Publicizing the US National Security State through Entertainment

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DAVID GRONDIN, AUG 6 2014

Harold Finch: [Opening narration, Season 2 of *Person of Interest*, CBS] You are being watched. The government has a secret system, a machine that spies on you every hour of everyday. I designed the machine to detect acts of terror but it sees everything. Violent crimes involving ordinary people. The Government considers these people "irrelevant". We don't. Hunted by the authorities, we work in secret. You'll never find us, but victim or perpetrator, if your number's up… we'll find *you*.

From a quick glance at some of the most popular TV series featuring the national security state [1] in the US since 9/11, one cannot help but wonder how crucial the events of September 11, 2001, and the ensuing "war on terror" have been for the imagination of TV creators and producers. From *24* [2] (on Fox, 2001-2010) to *The Unit* (on CBS, 2006-2009) to *Person of Interest* (on CBS, 2011-) and *Homeland* (on Showtime, 2011-), and more recently to *The Bridge* (on FX, 2013-), there has been no shortage of terrorist plots, preemption politics, criminal conspiracies, and current security issues screened for the American public. These TV shows can evoke, and even condone, some practices deemed reprehensible by the American public or outside (read *non-American*) viewers, such as waterboarding, torture, and rendition. However, the stories told in these pop culture vehicles can also elicit further critiques of currents policies, whilst also inviting alternative narratives and accounts of what September 11, 2001, has wrought for the American society.

The national security state governmental leaders believe it is necessary to think the unthinkable and the unimaginable; in other words, to always imagine the worst-case scenario – a governmental practice inscribed in the DNA of the national security state ever since the advent of the atomic bomb (Grondin 2010). Patrick Jackson and Daniel Nexon are indeed right to assert that "[b]y studying mass entertainment we can gain important insights into the changing parameters—the limits of possibility—of what constitutes legitimate political narratives and also into how such parameters may be reinforced through narrative and story-telling" (Jackson & Nexon, 2003: 144). In effect, popular culture has become an ideal platform to study the depiction of national security scenarios and the politics of the national security state. The series *The Americans* (on FX, 2013-), which is part of a recent TV retro fascination with all things "80s" (with ABC's *The Goldbergs*, 2013-) and which focuses on FBI counterespionage and Soviet sleeper agents facing one another in Ronald Reagan's America, still speaks to current concerns with its counterterrorism plot and its inquiry of true patriotism and sympathizing with the enemy. *The Americans* can also inspire and resonate with the current state of relations between the US and Russia, now back to a more eerily familiar oppositional state as we may currently acknowledge from the management of the ongoing conflict involving pro-Russian rebels in Ukraine. Henceforth, whether critical or not of current security practices and policies enacted under the name of national security by the US government, viewers all remain somewhat attracted and permeable to the surrounding discourse of fear, terror, and insecurity that has come to define the atmosphere in which American society is set – and which transpires even in its more mundane manifestations, such as popular culture, with the spectacular televisual representations offered by the US national security state entertainment complex (i.e., the web of institutions, TV and film studios, writers, producers, and broadcasters involved one way or another in diffusing national security stories) (Fattor 2014).

IR Turns to Pop Culture

To naysayers of the pop culture turn in IR (read Cahir O'Doherty's insightful engagement with them, 2013), the question may well be: why should we tether our analysis to popular culture to make sense of geopolitics and international relations? As can be surmised, following the work of others who have used pop culture to study the textual and symbolic aspects of popular geopolitics, popular culture allows us to foster the conditions of possibility for thinking about alternative futures, worlds, and scenarios. Paying attention to the representation of national security in popular culture partakes in the "aesthetic turn" of IR (Bleiker 2001; Grayson *et al*. 2009) and pays heed to the work of Klaus Dodds (2006, 2008, 2010) and Jason Dittmer (2005, 2010), who are interested to see how war and national security are visualized in several televised and cinematic productions (the focus here being on TV series). Though I take Gerard Holden's critique that most IR analyses of the aesthetics and of popular culture have so far been limited to cinematic ones, [3] it remains that cinema and television are massively popular media that have a sizeable public outreach. Given that they are also consumed digitally through computers and electronic tablets, adding to their penetration effect, I believe they have something more "uncanny" to deliver when it comes to depicting the national security state imaginaries because of their hyperrealist potential (i.e., when one can hardly distinguish reality from a simulation of reality).

Mainstream cinematic and televised entertainment from Hollywood and the major TV broadcasting stations have been at the forefront of American lives for the major part of the last century. Whether we like it or not, Hollywood and American mainstream TV shows have sold the popular culture of the United States at home and abroad, acting as a staple of the American way of life nurturing the American dream for generations and a global audience. Henceforth, more than a decade into the new millennium, in an era purported to be the "golden age of TV series" and slowly going through a noted decline of movie attendance amidst certain blockbusters' success, one must acknowledge that cinema and TV series are still understandably instrumental to the promotion, representation, and legitimacy of American values, and offer testimony to the continued relevance and influence of US cultural power in global politics. In effect, as the "US national security state entertainment complex" tries to sell a certain idea of America, it paradoxically unconsciously makes us all *viewers*, Americans and non-Americans, "immigrants" in the US in Lauren Berlant's mind. As Berlant explains, there are conditions that dictate how citizenship is understood by mainstream America and that shape the dominant view of what the American national identity ought to be, what America is, and even how it is embodied and sexualized (Berlant 1993: 552). In turn, this affects primarily those who fall outside this ambiguous national view, leaving these individuals with only fantasies to seeing their desire fulfilled, as they are struggling to reconcile with this impossible desire to become national (*Ibid*.: 565-6). As for us viewers, by wanting to watch these national security TV shows and movies, we implicitly and figuratively become immigrants, as Berlantian way, that is, "someone who desires America" (Berlant, 1997: 195-6). And selling an idea of what America is, and what it stands for *is* what matters here. Even if shows like *Homeland* or *The Americans* try to play on this, it ultimately comes back to the normal script (the narrated national(ist) story) of Americans as righteous do-gooders, and abandons the foil of treason to challenge the nature of the "enemy", and accepts the sacrifice and love of freedom.

Beyond the Real/Reel in Selling National Security *as* American Life

Poststructuralists like Michael Shapiro have long stressed how fallacious and problematic it was to try to maintain a fixed barrier between fictional and non-fictional texts, as "the production of all texts (as well as their reading or consumption) involves acts of imagination" (Shapiro, 1992: 17). The increasing blurring of the lines between reality and fiction is certainly not unprecedented, as there is a long history of public-private collaboration between the Pentagon and the entertainment industry that goes back as far as the Second World War. The novelty, however, is that we have become somewhat accustomed to such fetishism of national security. As Deepa Kumar and Arun Kundnani aptly point out, through "militainment", [4] the national security state pop culture system feeds on always going further in imagining the national security state, "where film and television become arteries through which the national-security state circulates its latest obsessions" (2013). Without amounting to propaganda (even though it could), this means that national security entertainment can also always be used as a form of advertisement for the national security state or a critique of it. For scholars of International Relations studying popular culture, militainment may thus show how US national life is transformed and inhabited by militarization when one considers the anchoring of the military fact in the social fabric of American everyday life with war and national security being propagated and consumed as entertainment.

If cinema and television are studied as cultural products in their own right in media and film studies, they are also crucial for having made entertainment worthy analyses of global politics. The blurring of both fiction and reality has reached new peaks, as the *Law & Order* TV franchise shows have often served us episodes said to be "stripped from the headlines" in the past twenty years – for instance, with stories evoking the DSK affair, like a*Law & Order Special Victims Unit* (on NBC, 1999-) episode recalling the Dominique Strauss-Kahn sex aggression of a hotel housemaid in New York City in 2011, or recently an episode of the CBS summer show *Unforgettable* (2011-) that was inspired by General David Petraeus's love affair with his biographer. In using these real life news as background, these TV episodes both make clear that the TV writers of these shows are part of US society as they are inspired by the news, and may get the viewer-citizen to debate political and key issues that these news have put to the fore, like the limits of money, power, fame, and the right to privacy, the right to free speech, a woman's right to consent, or the primacy of national security.

If these shows are also dated, they are set in a context, both a televisual and a historical one. But for anyone who has lived the past thirteen years in the US or has watched US TV shows and Hollywood movies, the impact of September 11, 2001, events and of the ensuing "war on terror" have been significant on the US political landscape and film industry. Indeed, when it comes to the September 11, 2001, events, the mediascape even felt "just like a movie" (King, 2005: 47). People were glued to their television and computer screens, watching live the collapse of the twin towers and video replays of the plane hitting the second tower. This uneasy feeling involved with the visual experience of the World Trade Center attacks that garnered a pornographic sentiment reminiscent of Hollywood disaster movies has *not* been lost on Hollywood filmmakers and producers since. Thereafter, movies like Paul Greengrass' *United 93* and Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* both dealt directly with the realistic representation of these very events and offered visualized realistic fictional accounts of the Real. But the same cannot be said when it comes to the paranoid fantasy of production of disaster movies like Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow* and *2012* depicting a post-apocalyptic climactic scenario, which fed on "the worst can happen" belief, crystallized for many Americans by the 9/11 events, and which the infotainment mediascape has vigorously instilled afterwards. [5]

Concluding Thoughts

In studying popular culture as "both objects and *worlds*" then (Meehan, Shaw, and Marston 2014: 61; original emphasis), one may study *Harry Potter* (Neumann and Nexon 2006), *Shrek* (Nieguth, Lacassagne, & Dépelteau 2011), or *Battlestar Galactica* (Kiersey and Neumann 2013) *in* IR and *as* IR. This "provides an impetus to view the signifying and lived practices of popular culture as 'texts' that can be understood as political and as sites where politics takes place" (Grayson *et al.* 2009: 157). Granted that "[s]cripted television – drama or comedy – serves as a political force in contemporary America" (Meehan, Shaw, and Marston 2013: 8), when it comes to studying the US national security state especially, it is actual and fictional worlds that coalesce. In looking more carefully at what the national security state entertainment complex has offered in the guise of CBS's *Person of Interest*, for instance, and its "Machine" (an AI surveillance software), one cannot help but notice how it almost anticipated PRISM, the NSA surveillance program leaked by Edward Snowden in June 2013, whilst offering a dystopia that can only ring true and hit closer to home than it could have ever had before the scandal. In so doing, one does *not* need to commit to a study of popular culture where it serves as mere representations of international politics, but, as Matt Davies acknowledged in a previous *E-Inernational Relations* article, one engages with "popular culture as a specific way of theorizing world politics that yields specific and different insights into international relations" (Davies 2013). In this sense, one can get to the core of what the national security state entertainment complex teaches in a more-than-representational way (Dittmer 2010: 96), in the projection of a dystopic future-to-come as the basis of a critique of the overreaching powers of the national security state blatantly violating the privacy of American citizens.

References

[1] This would mainly include the security institutions that are involved in the conduct of national security matters (Department of Defense, CIA, National Security Council, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Department of Homeland Security, main governmental leaders, etc.).

[2] It came back with *24: Live Another Day* for a 12-episode series in Spring-Summer 2014, while there is also a television film entitled *24: Redemption* that aired on Fox in 2008.

[3] Holden's critique of the limited IR aesthetic turn singles out cinematic IR (2006).

[4] This is the conflation of military and entertainment, as coined by Stahl (2010), an idea that rejoins James Der Derian's MIME-Net (2009).

[5] François Debrix, 2007.

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About the author:

David Grondin is Associate Professor in the School of Political Studies at the University of Ottawa. His research centers on the US national security state and the transformation of the American ways of war in the digital age, taking on issues of secrecy, surveillance, privacy, and technology, as well as exploring the cinematic and televisual rendition of the national security state. His current solo project addresses US technowar and the militainment complex, while a joint project undertaken with his University of Ottawa colleague, Nisha Shah, focuses on the materiality and (in)visibility of secrecy and surveillance. He is the editor of a special issue in *Geopolitics* (2011), also published as a book by Routledge in 2012, *War Beyond the Battlefield*.