

## How have national fears & anxiety influenced popular television?

Robert Ebert once said, “For me, the movies are like a machine that generates empathy.” Movies have and always will serve this vital function. But let’s face it, *television is the biggest empathy-generating machine on the pop culture landscape today*. And it just keeps growing.<sup>1</sup>

### HOW SO?

Much more than film, TV shows have a wide, regular, and habitual viewership. Television offers a ritual experience of certain kinds of plots, with reality TV now the most influential genre. It provides cultural benchmarks about which viewers speak and argue, sometimes with great knowledge and passion.

Neil Postman issued a critical view of the role of television in contemporary American life in his famous critique of popular culture, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. In our culture, Postman argues, television has a kind of mythological status, a “way of understanding the world that is not problematic.” We are not fully conscious of how TV shapes our perception of reality, and so it seems wholly “natural.”

Since at least the death of JFK, *our central and most significant cultural stories have been mediated to us through TV*, as has certainly been the case for all major events since 9/11. Television, Postman claims, is “our culture’s principal mode for knowing itself.”

*Film and television are at their best when they do not seek or promise an easy escape from the dilemmas of modern life or cheapen the human drama in which we participate, but when they provide a deeper sense of the comic, the tragic, and the possible in our puzzling times.*<sup>2</sup>

### MEANING WHAT?

Even lightweight, mindless popcorn entertainment, with special-effects fireballs and papier-mâché villains, does a service. It helps us confront our persistent fears, as it has from the allegorical sci-fi of the Cold War to the terrorism thrillers of today.

Pop culture is how we dream collectively. And it’s how we share nightmares — communal, cathartic nightmares that allow us to conceive awful things at a safe remove. It matters. Even the silly stuff.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Prime-Time TV Hasn’t Yet Gotten the Terrorism Issue Right,” *Variety*, Nov. 26, 2015.

<http://variety.com/2015/voices/columns/prime-time-tv-hasnt-gotten-terrorism-issue-right-yet-1201648219/>

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Hibbs, “Film and TV in Anxious Times,” *The New Atlantis: A Journal of Technology and Society*, Number 6, Summer 2004, pp. 90-106.

<http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/film-and-tv-in-anxious-times>

<sup>3</sup> James Poniewozik, “When TV Turns Itself Off,” *The New York Times*, Nov. 17

## Television during the Cold War

During the Cold War, Americans' fear of nuclear destruction, as well as the real or imagined threat of internal or external sabotage were omnipresent in people's lives. These fears not only played out in people's psyches but also on the big and small screen. While much of our popular entertainment was designed to ignore those realities and instead serve as a distraction for the public, others tackled those fears head on.

Television has the ability to provide the public with the opportunity to distract themselves from the reality of the world in which they live. It also oftentimes is a very real reflection of our fears and anxieties. This is most certainly true of television in the Cold War Era as well as the post-9/11 world.

Consider how these shows/films reflected and addressed Americans' Cold War fears:

Communist threat: *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) (2:20)

Spy stories & espionage: *Manchurian Candidate* (1958) and *I Spy* (1965) (3:08)

Nuclear threat: *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) (2:36), *Twilight Zone* (1959-1964)

Good vs. evil: *Lone Ranger* (2:49)

Now let's consider how our tv has been shaped in the wake of 9/11.

Think about these questions as you watch:

- What values, fears or anxieties are expressed in the episode?
  
- How are the government, military, American citizens portrayed?
  
- How does the threat in the show represent the fears of our post-9/11 world?
  
- What message or solution is the show trying to convey to the audience? Does it offer a solution?
  
- Does the show offer any comparison between the U.S. and our enemies, whoever they may be? If so, how does it represent each and in what light (i.e., positive, negative, ambiguous)?

***Your task for today is to evaluate how television in the post-9/11 world is in many ways a reflection of our fears and realities today. In order to do that, you will first watch an episode and then doing some research on your post-9/11 television show.***

***First***, find an episode or a substantial clip of the show on YouTube (remember, you can get to the non-educational version via <https://youtube.com>) or another site like Netflix or Hulu or the network on which it currently airs and watch it together.

Answer the questions below as you watch:

- What values, fears or anxieties are expressed in the episode?
- How are the government, military, American citizens portrayed?
- How does the threat in the show represent the fears of our post-9/11 world?
- What message or solution is the show trying to convey to the audience? Does it offer a solution?
- Does the show offer any comparison between the U.S. and our enemies, whoever they may be? If so, how does it represent each and in what light (i.e., positive, negative, ambiguous)?

***After you do this***, do a little research on the show. Read up on the show’s plot, viewers’ reception (a good source for this info is the Nielson ratings), and the any reviews/critics you can find on the show.

***When you finish this***, please write a 1 - 1 ½ page review of the show which includes the following information:

- Name of the show and the year(s) it ran (TYPE THIS INFORMATION AT THE TOP)
- A 1 paragraph summary of the plot/premise of the show & a brief intro to the main characters
- A solid 1-2 paragraph analysis of the episode or clip that you watched. Be sure to address the key questions you answered while watching. These will help you get the analytical lens you need to really give a scholarly review of the show.

Show	Block 5	Block 6
24	Tiauna, James N.	Sam, Mitchell
Alias	Jaelyn, Jacob W.	Elizabeth, Matt
Battlestar Galactica	Jacob S., Taylor	Ashley, Scott
Homeland	Tessa, Ariana	Cece
Fox News	Tristan, Quincee	Becca, Zach
The Walking Dead	Chris, Hannah	Katie H., Andy
Vampire Diaries	Erica, Vivienne	Olivia, George
The Daily Show with Jon Stewart	Lexi, Alyssa R.	Katie W., Caleb
Scorpion	Ryan, Greg	
NCIS	Hayden, Elizabeth	Lauren, Brian
The Unit	Melanie, Da’Quan	Izzy, Brett
Jericho	James M., Alyssa L.	Miranda, Austin