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Counter-Terror Culture: Ambiguity, Subversion, or Legitimization?

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This article examines themes of terrorism and counter-terrorism in US popular culture, focusing on eight cinematic or televisual works from the pre- and post-9/11 environment. Each of these works explores the dilemmas posed by terrorism, counter-terrorist mobilization, and occupation and resistance in fictional spaces. Three of the works – *24*, *The Agency*, and *The Grid* – are narratives that attempt to simulate the activities of counter-terrorist operations in, respectively, a wholly fictional Counter Terrorist Unit; the Central Intelligence Agency; and ad hoc intelligence and tactical groups combining CIA, FBI, NSC, and MI5 agents. The other five works are more removed from an explicit attempt to mimic ‘reality’: *The X-Files*, *The Matrix Trilogy*, *Alias*, *The 4400*, and *Battlestar Galactica*. In all of these works, the dangers to human rights posed by both overt and covert security operations lie at the core of their narrative structures.

Keywords terrorism • counter-terrorism • popular culture • *X-Files* • 24

IN THIS ARTICLE, I examine representations of terrorism and counter-terrorism in the contemporary culture of the USA. I focus on eight *representations*¹ of terrorism and counter-terrorism, first pre- and then post-9/11. Three of the works (*24*, *The Agency*, and *The Grid*) *simulate* counter-terrorist operations in, respectively, a fictional Counter Terrorist Unit (CTU); the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA); and combined operations involving CIA, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), National Security Council (NSC),

¹ When using the word ‘representation’, I follow the ‘schizoanalytic’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 203–204) line of flight offered by Deleuze & Guattari (1986: 306) in *Anti-Oedipus*: “‘Symbolic’ thus no longer designates the relation of representation to an objectivity as an element; it designates the ultimate elements of subjective representation, pure signifiers, pure nonrepresented representatives whence the subjects, the objects, and their relationships all derive’. For the relationship between ‘crisis of international politics’ and a ‘crisis of representation’, see Campbell (1998: 169).

and UK Security Service (MI5) agents. The other five works are more removed from *actual*² agencies and threats: *The X-Files*, *The Matrix Trilogy* (*The Matrix*, *Matrix Reloaded*, and *Matrix Revolutions*), *Alias*, *The 4400*, and *Battlestar Galactica*.

Dangers to human rights posed by security operations are a major concern of these works. Some take an ambiguous stance vis-à-vis dissident and/or security agent tactics involving terrorism and criminality. In this general context of ambiguity, I map these works' two dominant themes: *subversion* and the competing theme of *legitimization*.

Examples of the *theme of subversion*³ are: (1) embracing, or being ambivalent about, dissident or subversive acts, including the use of 'terrorism'; (2) delegitimizing the security apparatus by showing intra-organizational competition and factionalization within the apparatus; and (3) showing security agents engaging in criminal and at times *fascistic*⁴ behavior.

Examples of the *theme of legitimization*⁵ are instances that show the effectiveness of counter-terrorist agents, agencies, and technologies (mentioned briefly in this article). Beyond the thematic of legitimization, some of these works (or actors appearing in them) have been used to recruit agents for actual security agencies.

The subversiveness of an ambivalent framing of terrorism and counter-terrorism is noteworthy. Ambiguity subverts discourse used to legitimize counter-terrorist operations, because legitimizing discourse is characterized by absolute certainty. For example, the counter-terrorist discourse of US President Ronald Reagan's administration has been characterized thus: 'In such discourse, there are no gray areas, no complexities, no historicized understandings, no doubts about the self, and no qualms about the nature of the result' (Campbell, 1998: 86). This is obviously still a core theme in

² When discussing representations of actual or imaginary security agencies, terrorists, dissidents, and threats and targets, I am fully aware of the difficulty of any representation approximating a 'real' that is the referent of the representation. When using 'real', 'actual', and 'virtual', I am drawing on a vector of critique that deeply problematizes issues of representation; see Deleuze (2005); De Landa (1991, 1997, 2006); Der Derian (2000, 2001, 2002); Deleuze & Guattari (1986, 1987); Shapiro (2005, 2006); Pisters (2003).

³ My use of the word subversion to denote strategy and tactics to disrupt both 'micro-fascism' and 'macro-fascism', along with 'post-fascism', is informed by the works of Deleuze (as cited in Lotringer, 1996), Deleuze & Guattari (1986, 1987), and Foucault (2003).

⁴ Or perhaps better 'post-fascist' behavior emanating from a 'worldwide war machine, which in a way "reissues" from the States displaying two successive figures: first that of fascism . . . and the second, post-fascist, figure is that of a war machine that takes peace as its object directly, as the peace of Terror or Survival' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 421).

⁵ My discussion of 'legitimization' borrows somewhat from Foucault's understanding of 'legitimacy' and Habermas's ideas of legitimization and 'legitimation crisis' or 'deficit' in democratic polities. Foucault details the relationship between power, sovereignty, and legitimacy thus: 'the theory of sovereignty shows, or attempts to show, how a power can be constituted, not exactly in accordance with the law, but in accordance with a certain basic legitimacy that is more basic than any law and allows laws to function as such' (cited in Foucault, 2003: 44). Habermas identifies the origins of a 'legitimation crisis' when 'administrative manipulation of cultural matters has the unintended side effect of causing meanings and norms previously fixed . . . to be publicly thematized . . . a process that shakes the structures of the depoliticized public realm so important for the continued existence of the system' (cited in McCarthy, 1981: 369).

counter-terrorist discourse, which is typified by the US National Counter-terrorism Policy released on September 2006:

Democracy is the antithesis of terrorist tyranny, which is why the terrorists denounce it and are willing to kill the innocent to stop it. Democracy is based on empowerment, while the terrorists' ideology is based on enslavement (White House, 2006: 10).

All of the works examined in this article attracted, and continue to receive, critical attention for interpreting the cultural after-effects of the Cold War, the 1991 Gulf War, and, most importantly, both pre- and post-9/11 'wars on terror'.⁶ These works were in development or broadcast both before and after 9/11,⁷ providing an opportunity to detect discontinuous cultural shifts or the durability of certain themes. Following 9/11, some scripts and airdates were altered, raising questions of censorship and possible conflation of the 'real' and fictional *virtual*⁸ spaces of the global and US media space. Additionally, for both *The Agency* (allowed to film scenes at the headquarters of the CIA) and *Alias* (whose star, Jennifer Garner, recorded a recruiting video for the CIA), the role of these cultural products raises a critical question. Are they in the end subversive, or do they contribute to the legitimacy of internal security and intelligence agencies?

I explore the above question by: (1) demonstrating the historical roots of the representation of the ambiguities of subversion and order from World War II and the Cold War; (2) detailing the rationale for selecting the films and television programs I examine; and (3) discussing the two themes I identify by examining these works in both the immediate pre- and the post-9/11 environment.

Pre-9/11 Representations of Terror/Counter-Terror

I use the works examined in this article to detect shifts in representations of terrorism and counter-terrorism in the USA because they were in production or distribution both before and after 9/11. At the time of 9/11, *The X-Files* had been in production for nearly 10 years (its first broadcast date was 10

⁶ In particular, *The X-Files* (see Cantor, 2001; Kakutani, 1997; Kellner, 2002; Knight, 2000, 2002; Wildermuth, 1999; Willman, 2002) and *The Matrix Trilogy* (see Lavery, 2001) have generated debates about their larger cultural effects, including, but not limited to, themes relating to representations of counter-terrorism and terrorism. This is not to say that these are the only, or most important, works to use to examine the cultural effects of previous and current 'wars on terror', because terrorism and counter-terrorism has been a longstanding theme of literature and cinematic, televisual representations (see Black, 2001; Crowds, 2004).

⁷ Rather than stating 'the coordinated attacks of 11 September 2001' each time the events of that day are referred to, I will instead use '9/11'. Additionally, when I refer to the post-9/11 environment, I am including the invasion and occupation of Iraq, Afghanistan, and the post-9/11 'global war on terror'.

⁸ See Footnote 2 (above) for a brief discussion of works that inform my definition of these specific concepts..

September 1993). The first *Matrix* film was released in 1999, and the two sequels were in production during 2000–02. The series *24* was in production in late 2000, and first aired in late September 2001. *The Agency* was also in production in late 2000 and early 2001, as was *Alias*. *The 4400* and *Battlestar Galactica* began production post-9/11, and both have concluded their third seasons. Finally, three of the series are currently in syndication: *24*, *Alias*, and *The X-Files*.

US culture was affected by terrorism before the terrorist attacks of the 1990s and 2000s. World War II and the Cold War also had a profound impact upon the representation of internal security or policing issues raised by these conflicts.⁹ The domestic terrorist attacks and violent incidents of the 1980s and early 1990s – such as the first World Trade Center bombing and a succession of violent stand-offs between the federal security apparatus and white-nationalists, Christian Identity groups, and religious cults (such as the Branch Davidians) – provided much of the backdrop for some of the works considered here.¹⁰ Additionally, the highly complex and elaborate instruments of social control that have been developed and deployed to govern human populations through a variety of ‘crises’ throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries have had a cultural impact working at a much deeper level than the momentary spikes in cultural preoccupations occasioned by catastrophic events such as 9/11.

During the mid-to-late 1990s, there were indications that representations of terrorism could perhaps cut too close to the bone, as was the case with a scene in the 1998 cinematic adaptation of *The X-Files* (Maslin, 1998). In a somewhat controversial scene, the protagonists, Agents Mulder and Scully, search a building that resembles the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. The resemblance between the building in *The X-Files* movie and the Murrah building may have been coincidental, but the explosion of an elaborate improvised electronic device (IED) that severely damages the building in the film bears a striking resemblance to the Oklahoma City bombing. This was noted by media critics as either: (1) an inconsiderate exploitation of the tragedy of the bombing; or (2) a sign that the shock of the violent events of

⁹ A systematic view of the presence of themes of ambiguity, subversion, and legitimization in Depression era, World War II, and Cold War era cinema and television is beyond the scope of this article, although an integral part of my research agenda. There are a number of important works that examine this historical period (see, Black, 2001; Britton, 2004, 2005; Cohen, 2005a,b; Hepburn, 2005; Kackman, 2005; Miller, 2003).

¹⁰ The 1990s were characterized by various ‘wars on terror’ as well, including early mobilization of counter-terrorist apparatus against what came to be labeled as ‘Al-Qaeda’ and the equally intense series of security operations in the USA against white-nationalist, neonazi, and militia paramilitary organizations, terrorist networks and autonomous violent direct action cells, such as the cell that carried out the Oklahoma City bombing (see Coulson & Shannon, 1999; Dees, 1996; Flynn & Gerhardt, 1989; Gibson, 1994; Wright, 1995). US culture has long been affected by ‘terrorism’, going back to at least the 1880s during the US and global ‘wars against anarchist terrorism’ (Jensen, 2001, 2004) and violent struggle between anarchists and labor activists and private and state security forces (Preston, 1994; Smith, 2003), struggles reflected in literature such as Conrad’s *Secret Agent* and London’s *Iron Heel*.

1993–95 (World Trade Center bombing, the siege at Waco, and the Oklahoma City bombing) had worn off, or at least that the US public had moved past the shock of those events.

Post-9/11 Representation of Terror and Counter-Terror

To anyone familiar with the spy life, these plots sound anywhere from faintly to patently absurd. 'It's in the boredom that important stuff gets done,' says *MI-5* consultant Mike Baker, a 14-year CIA veteran who now serves as CEO of Veritas Global, a risk management service provider. 'But if you showed them people debating in a conference room and filling out forms in triplicate, they'd turn it off after five minutes' (Silver, 2005).

The above quote characterizes a media critic's portrait of the opening of the 2005 season for *24*, *Alias*, and A&E Network's broadcast of the series *MI-5* (the US title for the BBC series *Spooks*). The immediacy of 9/11 has faded, and perhaps a work's popularity is due to quality, rather than to its capturing the *zeitgeist* unleashed by 9/11.

A number of works, both those discussed in this article and others, had short runs or have been cancelled, including *The X-Files*, *The Agency*, *Alias*, and ABC's *Threat Matrix* (Stanley, 2003). And yet, the popularity of these cultural products may not fade. *The X-Files* and *Alias* are still in active syndication. *Battlestar Galactica* and *The 4400* are in the midst of their 2006–07 production and broadcast schedules, and are clearly flagship programs for the Sci Fi and USA Networks, respectively. With this extremely brief overview of both the historical and immediate pre- and post-9/11 examples of relevant works complete, I will now move on to detailing how the works I examine reflect the ambivalence of some US culture products regarding terrorism and counter-terrorism, as structured by the themes of subversion and legitimization.

Terror/Counter-Terror in US Culture: Ambiguities of Subversion and Order

In this section, I provide an overview of two major themes in the works examined. Given the global distribution and popularity of these films and programs, it could be said that they reflect themes that also resonate with global audiences. While issues of global production, distribution, resistance, and consumption clearly need to be considered,¹¹ I restrict my observations about the possible reception of these works to US audiences. The works evoke dominant US cultural norms, but they also either implicitly or explicitly

¹¹ For instance, see Amoores (2005).

represent, and at times embrace, the cultural norms held by counter-cultures in the United States, including 'extremist' political cultures.

This is why the field of interpretation opened by these works is so complex. They occupy a position in US culture that lies at the nexus of a profound ambivalence about the forces of order, the forces of rebellion, and the utilization of methods of terror by both to impose and legitimize their respective political projects. A key conclusion I draw from my analysis is that, while much has been written about the profound impact of 9/11 (Denzin, 2002; Martin-Jones, 2006;¹² Der Derian, 2001), the events of 9/11 have not erased ambivalence regarding the security apparatus and 'terrorism'. This may also indicate that the future impact of the 'global war on terror' will continue to be characterized by this ambivalence, because it is so embedded in US culture, and perhaps the culture of polities throughout the planet.

Despite 9/11, fears of excessive state intrusiveness and centralization of the means of coercion are clearly evident in these works. Deep-seated fears of the possible perfection of *securitization* and *biopolitical* control (Shapiro, 2005: 21–22) can be seen in them. Ambivalence towards certain forms of criminality and dissent are particularly apparent in *The X-Files* and *The Matrix Trilogy* (Warner Brothers, 2005). Sympathy with 'suspect populations' and violent resistance is evident in the USA Network's (2005) science-fiction series *The 4400*, and the use of terrorism as a tool of resistance to occupation in the Sci Fi Network's *Battlestar Galactica* during its third US season.

Ambiguity and subversion are indicators that a 'rally around the flag' effect permeates the entirety of neither the 'culture industry' (Horkheimer & Adorno, [1944] 1994)¹³ nor the 'military-industrial-media-entertainment network' (MIME-NET; see Der Derian, 2000: 786–788). The durability of ambivalence makes debatable whether the culture industry is uniformly in support of the 'virtuous war' of counter-terrorism (Der Derian, 2000: 772–775; 2002: 115). Direct or even oblique critique of the so-called global war on terror may retreat into (science) fictional spaces, including the western and action genres, as it did during the Cold War (Costello, 2003; Lipschutz, 2001; Hendershot, 2003; Robin, 2001). A telling post-9/11 summation of this retreat of critique of counter-terrorism and occupation into 'fictional' spaces and genres where self-censoring and censorship is less likely is expressed by Ronald D. Moore, one of the executive producers of *Battlestar Galactica*:

On *Battlestar*, these issues are more queasily ambiguous. Its futuristic tale of mass genocide of humans and persecution of survivors by the Cylons, a race of zealot androids, somehow manages to feel both realistic and oddly contemporary. 'The networks are terrified of controversy,' says *Battlestar Galactica* executive producer Ronald D. Moore. 'But in sci-fi, they don't notice or care so much – you get a free pass' (Edwards, 2006).

¹² See especially the chapters on 'American Triumphalism and the First Gulf War' and 'Renegotiating the National Past After 9/11'.

¹³ Especially the fourth chapter, 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception'.

Subversion: Embracing Dissent

Some of these works explicitly probe the amorphous boundaries between legitimate dissent and terrorism. In both *The X-Files* and *The Matrix Trilogy*, dissent – including ‘acts of terrorism’ – is portrayed as necessary to support political struggles: (1) to prevent the colonization of the planet in *The X-Files*; and (2) to disrupt the rule of Earth by artificial intelligence programs and sentient machines in *The Matrix Trilogy*. These works represent the durability of themes of subversion after 9/11, reflecting ambivalence toward, and fear of, a future dominated by techniques and technologies of control in the service of tyrannical elites.¹⁴

In *The X-Files*, FBI Agents Mulder and Scully often are allied with dissidents within or without the US security apparatus. The agents often hack into federal computer systems using the expertise of either the Lone Gunmen or other dissident cells, and disrupt experiments on the human population, some of which are justified as necessary counter-intelligence/counter-terrorist investigations.¹⁵

Subversion: Delegitimizing Policing

An argument could be made that, after 9/11, the USA collectively turned a blind eye to its tradition of anti-statism¹⁶ and suspicion of the forces of order, and uncritically embraced patriotism to bolster internal/homeland security. However, in these works, the apparatus is portrayed in an unflattering and threatening fashion, as opposed to being paragons of virtue and defenders of justice, and this is perhaps one of the most potentially subversive moves in these works.

Organizations and individual agents – from the CIA in *The Agency*, to the CTU in *24*, to the FBI in *The X-Files* – have complex motivations. This is even the

¹⁴ For a discussion of the configuration of the actual global surveillance apparatus and its component parts, see Amoore & De Goede (2005); Zureik & Salter (2005). For a discussion of representation of the surveillance apparatus in a film released post-9/11 but not discussed in this article, *Minority Report*, see Shapiro (2005: 29–32).

¹⁵ Discussion of the impact of federal ‘experiments’ upon the population has been a longstanding theme in both the spy/espionage and science-fiction genres, one that all of the works in this article draw upon (see Broderick, 1999; Britton, 2004; Cantor, 2001; Cohen, 2005a,b). Representations of US federal experiments are part of an even broader theme, the willingness of scientists to cooperate with horrific abuses of human rights, which is also an important component of critiques of the Enlightenment project, decrying its ‘self-destruction’ (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1994: xiii) in the light of projects executed by scientists around the globe (see Miles, 2006; Moreno, 1999) throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, when the ‘compound of totalitarianism, holocaust, and total war obviously and profoundly challenged the tradition of the Enlightenment’ (Katznelson, 2003: 33).

¹⁶ See Friedberg (2000: Chapter 1; 2002) for a discussion of the tradition of US ‘anti-statism’. I do not mean to imply that the USA has not developed a large central state and security apparatus, but rather that at the level of political culture there is a norm of suspicion of the dangers posed by a large federal state.

case for the 'Agents' of *The Matrix Trilogy*, who represent, in the virtual-prison world of the film, the agents of a security agency/entity who are policing¹⁷ a virtual world that distinctly resembles late 20th-century USA and global urban spaces. Agents in *The Matrix Trilogy*, in particular Hugo Weaving's Agent Smith, are garbed ironically in the stereotypical clothing and mannerisms of FBI, CIA, Secret Service, and/or National Security Agency (NSA) agents, and are the most obvious villains or enemies throughout the *Trilogy*. The deliberate dressing of violent agents of control in proto-typical FBI garb would be particularly jarring for those socialized in the representation of the FBI in such shows as *The FBI*, which simulated the J. Edgar Hoover-era bureau defined by an elaborate and strict fashion code characterized by dark clothes, dark ties, and starched white shirts (Donner, 1981: 120–125).

In these works, the security apparatus is represented ambivalently as: (1) engaged in enforcement of normality upon a restive population within which lie a number of different enemies; (2) divided internally between different factions, some of whom respect the chain of command and standard operating procedures (hereafter, SOPs), and others who willfully violate both the chain of command and SOPs; and (3) engaged in fascistic levels of violence and programs of mass experimentation and genocide.

Another potentially subversive representation of the apparatus focuses on both agents' and agencies' persistent violation of the laws and SOPs that regulate their activities. These works could be arranged on a spectrum indicating agent and agency autonomy and willingness to violate norms and SOPs, and those that represent the most deviance are the most potentially subversive.

An excellent example of this is Fox Broadcasting Company's *24*, which is based on a fictional CTU, similar to some of the intelligence-fusion 'ad-hocracies' assembled by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to fuse the activities of the FBI, the CIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), the NSA, and state and local law enforcement.¹⁸ In *24*, the lead character Jack Bauer (played by Kiefer Sutherland) has a degree of autonomy that frequently verges on criminality. However, though the fictional Agent Bauer's criminality might stand out, in the universe of *24*, the CTU, other components of the security apparatus, and even the presidency are all penetrated by factions who use criminal violence to accomplish their goals. While Jack Bauer has repeatedly tested the limits of his autonomy and deviance, he is also repeatedly reintegrated into the CTU (FBC, 2006a).¹⁹

¹⁷ This use of the word 'policing' borrows much from Foucault: 'the police . . . which is both a disciplinary apparatus and a State apparatus' (Foucault, 2003: 250).

¹⁸ An example of intelligence-fusion bureaus can be seen in the current US National Counterterrorism Center; see NCTC (2006).

¹⁹ One of the forms of deviance and criminality that is often featured in *24* is the use of interrogation techniques that are clearly acts of torture violating international and US law, acts that could easily be considered war crimes. This has generated significant controversy in early 2007, including a visit by actual inter-

The lead characters in *The X-Files*, Dana Scully (played by Gillian Anderson) and Fox Mulder (played by David Duchovny), are assigned to a wholly fictional unit within the FBI, with a degree of autonomy that allows them to violate norms and procedures. Agents Scully and Mulder are more frequently and explicitly punished for their deviance than agents in *24* or *The Agency*. One of the chief forms of punishment for the deviance of Agents Mulder and Scully is the use of the X-Files Unit within the Bureau as an arena of conflict. The unit's dissolution and destruction, and then reinstatement or reconstruction, occurred seemingly once every season (FBC, 2006b).

In *The Matrix Trilogy*, the security apparatus is represented by characters aptly termed 'Agents', who police the virtual human civilization in a manner roughly analogous to the role played by federal, state, and local security forces in the actual United States of America. These Agents have an incredible degree of autonomy from the norms of human governance in the Matrix, because they are merely simulating the appearance of law enforcement and intelligence agents. At any time, Agents can slip out of their simulated roles and use the most extreme forms of violence and manipulation to control their human subjects.

Before moving on, I must draw attention to the fact that I have avoided a direct examination of the (mis)representation of the Arab- and Islamic-American populations in these works, and in US cultural products generally (Akram, 2002; Shaheen, 2001). I have done this not because the subject is unimportant, but rather because of this article's focus on more general themes. It would be difficult to say that the 'enemy' in each of these works is primarily and/or consistently associated with Arab or Islamic populations (for instance, 'Islamist terror networks' are not the 'central threat' in *The X-Files*, *The Matrix Trilogy*, and *Alias*), although the recent controversy about the representation of an immigrant Arab/Islamic-American family in the 2005 season of *24* illustrates the sensitivity of this issue (Muslim Public Affairs Council, 2005).

As an example of sympathy with dissident and 'suspect' populations, in the finale of the concluding two-part series for *The X-Files*, 'The Truth', aired on 19 May 2002, Agent Mulder is imprisoned in a Marine brig at Quantico, Virginia, after having penetrated a federal facility and killed a Marine (who was actually an alien penetration agent posing as a Marine). Mulder's orange jump suit, the harshness of his interrogation, and the military tribunal empanelled to investigate and sentence him, bear a striking resemblance to the prison garb and interrogation and prosecution routines faced by the

rogators from the US military, intelligence, and law enforcement communities, to meet with the producers of *24* and Keifer Sutherland, asking them to reconsider, if not eliminate, the show's seeming embrace of war crimes and torture as a necessary expedient in the faltering 'global war on/of terror', because these 'virtual' techniques are slipping into the minds of 'actual' US security apparatus personnel being trained in the not-so-subtle arts of interrogation/torture (see Buncombe, 2007; Mayer, 2007).

detainees at Guantánamo Bay and throughout the CIA's overseas prison network used for 'extraordinary rendition' (Mayer, 2005). These final episodes in the series were taped following the events of 9/11, and are open to interpretation as being sympathetic to the plight of those unjustly accused of committing 'terrorist' crimes against the state.

Sympathy with 'suspect populations' can also be seen in the science-fiction series *The 4400* (Adams, 2004; USA Network, 2006; Stanley, 2004), which features the Department of Homeland Security and a fictional National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) managing the arrival of 4,400 abductees/returnees who suddenly materialize out of a ball of light at a lake in Washington state. The 'suspect population' of 'the 4,400' is quite sympathetic; they are processed through internment centers for reintegration back into American life, and placed under constant surveillance by the DHS and the NTAC owing to suspicions that they may still be under alien influence. In both the first and second seasons, the 4,400 are threatened with quarantine and detention owing to a disease propagating through the returnee population. Terrorism or hate crimes against 'the 4,400' returnees plays a role in the fourth episode of the first season, 'Trial By Fire' (air date 1 August 2004), which details not only a string of assassinations of returnees, but also a thwarted suicide truck bombing of a returnee compound.

The continued impact of the so-called global war on terror can be found in the Sci Fi Channel's reworking of the 1970s ABC series *Battlestar Galactica*. Whereas at first glance this series may not seem an ideal candidate for detecting shifts in US culture reflecting the 'war on terror', the presence of Cylon²⁰ suicide bombers conducting critical infrastructure attacks aboard the military craft *Battlestar Galactica* (aimed at destroying the fleet's water supply and disrupting efforts aimed at perfecting surveillance technologies to detect enemy agents within the human population) may demonstrate the impact of the global war on terror. The show's depiction of interrogation and torture scenes reflects a harsher and darker aesthetic than the first version. The narratives of all three seasons revolve around fears of penetration by Cylon sleeper agents mimicking humans and carrying out successful acts of sabotage, subversion, espionage, and assassination (Sci Fi Channel, 2006). It is evident that this series is evocative of a *zeitgeist* in which potential enemies, such as spectral Al-Qaeda sleeper cells, can attack without warning and shatter normalcy.

²⁰ The Cylons in *Battlestar Galactica* are an enemy species of artificial intelligence programs and sentient machines that were developed by humans and, at the opening of the series, staged a surprise attack against human planets, wiping out all but approximately 50,000 humans out of a population numbered in the billions.

Subversion: Nihilistic Violence of Invasion and Occupation

The invasion and occupation of Iraq are linked, both discursively and actually, to the post-9/11 environment. Therefore, it is critical to at least briefly touch on the emergence of themes of subversion and legitimacy as they relate to occupation and resistance. While future articles will explore more deeply the presence of these and other themes in post-9/11 culture, I offer some preliminary analysis. The most critical work for examining occupation and resistance is the third season of *Battlestar Galactica*, which was aired in late 2006 and early 2007 on the Sci Fi Network in the USA (Sci Fi Channel, 2006). In the first episodes of the third season, humans on the planet New Caprica are under the control of the Cylons. Under occupation, the humans have polarized into a resistance network that uses suicide bombings, sabotage, and assassination to disrupt the occupation forces of human collaborators and their Cylon overlords.

The brutality and nihilism of the representation of this struggle of terrorism/counter-terrorism, occupation and resistance, and genocide in *Battlestar Galactica* cannot be overstated. Most importantly, I would argue that the very ambiguity in the representation of the tactics and strategies used by humans and Cylons must be understood as having great potential subversiveness. That the representation of occupation and resistance is informed by the occupation of Iraq is incontestable, at least for one of the executive producers of *Battlestar Galactica*, David Eick:

We don't sit around saying, 'Let's do an Abu Ghraib episode,' says Eick. 'But we're informed members of society and we watch the news – these things seep in.' Many people have drawn parallels between the Cylons and Al Qaeda, but Moore warns that they're not intended to be directly allegorical: 'They have aspects of Al Qaeda, and they have aspects of the Catholic Church, and they have aspects of America (Edwards, 2006).

Other post-9/11 series and films have also attempted to represent invasion, occupation, resistance, and the treatment of suspect populations – see *Threshold* (NBC, Sci Fi Channel), *Invasion* (ABC), and perhaps even *Heroes* (NBC, Sci Fi Channel), the *X-Men* films, and, of course, *V for Vendetta*, *Syriana*, etc. These, however, are beyond the scope of the present article.

Legitimization: Recruitment

After 9/11, the culture industry confronted questions about the reaction of the US (and global) audience: would there be a discontinuous change in the cultural *zeitgeist*? The fall 2001 television season had already been labeled 'A

Season of the Spies' before 9/11, because three of the major networks, Fox, CBS, and ABC, had developed dramas involving intelligence service and counter-terrorist themes with hopes of high ratings (Bernstein, 2001; Bianco, 2001; Britton, 2004: 252–255; Sciolino, 2001; Taubman, 2001). Immediately after the attacks, networks reconsidered series based on terrorism/counter-terrorism or the activities of intelligence services, namely *24*, *Alias*, and *The Agency* (Farhi, 2001; James, 2001; Keveney, 2001).

This represented a nexus of fictional 'near-future' television series being brought into question by the eruption of actual attacks that represented the materialization of imaginary future threats. An example of this nexus of the actual and the virtual is a quote from *24*'s executive producer Howard Gordon, who, commenting on the second season's fictional discussion of intelligence manipulation that anticipated US and UK distortion of intelligence data in the buildup to the invasion and occupation of Iraq, stated 'that was a surreal experience for us. . . . We came up with that story before Colin Powell's speech at the UN, so we found ourselves in this bizarre dance with reality. We weren't sure who was leading' (Gilmore, 2006: 52).

Some of the works, such as *24* and *The X-Files*, did not receive technical advice or support from the public relations departments of the US security apparatus. Other shows, however, especially *Alias* and *The Agency*, not only received production support, but became actively involved in recruiting agents for the CIA. *The Agency* was invited to film scenes at the CIA headquarters and was also offered other forms of production support. Jennifer Garner, the actress who plays the protagonist of *Alias*, was selected to assist in CIA recruiting. Garner's character, Agent Sydney Bristow, is a graduate student originally working for a rogue CIA faction SD-6, who is recruited by the CIA to help it disrupt and destroy the rogue faction.²¹ Despite the complexities of *Alias* and the representations of rogue factions of agents operating within the CIA, Garner was asked to record a series of recruiting videos for the CIA. The recruiting pitch for the primary video explicitly frames the career opportunities at the CIA in the context of the events of 9/11. Below, I have quoted from the main recruiting video that Garner recorded for the CIA:

I'm Jennifer Garner. I play a CIA officer on the ABC TV series *Alias*. . . . Since the tragic events of 9/11, the CIA has an even stronger need for creative, innovative, flexible men and women from diverse backgrounds and a broad range of perspectives (CIA, 2004a).

The use of an actress who plays a graduate student recruited by a rogue intelligence operation and then the CIA to engage in the actual recruitment of agents represents a fascinating case study of the slippage between the actual and the simulacrum in the 'global war on terror'. Indeed, the CIA Office of

²¹ For an interesting comparison between the virtual career of Agent Bristow and the career of an actual female graduate student recruited as an agent for the CIA in the 1990s and early 21st century, see Moran (2005).

Public Affairs points to the Bristow character as an ideal agent: 'the character Jennifer Garner plays embodies the integrity, patriotism and intelligence the CIA looks for in its officers' (CIA, 2004b).

Conclusion

Examining the themes of subversion and legitimization in these works, we find that momentary spikes in preoccupations with terrorism and counter-terrorism are clearly evident. But, at a deeper level, the works reflect more general themes relating to the policing of the boundaries between the self and the enemy/other that apply not only to the 'global war on terror' but also to the general impact of the era of total war, Cold War, and the proliferation of various 'wars on terror'. Ambivalent representations of both agents of the security apparatus and dissident activities reflect a general suspicion of state and science that pervades many polities, including the USA.

Security agents are represented as complex humans (and non-humans in the case of *The Matrix Trilogy*), with a range of motivations and often a willingness to violate their SOPs and codes of ethics in the pursuit of counter-terrorism. The apparatus is represented as suffering from rampant internecine and inter-bureau competition, and directed by networks of elites, who are either penetrated by enemy terrorist and/or criminal networks, or are themselves fascistic enemies within. The actions of dissidents (at times labeled 'terrorists' by agents of the security apparatus, as, for example, when Agent Smith refers to the protagonist/hero Neo's mentor, Morpheus, as 'a known terrorist' in *The Matrix*), including acts of terrorism, are not uniformly condemned in these works. In fact, violent and criminal tactics of dissent and resistance are at times celebrated, even in works that have been released, if not produced, following 9/11.

In answer to the question that structured this article – do these shows represent 'subversion' or security apparatus 'legitimization'? – the answer is yes to both parts of the question. Each of these works exists (or existed) in a global capitalist marketplace that has long demonstrated the ability to turn fears into a profit center (Birchall, 2002). Yet, some of these works can be regarded as subversive, or at least lending themselves to a reading that subverts a simplistic hyper-nationalist embrace of the security forces' internal and external activities and condemnation of acts of 'terrorism' and 'dissent'. In certain instances, especially in *The Agency* and *Alias*, works have been explicitly linked to and used by components of the security apparatus, namely the CIA, to bolster recruiting efforts. The use of both of these works to change the image of the Agency and enhance its recruitment efforts was part of a CIA perception-management project initiated five years before 9/11

(Bernstein, 2001). 9/11 intensified the cultivation of contact between the culture industry and the intelligence–military–law enforcement community.

Despite these efforts to cultivate a positive perception of the US internal security apparatus, there are other works whose intent is to cast internal security agencies as subject to abuses by malevolent agents and forces (such as the critical representation of the DHS in *The 4400* and *Battlestar Galactica*'s portrayal of a violent and nihilistic struggle of occupation, genocide, and resistance between the human and Cylon species/races). In the end, the catastrophic effects of 9/11 notwithstanding, certain segments of US culture are not in lockstep, but reflect the dark complexities and ambiguities of both domestic and international security environments, and the promise and peril of science and technology, that define the early 21st century.

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