24, LOST, AND SIX FEET UNDER:
POST-TRAUMATIC TELEVISION IN THE POST 9/11 ERA

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

On the surface, the content of entertainment media may not appear to have changed much since the terrorist attacks on the U.S. on September 11, 2001. Reality shows are still primetime TV fare, and movie theatres can still expect the usual line-up of mindless summer action films.\(^1\) But upon closer inspection, a few things have changed. Trends can be identified, themes and structural tendencies that were not prevalent before. Some of these patterns include post-traumatic themes and style such as chaotic camera movement and complex narrative structures with achronologic shifts in temporality. This is combined with TV’s already melodramatic tendency toward seriality and continuing storylines, lack of narrative closure, multiple and intertwining plots, and emphasis on character development. There is also evidence that reality TV has had an influence on other formats of television. The result is a complex serial narrative style that exhibits post-traumatic, melodramatic, and reality-TV influences. This new style of television may suggest a culture that is subconsciously struggling with the effects of trauma.

This thesis will investigate the thematic content and the form of a selection of prime-time narrative television texts which aired during what I’ll call the post-9/11 era, a period of time that surrounds and includes the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The inclusion of the turn of the millennium and surrounding years is attributed to the cultural conditions that spawned the events of 9/11, a state of affairs that has been referred to as a “culture of fear.”\(^2\) These conditions were in existence prior to the terrorist attacks and it is these same conditions that produced the texts examined in this document.
Because of their post-traumatic thematic undercurrents, the following texts support this thesis: 24 (2001 – present), Lost (2004 – present), and Six Feet Under (2001-2005). Each of the texts chosen have common themes that relate to issues surrounding 9/11, such as post-traumatic stress, fear, paranoia, Othering, death, and loss. They deal with a cluster of issues that are reflective of the cultural conditions, concerns, and fears of their time. Additionally, common patterns are evident in their structure, which is significant because their storytelling approach not only affects their presentation but also viewers’ perception of them and of reality in general. Each text is representative of a traumatized culture in different stages of healing. Literally addressing the issue of terrorism is 24, a reactionary and paranoid text that immerses viewers in a world of conspiracy and violence. Lost metaphorically addresses the same issues but under the safe guise of fantasy and science fiction. Six Feet Under, the most reflective and introspective of the three texts, addresses equally difficult subject matter but in a more universal sense. Instead of focusing on social problems like conspiracy and terrorism, it turns its focus inward by depicting personal journeys of healing from the pain of trauma and death.

In an attempt to hypothesize what the existence of these television texts may signify about the state of the world’s subconscious in the post-9/11 era, it is imperative to discuss the cultural and historical context within which they were produced, and then perform a content and structural analysis of each text by examining recurring themes and narrative style. The investigation of these texts’ content and form may reveal patterns that have profound and far-reaching implications.
Trauma in Culture and History

A text’s meaning is always affected by its context, culturally and historically, and stories can have multiple meanings that may or may not have been intended by their creators. It is important to be aware of how meaning and connotation can change depending upon context, particularly when much of what is seen in media is assumed to be true and “naturally meaningful”. In terms of reception, texts are read intertextually within the context of other texts, cultural contexts, and discourses. Semiotic analysis, or the analysis of meaning making, is therefore significant when researching a medium’s storytelling strategies. Identifying and investigating patterns in media texts’ thematic content and structure allows one to consider the cultural implications of such texts, as well as determine historical and cultural reasons for the prevalence of these patterns.

It is difficult to write history from catastrophe without a clear picture or understanding of what has transpired or why. To frame the texts that are analyzed in this document contextually within the era in which the 9/11 terror attacks took place, it is useful to examine public reception of other disasters that have been broadcast live. For example, the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster which was broadcast in 1986 marked a sudden and radical displacement in viewers’ connotation of the U.S. space program. Previously it had seemed unstoppable, a pioneering entity that represented world dominance in science and technology. Reception to the 9/11 attacks likewise left many viewers caught unawares, causing them to form displaced connotations of the U.S.’s defense system and feel as though no one is safe even in the United States, a country previously thought impervious due to its military might. “America’s national illusion of invulnerability was ruptured,” leading many people, not just
Americans, to feel a sense of nihilism and paranoia, a fear that everything could go wrong tomorrow.

Because it historically frames the texts analyzed here, it is essential to point out just how different September 11 was to anything America had experienced before. Never before has video or film captured the killing of civilians on this massive a scale. It was also in everyone’s living rooms, and live. Audiences saw two commercial airliners full of passengers crash into buildings, and viewed the wreckage of two others. Viewers watched as buildings that were previously thought indestructible collapsed, with people still inside. They saw multiple people commit suicide. They witnessed the breakdown of communication such that events dragged on for hours before anyone knew what was really happening, inciting global panic. And finally, viewers observed workers comb through wreckage for weeks, searching for survivors with the grisly possibility of recovering victims’ remains from one of the largest heaps of mangled and twisted rubble ever seen. Though it sounds grim when spelled out this way, an acknowledgement and understanding of these elements is essential to exploring how and why these images have become fixed in the nation’s memory.

Many people described the events of that day as looking “just like a movie”, generating questions about media and desensitization to violent imagery and themes.9 Audiences have been accustomed to violence and death in film and television for decades. Whether and how witnessing of the events of 9/11 affects subsequent experience of film and TV, as well as whether and how it influences production of new cultural artifacts is integral to this thesis.10

While discussing the selected texts in their cultural and historical context, it is important to refrain from what film scholar Adam Lowenstein considers “the desire to posit September 11
as the end or the beginning of an era,” and to keep in mind that “cinema offers modes of thinking and experience invaluable to negotiation and perhaps even changing a world transfigured by modern technology and events.” Additionally, while it may appear that this document makes a comparison of the gravity of September 11 to that of other events like the 20th century’s World Wars or the Holocaust, it has no intention of diminishing the weight of those tragedies. Its aim is only to investigate and build upon the wealth of former literature and research. But a thorough exploration of the effects of September 11 on viewers, on film and TV producers, and on the media in general is beyond the scope of this thesis. What is postulated here is intended only to offer a cultural framework within which the selected texts were produced and received. Even the event of 9/11 itself is not so much a pivotal moment in American and world history as it is a symptom of the culture of its time. Additionally, the fact that each of the selected texts has experienced phenomenal popularity says something about viewing preferences and concerns that coincide with the current cultural conditions.

Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth, who has written at length about the effects of trauma on the mind, describes the past 100 years as the “century of trauma.” The past century has indeed seen its share with the World Wars and the Holocaust, the Vietnam war, and in more recent times, live broadcasts of traumatic events like the JFK assassination, the two space shuttle explosions, and the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. Even when traumas were not broadcast live, their aftermaths were shared almost instantaneously through media coverage like that of the Oklahoma City bombing and the plethora of U.S. school shootings beginning with the tragedy at Columbine. When one considers how first the industrial age and now the technology age has brought the world closer together, the existence of trauma is
shared by more people than ever before possible, making its dissemination immediate. The
perception that trauma is everywhere leaves one to wonder what effect this manner of thinking
has on present and subsequent generations. Living in the “century of trauma”, one is compelled
to speculate about whether or not the witnessing of traumas is secondarily traumatizing to its
witnesses. Film scholar Joshua Hirsch offers the theory of vicarious trauma, an idea that
suggests a viewer can become traumatized not only from experiencing a trauma personally, but
also from the witnessing of trauma. In a nationwide longitudinal study of psychological
responses to the events of 9/11, Dr. Roxanne Cohen remarks:

On September 11, 2001, everyone in the United States was exposed to an
incident unprecedented in scope and traumatic impact. Tens of thousands of
people directly witnessed the terrorist attacks against the World Trade Center
and the Pentagon; others viewed the attacks and the aftermath via the media –
most within a half hour after they occurred.

“Traumas can linger for decades,” claims horror historian David Skal, referring to the
world’s inability to get past Vietnam, whether those affected were soldiers in the war or not.
Vietnam is a recurring topic in the history of trauma study, perhaps because it marked the first
time a widely publicized discourse took place about the psychological effects of war on soldiers.
In a study of Vietnam vets, clinical psychologist and psychotherapist Erwin Parson found that
ex-soldiers exhibit a “profound attraction to death themes” and have a “functional disability in
affirming life”. As it is, American culture tends to deny death. It is a taboo subject, unlike how
death is perceived and experienced in many other cultures. This is likely because America
traditionally tends to discourage outward displays of emotion, its citizens proud to sport the
stiff upper lip and embodying tenets like ‘real men don’t cry.’ The rampant repression exhibited by American society may very well be a deeply engrained cultural phenomenon stemming from the country’s Puritan roots.18

Many Vietnam War veterans experienced post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a condition that is byproduct of extreme loss, caused from repression of memories and emotions associated with a traumatic event. PTSD can cause any number of undesirable symptoms, such as nightmares and flashbacks.19 Silence is a common symptom of those suffering PTSD because of the difficulty inherent in speaking about trauma. Holocaust survivor Eli Weisel writes at length about the non-representability of trauma, citing Theodor Adorno’s infamous assertion that “poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” implying that attempts to represent trauma following the Holocaust will not only fail but will also trivialize such trauma.20 In other words, language is not capable of describing that level of atrocity. Another way to describe this dilemma is Freud’s “failure to master the past.” According to Freud, flashbacks and nightmares take survivors back to their original trauma in an attempt to change or ‘master’ the past, to finally gain some sense of control. The purpose of flashbacks and nightmares is then to “master what was never fully grasped in the first place.”21 To a survivor, trauma cannot be expressed linguistically; the experience makes no sense, so the survivor is unable to express what he or she has experienced. In turn, many survivors lose faith in language. When an event is so out of sync with the mind’s understanding of the world, it can go into shock. At that point trauma has become a crisis of representation. Modern-day psychologists describe this non-representability of trauma as a failure of information encoding, or a reversion from linguistic encoding to less developed forms such as iconic and symbolic (or sensorimotor). Citing the archetype of
cinematic silence in response to trauma, Hirsch quotes narration from *Night and Fog*: “There is nothing left to say,” describing how the images in this Holocaust documentary proceed in silence as the viewer watches helplessly. Hirsch intimates that many survivors “no longer believe in words,” affirming how silence is deeply connected to trauma.22

After the traumatic events witnessed around the time of the millennium, the search for answers has exacerbated a polarizing of philosophies that was already taking place. Humanity is desperate to derive meaning from tragedy, and this is especially the case in American culture since 9/11. After the Columbine shootings, for example, the “reasons for the shootings became more important than the shootings”23. The same can be said for the public and media reaction to the more recent school shootings in 2007 and 2008.

In her work on memory and history, Caruth suggests that repeated denial of trauma encourages a language of forgetting.24 This is similar to what critical theorist Ann Kaplan calls cultural amnesia or traumatic forgetting, “the repetition of certain stories [that] may betray a traumatic cultural symptom,”25 whereby cultural stories are retold in a realistic (and seemingly historic) fashion. A culture may engage in denial because it seems easier than addressing the issues directly. Guilt and denial over traumas can create substantial distortions in perception, says psychiatrist Henry Krystal.26 Hirsch points out that in attempting to represent historical trauma, one struggles not to forget because of a self-preserving tendency to collectively or defensively ‘numb out’. Often societies will not address weighty post-traumatic issues immediately, resulting in a latency period after an event like 9/11. It is during this latency that post-traumatic discourse often occurs.27 As an example, consider that Hollywood took a decade or more to produce movies about the traumas of Vietnam. Contemporary issues often find
their way into cultural artifacts, whether it is through direct address or indirect avoidance in the way that cultural stories are retold.

Caruth claims that trauma theory is fundamental to contemporary thought about history and memory. She explores questions about death and repression that were previously posed by Sigmund Freud: “What does it mean for life to bear witness to death?” and “What is the nature of life that continues beyond trauma?” Building on Freud’s earlier work, Caruth talks about soldiers’ experience at war and their later associated nightmares, which seem to transport them back to those instances of fear and surprise as if they are experiencing their traumas all over again. Freud speculated that this tendency may be caused by a “lack of any preparedness for anxiety”, and that the soldiers’ minds continue to return to that place in time in an attempt to somehow avoid the trauma or undo the past.\(^{28}\) Freud points out how “awakening is itself the site of trauma.”\(^{29}\) The survivor dreams the trauma again, in hopes this time it will not happen. He or she awakens into reality, realizing that once again, he or she has failed to prevent the traumatic event.

Much of Caruth’s work focuses on the connections between trauma, death, and survival. Caruth observed a child who’d recently lost a friend and claimed she witnessed the practice of a “language of parting,” whereby the child exercised certain behaviors that allowed him to move on with his own life in the “very act of letting go” and “precisely in the process of turning away” from his dead friend. She remarks that the “consciousness of the death of others” is an “impossible demand at the heart of human consciousness.” Caruth points out that because of the “necessity and impossibility of responding to another’s death,” consciousness must turn away from death in order to truly survive.\(^{30}\) Death is so incomprehensible, similar to
one’s response to destruction, but the necessity to acknowledge death and destruction outweighs their incomprehensibility. The two opposing thoughts must somehow be rectified and assimilated into one’s consciousness. This leads Caruth to make a powerful observation about what she calls the “enigma of survival”:

It is only by recognizing traumatic experience as a paradoxical relation between destructiveness and survival that we can also recognize the legacy of the incomprehensibility at the heart of catastrophic experience.\(^{31}\)

This leads one to consider whether or not texts that indulge in traumatic topics are a sign of survival, a desire for survival, or even a celebration of those who witnessed and survived atrocity. The enigma of trauma as both destruction and survival – these two concepts are polar but very related. Perhaps that is what is so difficult in psychological terms for victims of trauma, resolving that the two ideas coexist in reality and in the mind. Caruth goes on to connect the concepts of destruction and survival to trauma theory:

Trauma theory is one of the areas today in which this survival is precisely taking place not only in the assuredness of its transformation and appropriation by psychology but in the creative uncertainties of this theory.\(^{32}\)

The danger of a lack of understanding of a traumatic history rests in its future consequences. A trauma survivor often does not recognize subsequent abuse because it might seem commonplace. Tending to live in the past, the survivor is often unaware of present surroundings. Hirsch asks a poignant question, “How does working through past trauma set up the possibility of recognition of traumatic implications of the present?”\(^{33}\) This leads one to consider whether the plethora of post-trauma infused texts like those examined in this thesis
encourage viewers to work through cultural traumas by witnessing others who are working through their own traumas.

Caruth asserts that a deeper understanding of trauma “can help us understand our own catastrophic era, as well as difficulties of writing a history from within it,” suggesting that in the process of telling a story, or as she puts it, “surviving to tell the story,” traumatic theory might be a means of healing or of moving on, in itself. In addition to traumatic art and theory inspiring a transcendence of trauma, perhaps the ultimate end goal for such concepts is to gain an understanding of catastrophe itself and about why it is so difficult to write history from it.34

Post-Traumatic Cinema

Caruth offers an inspiring proposition that with art, people can create acts of parting, through which it is possible pass on “a different history of survival.”35 This may explain the appeal of Holocaust films, particularly those produced in recent decades, such as Schindler’s List (1993), Life is Beautiful (1997), and The Pianist (2002), in which witnessing acts of survival affirms the resiliency of the human spirit. These and most Holocaust films fall into the category of post-traumatic cinema, a film style about which Hirsch writes at length. Post-traumatic films are characterized by post-traumatic themes and content, and often possess a structure that mimics the fragmented, chaotic, and circular memories that are typically experienced by trauma survivors. However, not all post-traumatic cinema evokes the inspirational mood of the films mentioned above. In fact, many do just the opposite. Studies show that post-traumatic films containing documentary footage of the Holocaust generates a significant shock in children who see it at school.36 This is an interesting finding, particularly if one considers its application to what the world witnessed on its collective television set on September 11, 2001.
Hirsch contemplates, “What is at stake, what are the consequences for historical memory, when different kinds of cinematic representations of genocide are produced and viewed?” He shares an example of vicarious trauma when he cites writer and philosopher Susan Sontag’s “negative epiphany” of viewing photos of Holocaust victims for the first time when she was a child. Sontag claims her lack of preparedness stemmed from the fact that what she saw in the photos did not fit into any reality that she had ever known. Sontag’s fright resulted not simply from the fact that she was unprepared to see the horrific pictures, but from the fact that what she saw was unthinkable. Hirsch claims that Sontag’s statement “something is still crying” illustrates the circular nature of trauma in the minds of survivors and witnesses, remarking that her sentiment provides a “remarkably clear picture of vicarious film-induced trauma.”

Hirsch poses a number of thought-provoking questions about filmic representations of trauma that are applicable to research on television in the post-9/11 era. He refers to the Holocaust as a “traumatic rupture in the Western experience” and considers that cinema may have been able to represent and embody the trauma as a rupture as well as possibly aid culture in grieving and healing that rupture. He offers a poignant reflection about the impact of traumatic events like the Holocaust (and by extension, 9/11) on the rest of the world:

I do not believe that historians have yet adequately understood the nature of the shock experienced by the West ... Nor have we been able to understand adequately the meaning of the shock for the Western understanding of both cinema and history – of what this tool we had built could show us of ourselves, and of what there was to be shown. I would certainly not be the first to
characterize this moment as a major epistemological shift in modern Western history.\textsuperscript{37}

According to Hirsch, a text can be classified as post-traumatic not only by its content, but also by its narrative structure. He describes the difference between what he observes as traditional narrative structures and post-traumatic structures in film. Borrowing from Freud, Hirsch claims traditional narratives are masterable and that post-traumatic structures are not. Both structures function much the same as memory. In the mind of a trauma survivor, post-traumatic (or hysterical) memory is unmasterable because “linear chronology collapses” and “time becomes fragmented and uncontrollable.” When engaged with a post-traumatic text, the spectator helplessly observes the events onscreen, so the content is therefore unmasterable. Post-traumatic texts often are disjointed and chaotic, where time is made circular and non-linear through the use of fragments, repetition, and flashbacks.\textsuperscript{38}

To Kaplan, post-traumatic texts are “narrative without narrativity... without the ordered sequences we associate with narratives.”\textsuperscript{39} According to theorist Janet Walker, these techniques create a disorientating effect and evoke a sense of moral ambiguity, causing texts “to intrude on linear narrative and disturb realist representation.”\textsuperscript{40} Viewer disorientation is a common byproduct of post-traumatic conventions. Walker suggests that catastrophic past events presented using such techniques interrupt linear narrative and disrupt realist depiction\textsuperscript{41}, generating viewer discomfort.

Historian Dominick LaCapra proposes that post-traumatic texts fall into three groups: those that deny trauma through disavowal or evasion, those that repeat trauma through reenacting it, and those that work through trauma.\textsuperscript{42} LaCapra’s theory is not about post-
traumatic film specifically, it focuses on critical and theoretical works by other authors about filmic representations of the Holocaust. However, these theories can be applied to any post-traumatic text. LaCapra’s research builds on Freud’s theory about the manner in which survivors’ subconscious minds seek to repeat trauma, and LaCapra proposes that as long as the “acting out” or repetition is accompanied by reflection, it can actually be a valuable tool in the healing process. While LaCapra’s theory is a psychoanalytical approach to trauma theory, he is wary of psychoanalysis, believing it is “an inherently historicized mode of thought... bound up with social, political, and ethical concerns.”\(^4\) He is likewise critical of trauma theory, concerned that its obsession with “post-traumatic fragmentation, disjunction, and instability” can intensify the effects of trauma. His approach then, which selectively utilizes principles of both psychoanalysis and trauma theory, provides a provocative methodology with which to investigate post-traumatic texts.

A number of conventions typify the post-traumatic cinema style. The most common technique is the disorienting time shift, most often seen in the form of a flashback. Because of the connection Hirsch observes between the narrative structure of post-traumatic cinema and the mind of a trauma survivor, he considers the survivor’s perception of time, the past, and the past’s implications on the present, applying this knowledge to his theories about narrative structure in post-traumatic texts.\(^4\) Such shifts in temporality and narrative order are also prevalent in other genres of film of recent years, such as *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Memento* (2000), *21 Grams* (2003), and *Rendition* (2007). Modern culture seems preoccupied with stories about time and the relationship between the present, past, and future. This obsession with time may be connected to modernity and postmodernity, which, as Walter Benjamin theorizes, are
closely tied to conceptions of time and humanity’s relationship to science, technology, and industry. Stories about time mimic contingency and “evoke a mood of temporal crisis by formally enacting a breakdown in narrative order.” In such stories, generally one temporality takes precedence over the others, but identifying that temporality can sometimes be a challenge, increasing the already disorienting tension inherent in complex narratives.45 Although not every flashback is traumatic, many are inserted into narratives in a manner that mimics a post-traumatic nightmare. They are often out of context, dark, blurry, shaky, disorienting and quick, like ‘flashes’ of a traumatic incident. When used as a narrative technique, “violently inserted flashbacks inscribe in narratives a shattering of complacency,” but they also have the potential to “put aside or bury a past that has not been worked through.”46 Traumatic scenes or actions often repeat themselves, much like memories do for survivors, where time is experienced as being circular or as a “post-traumatic deformation.” Continuing this concept, Kaplan observes that circularity and repetition are mechanisms used to “figure” the pain of trauma in film and literature.47

Another common post-traumatic cinema technique is a fragmented approach to story, a convention that complicates any clear picture of a text’s linear chronology and has a disorienting effect on viewers. Caruth describes this tendency as a “break in the mind’s experience of time.”48 A related post-traumatic cinema convention is formal openness. To expand upon this attribute, Hirsch compares post-traumatic cinema to narrative cinema, finding that narrative cinema adheres to realism in ways that post-traumatic cinema does not. He claims that realism makes narrative cinema more masterable because it generally tends toward closure or conventional resolution, which typically offers viewers an omniscient point of
view, or “an exterior position from which one can know and judge the past without being personally implicated in it.”\textsuperscript{49} The narrative film \textit{Titanic} (1997) is an example because it makes “the past masterable by making it visible.” Realism’s tendency for closure encourages avoidance of cultural and historic issues, however.\textsuperscript{50} This concept recalls Kaplan’s cultural amnesia, where adherence to conventional resolution may be indicative of a culture that is subconsciously sealing over its “traumatic ruptures and breaks”.\textsuperscript{51} In this way, post-traumatic cinema’s formal openness leaves a text open to interpretation, offering an opportunity for discourse where realist narrative cinema usually does not.

**Television as Culture’s Storyteller**

Cinema in general is perceived as a more aesthetic medium than television. And it is difficult to see TV as aesthetic when art is generally expected to be ‘subversive’. In other words, because television is in everyone’s homes, it is usually taken for granted. But TV is a profound technical and economic product of industrial capitalism, and its power comes from its versatility. When compared with feature films, TV is actually more capable of tackling complex topics than cinema because it has more time to develop and resolve storylines as well as present varying points of view. Television typically is also first to forge into new and potentially controversial territory when compared with mainstream cinema. It is perhaps for this reason that many of the post-traumatic conventions discussed previously have made their way onto television in recent years.

In contemporary western society, television serves as storyteller. For many people, it is the primary means by which they receive information about the world. It also is most people’s primary means of entertainment and escape. Television is therefore a principal influence on
modern society’s perception of the world because it reflects and often reaffirms culture’s ideologies. Television serves as a storyteller in multiple ways, whether that is through news broadcasts, reality programming, or fictional narratives. Television’s storytelling role is worthy of study because its texts create meaning through both their content and structure. Therefore, the form or discourse that television uses to convey its stories is just as important as the content of those stories. According to media scholar Sarah Kozloff, TV is “inescapably ‘formalist,’” implying that by its very commercial and fragmented nature, television must utilize modes of storytelling that are not shared by other media. Television texts merit consideration here because much of what is seen on TV is constructed as ‘reality’. The epistemic quality of television texts deserves exploration because of the medium’s far-reaching influence on society.

Narratives can serve as a form of denial by rewriting history or distorting public perception about the current state of affairs. Media scholar Lynn Spigel proposes that such narratives have existed since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, claiming that commercial television is “haunted by 9/11” and is in a mourning period. She points out that while TV aimed to return viewers to ordinary existences, it also played on their fears. Some programs even encouraged nationalism by focusing on America’s past. Elizabeth Anker also offers a theory about media coverage of the events of 9/11, suggesting that news broadcasters subconsciously constructed the events in a melodramatic fashion, positioning the United States as victim and justifying its retaliatory action as heroic. To emphasize media’s influence and significance in shaping viewer perception of that day, she adds, “It is crucial to recognize that for most American news viewers, the media coverage of September 11 was the primary experience of the terrorist
This substantiates media scholar Robert Stam’s observation about television news: “If illusionistic fictions disguise their discourse as history, television news, in certain respects, wraps up its history as discourse.”

Up until 2006, Hollywood TV studios were hesitant to portray the events of 9/11 in a literal sense. Only a few works were released on the topic. The first was a French documentary called 9/11 (2002), aired on CBS 6 months after the attacks. And few docudramas were produced prior to 2006, such as 93: the Flight that Fought Back, which aired on Discovery Channel on the anniversary of the attacks in 2005, and Flight 93, which aired in 2006 and was incidentally A&E’s most-watched program ever. Hollywood’s hesitancy to release 9/11-themed material was no doubt related to the impression that the viewing public around the world was relatively uneasy, unready, or unwilling to watch it yet. However as this document will attempt to show, television’s fixation with traumatic themes and styles may indicate a subconscious attempt to process events witnessed worldwide on 9/11. As suggested previously, the texts chosen for this thesis might be read as manifestations of repressed 9/11-induced fear, whether literal, metaphorical, or existential.

Melodrama’s Capacity to Confront Trauma

One of the ways that television engages with controversial subject matter like trauma is through what might seem an unlikely format, melodrama. What constitutes melodrama varies widely depending not only on a text’s historical context (Victorian melodrama was quite different than television melodrama today, for example), but also on its medium. Melodrama’s roots date back to 18th-century England, but melodrama today has changed a bit since then. Traditional melodrama was defined as “a dramatic storyline of villainy, victimization, and
retribution, in which characters’ emotional states are hyperbolized and externalized through
grandiose facial expression, vivid bodily gestures, and stirring musical accompaniment.”

Traditional melodrama was also perceived as romance-ridden and sentimental, emphasizing
spectacle and emotionality over classical dramatic elements such as plot. It has been
suggested that traditional melodrama perhaps filled the gap resulting from shifting imperatives
during the industrial age. When capitalism became the dominant way of life in Western
civilization, economic structures alone could not hold society together in the same way that
religion had. Melodrama became society’s “glue” and gave individual lives meaning, prompting
narrative theorist Peter Brooks to label this phenomenon the “moral occult”. What is most
remarkable about the mass-consumed art of melodrama is how important it has become to
modern culture. Melodrama resolves complex problems in moral and simplistic ways, and it
strives to do so using a mass appeal. This function bears a striking similarity to the purpose of
myth, giving melodrama considerable power to influence cultural attitudes.

Due to melodrama’s “low” art stigma, prime-time TV narrative historically differentiated
itself from melodrama by placing less emphasis on character and more emphasis on action.
But this bias is breaking down as more primetime series incorporate melodrama. Hirsch
suggests that melodrama may be a preferred genre for mainstream audiences because “higher”
genres like modernism can often be “too intellectual for the cultural needs of the general
public.” Hirsch argues that “the dismissal of melodrama by critics like Weisel seems to be
motivated more by aesthetic prejudice – the supposed incompatibility of the Holocaust as a
‘high’ theme and melodrama as a ‘low’ genre – than by a serious consideration of
representational modes and their limits.”

19
Traditional melodrama sought conventional resolution, albeit often an ambiguous sense of closure, and was “dependent on the freeze-frame of tableau and narrative closure” because it needed “to produce its symbols and moral lessons—in particular its deux ex machina resolutions”. The happy ending by Hollywood standards is a fundamental trait for traditional melodrama. After indulging audiences in emotionally cathartic content, the melodrama usually offers a conventional (but often unrealistic) resolution to return everything to ‘normal’ and the status quo. However, not all melodrama endorses conventional closure, and this misperception is where much of its criticism originates today.

Melodrama’s affinity for closure may seem at odds with the openness of TV seriality. However, because of melodrama’s ambiguous sense of closure, it lends itself well to the serial format. The traditional definition of a serial is a story with a continuous storyline. On television, some serials eventually end (like mini series) while others such as soap operas continue on without intent of ever reaching closure. Compare this to what typically characterizes a series: a story or situation with a unique problem that is introduced and resolved in each episode. Traditional series almost never reach absolute closure until they are cancelled, but each episode provides mini or temporary resolutions. What differentiates a series from a serial is the serial’s continuing storyline. In recent years the classification of ‘serial’ and ‘series’ has become muddled because of format hybridization. In fact most fictional TV narrative today is actually a combination of the two. Where the TV series used to rule supreme, more television programming is exhibiting serial traits. All TV narrative can be considered serial to a certain extent because its commercial nature dictates that it be segmented and fragmentary. By its very nature, TV narrative is “ongoing and cyclical rather than climactic and final.” In this way,
television narrative inherently implies “the form of the dilemma rather than that of resolution and closure.”74 “All the top new shows that are working are serialized,” says Jeffrey Bader of ABC, 75 pointing out that Lost and 24 have proven to be amazingly popular. This leads one to consider why seriality is so prevalent at present. The answer may lie in the fact that serial structures are ideal for the openness required to present post-traumatic material, because they allow for central problems and questions to remain unresolved.

Closely related to ambiguous closure and seriality is deferral, another popular melodramatic narrative technique. As far back as the 1980s, deferral was a common method used in prime-time serial soap operas like Dallas and Dynasty. The usual effect generated by deferral is suspense, and the convention used most often to create that suspense is the cliffhanger, in which many questions are presented and then left for subsequent episodes to be answered. In the case of season finales, questions may not get resolved until the following season. Historically in serials, these questions did not affect clarity or comprehension of the narrative. More recently, however, with the appearance of television serials like Lost, questions compound upon one another and rarely get resolved, leaving viewers hanging on critical points for months. One could argue this tactic may risk losing viewers, which was the case during Lost’s season 4, when many viewers discontinued watching the serial claiming that they had grown discouraged by too many unanswered questions.76

While television has always been character-focused, an increasing emphasis on character has been growing on narrative TV since the 1980s. But in recent years, this emphasis has become so great that at times, character is more important than plot.77 This trend is widespread and can be seen in many series, serials, sitcoms, and prime-time TV dramas. The
three case studies here exemplify this tendency, with *Lost* in particular tending to focus entire episodes on a single character’s back story to intensify viewer attachment and interest.\(^{78}\) This trend relates to seriality, because in traditional series, the setting and situation generally do not change, and characters often are oblivious to issues from prior episodes as well as the way in which those issues were resolved. In other words, characters do not learn from their pasts. This aspect of the series form is of particular interest to this thesis because its lack of character development affects the production and interpretation of cultural artifacts with respect to trauma, history, and memory. It also affects whether or not those cultural artifacts deny or address the culture’s contemporary issues.

Melodrama can never escape its “predictable and stereotypical formulas” (which sometimes cause it to appear unoriginal), so it instead seeks to exploit them in a self-conscious fashion while approaching disturbing and forbidden topics.\(^{79}\) Modern TV audiences are familiar with melodramatic conventions, so any deviation from the norm is noticeable. These deviations in themselves can create meaning. When melodrama’s conventions are regarded in this way, as genre rules or “enabling conditions for an encounter” with unsettling topics, it is not an “escape into blindness or easy reassurance, but [is] an instrument for seeing.”\(^{80}\) Which leads one to consider whether melodrama is indeed escapist as previously thought, or rather subversive. The answer depends on the cultural/historical context and where the emphasis lies: on the closure (happy endings as a denial or escape and reaffirming the status quo) or on the ideological conflict, justifying cultural change.\(^{81}\)

While melodrama’s propensity for happy moralistic endings generates “reassuring conclusions and [performs] moral allegorizing” that are far removed from reality, this does not
imply a denial about reality. As opposed to realism, which is bound by empirical knowledge, melodrama “demands that the real world match up to the imaginary,” while never denying its boundaries. Melodrama is capable of pushing reality towards the symbolic, thereby alleviating any pressure caused by its contradictions, representing a significant reaction to inconsistencies in culture. This is why the more unrealistic TV melodrama gets, the more potential it has of safely addressing the truth. But while melodrama historically has been the mode of choice to address tough issues with its taboo-breaking ability, Kaplan cautions that melodrama also tends to jumble and displace cultural fears, offering an avenue to safely address issues but also forget them. Through melodrama traumas can continue to repeat themselves, concealing “cultural traumas [that are] too painful to confront directly.”

Post-Traumatic Television

Narrative TV has experienced considerable genre and form hybridization in recent years due in part to the influence of postmodernism in the last quarter century. Hybridization has increased since 9/11, perhaps because hybridized texts symbolize an era fraught with ambiguity and few clear-cut answers. This might be due to the fact that genre hybrids can indirectly tackle difficult topics more easily than classical genres can with their limited rules and conventions. But what is most intriguing is that these narratives utilize a combination of styles, primarily post-traumatic cinema, melodrama, and reality TV. These styles may appear drastically different from one another on the surface. But a more in-depth examination reveals that they share many attributes. It is perhaps for this reason that many new TV texts in the 9/11 era incorporate these previously contrasting styles together. What is remarkable is that many conventions utilized within the various styles seek to serve the same purpose. Most generate a
sense of disorientation and chaos, for example. For the purposes of this study, I will call this new conglomerate of styles “post-traumatic television” or PTTV.

Thematically, a number of controversial topics distinguish PTTV’s content. Not surprisingly, the most prevalent theme on TV in general since 9/11 is death, and the American public seems more preoccupied with death and the afterlife than it has ever been.87 For example, in 2006 Medium (2005-present) was NBC’s highest-rated adult drama on Monday night in 15 years88, and that same year, other networks aired at least eight new series containing supernatural or spiritual content, like Crossing Jordan (2001-2007), Supernatural (2005-present), Revelations (2005), and Book of Daniel (2006).89 Additionally, CSI (2000-present) and similar crime dramas feature cadavers and forensics.90 One reason for the preoccupation with death themes could be that viewers who witnessed the events of 9/11 were vicariously traumatized. And a thematic obsession with the afterlife suggests that American culture might be starving for a discourse on death because it is a site of contingency.91 “People desperately want to know what it’s like to cross over,” claims Sharon Farber, who studies death anxiety. She cites the popularity of Six Feet Under as an example, in addition to texts like Crossing Over with John Edwards (1999-2004), a talk show in which a self-professed psychic or medium ‘speaks’ to deceased families of audience members.92 Border crossing is difficult for most audiences to grasp, and the dividing line between life and death presents a considerable border.

Another recurring PTTV theme is the concept of the “Other,” which adopts an “us versus them” mentality. By definition, “The Other is singled out as different.” In sociology, the concept has been used to refer to the process by which individuals that society wants to subordinate are excluded.93 “Othering” is often a response to catastrophic events. This is evident after a brief
look back at history after any large-scale catastrophe has taken place. The U.S.’s response to Pearl Harbor, for example, resulted in Japanese Americans being forced into concentration camps. Othering is problematic because “good” and “bad” are usually black and white in most TV and film; the border between protagonists and antagonists is delineated clearly. But in reality, good and bad are usually shades of grey; it is almost impossible to know who is trustworthy when anyone is capable of anything, given the right motivation. The 9/11 terrorist attacks and similar events that fell near the millennium may have reaffirmed and justified America’s penchant for identifying a definable enemy. Television has followed suit in terms of its choice of subject matter, reflecting the cultural conditions. Shows like CSI and its string of variants reflect America’s obsession with violence and its preoccupation with finding someone to blame. Othering is a common quality of melodramatic texts in fact, perhaps because the categorization as black or white easily conforms with melodrama’s moralizing tendency. Binaries such as these are popular with the masses because they allow people to easily label and categorize. This seems particularly the case in America since 9/11. Audiences became polarized in a number of ways, most notably politically and religiously, because in times of crisis, “people cling to their beliefs, no matter what those may be.” People tend to embrace traditional belief systems like religion when faced with tragedy because it is comforting and familiar, providing them with answers when events like the death of others do not seem to make sense.

How narratives are written, even fictional ones, can contribute to a culture’s sense of denial on a given subject matter. Many narratives succeed in aiding viewers in avoiding guilt and responsibility. Indicative of a world in a state of uncertainty, television in the post-9/11 era
appears preoccupied with themes that either address or deny guilt and responsibility. In fact, Spigel remarks that TV content since 9/11 harkens back to Cold War paranoia.\footnote{95} This sentiment is suggestive of literary scholar Jacqueline Foertsch’s theory about people’s fear of the unknown, which she calls the ‘enemy within’. Foertsch’s research links cultural and media reaction of the Cold War of the 1950s to the AIDs crisis of the 1980s, but many of her conclusions also apply to media in the post-9/11 era.\footnote{96} Problems such as xenophobia and witch hunts still plague society today, and one begins to notice a pattern of such attitudes and activities following a traumatic event or era, not only in the activities themselves but also in their media representations.

The predominance of paranoia in PTTV texts is one such pattern, symptomatic of a fear-induced reactivity associated with the post-9/11 era. The cultural atmosphere of fear and paranoia has resulted in a number of displacements such as a zeal for justified violence. For example, \textit{Band of Brothers} (2002) an HBO mini series about the battles fought by American soldiers during WWII, received the most nominations for a long-form television serial the year following 9/11. (Although one could argue that much of the appeal of this serial may be two-fold: it also exhibits a post-traumatic thematic undercurrent, another avenue that deserves examination.) Another mini series, Steven Spielberg’s \textit{Into the West} (2005), acquired the most nominations of all network and cable series at the 2006 Emmys, which is intriguing due to what some might read in this serial as a justification for America’s history of violence and expansionism. And the popularity of terrorist-themed shows like \textit{24} definitely merits examination, particularly when this serial earned more Emmy nominations than any other network TV show in 2006. This might generate a concern about viewer desensitization to
violence because atrocity images may not have as much of an effect on viewers if they’ve been overexposed to them.97

The cultural atmosphere of fear and paranoia has also resulted in a surge of conspiracy theories. In PTTV texts, authority figures are portrayed as corrupt, particularly if they are government officials. The public’s shifting and displaced connotations of those in power may be related to paranoia that no one is trustworthy following events like government scandals and 9/11 where people feel unprotected or even deceived. The old faith in respectable government has been replaced by a distrust of authority and a suspicion of betrayal, which are popular themes for many shows at present.

The controversial nature of PTTV thematic content provokes reactions of shock and confusion in viewers, effects which are intensified by PTTV’s complex narrative strategies. TV in general is moving from traditionally realist expression toward other styles of representation, most notably more complex narrative structures. Due to increased hybridization and melodramatization, PTTV’s narrative complexity exhibits itself via strategies that are borrowed from other styles of production and filmmaking. Achronology in the form of flashbacks and repetition and sequences that alternate between diegetic reality and character subjectivity are examples of techniques that PTTV has borrowed from post-traumatic cinema. Framing techniques such as ‘shaky cam’ and the creeping camera style are also common, conventions that PTTV has borrowed from reality TV. Using few demarcating signals (“storytelling cues” or “signposts”), these conventions create temporary confusion for viewers.98 Additionally, due to the inclusion of melodrama, the PTTV hybrid resembles the American soap opera, “continually destroy[ing] equilibrium and frame in order for the show to go on”.99 Like soap scenes and
plots, PTTV stories are in a state of constant flux, their endlessness dictating that their resolutions are merely temporary. Storylines arc, intersect, branch off into new stories, and seem to go on forever. But they usually have a payoff in the form of some type of resolution or closure, even if only temporary or ambiguous. PTTV texts tend to drag out their plots, giving the impression that time crawls more so than it does in reality. In addition, PTTV incorporates melodrama’s focus on character development and twist-of-fate narratives. Much of the pleasure derived from watching PTTV comes not from the diegetic material of the story, but from attempting to unravel the story’s mechanics. This concept is important because the way a story is told (its discourse) is tied to how the narrative action is perceived, and as mentioned previously, this can influence a culture’s sense of denial or responsibility on an issue.

Some narrative techniques are shared between the styles of production in PTTV. For example, melodramatic serial television uses repetition as a narrative convention like post-traumatic cinema does, but its motive for using this technique is quite different. TV narrative repetition is prompted by television’s fragmented and commercial nature; it can not afford to lose viewers during commercial breaks or hiatuses, and constantly seeks to attract new viewers. Network revenue is driven by advertising, so a show’s ratings are monitored closely by networks and their advertisers. Repetition is a tool that continuously reviews and flashes back to key information that viewers may have missed if they were not watching or were distracted. Repetition on TV is usually used to inform and entice, unlike repetition’s goal in post-traumatic cinema, which is to vicariously traumatize or leave a lasting emotional impression. In the case of PTTV, repetition may be serving a dual purpose.
This concept recollects LaCapra’s theory about the three categories of post-traumatic texts, specifically the third category, a text that can both repeat trauma and “work though” it, so long as its repetition plants the seed for critical thought to occur. Applying LaCapra’s idea to PTTV, I propose that some PTTV texts actually “work through” trauma. The final text that I have chosen as a case study, *Six Feet Under*, is one such text. As LaCapra theorized, this type of PTTV text contains many of the same traumatizing and repetitious elements as the other PTTV texts examined here, but it also offers opportunity for reflection on its content. Characteristics that differentiate this more reflective type of PTTV text from the type that merely denies or repeats trauma are realism, camera steadiness, long-shots, soothing colors, slow pacing, and minimal fragmentation. Reflective PTTV draws attention away from its form and toward its content, making it more conducive to understanding and comprehension. Its content, while still preoccupied with death and trauma, encourages healing and optimism in light of tragedy, rather than the promise of perpetual PTSD from never-ending catastrophe. While emotionally evocative, this type of PTTV text is also thought-provoking, eliciting a contemplative reaction rather than jarring disorientation.

But this introspective variety of PTTV is rare. As I have suggested here, PTTV’s incorporation of melodramatic, post-traumatic, and reality TV styles may be a mechanism to address controversial content, but the spectacle it creates can also detract from the real issues. To validate PTTV as an art form that unites rather than fractures culture, I’d like to expand upon an observation made by Spigel about melodrama, one that I believe can be extended onto PTTV and TV in general: as “the most degraded of media”, it also has brought the world together
In this way, PTTV may signify an attempt to “act out” and ultimately heal the post-traumatic pain caused by our culture’s collective traumas.

Chapter Outline

The case studies that follow will analyze three popular PTTV serials from the post-9/11 era. The order in which they appear in this document marks a progression from a reactive direct expression of a traumatized culture to a more reflective contemplation of a culture in healing.

Chapter 2 investigates Fox’s serial 24, a text that is a literal manifestation of millennial fears about terrorism, trauma, and death. This chapter probes 24’s ideology, revealing a paradoxical relationship between the concepts of heroism and terrorism. It also explores how 24 handles its thematic content of trauma, death, loss, and Othering. In addition, Chapter 2 analyzes 24’s narrative approach, paying particular attention to the show’s unique real-time format.

Moving forward from the literal into a world of denial, displaced fear, and fantasy, Chapter 3 explores the content and form of ABC’s Lost, a serial that might be considered a metaphoric illustration of the ambiguous and uncertain state of the world post-9/11. This chapter describes Lost’s ideology, illuminating an intense conflict between science and faith. It also examines the treatment of Lost’s thematic content such as trauma, death, loss, and Othering. Lastly, Chapter 3 dissects Lost’s narrative strategy, particularly its manipulation of time with its use of flashbacks and flashforwards.

Spinning the argument in a more hopeful direction is Chapter 4 with its examination of HBO’s Six Feet Under. Sharing many of the uncertain and paranoid tendencies of the previous two texts, Six Feet Under also dwells on ethereal and deeper concerns stirred by the post-9/11
era, such as questions about the nature of death and survival. It is notable that while Six Feet Under proves to be the most optimistic of the three texts, it was not only the first to appear in the post-9/11 age but also the only text discussed here that is no longer in production. This chapter explores Six Feet Under’s ideology, its thematic content, and its narrative structure.

Finally, Chapter 5 synthesizes findings from each case study and postulates conclusions about PTTV, suggesting it may be indicative of a culture in various stages of post-traumatic healing. Lastly, Chapter 5 proposes directions for future study.

Notes


5 Seiter 61.


7 Seiter 41-42.


24 Caruth, Unclaimed Experience 49.


26 Hirsch, “Post-traumatic Cinema” 12.


28 Caruth, “Parting Words” 13.

29 Sigmund Freud qtd. in Caruth, Unclaimed Experience 100.

30 Caruth, Unclaimed Experience 58.
31 Caruth, Unclaimed Experience 58.
32 Caruth, Unclaimed Experience 73.
34 Caruth, Unclaimed Experience 49.
35 Caruth, “Parting Words” 20.
39 Kaplan 204.
42 Hirsch, Afterimage 8.
47 Kaplan 204.
48 Caruth, Unclaimed Experience 61.
50 Hirsch, Afterimage 20.
51 Kaplan 203.


54 Seiter 41.

55 Lozano 207.


57 Spigel 239.


60 Martin 12.


64 Lozano 209.

65 Anker 23.

66 Lozano 209.


70 Kaplan 204.

71 Kozloff 91.

72 Porter 24.


76 Newman 20

77 Porter 1.


80 Thorburn 539.


82 Thorburn 543.

83 Gledhill 108.


85 Thorburn 542.

86 Kaplan 202.


Peyser 57.


Farber.


Spigel 262.


Alan Resnais qtd. in Hirsch, *Afterimage* 146.

Mittell 37.

Gledhill 113.


Gledhill 113.

Spigel 247.

Mittell 38.

Newman 19.

Spigel 250.
CHAPTER 2: 24

Fox Network’s 24 is a primetime television serial that began airing in the Fall of 2001. Although it was already in production, its premiere date was delayed for several weeks because the network feared that the viewing public would not embrace a show about terrorism so soon after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Its timeliness may have been to its benefit, however, because the serial was an immediate hit with critics and a constant winner at annual Emmy ceremonies. During its first season, 24’s popularity with the public was not as high as its awards and acclaim might imply, however. 24’s success with viewers came with subsequent seasons, suggesting that perhaps viewers were not initially captivated with this new show about terrorism.

24 is included here as a text for case study because it engages with a number of cultural topics that are pertinent to this thesis, and it does so using a combination of techniques that give it a style unlike any other show on television at the moment. 24 seeks to overwhelm and confuse viewers on various levels. Its subject matter is disturbing and emotionally evocative, its visual style is disorienting and chaotic, its pacing is rapid, its narrative style is enmeshed with hooks that generate suspense and shock, and its unique manipulation of time heightens tension by revealing the action minute by minute, second by second in real-time. When used in combination, these techniques create a potent fusion that inhibits full comprehension of events. Intense emotionally and visually, 24 is a compelling serial that plays on contemporary society’s deepest cultural fears. Such displays may discourage any real reflection about historical catastrophe, making 24 a reactionary text that not only repeats historical and cultural trauma for viewers but also denies it.
Seasons of 24 are considered “days” and are titled as such. Day 2 refers to season 2, for example. Individual episodes within each season are considered “hours”. Each episode is titled accordingly, hour “6:00pm to 7:00pm”, for example. These titles are introduced visually and aurally at the beginning of every episode so that viewers know exactly where the serial stands in the context of that day. Calmly narrated by the quiet voice of the main character, the hour is eerily announced, discordantly accompanied by a visual clock that beeps with the passing of each second. The clock reappears at commercial breaks, its beeps enhanced by orchestral stings that amplify its already agitating effect.

24 takes place in various locations, the most prominent being the Counter-Terrorist Unit (CTU) headquarters in Los Angeles, California, and the White House in Washington, D.C. Other locations are usually associated with field operations. The serial’s focus on politics is evident from its first season, when the backdrop on which the story unfolds is the California primary during a Presidential election year. 24’s main character is Jack Bauer, a federal agent who works for CTU. Only a few other characters are constant on the serial, because death occurs so frequently that most everyone is expendable. Chloe, a technical engineer, is Jack’s liaison at CTU who assists him with tasks associated with intelligence and security when he is in the field. The two quite often operate outside the law in order to help each other, oftentimes risking their jobs and their freedom by going against authority. Jack’s daughter Kim is also a constant in the serial, though her appearances have become more infrequent since season 5 when she and Jack became estranged. Political figures also make recurring appearances on the serial, the most notable being President David Palmer (who has now been assassinated) and his brother Wayne who was also elected President. Some antagonists also have become regulars on the
serial, until their deaths, that is. Former President Logan is one such example, as is Abu Fayed, an Arab terrorist. But for the most part, a new set of antagonists are introduced each season, because 24 makes a point of wrapping up all terrorist plots by the end of each season.

24’s Ideology: Heroism versus Terrorism

Through its terror premise and its unshakably patriotic main character Jack, 24 presents a paradoxical comparison and contrast between the notions of heroism and terrorism. For seemingly opposing concepts, these two ideas collide on 24 in a way that forces one to consider their meanings and connotations from an epistemological point of view. The ingredient that levels the playing field for the two concepts is the presence of trauma, which also might be considered a common denominator between the two ideas because they generally do not exist without it. Generating intensely emotional reactions, trauma triggers even the most trustworthy characters to act in the most unpredictable ways, illuminating a fundamental theme on 24; namely, that anyone is capable of anything given the proper motivation.

Whether heroes or terrorists, characters’ motivations for doing what they do on 24 range from allegiance to one’s country to family loyalties to religious beliefs. In some cases, dedication to one’s cause is often so steadfast that it borders on insanity. For example, Jack is unwaveringly loyal to his country even when it results in his own emotional deterioration. He puts himself in harm’s way without concern for his own well-being and jeopardizes all his personal and familial relationships by neglecting them for his true passion, serving his country. Jack is so zealous for his cause that he does not hesitate when duty calls for him to torture his girlfriend Audrey’s brother in season 4, despite Audrey’s plea for him to refrain. His sense of duty causes him to act even more radically at the end of that season when he takes on a new
identity without telling his own daughter. And in season 6, he readily takes on a suicide mission, claiming, “At least I’ll die for something”.

Jack’s obsession with patriotism is so intense that he often acts outside the law. In this way, a comparison can be made between Jack’s actions and those of the terrorists. Both break the law, both commit murder, both embark upon suicide missions. But narratively Jack barely gets his hand slapped for going against authority, while the terrorists are punished with death. Take Fayed for example, who is captured, beaten, and hung for “serving the will of God” in episode 137, whereas Jack continues to escape any serious consequence for continually breaking the law, although he has committed many of the same crimes as Fayed. From an epistemic point of view, 24’s dichotomy of “right” and “wrong” leads one to consider how such moralities are defined to begin with. 24’s double standard comes from a culture that holds an American-centric view about what defines “goodness,” where Jack’s values of freedom and democracy go unquestioned. Therefore his wrongdoings go unpunished because he committed his crimes for the “right” reasons, whereas Fayed is assumed to be misguided and evil for his actions. 24’s ethical relationship with American culture is reciprocal, because its viewpoint is influenced by American ideals about what is “right” and “true”, so its adherence to these ideals as absolutes only reinforces an American-centric point of view.

Another notion to consider about Jack’s obsessive patriotism is that in actuality, his faith does not lie with his actual country, but rather with the Western ideals it claims to stand for. He consistently challenges his country’s authority at the highest levels possible, for example, including the President and the White House, who are usually proven corrupt within 24’s paranoid world of conspiracy. So most often Jack acts on his own, a renegade hero. And again,
from an epistemic perspective, one is reminded that often what constitutes a hero in one culture constitutes a criminal in another. Jack’s father in season 6, for example, is a complex character who considers himself just as much of a patriot as Jack. However, as the season progresses, Philip is found to have been part of the conspiracy to assassinate President David Palmer. Claiming he did it for “the good of the country”, he firmly believes he did the “right” thing. He becomes paranoid and borderline psychotic upon being rejected by the very thing he has fought so hard to protect, feeling his country and family have betrayed him. Philip’s actions, regardless of whether he had good intent by Western standards, ultimately prove short-sighted when they almost incite the start of a third world war. “I’m a patriot, Jack. I never wanted any harm to come to this country,” he laments, unable to understand why his actions are not considered heroic, again calling attention to the double standard that differentiates heroism from terrorism on 24.

But because of this differentiation, 24 is wildly popular with viewers, in part because it allows them to believe in the mythical ‘hero’, and more specifically, the American hero. On this topic, executive producer Robert Cochran remarks:

24’s only onscreen constant is Bauer, who, in his daily missions on behalf of the government, offers a very compelling fantasy figure... People like to think there’s someone out there protecting us, and doing whatever it takes, at whatever the cost to himself, to accomplish that. That’s a nice thing to believe.1

Through its depictions of heroism and terrorism that polarize the real issues, 24 embodies a global playing field for the ideological collision inherent in cultural difference. But 24 usually does not aim to generate real debate or discussion on the topic because the message it puts
forth is that any definition that conflicts with America’s is ultimately flawed. As discussed previously, 24 occasionally offers alternative points of view, but these are usually presented by unfamiliar foreign characters with whom audiences either fail to identify or fail to trust because of their role in the story, minimizing the weight of any sentiment they put forward. Often these characters’ perspectives are radical or extremist, further alienating viewers. For example, Harsh words are spoken by Russian terrorist Gredenko during episode 131 when he declares a wish that might also be considered a prophetic warning given the present state of international affairs: that “the Arabs and the West [will] destroy each other.”

Trauma, Death, and Loss on 24

24 seems to thrive on its own ability to shock, consistently presenting tales that will elicit the most alarm in viewers. Its narratives not only evoke memories of historical catastrophes like world war and national tragedies like political assassinations, but they also induce fear about future apocalyptic possibilities, particularly nuclear war. The violent nature of 24’s terrorism plots and blockbuster-esque special effects generates a similar viewer response as that created by Hollywood action film and horror film, where a guilty pleasure is derived from watching destruction.

Preoccupation with such thematic material prompts consideration of Caruth’s connection between catastrophic experience and survival, the “enigma of survival”, whereby the recognition of the paradox between destruction and survival promotes comprehension of catastrophic experience. But as Kaplan suggests, these types of themes could also indicate cultural amnesia or traumatic forgetting, whereby viewers are engaged in denial because it is
easier than addressing issues directly, suggesting that our culture’s fixation with traumatic themes may be a repeated denial of trauma.\textsuperscript{5}

24’s nuclear bomb theme, for example, is repeated numerous times during the serial’s six seasons. For contemporary audiences, nuclear war is one of the most terrifying possibilities imaginable, and 24 routinely uses the threat of a nuclear bomb’s detonation as the ultimate consequence of international conflict. In the serial, at least two bombs have been detonated on U.S. soil, one in the middle of a densely populated city (Los Angeles), while yet another leaks radiation, exposing a member of CTU and threatening thousands of civilians. And in episode 136, viewers observe President Palmer from special advisor Tom Lennox’s mortified point of view as he hastily approves a nuclear assault on Russia without apparent forethought.

24 plays also on other contemporary fears such as biological and chemical warfare, as illustrated in season 3 when a deadly virus is unleashed and also in season 5 when nerve gas is released into CTU’s ventilation system and is expected to infiltrate the entire city’s natural gas system. Such catastrophic scenarios usually constitute the primary conflict in a given season. And if the threat of nuclear, biological, and chemical war are not enough to instill fear into viewers’ hearts, 24 also presents scenarios that many people fear could happen in their own backyards. The conflict presented in 24’s season 6 premiere consists of several small terrorist attacks that are aimed at transportation systems such as public transport and widely traversed roads and highways. Because such attacks have become a genuine fear in the U.S. due to their increasing prevalence in other parts of the world, 24’s use of this scenario proves timely.

Sutherland, the actor who plays Jack, comments, “I long for the day when we can go back to when the show is the fantasy it was designed to be.”\textsuperscript{6}
In using such scenarios to maximize tension and increase stakes, 24 may be indulging viewers in the same kind of fear that many felt when observing news coverage of events like 9/11, evoking fears of being completely powerless. But as suggested previously, these same scenarios could potentially encourage deeper insight into trauma as Caruth theorizes, prompting an understanding of our catastrophic age.7

Regardless of what types of emotions or memories such traumatic depictions stir in viewers, trauma on 24 is not without its share of death. Death occurs frequently, but the experience of it is only brief and little time is spent grieving. Therefore death’s consequences linger, because by forgoing a mourning period, any real acceptance of death is never fully reached. Rather 24 concentrates on the trauma itself and the fear and paranoia generated from the threat of death it generates. Because the loss suffered by survivors (usually Jack) immediately following a death is brief and not fully mourned, the pain associated with it resurfaces repeatedly. For Jack and many others, the multitude of deaths on 24 takes its toll. For example, Jack’s wife is killed at the end of season 1. By the start of season 2, Jack has quit CTU and is estranged from his daughter Kim. Just when Jack’s world is falling apart, President Palmer calls him pleading for help, sucking him back into the counter-terrorist fray.8 Jack’s behavior in subsequent seasons confirms that he did not fully mourn his wife’s death. Struggling with his emotions and conscience, he continues to endure trauma on the job at CTU, suffering many more deaths through the course of the serial. But this does not necessarily harden Jack, rather he seems noticeably more disturbed by death as time goes by. For example, when informed of Audrey’s death in episode 134, Jack grows so obsessed with avenging her murder that he jeopardizes CTU’s mission.
Other characters in 24 also struggle with mourning the loss of loved ones. Jack’s daughter Kim mourns Jack’s “death” when he assumes a new identity and she is not aware he is still alive, so in season 5 when he returns, she tells Jack that she does not want him in her life anymore (marking their second estrangement) because she can not handle the drama he brings to her life, remarking that death surrounds him.

Another example of a character who does not receive adequate time to mourn is Edgar Stiles, a CTU computer engineer in season 5. He is grief-stricken about the death of his mother, but he must suppress his emotion in order to continue his duties because of the significance of his job. When the radiation from a nuclear bomb prevents authorities from getting to where his mother’s body is located, however, Edgar is unable to contain his grief.

Edgar himself is a short-lived character on 24. Quirky and mild-mannered, Edgar quickly became a fan favorite as a new addition to the CTU team in season 5. So it is ironic that 24 kills him the same season that he is introduced. Edgar’s death comes as a result of his exposing himself to nerve gas to gain access to a control device that will save all of CTU. “Edgar became more vulnerable as his appeal grew,” says executive producer Howard Gordon. Before his “death,” the actor who plays Edgar was told, “The good news is you’re one of the best characters on the show. The bad news is that, unfortunately, we have to kill you now,” wryly illustrating how commonplace death is on 24. But Edgar’s is another example of a 24 death getting minimized. Chloe is horrified and grief-stricken, needing time to mourn. But her superiors use guilt to push her back to work immediately, even before Edgar’s body can be removed from CTU.
The manner in which 24’s characters experience the most extreme levels of loss without adequate chance to heal prompts consideration of Caruth once again, particularly her theories about death and repression, especially the nature of life beyond trauma and death. Jack’s character, for example, struggles throughout the serial with PTSD that began at the loss of his wife. But 24 cannot allow Jack to give in to his grief; he must remain functional in order for the serial to continue. This illustrates how the acceptance of death is an “impossible demand at the heart of human consciousness” and explains how people like the characters on 24 are forced to turn away from death in order to survive. In their efforts to do so, 24’s characters turn to a variety of coping mechanisms such as addiction, silence, and shame.

Shame or self-blame, an emotion that often plagues trauma survivors, is expressed by Chloe’s husband Morris in episode 129, when he becomes overwrought with guilt, blaming himself for relenting to terrorists’ torture tactics. Believing that his cooperation aided efforts to detonate a nuclear bomb, he feels responsible for all the deaths attributed to that weapon’s detonation. A recovering alcoholic, Morris is consumed with remorse and slips back into drinking again. Morris’ relationship with Chloe is a resulting casualty and the two split by the season’s end.

Silence in response to trauma is exhibited by several characters on 24, including Jack, who does not speak for nearly two years during the time he is held captive by the Chinese. After being rescued, he does not hear when spoken to and is visibly jumpy in response to loud noises and human touch. His appearance reflects his ordeal; he is physically scarred and is noticeably unkempt. He is shell shocked, just as a soldier or prisoner of war might be. Audrey, Jack’s love interest during seasons 5 and 6, is also captured and tortured by the Chinese. Upon
her rescue, she is so catatonic that the only phrase she is capable of uttering is “Help me, Jack. Please don’t let them do this to me.” But even this utterance is programmed; she repeats it over and over as the response to any question.

24 takes full advantage of Jack’s post-traumatic condition to develop his character, even exploiting it to the furthest extent possible. Jack is a circus animal of sorts, caged and growing more detached with each successive trauma he faces. As the seasons progress, Jack’s character direction morphs as he grows evermore void of emotion. In season 4 Jack struggles with a drug addiction that he developed while working undercover. He tries to hide the addiction from CTU but is discovered by his supervisor and is subsequently fired. Perhaps most significant about Jack’s PTSD is that it causes him to grow evermore violent and unpredictable. In episode 121, Jack bites into another man’s neck like a vampire during a bloody fight scene, then spits out the victim’s Adam’s apple. By 24’s 6th season, Jack is so traumatized and burned out that he quits CTU for the second time (the first time was after his wife’s death in season 1). After being forced to kill fellow-agent Curtis who has jeopardized a mission, Jack’s guilt overwhelms him viscerally when he collapses to the ground and vomits. During this scene, Jack gets a call from his supervisor Bill Buchanan giving him further directives but Jack replies, “I don’t know how to do this anymore.” This is Jack’s first assignment since he was rescued from the Chinese. But in 24’s typical melodramatic style, before Jack can actually quit CTU, a nuclear bomb is detonated in Los Angeles. Jack’s sense of duty sucks him right back into his counter-terrorist mold once again.

By the end of season 6, Jack’s PTSD has become so severe that he stands on the edge of a cliff with a gun in his hand, an image that strongly suggests his contemplation of suicide.
Throughout that entire season, it was evident in all of Jack’s behaviors that he was barely functional after his rescue from two years of Chinese captivity and torture. Executive producer Gordon affirms this implication when he says “The year is all about him finding reasons not to want to die…. it’s a tragic exploration of Jack’s destiny.” Jack is clearly trapped within the system, unable to escape his duty or his emotion about past traumas. Jack’s physical predicament is paralleled by his paralyzed mental state – he is stuck, unable to move forward. And following traumas like these, it is natural to want to make sense out of tragedy, particularly to locate a definable cause. The easiest direction to turn is outward rather than inward, so the most common reaction is to place blame on someone else.

The Other on 24

The tendency to “Other” on 24 derives from uncertainty or doubt about who can be trusted. Protagonists routinely chase the wrong target as a result, such as in season 6 when the protagonists are not sure if they should be chasing Assad or Fayed. But the primary expression of Othering on 24 is racial profiling. By mid-season 6, 24 recalls Cold War-era paranoia with its antagonists all being Russian, Chinese, and Middle Eastern.

But despite the fact that 24 tends to ‘other’ all types of nationalities and ethnicities, it has a particular tendency to place Middle Eastern characters as the center of suspicion. Additionally, 24 is strikingly vague about which specific Middle Eastern country from which these characters hail. In season 6 for example, a conflict erupts between the U.S. and an unspecified Middle Eastern country. Through awkward and painfully wordy dialogue, 24 goes to great lengths to avoid ever naming this country, and it is equally vague when maps are utilized during strategic sessions, making sure never to show the context or full shape of the country in
question. 24’s ambiguity in leaving the enemy undefined is uncharacteristic and a new approach for the serial, leading one to speculate whether this posture might be read as a critique of America’s traditionally xenophobic inclination to lump all non-natives together as simply “Other”, or if it rather supports such attitudes and is intentionally exploiting its audience’s cultural fear.

Season 6 brims with Othering examples, mostly directed at people of Middle Eastern descent. In episode 121, a bus driver will not allow a man to board because he appears Middle Eastern, even when the man is warning the bus driver about a terrorist attack occurring at that instant. Signaling the start of the season, this episode shows a nation in chaos and facing civil unrest, with terrorist threats occurring in small scale but frequently. In reaction, numerous Othering responses like xenophobia occur, such as a rally to round up all Muslims, a topic hotly debated within 24’s fictional White House. In the civil sector, neighbors attack neighbors, and in their paranoia, mistakenly report each other as suspects. The distraction leads authorities to jump reactively at every potential lead and thus completely miss the real perpetrators.

But 24’s penchant for Othering is not unlike the culture that produced it. Activities like terrorism elicit feelings of fear and paranoia in most people, and, in fact, that is what terrorism usually strives for. So paranoia and fear are thus understandable and expected as reactions. The responses seen on 24 in reaction to terrorist events likewise arise out of paranoia and fear, giving the serial a reactionary mood. An example of characters reacting hastily to fear and paranoia can be found in episode 134 when Vice President Daniels overreacts to Fayed’s release of a nuclear drone in California. Although Fayed is an independent terrorist who is not acting on behalf of his country, Daniels chooses to retaliate against Fayed’s home country in
large scale by launching a nuclear attack. Even after CTU agents locate and remotely land the drone safely, the radioactive material seeping from its core is perceived as a successful attack on the U.S. by Daniels, who uses this as his excuse to proceed with a counter-attack. A similar reaction is seen in episode 136 when President Palmer authorizes the launch of a missile against Russia in reaction to an ambassador’s withholding of information that would aid in the apprehension of a terrorist.

These types of knee-jerk reactions illustrate 24’s “eye for an eye” attitude. And on 24, revenge is always justified. The most common reaction to acts of terrorism or potential acts of terrorism on 24 is some form of justified violence, which is expressed in a variety of ways, including revenge after a terrorist act has taken place and the utilization of torture tactics during government interrogations (usually during the prevention stage). It does not matter whether the supposed perpetrators have actually done anything threatening to the protagonist or not; they are guilty by association. Jack often sneaks onto enemy territory and subsequently kills anyone in sight, assuming they are on the other side simply because of their location. In season 6 for example, Jack becomes more reactive and less observant than in previous seasons. Exhibiting a severe lack of patience, he is offensive rather than defensive and resorts to violence much more often and more quickly than he had before. When he turns violent, Jack can be ruthless, inflicting emotional and physical pain. For example in episode 137, Jack and his nemesis Fayed fight using their fists, pipes, and chains, the latter of which Jack ultimately uses to strangle Fayed. Jack is also responsible for the death of Fayed’s brother, so in his embittered ruthlessness, Jack ensures Fayed’s agony by whispering before he hangs him, “Say hello to your brother.”
But the foremost manifestation of justified violence on 24 comes in the form of torture during interrogation efforts. An example of 24’s torture tactics occurs in episode 132, during which Jack cuts off a man’s finger when he will not cooperate. This particular torture scene is intercut with another scene that demonstrates proper diplomatic measures, providing a compelling contrast. Countless examples of scenes like these can be found in 24, and most episodes boast at least one torture scene, with such scenes becoming a hallmark of the serial. In episode 126, Jack tortures his own brother to obtain information. And in episode 128, when Morris is tortured by terrorists, a hole is literally drilled into his shoulder to gain his cooperation, illustrating the graphic nature of 24’s torture scenes.

Jack gets a taste of his own form of vengeance at the end of season 5 when he is captured and traded to the Chinese government. While in Chinese custody, Jack is subjected to pharmaceutical torture and is brainwashed. When Agent Doyle comments in episode 137 that he has never seen pharmaceutical torture to be effective, Jack, who up until that point has been of few words upon his return, responds, “I have.”

The extreme nature of its coerced confessions has generated controversy, and 24 is aware of the viewing public’s reaction to such scenes. This reaction extends outside of the entertainment industry, as 24 has attracted criticism from the U.S. government itself. In 2006, government officials, who were uncomfortable with the tactics used in the serial, feared the viewing audience would assume 24’s fictional situations were representative of real interrogations. Creative executives at 24 met with these officials and learned that the government believes that the scenes are inhumane and confusing to cadets in training, conflicting with the proper interrogation procedures that they are taught. 24’s producers argue
that these scenes exist for dramatic purposes only, and are not intended to depict reality. To its creative team, 24 has no responsibility other than to entertain. However, the producers at 24 do claim to have backed away from intense torture. They contend that the change is not attributed to their visit from U.S. officials, but rather that they themselves have grown tired of writing such scenes. Either way, this change is timely, leading one to wonder if the show is self-censoring itself after pressure from outside groups in the name of “political correctness.”¹⁵

Notwithstanding the controversy, 24 occasionally presents scenarios that offer a critical view of government policy and prompt deeper consideration about the nature of our reactive post-9/11 culture. For example in episode 134, 24’s propensity to Other leads even CTU to mistakenly condemn one of its own. The White House has reactively responded to the civil unrest by invoking a nationwide racial profiling campaign against all Muslims. When CTU suspects a spy in its midst, Agent Doyle looks to his supervisor Nadia, who is Muslim, and suggests running a trace on her system. When a leak is discovered, Nadia is confined to the interrogation room and torture tactics are used to coerce her admission of guilt, but she swears on her innocence. When the truth is revealed that she is indeed innocent, CTU’s entire department is embarrassed of its actions. Nadia’s boss Buchanan apologizes, telling her that he would not blame her for quitting that instant and seeking legal action. But when he tells her how much they need her in light of the impending terrorist threat against the country, she agrees and goes back to work without complaint. This episode not only illustrates but also critiques how unnecessary the sometimes radical U.S. security measures have become in the post-9/11 age.
In an equally uncharacteristic move, 24 asks its viewers not only to have compassion but also to consider forgiveness in season 4. A Muslim family is mistakenly accused (or so the viewer is led to believe at first) of terrorist ties. Before long, however, the family is found to be deeply involved in terrorist activities. But by episode 78, the mother, Dina Araz, chooses to go against her husband to save her son who is being pursued by the terrorists because he refused to carry out murder. In the process, Dina aids CTU in halting forthcoming terrorist activities. In this instance, the viewer is presented with a moral quandary that runs counter to dominant Western ideals about violence and punishment, and that is whether to have compassion for, and ultimately, whether to forgive and accept, a “reformed” terrorist.

And in yet another respect, 24 exercises hegemonic negotiation before the real world does when its fictional society elects a black president. Two men, brothers David and Wayne Palmer, both hold the title of President during 24’s first six seasons. This paradox leads one to speculate whether these are merely “token” characters and the serial’s attempt to appear diverse, or if their inclusion is a critique of continued racism within the supposed “melting pot” of American society.

With these examples, 24 may be offering a shift in perspective that is a departure from that of dominant culture. Even if this is the case, however, it has perhaps swung the pendulum too far in its efforts to locate a solution to the problem of terrorism, because rather than endeavoring to locate the core of the issue, it merely finds someone else to blame. The real antagonists on 24 are usually found to be an “enemy within” or traitor of some type, recalling Foertsch’s theory about literary parallels during historic eras when paranoia runs high. On one hand, the enemy-within concept counters 24’s reactionary Othering tendency by not locating
blame outside American borders; but on the other hand, it also is an equally reactionary response that only exacerbates the viewing public’s already high level of paranoia in the post 9/11 age.

24 usually implicates domestic government as the ultimate source of corruption for its terrorist plots. These “enemies within” most often turn out to be the most malicious characters on the show because their motivations are most often self-serving as opposed to dedicated to a specific cause. For example, the First Lady Sherry Palmer proves to be part of the conspiracy during season 1. But later in season 3, after she and President Palmer have separated, she proves to be an asset to international intelligence efforts because she is a master at manipulation and deception. Another example is President Logan, a character that viewers love to hate and who bears a remarkable physical resemblance to former real-world President Nixon (no doubt the result of a deliberate casting decision). So it is not unexpected when Logan is found to be the source of corruption in season 5. When First Lady Martha begins to suspect him and discovers his involvement in the terrorist activities, Logan substantiates his character’s already underhanded nature by heartlessly condemning Martha to a mental institution. Some of Jack’s partners at work are also found to be traitors. Nina Meyers, for example, is Jack’s partner at CTU in season 1, but she is later found to be a terrorist spy who has sabotaged CTU’s anti-terrorist efforts from the inside.

24’s “enemy within” theme is also evident in the private sphere. The worst betrayals occur when family members such as fathers, brothers, wives, and sons are found to be involved or responsible for the most unscrupulous deeds, such as President Logan’s betrayal of the First Lady mentioned above. And in episode 127, when Jack discovers that his own father and
brother Graem are involved in terrorist activities, Jack’s father murders Graem to protect himself and later threatens Jack at gunpoint as well.

24 is loaded with such twists and terrorists. People who are closest to the protagonists often are found to be working against them. This cynical attitude is prevalent throughout the serial, and it becomes clear through 24’s six seasons that no one can really be trusted (with the exception of possibly Jack, when he is not on the verge of a meltdown). So when terrorism strikes, 24 first blames the Other, then later it is revealed that the enemy within, or one of “us” is truly responsible. This may contradict the argument then, that 24 denies trauma, because it points inward as the source of the problem. However, 24 does not usually prompt discussion about what is next, how to resolve the problem. The serial stops here, blaming the enemy within and only punishing those responsible after the damage has been done, rather than exploring and addressing what might be causing the problem in the first place. Additionally, corporal punishment is almost always the solution regardless of the crime, rather than any form of compassion, understanding, or prevention. But again, 24 is ultimately reflective of the society that created it, and in some respects it does attempt to probe and critique the cultural milieu.

24 as Post-Traumatic Television

Whether blaming the Other or potentially posing controversial social statements, 24 prides itself on exhausting its viewer. Bombarded by the suspense of ticking clocks, intense violence, an overabundance of plot points in a relatively short period of time, subject matter that recalls real-world fears and paranoia about apocalyptic topics, emotionally evocative (and often ridiculous) melodrama, and unbelievable action scenarios that stretch the limits of the
imagination, 24’s viewers are likely overwhelmed by its extremity. But the show has been popular among critics and audiences alike, offering a unique spin on cinematic style and narrative strategy for network primetime television by combining a variety of styles, including post-traumatic cinema, daytime and primetime TV melodrama, and reality TV.

When it premiered in 2001, 24 was the only network TV show that presented its fictional narrative in real-time. 24’s approach to time representation is possibly its most notable characteristic and was the inspiration for the serial’s name (“24” denoting the number of hours in a day). Even before the show premiered, this aspect of its presentation was a much-talked about feature. 24 might be thought to “play” with time like post-traumatic cinema does. But while 24’s time representation may be unique within the context of other television shows, its screen time is also established and rigid in structure. In other words, 24 does not manipulate time in the same way as does post-traumatic cinema; there are no flashbacks or flash forwards, for instance. Time inches forward realistically, with one anomaly occurring between seasons 2 and 3 – a three-year temporal leap is made to account for the ellipse in a Presidential running term.16

24’s real-time correspondence recalls the nature of many reality shows that are time driven, like Survivor and its “race to beat the clock” style of competition. Reality programs were indeed at their ratings peak in the late ’90s just before 24 premiered, so their prevalence may have had an influence on the serial and its popularity. But 24’s unique style also incorporates suspense, a narrative technique that was not as prevalent during the zenith of reality TV.17

24’s real-time is enhanced by a digital beeping clock that displays at the beginning and end of every episode and between commercial breaks, encouraging viewers to be ever mindful
of what time it is. Embodying a race against time, 24’s clock forward movement suggests impending catastrophe, reminiscent of the Atomic Scientists’ “doomsday” clock, whose movement is influenced by the state of international affairs. When violence or conflict rises that leads the world toward potential nuclear war or apocalypse, the minute hand on the doomsday clock inches closer toward midnight. In this sense both clocks behave more like a countdown than an actual clock. The concept of a countdown conjures visions of a ticking bomb, and it is a suspense technique in narrative that increases tension by making the viewer or reader acutely aware of time. Like the doomsday clock, 24’s ‘timer’ also counts up rather than down, but the effect of both is the same, especially when one considers how 24 already indulges viewer fears of bombs and apocalyptic possibilities with its theme of terrorism.

24’s minute-by-minute correspondence also resembles melodrama, reflecting the manner in which daytime soap operas are presented. But in soaps, time actually passes more slowly than real time. For example, a single situation can drag out for months and a single day can drag out for weeks. To some extent, this is also true for 24 because one day takes 24 episodes (or weeks) to portray. But soap opera time’s propensity to “crawl” is dictated by multiple story lines that must take place simultaneously, where often what transpires in one scene occurs simultaneous to something that is shown at another time. This causes events in soap operas to drag out. A holiday or special event that only takes an hour of story time can take a week of one-hour episodes to portray. In this respect 24 differs from daytime melodrama, because even though its story occurs in real time (which can have an effect of time crawling) events in the serial occur quickly rather than slowly as in soaps. Every minute of 24 is packed with action of some type, making the serial difficult to digest because information is
presented so rapidly that it is a challenge just to follow the plot. There is not enough time to fully comprehend what one sees before the action changes again. In addition, 24’s more intense action sequences flick by in flashes like a post-traumatic memory. In this way, 24’s pacing recollects the style of post-traumatic cinema.

One might conclude that 24’s minute-by-minute story correspondence to real time also makes the serial seem “realistic,” but this characteristic only gives 24 the illusion of realism. In actuality, the show is exceptionally unrealistic because the number of events that happen within a 24-hour period is unbelievable and unlikely. 24’s handling of time representation is an area where disparate styles of story telling come together to generate the edge-of-your-seat mood for which 24 is known.

Another aspect of 24’s style that contributes to its chaotic mood is fragmentation. A technique borrowed from melodrama, post-traumatic cinema, and reality TV, fragmentation is used on 24 in several ways. First, the frame itself is fragmented using a split-screen format at key points in the action, which, like the ticking clock, are strategically located before and after commercial breaks, where it is used as a preview and review device to entice viewers to continue watching the program or to suture them back into the story after they’ve stepped away. Additionally, because 24’s story is presented in real time, the only way viewers can see unrelated events occurring simultaneously is via a split screen. The split screen not only offers the enticement of voyeurism, it is also suggestive of an omniscient or objective narrative voice, giving the illusion of multiple perspectives.

The second method of fragmentation used on 24 is fragmentation of the plot, which is carved into many mini-stories. Because of the multitude of side stories, events from one
storyline are often interrupted by events from another via an editing technique called a cutaway. When stories unfold, they are presented in fragments such that only little bits of each scenario are seen before the camera cuts to another location and set of characters. Not only does this create suspense by heightening tension, a common device in contemporary melodramatic TV narrative, but it also prevents the formation of a full or accurate picture of what is taking place. Keeping viewers in the dark contributes to 24’s sense of chaos, a quality often seen in post-traumatic narratives. No event is covered or revealed entirely, generating ambiguity about what is really transpiring. In this manner, 24’s story presentation mimics the state of a traumatized mind.

Another way that 24 uses fragmentation is in its manipulation of frame space via the close-up. The close-up is a common framing technique utilized in melodrama to amplify emotional intensity by zooming in on characters’ facial expressions. While it is also used for this purpose on 24, the close-up serves another purpose, and that is to obscure any complete view of a scene, which, like the cutaway, is another method of keeping viewers guessing. Because settings and situations can not be examined fully, deciphering events is arduous, contributing to the mood of chaos. In this manner, the use of close-ups and cutaways on 24 achieves much the same effect as similar techniques in post-traumatic cinema that generate not only disorientation but also ambiguity. This is appropriate considering the content of 24, secrecy and covert activities, which by default are associated with uncertainty. In this manner, 24’s disorienting and ambiguous visual style inhibits rather than enhances viewer comprehension.

In connection with covertness and secrecy, 24 makes use of another cinematographic technique that parallels the nature of its content, the creeping camera. Reminiscent of the
spying point-of-view shot often seen in horror film, creeping camera is a common style used today in reality TV. 24’s creeping camera consistently hides behind objects during scenes, not only obscuring a full view of the setting and characters, but also implying that what is being witnessed is a privileged or private situation, again appealing to voyeuristic desire. During season 6 the creeping camera peers at the scene in CTU’s “situation room” (the conference room where CTU’s missions are planned) though glass partitions that separate it from the rest of the office space. In fact most all of the rooms of CTU are enveloped in glass, which is ironic considering that this is the headquarters through which terrorist activities like bomb explosions are defused. During an intense scene in which CTU is in heated debate with the White House via a conference call, the view is not only through the glass but through the U.S. emblem that is etched into the glass, suggesting someone, perhaps the viewer or the characters or both, are wearing proverbial rose-colored glasses, which might be tinted the color “American-centric.”

Another technique that 24 borrows from reality TV (and even documentary filmmaking) is what is most commonly called “shaky cam.” A style born out of necessity when filming situations with handheld cameras without much warning or preparation, shaky cam is a technique that has been adopted by both narrative cinema and television in the past decade. Gritty and raw, it has come to be associated with realism and “reality.” Because the image in frame does not remain still long enough for the viewer to focus on it, the shaky cam style can be unpleasant to view and contributes to 24’s disorienting and suspenseful tone.

Many of these cinematic techniques make 24 seem deceptively “real.” But from a plot perspective, 24 is known for its extremity, with often unbelievable depictions of crises and far-fetched resolutions. Borrowed from melodrama, 24’s extremity and ridiculousness are devices
intended for entertainment, but they may be detracting attention from the very real issues around which the serial is based. 24’s producers are unapologetic about the show’s lack of realism, however. Gordon claims that 24 “never pretended to be real,” pointing out that its realism stems more from “the emotional realism between the characters” than any element of the plot. Executive producer Joel Surnow adds, “It may not be good, but it’s never boring... That’s our motto.” 19 Critics seem to agree. One critic notes that the show is exciting because it “revs up the tension,” but that it accomplishes this task by amusing its audience using “circus-act audacity.” 20 “24 has never been a great drama,” observes another critic. “The characterizations were always too thin and the plots too outlandish.” 21

24’s unrealistic scenarios include Indiana Jones-style action such as the scene in episode 137 during which Jack hangs from the undercarriage of a sanitation truck as it careens down the road. And if that is not absurd enough, he is also having a cell phone conversation with Chloe. Other unrealistic scenarios in 24 include the episode where Jack is tortured, dies, is resuscitated, and is tortured some more. And in season 6, he stares at a nuclear explosion that, because of his proximity to the blast, should have reached him within 35 seconds. The show’s lack of realism perturbs some experts. “The man is dead and 15 minutes later is up again and killing people,” complains Saif Nazir, a medical doctor who was consulted by critics. 22 And Jack is not the only implausibly invincible character in the serial. In episode 134, President Wayne Palmer recovers from an assassination attempt in an induced coma, the White House staff and Palmer’s sister convince his doctor to wake him up over a matter of national security, further risking his life. Upon his awakening, he proceeds to assume his full duties as President in under
one hour, which includes retaking control of the White House cabinet and handling a major terrorist crisis.

Many such scenarios are recycled and repeated through the course of the serial. For example, the assassination attempt just mentioned is the fourth in 24’s history. The attempt made on Wayne Palmer’s brother David constituted the season-ending cliff hanger at the end of season 1, and another attempt is made at the end of season 3. After David Palmer leaves office in season 5, an attempt is made yet again on his life, only this time, he is successfully assassinated.

Perhaps 24 has exhausted its creative well. One of the reasons for 24’s plot recycling is due to the way it is written, which has proven cumbersome for writers. During its 6th season, producers acknowledged that the real-time structure makes their work difficult because they must account for every minute within a 24-hour day. Gordon remarks, “We never thought it would last this long….How long could you keep this ball in the air?” Additionally, 24’s writers map out the story in six-week increments rather than full seasons, causing them to write themselves into corners at times. This may also be the reason for many of the serial’s unrealistic storylines. Producers admit that Kim’s plots often are a stretch because she is usually outside the main line of action, so they have to create extreme twists just to bring her back into the fold. Kim’s cougar attack after she is lost in the mountains is one such example. “As always, among the thrills and shocks there are twists that don’t make sense and plot threads that don’t quite tie together,” says one critic, adding that, “On this show, the day is often more than the sum of its hours.”
At times, 24 is self-reflexive, poking fun at its own ridiculousness when it injects humor (albeit dryly and subtly) into situations that otherwise should not be funny. For example, during a highly tense scene in season 6, Jack storms enemy territory to apprehend a terrorist, running across an unsuspecting passerby with a cup in his hand. Jack perceives the cup as a potential weapon, so he barks at the startled man who stands frozen in terror, “Drop... the coffee!” And perhaps because he is never in a good mood, Jack’s normal demeanor borders on comical. His incessant repetition of the phrase “Damn it!”, for example, has become an anticipated comedic morsel in recent episodes. Always serious and stressed out herself, Chloe is another character who’s intensity approaches humor. While 24’s humor is part of its absurdity, these moments of humor provide viewers with much needed relief from a serial that broaches the heavy topic of terrorism.

24’s ridiculousness and twists resemble those seen in American soap operas. Audrey’s “return from the dead” in episode 137 is an example. Another similarity to soaps is how its writers “fearlessly turn good guys into bad guys, bad guys into good guys, and kill off characters when they have to.” 26 And like most primetime TV dramas at the moment, 24 indulges contemporary audiences’ thirst for gunfire, explosions, violence, and blood, not to mention ample doses of shock, catastrophe, and destruction. This level of extremity is not uncommon to melodrama, but again, because of 24’s weighty subject matter, such extremity may be not only masking the real issues, but also repeating trauma.

24’s melodramatic influence can be seen in how it handles narrative closure. It is a melodramatic serial after all, and by nature this classification implies lack of closure. 24’s ongoing premise dictates that the threat of terrorism will likely never be fully resolved.
However, to prevent alienating viewers, most of whom prefer some sense of closure in their narrative TV diet, closure does exist on 24 in varying degrees. The primary or foremost terrorist threat of each season is always solved by that season’s end, for example. Each episode likewise contains mini missions or subplots that entail some level of closure. But in this way, the show does not encourage thought or consideration about the global issue of terrorism or the politics involved. Although it depicts government corruption extending to the highest levels, and although some mini missions fail, 24’s eventual successful resolution of every major anti-terrorist effort confirms American cultural ideals about democracy, freedom, and justified violence for “the good of the country.” It sends the message that one should have faith in the “American way” because it is the “right” way, even when it is accomplished through force or other sacrifice, like restricting the civil liberties of innocent people.

Concerning closure, 24 toys with the future of its own seriality in season 4. Viewers had been reportedly dissatisfied with the cliffhanger assassination attempt at the end of season 3, so producers sought to provide more finality at the end of the subsequent season. The approach they implement places the fate of the entire serial in the balance, however. 27 Agent Jack Bauer is considered officially “dead.” Wanted by the Chinese government, Jack’s superiors feel their only option is to turn Jack over to the custody of the Chinese or kill him. Fearing Jack will be tortured into jeopardizing national security if released, President Palmer and CTU officials issue him an alternate identity instead, dumping him in the middle of nowhere armed with a bag of supplies and a cell phone that has only one minute of untraceable talk minutes on it. In 24’s typical melodramatic style, Jack uses his only minute of phone time to call President Palmer and affirm his patriotic duty, “Mr. President, it’s been an honor.” Season 6 presents a
similar challenge to the future of the serial. Given his deteriorating emotional state in recent seasons and the fact that he has attempted to quit CTU twice, Jack’s edge-of-a-cliff stance does little to infuse viewers with confidence about his ability to continue as a federal agent, and leads one to question the future of 24 without Jack Bauer.

24’s handling of character development, particularly Jack’s, is another area where there is little closure. As mentioned previously, many characters on 24 are post-traumatic, and some, like Jack, are perpetually so. The irony, however, is that these same characters continue being fully functional despite what has happened to them, moving beyond their pain quickly for the sake of the story. It can also be argued, however, that they only disguise their pain by robotically performing their duties, and that the real pain still lingers, never getting resolved because it never gets addressed. In addition, 24 complicates character development because it routinely flips antagonists into protagonists, and vice versa. An example is Jack’s supervisor, district director of CTU George Mason. George is a character audiences loathed but who ultimately turns out to be a ‘good guy’. During season 2, a vulnerable side of George is revealed after he is exposed to radiation from a bomb the terrorists are assembling. He conceals his character’s newfound vulnerability with his old familiar prickly persona, however, when he drags his son into CTU by handcuffs just to tell him that he is dying.28

Another melodramatic technique utilized on 24 is the confessional, a tool traditionally used to develop character. But because 24’s characters are perpetually post-traumatic, their confessionals only further spin them into their cycles of pain, perhaps even repeating their traumas. For example, while there is lots of “talk” on 24, its confessionals are superficial, failing to get to the core of any issue. They only succeed in either revealing other aspects of story or
recapping events repeatedly from every angle imaginable. Most often they are used to update viewers who may have missed previous scenes, a technique that is seen frequently in daytime soap operas. 24’s confessionals contain a lot of chatter but little substance or depth, illustrating another way that 24 might be repeating and denying trauma because it prevents characters (and the story) from moving forward. Trauma and reactivity therefore continue to consume 24.

So again, the cinematic and narrative styles discussed here are a recipe for disorientation and confusion, contributing to the mood of chaos on the show. They succeed in generating shock and suspense, but they are also smoke and mirrors, blockbuster-esque visual effects and melodramatic approaches to story that entertain but do little in the way of addressing any real issues, and may actually be repeating trauma as a result.

Conclusion

Because it engages with multiple contemporary issues addressed in this thesis, 24 is an ideal case study for examination. Disorienting and at times overwhelming, 24’s cinematic and narrative techniques not only infuse the serial with suspense and shock but also limit full comprehension of an intensely disturbing and real subject matter, playing on culture’s worst fears. 24’s American-centric ideology reinforces cultural ideals in a way that potentially repeats trauma by trapping viewers in a structure that encourages and rewards justified violence as a response to terror. Additionally, its continual regeneration of traumatizing images and scenarios, in effect, distracts the viewer from any real reflection about historical catastrophe.

Like its hero Jack, 24 is stuck, paralyzed, and spinning on its own repetitious axis of catastrophe, unable to draw any understanding from trauma. Therefore, considering its cultural
context, the subject matter of 24, combined with its cinematic and narrative techniques, may be not only denying historical and cultural trauma but also repeating it for viewers.

Notes


2 Cathy Caruth, Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1996) 73.

3 Caruth 58.


5 Caruth 49.


7 Caruth 105.


9 Gary Levin, “Alas, poor Edgar, we only sort of knew him,” rev. of 24, prod. Joel Surnow and Robert Cochran, USA Today 7 Mar. 2006: 01d.


11 Caruth, Unclaimed Experience 104.

12 Levin “‘24’, Jack return with a bang” 07d.


15 Greppi 10.

16 Keveney 03d.
Frutkin 12-15.


Frutkin 12-15.


23 Frutkin 12-15.


25 Keveney, “Damsel Kim is back to distressing ‘24’ fans” 03d.

26 Frutkin: 12-15.

27 Robert Bianco, “‘24’ fans can count on a better finale” rev. of 24, prod. Joel Surnow and Robert Cochran, USA Today 24 May 2004: 02d.

CHAPTER 3: *LOST*

ABC’s *Lost* is a primetime television serial that began airing in 2004. It is included here as a text for case study because it exhibits themes that relate to post-9/11 historical and cultural conditions, such as violence, fear, paranoia, death, loss, trauma, and post-traumatic stress. The manner in which it addresses these issues differs from that of the other two texts discussed in this thesis, however. *Lost*’s narrative approach utilizes a variety of devices that indirectly tackle controversial topics, such as a more melodramatic style, narrative conventions such as metaphor, and a hybridizing of fantasy and horror genres. *Lost*’s format also tends less toward realism and more toward post-traumatic style because of its frequent use of time deformations that create viewer disorientation. *Lost*’s narrative style and its tendency toward fantasy mask the issues that lie beneath its surface, discouraging independent thought on the effects or consequences of trauma, and therefore concealing or even forgetting trauma as Kaplan suggested. I contend that *Lost*’s thematic and stylistic approach qualifies it as a reactionary PTTV text that unconsciously denies and repeats trauma.

From its inception, trauma has been *Lost*’s backdrop. The story begins on September 22, 2004, an intriguing choice of date considering its resemblance to September 11 and the show’s preoccupation with numerology. But what happens on this date is even more striking because it palpably evokes 9/11-induced fears about plane crashes. An international flight encounters abnormal turbulence and the aircraft rips in half, crashing on a remote island in the Pacific Ocean. Many passengers from both ends of Oceanic flight 815 survive the crash, and not long afterward, they progress individually through the stages of loss in varying degrees. Many are numb or in denial, many are angry, while others are disoriented or hysterical. They react to a
variety of issues in addition to the trauma itself, including loss of their former identities on the mainland. Eventually many experience symptoms of PTSD such as nightmares, hallucinations, and flashbacks. There is no time for wallowing, however. The reality of their dire situation sets in quickly. The survivors know that their chances of survival are better if they work together. They form a community and informally adopt a leader, Jack Shephard, an American surgeon. The “Losties” (as critics and fans have come to call them) also discover that they are not alone on the island.

The collective goal of the survivors during its first three seasons is rescue, but survival is the more immediate problem that materializes in various ways. These include a mysterious group of people dubbed “The Others” and a complex chain of surveillance and communication technology that was installed by a now-extinct group of people who called themselves “The Dharma Initiative.” The island itself also presents the survivors with natural and supernatural challenges, including wild boars, polar bears, disease, and the infamous black smoke that judges a person’s character before annihilating them. There are also other survivors from previous plane and boat wrecks, including a nervous French woman named Danielle, and an equally jumpy Irishman named Desmond, both of whom spent years in isolation on the island before the survivors discovered them. Another stranger, a helicopter pilot named Naomi, also crashes on the island, bringing with her three more strangers and news that the mainland believes there were no survivors of Flight 815. Viewers are left wondering if the survivors are in some form of Purgatory.¹

Despite constant turmoil and infighting, the survivors of Flight 815 find that they are most successful when they work together to survive and defend themselves against their
various threats. Group dynamics are shaken further when members of The Others either assist or infiltrate their camp. Who to trust is unclear, and the motivation of everyone comes into question. It becomes clear that the ultimate enemies for all island inhabitants are fear, paranoia, and lack of information. By season 4 (the most current as of this writing), not even the dominating Others are in control.

Lost’s Ideology: Science versus Faith

The principal conflict on Lost is a clash between science and faith, exemplified by the alternative rule system or mysterious “law” of the island. For reasons they do not understand, some characters, like Locke, are inclined to gravitate toward unconventional and reactionary belief systems, where mysticism is considered just as legitimate as empirical science. Lost’s fictional conflict may symbolize a real-world cultural crisis in epistemology, perhaps metaphorical for American culture’s post-9/11 desperation for answers.

People often turn to their traditional beliefs when faced with crisis because these beliefs provide comfort and answers when other philosophies may be lacking. It is not surprising, then, that the pursuit of meaning following the 9/11 tragedy has generated a polarizing of philosophies. A focal theme within Lost typifies this polarization, the conflict between empirical thought (represented by science and technology) and faith. Lost constantly asks the question of causality. Did this empirically cause that or is this the unfolding of fate? Many things on the island of Lost cannot be explained scientifically, at least not yet because of a stark lack of information. The island abides by a different set of rules than the outside world, governed by a bizarre brand of other-worldly science. Its strange environment propels some survivors onto an obsessive quest for answers.
The Others’ camp, for example, literally experiments with the science of fertility. The Dharma Initiative was founded and bound by science and technology, evidenced by its instructional videos and secretive high-tech, subterranean control stations. The notorious “button” that must be pressed every 108 minutes or “the world will end,” for example, is a Dharma invention. At the same time, the infamous button also tests the faiths of several characters. Most characters who come into contact with it eventually come to doubt its purpose. In the episode titled “Live Together, Die Alone,” there is a conspiracy to ‘quit’ the button. After what seems infinite questioning and bickering, the survivors neglect to press it. As the button’s station (initially known as the Hatch and later called the Swan) begins to implode onto itself, Desmond tells Locke, “I’m sorry about whatever happened to make you stop believing, but it’s all real.” The inference here to reality is noteworthy considering Lost’s hybrid genre and style, hinging on fantasy yet hinting at realism. Additionally, the button’s associations with time, countdowns, technology, faith, and end-of-world apocalyptic themes could symbolize a metaphoric representation of post-traumatic fear about 9/11 era events.

The nebulous black cloud is another element of Lost that bridges science and faith. Unexpectedly appearing in the jungle at the most inopportune moments, the cloud is a mystery that leaves characters both guessing and traumatized. Its true nature is yet to be revealed. Is it a form of technology or the stuff of nightmares? The only defense against the cloud is magnetism, so it could be a form of man-made technology. But it also has its own intelligence, assessing a person’s fear before attacking, and leaving some potential victims unharmed, such as survivor Locke and ‘Other’ Juliet.
The significance of number patterns and combinations throughout the serial is another twist on the science versus faith theme, indicating a tendency toward alternative science and hinting at numerology. It is unclear whether connections between the number combinations imply the existence of fate or are merely coincidental. For example, Hurly wins the lottery before coming to the island, but his winning lotto numbers and the combination on The Hatch have a mysterious connection. Once he makes this discovery, Hurly is convinced that his numbers are cursed. This suspicion germinated in his head before he ever embarked upon his doomed flight, due to warnings both from his ‘imaginary friend’ during his mental hospital days and also from a fortune teller who tells him, “Darkness and these numbers, great tragedy. Death surrounds you, more is coming.” Hurly later discovers, however, that the psychic is a fake who was paid by his father to convince him to give away his lottery money. The show’s various clairvoyant characters like Hurly’s psychic, whether viewers believe they are genuine or just plain crazy, provide more illustrations of the discord of between destiny and empirical thought. During a flashback to Desmond’s life prior to his being shipwrecked in “Flashes Before Your Eyes,” a psychic tells Desmond, “It’s your part to go to the island. You can’t do it because you choose to, you do it because you’re supposed to… pushing the button is the only great thing that you will ever do,” illustrating the predominance of Lost’s faith theme.

The serial creators draw attention to the science-versus-faith theme in “The Answers” episode, which highlights key moments presented during the course of the show’s three seasons. They point out how level-headed Jack is the physical embodiment of scientific, rational thought while Locke is his opposite, associated with destiny and faith. The choice of name for Locke’s character is ironic because the real John Locke was an 18th century philosopher, an
Enlightenment thinker, the first of the British Empiricists, whose ideas influenced epistemology and political philosophy. Having studied medicine and believing that reason and tolerance characterize human nature, Locke’s namesake seems more akin to Jack’s character. Lost’s John Locke was disabled before crashing on the island but is miraculously healed upon his arrival and develops an uncanny connection to the island. In the serial pilot, Locke isolates himself from the rest of the survivors and sits in a rainstorm, enjoying getting soaked and extending his arms to the heavens. In subsequent episodes, he makes comments like, “We have to do it for the island,” or “The island told me to do it.” His bond with the island also causes him to sabotage attempts at communication with the outside world, preventing prospects of rescue. In season 3’s finale, Locke kills Naomi to prevent her from radioing for help, and then claims, “Jack, you’re not supposed to do this,” when Jack disarms him and makes a distress call to the off-shore freighter himself.

Whether or not there is rational motivation for Locke to behave this way remains unclear. He seems to take action based on faith alone, without a logical understanding of why he is taking it. Locke clearly is one who needs a purpose, and he loses faith after failing to press the 108-minute button. But when a threatened Ben shoots him and leaves him for dead in “The Man Behind the Curtain,” a hallucination of Walt (or the real Walt – this is uncertain) tells Locke, “Get out of the ditch, John. You have work to do.” The smile that subsequently creeps across the resurrected Locke’s face says volumes. Viewers are left to question whether or not Locke is right all along, because during the off-island flashforward in “Through the Looking Glass,” an emotional Jack tells Kate, “We made a mistake. We were not supposed to leave. We have to go back.” Locke’s motivations on Lost are a peculiar representation and combination of
a post-traumatic failing of language and crisis of representation. He is driven by something beyond language, so that he rarely articulates his intentions to anyone, nor are we led to believe he understands his motivations himself.

Thematically, *Lost*’s blend of science and faith-based elements causes it to bear similarities to science fiction, further causing it to appear reactionary. Classical science fiction of the 1950s has been theorized to be a manifestation of Cold War fears about espionage and foreign infiltration. *Lost* might likewise be considered an allegorical depiction of similar uncertainties in the post-9/11 era. For example, through the Others’ fertility research and experiments, creation is portrayed as a dangerous force, destructive and corrupt, reminiscent of mad science like that of Dr. Frankenstein. It is unknown whether this creative power is the Others’ invention or is inherent in the island’s environment. During “D.O.C.,” it is revealed that male sperm counts are unusually high on the island, explaining Sun’s pregnancy when previously she and Jin could not conceive. The island’s mysterious creative power also miraculously heals disabled and terminally ill people upon their arrival to the island, like Rose who had terminal cancer before the plane crash. The friction between science and faith in *Lost* may signify a troubling cultural concern, a crisis in epistemology. A post-9/11 desire for answers is evident through the reactionary alternative philosophies on *Lost*, where psychic phenomena, numerology, and magic are considered just as valid as empirical science.

**Trauma, Death, and Loss on Lost**

*Lost*’s ideological conflict effects its handling of other thematic material. Trauma, death, and loss are challenges that its characters face regularly, but due to the prevailing philosophical polarization in the group, tensions run even higher than they normally would. The conflict
generates so much distraction that characters spin their wheels needlessly, obsessing over mysteries that ultimately have no bearing on their survival (like the significance of the 108-minute button, which did not end the world as many supposed), and they are often so preoccupied with their disputes that nothing is accomplished. Such an impasse might be seen not only as a repetition of trauma but also as a form of denial about the real issues.

Even as some of Lost’s mysteries and objectives are solved (like the question of rescue which is revealed at the end of season 3), above all else for the inhabitants of the island, survival remains the prime objective. But for characters on Lost, survival is also a curse. No sooner do the Losties survive one catastrophe then another erupts, causing their survival to become increasingly more complicated. Some characters do not want to survive or have lost the will to live. During the first season, there is a lot of “Why Me?” being asked. And because the characters still do not know the rationale behind events that happen on the island, whether scientific or supernatural in nature, their survival is even more riddled with complication. In the third season, characters begin to ask if they are even ‘supposed’ to survive or ever leave the island at all.

Survival becomes progressively more arduous when the creative science that the Others wield is introduced, convoluting female reproductive power. Juliet reveals that all women who become pregnant on the island inevitably die, illustrating how life and death on Lost are inextricably bound together. Although much of it is veiled in fantasy, this connection makes Lost exceedingly destructive and violent, as week after week, the plot relies on how the survivors come back from destruction. But with such scenarios comes the inclination to extricate
meaning from tragedy, Caruth’s “enigma of survival,” the paradoxical relationship between catastrophe and life.\(^5\)

*Lost*’s handling of the topic of death is also worthy of exploration here because although it occurs frequently, *Lost* tends to deny and avoid death’s consequences. Deaths are mourned only briefly if at all. The survivors are constantly confronted with the death of their colleagues, but it is necessary for their own survival to acknowledge these deaths and move on. Hurley’s brief mourning of Libby is one example.

An exception to this rule is what the serial does with Charlie’s character in its third season when it depicts a character’s awareness and acceptance of his own death. In the season finale, Charlie mourns the loss of his life but also celebrates it when he writes his “5 Best Moments” on a sheet of paper for Claire. They include such memories as meeting Claire for the first time and starting a rock band with his brother. “All I’ve got are these memories,” he laments. Charlie’s awareness and coping strategy in this instance is significant because it demonstrates a “working through” and an acceptance of trauma.

But Charlie is also a key character whose death is previewed repeatedly, building tension. It could be argued that the repetitious witnessing of such a trauma may have been vicariously traumatizing to viewers, many of whom dreaded the season’s ending because they were forewarned through Desmond’s repetitious visions that Charlie was eventually going to die.\(^6\) Additionally, how other characters cope with Charlie’s loss in season 4 is noteworthy because they quickly move on to face the next catastrophe. As is typical of texts that deny trauma, Charlie’s death is not adequately mourned, especially considering his significance as a main character on the show. But again, this lack of mourning might be a necessary avoidance,
because due to the impossibility of comprehending the death of their comrades, the survivors must turn away in order to survive.\textsuperscript{7}

Closely related to the topic of death are trauma and loss, two of the most pronounced themes on \textit{Lost}, which play out within its plot and characterization. The pilot begins with a traumatic plane crash, stirring emotions and playing on viewers’ fears of planes and plane crashes following 9/11. Just after the crash, Shannon is seen standing alone and in a total state of shock, speechless. She vocalizes but only helplessly cries out for her brother, unable to make sense of her experience or productively articulate herself. As is typical of trauma victims, Shannon and many other survivors are speechless, even catatonic, after traumatic events on the island.\textsuperscript{8} Some \textit{Lost} characters develop amnesia and others withdraw from the group, keeping their experiences to themselves. This isolating behavior is exhibited by several survivors after they are held hostage at The Others’ camp.

From the plane crash onward, it is evident that the majority of \textit{Lost}’s characters are perpetually post-traumatic. Few of them, if any, ever move beyond their traumatic pasts because every minute is focused on immediate survival. Characters suffer PTSD not only from the plane crash and subsequent struggles, but also from their distant pasts. The characters who experienced the most traumatic events appear calm rather than reactive, but they’re also numb. Silence and secrecy are the outward expression of their repression, and often this is attributed to an overwhelming sense of guilt and denial.\textsuperscript{9}

Kate is an example of perpetually post-traumatic character on \textit{Lost}, having been abused by her stepfather as a child. Although she appears incredibly levelheaded today, she killed her stepfather and performed other violent crimes before coming to the island, a past that she
fights hard to conceal. After being held captive by the Others, Kate’s speech resembles that of a prisoner of war in “Tricia Tanaka Is Dead”: “It’s strange being back... I’m not looking for a way out of a cage, finding a reason not to run off into the jungle again. I almost don’t know what to do with myself.” To which Jack offers, “Well, enjoy it. I’m sure something will go wrong soon enough,” demonstrating the show’s consciousness of its own melodrama and reflecting a doomsday perspective felt by many people post-9/11.

Sayid is likewise calm but numb due to shame about his history with the Republican Guard in Iraq and the CIA where he tortured captives in order to obtain information. This scenario is remarkably similar to Jack Bauer’s in 24. Though Sayid most often resorts to silence, he verbalizes his remorse early in the serial, intentionally separating himself from the survivors by trekking off on his own because he regrets torturing Sawyer to obtain information. He rarely speaks of his past life so his history is conveyed in flashback form as chaotic and disjointed images. In fact, with most characters, when viewers learn of a traumatic past, it is often via images presented in flashbacks as opposed to linguistic narrative, typifying the manner in which language so often fails trauma victims.10

Ben, arguably the most callous and numb of all characters on Lost, is an example of post-traumatic displacement turned violent. During “One of Us,” viewers learn through Ben’s back story how severe emotional paralysis can result from guilt and denial due to trauma. Blaming Ben for his mother’s death, his father inculcates so much guilt onto him that he grows resentful. Resentment becomes hatred when Ben eventually turns on his father and kills him with incredible coldness in a scene reminiscent of the Holocaust gassings. Robotic and void of
emotion, he dons a gas mask and leads an effort to release a toxic gas that instantly kills the
Dharma Initiative members and his father, marking an initiation of sorts for Ben into the Others.

Sawyer is another post-traumatic character, disturbed by flashbacks of his parents’
murder/suicide when he was a child. He is so traumatized that he assumes the identity of the
conman responsible and still carries a letter he wrote to him after his parents’ death. In a
bizarre coincidence, this man is discovered on the island, making it seem a nightmarish illusory
environment where characters’ worst phobias and fixations are realized. But Sawyer’s
obsession with finding the conman leads to his lashing out and killing him. Although Kate does
not know that Sawyer just committed murder for the first time in his life, she is perceptive in
season 3’s finale when she remarks to Sawyer, “You don’t seem to care about anything any
more.” Not long after, an increasingly numb Sawyer kills again for the mere fact that he does
not believe the person when they surrender; trust has clearly become an issue for him. For
already protective and closed-off characters like Sawyer and Ben, it does not take much to
harden them when their faith in humanity is shaken by trauma at such a young age.

Juliet, the Other-turned-survivor, is also numb, having experienced a nasty divorce from
a controlling husband. Desperate to run to any life away from him, she joins the Others on the
island. Once there, however, she is disillusioned with Ben’s false promises and realizes she has
walked from one abusive situation into another. She grows increasingly bitter and is forced into
numbness in order to cope, quickly becoming a calm but potentially dangerous force to both
the survivors and the Others as well. Juliet exemplifies the predisposition of abuse victims to
fail to recognize subsequent abuse.11
A less common characterization of a character with PTSD on *Lost* is Danielle. Through her character, post-traumatic stress is shown to be a coping and survival strategy. As opposed to other characters who appear numb, Danielle is noticeably jumpy, jittery, reactive, and paranoid, behaving like a cautious wild animal. She is slow to trust, defensive, and protective. Because of her isolation, she has become incredibly eccentric, but she has managed to survive the island alone by learning its terrain and rules, concealing herself, setting traps, and defending herself with weapons like guns and archery.

Jack is perhaps the most extreme instance of a character with PTSD on *Lost*, initially guilt-ridden and plagued by memories of a failed surgery in which his actions killed a patient. At first Jack seems in control but as the serial progresses, pressures of leadership cause him to exhaust his emotional reserves. He becomes visibly agitated and loses his temper with Ben in season 3’s finale, and in his flashback during the same episode, he has a nervous breakdown. Although he is home safe at that time, he is forced to keep silent. Driven mad by guilt, he loses control of his life, becoming obsessed with returning to the island to rectify matters. He drinks, becomes a prescription drug addict, and attempts suicide. After an embarrassing altercation with a pharmacist at a drug store, Jack confronts a supervisor at the hospital where he works, expressing his helplessness when he proclaims, “Don’t you look at me like that! Don’t you pity me. You *can’t* help me.”

The Other on *Lost*

Another theme on *Lost* that confirms its reactive mood of denial is Othering, a phenomenon that is indicative of an avoidance of responsibility. As suggested previously, alien encounters in the science fiction genre have been read as metaphorical symptoms of paranoia
and reactionary Othering attitudes toward foreigners.\textsuperscript{12} Lost’s satiric use of the designation “Other” to label and single out non-survivors not only reflects but accentuates an American paranoia of non-natives since 9/11.\textsuperscript{13} Lost is not unaware of the cultural and historical prejudice inherent in this ‘us versus them’ mindset, titling two of its episodes “One of Us” and “One of Them.” When paired with the word “Survivor,” what Lost calls the crash victims, the term Other recollects Anker’s idea that media melodramatically painted America as the undeserving victim of the 9/11 tragedy, unjustly assaulted by evil Others.\textsuperscript{14}

The name is first suggested by Danielle when the survivors first encounter her. When the survivors experience their own negative encounters with the Others, they also begin using this label. In “The Man Behind the Curtain,” Ben flashes back to when he was part of the Dharma Initiative as a child and he encounters one of the Others in the jungle, asking, “Are you one of Them?” This scene implies that years before Danielle’s arrival, the Dharma Initiative also was aware of the Others’ existence.

During season 3’s finale, the survivors learn that the Others refer to the survivors of Flight 815 with a similar label. When Charlie swims into a station called The Looking Glass in hopes of un-jamming the island’s radio signal, two Others capture him, shouting, “He’s one of Them!” When Charlie asks one of the women why they follow orders without knowing their reason, the woman replies, “The minute I start questioning orders, this whole thing, everything we’re doing here, falls apart.” In the same scene, Desmond and Charlie ask Mikhail why he takes orders from Ben and he replies, “Because I trust Ben.” These characters’ replies illustrate Lost’s adherence to faith as a theme in addition to critiquing absolute trust in authority and paternal institutions like political and religious bodies. Trust is a thorny topic on Lost because
viewers often are not sure with whom they should identify. Who is trustworthy? For example, it is often after-the-fact that viewers discover that the perpetrator for a particular act is one of the survivors. And now that the serial has presented yet another party of potential enemies (Naomi and her off-shore freighter), even the supposed malicious motivations of the Others comes into question.

Further complicating matters, there are many “others,” even others within others. There are the survivors of Flight 815, there is the Dharma Initiative, Danielle who crashed on the island 16 years ago, Desmond who was shipwrecked while sailing 3 years prior, Naomi who crashes on the island during Lost’s third season, Juliet who is recruited by the Others’ camp but switches to the survivors after the Others abandon her, and Ben and his father Roger who arrived from the mainland years earlier to join Dharma. Many of Flight 815’s survivors have criminal or suspicious pasts, yet because Lost’s narrative depicts them as the good guys, viewers are encouraged to identify with the survivors regardless of their histories.

Such reversals affirm the inference that anyone is capable of anything if given the right motivation, recalling the same presumption in 24. For example, in “Live Together, Die Alone,” Michael unexpectedly and ruthlessly shoots and kills two survivors in order to get his son back. And in a back-story flashback during “Enter 77,” the tables are turned on Sayid as one of his former hostages now holds him hostage. While he is in custody, the woman shares a melodramatic story about her cat, who was tortured by neighborhood children with fireworks to the extent that it almost died. She explains to Sayid that this trauma is why the cat is slow to trust, and that it sometimes hisses or lashes out in reaction to human contact because it forgets that it is safe, adding, “We are all capable of what those children did to this cat. But I will not do
that. I will not be that.” She then not only sets Sayid free, but forgives him for torturing her. Reminiscent of a similar circumstance in 24, this scene suggests forgiveness as an alternative to vengeance.

The concept of the Others of Lost may only be exacerbating a paranoia of difference that already is common in much of the Western world, and confirms the idea that people must stick to their kind, sacrificing personal rights, perhaps even their lives, for the “good” of the community.

Lost as Post-Traumatic Television

While Lost’s thematic content exhibits traits that qualify it as a PTTV text, its form is also consistent with what constitutes PTTV because of its incorporation of various narrative and cinematic styles that produce the effect of chaos and disorientation. And perhaps even more significant is that Lost’s metaphorical treatment potentially denies the existence of the real issues because its bizarre alternate universe is so far removed from reality.

Lost’s narrative structure is the most intricate of the three texts discussed here. Information is consistently presented in traumatic memory form, out of context, lacking the necessary detail for full comprehension, and it is shown from a subjective point of view such that one does not know if one can trust what one sees. Lost’s fragmented approach to story is an example of a narrative convention that inhibits full comprehension, and recalls Caruth’s assessment that fragmentation implies a “break in the mind’s experience of time.” Scenes are presented so disjointedly and in such a fragmented fashion that it is impossible to know the full truth and context about anyone or any event on the island. For example, when Sun is abducted, the scene is presented from her subjective point of view as she works in the garden, unaware of
the perpetrator creeping up behind her. Everyone (including Sun) assumes the kidnapping is the work of the Others but it is revealed seasons later in “Exposé” that a group within the survivors is responsible. Additionally, Lost’s use of the creeping camera technique to depict Sun from the perspective of her attacker is a convention reminiscent of both the horror genre and reality TV.

Another way Lost approaches story in a fragmented manner is its multitude of plots that intertwine and collide with one another. Lost begins several storylines and then drops them, only to pick them up again in subsequent episodes or seasons, furthering viewer disorientation. Unless subtitles are used, it is also difficult to tell when scenes take place in the plot’s chronology. And when subtitles are actually used, they most often relate to the beginning of the serial, the date of the plane crash. In a sense, what is happening within Lost is the opposite of a countdown. Rather than counting down to something traumatic occurring, Lost counts upward from the traumatic incident, signaling a preoccupation with the trauma. The concept of the countdown and its relationship to catastrophe recalls the doomsday clock and the extra-diegetic clock of 24.16

In the same way that many trauma victims are unable to escape their pasts, the plane crash and its aftereffects are the core of this serial. It is the center around which all other events revolve, defining its fundamental question during the first three seasons. However, some scenes are introduced in terms of their relationship to the present and not the plane crash. For example, in the episode “Greatest Hits,” a subtitle appears informing viewers that what they’re about to see happened six hours ago. Similar to the characters’ confusion about where they are in terms of location (hence the title ‘Lost’), viewers are likewise lost in time, perpetually confused about when events take place.
As Lost’s staple narrative convention, the flashback is a repetitious and disorienting time shift that is indicative of the post-traumatic cinema style and that is present in every PTTV text examined in this thesis. The concept of the flashback in itself evokes a traumatic connotation regardless of how it is used in a text. In Lost’s case, flashbacks update casual viewers about past events, a practical function that is common on serial TV. However, it can be argued that this repetition serves multiple purposes as it did on 24, to inform viewers, to “hook” casual viewers, and to vicariously traumatize viewers. Lost’s affinity for repeating traumatic events frustrates its time chronology and injects additional complexity into its already confusing narrative.

Additionally, Lost fractures reality by subjectively repeating events from different viewpoints, which is not only another example of fragmentation but also a modernist technique. For example, “One of Us” takes viewers all the way back to Day 1 when Flight 815 crashes. This time, the trauma is witnessed from the perspective of those on the ground in the Others’ camp. And in “Greatest Hits,” Lost provides a clue to a mystery presented in a previous episode by flashing back to hours earlier when the reason for Ben’s angry behavior is revealed. Through such flashbacks, layers to Lost’s complex story are slowly peeled away. But with each layer, a seemingly never-ending array of new questions arises. The essential truth of Lost therefore remains a mystery. Other flashbacks on Lost imitate the style of a post-traumatic nightmare, such as Claire’s and Charlie’s memories of their abduction in “Raised by Another.” Claire’s PTSD blocks her memory of the incident altogether, until events come rushing back to her traumatically and violently, which viewers witness as sudden, erratic and out-of-context imagery punctuated by dramatic music. As Turim suggested, such flashbacks may discourage complacency but also suppress a past that has not been worked through.
In its third season, *Lost* utilizes a narrative strategy that resembles the flashback but that creates a different effect and whose implications are far reaching. *Lost* uses two distinctive flashforward mechanisms. One is an entire ‘back story’-style segment presented in fragments during season 3’s finale, which utilizes no subtitling or clear contextual identifiers such that viewers are confused as to whether they are witnessing the past or future. The biggest shock for viewers is the discovery that the survivors finally get off the island, but that this outcome has worse consequences than if they had remained “lost”.

*Lost*’s other flashforward mechanism is accomplished through character. Desmond, who proves to be one of *Lost*’s most intriguing narrative devices, not only endures flashbacks (as most other characters in the serial do), but also has a precognitive ability to foresee future events. He experiences visions in a post-traumatic manner; they come to him unexpectedly, uncontrollably, and in bits and pieces. Desmond claims that deciphering his visions is like trying to put a puzzle together but not knowing how the whole is supposed to look. Because his visions are fragmentary and out of context, Desmond is forced to draw conclusions about their meaning, sometimes causing him to make false predictions. His inability to adequately articulate (or form a coherent narrative of) the traumas that he foresees could be attributed to how different people see the same event in different ways. Additionally, viewers experience Desmond’s visions from his point of view, further emphasizing the pervasive subjectivity in perception that is present in post-traumatic texts.19

Because Desmond’s visions are out of context, he is unable to decipher how closely together events occur or determine whether there is a direct causality inherent between them. For example, when a helicopter crashes in “Catch-22”, he is certain it is transporting his former
girlfriend Penny. But when he and other survivors locate the helicopter pilot, they discover another character altogether. Desmond’s powerful foresight is therefore not empowering to him. Like post-traumatic memory, his visions are emotional and exhausting, leaving him feeling helpless. What he foresees eventually comes to pass, no matter how hard he tries to change the future. In this way, Desmond’s visions are much like post-traumatic nightmares because he revisits the site of trauma again and again until the event actually occurs, in which case he attempts to alter the course of events, such as the many times he saves Charlie’s life in season 3. In this way, Desmond’s precognitions recall Freud’s theories about soldiers’ repeated attempts to master or alter the fate of their post-traumatic nightmares. Ultimately, however, the destiny that Desmond foresees for Charlie is inevitable.

In addition to its stylistic influences from post-traumatic cinema, few critics would argue with the fact that Lost’s style is also highly melodramatic. And as Kaplan observed, melodrama is a way to safely tackle issues but also mask them, so Lost’s melodramatic approach might be seen as a form of denial. This denial is evident in the way Lost muddles and transfers cultural fears onto things that cannot be controlled, solved, or explained, like religion and the supernatural. Its unrealistic and fantastic plots are convoluted and outrageous, where everything that can go wrong does. Over-the-top acting styles and musical cues like dramatic orchestral stings likewise exude melodrama.

But Lost’s melodramatic influence also permits it to affect other audience reactions, such as an emotional investment in character, and it accomplishes this task through “back story.” Every episode has at least two parallel storylines, one that takes place in the diegetic present, and one that takes place in the past before the crash. This storyline usually focuses on
just one of the primary characters and is intercut amidst events that take place in the diegetic present in a manner that thematically unifies the episode. For example, the episode titled “White Rabbit” shares the details of Jack’s former life, and “Tabula Rasa” exposes Kate’s past. In addition, the back stories of several characters, including Jack, Kate, John, Sawyer, Charlie, and Hurly are the primary focus of more than one episode. Through a character’s back-story flashback, viewers learn about that character’s past in addition to what motivates and frightens him or her. The prevalence of such back story suggests that characters are so traumatized by their pasts that they are stuck there, unable to move forward or be present in their new lives on the island. For a serial like Lost with such a complex narrative strategy, this convention provides viewers with not only consistency in episodic structure but also intensifies interest and attachment to the main characters. But because the show has such an enormous cast, one of its challenges is its ability to encourage emotional connections between characters and viewers. When Paolo and Nikki die in “Exposé,” their back stories and deaths are presented concurrently so viewers have only one hour both to get to know them and to acknowledge their absence. But Paolo and Nikki’s brief character development is atypical of Lost, because emotional investment in character is a prime incentive that the serial employs to maintain viewer interest. Another such hook is Lost’s seriality. Nothing ends cleanly in its narrative, and tracing the causality of events proves to be quite complicated. The plot contains many convoluted twists, creating a confusing mass of interrelated branches and dangling storylines. Things change little from one episode to the next, giving the impression that time crawls. In addition, new characters and locations cause the show to grow ever more cumbersome and difficult to follow. But as suggested in Chapter 1, unraveling such complicated story structures can be part
of the pleasure of watching PTTV like Lost, because viewers receive gratification when they believe they’ve solved a puzzle within the elaborate plot. Because of its complex story structure and its large cast of main characters, Lost’s format bears a strong similarity to that of an American soap opera.

Lost’s perpetual deferral is its biggest similarity to soaps. Lost abounds in perpetual deferral, escalating narrative tension by introducing new obstacles in every episode and rarely providing resolution. This classic approach to hooking viewers may have backfired, however, when after holding audiences captive for three years,22 a ratings decline at the close of its 2007 season alerted ABC that Lost’s consistently hopeless storyline had become tired and tedious.23 Viewer discomfort and dissatisfaction are not surprising as byproducts of a serial like Lost, which to some fans, had been dragging along with the same unresolved plot.24 Applying Freud’s theory of mastery to the ratings drop, perhaps viewers began to feel that they were unable to master what they were watching.

Lost attempts to offset the uneasiness generated by its serial deferral through a mechanism that is common to melodramatic TV serials in general, thematic unity or parallelism. Multiple storylines within an episode may address the same topic, for example, creating a cohesive unit even if some stories are not resolved by the end of the episode. At times opposing themes are presented against one another to create a counterpoint, such as in “Do No Harm,” where one character is born as another character dies.25

The show’s producers have also indicated that Lost will not have an ambiguous ending.26 Whether or not that ending will be a ‘happy’ resolution is yet to be seen, and may negate Lost’s post-traumatic direction. However, season 3’s flashforward makes the prospect of rescue
appear more horrific for some characters than what they experienced on the island because they have been coerced into silence and are now plagued by guilt, a familiar emotion to victims of trauma.  

The revelation of Lost’s ending prompts consideration of whether or not the show’s melodrama and metaphor are really escapist devices, or if these same conventions might position the show as a subversive “instrument for seeing”. The answer depends on Lost’s cultural/historical context and where its emphasis lies: on its closure or on its ideological conflict. If its focus remains on the struggle between the polarizing philosophies of science and faith, Lost may represent a subversive reaction to inconsistencies in modern culture. And this is a possibility now that the serial’s emphasis no longer seems to be on closure (because via its flashforwards, rescue is imminent). However, an all new form of closure has taken its place, which is solving the puzzle of the island’s various mysteries. This strategy keeps viewers engaged but it may also be diverting them from independent thought on the underlying issues because they are too distracted trying to decipher Lost’s many riddles.

Conclusion

Because it is on primetime commercial television and on a network that is owned by one of the most powerful media conglomerates in the world, Lost strives to entertain, much like its counterpart 24. Its melodramatic plots and blockbuster-esque special effects have attracted much attention during the course of its four-season run, making it one of the most talked-about serials of this decade. Where exactly the journey will end is uncertain, but Lost will likely continue to remain a metaphorical representation of cultural concerns in the post-9/11 age. Lost’s application of metaphor to allegorically represent real-world issues is one step toward
addressing those issues, but this methodology also buries them, encouraging denial and avoidance. And via its melodramatic strategies, *Lost* succeeds in distracting viewers with shock and suspense, providing entertainment but also escape, thereby discouraging any focused thought on its subject matter. Additionally, *Lost*’s repetition of traumatic flashbacks may only be aggravating cultural fears brought on by 9/11-era traumas, vicariously traumatizing viewers. *Lost* therefore emerges from this analysis as a text that denies and repeats trauma simultaneously.

Notes


7 Caruth 100.


9 Henry Krystal qtd. in Hirsch 12.

10 Hirsch 13.

11 Hirsch 18.
12 Foertsch 33.


15 Caruth 61.

16 Foertsch 33.


20 Caruth 62.

21 Kaplan 202.


27 Henry Krystal qtd. in Hirsch 12.


CHAPTER 4: SIX FEET UNDER

_Six Feet Under_ is an HBO cable television serial that aired from 2001-2005. In its first year, the show experienced immense popularity, garnering more Emmy nominations in 2002 than any other cable television show ever had at that time,¹ and it debuted as the single most-watched premiere in HBO’s history.² _Six Feet Under_ gained an immediate fan base due to creator Alan Ball’s name recognition for his Oscar-winning screenplay for _American Beauty_ (1999). Both works are melodramas about dysfunctional families. _Six Feet Under_ is included here for case study because it exhibits themes that confront post-9/11 historical and cultural conditions such as death, loss, trauma, and post-traumatic stress. However, the manner in which it addresses these concerns sets it apart from its counterparts, both thematically and structurally. Its approach makes _Six Feet Under_ the only text of this thesis that I contend does not deny or repeat trauma, but that rather attempts to work through it.

_Fisher & Sons_, a fictional family-run funeral home in Los Angeles, is _Six Feet Under_’s setting. The Fishers live in a residence that is situated on the upper two floors of the building that houses their family business. When the family patriarch, Nathaniel Fisher, dies in an ironic hearse accident in the serial pilot, he leaves his business to his two sons, Nate and David Fisher. His wife Ruth Fisher and employee Rico Diaz also become partners in the business later in the serial. Daughter Claire, the youngest Fisher and a disillusioned teenager, also lives in the household. Among the main cast of characters outside of the Fisher home are Brenda Chenowith, Nate’s love interest, and her family.

As one might expect from its setting, _Six Feet Under_ contains plenty of death. But sprinkled amidst the morbidity is humor and a touch of fantasy. Touted as a black comedy, the
show features a quirky twist that infuses absurdity into an otherwise gloomy atmosphere:
ghosts haunt the Fisher household. Sometimes providing comic relief, other times addressing
serious issues, ghosts in Six Feet Under ultimately represent the unconscious mind of the
characters.

Because Six Feet Under tackles a significant taboo, death and its associated grief,
counseling and psychology are major themes. The Fisher & Sons funeral home proves to be
fertile ground for the expression of Freudian ideas, sometimes excessively so. Every family who
delivers a departed loved one sits “on the couch” so to speak, unloading their troubles into the
sympathetic ears of the funeral directors. The Fishers’ clientele exhibit every imaginable
emotion, from sadness and denial to laughter and rage. Whether disguised as ghosts or outright
psychological inferences and language, Six Feet Under’s psychoanalytical discourse may indicate
a preoccupation with “fixing” oneself in the post-9/11 era.

But Six Feet Under seems intent on drawing focus away from what it considers overly
self-conscious self-help, which it regards as a tedious, repetitious, and unnecessary waste of
time, and rather toward its hailing mantra, acceptance of the conclusion that “everybody dies.”
This principle becomes literal in the serial finale when Six Feet Under flashes forward to the
death of every member of the Fisher family. In typical Six Feet Under style, these flash forwards
are presented melodramatically, in a surreal yet emotion-invoking montage sequence where
characters’ lives and deaths are honored rather than mourned.

Six Feet Under’s Ideology: Psychobabble versus Introspection

While it is rich with psychoanalytic language and references, Six Feet Under criticizes the
traditional implementation of psychology and psychiatric treatments for being outmoded and
possibly harmful. During its first season critics described *Six Feet Under* as “deep psychological drama,” “implosive,” and “built on a foundation of repression.”

The most obvious evidence of *Six Feet Under*’s attitude toward psychology and therapy is the characterization of Brenda’s family. Her parents Margaret and Bernard Chenowith are “two prominent but severely dysfunctional psychiatrists” and the serial’s greatest critique of psychotherapy. The atmosphere exudes psychobabble in their presence, such as when Bernard meets Ruth Fisher for the first time at Brenda’s bridal shower in “The Secret,” shocking her by asking if she knows about her daughter’s depression. The Chenowiths are not ethical psychiatrists either, when at the bridal shower it is revealed that Margaret met Bernard as one of his patients. Margaret contradicts the claim by stating she was actually his intern. The ambiguity does not negate the fact that both scenarios are equally unethical by professional standards. In “The Liar and the Whore,” the Chenowith scandal becomes more clear. Revealed via Brenda’s flashback to childhood, the Chenowiths throw wild parties complete with sex and drugs, with young Brenda witness to it all. Because she grew up with the Chenowiths for parents, Brenda is understandably skeptical of psychotherapy. She remarks in “In Place of Anger” that therapy is “...something habit-forming and expensive that totally destroys your ability to lead an authentic life.” Brenda’s attitude confounds her oblivious mother, who gets defensive in “The Secret,” claiming she does not know how Brenda became so passive-aggressive. While they are over-the-top dramatizations, the Chenowiths are consistent with the usual Hollywood stereotype of mental health professionals being useless and possibly even damaging.
Six Feet Under also mocks the self-help industry. No topic is too personal or sacred, and support groups and addiction are no exception. For example, Brenda attends a sex addicts support group in “The Last Time.” Even if intended to be taken seriously, the scene is humorous because the topic is uncomfortable and difficult to discuss by default. In “You Never Know,” Ruth’s sister Sarah withdraws from a Vicodin addiction. Her dramatic and comic antics provide such a light-hearted approach to the subject matter that it is almost impossible to take her addiction seriously. And in “Someone Else’s Eyes”, self help is mocked when Brenda strolls through a bookstore. The titles on the shelves are typical of what one might see in any self-help section until Brenda runs across the book about her own childhood, Charlotte Light and Dark. She begins to fantasize and the titles become personalized messages just for her, such as Nothing Means Anything, So Why Bother? and You’re Brother’s a Wacko and Your Fiancé’s Going to Die.9 In the same episode, Brenda swears that she will never see a therapist because therapists “fucked up her life.” But despite her aversion to therapy from being over-psychoanalyzed as a child, Brenda goes to therapy anyway.10 In “The Secret,” Brenda arrives at a therapy session with the expectation that she will not learn anything new. She imagines the therapist telling her how she wishes she could be like Brenda and how she is “in awe of” Brenda’s free spirit. After the visit, Brenda concludes, “I think I’m the only one who can solve any of my problems,” to which her confidant, a massage client who works as a prostitute, agrees, “We are ultimately stuck with ourselves.” Through Brenda and her family, Six Feet Under offers illustrations of ineffective counseling and a dim view of the psychology industry in general. But ironically by Season 5, Brenda goes back to school and becomes a counselor.
herself. Even Brenda, the show’s most cynical character toward psychoanalytic attitudes, is herself trapped within the structure she tries so hard to escape.

Even when *Six Feet Under* is not directly critiquing the psychology industry, it is rich with psychoanalytic terminology and language. Psychoanalytic language is so integrated into the American lexicon that audiences may not be sure whether to laugh at *Six Feet Under*’s language or take it seriously. Referring to America’s obsession with therapy, media critic Ashley Sayeau observes, “You can critique it but you can’t escape it. Self-help is who we are.”11 David and Keith’s couples counseling visits are an example. In “You Never Know,” when the therapist asks, “And how did that make you feel?” Keith sends him a look that could kill. Whether viewers are to identify with Keith’s annoyance or accept the therapist’s curiosity as a genuine question is unclear. Later in “Perfect Circles,” David shows off his psychoanalytic tongue when he tells his brother that he and Keith are “seeking a trained professional to help [them] establish appropriate boundaries and write the rules of [their] relationship together.” But narratively speaking, the psychoanalysis of David and Keith’s relationship ultimately does not help it to improve.

*Six Feet Under* also satirizes the language used by pop-psychology cult groups. The Plan, for example, is a bizarre and cultish life-building seminar with a militant philosophy that people must be torn down in order to be built back up. The Plan embodies a theme that is also prevalent in the previous two case studies, a polarizing of philosophies due to humanity’s desperation to locate meaning. The name itself is a double-entendre (think architectural blueprints in addition to strategic implications). In an episode aptly named “The Plan”, fanatical advocates at the seminar preach to Ruth and other pathetically desperate characters that they
should rebuild their lives “from the ground up”, “put in new floors” and make other such “renovations”, maintaining that they are the “architects” of their lives. The Plan has a powerful effect on shy and repressed Ruth. Though she has not yet acknowledged the mind-hold that the organization has on her and its other members, Ruth’s dialogue proves otherwise when she declares in an uncharacteristic manner:

You want me to complain? Alright then. Fuck this. Fuck you. Fuck all of you, with your sniveling self pity. And fuck all your lousy parents. Fuck my lousy parents while we’re at it. Fuck my legless grandmother. Fuck my dead husband. Fuck my selfish Bohemian sister and her fucking bliss. And my children and their nasty little secrets!  

By the episode “Driving Mr. Mossback,” Ruth is completely caught up in The Plan’s vernacular, spouting building metaphors to everyone she knows. Many episodes pass before Ruth snaps out of her Plan-induced trance.

*Six Feet Under* demonstrates a less guarded perspective, however, when it comes to the most important aspect of psychology, the patient. Here it treads delicately, taking a less satirical approach. Its realistic treatment of Brenda’s manic depressive brother Billy is an example. When Billy is committed to a psychiatric hospital, he offers a different portrayal of mental illness from that which is normally seen in Hollywood film or television. In “Knock, Knock,” Billy tells Brenda, “I hate that my blood makes me crazy. I hate that I can’t function without being chemically altered… I’m so lost inside. I wish that I could get out, but I don’t know that I ever will.” And later in “It’s The Most Wonderful Time of The Year,” Billy explains to Nate, “I was sick. I’m still sick. I’ll always be sick... It’s something I’ll have to live with for the rest of my life. It’s not
up to me.” Of course one can argue that the depiction of Billy’s full mania when he attacks his sister with a razor in “A Private Life” is overly dramatized and frightening to the extreme, but it can also be pointed out that this is the reality of bipolar disorder when left untreated.\(^{13}\) *Six Feet Under*’s rendering of Billy is convincing enough that it has been discussed in industry publications such as *Psychology Today*, which commends the show for portraying the realities of manic depression.\(^{14}\)

George Sibley, Ruth’s new husband, is another example of the serial’s attempt to portray mental health patients less stereotypically. As with Billy, the initial manifestations of George’s mental illness border on comical, especially when he insists on not only stocking the Fishers’ bomb shelter in episode 51 (“Untitled”), but also living in it. However, the harsh reality of his condition is evident when he endures shock treatment in “Hold My Hand,” and has a flashback that reveals the childhood trauma (his mother’s suicide) that prompted the onset of his disorder in the first place. *Six Feet Under* also attempts to depict the complexity of family life when mental illness is discovered. In “The Coat of White Primer,” Ruth is uncomfortable and does not know how to act around George, claiming that he is a burden and that she does not love him anymore. For this news, the audience is positioned to experience the sting of Ruth’s implication from George’s perspective.

In a paradoxically tender scene from “Time Flies,” fellow mental health patients George and Billy meet for the first time and bond. Scenes like these offer a perspective that is atypical from the stereotypes that Hollywood usually provides, encouraging a greater understanding of people who live with mental illness or have survived trauma. *Six Feet Under*’s satirical criticism
of psychoanalytic philosophy only extends to the professional realm; when it comes to patients, *Six Feet Under* approaches its characters carefully and honestly.

**Trauma, Death, and Loss on Six Feet Under**

In addition to its psychoanalytical discourse, death is a focal theme of *Six Feet Under*, and is appropriately so for a serial that is set in a funeral parlor. But death is everywhere, its presence manifest not just in the physical corpses of the departed, but also in their spirits who stick around to haunt the living. One ghost in particular, the Fishers’ deceased father Nathaniel, roams the entire house. He also follows family members to other locations such as his own burial in the serial pilot. Other ghosts appear for single episodes or a string of episodes during continuations of their story arcs. But these ghosts are not necessarily indicative of supernatural phenomenon. As Nate’s girlfriend Brenda insists in “The Plan,” “talking to dead people is delusional.” Usually just an annoyance and rarely ever “scary,” ghosts in *Six Feet Under* hound characters about things that are troubling them,\(^{15}\) representing the voice of conscience, fear, and repression within their minds.\(^{16}\) So while *Six Feet Under* is mostly a realistic family melodrama and black comedy, the presence of ghosts as characters is suggestive of the fantasy and horror genres. *Six Feet Under*’s ghosts create the ideal counseling/confessional environment, a perfect opportunity for a discourse with the self.

Beyond its fantastic use of ghosts, the way *Six Feet Under* handles the topic of death is notable. Having no contemporary predecessors, *Six Feet Under* is a curious experiment that examines America’s denial of death.\(^{17}\) Criticism of this denial is evident as early as the pilot episode where Nate expresses his frustration about having to sanitize everything. Instead of using the dirt shaker provided at his father’s burial, he picks up dirt from the ground with his
bare hands and casts it onto the coffin. And at Nate’s own burial in “All Alone,” his family members also get their hands dirty by heaving shovel-fulls of dirt onto his coffin. Moreover, Nate’s primary struggle throughout the serial is accepting his own mortality. This journey is the fundamental storyline as Nate’s character growth arcs from his father’s death in the pilot to accepting his own death by the show’s finale. 18

Symbolically, the portrayal of corpses and cadavers in Six Feet Under could signify an emotional paralysis stemming from repression about mortality in general. Repression, both as it pertains to averting the mourning process and in respect to other circumstances, is a principal theme in Six Feet Under. A striking parallel throughout the serial is the routine juxtaposition of corpse imagery alongside characters who persistently struggle to break free from repressed emotions. Both are essentially in a state of paralysis, one physical and the other emotional. Ball makes the connection himself between “embalming and the formaldehyde effect of repressed emotions.” 19 Film theorist Carol Clover suggests such an idea when she makes a connection between the corpse and emotional paralysis or repression. 20 And Barbara Creed, another film scholar, also discusses the corpse, maintaining that it is the “ultimate in abjection” 21, signifying “one of the most basic forms of pollution – the body without a soul”. She describes the abject as “the place where meaning collapses”. 22 Given humanity’s propensity for making meaning out of tragedy, this connection is profound because it demonstrates how these two concepts oppose one another by nature. The void inherent in death complicates any endeavor to derive meaning from it. In other words, humanity is chasing its tail in seeking answers where there possibly are none.
Freud’s concept of the “return of the repressed,” which suggests that “what is repressed must always strive to return,” also can be applied when exploring Six Feet Under’s morbid themes and imagery. For example, in “In Case of Rapture,” the Fisher family experiences the literal representation of just how virulent their repression has become. A problem that they know has been brewing but has been overlooked for months is their antiquated sewage system, which backs up blood at the worst possible time, when a health inspector comes for a visit. In a nightmarish scene, blood pools in the sink as Ruth prepares a meal in the kitchen. Several critics have made the connection between Six Feet Under and repression. In the words of one critic, Six Feet Under’s Fisher family is a “nuclear implosion of a family that operates what one character [calls] ‘the most depressing funeral home’ she’s ever been in.” According to the show’s writers, the emotional implosion experienced by characters is part of their development so that they may “grow and change and crash and burn and slowly put themselves back together.” Six Feet Under’s close attention to character development in this case bolsters its position as a text that potentially works through trauma.

Many viewers report that they watch Six Feet Under for its honesty. It does not evade the dirty side of death or ‘pretty it up’ for easy consumption. This frankness is refreshing and perhaps even necessary for a previously sleepy viewing public that was awakened by the tragedies of events like 9/11. After traumatic incidents of this magnitude, American culture may have needed an outlet like Six Feet Under, a suggestion echoed by one critic who speculates that Six Feet Under’s appeal is related to not only modern audiences’ obsession with death but also its address of the mystery of mortality. And while Six Feet Under’s popularity may be consistent with these causes, it differentiates itself from its contemporaries by being one of the
first new shows of the millennium that does not concentrate on crime solving. In relation to the other popular dramas that appeared around the time of its premiere in 2001, it is remarkable that Six Feet Under is one of the few that contains very little violence.

Due to its overarching death content, another theme that runs throughout Six Feet Under’s five seasons is loss. While its attitude may appear mixed with respect to psychology and its implementation, Six Feet Under advocates the importance of facing loss in order to move beyond it. Whether it is the death of a loved one, the discovery of a life-threatening illness, or victimization stemming from a trauma, loss is addressed in every episode. Like its delicate handling of characters with mental illness, Six Feet Under takes the concepts of trauma and subsequent mourning, grieving, and accepting of loss seriously. Its meticulous attention to the procedures at grief counseling sessions within the Fisher business are one example.

Another example follows David’s car-jacking encounter during which a homophobe kidnapss and nearly kills him by threatening to set him on fire in “That’s My Dog.” The ghost of Nathaniel Sr. stands beside David as he peers out a rainy window. Distraught and disappointed that his confrontation with the car-jacker did not provide him with the relief and vindication that he expected, David laments, “I thought it would set me free, but it didn’t change anything.” His father’s response effectively sets David’s priorities straight, because while he experienced a life-altering trauma, he also survived it. “You’re missing the point... You hang onto your pain like it’s worth something. Let me tell you, it’s not worth shit... You can do anything you lucky bastard, you’re alive!” To which David replies, “It can’t be so simple.” The episode ends with Nathaniel’s emotive reply, “What if it is?”
David’s car-jacking encounter itself illustrates another significant theme in *Six Feet Under*, trauma and its associated post-traumatic stress. All of *Six Feet Under*’s chief characters experience post-traumatic stress at some point in its five seasons, but David’s PTSD is the most pronounced. Severely depressed and unmotivated, he sleeps all day and hides in his apartment in “Terror Starts at Home,” afraid to venture out due to fear of his attacker. He experiences post-traumatic symptoms such as nightmares, flashbacks, and panic attacks like the one he suffers at Nate’s funeral in “All Alone” when he realizes his brother is no longer there to protect him.

David’s love interest, Keith Charles, a policeman, also shows signs of PTSD after he accidentally kills a suspect during a domestic violence call in “The Invisible Woman.” Although in a committed relationship with someone else at the time, Keith shows up distraught at David’s home and cheats on his partner, costing him his relationship in “Back to the Garden.” Experiencing troubled sleep and uncontrollable emotions in “It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year,” Keith is unable to deal with his experience and his anger becomes his prominent emotion, eventually ending his career in “The Last Time.”

Nate is also a post-traumatic character, perhaps perpetually so. After he discovers he has a life-threatening condition in “In the Game,” he delays telling family and his fiancé Brenda until there is no way to hide it. During his first brain surgery in “Perfect Circles,” an artery ruptures and Nate almost dies, confusing and frightening him about his life’s direction and meaning. In “The Last Time,” Nate’s younger sister Claire intuitively observes, “I just get the sense that you’re not fully dealing.” The unfortunate result for each of these characters is that nothing can comfort them, not even the psychoanalytic “talking cure.” So as suggested before,
while *Six Feet Under* acknowledges the value of some aspects of psychology, it critiques traditional psychoanalysis as an absolute solution to weighty issues like trauma.

The principal way that *Six Feet Under*’s thematic content differs from the other two texts examined in this thesis is its fundamental message that one must let go in order to move beyond the pain of trauma and death. No episode expresses this philosophy more palpably than “Out, Out, Brief Candle,” when Nate yells at the ghost of an athlete who died during football practice. The athlete cries, “Why me? I was too young!” And Nate responds, “Why not you? Did you think you were immune to this? Everybody dies, everybody! Why are you so fucking special?” *Six Feet Under*’s characters consistently battle fear, death, violence, and post-traumatic stress, but they do so in a much different manner than those on *Lost* and *24*. Its philosophy proposes that these challenges are inevitable and a part of life, suggesting that facing them directly and moving on is healthier than distracting oneself with other issues or dwelling on the past. In a sense, this philosophy reflects Caruth’s argument that trauma should be considered “a possibility of experience as opposed to an exceptional experience or the rule of experience.”

*Six Feet Under* as Post-Traumatic Television

*Six Feet Under*’s classification as a PTTV text is complicated by its style. From a cinematographic and narrative perspective, *Six Feet Under* is a more masterable text than the other two discussed in this document because of its linear narrative strategy, classical Hollywood shooting style, and fluid editing techniques. Rather than disorienting its viewer, *Six Feet Under* presents its content linearly and relatively slowly, making the subject matter its real focus.
But its coherent narrative style does not necessarily disqualify it from being a PTTV text. Due to the helpless subject position in which Six Feet Under often places viewers, many find the show difficult to digest, claiming they do not watch it because it makes them uncomfortable. Curiously, this is particularly true among Christian viewers. Their discomfort signals that the text is somehow difficult to master despite its coherent narrative style. In season 4, “That’s My Dog” drew protests from viewers because of its portrayal of David’s traumatic abduction and beating. And when David’s brother Nate collapses from his brain aneurism in “Ecotone,” viewers expressed their frustration on Internet message boards because they feared HBO might kill his character. Fans also suffered anxiety as a result of Nate’s near-death two seasons earlier, where his life passes before his eyes and he experiences surreal and alternate futures. In all these instances, viewers were vicariously traumatized as witnesses to situations that made them feel powerless.

Although Six Feet Under’s narrative flows coherently, its narrative strategy occasionally draws from those of post-traumatic cinema. For example, the flashforward in both “Perfect Circles” and the series finale make Six Feet Under the third text in this thesis that leaps forward temporally. Six Feet Under also makes use of the traditional post-traumatic flashback. Whenever David experiences a vision or nightmare of his attacker in season 5, it is presented in brief but jarring fragments. Nate’s flashback to his mortician father embalming a corpse is another example. But in this case, Six Feet Under turns the scene into a parody of Psycho. Jabbing orchestral stings are heard as the camera takes on Nate’s subjective point of view when he hesitantly descends the stairs to the basement where he witnesses his father at work. Yet again, PTTV’s narrative subjectivity places the viewer in a potentially traumatizing position.
The use of music to accentuate the melodrama of Nate’s flashback is an anomaly for *Six Feet Under*, however. With the exception of its opening and closing credits, fantasy sequences and temporal leaps, when representing diegetic reality in the ‘present,’ *Six Feet Under* exhibits a stark lack of extra-diegetic background music. This technique intensifies its already quiet mood, a characteristic that sets it apart from the other PTTV serials where music is integral to increasing suspense and emotionality. *Six Feet Under*’s tranquil tone might situate it as a text that strives to transcend trauma, because such silence can be conducive to genuine reflection and healing.

While melodrama’s tendency to safely address but also conceal issues runs counter to *Six Feet Under*’s root message,34 *Six Feet Under* is still essentially a melodrama. Not only that, but it is a family melodrama, a genre perceived to be ‘low’ in the futile high-art/low-art debate, even though its cinematic style may cause it to appear more high-brow than its contemporaries. *Six Feet Under* received outstanding ratings and critical reviews during its first few seasons, but it did not fare as well near its end, which may have contributed to the creators’ decision to cancel it. In comparison, *Lost* and *24* are still going strong as of this writing. Despite the fact that it is melodrama, “the most degraded of media,”35 perhaps *Six Feet Under*’s guise as higher art was intimidating, appearing “too intellectual for the cultural needs of the general public.”36

One of the conventions that *Six Feet Under* generously borrows from melodrama is seriality. Although *Six Feet Under* often has an episodic theme of the week, it does not necessarily resolve all problems associated with that theme within the span of one hour. In fact, most issues get agonizingly dragged out for seasons. *Six Feet Under*’s screen time does not
progress as slowly as 24’s, but one of its criticisms is that it has a painfully slow narrative. At the same time, however, the serial does supply closure in the form of a shocking and very final conclusion to its five seasons. But while the deaths of all characters is closure, it certainly does not qualify as conventional by Hollywood’s standards. Seriality and closure may appear to run counter to one another’s purposes as discussed in Chapter 1, but melodrama’s manner of closure is often ambiguous, and in this case, it is even unconventional when compared to the classical Hollywood happy ending. In this fashion, Six Feet Under may have helped redefine viewer expectations of future serial TV content in the post-9/11 era.

Another narrative device Six Feet Under utilizes is humor. The serial’s black comedy provides an avenue to gently make social commentary. Six Feet Under’s cynicism is over-the-top, however, and this attribute alienated many viewers from the beginning of the serial. For those who could stomach its black comedy, the death of the week that precedes each episode was a much talked-about and anticipated pinnacle. It was not uncommon for viewers to speculate and anticipate what each week’s death might entail. Usually tragic yet often amusing, each death is punctuated by a nameplate that resembles what one might see on a tombstone, complete with the character’s full name and years of birth and death. The nameplate then fades to a white screen rather than black, suggestive of a journey into the afterlife. The circumstances of each death stage the theme for the rest of the episode, and these deaths are usually comical, featuring such irresistibly gruesome endings as a bakery employee who falls into a giant dough mixer (“The Foot”), a fanatically religious woman who runs out into traffic because she mistakes a flock of escaped sex dummies for angels (“In Case of Rapture”), a porn star whose pussy literally kills her when she is electrocuted by a cat...
knocking hair rollers into the bathtub ("An Open Book"), and a divorcee who pulls a Leonardo DiCaprio Titanic move by standing up in the sunroof of a limo on a girls’ night out, shouting “I’m king of the world!” and then being impaled by a low-hanging traffic light ("Crossroads").

Some of the allure to Six Feet Under’s black comedy could be due to the appeal of the horror genre in general. Viewers are both attracted to and repulsed by horror.39 “It’s ‘fun’ to be scared,” creating a “healthy catharsis of surplus repression.”40 Zaur from NTC, a viewer, claims that Six Feet Under is “like a car wreck you just can’t turn away from.”41 Emotional catharsis can be a byproduct of watching horror and black comedy. The comic relief that results from scenes like those described above serve as a light-hearted outlet for a nation suffering in silence from death anxiety. And this catharsis in itself can prompt a discourse about death, a topic that many Americans have long considered off-limits. Particularly since events like 9/11, anxiety and fear over traumatic death is of primary concern, but most people are afraid to talk about their fears or do not know how, recalling survivors’ tendency toward silence following trauma.

Like black comedy, traditional melodrama indulges in emotional catharsis. Six Feet Under is almost excessively emotionally cathartic. Its characters are always struggling, whining about something, and are desperately lost, depressed, or otherwise psychologically troubled. Although its plot is slow, viewers get to know the depth of Six Feet Under’s characters due to the show’s emphasis on character development. One of the ways Six Feet Under develops character is through the confessional, a device in which the innermost emotional state of characters is revealed. Six Feet Under’s structure revolves around the confessional, as grief counseling sessions are usually one of the first events witnessed after the initial death is presented. Nate initially wants nothing to do with his inherited ‘death care’ business. But he
finds he has a knack for grief counseling, and acknowledges its inherent complexity in “In Place of Anger” when he asks his brother David, “Does it ever get any easier?” David replies that it does not, and that time and experience only cause the profession to become “more familiar.” In “The Eye Inside”, Rico, the funeral home’s restorative artist who has previously only been accustomed to working with deceased bodies in the basement, has just become a partner and now must interface with bereft family members. “I didn’t know if I should hug her, or…” he confesses to David about a recent client, revealing his prior underestimation of grief counseling’s challenges. The remainder of each episode brims with confessionals, whether performed in traditional professional settings like a counselor’s office or articulated through friends and family confiding in one another. And, in a fashion that is uniquely Six Feet Under, confessionals can take place through conversations with the dead.

But Six Feet Under presents such a conflicted discourse with respect to whether it advocates or condemns psychology as an effective system, that its use of psychoanalysis or the “talking cure” to express its ideology is paradoxical. Also notable here is the nomenclature itself. The talking cure implies that language, or the practice of using language, can treat or heal mental and emotional suffering. And while Six Feet Under portrays the psychology industry as being ineffective and even harmful, particularly mocking and satirizing its jargon and rhetoric, it also narratively rewards characters for confessing and talking about their problems.42 Characters suffer by facing negative consequences for repressive responses to trauma, and positive results occur when they utilize the confessional as a post-traumatic outlet. For example, early in the serial, David is anything but the epitome of psychological health.43 Because he is not coping with his emotions about his sexuality, he is plagued by the gory spirit
of a young male who was the victim of a gay hate crime in “A Private Life”. Only after David confesses to his church congregation in “Knock, Knock” does the haunting cease: “Let me never be ashamed... How am I supposed to spread God’s love when I deny it to myself?” David’s speech triggers the ghost to reappear one last time, and not as a gruesome monster as he had appeared before, but as a benevolent spirit.

Conversely, Brenda is an example of how the serial narratively punishes characters for repression of emotions. She is overt in her emotional expression (though shrouded in sarcasm) early in the serial. She regresses, however, in later episodes, demonstrating that she is not the most psychologically healthy character on the show. After a lifetime of being scrutinized psychoanalytically, Brenda shuts down in “In the Game.” She recognizes what is happening to her, readily admitting she is depressed in “Out, Out, Brief Candle” when she tells Nate, “Maybe I made myself into a self-fulfilling prophecy and really am a border-line personality. Now wouldn’t that be ironic?” Brenda’s discontent and unhappiness is Six Feet Under’s negative narrative consequence for her repression. Facing an identity crisis, she reflects about how she got to this point, “I spent my childhood performing for clinicians, the rest of my adult life caring for my wreck of a brother, and I have no idea who I am.” Attempting a form of confessional, Brenda begins writing a novel in “The Invisible Woman,” the same episode in which she decides she is ready for commitment and asks Nate to marry her. Even though she is the one who proposes, the engagement heightens her fear of intimacy, suggested by her Freudian dream about being smothered by Nate’s pillow in “In Place of Anger.” Because of her overexposure to psychoanalytic scrutiny, Brenda believes that she understands what is happening to her and reacts in a manner that is counter to what she thinks a professional might advise – she becomes
a nymphomaniac. In psychoanalytic terms, Brenda does exactly what is expected. She runs, compulsively engaging in an addiction to shut down and numb her pain. Once again she faces negative narrative consequences for her repression when in “The Last Time,” Brenda’s relationship with Nate ends. But this instance is uncharacteristic for *Six Feet Under* because it punishes Brenda rather than rewards her for confessing her infidelity to Nate. Perhaps the point is that Brenda waits so long to face her issues that no confessional can undo the damage her repression has caused.

Nate is another character who is punished narratively for repressive behavior. He can be seen running, literally, throughout the serial, and he usually does so following an experience with death or his failing health. According to Freud, this behavior is to be expected because “no one believes in his own death... In the unconscious, every one of us is convinced of his own immortality.” Nate’s avoidance of issues is not so different from Brenda’s. Figuratively, he runs from intimacy, responsibility, and conformity. This is evident to his brother David in “In Place of Anger” when he accuses Nate of living in denial. According to the back story suggested in the pilot, Nate ran from being part of the death care business for most of his twenties. *Six Feet Under* narratively punishes Nate with the ultimate punishment in “All Alone”, death. Whether or not the show’s creators devised a direct cause-and-effect relationship between Nate’s repression and his death is not known. Even if the connection is not intentional, one can not help but wonder if it is proof of the unconscious at work, the manifestation of this culture’s deep-seated belief in a psychoanalytic sense of causality.
Conclusion

Like the other texts discussed here, *Six Feet Under* thematically engages with a number of post-traumatic cultural concerns. But *Six Feet Under* differs in its message of hope that recollects Caruth’s language of survival and departure. This theme is integral to *Six Feet Under* and few, if any, prior television shows have dealt with the topics of death and loss quite so directly. The serial’s fundamental message is letting go, not only of loved ones who have departed but also of pain from the past, a universal message that can be broadened onto culture in general as it attempts to heal from the traumas of the post-9/11 age. Whether or not *Six Feet Under* is truly attempting to forge the type of healing and community as Spigel suggested is certainly open to interpretation. The answer may be surmised from *Six Feet Under*’s precept that “everybody dies,” which confronts a substantial taboo for American culture. The serial is able to tackle this delicate subject via a unique blend of narrative techniques that draw attention away from its form and toward its provocative content, making it the only text discussed here that I believe qualifies *Six Feet Under* as a text that is capable of transcending trauma.

Notes


10 Tobin 92.

11 Sayeau 100.


22 Creed 39.


37 Lynch 18.

38 “Six Feet Under,” The Internet Media Database.


40 Shaw 2.

41 “Six Feet Under,” The Internet Media Database.

42 Merck 69.

43 Tobin 92.


45 MacLeod 142.


48 Spigel 250.
CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY

Cultural artifacts often reflect and uphold a culture’s ideologies, and by doing so, they can also affirm that culture’s state of denial or acceptance of a given issue. Many television programs in the post-9/11 era address a group of cultural concerns that reflect the conditions of society at the time, exhibiting a pronounced preoccupation with themes of trauma, death, paranoia, and fear. But not all these texts address this subject matter in the same way, which is perhaps reflective of a world in a state of uncertainty and moral ambiguity at present. And because television serves as storyteller for contemporary society, the manner in which these TV narratives are constructed is worthy of investigation because they not only reflect but can also effect culture’s perception of reality, with some texts even encouraging an avoidance of guilt or responsibility.

This study sought to determine if and how TV texts in the post-9/11 era reflect and address cultural concerns by analyzing patterns in their theme and narrative style. The case studies I selected possess a common cluster of themes characterized by trauma, death, and loss, and some demonstrate reactive attitudes with themes such as Othering and justified violence. All three texts portray topics that confirm an influence of prevailing post-9/11 cultural fears.

One of the more remarkable findings of this research is the similarity in the ideological conflict among the case studies – all demonstrate a fervent battle between polarizing philosophies. 24’s ideological problematic is an ongoing dialogue about what differentiates heroism from terrorism. Lost’s primary ideological tension is the disparity between rational scientific thought and destiny. And Six Feet Under sustains a conflicted discourse with itself
about whether psychology as a practice is harmful or helpful. The appearance of such philosophical polarization now in the post-9/11 era may reflect a traumatized culture’s search for meaning following tragedy.

Additionally, the approach to plot, characterization, camera techniques, and editing taken by these three texts is more experimental than that of their predecessors. Their narrative strategies reveal an unlikely blend of contrasting genres and styles borrowed from post-traumatic cinema, melodrama, and reality TV. These stylistic influences may seem dissimilar at first glance, but they share many attributes, and when used in combination, they achieve an effect that intensifies the viewer reaction of alarm and confusion that is already realized through the delicate subject matter rendered within the texts. Considering the resulting shock effect on the audience, one can argue that such a strategy potentially re-traumatizes viewers, particularly when the images and scenarios depicted evoke memories and fears of historic cultural traumas like those evoked by scenes in Lost and 24.

Furthermore, an investigation into the purposes and effects the melodramatic form may have on these texts reveals that while melodramatic tendencies offer a safe avenue through which to address cultural concerns, often these same techniques distance and distract viewers from the issues rather than encourage independent thought. In this way, such texts may exhibit a mood of denial, and I found this to be the case in two of my case studies, 24 and Lost.

The order in which I present each case study within the overall structure of this document bears significance because it represents a progression that moves from a reactive response to traumatic events and cultural fears in the post-9/11 age to a more reflective consideration of universal concerns related to those same events and fears. 24 is a literal
manifestation of 9/11-era paranoia that plays on culture’s deepest fears about terror and apocalyptic possibilities. *Lost* moves toward the safe mechanism of metaphor, where it addresses cultural issues in an environment that is far removed from reality. *Six Feet Under* takes the same cultural concerns and locates them at the personal level, filtering them to their essence, which is simply the fear of death. *Six Feet Under’s* text is noticeably absent of many of the post-traumatic cinematic and editing techniques that typify the other two texts, making it capable of presenting a smooth and coherent narrative such that its focus remains on content rather than form, which draws attention to its core message of healing in the wake of trauma.

One might wonder why the narrative complexity and genre hybridization of PTTV is occurring now at this point in America’s cultural history. While hybridized genres were already prevalent in recent decades due in part to the influence of postmodernism, hybridization seems to have notably increased since 9/11. This increase may symbolize an era shaped by ambiguity because genre hybrids can indirectly tackle difficult topics more easily than classical genres due to the fact that they are not limited by the same rules and conventions.

My focus for this analysis was to explore how each case study handles its underlying cultural concerns. Ultimately I was most interested in determining whether the resulting implication was a denial of trauma, a repetition of trauma, or an attempt to work through trauma. In so doing, I found that each text examined here is representative of a traumatized culture that is in various stages of healing, and that this new PTTV style of television may be indicative of a culture that is subconsciously struggling with the effects of trauma.

A number of other texts that fit the PTTV classification have emerged in the past 5 years. And just like the texts analyzed here, their subject matter and styles vary widely but their
ideological concerns, thematic tendencies, and principal narrative strategies reveal similar patterns. Due to its cultural context, *Rescue Me* (2004-present), FX’s serial melodrama about New York firefighters who lost some of their squad in the 9/11 attacks, is particularly noteworthy. The main character struggles with addiction issues, post-traumatic flashbacks, and delusions that he is being visited by the ghost of his brother who died on 9/11. Its premise calls attention to the American concept of heroism, especially its relationship to Western ideals of masculinity. Another program that challenges the traditional definition of heroism is NBC’s *Heroes* (2006-present). Bringing science fiction and the whimsy of comic books to primetime, it follows a group of characters who struggle to adjust after discovering they have superhuman abilities.

In 2006 and 2007 a flurry of 24 “copy cats” appeared, but curiously, they have all since been cancelled, some only lasting a matter of months. Their titles are notable considering the traumatic mood of PTTV: NBC’s *Kidnapped* (2006-2007), The CW’s *Runaway* (2006), and Fox’s *Vanished* (2006). Additionally, a real-time formatted sitcom by the creators of 24 is now in production at ABC. Titled *The Call*, this hybrid format program demonstrates the predominance of genre hybridization in PTTV. And its characters, a team of paramedics, represent the epitome of PTTV thematic material, trauma.

Death-themed shows have also materialized, such as ABC’s *Pushing Daisies* (2007-present) and Showtime’s *Dead Like Me* (2003-2004). Analogous to *Six Feet Under* in content and form, these programs incorporate even more comedy, spectacle, and fantasy into their melodramatic serialized structures. And as suggested in Chapter 1, the *CSI* (2000-present) series is significant because of its fixation on both cadavers and crime solving. The *Law & Order* spin-
off *Special Victims Unit* (1999-present) is also notable due to its focus on content that is often more trauma-inducing than its other variants because of the type of crimes committed (sexual assault and rape). It should be mentioned, however, that these programs are series more so than serials, unlike the texts explored in my case studies. For the most part, each episode can stand on its own and be viewed as its own complete unit, a fact which may negate the traumatizing effect generated by the PTTV thematic content.

Other texts have also appeared that take the crime solving theme and spin it toward the realm of fantasy. For example, NBC’s *Medium* (2005-present) features clairvoyant characters who predict future events that will result in death unless intervention occurs. ABC’s *Eli Stone* (2008-present) also features a psychic character, but this serial is less traumatic and incorporates more comedy and spectacle into its narrative strategy. The focus on psychic phenomena in both these shows illustrates the prevalence of the fate theme in PTTV texts, and also further affirms a cultural preoccupation with the relationship between the past, present, and future. Considering all the texts mentioned here, the distinctive recipe for PTTV is form hybridization, traumatically themed content, and a fascination with time.

The results of this study trigger questions that warrant further investigation but that are beyond the scope of this thesis. 24 and the real-world controversy stirred by its torture scenes prompts consideration about fiction when it is constructed as reality. What is at stake when a nation’s government is concerned that a TV show’s illusion of reality might actually be misconstrued as reality? Part of the confusion originates from the fact that much of what is seen on TV already is constructed as “reality,” especially when one considers the hybridization that is taking place at present. News often constructs itself as narrative, as much of the 9/11
coverage proved in the weeks following the attacks. And with programs like 24, realistic events and cultural anxieties are depicted in a format that resembles the “raw” style of reality TV and the historic quality of post-traumatic documentary. Is an epistemological crisis underway with respect to TV form if the mere “reality” TV style is now being perceived as reality?

And what is at stake when the reverse occurs – when something real, like the terror attacks of 9/11, is taken and depicted as horror? While many of the televised documentaries fared well with viewers, theatric representations like United 93, a docudrama about 9/11, were miserably unsuccessful at the box office. Critics speculate that even five years beyond the attacks, the audience still was not ready for such a film. The question then becomes, is the world ever ready to witness a film about such a tragedy? This notion brings into question the gratifications and pleasures derived from watching TV and film. When something is made too real, is it more palatable when presented as news or documentary than converted into narrative for consumption as entertainment? And what does that mean for traditionally escapist genres like melodrama when the aim of a historic reenactment and that of the chosen medium contradict one another? The fact that melodrama sometimes succeeds in meeting the various non-escapist objectives of the case studies within this thesis should prove otherwise, but the exact nature of audience reaction to such texts is not yet known, so this is an area that is certainly worthy of further research.

Media is faced with an immense challenge if it seeks to engage in any serious discourse with mass audiences about topics that are considered taboo or controversial, but PTTV’s assimilation of various styles appears to be one way this engagement may be taking place. However, PTTV’s spectacle may also divert attention from the real issues, and perhaps worse, it
may be repeating trauma with its tedious circularity. But as LaCapra observes, repetition can be a means of working through trauma, so combined with Caruth’s belief that healing can be found in the act of surviving to tell a story, this perspective provides an optimistic approach to trauma theory.

While TV has increased the dissemination of trauma like no other communication medium ever has, it also has provided us with “a tremendous sense of healing and community”.

2 We are indeed a traumatized culture – our preoccupation with trauma in cultural artifacts at the moment is proof. But this might also be an indication of society’s desire to heal, a movement toward eradicating our post-traumatic pain. Cultural artifacts like PTTV may be doing just that, attempting to close the fissures that trauma created, and ultimately, to transcend the cultural traumas of our collective past.

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