

Jack Bauer: The Smart Warrior's Faustian Gift

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Abstract: Jack Bauer of the television series *24* is a highly charged contemporary mythic character who exists in powerful relationship to past and present real world and fictional figures. If Rambo was a classic Reagan era cinematic "hard body" (Jeffords 1994) Jack is the archetypal Bush "smart warrior," in a post-Patriot-Act-era. However like Rambo, Reagan's displays of bravado were decisive and successfully staged but George Bush has faced a multiplying set of uncertainties. This sets up a more complex set of relations between Jack, George W. Bush and contemporary masculinities than those presented by the Reagan era. Jack is both an emblem of unimpeded presidential will and a parable of its Faustian consequences.

"Let's play 'You're the President,'" *New York Times* columnist David Brooks wrote provocatively at the beginning of a piece that tried to shore up George Bush's stock in the wake of the December 2005 domestic eavesdropping revelations.

"Let's put you in the Oval Office and see what kind of decisions you make in real-world circumstances," he continues, setting up a narrative of real versus ideal in his mock make-believe.

"Because you are president, you are briefed each day on terrorist threats to this country. These briefings are as psychologically intense as an episode of "24," with descriptions of specific bad guys and their activities." (Brooks 2005)

Brooks choice of televisual metaphor is acute. *24*'s hero Jack Bauer has certainly defeated his share of "bad guys". Bauer is an artefact of crisis, a personification of apocalypse averted. In season one he stopped an assassination on Presidential candidate David Palmer, in season two he stopped terrorists exploding a nuclear bomb in LA, in season three he averted the release of a deadly virus and in season four he faced a rolling series of crises: including the potential melt down of all US nuclear power plants. In season five he not only confronts biological terrorism, he has to fight collusion at the highest level of the US government and then in season six he's pitted against nuclear dirty bombs again. In each season he races against the clock in 24 episodes, each representing an hour of counted "real time".

I will argue that the effects of *24* are more than just nail-biting cliff-hangers that carry over from episode to episode and season to season in a string of increasingly spectacular scenarios. Shows like *24* invite us into the presidential briefing room where in simulated "real-time" no-win security decisions have to be made. It is in the imagining of these extra-democratic moments that the real effects of *24* need to be located.

This paper argues that *24* is a highly significant contemporary television drama that speaks strongly to both current fears about national security and the potential excesses of securitisation. Its hero counter-terrorism agent Jack Bauer of the fictional Los Angeles based Counter Terrorism Unit (CTU) has become a cipher, a charged symbolic figure who can be read as a particular contemporary manifestation of two mythic stories central to American identity: the story of the apocalyptic and the story of

the frontier. Both these stories give rise to particular versions of masculinity and link to particular narratives of presidential authority.

The Sphere of Public Imagination

Understanding these complex processes that link our political and televisual realities involves a vision of the public sphere conceived of as a set of organic, associative reimaginings rather than a space of rational discourse. John Ellis argues that television as a whole – from current affairs to soap opera to reality shows – is a primary cultural mechanism that allows us to “work through” the various contradictory fragments that circulate in this space. He expresses it this way:

Television can be seen as a vast mechanism for processing the raw data of news reality into more narrativized, explained forms. This can be likened to the process of ‘working-through’ described by psychoanalysis, a process whereby material is not so much processed into a finished product as continually worried over until it is exhausted. Television attempts to define, tries out explanations, creates narratives, talks over, makes intelligible, tries to marginalize, harnesses speculation, tries to make fit and, very occasionally, anathematizes.....Television does not provide any overall explanation; nor does it necessarily ignore or trivialize.... Its process of working-through is more complex and inconclusive than that. (1999:55)

Many of the prerogatives of traditional media and the journalistic public sphere – as primary mechanisms of political deliberation – have passed

to this broader inconclusive public sphere of popular screen culture, and political deliberation must now be understood as an imaginative rather than a purely, or even primarily, rational process.

Schudson (2002) has contrasted Habermas' (1989) theory of the public sphere and its concentration on the development of a "free domain of reasoned public discourse" with that of Benedict Anderson's (1991) "imagined communities," which exist as "objects of orientation and affiliation." While he acknowledges media studies' debt to the Habermasian model, he argues Anderson's framework provides a more productive way forward. According to Schudson the Andersonian model recognises that "news is not only raw material for rational public discourse but also the public consideration of particular images of self, community and nation. It implies that the study of news should be kin to other studies of the literary or artistic products of human imagination more than to studies in democratic theory." (Schudson 2002:484)

I will argue for what might be called a new sphere of public imagination where the raw material of news clusters with images from other media and artistic productions to remediate "images of self, community and nation". Jonathan Hartley (1996) has described a similar process, which he dubbed "popular reality" and DeLuca and Peebles (2002) argue that the "public sphere" has been superseded by the "public screen". This shift in metaphor is important, DeLuca and Peebles argue, not just because it reflects the dominance of screen media but because it moves our understanding of public political processes forward. It delineates a move away from a necessarily nostalgic idea of public life dominated by the idea of embodied voices and rational dialogue to one that emphasises

the power and the hypermediacy of the image and the conscious and unconscious public work of the imagination. Unlike many critics (Boorstin 1961; Postman 1985; Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995) who describe a similar shift in public discourse, they hold that the dynamics of the “public screen” and its multiplying image events/effects are not necessarily negatives for political participation and cultural change, rather the public screen “entails different forms of intelligence and knowledge” (2002:136).

Bolter and Grusin’s (1999) remediation paradigm allows us to conceptualise these new forms of intelligence and knowledge more deeply. According to Bolter and Grusin (1999) all media “remediates” other media. Their complex theory of remediation was developed to explain the emergence of “new media” and its relationship to old media but they also argue that it can be viewed as a “broader cultural logic”. Although this might sound like it is another version of the Baudrillardian simulacra (Baudrillard 1994) Bolter and Grusin are careful to distinguish their ideas from his.

Although Baudrillard's notion of simulation and simulacra might suggest otherwise, all mediations are themselves real. They are real as artefacts (but not as autonomous agents) in our mediated culture. Despite the fact that all media depends on other media in cycles of remediation, our culture still needs to acknowledge that all media remediate the real.... because all mediations are both real and mediations of the real, remediation can also be understood as a process of reforming reality as well. (55-56)

These dynamics of remediation can be seen clearly in *24*. Firstly in formal terms it is a self consciously mediated show: each season unfolds over the course of one day, in "real time," across split screen locations, over 24, one hour episodes. Secondly as Brooks (2005) noted, *24* remediates "real" situations: the psychological intensity of a presidential briefing that identifies "real" threats. Equally the omnipresent news of terror cells, of real goodies and real baddies, remediates the real time action of a series like *24*.

Multimodal Mythic Clusters

In this article I will also use a heuristic device I call "multimodal mythic clusters" to map some of these processes. These multimodal mythic clusters are, in Bolter and Grusin's (1999) terms, "real" artefacts that are central to the process of remediation. Multimodal mythic clusters – the clustering of images across media, genre and modal spaces – concentrate the imagination on a particular emotive image or series of images but at the same time produce a vibrant scan of multiple, clustered images.

This way of understanding contemporary mythic systems highlights a dialectical understanding of the mythic that incorporates elements of a traditional anthropological understanding of myth as well as its relationship to the production of contemporary multimedia hypertextuality. Traditional notions of myth have always been cognisant of story as a multimodal performance rather than a static text. The well established connections between myth and ritual demonstrate this (Coman 2005). Claude Levi-Strauss' famous metaphor of myth as "bricolage" stresses that myths are associative and combinatory as does

his exhortation that we treat myth as "an orchestral score" (Levi-Straus 1963:206).

Jack Bauer is a mythic collage, a mythic hypertext. In some senses he is the classic outsider hero familiar from traditional myth, comic superhero tales, Hollywood westerns and the Rambo films. But to analyse his status only in these terms is reductive and unenlightening. Jack is all of these heroes but importantly he represents the remediation of such mythic themes. On internet fan sites, in news commentary, in the unfolding television series, in the *24* video game, Jack is being made to mean. He is being bundled in the popular imagination with crisis, masculinity and presidential power all of which sit within complex mythic histories. In the remaining sections of this paper I will analyse three aspects of this multimodal mythic cluster: firstly Jack as a new kind of superhero: the smart-warrior; second Jack's relationship to presidential power past and present; and finally Jack as a cipher that both legitimises and subverts elements of current US security policy.

No-compromises Jack

The key to Jack's character is revealed half way through season one, episode one. Explaining his actions, (which have included shooting a CTU superior in the leg with a tranquilizer gun to get information) Jack says to Nina his deputy and ex-lover:

"You can look the other way once and it's no big deal except that it makes it easier for you to compromise the next time and pretty soon

that's all you are doing is compromising because that's how you think things are done.

"You know those guys I blew the whistle on - you think they were the bad guys? Cause they weren't. They weren't bad guys they were just like you and me except they compromised - once!"

George Mason the agent Jack shot in the leg has a different take on this. Later in the season Jack has gone AWOL tracking a suspect. We watch him chasing the suspect through a rabbit warren of a warehouse. He is being assisted by a police officer who has stumbled into the action.

Jack: I wish you hadn't called for back-up.

Officer: Why?

Jack: Because cops have to play by the rules and I might have to break a few with this guy tonight.

We cut back to CTU where Mason is interviewing Nina trying to get information about Jack's whereabouts. He says:

He's a loose cannon. Rules don't apply to Jack Bauer. He does what he wants when he wants and he doesn't care whose life it affects. I mean he shot me in this office with a tranq gun for Christ sakes.

This negotiation between no compromises and no rules creates a constant tension in all six seasons of *24*. It is a clever narrative device

but it also clearly situates Jack in a much larger tradition of American outlaw heroes that Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence (2003) call the "Captain America complex." They locate this tradition at the intersection of the founding frontier myth of American culture and the biblical apocalyptic tradition of "zealous nationalism". These two strands are often interwoven in recent American popular culture where contemporary "cowboys" like Bruce Willis' Harry Stamper (*Armageddon*) save the world from apocalyptic destruction. (Jewett & Lawrence 2003:37). Jewett and Lawrence argue that because heroes like Captain America and Stamper typically take the law into their own hands in their confrontation with evil, this tradition "produces acute conflicts between the impulse for holy crusades and a commitment to the rule of law" (Jewett & Lawrence 2002). This dialectic between the crusading individual and the community they serve is also at the heart of the "old west fantasy" that West & Carey (2006) argue is central to the rhetorical redefinition of the Bush presidency post-September 11, and is the same mythic construct that was at the heart of Ronald Reagan's presidency (Rushing 1986; 1986a).

24 remediates Captain America and the wild west yet again. Specifically the heroics of Jack Bauer can be understood as part of the multimodal mythic cluster I call "apocalyptic masculinities."² This cluster of mythic elements can be seen particularly clearly when it is read against the figure of Rambo, another outlaw hero, and his relationship to the presidential dynamics of his era (Figure 1).

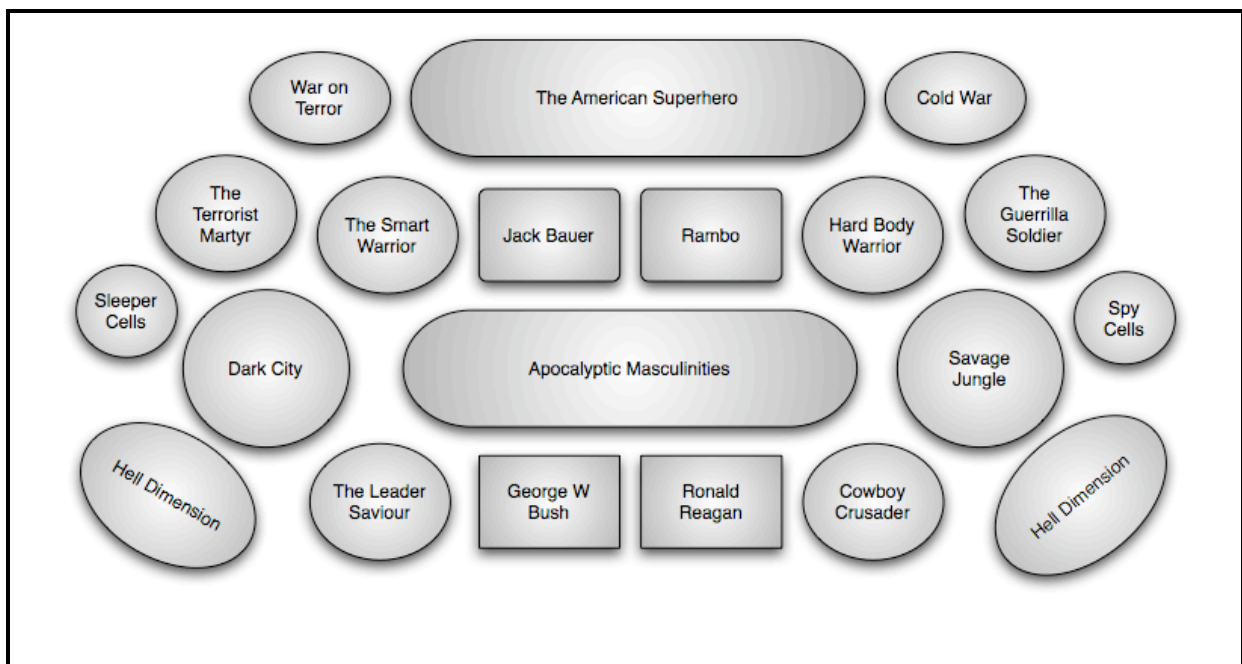


Figure 1. Multimodal Mythic Cluster: Jack Bauer, Rambo and Apocalyptic Masculinities

In order to understand the “fantasy chain” (West & Carey 2006:382-3) set off in this cluster it is necessary to step back briefly and take a look at the dynamics of the Reagan presidency.

Hard bodies and smart warriors

Susan Jeffords (1994) in her study of masculinity in the films of the Reagan era argues that there was a clear confluence between the invention of Rambo and the invention of Reagan’s America. Rambo’s hard body physique matched perfectly Reagan’s hard body presidency. Drawing on the work of John Orman (1987), Jeffords shows how Ronald Reagan embodied a “macho presidential style” which was constructed as a tonic to the weakness of the Carter presidency.

Reagan established these [macho] qualities as significant in his presentation of the presidency and his embodiment of the national character. Just as the Rambo films provided narrative models of these characteristics in action, the invasion of Grenada and the bombing of Libya provided concrete, historical instances of the same thing. In particular the plots of the three [Rambo] films enabled the Reagan hard body to lay to rest the anxieties...about the masculine body. (Jeffords 1994: 35)

If Rambo was a classic Reagan era cinematic "hard body" (Jeffords 1994) Jack is the archetypal Bush "smart warrior," in a post-Patriot-Act era of cyber-terrorists, surveillance and high-tech interrogation techniques. Jack is a contemporary Rambo but he is Rambo's instinct transformed. Rambo is a body instinctively moving through the landscape. Jack acts instinctively - we are constantly amazed at his just-in-time reactions - but he is also a flashing mind driving through the city and navigating through cyberspace, cracking computer code as well as tracing footprints.

While a reading of the jungle is a key to understanding Rambo's visceral heroics a reading of the dark city – specifically Los Angeles – is vital to understanding Jack. Urban LA is Jack's jungle. It is the city that Mike Davis (1999) has called an "apocalypse theme park": not only does its fragile ecology make it subject to earthquakes and floods, it is the scene of well-documented crime and explosive urban tensions. It has also been a favourite site for literary and cinematic destruction: according to Davis the city has been raised at least 139 times in different fictional scenarios. This all goes to make-up what Davis terms LA's "ecology of fear". Such a

setting provides the perfect backdrop for a series that is constantly negotiating the apocalypse. In *24* LA is a mapped, hunting ground, constantly refracted and remediated through video screens, surveillance devices, radar, mobile phones, tracking devices, traffic cameras, the internet and computers. From the offices of the CTU - a softly lit modernist concrete cave - the whole city can be surveilled. Christopher Hight (2007) has recently argued that although *24*'s portrait of LA trades on the city's vast suburbanised expanse it also collapses distinctions between private and public space through its concentration on the "emerging metropolis of sensory networks human and otherwise". The city becomes a series of nodes and vectors:

Almost all the major plot developments and most of the scene transitions involve decoding and transmitting information. In sum the show operates through a massively linked non-scaler networking topology: 'small worlds' linked to each other via co-valent bonds of electronic infrastructures that unlink propinquity, propriety and proximity from territoriality (374).

This new vision of territoriality marks Jack as a distinctly different hero facing a distinctly different enemy. Although in *Rambo II* the hero tells the mission-head Marshall Murdock that a man's brain is his most important weapon, it is obvious from Rambo's power as he moves through the jungle that *embodied* instinct is key and his rejection of technological assistance is highlighted a number of times. Jack too relies on instinct but is rarely parted from his mobile and PDA. Rambo tracks through the jungle adept at reading the signs, Jack careers through LA in his Nissan Pathfinder having the signs relayed to him via satellite.

Although like Rambo, Jack is singularly the hero, often forced to work outside official perimeters, he is always networked and guided from the centre even if this is through hacking into the system. This plays to a new model of heroism as well as highlighting a new set of fears. If the parameters of the city are condensed in this new vision of territoriality so are the parameters of terror. As Hight puts it, the villains of 24 are “powerful and dangerous...because their intimate relationship with technology renders moot the spaces of domestication”(2007:373).

This domestication of terror complicates any easy production of Bush era redemptive heroics. Carter’s perceived failures (such as the Iran hostage crisis) and Reagan’s perceived victories (such as the invasion of Grenada) both involved external threats and Rambo’s remediation of the Vietnam hero in a post-Vietnam era achieved catharsis against a foreign landscape. Like Rambo, Reagan’s displays of bravado were decisive and successfully staged however George W. Bush has had to face a multiplying set of uncertainties including a foreign war widely regarded as a mistake and a sense of encroaching terror on the domestic front. This sets up a much more complex set of relations between Jack, Bush and contemporary masculinities than those presented by the Reagan era.

Bush came to power promising a return to moral values and integrity following the sexual scandal of the Clinton presidency (Malin 2005). But the president’s image of moral certainty and religiously inspired mission, buttressed by a series of powerful post-September 11 rhetorical performances (Bostdorff 2003), was marred by the moral disorder of Abu Gharib, Guantannamo Bay, the foreign rendition and torture of terror suspects and the authorisation of domestic wiretapping. In each

case his reach for presidential authority was mired in complex constitutional argument and public debate (Fisher 2007). At a personal level Bush's image of authoritative military leadership has also been scarred by the controversy over his National Guard record and, in quite a different context, by his failure to provide decisive leadership in the wake of hurricane Katrina. Thus any links that may be drawn between Jack Bauer and the presidency of George W. Bush are awkward at best.³

The internal intrigue of presidential power played out dramatically in *24*, marks the series as explicitly about the limits of presidential authority – both embodied and delegated. During the presidency of David Palmer Jack is on many occasions the embodiment of presidential will. It is through Jack that President Palmer is able to carry out a number of both official and unofficial, "off the reservation," activities. Palmer embodies a new kind of macho presidential style: he is willing to act, even to go against protocol, but he is also willing to withhold action when restraint seems to be the wiser but less spectacular move. This is the classic tension of the macho style that John Orman described:

The macho style of leadership has certain policy consequences in foreign policy and national security arenas, as well as other areas. Presidential behaviour can be explained partly by the president's efforts to live up to the macho myth. If a president consistently deviates from the macho myth, he jeopardizes his political power stakes within a sexist system that attempts to define social and political roles by gender. Yet if a president strives to live up to the macho myth to ensure his personal political prestige and his power position, he may find himself in trouble, as this style of leadership

can have serious adverse effects on the conduct of public affairs.

(Orman 1987: 7-8)

Although Jack is deferential to presidential authority he is outside its obligations. While Palmer falls prey to the wiles of his conspiratorial wife and the plotting of his own advisers, Jack stays his course. No matter what disaster ensues Jack returns to save the day. As the American people and the presidency of George W Bush live through a series of failures in intelligence and action, no-compromises-Jack embodies the possibility of action rather than indignation.

Jack Bauer's ticking time-bomb

Guardian columnist Jonathan Freedland (2005) calls this symbiotic relationship between the world of *24* and the world of current events "Jack Bauer syndrome." He argues that in our edge of the seat enthusiasm as viewers of *24*, "there is no ethical corner we don't want Bauer to cut, if that's what he has to do to prevent murder and mayhem." Writing just after the 2005 London terrorist bombings he continues:

Jack Bauer syndrome operates in real life too. Almost three-quarters of us are happy to give up civil liberties in order to make us safer from terrorist attack, according to...[a recent] poll. Having seen the all-too-real threat of the July bombings, 73% are ready to pay the price, ready to let our protectors do whatever has to be done.

Other commentators (Mayer 2007; Regan 2007) have also written about the Jack Bauer effect on civil liberties. A number of West Point

instructors told *The New Yorker* that Bauer's constant resort to brutal interrogation techniques – ranging from shooting a suspect in the thigh, to the threatened execution of a suspect's family – was influencing the culture of young military graduates. The show is a classic embodiment of the “ticking time bomb scenario” used to justify torture. ²⁴ creator Joel Surnow summed it up succinctly when talking with *The New Yorker*: “Isn't it obvious that if there was a nuke in New York City that was about to blow—or any other city in this country—that, even if you were going to go to jail, it [torture] would be the right thing to do?” (Mayer 2007). Perhaps more disturbingly Surnow's views were echoed recently by US Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia who surprised a legal conference when he argued that Bauer was a hero who saved thousands of lives and therefore would not be convicted no matter what laws he had violated: “Are you going to convict Jack Bauer?” Judge Scalia challenged his fellow judges. “Say that criminal law is against him? 'You have the right to a jury trial?' Is any jury going to convict Jack Bauer? I don't think so.” (Freeze 2007)

However Christian Erikson (2007) has recently argued that shows like *24* (and others that deal with counter-terrorism themes such as *Alias*, *Battlestar Galactica* and *The X-Files*) serve to both legitimise and subvert new forms of securitisation:

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 the events of 9/11 have not erased ambivalence regarding the security apparatus and “terrorism”....Despite 9/11, fears of excessive state intrusiveness and the centralisation of the means of coercion are clearly evident in these works. (202)

This ambivalence is central to any reading of seasons four and five when Jack’s relationship to presidential power is radically altered with the introduction of President Logan who assumes power after Palmer’s successor, President Keeler, dies when Airforce One is downed by terrorists.

In season five it becomes clear that Logan is involved with a mysterious group of men with unclear affiliations (probably corporate, possibly international spy agencies, perhaps both) and has colluded in the staging of several terrorist attacks meant to create a reason for military intervention in Central Asia and the securing of the oil supply. It is the ultimate macho presidential act and in sharp contrast to his inability to provide leadership following his accession to the presidency in season four.

Through the various transitions of presidential power it is Jack who remains constant. However, while Jack Bauer syndrome may pave the way for harsh action in the war on terror, it is also a double-edged sword as it highlights the brewing ambivalence about these measures and the effective emasculation of a president who does not live up to his own macho style. True to his Nixonian demeanour an exposed Logan is forced to resign and in a secret deal to avoid scandal he is exiled to

permanent house arrest. Logan's inability to negotiate the macho dialectic is telling in Bush's divided America.

Jack may represent the possibility of decisive action – unimpeded presidential will – in an age of terror, but he is also a parable of its Faustian consequences. This is brought home to Audrey Heller, his colleague and lover in season four, as she witnesses the transformations of Jack in action. In an exchange with Bauer colleague and friend, Tony Almeida, Audrey challenges the notion that Jack effectively lives in a hell dimension.

Tony: You've seen Jack in both worlds today. You think he'll go back to wearing a suit?

Audrey: After the hell he's experienced today you think he'd choose this again?

Tony: Some people are more comfortable in hell.

Audrey: Are you talking about Jack or about yourself?

But at another point Audrey recognises Jack's Faustian gift. Jack tries to comfort Audrey urging her to let go of thoughts that her actions may have indirectly led to her husband Paul being endangered:

Jack to Audrey: If you are to remain effective you have to let it go.

Audrey: Jack that's your gift. I can't do that.

But the Faustian pact is never without consequence. As Audrey's father says to him in the final episode of season six: "Jack you are cursed. Everything you touch turns to death." As the series advances into its seventh season Jack may still be capable of saving the day but he is clearly at some level a spent force. As the show's lead writer Howard Gordon said recently: "Jack is basically damned." (Mayer 2007)

Conclusion

The cultural world of *24* is a collection of performance texts, news texts, fan texts and intertextual relations, a cluster of mythic ideas expressed and received across a range of modalities. These clusters of images are constantly being remediated: made to mean in new and often unexpected ways. Each of these experiences remediates each of the others as viewers, producers, and commentators project Jack onto the public screen and make Jack mean in complex ways that expand the domain of public imagination. As DeLuca and Peebles (2002) have argued this domain of image events gives rise to "visual philosophical-rhetorical fragments, mind bombs that expand the universe of thinkable thoughts" (2002:144).

These images are ambivalent, partial and often contradictory. Some analysts have seen in *24* merely a conservative ideological remediation of its parent company Fox/News (Broe 2004). While there are undoubtedly elements of this occurring this is a much too easy explanation of the dynamics of the show and its import. As we have seen *24* both reinforces

and exposes the excesses of the macho presidential style and the new dynamics of national security.

As the series progresses Jack's outsider actions increasingly problematise the boundaries of acceptable behaviour both for himself and for others and the dynamic of excommunication and reintegration is in constant play. As Erickson points out: "while Jack Bauer has repeatedly tested the limits of his autonomy and deviance he is also repeatedly reintegrated into CTU" (2007: 204). This tension between the rugged individualism of the hero and the pull of community is a driving paradox of the American frontier myth. West and Carey argue that this conflict has played a very particular role in post 9/11 US culture: "When the American frontier hero becomes associated with war, this acts to highlight an essential function of the cowboy ethos: he is at once a mixture of vice and virtue....The rugged qualities of the frontiersman at war allow the public – through the shared rhetorical vision – to navigate its own post September 11 feelings of both virtue and vice, of faith in community and desire for revenge." (2006: 396)

Caught between virtue and vice, the hero and the outsider, the rescuer and the torturer Jack Bauer is a powerful cipher for the contradictory forces at work in the contemporary sphere of public imagination as we oscillate between memories of heroes past and the demanding realities of a new security environment.

NOTES

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² In dubbing this cluster “apocalyptic” I am not only referencing the obvious cataclysmic aspects of 24 but also the broader “apocalyptic style” which Berlet (2004) has characterised as including elements of scapegoating, conspiracism, and fundamentalist dualism.

³ Blogs and fan sites have already made unflattering comparisons. For example Zach Hale a University of Washington student speculated that Jack could be what America was looking for in a leader: “Yes, that's right, forget John Kerry and George Bush, vote for Jack Bauer. Jack Bauer could have stopped 9/11 in 2 hours flat, easy. I mean, seriously, who are we kidding watching Kerry and Bush debate when there is such an obviously better alternative.” (<http://wayblur.com/archives/2004/10/09/vote-jack-bauer-for-president/>)

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