

# 24/7, 16.8

## IS 24 A POLITICAL SHOW?

When writing about culture, one must necessarily contend with the problem of meaning. What can be said coherently about any given cultural artifact? Is the artifact always forthright about expressing what it means? Or is the artifact dealing in figurative expression, an allegory perhaps, that might make covert reference to a parallel, alternate narrative? What is the "best" technique for hunting down such a parallel narrative? Must we all become vigilant audience members, carefully substituting readings for or against any given manifest clue, in order that the latent narrative may see the light of day?



There is a commonsense notion today that *24*, the Fox television drama that premiered in 2001, is a show that tells us something about contemporary life. Roughly stated, the conventional wisdom on *24* is that "the show is America." Set in the post-9/11 United States, the hour-long serial is a prism into the nation itself, its anxieties about terrorism and torture, the growing police state, an obsession over real-time phenomena, the security of the clan and the family, the power of information systems, and the like. In recent months the show has provoked a flurry of controversy around these and other hot-button political debates.

Whether or not any of these issues adequately describes the inner workings of this particular cultural artifact remains to be seen. However, I would like to pose it as a problem for critique: Is *24* a political show? If so, in what ways is it political? How does this particular cultural artifact express a political claim? What hermeneutic method is appropriate to interpret the "meaning" of *24*?

The most prevalent interpretation of *24* is a political one because the series advocates a utilitarian moral philosophy that pits dubious short-term actions (e.g., torture) against the "greater good" of the contemporary state. If the new millennium brings a novel spin to the utilitarian impulse, it is probably the way in which a teleological sense of total utility is concocted anew with both a tick-tock urgency and a military state in which the "maximized good" is that of moral

truth itself. It is not clear if this is utopia or fascism. Nevertheless, two flags become unfurled. On one hand, the sense of urgency is a natural sublimation of the information age in which networked instantaneousness is the expected norm; any political "solution" is chronologically dependent only on the computer cycles available to execute it. The challenges in *24* are always informatic in this sense, because they hinge on the abilities of various cybernetic systems (weapon, com-link, agent, satellite camera) to operate smoothly without obstruction. On the other hand, from where does the show derive its yen for the definition of the total moral frame as that of the security of the state—at any cost—against total annihilation? This is also the consummate late-modern anxiety that those threats, which until now have arrived in many shades of grey, have now become, like the computer itself, *binary*; like the nuclear holocaust of the cold war, the terror strike, or the viral pandemic, or the warming of the planet—which promise to arrive not with small pricks of pins and needles but with a total collapse without recourse.

The utilitarian moral philosophy appears via a number of narrative and formal details. The most common is the digital clock, both in the nondiegetic time code that appears regularly before and after each commercial interruption and occasionally during narrative action, but also with in-world clocks that are ticking in every show (the nuke in season two, the virus pods in season three, the gas canisters in season five, etc.) The clock is adept at heightening the persuasiveness of the utilitarian rationale, for it convincingly elevates the absolute importance of the teleological good over the necessary blood that must be spilled in order to get there. If the end of society is so near, in seconds and minutes even, who will notice a little bit of spilt milk? Even President Wayne Palmer, one of the show's few characters not guided solely by the utilitarian impulse, confesses: "Sometimes you have to do the wrong thing for the right reason."

The question of totality is crucial here. One should remember that in Marxist theory "totality," echoed later by Georg Lukács as simply the "whole," was an indicator for political consciousness: as capital evolves via fragmentation and isolation, thus progressive thought must totalize both spatially and systemically but also chronologically via reference to "historical" wholes. The teleological quality of utilitarianism as utopia, in the form of thinking about the total security of the population or the future good in broad strokes, is thus at first blush a positive development. It evokes the extremely valuable task, in a very general sense, of obtaining a knowledge of future desires in terms of the material present. This is a version of totality that is closely allied with achieving a progressive social consciousness. In *24*, however, this does not happen. In a sort of "transfer of affect," any viable consciousness of social totality is transferred in the show over to the absolute totality of the moral claim: first that "we must save innocent lives" (the utopian,

biopolitical claim), which leads directly to the second that “we must stop the terrorists at all costs” (the fascistic, utilitarian claim) All intermediate crimes therefore—murder, suspension of juridical rights—are absolved and erased by the moral telos The totality creating the horizon of truth by virtue of the moral claim itself defines a new set of expedient “realities on the ground” that fit into such an image of the situation

Yet the utilitarian position is perhaps most interesting not for the expedient solutions it proposes but for the way in which it prohibits alternate moral frames such as the fixity of specific economies and flows, the logical destiny that this or that must happen no matter what the injury, the militarization of everyday life, the alienation of the here and now in exchange for some profiting to be realized later—this is the ideological framework of millennial U.S. capitalism that saturates the moral narrative of the show It is fundamentally the inability to think or dream in a non-economic manner that is the “totality” of the utilitarian claim But what sorts of alternate frames are possible? Certainly pacifism has been evacuated as a possible moral frame, or altruism, or any sense of romanticism Barring the saccharine subplots concerning the reuniting of various Counter Terrorist Unit (CTU) family members, there is no inner life in this story, no feeling of interiority, and no longing for communion with humanity. But ironically it is also the moral frame of universalism that must fall by the wayside. The expediency of utilitarianism, at least in the militarized and biopolitical form evident in *24*, is one that claims that there *are* no absolutes For this is the only way in which short term crimes can be absolved by long-term solutions Any action is okay today, as long as it is efficient and expedient in the long run But is this not also the moral relativism of capitalism, that those cute premodern values such as family, justice, or the integrity of the individual must be cast off for ‘round-the-clock attention to the bottom line? Thus the single moral claim, that the whole must endure, brings about its inversion in the absolute erosion of ethical action minute by minute

To summarize, “totality” in *24* has a double if not triple life It refers to the singular utilitarian frame, which must be asserted globally in order to vaporize any sense of experiential moral holism at the human level. Beyond this is a different notion of totality, the Marxian notion that the whole must always be brought to the fore if we are to make any coherent sense of our life or the social space we inhabit In this new cognitive totality, one finds the logic of all the rest reflected. In fact, the logic will indicate the hermeneutic process itself, replete as it is with all the necessary gaps and hiccups of doing interpretive work

The utilitarian reading leads quite briskly to a second: “the circumvention of protocol,” or more euphemistically, “hacking,” that is, the instigation of material governance within information systems in a manner entirely different from any notion of commercial or juridical power. This is where a specifically anticapitalist desire blossoms in *24*—through a pervasive rejection of law, bureaucracy,

and structure. The utilitarian moral telos, which might be fascistic in itself, nevertheless endorses principles of personal virtue, will-to-power, instinct, and usurpation of governance. In the control society informatic systems are always in a state of “self-exploitation” and are defined not as an integral object but as a flexible network of command and control, which only becomes realized through its own transgression by another informatic force. The force is often a virus, a CTU hacker, or any other informatic agent In a total, pervasive structure of organization—state of war, militarization of the police, automatic weapons, C4 explosives, pervasive militarism, SWAT teams outside every door—the cycle of control also facilitates “going dark” in the form of the “state of exception,” black prisons, extradition, and so on. The show fetishizes teamwork and chain of command, and protocol is always followed to a tee But protocol is also what must always be circumvented; by breaking the rules efficiency is achieved, whether toward the utilitarian, biopolitical moral end or ultimately the security of the population Is this utopia or fascism? Again, it is not so clear.

#### “JUST LET ME DO MY JOB”

But the question is still not completely addressed: is *24* a political show? The various moral claims only go so far. So for a first salvo, I propose a renaming of the series: *24/7* And likewise an assertion, if not evocative then at least provocative: CTU is the sweatshop of the new millennium.



The characters on *24* need to be understood not simply as a paramilitary force, what Louis Althusser calls the repressive state apparatus, but as a post-Fordist labor force as well. These are employees who quite literally *cannot clock out*. Like a sweatshop, they are chained to their jobs. This principle is demonstrated in the basic premise of the show, that the work day is no longer nine to five, but extends throughout all twenty-four hours. The show’s “day” is a work day. It is an economic state of exception, wherein the normal rules of fair labor practice (periodic work breaks, personal injury protection, overtime pay) are tossed out the window, and willingly so by the employees in question. Modernity brought the “I’m just doing

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Stills from the television series *24*

my job"—leave me alone in my penance, I'm just "working for the weekend"—attitude. But the information age has an entirely different emphasis: "Just let me do my job." In this mode there is a heightened ownership of one's labor within an ethic of self-worth and spiritual achievement. Real life is an anti-labor blockade, an interruption. The goal is not to uncouple from the sphere of labor, but instead to enter it entirely and sincerely. Inefficient extra and inter-labor distractions must be cast off. "Just let me do my job, OK?"—these words are vocalized in the show at least one time per episode.

At the same time as it is a sweatshop, CTU is also mutually related to a "normal" labor environment. The exceptional is always articulated via the normal and vice versa. The sleek corporate feel of the contemporary work space is everywhere in the show. Laptops, cell phones, open cubicles, conference rooms, and multipurpose spaces all are signifiers of the post-dotcom renovation of corporate life. Everything is fluid and flexible, which also means nomadic and impermanent. The explosion at CTU in season two is illustrative of the temporary nature of all contemporary work space. One often has to work in physical conditions that are perpetually "under construction." The members of the team might have to leave their jobs on a moment's notice. The workers on this show are a post-Fordist, nomadic labor force left with little to no job security.

The cruel irony is that the CTU lineup is not very good at doing its job. Each looming catastrophe that drives the show's serial narrative fails to be averted by this crack team: in season one, the Palmer assassination attempt goes forward; in two, the nuke detonates; three, a spurt of white stuff as the virus vials pop; four, meltdown, Air Force One down; five, hostages die, the gas is released. Catastrophe is, in the narrative logic of *24*, the money shot—it *must* be shown.

But the slacker nineties are gone forever even if these workers are not getting the job done. A new totality of work dominates in such a way as to trump all other realms—desire, juridical justice, personal relationships, etc. In fact, there is effectively *no* domestic space on this show at all. All sexual or familial relationships transpire within the walls of CTU headquarters or within the context of other work spaces. Women and children have joined the work force. Most if not all other personal relationships that defy the work space are met with death and ruin. Being alive and being on the clock are now essentially synonymous.

CTU agents cannot clock out, but at the same time they are expected to sacrifice life and limb while on the job. Each employee is expected in the normal course of the work day to risk his or her personal well-being. Like a sweatshop, where safety guidelines are routinely ignored, the notion of an injury-free work environment is prohibited here: both Tony and Chase are shot at close range but are back working at peak performance within the hour; Jack's heart stops but he is right back to work; George Mason goes terminal with plutonium poisoning but stays at his terminal all the way to the grave.

It is, in Marx's terms, the extension of both absolute and relative surplus: the work day is extended "absolutely" from eight to twenty-four hours, and at the same time the actual minute-by-minute urgency of the work day is elevated "relatively" such that the importance of productivity is measured by the raw horizon of one's own life force.

#### INFORMATICS AS STYLE

It is time now to address a mathematical concern. The chronology lie in *24* is flagrant. Here is a show that not only professes to be concerned with the fidelity of real-time representation, it goes so far as to avow this commitment, this mathematical obligation, by actually naming itself after the day-long interval it attempts to document, using the very numerical language of that interval: "Twenty-four." The numbers go like this: each episode lasts 42 or 43 minutes minus commercial interruptions; 42 minutes on the hour comes to 70 percent; there are 24 episodes per season. A complete season, therefore, comes to approximately 16.8 hours. So now a second retitling is warranted: not just *24/7* but also *16.8*.

What about the rest? Where is my missing time? What happened during those lost hours, those many accumulated interruptions? Of course the obvious answer: commerce happened. But it is more fundamental than that. Commerce did not happen; it is withheld, both from the perspective of form and narrative. The advertisement is "there," the content is "here." And then later after broadcast, on DVD for example, the advertisements are excised completely with no explanation at all. This is not to be alarmist, for of course we are dealing here with fictions from the onset, but the fact that the show flaunts its own chronometric failings by denying that they even exist is an indication of a logic of absence and disavowal that is worthy of closer scrutiny. This is the "reality gap" of reality television. There is a chasm, a media hole the length and width of which run 30 percent of the total dimension. What a massive void, all the more awe-inspiring in that it seems not to be missed at all.

But the loss of time reflects itself back on the immediate presence of the whole, as the mode of production becomes synonymous with "style" itself. In an extension of Raymond Williams's reading of television, one is able to see the media-formal imprint of capitalist modes of production and distribution on the semiotic logic of the medium. This was already explored above with the discussions around utilitarianism and totality. But it is also evident here, as 30 percent of the material withholds itself, all the while professing its own stopwatch exactitude.

The mock title *16.8* is a way to introduce the question of informatics as style. This is an occult numerology whereby one "special" number is replaced by another right at the very moment of its own articulation. The show does not present 24 hours to the viewer.

I suggest titling this phenomenon "disingenuous informatics." One piece of data, a specific time duration, is swapped for another of

lesser duration but equally as specific. The avowed threat becomes a spoof. One minute Jack is a traitor, the next minute he reveals it was all an elaborate lie. Every few minutes, the plot of the show flips radically, as unceasingly as the ticking clock itself. This is pure information as aphrodisiac, a cult of epistemological reversal. Surprise reversals, the "gotcha" ending, thinking one thing and then learning later that it all was otherwise—these many rapidly unexpected and changing narrative states evoke an "informatic pleasure" over and above any sense of visual pleasure. It is Aristotle's *peripeteia*, only repeated at such rapid frequency that it eclipses all other formal techniques. It is a central trait of the contemporary trend toward informatics as style.

Another trait is the issue of the body as an informatic database. Perhaps the single most emblematic scenario in *24*, the one motif that returns with most regularity and that sums up the entire signature of the show in a single gesture, is the interrogation scene. It is Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib writ large in the cultural unconscious. But in *24*, interrogation and torture are never questions of punishment, or of sadistic mutilation; the goal in these scenes is to extract informatic data from organic bodies. Interrogation is merely the technique for information retrieval; the body is a database, torture a query algorithm. If Jack is impassioned during an interrogation, it is always strictly his own PSYOPS tactic. There is never pleasure-seeking in his sadism. It is torture as zen.<sup>1</sup>

Information retrieval is always paramount in the *24* interrogation scene: the location of a bomb, or the answer to a clue, and the question is more about information flows. Answers are needed back at headquarters, answers that will allow the machines to hone in on the next piece of the puzzle. Bodies inevitably block those flows, contravening a more perfect efficiency of informatic flux. The body in interrogation is never mere flesh but is an informatic space that must be hacked according to its own proclivities, its own psychological or physiological profile. "Everyone has a breaking point," the viewer is reminded. It is merely a question of hacking the particular individual in question given the precise exploits known to be effective against him and only him. If the body happens to be damaged, it must be healed just to the point where the corpus is legible again (to proffer a password, to testify) before the body is discarded as no longer informatically viable. Or if a body no longer has any useful information it is summarily executed, as Nina is by Jack in season three. Data equals life; informatic viability trumps all other considerations (due process, mercy, human rights). In many ways it marks a return to the medieval inquisition model of torture. Both exclusively value immaterial rewards, except today it is informatic not spiritual.

Another important formal detail in the context of informatics as style is the waning of montage in the moving image. It is hard to understate the importance of montage as a twentieth-century cinematic technique. It extends from Lev Kuleshov and Dziga Vertov to the very center of the classic Hollywood continuity method.

However, with new media of the late twentieth century it is possible to identify a waning in the importance and use of montage as a technique. Lev Manovich has pointed out how the general aesthetic approach that he simply calls "morphing," a technique facilitated by the computer, is one for which montage is no longer central or even necessary, as one image grows and warps into another without a cut or even a dissolve in the cinematic sense.<sup>2</sup> The notion of morphing is crucial, as is the logic of "windowing" whereby more than one image appears framed within the entire screen.<sup>3</sup> This is one of the great aesthetic leaps of the graphical user interface beyond the example set by the cinema: no longer will the viewer experience montage via cuts over time, proceeding from shot to shot; one must now "cut" within any given frame, holding two or more source images side by side, which themselves will persist montage-less over much longer "takes" than their cinematic predecessors. Fusing cuts within the frame replaces fusing cuts in time.

But "beyond" cinema may also indicate a prefiguration of cinema, an undoing of its demands. In *24* the techniques of visual simultaneity follow the historical example of the visual arts, in particular certain genres of painting, illustration, and graphic design, whereby multiple panels appear together within a single overall frame, as in a triptych painting, ecclesiastical stained glass, or comic book. This side-by-side technique is used at the climax of each episode, as well as going in and out of each commercial break, and additionally throughout the show for special scenarios such as telephone dialogue.



One can quibble over why this might be the case. To formulate a coherent explanation, return to the question posed at the outset: is this show political? Note that the question is not: does the show have a political message? That question is exceedingly more difficult to answer, and is frankly much less interesting. The issue at hand is, rather, the expressive relationship between any given cultural artifact and the larger geopolitical context in which it exists. The question is: is the show, in itself, political—not, is it a courier for this or that political ideology. Thus, if the viewer can

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Still from the television series *24*

determine the material reality of the current geopolitical context and interpolate from it a model of semantic expression, as flawed or symptomatic the model might necessarily be, he or she will arrive at a coherent “way of viewing.” And this “way” will be political, simply by virtue of it being true. So the question remains, what are the material conditions of contemporary life? Luckily this is not a difficult question to answer, even if the answer is time-consuming in its telling. Gilles Deleuze referred to this as the “control society”: millennial flows of bodies and commodities, the transnationals, flexible accumulation, universal informatic protocols, rhizomatic networks, biomedicine, global empire, and so on.<sup>4</sup> More complicated is the model of semantic expression, which could be labeled “flawed or symptomatic.” I must thus show my true colors and side, somewhat axiomatically, with the Marxian and psychoanalytical notions of semiotic economies. This is a perspective that explains meaning-making and expression through the notion of what Fredric Jameson calls a “political unconscious” wherein cultural production is not simply the act of making a work of art and disseminating it, but instead is understood through complex flows of sublimation, transfer of affect, repression, subject formation, neurosis, and all the other aspects of desiring production. This is indebted to a tradition of critical materialism starting with Marx and proceeding through a number of figures, including Jacques Lacan and Jameson. The claim that the model is “flawed or symptomatic” is not to discredit its predictive utility but to acknowledge the critical gap that must necessarily exist in any theory of mediation. If we are lucky, the act of interpretation itself will realize and confess to the gap, shunning the folly of trying to cleanse the aesthetic by annihilating it in either the utopia of union or the dystopia of exclusion.

To see this at work in *24* it is helpful to return to the discussion of visual simultaneity and the waning of montage. Visual simultaneity is indicative of how informatic economies reappear in the show as “style.” In other words, what is evident in this show is the distributed network as an aesthetic construction, both at the level of narrative and formal design. Since it represents difference through time, traditional montage is less effective at displaying networked relationality. The notion of difference in space is better suited to a single plane, which is then bisected one or more times. Hence, the polyptych supercedes montage because it is a better representation of informatic networks, perceived as they are—surfaced, flat, horizontal, topological, and synchronic. The “poly-ptych” is, to stress an etymology that Deleuze would have liked, a “multi-fold.” It is a single plane that, through its own internal folding, allows multiple significant subsystems to express themselves simultaneously. In short, the polyptych is a network.

But visual simultaneity is also paired with a specific form of narrative construction that privileges the complex synchrony of an ongoing swarm of characters in a web of interaction. This is the visual and narratological equivalent of graph theory and social network theory. Filmmaker Robert Altman is the primary auteur for this technique, aesthetically repurposing in his style the growing importance of

interpersonal, “grassroots” networks in the new social movements of the 1970s. Thus, the ambient interconnectedness of story and character in *Nashville* (1975) or later in *Short Cuts* (1993) exists as a sublimation of the growing globalism in which “we’re all connected” even if we don’t entirely realize how, why, or what for. *Short Cuts* is, in this sense, a friends-of-friends network in which characters are nodes and their various actions and interplays constitute propagating links and gateways to other nodes. Altman gives some context, then, to the growing emphasis today on serendipity and concurrency in narrative media: two things happening in the same time or place, which may or may not overlap or “link.” Today the Altman touch has gone mainstream, essentially becoming a new dominant, as seen in films like *Magnolia* (1999) by Paul Thomas Anderson, *Traffic* (2000) by Steven Soderbergh, *Crash* (2004) by Paul Haggis, *Syriana* (2005) by Stephen Gaghan, or *Babel* (2006) by Alejandro González Iñárritu, all of which devolve into a narrative construction of pure rhizomatic imbrication. In these films, a number of relatively autonomous, yet ultimately interconnected, subnarratives proceed in parallel, often interconnecting for logical reasons or for reasons of happenstance. The thick latticework of relationships is not without precedent. *24*’s iteration owes as much to the soap opera as it does to Altman or Anderson. Regardless, this unique brand of narrative and visual simultaneity is one of the newly identifiable formal techniques in the control society.

Thus, *24* is a political show, but for entirely different reasons than might be assumed at the outset. *24* is political because the show embodies in its formal technique the essential grammar of the control society, dominated as it is by specific network and informatic logics.

The role of the viewer is to identify the specific socio-historical reality in operation and then to establish expressive connections between the medium itself and the larger context in which it is embedded. The expressive connections of course are never neat and tidy, but this is precisely what makes the act of interpretation so fun to begin with. What is the ideology of the aesthetic? It is an historical and material productive circuit, which both proscribes, in a stochastic if not outright manner, the formal grammar of any given aesthetic medium, yet nevertheless is the retroactive effect of that very grammar accumulated over time and culture.

ALEXANDER R. GALLOWAY is an author and programmer. He teaches at New York University in New York City.

NOTES 1. I thank David Parisi for this word choice, as well as his thoughts throughout. 2. See in particular Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001). 3. Anne Friedberg attends these questions with much greater detail than I. See the final chapter of her book *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006). 4. Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on Control Societies,” *Negotiations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 177–182.