

British Culture and *spooks*

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Abstract:

This paper examines the first season of the BBC Drama *spooks* in terms of how the text reflects the culture which produced it. The culture in question is that of the United Kingdom.

Specifically, the discussion will center upon the construction of meaning within the text, how the program uses genre, draws upon mythology, arranges narrative structure, and relates to the institutions and industries responsible for its creation as well as the historical context in which the series premiered. This discussion will reference a similar examination of the FOX Drama *24* for comparison, as both deal with similar material in similar times, though they speak to very different cultural understandings.

British Culture and *spooks*

The BBC Drama *spooks* premiered in the United Kingdom in 2002. Just a few months earlier, 19 members of a fundamentalist religious sect hijacked four passenger jets and used them as weapons to attack the United States. The United Kingdom declares its allegiance to and defense of the United States against global terrorism, and a new age of espionage, counterespionage, terrorism and military action is born. That sounds less like a historical backdrop for the premiere of a televised spy drama and more like the plot for a season cliffhanger for a televised spy drama. Nonetheless, that is the reality that *spooks* premiered into, and as such, this paper will attempt to gain a greater understanding of the culture that produced and consumed *spooks*.

The denotative meaning within spooks

In a word, *spooks* is about spies. The choice of the title makes clear from the beginning that the series centers around a job, and how that job impacts the lives of the group of people who do that job. In the first series, the men and women of MI-5 deal with threats from overseas, from within the United Kingdom, from the national bureaucracy, and from within the agency itself. Interestingly enough, the first threat the group faces comes not from the IRA, nor Al Qaida, but instead from a white American woman with a southern accent, a penchant for quoting the Bible and a plan to set up a pro-life terror network in the United Kingdom. Other notable threats come from rogue agents, white supremacists, Kurdish nationalists, felonious Members of Parliament, and a hard-core Al Qaida splinter group. The men and women of MI-5 deal with these threats, with varying degrees of success, in the course of executing their jobs. Rarely in the series is patriotism pointed to as a motivation for the characters, but rather they do it because it is what they are good at and what they are being paid to do. Consequently, much of the series focuses upon “the grid,” the physical location, or office, where they coordinate their duties. It is

somewhat similar in design to the Counter Terrorism Unit from *24*, which premiered shortly before *spooks*, although the grid is much smaller and lacks much of the high-tech accouterments featured in *24*. This may be an attempt to convey a deeper sense of reality, or it may simply reflect the limited resources employed in the execution of *spooks*.

The job is all-consuming for the men and women of MI-5, as is demonstrated consistently throughout the series by the number of times members are pulled away from “normal” lives to return to their duties. This is illustrated effectively through the character arc for the protagonist, Tom Quinn, who begins the series pretending to be an IT worker named Matthew Archer. Matthew has a relationship with a real woman who is clueless to his true identity, and Tom is forced to risk his normal life by revealing who he really is. He does, and in doing so, inadvertently places them in danger. In fact, the series ends with the unanswered question of whether or not Tom’s actions have indeed led to the deaths of his girlfriend and her daughter. The implication is that all three, Tom included, are killed in a bomb blast in the last scene.

Connotative meaning in spooks

The word “spook” has several key meanings. First off, spook in this case refers to a spy. Secondly, a spook is also a ghost. Someone who has been spooked has been scared. Lastly, spook is also a racial slur in the southern United States. For obvious reasons, the series has been re-titled *MI-5* in the United States. However, in the British context a spook is a spy, someone who blends in with the crowd and reports on what that crowd is doing. It carries something of a negative connotation, in much the same way one might refer to a lawyer as a shyster or ambulance-chaser. At the same time, the term evokes mystery, and elements of intrigue that normal citizens cannot participate in.

The characters in *spooks* are not easily read. They all have back stories that neither audiences nor agents, it is hinted at, are privy to. This mystery adds to overall impression of

intrigue and obfuscation that pervades the series. The characters make reference to themselves as civil servants, for example, which is obviously true but at the same time leaves out a good deal of who they are and what they do.

Also, the spooks are often shown conducting their business, which is literally of life-and-death seriousness, in the most unassuming of places. Bars, restaurants, parks, markets, real estate agents, and cemeteries are all venues for the clandestine, yet public, operations they undertake. The connotation is that these stories could easily be unfolding around average people every day without the knowledge of the bystanders.

Lastly, it is interesting that family and friendly relationships are spoken of by the characters, but only Tom's doomed romance, mentioned previously, is ever explored on camera in the first series. This helps to heighten the mystery and isolation of the series.

Mythology and spooks

One of the main myths that *spooks* draws upon is that of St. George and the Dragon. The myth itself is inextricably tied to the United Kingdom, and is instantly identifiable with the British people. In the context of *spooks*, the men and women of MI-5 are constantly battling the dragon, or evil, in an attempt to protect the kingdom. There are few scenarios that could be more in tune with traditional British ideals of service and self-sacrifice for the crown. Just like the airmen of the battle of Britain, the spooks give their lives in defense of the country.

Another important myth for *spooks* is the Arthurian myth. The agents of MI-5 are similar to Arthur's knights in one key way. They are steadfast in their devotion to King and Country, and in fact the two agents who turn rogue are notable, much like Lancelot, for their forbidden love. One was in love with another agent, and another fell in love with a young anarchist and killed himself to save her from being arrested.

Also, the series draws, negatively, from the "mythology" of James Bond. As Bond was a

fictional hero operative for MI-6, his character stands as the anathema of the MI-5 operatives. They drive Ford Mondeos, not Astin Martins, they drink beer, not martinis, and they frequent the streets of London rather than the casinos of Monte Carlo.

Like *24*, however, *spooks* often places the blame for betrayal with women, much in keeping with the Christian myth of creation. Tessa, one of the senior agents at MI-5, for example, turns out to be defrauding the agency of thousands of pounds in money to pay for phantom sources. In *24*, Nina, one of Jack Bauer's closest allies, and woman with whom he shared a bed, turns out to be a double agent working against the Counter Terrorism Unit.

Genre and spooks

The producers of *spooks* drew upon spy drama, thrillers, action, soap opera, and office dramas in order to create the series.

The producers of *spooks* utilize gadgets and spy gear in much the same way that other spy programs, such as *24* or *Alias*, would. However, *spooks* makes reference to budget problems, warrants, and mundane details such as dealing with a surveillance subject's household pets and alarm clocks while still dealing with the fantastic intelligence-gathering equipment found on other programs. The result is almost a pervasive sense of dowdiness, or a slight absurdity. Long shots of the stars walking in slow motion while wearing dark, billowing trench coats are few and far between on *spooks*. The characters never stop being human, and as such do not turn into icons.

There are moments of intense action, and cast members do end up on the wrong side of violence somewhat often. While not creating the type of body count seen in *24*, there is a steady stream of action throughout the series. The first series featured car bombs, a vest bomb, sniper rifles, a deep fat fryer, knives, handguns, machine guns, fisticuffs, and an antitank missile. However, the violence was never stylized and rarely accompanied by a musical score.

At the same time, *spooks* series one relied heavily upon personal relationships in much

the same way as office dramas and soap operas. Tom's doomed romance, for example, experiences many ups and downs throughout the series, and his romance is never given short shrift in favor of car chases or gun fights. Also, the politics of the office are extremely important in that whoever is in control of the office is also in control of determining how the office, and by extension national security, operates.

Narrative structure of spooks

Series One of *spooks* consists of 6 hourlong episodes. Unlike *24*, *spooks* employs a fairly traditional narrative structure. Each episode introduces a new problem, including a new villain, and proceeds to focus almost exclusively upon that conflict, resulting in the eventual resolution of the conflict before the end of the episode. Naturally, time and attention are devoted to the common threads that run through the entire season. For example Danny, a young MI-5 agent, has a problem with credit cards which is introduced in the second episode and eventually comes to a final conclusion in the fourth episode. While the narrative deals with these smaller, personal details, the series still devotes the greatest focus to dealing with the terrorist threats that the agents face. As the program is something of an ensemble piece, the narrative focus is divided amongst several different viewpoints during each episode, including that of the villain for each week.

Time is generally important in *spooks*, although not nearly so much as in *24*. Events do not occur in realtime within *spooks*, and as such the narrative is far less constricted than for *24*. The freedom to manipulate time makes it possible for the narrative to allow events to unfold over days and weeks, and in different parts the United Kingdom.

In other ways, *spooks* is far less traditional. For instance, *spooks* does not use violence casually. Whereas other series, notably *24*, may let bullets fly with great frequency, the main characters in *spooks* do not fire a single bullet throughout the six episodes of the first series. This

is not to say that the series is devoid of violence, but a good deal of it is hand-to-hand fighting and much of the rest occurs outside of the audience's view. Also, *spooks*, like *24*, manages to kill off one of its female leads in the first season. The death featured in *spooks*, however, was so horrific---it involved a young woman's head being forced into a deep fat fryer before she was finally shot---that it generated the most complaints the BBC received during the entire season. It was, however, not the climactic tragedy that ended the first season of *24*, but was rather another step in the overall narrative structure of *spooks*, serving to color the events that came after.

Institutions involved with spooks

Series one of *spooks* was produced by Kudos entertainment for the British Broadcasting Corporation. Kudos is an independent media producer operating in the United Kingdom, while the British Broadcasting Corporation is a publicly owned broadcaster funded by viewer license fees assessed to all television-owning households in the United Kingdom.

Kudos specializes in producing film and television works, with many destined for publication through the BBC. As such, Kudos produces programs designed to appeal to the sensibilities of audiences in the United Kingdom. As an independent producer of film and television, Kudos stands to benefit from close relationship with the BBC, and also from the renewal of a series for multiple seasons. This fact necessarily impacts the manner in which a series is structured. For example, the cliffhanger ending of episode 6 is designed to leave viewers wondering how the situation will resolve. Consequently, the content of any future series of *spooks* will also be tied the content of the previous series and will be forced to explain and resolve the ending of the last series.

The BBC, on the other hand, is not as dependent upon the success of *spooks*. As the publisher, the BBC has a wide variety of sources to turn to for material. However, they do benefit from a successful series in that it provides evidence that the BBC is fulfilling its mandate

to operate in the public interest. A series like *spooks* is also the sort of property that is likely to do well in foreign rebroadcasting, as has been the case with *MI-5* on A&E in the United States, as well as in home video renting and ownership. While the monetary success associated with syndication and DVDs is not part of the BBC's mandate, it does help to spread the image of the BBC, and the United Kingdom, contributing to the perception of the BBC and the programming it offers as something special and perhaps slightly above what other media outlets are capable of providing. Also, a high profile success like *spooks*, which is now in its fourth production season, helps to justify the license fee, as it demonstrates that the fee goes to support television for all members of the audience.

Industry and spooks

The British television industry is quite different from that of the United States. The drive for ratings is not nearly as strong as it is in the U.S., nor is there a set standard length for a series. For example, *24* season one is composed of 24 episodes, which is a normal amount for an hourlong drama. The first series of *spooks*, however, is only comprised of six episodes and would most likely have found life on network television, such as FOX or ABC, in the form of a mini-series (the series did find an American home on the cable network A&E, but only after achieving success in the United Kingdom). Another quirk of the British television is the idea of the "watershed" point, at which adult content becomes fair game for the programs. As such, the producers of *spooks* are not bound to keep violence, nudity, sexuality, or adult language out of their programs. Whereas Jack Bauer is never able to use the words "shit" or "fuck" in dealing with the horrible events of his day, Tom Quinn is free to use them within reason. The frankness of speech and behavior possible on *spooks* that is missing from *24* helps to ground the program by making the verbal reactions of characters realistic, if not always palatable. The same convention has yielded effective results on American cable programs such as *Sex in the City*,

Deadwood, The Sopranos, and The Shield.

Conclusion

The British culture reflected in series one of *spooks* is one that hails bureaucracy as the path to salvation against threats to the common good. The men and women who protect the country do not use jet packs and laser-powered watches, instead they wear button-down shirts and sensible shoes while thwarting evil. At the same time, it is a culture of mistrust and often unwelcome alliances. The dichotomy therein is undoubtedly a reflection of the changing nature of security, and how one enemy, such as the IRA, can be useful in gaining intelligence about and perhaps stopping another enemy, such as Al Qaida. The role of the United Kingdom is changing, and *spooks* reflects that change. No longer is the U.K. a dominant empire, able to shape world events through the barrel of a gun, but turning instead to “soft power” and the power of intelligence to alter the course of world events and ensure the survival of the British people. Series one of *spooks* not only accepts that change, it embraces it, offering nuance and sophistication where previous generations had relied upon strength and intimidation to achieve the same goal.