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CONVERGENCE

ARTICLE

Little Players, Big Shows

Format, Narration, and Style on Television's New Smaller Screens

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Abstract / This article highlights the role that *aesthetics* play in television's current convergence with mobile telephones and portable media players like the iPod. I contend that contemporary television style does not just constitute a response to the demands of technological convergence – it is rather an integral component of that which allows television to merge with new devices in the first place. When we engage with style as a precursor to these developments, important continuities emerge between the aesthetics of the small screen and those of the new smaller screens. These continuities underscore that convergence is at once a technical *and* aesthetic process that entails the hybridization of hardware *and* cultural forms.

Key Words / aesthetics / convergence / iPod / mobility / television

The second episode of the ABC drama *Lost's* second season (original airdate: 28 September 2005) contains a scene in which two characters desperately clutch to the wreckage of a shipwrecked raft as a shark aggressively circles. After determining that their only hope for survival is to make it to a more substantial section of the wreck, one of the castaways braces himself to swim the short distance to a pontoon floating nearby. Just as he does, the camera cuts to a low-angle shot of the raft from deep beneath the ocean's surface, and the menacing shark glides into the frame from off screen left, blocking our view of the raft with its dark silhouette. This being *Lost*, this scene also contains one of the scores of narrative clues hidden in each of the series' episodes. By slowing down recordings of this episode, viewers determined that the shark's tail bore the insignia of the Hanso Foundation, the shadowy organization believed to be behind *Lost's* many mysteries. But for viewers who, like myself, watched this episode not at home on a conventional television set, but rather on an Apple iPod, this subtle clue was invisible. Watching this scene on an airplane, with one hand shielding out the glare from the window my neighbor in seat 24A insisted on keeping open, my only real cue that the dark shape moving across the even darker frame was a shark came from an ominous music stab on the soundtrack.¹

This experience provided me with my first exposure to the questions the US television networks and their major suppliers of programming currently face as they attempt to translate established media properties to handheld devices like the iPod and the mobile telephone. Will established television formats and sedimented modes of television narration and style survive these platforms' convergence? Or will television's new smaller screens only be compatible with formats, styles, and narrative modes specially designed to suit their distinctive technical and material properties?² If the latter is true, is television as we know it, both as a technology and a cultural form, destined to become an entry in 'the dictionary of historical terms, like "horseless carriage" and "picture radio"' (Bloxham, 2006)? Television critics and historians face similarly urgent questions. For starters, do these smaller, handheld screens even qualify as televisions? What effect will the proliferation of these smaller screens and the new modes of storytelling, distribution, and reception they inaugurate have on the already tenuous place of aesthetic analysis in television scholarship? As Jeffrey Sconce points out (2004: 94), television scholars have, with a handful of notable exceptions (see, for example, Anderson, 2005; Caldwell, 1995; Ellis, 1992 [1982]), conspicuously avoided questions about television's formats, audiovisual language, and narrative modes in favor of studies of its specificity as a communications medium, the domestic contexts in which it is received, and the intersubjective meaning-making activities its audiences participate in. With a great deal of contemporary writing on TV-new media convergence falling under the banner of fan studies (Jenkins, 2006), it seems likely that scholarship on handheld video will only further push aesthetic questions towards the periphery of television studies' attention. If, as some industry observers forecast, television is destined for obsolescence, what is to become of that branch of television studies that has deemed the television text worthy of aesthetic analysis?

This article highlights the role that format, narration, and, perhaps most importantly, style play in television's convergence with mobile telephones and handheld media players. This focus on mobile programming – as opposed to the fetishized artifacts that are at the center of most narratives of technological convergence – reveals striking continuities between the aesthetics of the small screen and those of the new smaller screens. These continuities in turn provide historical perspective both on the hype that heralds the new mobile television technologies, and, more broadly, on the crucial role aesthetic analysis stands to play in studies of media convergence. It also explores the multiple meanings the term 'mobility' takes in discourses surrounding television's convergence with the new smaller screens. In these discourses, mobility refers at once to the voluntary geographic motility of consumers and to the ability of programming to migrate across platforms.³ While cross-platform repurposing is certainly an important item on the agendas of the media conglomerates involved in programming handheld devices (Caldwell, 2004), thus far, the budding mobile television industry has placed a greater priority on the mobility of viewers than on the mobility of texts. This focus reflects the mobile television industry's understanding of the composition of the audience for its programming. According to industry projections, the average mobile television viewer is a white male, under 36 years old, and wealthy enough to afford programming services that can add more than twenty dollars to his monthly telephone bill (Whitney, 2006b). At a moment when competition for the attention of this lucrative demographic pits broadcasters against cable channels, DVDs, video on demand, console and computer games, and the internet, television

industry trade journals have identified mobile television as a godsend for broadcasters desperate to reach free-spending young males. Advertisements for mobile television services address affluent, technologically-advanced male consumers between the ages of 18 and 34 who, on account of their age, gender, and class status, experience limits on neither their movements nor their consumption habits. To consume mobile television is, in the context of these advertisements, to escape the social and spatial constraints of the home – as well as the feminine connotations of domestic viewing – for more interactive (and appropriately masculine) forms of perambulatory public leisure and consumption. For example, in one advertisement for MobiTV, a service that transmits television to mobile phones and laptops, a self-professed ‘TV-holic’ lugs a giant television set with him like a ball-and-chain, struggling to support its weight as he exercises, attends a sporting event, and walks down city streets. In each scenario, his mobility is constrained by the bulk of the set and the length of the extension cord that keeps him literally tethered to indoor power points. In this advertisement, television is not a means of virtual travel or disembodied presence, but rather is a cumbersome burden that inhibits the restless male subject’s geographic and social mobility. The implication is that before he may enjoy the mobility advertisements like this one insist he is entitled to, this subject must trade his set for a video-equipped mobile telephone, sever his connections to the feminized spaces and temporalities of domestic spectatorship.

The early adopters of mobile video technologies have proven somewhat indifferent to these promises of liberation, personal autonomy, and geographic mobility. To the frustration of the budding mobile television industry, young men have not in large numbers made television viewing a part of their ‘mobile’ lifestyles. The first studies of mobile viewing habits report early adopters primarily view mobile television in their homes, of all places (Nokia, 2006; Whitney, 2006b). Indeed, early adopters have shown greater interest in orchestrating the movements of programming between ever-expanding ensembles of digital devices than in watching television ‘on the go’. For early adopters, a considerable component of the appeal of mobile television appears to lie in making programs move between devices located in different rooms of the same house: in other words, from a set-top digital video recorder (DVR) in the living room to a PC in the guest bedroom to a Bluetooth-equipped mobile telephone in the bedroom. At the very least, many early adopters seem more interested in mastering video compression software or in developing hacks that allow them to overcome incompatible technical standards and draconian digital rights management (DRM) software than in participating in the freewheeling lifestyle depicted in advertisements for mobile television services.

The disconnect between the priorities of mobile television’s programmers and audiences is evident in an emergent mobile television aesthetic. With regards to matters of aesthetics, ‘mobile television’ is a slippery term. It currently encompasses a range of cultural forms which appear to have little in common. These include mobisodes (short content produced for mobile telephones), webisodes (episodic content designed for web playback), viral videos (short clips uploaded to video sharing websites like YouTube and Google Video and, increasingly, showcased on US cable channels), vlogs (video blogs), machinima (scenes from video games edited with original dialogue), digests (abridgements of primetime network programming, sporting events etc), and even primetime serial dramas like *Lost* and *24*. Ultimately, what unites these heterogeneous forms is their amenability to a type of extreme textual segmentation I term *unbundling*. Unbundling

describes the dismantling of integral television texts into fragmentary, yet self-contained, segments. Viewers may watch these short segments one at a time, or combine them with pieces of other unbundled texts to construct longer narrative and/or visual sequences. Mobile television programmers have only begun to explore the aesthetic possibilities of unbundling. Instead, they have more avidly pursued an aesthetic that assumes that it is the viewer, and not the text, that is in motion. As a consequence, many mobile programs are both digitally and aesthetically 'locked' to the technical properties of a single platform, device, or delivery protocol. In other words, when programmers produce mobile content with the properties of a single playback device in mind, they frequently disregard the likelihood that their creations will migrate to other screens. Though suited for viewing outside the home on handheld devices, the proprietary aesthetic of such programs has difficulty traveling between platforms. Early adopters have thus far not yet embraced these texts, opting instead to program their mobile devices with content derived from other sources, including the home television receiver, the PC, and the multiplex. For these viewers, the smaller screens of the iPod or mobile telephone are extensions of, and not alternatives to, established media. Accustomed to, for instance, the migration of motion pictures from the cinema to the television set to the PC, early adopters of mobile television have thus far sought out programming adept at inhabiting a number of screens. When programmers fail to provide such content, viewers take initiative and create it for themselves, employing a variety of high- and low-tech methods to make their media mobile.

In the following sections, I examine the tensions between these competing definitions of mobility and the competing definitions of mobility they materialize, and trace some of the ways in which mobile television programmers have attempted to reconcile their conception of the ideal mobile viewer with early adopters' ideals about textual mobility. These tensions become visible on the screen, in content as diverse as primetime network serials, exclusive short form mobile dramas, viral videos clips, and interactive mobile telephone game shows. Questions about the forms of programming appropriate for mobile screens are far from being resolved. For this reason, this article does not attempt to divine future developments in mobile programming. Instead, it takes a historical approach to these ongoing developments, drawing insight from theories of television aesthetics developed at prior moments in television's history, moments equally marked by dramatic technological and cultural transformations.

Textual Mobility and the Limits of the Hardware Aesthetic

Since Apple's introduction of the video iPod and addition of video downloads to its popular iTunes Music Store in October 2005, discussions of future programming options for television's new mobile screens became a fixture of both the television industry trade press and newspapers and magazines. In these articles, the producers and aggregators of programming for mobile screens, as well as the major manufacturers of mobile television devices, typically endorse one of two positions.⁴ Advocates of the first position argue that to *mobilize* television means to *miniaturize* it: literally, to shrink established media properties to sizes, scales, and durations appropriate to the diminutive new devices. MTV Networks' programming strategy is exemplary of this approach. When programming its Overdrive website, iPods, and mobile telephones on the Verizon network in the US, MTV pairs cablecast programs with specific playback media on the basis of

widely-accepted industrial theories of medium specificity. Acting upon these theories entails establishing and naturalizing links between program formats and specific playback devices. A heavily segmented comedy like *Punk'd*, which lends itself to being dismantled into short, self-contained clips, is streamed across mobile telephone networks, where bandwidth restrictions limit the duration and definitions of video programming. Episodes of the reality series *Laguna Beach*, on the other hand, are expanded with deleted scenes to take advantage of the internet's expanded bandwidth (Lafayette, 2006). In each instance, the technical properties of playback hardware and network infrastructure ultimately determine the scope of textual mobility.

Supporters of the second position contend that mobile television's future as a medium rests on the development of all new formats, narrative modes, and visual styles. Not surprisingly, advocates of this view tend to be independent startups or established hardware companies that lack their own production divisions or content libraries. Trip Hawkins, the founder of a mobile television production startup called Digital Chocolate, encapsulated this position when he predicted to the *New York Times* that 'The first big mobile hit will be a completely original creation. . . . If you're going to really establish something as a new medium, you can't do that with content that is derivative and a second-class version of another medium' (Manly, 2006). So far, this approach to mobile programming has produced new formats, including the mobisode; new genres, including 'massively social' dating shows like Digital Chocolate's *The Hook-Up: Ava Flirting* (Whitney, 2006a); and visual styles tailored to the unique properties of specific hardware devices. For the most part, these innovations have been proprietary, available only to subscribers of a single mobile telephone network.

Despite their divergent agendas, a common aesthetic underwrites both conceptions of mobile television programming. This is a 'hardware aesthetic', determined, to paraphrase Barbara Klinger (2006: 75), by 'imperatives drawn from technological considerations'. According to Klinger, with a hardware aesthetic, 'What is noticed, valued, and appraised . . . is how [textual] characteristics – mise-en-scène, special effects, sound, supplemental features – either exploit or fail to realize the capabilities of the machine of reproduction' (p. 85). Mobile television's hardware aesthetic is pervasive, and has already engendered the establishment of a repertoire of production techniques geared towards producing video content suited to the small screens, reduced frame rates, short battery lives, and limited storage capacities of mobile television's central artifacts – the video iPod and the third generation mobile telephone.⁵ The mobile television production community cynically refers to this repertoire as 'filming to the phone' (Manly, 2006): trading long-shots for static close-ups, fast zooms for slow motion replays, and pans for cuts, increasing the size of props and graphics, and reducing program durations to between 45 and 75 seconds.

While I would not deny that the technical and material properties of mobile screens and network infrastructures exert substantial limits on the kinds of texts handheld devices are equipped to display, I nonetheless want to interrogate the industrial discourses that portray the practice of 'filming to the phone' as a natural and inevitable consequence of media convergence. Proponents of this aesthetic contend that by conforming style to the limits of each of television's new mobile screens program producers and aggregators *increase* the mobility of media texts and franchises. Such an argument takes for granted a singular definition of mobility, whereby a text is deemed mobile when it can be viewed

outside the home, on an iPod, a mobile telephone, or a similar device. By broadening our definition of mobility to encompass both the mobility of viewers and of texts, however, we may begin to see that the primary effect of this hardware aesthetic is to reify the socially-constructed boundaries that distinguish television from its partners in convergence, thereby *limiting* the mobility of texts. Media are never discrete objects; rather, as Carolyn Marvin (1988: 8) argues, they lack 'natural edges. They are constructed complexes of habits, beliefs, and procedures embedded in elaborate cultural codes of communication.' The distinctions mobile television's medium-specific hardware aesthetic draws between television and the new mobile screens do not simply reflect the essential technological characteristics of discrete media. On the contrary, these distinctions are discursive formations that mobilize socially situated 'interpretation[s] of video technology and its limitations' to mitigate the uncertainties posed by the accelerated interpenetration of technologies and cultural forms (Seiter 1992: 43).⁶

The ideological (as opposed to material-technical) basis of these aesthetic distinctions becomes apparent when we examine an example of a program 'filmed for the phone'. Rather than exploring the unique *capabilities* of the mobile telephone as a video medium, the first original programs produced for mobile telephones illustrate the limitations of this hardware aesthetic. *24: Conspiracy*, a serialized mobile telephone spinoff of Fox's *24*, was first transmitted to mobile telephone handsets in the UK over the Vodafone network before airing in the US on the Verizon network. Translating *24*'s enormously profitable multi-media brand to the two-inch screen required a number of formal and budgetary compromises. *24* is one of the most expensive productions on television and is renowned for its stylish sets, virtuoso camerawork, big-name cameos, and high-tech special effects. *24: Conspiracy*, on the other hand, was shot on digital video on a shoestring budget, employing a non-union crew, unadorned sets, minimal location shooting, and unknown actors. Each 'mobisode' (a term trademarked by News Corporation) was limited to one minute in duration. In a twist on its parent program's 24-hour-long, day-in-the-life narratives, the spinoff's story takes place over a series of 24 mobisodes. Over 70 percent of shots are tightly framed close-ups, lit in a flat, high-key style as opposed to *24*'s distinctive cool blue color scheme. Dialogue is terse – even more so than on the laconic *24* – and performances are exceptionally expressive. Blocking centers characters squarely in frames shot with an extremely shallow depth of field. Elements of the *mise-en-scène* are equally exaggerated: for instance, to be legible on mobile telephones, bullet holes were made the size of grapefruits, and props are large and shot in extreme close-ups (Holson, 2005).

Such concessions to the technical constraints of the mobile telephone became distractions when the mobisodes were later collected as a special feature on the DVD release of *24*'s fourth season. Scaled up to the proportions of the home receiver, *24: Conspiracy* struggles to fill the screen. Performances pitched to the dimensions of mobile telephones appear exaggerated. The abundance of static close-ups and the use of cuts in the place of even subtle camera movements unintentionally engender a sense of disorienting claustrophobia, and harsh lighting and shallow framing make sets look two-dimensional and cheap.⁷ The one-minute long episode durations require that narrative developments be oversimplified and drastically compressed. By drawing strict boundaries between the mobile telephone and the home screen, and by subordinating content to the dictates of a hardware aesthetic, *24: Conspiracy*'s producers created a program ideally

tailored to the dimensions and technical properties of the mobile telephone, but poorly suited to the mobility across platforms.

24: Conspiracy is most generously regarded as a low-budget, low-stakes experiment in mobile storytelling. It was moderately well-received by viewers and critics, and in 2006 it received an Emmy nomination for outstanding internet, cell phone, or iPod programming. Nevertheless, its stumbles illuminate a great deal about how style migrates back and forth between platforms. As opposed to its mobile spinoff, *24* itself has proven adept at making the leap between screens. *24* consistently ranks amongst the most downloaded series on Apple's iTunes video store, and the internet is host to hundreds of clips from the program that have been edited and uploaded by fans to video sharing websites like YouTube.⁸ If anything, viewing *24* on an iPod or in a pixilated window on a computer monitor brings the series' signature style into sharper definition. What these screens lack in size, resolution, or frame rate they make up for by focusing the viewer's attention on visual elements that, on the home receiver, can be overshadowed by crowded framings crammed with depth and detail. On an iPod, for example, spectacle, depth, and detail are sacrificed; however, color, contrast, and visual rhythms are concentrated. The smaller screen distills *24* to its quick cuts and chiaroscuro compositions, underscoring the real time urgency of Jack Bauer's missions and the moral ambiguity of his tactics.

24's ability to exploit the properties of screens both big and small is emblematic of the general flexibility of a television aesthetic that has developed at least in part in response to the historically uneven diffusion of domestic receiver technology. Throughout television's history, program producers and broad- and cablecasters have created content that is viewed on an array of screens with radically different dimensions and technical properties. The variability of home receiver technologies (and, later on, the proliferation of television distribution methods [e.g. broadcast, cable, satellite, cassette, etc.]) mitigated against early attempts to establish a hardware aesthetic for television.⁹ While mobile television likewise lacks common transmission and reception protocols, the structure of the US mobile telephone industry and the proprietary nature of handheld media player technologies compel the producers of original mobile programming to enter into exclusive partnerships with aggregators or distributors like Apple, Google, Cingular, or Amp'd Mobile. For example, Fox developed *24: Conspiracy* for exclusive playback on 'locked' mobile handsets (programmed to operate only on a specific network) distributed by Vodafone and later Verizon. The series' later migration to the home receiver via the DVD only served to call attention to the fact that critical production decisions had been made with the specific limitations of proprietary network architectures and handsets in mind. As opposed to *24*, which can be enjoyed on both a state-of-the-art high definition plasma monitor and a vintage black and white set with coat hanger antenna, *24: Conspiracy* was both *aesthetically* and *digitally* locked to a single playback device. While the digital lock linking the mobile series to Vodafone's and Verizon's handheld players was easily removed, the aesthetic lock linking *24: Conspiracy* to these smaller screens proved much more durable.

Attempts to limit programming to a single platform have proven to be at odds with the both the economic imperatives driving TV-new media convergence and the proclivities of mobile television's earliest adopters. As media conglomerates like News Corporation face the challenges of programming a proliferating ensemble of screens, the ability to repurpose content across platforms becomes an essential component of their

business strategies (Caldwell, 2004). In this respect, a program aesthetically locked to a single platform by a hardware aesthetic may prove less versatile, and, in the long run, less valuable, than a program that can more easily make the transition between screens. Moreover, early adopters of mobile television technologies have repeatedly demonstrated their desire to make programming move, sometimes in ways that contravene copyright laws or the intentions of copyright holders. Many early adopters display a preference for texts that move from screen to screen with minimal friction. Thanks to the efforts of industrious users, even programs digitally 'locked' to proprietary systems or devices enjoy prolifically mobile afterlives. Master hackers distribute command-line code that dismantles the copy protection software on TiVo DVRs, enabling users to output pure digital recordings to their handheld devices or networked computers. Resourceful MobiTV subscribers have devised an equally ingenious solution to contravening the phonecaster's DRM software. Rather than hacking their telephone's operating systems, subscribers have begun making video recordings of MobiTV programming by training camcorders on their mobile telephones. Once these videos are uploaded to video sharing websites, non-subscribers may view MobiTV's exclusive programs on PCs or transfer them to handheld players or to digital set-top boxes connected to television sets. On countless internet discussion lists, mobile telephone owners swap tips on which codecs (**compression-decompression** algorithms) give the best results when compressing web videos for playback on their mobile handsets. Where viewers have proven much less successful, however, is in breaking the aesthetic locks that a hardware aesthetic can impose on video programming. That is, while DRM software is relatively easy to crack, there is little viewers can do to compensate for the aesthetic inflexibility of a program like *24: Conspiracy* – save for re-shooting it themselves!

Early adopters have demonstrated that proprietary programming digitally and aesthetically locked to a single platform is thoroughly incompatible with their preferred definition of mobility, in which mobility refers first and foremost to qualities of the text. From the perspective of these early adopters, the mobile television program is characterized by its ability to migrate between screens and environments, via both authorized and unauthorized channels. Such a definition recognizes that mobile television programs are as at home in the living room as they are in the transit station, the line at the bank, or the public restroom. In each of these spaces, texts distinguish themselves through their flexibility: in other words, through their ability to adapt to the particular conditions of the many social and material environments which they travel through. As Anna McCarthy (2001: 13–4) observes, television is a *site-specific* medium. Its presence in both the home and a cross-section of non-domestic spaces underlines its ability to implicate itself into – and subtly alter the dynamics of – almost any environment. In light of recent developments in mobile television hardware and programming, however, it is perhaps more appropriate to think of television as *site-unspecific*. This neologism represents an attempt to reconcile McCarthy's groundbreaking work on television's environmental aesthetics with forms and technologies that are theoretically capable of moving between environments. The forms of 'ambient television' McCarthy describes may appear simultaneously in multiple sites. But, for the most part, these forms are *immobile*. We find each only in a single type of environment – for instance, the waiting room, the airport terminal, or the doctor's office. When we move out of these environments, these forms cannot follow us. While contemporary mobile television forms may appear most frequently on a

particular kind of device or in a particular environment, a considerable number of mobile texts do not enjoy exclusive relationships with any of the many devices or screens they traffic between. This is as true of a television series like *Lost* – which can be viewed on the ABC network, on ABC.com, on iPods, on mobile telephones, and on video clip websites – as it is of the viral videos that traffic between YouTube, Google, and cable programs like VH1's viral video showcase *Web Junk 20*. According to this definition of mobility, the truly mobile television program would then be that which could be started on the home receiver, continued during the commute on an iPod, and finished at the office on a work PC, but which in practice would just as likely be watched on the living room couch.

Unbundling the Aesthetics of Convergence

As many commentators have observed (Anderson, 2006; Jenkins, 2003; Mannes, 2005), digital distribution technologies have facilitated the rapid growth of an alternative 'Itemized Economy' of unbundled cultural goods, in which the primary unit of exchange is no longer the compact disc, the newspaper or magazine, or the television series, but rather the track, the article, the episode, or the scene. The producers and distributors of information and entertainment commodities increasingly compliment traditional distribution models, oriented around the ideological sanctity of the integral media text, with models that allow them to distribute itemized, unbundled cultural goods at a la carte prices. In addition to annual subscription rates and single-issue newsstand pricing, the *New York Times* sells individual articles priced at US\$2.95. Similarly, through its iTunes Music Store, Apple has pioneered the sale of individual album tracks, and, more recently, individual episodes of television series. Likewise, many US cable television systems offer as an alternative to bundled channel packages films and individual episodes of television series on-demand on a pay-per-view basis.

With regards to mobile television, unbundling is more than just an economic efficiency engineered to capitalize on a perceived consumer demand for increased control and customization. The unbundled text is exemplary of an emergent mobile television aesthetic that exploits the segmental quality of the television text to reconfigure integral media commodities into flexible forms expressly constructed so as to flow freely between screens. While economic and technological imperatives certainly inform the production of unbundled texts, this practice has important – and thus far unacknowledged – aesthetic implications. Unbundling presently plays a key role in television's contemporary movements between platforms and environments, and must be explored as both an economic *and* aesthetic process.

The extreme segmentation of the television text is a precursor to these forms of unbundling. In the early 1980s, John Ellis (1992 [1982]: 116) proposed that television's 'basic unit is the segment, with segments following on from each other with no necessary connection between them'. Ellis offered this description of television's textuality as a corrective to what he perceived were the shortcomings of Raymond Williams's seminal work on the concept of television flow. Television's juxtaposition of programs, advertisements, trailers, and station identifications suggested to Williams a seamless, irreversible flow that elided the distinctions between its constitutive elements. The experience of watching television, Williams (2003 [1974]: 96) argued, was like:

having read two plays, three newspapers, three or four magazines, on the same day that one has been to a variety show and a lecture and a football match. And yet in another way it is not like that at all, for though the items may be various the television experience has in some important ways unified them.

Ellis challenged Williams on precisely this point, arguing that flow does not efface, but rather *accents* the seams that stitch together short segments. Segments, defined by Ellis (1992[1982]: 148) as 'relatively self-contained scene[s] which convey . . . an incident, a mood or a particular meaning', do not combine with one another. Rather, their 'Meanings are discrete and separate', and their relation to one another is one of 'succession rather than consequence'. Segments join together, not, as Williams suggested, in the 'irresponsible' flows of the broadcast timetable (1992[1982]: 149), but rather only in the minds of viewers familiar with television's sign system. That is, the viewer's familiarity with such television conventions as the episode or the series enables her to reassemble segments into something resembling a coherent message or narrative (Williams, 2003: 118). Overall, Ellis argues (1992: 148), 'The aspect of the break, of end and beginning, tends to outweigh the aspect of continuity and consequence'. By the same token, however, segments do not stand on their own, but instead 'cluster' and 'incite' one other to make meaning through their differences. Only through their positions vis-a-vis other like and unlike units within familiar patterns of repetition and difference do segments become meaningful for viewers.

Jane Feuer (1983) subsequently elaborated on the relation between television's segments and flows in a manner that suggested a productive compromise between Williams' and Ellis' respective models of the medium's textuality: 'television,' Feuer writes, 'is constituted by a dialectic of segmentation and flow. . . . Williams should more accurately say that television possesses segmentation without closure, for this is what he really means by flow' (15-16). Feuer's conclusion is equally relevant to Ellis' concept of television's segmental quality: according to her formulation, the 'breaks' between segments do not outweigh the continuity across them, but exist in a perpetual state of tension with the television text's quality of flow. Additionally, with certain television formats, Feuer argues, segments can in fact be self-sufficient. In fact, she recognizes, programs like the breakfast news and chat show *Good Morning America* are not designed to be watched 'as a totality', but rather consist of segments that can be individually or cumulatively consumed. While viewers may enjoy the news packages, interviews, filmed reports, weather forecasts, and live studio interludes that comprise such programs as an integrated sequence, they are more likely to apprehend them sporadically, and assemble them into new sequences, as they dip into and out of the flow.

New mobile screens like the iPod and mobile telephone accentuate the segmental quality of the television text, tilting the dialectic between the television text's segmentation and flow decisively in the direction of the former. Just as Apple's iTunes store 'unbundles' albums into tracks that consumers may purchase individually for US\$0.99, the producers and aggregators of mobile television programming disassemble US commercial television's traditional storytelling units (chiefly, the 22-episode season and 30- or 60-minute-long episode) into units of variable durations that may be combined into new sequences, purchased a la carte, or streamed on demand. The most banal instances of unbundling entail the sale or rental of individual episodes from online retailers. Whereas previously viewers were presented little choice but to rent or purchase collections of

multiple episodes bundled on physical media like DVDs or cassettes, with the advent of digital distribution channels viewers may now download or stream individual episodes from sizeable archives of digitized programming. More noteworthy from an aesthetic standpoint, however, are those mobile forms which apply the logic of textual unbundling to the level of television's individual segmental units. The producers and aggregators of mobile television programming disassemble integral television texts – for instance, complete episodes of prime-time series, or televised sporting events – into segments of variable durations. These units may be reconfigured into new narrative sequences (frequently in combinations dictated by individual users' preferences or collaborative filtering recommender systems) or presented on their own, as what the mobile television industry terms 'entertainment snacks' (Higgins, 2005: 12). NBC, for instance, sells downloads of Jay Leno's *Tonight Show* monologues and individual *Saturday Night Live* comedy sketches via iTunes for US\$1.99 each. By excerpting individual segments from larger programs and flows, these new unbundled forms call attention to the segmental nature of the television text and underscore Ellis' claim that the segment is television's basic building block. At the same time, however, the prevalence of the freestanding sports highlight, monologue, comedy sketch, or news item on television's handheld screens gives us cause to question his assertion that individual segments only become meaningful when read against the segments that precede and succeed them. On mobile screens, segments both stand alone and combine with other units. The crucial variable here appears to be time: mobile viewers select from menus of segments to assemble programs that are as long – or short – as they want them to be. According to industry trade journal *Television-Week*: 'When it comes to television on the Web and on handheld gadgets, five minutes may be the new half-hour' (Hibberd, 2006: 18).

The producers and aggregators of mobile television programming have found in television's most segmented formats sources of content and templates for their unbundled mobile forms. Unbundled short form programming, including music videos, comedy sketches, individual news items, weather forecast, sports highlights, movie trailers, and viral videos, preponderate on mobile telephones and iPods, and feature prominently in promotional materials for the services that supply these devices with programming. Some services offer unbundled segments on a subscription or a la carte basis. For instance, MTV offers on demand excerpts from its sketch comedy program *Wonder Showzen* through mobile telephone provider Verizon Wireless's V Cast service. Unbundling capitalizes on *Wonder Showzen*'s short segment duration: disassembled into its constituent segments, a single episode yields dozens of pieces of mobile content. Other unbundling services act as filters for the vast volume of video currently circulating through the web. *The Daily Nut*, a video podcast produced by G4 (a US cable network dedicated to video gaming and computer culture) and distributed as a free download, presents brief excerpts from the web's most heavily-trafficked viral videos. In each five-minute-long episode, telegenic hosts introduce short clips of preening webcam girls, teens lip-synching in their bedrooms, and *Jackass*-worthy stunts. As the hosts provide their snarky commentary, onscreen graphics point viewers to the URLs where they may download unabridged (and uncensored) versions. Another form of unbundling recombines segments extracted from broadcast or cable television series into new sequences or programs. This form of repurposing is familiar from syndicated entertainment news programs like *Entertainment Tonight* or *Access Hollywood*, which combine

footage culled from unbundled television series and films and electronic press kit materials with stand-ups and interviews shot on video to create new, inexpensive programming. Often, these unbundled mobile forms serve as advertisements for upcoming broad- or cablecasts. Unbundling in this respect represents an economical way of exploiting media conglomeration and synergy: by repurposing content across their multiple holdings, copyright holders and conglomerates multiply their opportunities to capitalize on their initial investments in original programming (Caldwell, 2004). At other times, these reconstituted sequences offer abridged versions of popular 'water cooler' programs. Cingular Wireless, for example, offers subscribers five-minute-long weekly recaps of *The Sopranos*; GoTV, meanwhile, reduces episodes of *Desperate Housewives* and *Alias* to under four minutes, 'for those viewers who simply want to keep up' with their favorite shows (Kantor, 2005).¹⁰

Mobile programs like *The Daily Nut*, which are comprised of sequences of unbundled segments, are illustrative of the links between mobile television's unbundled aesthetic and the related practice of 'redaction'. John Hartley (2004) identifies the ascendancy of redaction, the act of creating new material out of existing content, as a significant consequence of the explosive proliferation of information and entertainment texts. According to Hartley, redaction is 'a form of production not reduction of text (which is why the more familiar term 'editing' is not adequate),' in which what is ostensibly 'new' programming is fashioned out of excerpts of existing materials. He situates the redactor somewhere between an overloaded media sphere and the viewing public, where she acts as a filter, 'sort[ing] order from the chaos' (p. 42). (Though his chief examples of contemporary redactors are CNN and the website associated with the British newspaper *The Guardian*, he also describes how viewers themselves become redactors as they watch television. From zapping channels to writing fan-fiction to moderating an online discussion forum, many opportunities exist for viewers to become redactors.) Out of this information overload the redactor fashions new textual forms – and a new modality of socially-legitimated truth, premised not on authorship, but on aggregation.

Arguably even more so than traditional forms of broadcasting and cablecasting, mobile television is a redactor's medium. But as the examples above indicate, with respect to the mobile screen, redaction entails equal parts composition and *decomposition*. That is, while redaction cannot take place without unbundling, mobile texts like the V Cast version of MTV's *Wonder Showzen* demonstrate that by no means does unbundling anticipate redaction. When we solely emphasize, as Hartley does, the redactor's status as the composer of new media texts (and truths) out of incomplete fragments of meaning, we run the risk of overlooking that many contemporary unbundled texts are never redacted, nor are they intended to be. On mobile telephones or iPods, unbundled segments are as likely to exist as autonomous 'entertainment snacks' as they are to be combined into more filling TV 'dinners'. By ignoring the temptation to interpret these metaphors as reflections on the nutritive value of unbundled content, we stand to gain an appreciation of the segment as much more than the elemental, though necessarily incomplete, building block of television's sign system. Placing unbundling and redaction on more equal footing reveals that neither are simply reflexive responses to the accelerated multiplication of the volume of media in circulation. Long before the advent of the video iPod and mobile telephone, television was a medium of unbundling and redaction. However, with the proliferation of these devices the connection between unbundling and

redaction becomes tenuous, and the unbundled segment insistently asserts both its independence and its mobility.

As Hartley recognizes, program producers do not monopolize the prerogative to unbundle television texts. Television provides its viewers with many opportunities to decompose and recompose programs. Henry Jenkins (1992: 223–49) has likewise written at length about how television fans creatively deconstruct and reconstruct broadcast texts, demonstrating how unbundled segments can take on new meanings when fans juxtapose them with other images, sounds, or music. Jenkins' observations about fan cultures are especially relevant today. Inexpensive video and audio editing software gives viewers access to a variety of professional-quality tools for unbundling (and redacting) television texts; meanwhile, sharing sites like YouTube and Google Video provide venues in which viewers may exhibit their creations to large, geographically-dispersed audiences (Jenkins, 2006). Members of the *Lost* fan community, for instance, use these tools and services to select, unbundle, and upload to video sharing website segments that are instrumental to the series' convoluted narrative telos. Frequently, fans digitally manipulate segments containing concealed clues about the series' central mystery, including the image of the shark's tail described previously. By slowing segments down, remixing their soundtracks, color-correcting murky images, and digitally zooming in on subtle visual cues, *Lost* fans render these scenes – and, by extension, the series' cumulative serial narrative – both more legible *and* more mobile.¹¹

Clearly, some television formats would appear to be better suited to unbundling than others. News segments produced on videotape are, as John Caldwell (2004: 49) observes, particularly conducive to unbundling:

Tape, after all, can be endlessly recut and graphically restyled in digital postproduction. . . . Also, unlike the textual 'resistance' that an hour-long narrative arc in a prime time show or a movie of the week places in the face of would be abridgers, cutters, and repurposers, news is sound-bite and image driven, making it far more suited to [unbundling].

Caldwell's description of their 'textual "resistance"' notwithstanding, hour-long prime time shows, including serial dramas, have proven especially conducive to unbundling. Though the disassemblage of expensive, long-form dramas may seem to undermine the appeal of these programs – after all, serials are characterized by open-ended narratives that defer or disavow closure – primetime dramas are regularly unbundled, making programs like *24*, *Lost*, and *Desperate Housewives* amongst the most mobile of all television texts. *Lost*, for instance, consistently rates as both the most downloaded program from the iTunes store – at the time of this paper's writing, it occupied 16 of the top 20 spots on Apple's download ratings – and is the most searched for term on peer-to-peer file sharing networks. Series and serials, comedies and dramas, and 30-minute and hour-long program formats are all today equally implicated in the unbundling and mobilization of television's segmental units.

Unbundled to Distraction?

Discussions of television's segmented aesthetic tend to negatively evaluate the quality and merit of segmented programming and the spectatorial practices engaged in by their audiences. But by highlighting the heavy segmentation of many mobile television

programs, I do not wish to suggest that this unbundled aesthetic encourages or is conducive to inattentive viewing. Klinger (2006: 196) seems to reach this conclusion in her analysis of the video clips that circulate on the world wide web, arguing that, aesthetically, these clips appeal primarily to the distracted cyberslacker who watches videos at work. 'Given its brevity,' she writes, 'the e-film does not involve the kind of commitment of attention, time, and energy required by "longer and bulkier" artifacts'. Klinger contrasts the web short's 'uncommitted' viewer to the figure of the 'contemporary cinephile', the home-theater enthusiast or film collector who zealously scrutinizes the transfer quality, aspect ratio, and sound mixing of special edition DVDs and laserdiscs. Through her pairing of these spectator archetypes, Klinger subjects the digital short to the 'glance theory' primarily associated with Ellis' model of television's segmented textuality. According to Ellis (1992 [1982]: 162), whereas the cinema demands – and receives – its spectator's undivided attention:

The consumption of TV is often described as 'relaxation', indicating a process that demands little concentrated attention, and is concerned with variety and diversion rather enlightenment and excitement. The broadcast TV viewer is not engaged by TV representations to any great degree. . . . The TV viewer is therefore constructed as an individual who is prone to consume TV broadcasts, but needs to have attention drawn back to them.

Ellis presupposes two images of television's viewer: in the first, the viewer is intellectually lazy; by presenting an unrelenting stream of unrelated, stand-alone elements, television's heavily segmented texts excuse this viewer from contemplation and reflection. In the second, the viewer is active, but distracted: television's short segments are only a background for this peripatetic viewer's erratic domestic routine. Television's segmented aesthetic, Ellis argues, reflects that the medium must compete for the attention of both of these types of reprobate viewers. Within this aesthetic, sound, repetition, and formulaic structures that draw the viewer's attention – but not necessarily their eyes – back to the set assume a priority over the televisual image.

Though elsewhere Klinger quite convincingly exposes glance theory's many shortcomings (2006: 49), her handling of the web film resurrects, and inverts, the terms of Ellis' model of distracted and attentive viewing.¹² Public viewing, performed on a PC in the workplace, substitutes for Ellis's descriptions of the distracted reception that formerly took place in the home. That is, the web viewer watches videos to kill time, surfing absentmindedly, with one eye on the screen and the other scanning the office for his boss, in search of the next disposable viral video. The contemporary cinephile, on the other hand, performs deep readings of consecrated texts in the living room, the very site where, according to Ellis, distracted viewing is the norm. Even as she argues that home theater technologies unsettle such dyads as cinema/television, public/private and attention/distraction, ultimately Klinger's analysis of short form content consolidates these distinctions. In particular, domestic and non-domestic spaces remain discontinuous spheres, venues for essentially incompatible forms of media consumption.

Mobile television undermines these binaries, but its ability to connect screens and environments in ways that open up possibilities for new forms of *site-unspecific* textual scrutiny – and distraction – is contingent upon a definition of mobility that recognizes the peregrinations of both texts and viewers. Thanks to the availability of unbundled programming, viewers may distribute their viewing – and their attention – across a variety

of viewing sessions and locations. To return to the example that began this article, *Lost* rewards the diligent home viewer who painstakingly scrutinizes its episodes for hidden clues that promise to unlock the secrets of its convoluted narrative. Like the logo tattooed on the shark's tail, many of these embedded clues are accessible only to those who view on DVR-equipped high-definition televisions. As I learned from my experience of watching *Lost* on my iPod, the forms of engaged reception practiced by Klinger's contemporary cinephiles may sometimes appear off-limits to the mobile viewer of a scaled-down or unbundled version of this series. That is not to say that the mobile viewer accustomed to finding hermeneutic pleasures in *Lost*'s imagery will not try to read deeply into the tiny images contained on smaller mobile screens. Watching *Lost* on an iPod, the viewer must work even *harder* to read into its dense images. In fact, it is quite conceivable that the technical limits of the iPod or mobile telephone do not encourage distracted viewing, but rather challenge viewers to look even *more* closely at the images contained on these smaller screens (Caldwell, 1995). At the very least, we should entertain the possibility that new handheld video technologies can accommodate a variety of ways of engaging with the television text, including both distraction *and* attentive scrutiny.

When content is truly mobile, and free from the limits that the dominant hardware aesthetic imposes on many early mobile productions, these technical matters become irrelevant. With a program like *Lost*, viewers may compensate for the technological shortcomings of one screen with the strengths of another. After reading about the logo on the shark's tail on a *Lost* fan website, I followed links to a clip from this scene that had been uploaded to YouTube. Stepping through the shot of the shark on a frame-by-frame basis on my PC's monitor, I noticed not only this hidden clue, but also other details, including aspects of the mise-en-scene, and nuances in the actor's performance, that I had missed on my first viewing. As this anecdote suggests, it is no longer productive to think of the home screen, the iPod, and the mobile telephone as discrete, clearly defined entities, each with their own proprietary textual formats, narrative modes, visual styles, and viewing protocols. Television today more accurately refers to an ensemble of *site-unspecific* screens that interact with one another as viewers *and* forms traffic between them. Increasingly, these screens share a *collective aesthetic*, determined not by the specific technical demands of one or another form of hardware, but rather by the imperative that they be open to exchanges of programming and style.

Conclusion

A recent report on mobile television style made the claim that the iPod and mobile telephone are:

not simply changing the way [television] looks and feels. Even now, in its infancy, mobile video is starting to make the very definition of television, as a place where people watch "shows" on "channels", sound pleasantly anachronistic, like a description from an old issue of Popular Mechanics'. (Kennedy, 2006: 45)

The corporations with the greatest investments in mobile television have gone to great lengths to deny the mobile screen's connections with the home, the home screen, and television's proven forms. Obviously, marketing rhetoric cannot be taken at face value. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that many of the qualities purportedly endemic to

the iPod, the mobile telephone, and the highly segmented forms designed to showcase their capacities are far from unprecedented. As Lynn Spigel's research demonstrates, the concept of mobile television antedates the advent of the iPod and third generation mobile telephone by more than three decades (Spigel, 2001). And as early as the late 1940s, before television sets were even widely available to consumers, critics, social commentators, and journalists addressed the medium's segmentation as they debated its 'claim as a new art form' (Gould, 2003: 36). Though these first attempts to outline a poetics of television focused primarily on the television's intimacy and immediacy, they also touched on such matters as the best way to transition between the spectacular performances and comedy routines presented by variety shows and how to smooth the potentially jarring transition between program narratives and sponsored messages. In fact, one of the most consistent criticisms leveled against variety programs like *Texaco Star Theater* in the 1940s was that they lacked a compelling sense of 'continuity between performances' (Spigel, 1992: 146). Critical and industrial discussions of such matters shaped the new medium during its formative years, providing television with many of the genres, formats, and formal and narrative conventions that define its textuality to this day.

In some respects, with the advent of mobile video players, it appears as if television has come full circle: as one 2006 advertisement for the History Channel put it, surprisingly, 'the 2-inch TV screen is enjoying a repeat showing'. The handheld screens a growing number of us today tuck in our pockets recall the playing card-sized screens prominently displayed in living rooms 60 years ago. The purpose of drawing attention to these precedents, however, is not to downplay the significance of contemporary transformations of television's technologies or texts, nor to argue that there is nothing new or noteworthy about emergent forms of mobile television. Conversely, by historicizing their emergence, we equip ourselves to identify and understand their industrial, aesthetic, and economic consequences. Near-consensus support for mobile television's industrially-sanctioned hardware aesthetic, however, leads many observers to conclude that the new mobile screens are incompatible with the aesthetics of the home screen. Even Caldwell (2004: 44), the leading critic of the television industry's self-legitimizing narratives, suggests that '[to] understand dot-com/TV permutations, TV-Web synergies, multichannel branding, and marketed poses of "convergence"' scholars must develop and deploy new approaches to theorizing television style.¹³ Both conclusions, I believe, are somewhat overstated. Well before iPods and mobile telephones were capable of playing video clips, television 'moved'. From its earliest beginnings, television has occupied a variety of domestic and non-domestic environments. Moreover, television has always borrowed from, quoted, and commented on the aesthetics of other media, including cinema, radio, vaudeville, and print. Indeed, as Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999: 188) argue, television is defined by its willingness 'to entertain a wider range of visual and cultural styles and to remediate other media more vigorously and frankly than [its antecedents]'. These 'remediations' continue today, as television, the mobile telephone, and the iPod inform one another's presentational style, and are most visible in those increasingly common instances when content migrates between these screens. Networks and television producers now develop shows with the smaller screens of new technology in mind. Commencing in the Fall of 2006, each primetime series on the NBC network offered complimentary web, mobile telephone, and iPod editions. Meanwhile, content that has its debut online crosses over to the home screen. On cable programs like VH1's *Web Junk*

20 and Bravo's *Outrageous and Contagious Viral Videos*, digital shorts produced on inexpensive consumer equipment for playback on PCs or iPods are up-converted to broadcast standards and viewed on living room sets. Cable channel Current, launched in 2005, has built its brand identity and house style on its policy of airing short video clips, or 'pods', submitted by viewers. Current superimposes on these pods progress bars that mimic the digital interfaces of internet video streaming applications, and 'video playlists' (an obvious nod to Apple's iTunes MP3 software) periodically appear on screen, previewing the order of upcoming pods (Chamberlain, 2007). These examples underscore that convergence is never simply a matter of merging discrete technologies. On the contrary, on the TV screen, as on the screens of the iPod and mobile telephone, convergence is at once a technical *and* aesthetic process that entails the hybridization of hardware *and* cultural forms.

By sheer strength of their novelty, videos displayed on iPods and mobile telephones attract and hold the gaze of curious spectators. The same was the case nearly 60 years ago, during the period when television was first installed in American homes. Today, it is imperative that we look past the glossy surface of the iPod or the sleek profile of the Motorola RAZR and concentrate our attention on the images contained on these devices' tiny screens. For when we look closely, we find in these devices' matchbook-sized screens concentrated versions of properties that have long been central to our understanding of television's formats, narratives, and styles.

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Notes

- 1 As I later learned, I was far from alone in having this experience. In an article on the launch of the Apple iTunes video store, the *New York Times* (Kantor, 2005) used this scene to illustrate the limitations of mobile video hardware.
- 2 These questions took center stage at the May 2006 television upfront meetings, where the US networks pitch their upcoming season lineups to their largest advertising clients. Tagged 'the first digital upfront' by the networks, coverage of this year's presentations was dominated by talk of the projected US\$800 million advertising market for mobile television. For the first time, in 2006 the networks sold their schedules to sponsors based on both their Nielsen ratings and on the strength of their mobile television offerings, prompting one industry observer to predict that: 'Someday, shows may be renewed not because of ratings but because of how many downloads they get' (Lisotta, 2006).
- 3 David Morley (2004: 309) makes a similar point, quoting Scott Lash and Jonathan Friedman's observation that contemporary forms of mobility encompass 'two simultaneous modes of circulation: first the "one in which goods, such as TV broadcastings, records, videos, [and] magazines circulate among the audiences," and second, "that of the built environment, in which the population circulates among the symbolic goods".' See also Morley and Robins (1995), Morley (2000), and Appadurai (1988).
- 4 These positions do not break down on industrial or corporate grounds. Rather, manufacturers, producers, and aggregators are just as likely to endorse either stance. Moreover, we see a diversity of opinions on this matter even within the same organizations. This is especially the case with large media conglomerates, whose many divisions may pursue divergent strategies when programming mobile technologies.

- 5 As of the time of this article's writing, the video iPod had a two and a half-inch diagonal color screen that could support the playback of compressed video from an internal hard drive at a frame rate of 30 frames per second, with each frame consisting of 480 lines of video. Mobile telephone video playback specifications vary by handset manufacturer and carrier. For example, the LG CU500 mobile telephone on which the majority of this research was conducted, has a two-inch diagonal color screen that displays streaming video feeds at a frame rate of up to 15 frames per second, each frame consisting of 76 lines of video. (For mobile telephones, video quality is linked to network bandwidth. The lower the bandwidth, the lower the frame rate of video playback.) For comparison, standard-definition NTSC television has a frame rate of 29.97 frames per second, with each frame consisting of 480 lines of video; high-definition NTSC contains between 720 and 1080 lines per frame.
- 6 This analysis is greatly indebted to Christopher Anderson's (1994: 14) discussion of the interpenetration of the American motion picture and broadcasting industries during the 1950s.
- 7 Though they had no involvement in its production, *24*'s executive producers have subsequently distanced themselves from *24: Conspiracy* in interviews with the mainstream and trade presses. See Manly (2006) for more on the reception of *24: Conspiracy* amongst critics and other program producers.
- 8 *24* is an exemplary mobile text, and its migrations track in both directions. Critics regularly identify *24* as one of television's most 'cinematic' series, singling out its performances, direction, design, and special effects as on par with anything on the big screen. Likewise, home theater enthusiasts praise the series for exploiting the capabilities of high-end televisions and surround sound systems. On websites like hometheaterforum.com, audio- and videophiles debate the sound and picture quality of its DVD box sets. As of late 2006, a feature film version of *24* was in pre-production.
- 9 Amongst the earliest proponents of such an aesthetic were press critics like Jack Gould, John Crosby, and George Rosen. In the 1940s and 1950s, these critics called on television producers, and in particular the writers and directors of live anthology dramas, to cultivate visual and narrative styles that would exploit the new medium's technical limitations (namely, the small sizes and limited resolutions of receivers) to create a sense of intimacy and psychological depth (Gould, 2003).
- 10 It is not insignificant that the series unbundled in this fashion, including *The Sopranos*, *Big Love*, *Desperate Housewives*, and *Alias*, are amongst television's most critically-acclaimed programs. Positioned in both critical and industrial discourses as important and innovative 'quality television' programs, these series bestow on their audiences the social and cultural distinction that come from investing their valuable time in critically-sanctioned programming. Viewers of these serial dramas who miss an episode stand to lose more than just the pleasure they derive from their narratives; also at stake is their status as discerning subjects versed in the 'finest' that television has to offer. Unbundled digests enable lapsed viewers to both save face amongst their peers and maintain the sense of cultural sophistication that they are entitled to as members of the audience for these programs. The digest is marketed to discriminating, time-pressed viewers as a convenient way of streamlining their consumption of 'quality' television that allows them to extract the greatest amount of cultural capital out of the most parsimonious temporal investments. At the same time, however, in the name of concision and clarity the digest abridges the narrative complexities and eliminates the formal flourishes that mark these series as 'quality' television in the first place. For the digest's viewers, then, pop-cultural cramming appears to take precedence over aesthetic experience. The availability of the digest only confirms these viewers' positions within taste hierarchies. Needless to say, there are at present no plans to abridge daytime quiz shows or other low-prestige programs.
- 11 Just as frequently, however, fans isolate and upload exchanges that are irrelevant to the series' 'official' narrative, yet which are central to the program's appeal. For instance, YouTube is host to more than a dozen unbundled segments in which fans have identified suggestions of a suppressed sexual tension between Jack and Sawyer, two of the series' protagonists. Many of these clips have only short life spans on mainstream video sharing sites, as copyright holders may at any time request that hosts cease distributing them. Nevertheless, even after being removed from high-traffic sites they may circulate via peer-to-peer file-sharing.
- 12 John Caldwell's (1995) genealogy of television style provides the most substantial counterargument to glance theory.
- 13 In works like *Telesuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television* (1995) and 'Second-Shift Media Aesthetics: Programming, Interactivity, and User Flows' (2003), Caldwell compellingly argues that aesthetic analysis 'helps bridge the unfortunate gap that has widened between academic studies of industry, from a political-economic perspective, and critical studies in the humanities' (2003: 132).

In a later essay (2004: 44), however, he calls for a 'shift in the focus of analysis from aesthetics to notions of performance (how form is sociologically and industrially produced) and then to notions of "distributed cognition" (or how TV form emerges in from broad but unstable networks of codified and contested industrial rationality)'.

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