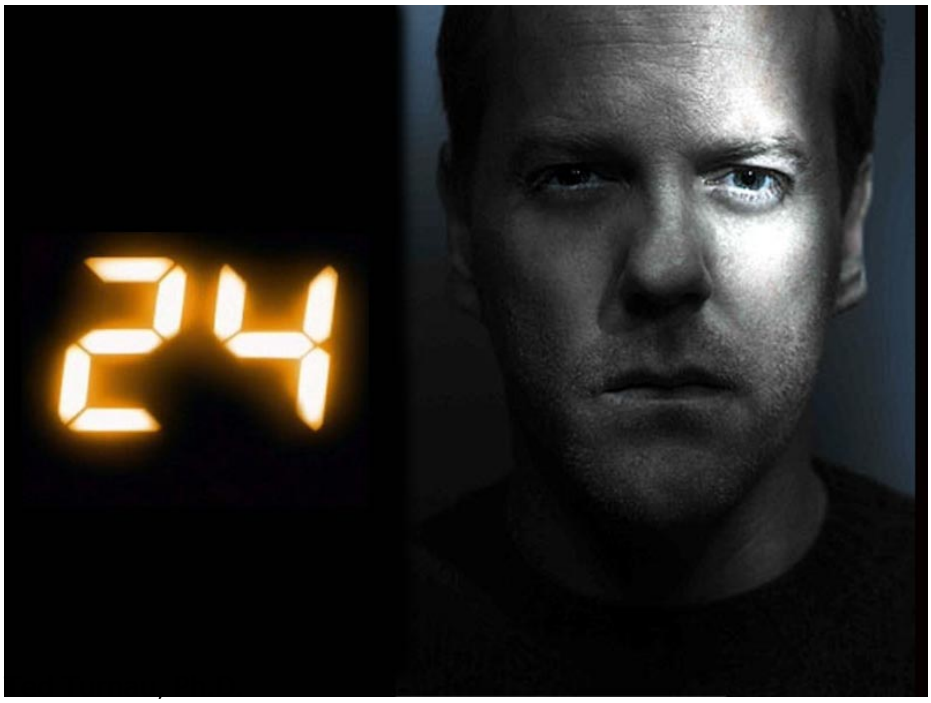
Part 1 - Introduction

Jack Be Evil, Jack Be Quick: Reflections on the Necessary Evils of *24*



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Abstract

This paper explores the narrative world of the American action-adventure television show "*24*" to see how it understands evil (especially the evil done by its hero, Jack Bauer). The putatively realistic use of time in *24* actually collapses time, making questions regarding evil difficult to broach because there is no time for reflection. The reason for this collapse of time is that the world of "24" is under constant threat, making the hero's evil excusable. Further, the hero is coded within the program as simultaneously "one of us" and omni-competent at fighting the bad guys. And Jack's character bears a striking resemblance to post-9/11 America – wounded, but ready to do what he must to get the job done. Jack is still, by narrative fiat, the good guy, even when he does evil. The paper contains an epilogue in which the author reflects the purpose of such popular cultural analysis: to encourage moral reflection when shows short-circuit such reflection; and to understand how popular culture has taken on a quasi-religious function in our secularized cultural environment vis-à-vis our understanding of evil. **Key words**: evil, television, popular culture, Ricoeur, narrative, time, September 11, 2001, secularization.

1. Introduction

Searching for a show to replace the popular *X-Files*, America's Fox Network, on October 30, 2001, launched *24*, a show about counter-terrorist agent Jack Bauer and his quest to save a presidential candidate from assassination. Though it struggled initially in the ratings, it garnered critical praise and several awards, and it survived to draw stronger ratings in its second season and third seasons.[1]

In its first season, Jack Bauer (played by the ever-intense Kiefer Sutherland) was portrayed as a proficient, inventive, and at times ruthless operative who only wanted to protect his family and do his job. And he did get the job done despite impossible odds (and that is part of the fascination of the show - "How will Jack pull the rabbit out the hat this episode?"). In season two (taped after the September 11 tragedy), the show started to push ethical boundaries and explored a dark side to Jack's personality (which had already been uncovered toward the end of season 1). Jack Bauer was a hero who, at times, had to be evil to get the job done. In this way, the show argues for a hero who must be evil by necessity (an interesting - but certainly not unprecedented - twist to our understanding of "hero" in American popular culture).

This paper seeks to explore the character of Jack Bauer and the fictive world he dwells in. The analytical method I will use is a rough and ready appropriation of the Ricoeurean concept of *le monde du texte*, the world of the text. Paul Ricoeur argues that for any given narrative, our attention should be drawn not to the world behind the text (for example, the world of the author), but to the world projected in front of the text. The text opens a world for the reader to inhabit. In this way the world of the text and the world of the reader intersect. The reader returns from the world of the text reconfigured, with a subtly different perspective, a different sense of time, a different identity. I will argue that once we understand the fictive (though seemingly realistic) world of the second season of *24*, Jack's embrace of necessary evil makes sense. Further, the parallels and differences between the world of the text, Jack's character, and the world of the audience (post-9/11 America) prove illuminating as to why the show is both so effective (as entertainment) and affective (that is, in reconfiguring the audience's identity). In this way, the world of *24* and the character of Jack Bauer - both devoid of any explicit transcendent ethical or religious framework - provide the viewer a sentimental education in the use of necessary evil, in accepting the unacceptable.

First, we will briefly examine the contours of the apparently realistic world of *24.* It is not, however, the real world (surprise!), and the differences between the fictive world and the real one provide insights into the character of Jack Bauer. Second, we shall look at the character of Jack Bauer: his abilities, his character traits, and the way his experience parallels that of post-9/11 America. It is this mixture of sympathetic resonance and fictive difference that makes this show so entertaining *and* morally instructive (though we may differ with the content of that moral education).

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[1] The major awards that 24 won for its first season included two Emmys (for "Outstanding Single-Camera Editing for a Series" and "Outstanding Writing for a Drama Series"), a Golden Globe (for "Best Performance by an Actor in a Television Series" for Kiefer Sutherland), and two Television Critics Association Awards (for "New Program of the Year" and "Program of the Year"). Information obtained from "Awards for '24,'" Internet Movie Database, n.d., (27 February 2004). <http://imdb.com/Tawards?025331>.

[2] In the last episode of season one, Jack mistakenly believes that the evil Serbian warlord Viktor Drezen (played way over-the-top by Dennis Hopper) had killed his daughter. Jack, in an act of pure revenge, fires bullet after bullet into a helpless Viktor Drezen, execution style.

Part 2 - The Fictive "Real World" of 24

2. The Fictive "Real World" of 24

A. The Collapse of Time

Like a lot of action-adventure TV serials, *24* relies on a gimmick to hook the audience in. In this case, *24* boasted a gritty authenticity that emerged from its "realistic" handling of time. The voice of Jack reminds us at the beginning of every episode that the events portrayed are happening "in real time." Every episode represents one hour in a truly intense day. Before every commercial break, a digital clock face at the bottom of the screen reminds you where you are in that episode's hour (apparently, nothing of consequence happens during the commercials). And at the end of every episode, as the narrative climaxes toward the cliff-hanger for that week, you see the digital clock face and hear an exaggerated ticking sound from an unseen second hand ("ka-chunk ka-chunk!"). The message is fairly straightforward: the good guys are in a race against time, and time (which we're showing you as it is in the *real world*) is weighing heavy as events hang in the balance. It's a way of raising suspense and making sure you tune in next week.

But on the other (clock) hand, the show works very hard to emphasize the tension induced by time (and time's running out) in a way that is markedly artificial. In reviews of the show, you hear certain phrases repeatedly: "gripping," "pulse pounding," "thrilling," and so on.[5] The show's production values serve to reinforce the frenetic pace of the show. It follows characters around with hand-held cameras to give the cinematography a more unsettled motion. The editing is quick and clean - no fade-outs or dissolves. In every episode there are at least three or four times where the show employs a split screen (with the digital clock face in the center of the screen, of course) to show you what is going on in the four or five plot threads that are happening simultaneously. The first time I saw it, I was both thrilled by such a different look, but almost overwhelmed by the amount of information that I was supposed to process. (Fortunately, I was watching taped episodes so that I could back it up after some mumbled dialogue – Kiefer sometimes mumbles – or some plot twist that left me saying, "What in the world just happened?") The net effect of all of these narrative and technical devices is that time is presented as full to the bursting every second of this day with momentous, decisive events.

But it's just here that the show undermines its own realism. Gritty? Realistic? How can this hyper-kinetic, collapsed, over-laden with moment-by-moment *gravitas*, slant on time be called *real*? Even given that "realism" in media is something of a vexed question (do we really want a completely "realistic" portray of eight hours, such as Andy Warhol's movie *Sleep*?), the pace of *24* leaves something of the texture of real time behind.[6] Real time that we experience in the real world sometimes drags along. Never in *24*. Sometimes people take breaks to eat, or sleep, or go to the bathroom. Never in *24*. (The only reason you have to go in the bathroom is to make a secret cell-phone call to a covert ops agent who's working deep undercover, or something like that.) In *24*, time has one speed, and that's Autobahn reckless full-throttle break-neck speed. The artificial, fictive nature of time in the world of *24* becomes clearest when you consider time-periods to complete some off-screen action. Agents drive from downtown Los Angeles to a small airport somewhere in the suburbs . . . in ten minutes. A computer will search the entire county's license and registration records to find a match on a car . . . in seven minutes. And so on. That is part of the constitution of this fictive world - there simply is no significant time waiting for anything. Things must be kept moving as fast as possible.

The significance of the shape of time in *24* is that what seems like gritty real-world temporal perspective is actually a fictive device, a mythical world that is biased towards action and away from moral reflection. In the world of *24*, there simply is no room for deep ethical deliberation or reflection upon values. So no deep moral framework or guidance (religious or otherwise) has a chance to emerge. Compare that with another recent post-9/11 popular cultural offering which also has an approaching deadline as its theme: Spike Lee's movie *25th Hour*. The film tracks the last twenty-four hours before Montgomery Brogan will be sent to prison for seven years for dealing drugs. In contrast to *24*, in the world of Monty Brogan, there is all kinds of time for reflection: on past mistakes, on what is most valuable in life, on whom you can really trust, and so on. Spike Lee even gives Monty an extended soliloquy, that most favored of all dramatic devices for dealing with moral introspection - and a device rarely seen in movies or television lately. In other words, in the world of *25th Hour*, time slows and people have time to think. Not so in *24*: he who hesitates (to weigh moral options or to consider his actions) is lost. In this way, *24* renders any sort of transcendent moral framework irrelevant (and so evil cannot carry the same sort of weight it should).

Not only does time seem too fast, but in some ways it seems too "light." Some events (for example,

the evil that Jack does) pass without a trace, and are forgotten next season. You could call this the "Dirty Harry Complex," where an official entrusted with guarding the law repeatedly violates the law "for the greater good," but the violations are never remembered from one sequel to the next. Similarly, in the second season of *24*, Jack's actions are without consequence. When Jack psychologically or physically tortures suspects, or when he murders a man in custody, there simply are no consequences. When Jack orders his daughter to kill a man he believes to be dangerous to her, even though the man lies prone and helpless, there are no consequences for her (apparently police don't do ballistic checks on shootings involving Jack's daughter). In fact, the only time when there are consequences to characters' actions is when President Palmer is called by his cabinet to account for his behavior (including the torture of the head of the NSA).[7] But even this episode is not really a moment for ethical reflection upon Palmer's actions. It is revealed to be part of a conspiracy by administration hawks (who are connected to shady international oil interests) to remove Palmer from office because he opposes starting a war. Palmer eventually regains his office when it is proved that he was right in opposing the war, and his questionable actions in pursuit of such proof are conveniently forgotten.

Again, a comparison with *25th Hour* is instructive. That film is about nothing *but* the way the past has repercussions that reach into the present. Monty Brogan's drug dealing, connections with childhood friends, even a dog he decides to save – in short, his history – all become part of the complex context in which he lives, which shapes and constrains him. The past is not so easily forgotten, and it does catch up with him. In some ways, the second season of *24* shares that ethos (for example, Jack bears the wounds of his wife's death throughout the season). But with regard to the evil actions for which characters are responsible, there is an overall pattern of ethical violations markedly not returning to haunt their perpetrators. How can they? Things move too fast for someone's history to catch up with them. So one of the consequences of the quickened pace of time in the show is that time itself passes without trace, without consequence.

B. A World Under Extreme Threat

The reason that everybody is so darn busy in *24* is that the world of *24* is a world *in extremis*. In season one, Jack struggled to foil an assassination attempt on the democratic presidential candidate. In season two, the stakes are raised: he and his colleagues at CTU (Counter-Terrorism Unit) must foil a terrorist plot to detonate a nuclear weapon over downtown Los Angeles. Millions of lives hang in the balance. And the threat is drastic, not simply in terms of numbers, but with regard to Jack personally as well. In season two, Jack has only one surviving family member - his teenage daughter Kim. And, sure enough, nearly every episode ends with Kim in danger. It becomes reminiscent of the *Perils of Pauline*.[8] And in many episodes, Jack himself is in mortal danger. Jack's public world (the citizens of the United States, and of L.A. county in particular) and Jack's private world (his daughter, his own person) are in constant jeopardy throughout the show.

There are any number of reasons why the world of *24* (Jack's world) has been shaped like this, a world on the edge of a knife, where failure means humanitarian disaster and personal tragedy. Certainly it raises the suspense and dramatic tension. It keeps viewers tuned in week after week. It keeps the story moving at such a pace so viewers won't get bored. But what interests me more is how this world in extremis can serve as a substitute for principled moral reflection. It does this in two ways. First, it forces the collapse of time - people are compelled to rush to action because of the extreme circumstances. And that undermines the possibility of moral reflection (as we discussed above). The constant "ka-chunk" of the second hand simply reverberates too loudly. Second, it preempts moral reflection on action by installing a facile utilitarian calculus. What's the torture or murder of one bad guy when weighed against the possibility of personal and humanitarian disaster? Why even raise the question? Evil actions are excused even before they can be interrogated.[9]

But it did not necessarily have to be this way. There are plenty of examples in film and television where being under threat actually serves to bring out moral discourse (and especially the nature of evil) *more* sharply, even in action/adventure-type plots (consider Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*, Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, or Bryan Singer's *The Usual Suspects*). The writers and producers of *24* decided to use plot pace and imminent danger as tools to suppress questions regarding evil (perhaps to keep the audience from scrutinizing Jack Bauer's evil actions too

closely).[10]

One more observation about this world fictively configured to be constantly under threat: it draws compelling parallels to America's post-9/11 self-perception. America, too, feels itself to be constantly under threat from hostile outside forces. Whether officially or not, the American government and media have succeeded in giving America a "Code Orange" heart. Intentionally or not, the creators of the world of 24 contribute to that image of America. In so doing, the writers give the series a faux-realism, not because it presents the real world, but it presents an image of the world that many Americans hold.[11] We'll see in a moment how those parallels grow even more compelling in the character of Jack Bauer.

In sum, the world of *24*, by collapsing time through various narrative and cinematic techniques, and by presenting a world under constant threat, serves to undermine the possibility of reflection upon evil. In so doing, it renders any transcendent moral framework irrelevant - what is needed is not a consideration of moral principles, but a reactive pragmatism that will get the job done and save the day.[12] Let us now consider the hero Jack Bauer. We will find that he is every inch a creature of this fictive world.

Notes from this page

[5] Some of the online reviews that used these phrases were: Ivana Redwine, "'24 - Season Two' DVD Review," What You Need to Know About Home Video/DVD, n.d.,(27 February 2004). <([1] Engineerboy, "24 (****) (TV), 12/17/2002," CleverDonkey.com, 17 December 2002, (27 February, 2004). <http://www.cleverdonkey.com/ViewArticle.asp?ID=45&Cat=Entertainment>; and Thomas Chau, "'24: Season Two' DVD Review," DVD Fanatic, 9 September 2003, (27 February 2004). <http://www.dvdfanatic.com/review.php?id=24-season.2>.

[6] Thanks to my friend and colleague Chris Simmons for alerting me to the pitfalls that attend the term "realism" in film and television.

[7] NSA stands for National Security Agency. It is charged with protecting the information systems of the U.S. government, but on the show it seems to have a much broader intelligence and political agenda.

[8] *The Perils of Pauline* (1914) is a famous silent film serial that has been remade numerous times. In each episode the heroine escapes certain death from animals, criminals, savages, etc. The familiar image of a young woman tied to railroad tracks, screaming, as the train barrels towards her (and her inevitable escape thanks to a handsome hero) comes from this serial.

[9] I am arguing from a Christian perspective that does not accept the maxim that the "ends justify the means," or "victory at whatever cost." Though the reader may not share my moral perspective, my point (and what I find disturbing in the show) is the fact that the issue of moral perspective is not even raised so that an unprincipled pragmatism can be given its fullest, unchallenged scope.

[10] This paragraph owes a lot to Chris Simmons.

[11] The question raised by such a staging of American identity is this: Could that fictive image likewise interrupt moral reflection upon the possibility that our collective actions are evil, or does it automatically justify them in the name of protecting that which is closest to us?

[12] It must be conceded that there are moments when there is moral deliberation going on, but it's not being done by Jack. The moral center of the series is represented by President David Palmer (played by the sagacious-looking Dennis Haybert). But even President Palmer's agonized moral decisions are inevitably brought to a close prematurely by the press of time and overhanging humanitarian disaster. Such extreme circumstances also force Palmer into making some morally questionable choices himself, such as ordering the torture of NSA Director Roger Stanton, whom he believes is involved in a conspiracy concerning the nuclear bomb.

Part 3 - The EvilGood-Guy: the Character of Jack Bauer

3. The Evil Good-Guy: The Character of Jack Bauer

A. Is Jack Evil?

Before we get into an analysis of the character of Jack Bauer, the question must be asked, “Is Jack really evil? What sort of evil are we talking about?” After all, Jack does good things (as well as evil things). He loves and strives to protect his family and his country (in fact, these seem to be the only moral imperatives that Jack obeys consistently). So let me assure you: Jack is no Hannibal Lechter.[13] He does not sadistically relish the evil he does. But the evil he does is almost worse in its pragmatic, matter-of-factness.

A scene from the first episode of season two is, to my mind, paradigmatic of the type of evil I’m talking about - this is the scene that really started me thinking about Jack as evil. The only connection the Counter-Terrorism Unit has to the terrorists is a criminal organization which Jack had previously infiltrated undercover. Jack calls in a witness the FBI has in custody that has agreed to testify against the head of this organization. Jack asks a question or two, then pulls out a gun and shoots the handcuffed witness in the chest at point-blank range. Jack’s superior is beside himself, but Jack retorts, “You want results, George, but you don’t want to get your hands dirty! Now get me a hacksaw.” Jack then takes the severed head to the leader of the criminal organization as a display of his loyalty. Note the attitude that typifies Jack’s evil: “You want results, but you don’t want to get your hands dirty.” Jack’s evil is of the type that is somehow considered to be a sort of practical virtue - like “rolling up your sleeves” to fill the wheelbarrow with compost. It stinks, but it’s what’s best for the garden, and *somebody’s* got to do the dirty, hard work around here. It’s just part of the job, something that has to be done (and the job must be done). It is evil that is pragmatically necessary, unavoidable.

Let’s look at some of the fictive contours of his character that make it possible for the audience to continue to see him as the hero, the good-guy who occasionally does evil things (but they’re not *that* bad, because Jack’s the hero).

B. Jack as Normal Superhero

The show tries to pull off a pretty neat trick: to show Jack as simultaneously a normal, everyday kind of guy, *and* someone with extraordinary powers. Season one begins with Jack trying to heal his broken marriage, a marriage he damaged through sleeping with a co-worker at CTU. He’s not the best father. At the beginning of season two, he is paralyzed with grief, unable to restart his life after the death of his wife. At the beginning of season three, he’s even struggling with a nasty heroin habit that he picked up during his last undercover assignment. He’s a normal, fallible guy with human vulnerabilities and failings.

But once he is put under stress and given responsibility to save others, his true, mythic nature emerges. He is absolutely omni-competent. He is a skilled marksman, martial arts fighter, helicopter pilot, computer programmer, interrogator, and so on. Whatever the exigencies of the situation, he *will* rise to the challenge. Not once in the show did I hear the words “I don’t *know* how to do *that*” escape his lips. This omni-competence makes him trustworthy. He knows how to get the job done, and therefore (and here’s the intuitive leap) the audience can trust that the job Jack has to get done is the right one, and he’ll do it in the most appropriate manner. Because he’s competent, he’s also assumed to have an infallible moral compass. He *is* the substitute for a transcendent moral framework.

But the best asset that Jack possesses (in terms of the hostile, edgy world of *24*) is being able to think on his feet, to improvise, to react quickly and lethally. In other words, his best character trait undermines the kind of moral reflection needed to recognize evil as evil - it makes such reflection superfluous, ponderous, impractical. Jack hasn’t got that capacity. He’s got something *better:* lightning quick reflexes, a command of the situation. And so ethical reflection is passed over in preference for technical competence and efficiency.

Another aspect of his character that marks him as a superhero is his amazing tenacity and resilience. Jack doesn't give up. Ever. He just keeps going and going through this 24-hour period of crisis. And he won't stop until the job is done.

Not even death can stop Jack Bauer. He does die in season two, twice actually. Once symbolically - he pilots a plane to take the bomb to the Nevada desert to explode in an unpopulated area, and he must guide the plane to ground zero, sacrificing himself (Christ-like) for the masses. In an amazing twist of fate, Jack's boss from CTU, who is already dying from radiation-sickness, stows away on the plane and convinces Jack to parachute out early and let him pilot the plane to ground zero. Jack dies and comes back to life (figuratively), and continues to search for the terrorists. The second time Jack dies, it's literal. Jack is captured by the enemy and tortured to death, only to be "resurrected" via defibrillator. After that, a normal human being would be in an ICU for a week. But not Jack. He's able to escape his bonds, kill his captors, and return to the hunt for the dangerous men still at large. The only ill-effects he suffers for the rest of season two are a couple of mild heart-attacks (signified by Kiefer grasping his chest, wheezing, and wincing in pain momentarily). But these, too, pass, and he is able to pursue the villains to their untimely demise. Jack outdoes Jesus - he dies and comes back to life *twice! And* he kicks butt. He's sort of a Christ action figure, complete with Uzi.

If ever there were a man you could trust to get the job done, it is Jack. He's omni-competent, tenacious, unstoppable, and yet, just a regular guy, like one of us. This interesting combination of the quotidian and the mythical is even reflected in his name: Jack Bauer. Why did the writers choose "Jack Bauer" and not, say, "Haywood Chesterfield III"? The name "Jack Bauer" marks the hero as being middle-class, from German immigrant stock ("Bauer" is German for "farmer," so perhaps Jack has agrarian class roots). The nickname "Jack," instead of "John" or "Jonathan," marks him as being informal, non-aristocratic – that is, one of us, a normal guy. At the same time, "Jack Bauer" (like "Clark Kent") is short, punchy – a strong name with lots of explosive consonants. (Try saying "Haywood Chesterfield III" with a sense of urgency – it doesn't work; it's too long to be taken seriously.) More than that, "Bauer" is about as close as you can come phonetically to the English word "power" (the difference being an initial voiced labial versus an unvoiced labial). It suggests the superhero power Jack has without stating it obviously. "Jack Power" would be ridiculous. "Jack Bauer" is understated, yet brims with a hidden potency (like the character himself).

For all of these reasons, then, Jack is coded within this world as a trustworthy moral guide - we don't have to consider his actions too closely. He is at once gifted with amazing resilience and competence, and he is identified with us, a normal, everyday kind of guy - a sort of god-man, if you will. He does what we'd do, if we were as able and cool as he is. The evil he does is eminently excusable.

C. Jack as Post-9/11 America

But perhaps the trump card that allows us to excuse Jack's evil is that he, like the world of *24*, is an image of us (or of U.S.). In Jack Bauer, we find a certain image of post-9/11 America staged for us, and it's hard not to root for yourself when you see it in another.

How does Jack embody a post-9/11 America? First, and perhaps most importantly, he is wounded. Season one ends with the violent death of his wife, Teri Bauer. Jack, like us, has lost something precious, irreplaceable. We find Jack at the beginning of season two estranged from his daughter (because of grief over the loss of her mother). He is devastated, emotionally exhausted, numb. He has retired from CTU and wants nothing more to do with it. Jack feels what Americans felt after the towers fell - he's been personally wounded.

So naturally a situation arises that only Jack can handle, something that calls him out of retirement. The only lead CTU has on the terrorists is a criminal organization that Jack had contact with as an undercover agent. The situation is urgent, and there isn't time (remember how time is configured in this world) for anyone else. It's got to be Jack or no one. And naturally, Jack rises to the challenge, wounded though he be. I would argue that Americans (at least many of them) have a similar view of America's mission in the world. There is a grave terrorist threat out there, and though we're

wounded, it's up to the U.S. of A. to handle it. Who else can give the kind of leadership so urgently demanded? Europe? They're effete and self-conflicted. Africa? It's too mired in its own problems. Asia? They're either part of the problem or not interested in helping. Nope. It's either us, or no one, wounded though we are. And if we do some evil along the way, just remember that we didn't come looking for this job; it came looking for us. In this way, Jack's character has a peculiar resonance with a popular American self-perception. And this resonance has the effect of short-circuiting any overriding moral considerations other than protecting one's own (say, human rights, for example).[15] We, like Jack, have a job to do, and we may have to get our hands dirty doing it.

Notes from this page

[13] Hannibal Lechter is a recurring character in Thomas Harris' books (each of which have been made into movies). The character became a household name after the release of the movie adaptation of Harris' book *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991).

[14] Any lasting effects of his temporary death or the heart-attacks are completely forgotten by the beginning of season three. Jack's good as new, and ready for action.

[15] In another plot twist, it is revealed mid-season (after the nuclear bomb has exploded) that the terrorists behind the bomb-plot were financed by wealthy oil tycoons who want to start a war in the Middle East to drive oil prices up. Jack spends the second half of season two trying desperately to procure evidence to clear the Arab nations accused of any involvement in order to avoid a war. One could argue that Jack is, in this case, pursuing a noble, moral goal. But my argument still stands. I am not arguing that Jack's ends (saving downtown L.A. from a nuclear blast, stopping a war) are evil, only that there is no reflection on the evil that he does to accomplish those ends.

Part 4 - Summary and Conclusions

4. Summary and Conclusion

In this essay, we've considered how different facets of the world of *24* and of the character of Jack Bauer make any transcendent ethical framework irrelevant compared to the pragmatic exigencies of the situation and the mythic presence of the hero. The world of *24* collapses time; it is a world on the edge, and so no moral deliberation can be afforded. The character of Jack Bauer is this curious blend of the normal and the superheroic (without the cape), and his situation strangely parallels our own, so he is commended as a trustworthy hero, despite (or because of?) the evil he does.

I have also been arguing that this sort of projecting of a fictive world the viewers can inhabit and a hero with which to identify all have definite effects upon the identity and moral perspective of the audience (what Ricoeur would call the "refiguration" of identity as the world of the text intersects the world of the reader).[16] I have argued that the show enrolls us in a sort of sentimental education whereby evil is seen as necessary and acceptable.[17] But perhaps the connections I've been making have been misleading, the paths of influence too direct: Jack does x, so we'll collectively do x.[18]

Actually, I believe that the influence is more subtle and indirect because of the institutional setting of the character of Jack Bauer. He works for CTU, he is a government agent. Part of his super-prowess seems to emanate from his position as a government agent (his training, his field experience, and so on). The subtext seems to be, "Don't try this at home, folks! Jack's a *professional.*" Rather than directly influencing the audience to go out and emulate Jack, I would argue that the show would have a pacifying effect upon its audience. Instead of spurring us to action, the show may subtly influence us towards passivity, to accept whatever the government deems is necessary in getting the job done in its post-9/11 "War on Terror," to let the talented and trustworthy folks like Jack and his friends at CTU take care of it. In accepting evil heroes like Jack, we may be tacitly abnegating our responsibility to morally approve or censure the actions of those who represent and protect us. That sort of moral reflection and moral accountability seems irrelevant given that time moves so fast, the threat looms so large, and people like us (but a whole lot better and cooler) are getting the job done.

Notes from this page

[16] See Ricoeur, 1984, 70-86.

[17] Ricoeur calls fiction a moral "laboratory of the imaginary." See Ricoeur, "The self and narrative identity," in: *Oneself as Another*, translated by K. Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 164.

[18] Lawrence and Jewett call this direct effect of popular culture upon the behavior of its audience the "Werther Effect," after the copycat suicides that swept Europe after the publication of Goethe's popular novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. See Lawrence and Jewett, 9-12.

Part 5 - Afterword: Context and Applications

5. Afterword: Context and Applications

One question that always dogs essays like these is the dreaded "So what?" What practical good does such a reading of an American television show do? Allow me, therefore, to draw back the curtain on some of the motivations behind the essay above as they apply to our understanding of evil. This paper serves two purposes: first, to underline the necessity of critical reflection in the consumption and reception of popular culture; and second, to explore the displacement of religious discourse on evil in a secularized environment.

A. Popular Culture, Reflection, and the Visceral

First, concerning critical reflection and popular culture . . . One of the dangers attending popular performances like *24* is that the visceral always threatens to trump reflection on evil. This happens in two ways. One is that the show (or movie or video) uses the shock of evil to turn popular entertainment into a sort of amusement park thrill ride. Each particular act of evil then functions as a sort of commentary on the performance as a whole, in essence saying: "Hang on, kids! This is going to be *wild!* Wheeee!" In other words, the shock-value of these acts consigns the show to a genre where reflection is assumed to be unnecessary. It's a show to be bathed in, not thought about.

The second way the visceral trumps the reflective is in the presence of the hero. The popular hero is generically trustworthy – he is the good guy by definition.[19] The evil that he might do along the way is not worthy of reflection compared to the admirable qualities immediately displayed by the hero (bravery, perseverance, physical prowess, and so on). Moral reflection upon evil is rendered unnecessary by fiat, by dint of the personality and skill-set of the hero. The hero becomes a savior who need not be questioned (more on that later).

This paper then acts as a corrective reading (and perhaps as a model for other readings). The type of reading recommended here allows evil to assume a voice, a specific gravity that would allow it to be reflectively weighed and sifted. Such readings always feel like swimming upstream and "spoiling the fun" of this kind of popular entertainment, but I believe it is all the more necessary. Without reflection, an attitude of acceptance and resignation with regard to evil slowly becomes the norm. The influence of such popular discourses of evil flies in under our radar, so to speak.

B. The Displacement of Religious Discourse on Evil

The second concern driving this paper (though kept much more in the background) is the social scientific debate over secularization, and specifically as it applies to how we weigh evil in the "secular" West.[20] Religion has been the traditional carrier of moral discourse in the West. That is, until relatively recently in human history. Beginning in the eighteenth century, an influential group of cultural and intellectual elites made a sustained effort to discredit religious discourse as an effective

carrier of moral or metaphysical truth. That effort, combined with certain changes in key social structures during and after the Industrial Revolution, have attenuated traditional religions' claim to speak Truth (with a capital "T") on matters of morality, epistemology, or ontology. Sociologists of religion call this coupling of elite discourse and social change "secularization."

All alike agree that something indeed has happened, that the texture of life *is* different since the onset of modernity in the West. But what secularization *means* and to what extent religion itself is truly impaired is by no means agreed upon.[21] This paper is meant to be an indirect contribution to that debate, namely, that even though traditional religion has in some respects lost its social legitimacy as a carrier of moral and metaphysical truth, much of the slack has been picked up by popular cultural discourses. In other words, it seems clear to me as a student of popular culture that secularization has not meant a decline in religion (as Steven Bruce and the "classical" theorists would have it). Rather, secularization has produced a religious *displacement,* a reorganization of the sacred arena in which discourse about evil is produced.

So my comparison of Jack with Jesus wasn't (only) a bit of cheek – it was meant very seriously. The dynamics of *24*, by trumping traditional religious moral reflection with action and heroism *themselves take on a religious (or quasi-religious) weight*, complete with their own rituals, myths and savior figure.[22] Such entertainments can have that sort of influence (with specific political consequences) without having to be taken seriously *as* religion. After all, it's only a television show. But surreptitiously, something sacred is slipped in, something numinous that excuses the evils of torture, murder, or what have you. The sacred in *24* is "family" and "national security." In other shows, it might be "romantic love" or "success," or whatever. In this respect, I feel that the discourse of popular culture is the great overlooked wildcard with respect to debates on civil religion, and the fate of religion in general in the "secular" West.

As a way of understanding evil, I myself vastly prefer the grounded discourse offered by traditional religions such as Christianity.[23] Without such rooted reflection, moral discourse soon becomes weightless, nothing more than strongly felt sentiments – umbrage without ballast (and therefore, more easy to manipulate). But such a shift in perspectives on evil is indeed underway, and has been for some time. To my mind, this means that the kind of reflective reading of popular discourses on evil is all the more timely, all the more exigent. We need to know the lay of the land, the way the terrain of evil is being changed by this popular discourse. Otherwise, friends, you don't know Jack.

Notes from this page

[19] I am using the masculine hero here as an example. There are examples of this sort of undermining of reflection with female heroines (the film version of the Lara Croft character would be one such example). But typically this visceral role is filled by male characters. The typical heroine is configured very differently in Western popular discourse.

[20] I would argue that religion has been the main carrier of moral discourse not only in the West, but the world over. But my focus here is how we evaluate evil in the West.

[21] Opinions over how best to understand secularization vary greatly. After the 1980s and 90s, when religion became once again a very public presence in various parts of the world, few of the "classical" secularization theorists remain. But those who do (such as Steven Bruce) are vocal. See Steven Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), and *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). Others critique the notion of classic version of secularization as overly simplistic. José Cassanova, for example, believes it is crucial to differentiate between secularization as social structural differentiation (which is indisputable) and secularization as religious decline (which is very disputable). See José Cassanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). Others, such as Danièle Hervieu-Léger, see secularization as a sort of social amnesia that breaks the chain of tradition (but religion has a way of repairing those chains in creative ways). See Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, translated by Simon Lee (Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000). In one case, Peter Berger, a notable theorist for the classical secularization view, reversed himself after the notable resurgences of religion in the 1980s and 1990s. See Peter Berger, "The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview," in *The Desecularization of the*

World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics, edited by Peter Berger (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999). For a helpful synopsis on the debate, see David Lyon, "Faith's Fate," chapter in *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000).

[22] This is also one of the reasons why I prefer receptor-oriented readings of popular texts over sender-oriented readings. In cultural studies, sender-oriented readings tend to focus on how texts (such as TV shows) manipulate passive readers (or viewers). Receptor-oriented hermeneutics (like Ricoeur's) tend rather to focus on the active appropriation of texts by readers, that is, how readers use texts to make meaning (in this case, meaningful perspectives about evil). I would argue that this activity of meaning making (or, more precisely, meaning re-making) lies at the heart of religion.

[23] Further, I would argue that moral discourse must assume a personal absolute (that is, the type of God worshipped in Christianity) if it is not to dissolve into relativism or abstraction. But arguing that in detail would, I am afraid, take us too far afield at present.

Part 6 - Bibliography

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