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Family, Fear, Paranoia and Revenge in 21st Century America: A Cultural Analysis of 24

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Abstract:

This paper examines the first season of the Fox Television program *24*. Specifically, the discussion will center upon the construction of meaning within the text, the genres *24* draws from, its narrative structure, the institutions and industry responsible for its creation and the historical context in which the series premiered.

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The Denotative Meaning within 24

At the most basic level, the first season 24 is a tale about three families: the Bauers; the Palmers; and the Drazens. The families are at different times in conflict against and in alliance with each other throughout the course of one day. Jack Bauer is a federal agent tasked with protecting Senator David Palmer, who is also a presidential candidate and is the target of a conspiracy orchestrated by the surviving family of Serbian war criminal Victor Drazen. The Drazen conspiracy is a plot to extract revenge upon Bauer and Palmer for the deaths of Drazen's wife and children in a botched covert operation carried out by Bauer and authorized by Palmer two years before the events of season one.

At the same time, both Bauer and Palmer must contend with conflicts within their own families. For example, Jack is dealing with the recent separation from and reconciliation with his wife Teri, as well as her strained relationship with their teenage daughter Kimberly. Early on in the season, Kimberly and Teri are kidnapped by the conspirators and used as leverage to force Bauer to assist in the plot to kill Senator Palmer. David Palmer, on the other hand, is forced to confront his son and wife over the murder and cover up seven years ago of the man who raped his daughter. In doing so, he comes into direct opposition with the high-powered donors who have financed his political rise.

It is the way in which the families deal with themselves and the threats to their unity, both internal and external, that drives the first season. Almost every character, major and minor, can trace his or her loyalty to one of the three families of this story, with the notable exception of the numerous federal agents struggling to control the situation. The players in this story will lie to, cheat, steal from, torture, murder and betray each other in order to protect their interests and, ultimately their families. The actions of the characters are believable, because all of the intrigue,

espionage, murder and betrayal is motivated by the most basic and universal of impulses.

Connotative meaning behind the characters in 24

The main characters add a further level of meaning to the story. The following three characters are explored in order to provide a broad understanding of the season. Due to the specific details of the narrative, which will be discussed later, 24 has an incredibly high number of characters for a network series. It would be impossible to discuss them all, even in passing, within this particular paper. The story will be discussed in the next section.

Jack Bauer is a white male in his late 30's to early 40's, who works for the federal government as an antiterrorist agent. He is a father, a husband, and a protector of the American way of life. He is linked inextricably to the power and potency of the United States of America. For instance, the Counter-Terrorism Unit, of which he is the head, is a fictional entity that stands between American civilians and the certain death wished upon them by terrorist threats both foreign and domestic.

Teri, on the other hand, is not linked to such "strong" institutions as Jack. She is a wife, and a mother. As such, she is ill-equipped to take part in the world of counterespionage. Not surprisingly, Teri becomes something of a liability, a victim, and ultimately a casualty in the events of 24. In the meantime, however, Teri does exhibit great courage in her attempts to protect her daughter, even to the extent that she allows herself to be raped in order to spare her daughter the same ordeal. Her actions and sacrifice underscore the inherent strength of motherhood, which again goes back to the idea that season one of 24 is all about the importance of family.

David Palmer is a father, a husband, a Senator, a presidential candidate and an african-american male. All of the above makes him a likely target for assassination in any number of political thrillers. It is his minority status, however, which makes him unique within the narrative. He is referred to as "the first minority candidate with a real shot at the White House."

This links him, then, to the idea of change as much as anything else. It is also interesting to note what he is not linked to. Only once during the course of the season is his party named, and that is only during the last quarter of the season and only in passing. In unlinking him from specific policies or goals he becomes more acceptable to more people within the audience. At the same time, it highlights the role of C.T.U. in protecting political figures regardless of loyalty or belief system.

Mythology in 24

The mythological backing for 24 is diverse, to say the least.

Elements of Pinocchio, for example, crop up in the story line of the first episode when Kimberly sneaks away from her parents to go out with a dangerous pair of men in their 20's. Much like Pinocchio's experience with the lost boys who turn into asses, Kimberly quickly loses control of herself and the situation.

On another level, Jack's story is reminiscent of the Book of Job. At the outset, he is an honest man, doing his work well and pleasing his bosses. Just like Job, however, all of the supports within Jack's life quickly fall away, leaving him on the other side of the law and cooperating with his enemy, much as Job was separated from God.

Also present in 24 is the camelot mythology, in this case referring to both the Arthurian legends and the Kennedy's. Palmer represents the same type of virtuous leadership figure as Arthur or Galahad. His quest, however, is for power rather than the Grail. At the same time, he is a younger man, much like John F. Kennedy and Robert Kennedy, and the possibility of his death evokes the same type of tragedy as R.F.K. In fact, one of the assassination attempts take place in a hotel, just as R.F.K.'s death occurred in a hotel during a campaign stop.

More fundamental to 24, however, is the idea of the damsel in distress. Jack's motivation is inspired by the need to rescue Teri and Kim as much as it is to protect Sen. Palmer. The

Drazen plot also stems from distressed damsels, in this case those who were accidentally killed by Bauer's team six years ago.

24 and genre

24 draws heavily from action, thriller, espionage, and drama. Like most action programs and thrillers, the entire season is marked by the use of handheld or steadicam shots. The camera is in motion more often than not, reacting to and following the action during gunfights, car chases, and other similar sequences as well as during tense exchanges of dialogue. The music is sweeping, epic and immediately noticeable, utilizing a full orchestra to permeate, link, and emphasize every scene to the point that scenes with no musical score stand apart.

At the same time, guns and computers are featured prominently in the scenes dealing with Jack and the federal agents. Weapons of different sizes and types make frequent appearances and are discharged with a disturbing regularity that cannot simply be attributed to the series taking its setting from Los Angeles. The violence, while ostensibly portrayed in a hyper-realistic manner is such a huge presence within the series that it borders on the absurd, especially when one considers that the entirety of the action occurs during one 24 hour period. Technology, especially that which is associated with information-gathering and communication, appears almost as frequently.

The dialog is incredibly serious, devoid entirely of comedic relief and bordering on melodrama. Everything that occurs in *24* is of the gravest importance, and that is conveyed through the earnestness with which the lines are delivered. As with espionage programs, surprise is vital to holding the interest of the audience. To that end, plot twists can be expected to crop up, oddly enough, right before the hour, every hour. This is not to say that the rest of the structure is devoid of surprises, but a cliffhanger is assumed to occur at the end of each hour.

As for drama, it is found between the lines of this text. Unlike dramas such as *The O.C.* or

Dallas the creators of *24* must fit interpersonal drama in between the other elements of the program which, admittedly, occupy a lion's share of the airtime. The drama is found in the downtime between gunfights, or in moments of desperation as characters wait for their imminent deaths.

Narrative structure of 24

The structure of *24* is such that each episode of the season corresponds to one hour of the day. This includes commercial breaks, and makes allowances for credit sequences. One drawback to this unique format is that each episode could very well center on Jack Bauer's titanic struggle with Los Angeles traffic if his was the point of view through which the entire story was told. In order to mask the mundane and boring elements of the day, the narrative structure is advanced through several different stories unfolding at the same time in disparate locations with completely unrelated casts. Of course, the events of the day bring the unrelated casts together at specific points, but the ensemble nature of the program allows the authors to switch the perspective to whatever story arc is the most useful at any given time.

The narrative begins with a revelation that a plot is in the works to kill Senator Palmer. Equilibrium is broken, and from that point events unfold that involve Jack, Teri, and Kimberly in the conspiracy. The Senator, meanwhile, learns of the coverup his wife and son entered into seven years ago, and the fact that the story will soon break, coincidentally enough, during the California presidential primary. Jack learns that the people he works with are involved in the plot as Palmer deals with the trials of the primary and his family situation. After Kimberly is kidnapped, Jack is forced to participate in the plot against Palmer, and is eventually implicated in an attempt on his life. Jack escapes from police custody and rescues his wife and daughter, then works with Palmer to thwart the plan. Eventually they discover that the Drazen's are behind the plot to kill them. Jack and the C.T.U. agents continue unraveling the plot and eventually thwart

the plan, which includes freeing Victor Drazen, who is still alive and in the custody of the United States government. At that point, the three families are in direct conflict, with Victor still wanting to use Jack to kill Palmer. Not surprisingly, this conflict comes to a head during the final quarter of the series, and features sweeps-worthy guest stars Dennis Hopper and Lou Diamond Phillips (both of whom, it is interesting to note, have previously starred in movies with 24 star Keifer Sutherland). The conflict plays out with Jack wiping out the Drazens, Palmer riding a strong victory in California to an assured victory in the general election, and a final betrayal that sees Jack's most trusted ally revealed as a mole within his unit who kills Teri in an attempt to escape.

It is important to examine the ways in which Keifer Sutherland's Jack Bauer goes about his duties. He tortures suspects, ignores rules of evidence such as warrants, and works literally outside the law at points. It is also important to remember that only a few short weeks had passed since the terrorist attacks of 9/11/2001 when 24 premiered on American television. Naturally, a large portion of the audience would identify with, perhaps even encourage an authority figure to circumvent civil liberties in order to protect the American way of life. The logic of that can, and should, be debated, but given the kind of certainty of Jack's inherent capability to judge right from wrong, his decisions to break the law are understandable when couched within the narrative.

Institutions involved in 24

24 is created by Imagine Television and airs on the Fox Television Network. As such, the production of 24 is contingent upon two conditions. First, Imagine Television must acquire a budget to produce the program; and second, Fox must agree to air the program. Without one, the other condition is irrelevant. Central to maintaining this relationship are several factors, such as viewer reaction (i.e. ratings), press reviews, network perceptions, and the cost of production versus the revenue that can be generated through advertising sales.

Star power is an important aspect of the show. Keifer Sutherland is a known quantity in Hollywood, with many successful films to his credit. As a motion picture actor coming to television, his very presence adds credibility and increases interest within the press community. Unfortunately, that star power also means that Sutherland must continue to be associated with the program. So, the audience will never take seriously any threat to Jack's life. Consequently, the tension must come from threats to the "mission" or those close to Jack.

Imagine Television is reliant upon Fox Television for providing airtime for the program. A good time slot on a good night can make the difference between acceptable ratings and early cancellation. Fortunately for Imagine, Fox gave them a 9:00 Tuesday time slot, putting them in competition against situation comedies and reality programs. With no other dramatic fare to compete against, *24* was allowed to make a name for itself as something new and different from the current offerings from other networks.

The industry and 24

24 is produced in the United States of America, specifically in California. The production utilizes union labor to create, write, shoot, edit and finalize the work into an airable product. The season is broken into 24 equal segments approximately 42 minutes each. The *24* episode format conforms to the industry standard for a season of hour-long drama. The episodes are 42 minutes long in order to allow for the industry standard amount of advertising and station identification. These industry-driven requirements actually serve to reinforce the narrative structure, as noted previously. Finally, after the product has first aired, opportunities wait for syndication and DVD sales.

Conclusion

Assuming that the previous reading of the first season of *24* is correct, certain connections can be inferred between the content of the text and those audiences who contributed to the

success of the series.

Beneath the images, the story, and the characters of *24*, the central driving force is the desire to stave off change for as long as possible. All of Jack Bauer's efforts are focused upon bringing his family back together and removing them from the danger that his life has placed them in. At the same time he is forced to balance that motivation against his loyalty to protecting the security of the United States of America from those who seek to upset the status quo. This is ironic from an industrial standpoint, however, in that the text itself represents a significant break, in many ways, from the traditional way in which hourlong dramas are produced for American television. That break is also reflected in the ultimate resolution of the season, which ends with Jack saving the Senator's life, thus fulfilling his obligation to maintain societal order, while failing to save the lives of his wife and the unborn child she carried. For whatever reason, the content of the season, when taken as a whole, was able to secure a second season on FOX during a season in which a great number of programs were canceled. In fact, *24* has recently completed its fourth season on the FOX Network and enjoyed brisk DVD sales of the previous three seasons. The success it has experienced with audiences and the network shows that something about the series resonates with those who watch it. It is plausible, given that the series premiered shortly after the 9/11 attacks, that audiences responded to the authoritarian nature of Keifer Sutherland's Jack Bauer, and the unflinching manner in which he roots out and destroys threats to his family, the United States, and by extension the families of all Americans. The fact that in doing so he breaks many laws and violates the rights of many people may have been lost on some viewers, or perhaps even welcomed by others. What this tells us is that viewers, while perhaps not explicitly endorsing the torture, extortion, kidnap, and murder of criminal suspects, may have found gratification in seeing those methods employed against those hardened international criminals who deserved such treatment.