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# The American Presidency and the 25<sup>th</sup> Amendment in Contemporary TV Series: Fiction, Reality, and the Warped Mirrors of the Post-9/11 *Zeitgeist*

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**The American Presidency and the 25<sup>th</sup> Amendment  
in Contemporary TV Series:  
Fiction, Reality, and the Warped Mirrors  
of the Post-9/11 *Zeitgeist***

Monica MICHLIN

This article analyzes how recent TV series (1999-2010) have staged the American Presidency in a form of “revolving door” between fiction and reality, and how all stage a crisis allowing a vice-president to become president. While highlighting the contrasts in representations staged by series as diverse as *24*, *The West Wing*, *Commander-In-Chief*, *Heroes* or *Battlestar Galactica*, this study will examine whether scripts that imagine “alternative” presidents *empower* us, as viewers, through projection and identification, preparing the collective subconscious for long-delayed progress and change, or whether the systematic casting of a central presidential figure simply reinforces the institution of the presidency itself. It will also question viewing *in time*: since History continues to unfold (or to repeat itself) after the series themselves have come to an end, is it not the case that the gap between the original viewing and a later viewing creates a “time warp” of sorts? More ironically still, is it not unavoidable that an opus that represents the Oval Office as a place of noble civics and virtuous political drama like *The West Wing* has become outdated compared to those series that most warp time, space, and our worldview, because fiction centering on distrust and paranoia, like *24*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and even *Heroes*, better translates the *post-9/11 zeitgeist*?

Recent TV series focusing on the White House have been a fascinating illustration of the revolving door between fiction and reality: Fox’s *24* introduced the USA’s first black president as early as 2002, NBC’s *The West Wing* (1999-2006), portrayed, in its last seasons, Latino president Matt Santos, while ABC’s *Commander-in-Chief* (2005-2006), Syfy’s *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-2009), and Fox’s *24* (2001-2010), all projected women presidents from 2004 onwards. Although they belong to very different narrative genres – political soap (*The West Wing*), thriller (*24*), a cross between soap and fairy tale (*Commander-In-Chief*), science-fiction epic (*Battlestar Galactica*) – what all these series share is that they saw the US presidency (thinly disguised as the presidency of the *Twelve Colonies* in *BSG*) as the very stuff of drama. They were also either recasting current or recent events, as well as prophesying what still lies ahead. In this study, I shall focus on an event all these series stage: a vice-president becoming president, in a variation of some sort on the 25<sup>th</sup> amendment, which was added to the Constitution in 1967 to clarify the Constitution’s article II section 1, and which provides that if the president is incapacitated (“dies, resigns, is removed from office or is otherwise unable to discharge the powers

of the presidency”), the Vice-President is to become *Acting President*. Within a series, the very expression rings with a number of ironies – and although screenwriters were undoubtedly attracted to this narrative motif by real events in the context of the George W. Bush presidency, it rapidly became a narrative ploy to introduce major narrative twists and to bring hyper-idealistic and/or hyper-idealized figures – in particular, women – to power. We will see how each series stages this motif, in specific narrative and aesthetic ways, and ponder whether such scripts *empower* us, as viewers, through projection and identification, preparing the collective subconscious for long-delayed progress and change, or whether the systematic casting of a central presidential figure simply reinforces the institution of the presidency itself. Finally, since History continues to unfold even as each of the series evoked here has come to an end, does the gap between the original viewing and a later viewing or re-viewing not create a “time warp” of sorts? More ironically still, is it not unavoidable that series which represent the Oval Office as a place of noble civics and virtuous political drama, like *TWW*<sup>1</sup> must become more rapidly outdated than those that most warp time, space, and our worldview? Do not series centering on distrust and paranoia, like *24*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and even *Heroes*, better translate the *post-9/11 zeitgeist* ... even now, as we are told that the ten-year period opened by 9/11 has come to a close, with the recent assassination of Osama Bin Laden?

As numerous critics have pointed out, biopics have long made the presidency the subject of drama; but a series, through its sheer duration, can more aptly mirror the real-life unfolding of events, and of a presidential mandate, in its many quotidian facets and extraordinary crises. It is likely that the sudden increase in representations of US presidents in TV series over the last decade were not merely a “spillover” into television of a major cinematographic theme of the 1990s<sup>2</sup>, but also stemmed from the hotly contested legitimacy of G.W.

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<sup>1</sup> See Charles Girard’s “The world can move or not, by changing some words”: La parole politique en fiction dans *The West Wing*, RRCA (Revue de Recherche en Civilisation Américaine), [En ligne], 2 | 2010, mis en ligne le 03 mai 2010, last consulted 30 July 2011. URL:

<http://rrca.revues.org/index310.html>

<sup>2</sup> Emilio Pacull’s documentary *Mr. President* (Ed. Montparnasse, 2008) provides an excellent overview of American presidents on screen. The millennium fears no doubt prompted such asteroid disaster films as Mimi Leder’s *Deep Impact* (1997), or “alien invasion” films or remakes such as Roland Emmerich’s *Independence Day* (1996), or Tim Burton’s *Mars Attacks* (1996). The representations themselves are vastly different: in *Deep Impact*, the president is an African-American and an idealistic figure (Morgan Freeman); in *Independence Day* he is a “weak” president turned action film hero under the pressure of circumstance (although it is possible to read the triple-hero structure of the film as a triple embodiment of presidential virtue, in an intellectual, a soldier and a political leader); and in Burton’s delightful satire, embodied by Jack Nicholson, he is the ultimate Machiavellian cynic who meets his (Martian) match. In 2009, Emmerich’s disaster film *2012* again staged

Bush's presidency. On Inauguration Day 2001, TV networks did not show demonstrators waving signs reading "Hail to the Thief" instead of "Hail to the Chief"<sup>3</sup> and deplored the booing they could not shut out; Michael Moore's incendiary documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) shows this footage, in keeping with the filmmaker's March 2003 acceptance speech<sup>4</sup> on winning the Oscar for *Bowling for Columbine*, when he declared "we are living in fictitious times with a fictitious president" ending his address on "Shame on you, Mr. Bush", doubly denying that Bush was president by calling him "Mister"<sup>5</sup>. Precisely because Bush came to the White House as that *president-select* whose victory had been handed him by the US Supreme Court's infamous *Bush v Gore* (2000) decision, it is no surprise that screenwriters saw not only the opportunity but the *need* to create fictional presidents that loomed larger than life both as wish-fulfillment and as the reconstruction of a presidential ideal.

### 1. *The West Wing* and the Alternative Presidency of Jed Bartlet

This had already started within a "realist" perspective: *TWW* explicitly staged Democrat Jed Bartlet as a rewriting of Bill Clinton's two terms<sup>6</sup>. Quickly, though, the Bartlet White House was perceived as a wishful thinking, *what-if*, alternative reality to Bush's presidency, as Kristina Riegert (2007) has pointed out<sup>7</sup>. While the plot took viewers "behind the scenes" and into the *wings* of the White House, it was in a theatrical, rather than a sensational, sense of the term – as inside-the-Beltway drama for political junkies, it sought to show how politics actually "play out." Although practically every episode of the first five seasons ended with a scene in the Oval Office and a final high-angle shot of the presidential seal on the Oval Office carpet, in what could appear as a metatextual image for where the series dared to tread (or for its blending of the symbolic and the quotidian), much of the action was also played out in the halls and corridors, where the Chief of Staff's team – from speechwriters like Toby and Sam, to the Press Secretary,

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an African-American president, in a (failed) crossover between his own *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and Leder's *Deep Impact*.

<sup>3</sup> The official presidential anthem can be heard here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uRPTsJ1487w&feature=related>

<sup>4</sup> See the entire March 23, 2003 speech on You Tube:

[http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xhbzq\\_michael-moore-oscar-speech\\_music](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xhbzq_michael-moore-oscar-speech_music)

<sup>5</sup> See the many forms the "Not My President" popular protest took, such as this T-Shirt:

<http://www.amazon.com/President-T-Shirt-Officially-Licensed-Merchandise/dp/B000GRA192>

<sup>6</sup> See all the essays in in Rollins & O'Connor, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Kristina Riegert, "The Ideology of *The West Wing*: The Television Show That Wants To Be Real", in Kristina Riegert (ed), *Politicotainment: Television's Take on the Real*, NY, Peter Lang, 2007, 213-236.

C.J. Cregg – had to broker deals, find strategies, while remaining true both to themselves and to the president.

To make virtuous politics dramatic, in the absence of thriller-like “plots” and intrigue of the type cast in series like *24* or *Prison Break* (at least until *TWW*’s Season 4), in-staff verbal duels on matters of policy were made less static by a “walk and talk” steady-cam aesthetic, that showed staffers barking orders or dictating memos while in motion – a technique justifiably lampooned by *Mad TV*<sup>8</sup> although it had been acclaimed by critics for its audacity and dramatic power as an example of “quality” TV series<sup>9</sup>. Although the series was cast as an *ensemble* show rather than one centered on the president alone, and although the last two seasons see Bartlet’s role gradually fading, the pilot episode’s deliberate delaying of the president’s entrance, which occurs as he quotes the First Commandment (“I am the Lord thy God”) to a rightwing opponent, adding “Boy, those were the days!” in a deliberate wink to his own power, emphasizes the presidential figure’s central importance. In the early seasons, each episode dramatized two specific institutional, political or social issues, and although screenwriters wove in love stories and other subplots, the series presented itself as one hundred per cent *political* soap, asking viewers to hear out arguments for and against affirmative action, or the unlimited right to bear arms. Thus, beyond the *pageantry* of the presidency – dramatic moments like the Inauguration, the State of the Union speech, campaigning for election or reelection – and beyond the “voyeuristic” desire to see the dress rehearsals of such public moments – Aaron Sorkin, as creator and screenwriter for the series, bet on (educated) viewers’ desire to see *politics* onscreen. Everything was recast both as political and as theatrical, thanks to the use of didactic or agonistic dialogue. In the first seasons, much of the eloquence is Bartlet’s: a Nobel-prize winning economist, he is, more essentially still, an intellectual who never shies from parrying, either with staff or with the (Republican, Christian Right) enemy on any issue from gay rights to the death penalty to the federal budget.

Against the backdrop of the Bush presidency, *TWW* necessarily appeared as a liberal alternative to reality, although as early as 2004, a number of the studies devoted to the series pointed out its narrative paradigm as pointing to a “New Democrat” acceptance of compromise and “centrist” pragmatism over liberal ideals in the actual narrative

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<sup>8</sup> See *Mad TV*’s parody of the series focusing on this feature as well on Josh’s constant barking of Donna’s name and on various characters’ repetition of the last word spoken by another, to express incredulity:

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SnxQk8C\\_-kE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SnxQk8C_-kE)

Josh is said to be a fictional version of Rahm Emanuel (in a coincidence, Emanuel’s brother was the agent to one of the show’s producers).

<sup>9</sup> See Jane Feuer, “HBO and the Concept of Quality TV” in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (eds), London, I.B. Tauris, 2007, 148-150.

outcome – what Kristina Riebert, taking up John Fiske’s term, calls “clawback”: a final mainstreaming in the resolution after what seemed a truly open-ended debate. But then again, this contributed to the idea that this was realistic fiction. Some critics have pointed to the show stepping in where journalism no longer could or would and asking “how” and “why” instead of just reporting the “what” on policy-making<sup>10</sup>; others have pointed to the gap between myth and reality, in part because the Bartlet administration comes across as “overly noble”<sup>11</sup>, because the president is shown as a “romantic hero” within a “political romance” (Parry-Giles, p.13)<sup>12</sup>. Many, like Charles Girard (2010), Samuel Chambers<sup>13</sup> or Patrick Finn<sup>14</sup>, have focused on the force of speech in the series, and the rehabilitation of political discourse and engagement with political issues over real-life disenchantment, and voter apathy. Whether one thinks, like right-wing critic Norman Podhoretz, that *TWW* was a “liberal fantasy” or like left-wing critic Kristina Riebert, that it imposed “reality” as a turn to the center, the series did encourage viewers to think *outside the box* (even as it was being shown “on the box”) and to question the real-life, 1999-2006 framing of the debate on these many issues.

## 2. The “Mirroring” Effects Between Fiction and the 2008 Election of Barack Obama

But since the 2008 election, *TWW* has been credited with something more – with having predicted the victory of a minority president, since its last two seasons depict the rise of Matt Santos, a Latino candidate whose speeches strikingly resemble Barack Obama’s, from runaway Democratic Party Nominee to president-elect; *The New York Times* October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2008 article “Following the Script: Obama,

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<sup>10</sup> Donnalyn Pompper, “*The West Wing*: White House Narratives That Journalism Cannot Tell”, in *The West Wing: The American Presidency As Television Drama*, Peter C. Rollins & John E. O’Connor (eds), Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2006, 17-31.

<sup>11</sup> Myron A. Levine, “The West Wing (NBC) and The West Wing (D.C.): Myth and Reality in Television’s Portrayal of the White House”, in *The West Wing: The American Presidency As Television Drama*, Peter C. Rollins & John E. O’Connor (eds), Syracuse, NY, Syracuse University Press, 2003, 42-62.

<sup>12</sup> Trevor and Shawn J. Parry-Giles, *The Prime-Time Presidency. The West Wing and U.S. Nationalism*, Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Samuel Chambers, “Dialogue, Deliberation, and Discourse: The Far-Reaching Politics of *The West Wing*”, in *The West Wing: The American Presidency As Television Drama*, Peter C. Rollins & John E. O’Connor (eds), Syracuse, NY, Syracuse University Press, 2003, 83-100.

<sup>14</sup> Patrick Finn, “The West Wing’s Textual President: American Constitutional Stability and the New Public Intellectual in the Age of Information” in *The West Wing: The American Presidency As Television Drama*, Peter C. Rollins & John E. O’Connor (eds), Syracuse, NY, Syracuse University Press, 2003, 101-124.

McCain, and “The West Wing” said as much<sup>15</sup>. The slightly imperfect mirror effect between fiction and reality – *TWW*’s presidential election took place in 2006, two years ahead of the real-life election that saw *change come to America*<sup>16</sup> – creates the impression that Barack Obama modeled himself on the fictional Santos, when in fact, Barack Obama’s speech at the 2004 Democratic Convention and his subsequent rise to Senator of Illinois and presidential hopeful led to the *creation* of Matt Santos, as underlined by a February 21<sup>st</sup>, 2008 article in *The Guardian*: “From West Wing to the real thing: Scriptwriters modelled TV’s ethnic minority candidate on young Barack Obama”. *TWW* thus constantly *mirrored* reality – but it did, in turn, *inspire* it – Obama’s 2008 campaign and November 5<sup>th</sup> victory speech stand witness to that – and it was prophetic in a number of ways, for instance, by imagining a brokered Democratic Convention, the primaries having failed to hand any of the Democratic contenders a clear victory, a script that almost played out between Hilary Clinton and Barack Obama in June 2008. Barack Obama and Matt Santos<sup>17</sup>, the real and the fictional candidate, both refused to be pigeonholed as the “minority candidate”; both claiming to speak to, and for, an America “beyond race”, beyond “red states and blues states”; and to stand for *hope* against *fear*. The montage compiled by *Slate* magazine’s Torie Blosch shows the incredible mirroring effects<sup>18</sup>.

Ironically, *24*, which has increasingly come to be identified as a propaganda vehicle within the *War On Terror*, was even more prophetic in casting David Palmer as first Black President in 2002, thus preparing the collective subconscious for an African-American president years before the fact. Not only has actor Dennis Haysbert,

<sup>15</sup> Read in particular Brian Stelter’s article in *The New York Times* online, October 30, 2008: “Following the Script: Obama, McCain, and ‘The West Wing’” (last consulted July 2011):

[http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/30/arts/television/30wing.html?\\_r=2&sq=west%20wing&st=cse&oref=slogin&scp=1&pagewanted=print](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/30/arts/television/30wing.html?_r=2&sq=west%20wing&st=cse&oref=slogin&scp=1&pagewanted=print)

And Jonathan Freedland’s February 21 2008 article in *The Guardian*: “From West Wing to the real thing: Scriptwriters modelled TV’s ethnic minority candidate on young Barack Obama” (last consulted July 2011):

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/feb/21/barackobama.uselections2008>

<sup>16</sup> Re/Barack Obama’s Nov 5 victory speech Grant Park, Chicago: “It’s been a long time coming – but tonight, because of what we did on *this* day, in *this* election, at *this* defining moment, change has come to America”. See the full speech on YouTube (last consulted July 2011):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bN5YMz8yuKI>

<sup>17</sup> An irony that escaped the majority of viewers, given Bartlet’s being defined as descending from the Founding Fathers, was that he was in fact an actor of *Latino* origin: Martin Sheen’s real name is Ramon Estevez, and he is one of the ten Estevez siblings, some of whom are Hollywood names in their own right (Joe and Emilio, for instance). Thus, in an ultimate irony, viewers can reread the Matt Santos presidency as the hidden Latino subtext of the Bartlet/Sheen presidency...

<sup>18</sup> (URL last consulted July 2011)

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KgY6qc18hPA&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KgY6qc18hPA&feature=player_embedded)

who played Palmer, made this claim<sup>19</sup>, but so have a number of journalists worldwide<sup>20</sup>. Some fans have used video morphing to make the same point<sup>21</sup>. Actors, viewers, politicians themselves all contributed to blurring the line between fiction and reality in presidential series: Emilio Pacull's fascinating documentary *Mr. President* (2008) reminds us that liberal American politicians made the trip to NBC studios to be photographed alongside Jed Bartlet (a.k.a. Martin Sheen); that Martin Sheen marched against War in Iraq in February 2003 in demonstrations where thousands of ordinary citizens and TV viewers held up signs "What would President Bartlet do?"; and, that, during the real-life 2008 campaign, people would walk up to Dennis Haysbert of 24 and tell him they were voting for him come November. While in the case of Martin Sheen, this blurring was justified and indeed capitalized upon, to some extent, by the creators of the show<sup>22</sup>, in Haysbert's, it points to viewers' confusing fiction and reality. Emilio Pacull's documentary *Mr. President* claims that more viewers tuned in to the fictional debate between Santos and his Republican opponent in 2006 than had tuned in for the Bush-Kerry debate in 2004, and that the vast majority of those who had watched both, felt the fictional debate was better...

Since the 2008 election, the play on blurring the line between the fictional and the real-life black president has produced posters like these two, in a pendulum swing between Shepard Fairey's iconic "Hope" campaign poster and an image of disenchantment:

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<sup>19</sup> See "Dennis Haysbert: I Helped Pave Obama's Way", *The Huffington Post*, July 1, 2008. Also see his interview in the documentary *Mr. President* by Emilio Pacull.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Langston Moore developed this analysis in his article "Did David Palmer Pave the Way For Barack Obama?", *Boston TV Examiner*, May 28, 2009 (last consulted July 2011):

<http://www.examiner.com/x-11484-Boston-TV-Examiner-y2009m5d28-Did-David-Palmer-pave-the-way-for-Barack-Obama>

<sup>21</sup> See this morphing of the two Black presidents, fictional and real (last consulted July 2011):

[http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x6d22e\\_de-david-palmer-a-barack-obama-morp\\_news](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x6d22e_de-david-palmer-a-barack-obama-morp_news)

<sup>22</sup> Sue Collins, "Traversing Authenticities: The West Wing President and Activist Sheen" in *Politicotainment: Television's Take on the Real*, Kristina Riegert (ed), NY, Peter Lang, 2007, 181- 211.





To think that David Palmer had it easy in his own fictional universe, however, would be a serious mistake – for, like all of the presidents in series, he faced not only political opposition, but intrigues, a plot to depose him, and finally died assassinated (when no longer in office, at the beginning of Season 5); a stark reminder of both JFK's and Martin Luther King's fates (an outcome Haysbert regretted, as a glorification of political violence, that brought a spike in viewer ratings). The 1963 assassination of JFK is of course the obvious subtext to another series: *BSG*'s staging Secretary of Education Laura Roslin taking the oath of office aboard the Battlestar after a Cylon attack has wiped out the entire executive of her planet echoes the swearing in of Vice-President Lyndon B. Johnson aboard Air Force One:



### 3. Fiction Outdoing Reality: the 25<sup>th</sup> Amendment as Constant Narrative Ploy

Between 2003 and 2006, all of the series featured vice-presidents (and sometimes, Speakers of the House or Secretaries of Education) ascending to the presidency through catastrophe. There were of course real-life concerns that the series 24 mirrored – that

terrorists might want to assassinate a US president, after it became clear that one of the 9/11 planes had been intended for the White House<sup>23</sup>; the concern that the real president, in the Bush administration, was Richard Cheney and the group of neo-cons who without being elected on their Project for A New American Century, had managed to seize the White House to implement precisely this agenda<sup>24</sup>; but more mundanely, Bush *had* invoked the 25<sup>th</sup> in June 2002 because he was to undergo general anesthesia<sup>25</sup>. Beyond the mirroring of real-life events in 2002, the 25<sup>th</sup> creates dramatic climax, allowing the presidential character to define or redefine himself or herself; it sets intertextual challenges for other screenwriters; and finally, it seems the main way for women to become president in a society that remains sexist<sup>26</sup>.

24 and *TWW* both staged the 25<sup>th</sup> in the last week of April 2003, when the War on Iraq had just been launched – and just days before the president was to proclaim it over, on May the First. In 24 Episode 21 of Season 2, aired April 29, 2003, President Palmer's refusal to go to war against a foreign country seemingly responsible for bringing a nuclear bomb to Los Angeles, his (correct) insistence that a conspiracy is afoot within the White House, and his having tortured his own head of National Security to get him to confess, all lead his Vice-President and his cabinet to question his capacities as a leader. (One can only be mind-boggled at how the screenwriters vindicate torture or the detaining of journalists despite recognizing that both trample the Constitution, thus bolstering the War on Terror, while simultaneously seeming to take a strong antiwar stance – but such apparent ideological contradictions are a trademark of the series). Although, true to the pattern set up in 24 Season 1 (or *Day 1*, as Seasons are known for this series), Jack Bauer races against the clock to untangle the conspiracy and prove the President right, the VP, Prescott, has managed to flip the President's closest adviser, Mike Novick. In an *Et tu Brute* scene, as Palmer understands that Prescott has set up a cabinet meeting to depose him, and that the vote is about to take place – all of this is in videoconferencing, to keep the multiple screen and high-tech aesthetic that defines 24 – Palmer accuses Novick of being

<sup>23</sup> Although the cliffhanger to the first season of *TWW* portrayed just such an attempt, it was by white supremacists, (in keeping with the Oklahoma City bombings and the history of white right-wing terrorism during the Clinton Administration). The English long feature film *Death of a President* (2006) imagined the assassination of G.W. Bush on October 19, 2007 and presented itself like a documentary of the FBI investigation after the fact.

<sup>24</sup> On this issue, see John Nichols' *Dick: The Man Who is President* (2004), and documentaries like William Karel's *The World According to Bush* (2004), Robert Greenwald's *Uncovered* (2004), or Eugene Jarecki's *Why We Fight* (2005).

<sup>25</sup> This was to happen again on July 21, 2007.

<sup>26</sup> Even the most optimistic polls now show that 7% of voters would not vote for a woman candidate (down from 15% in 2006). See this recent 2011 Pew Poll: <http://people-press.org/2011/06/02/section-2-candidate-traits-and-experience/>

on Prescott's side. Novick replies "I'm on your side, David" but insists "you're making a mistake, launch the attack now" – prompting the authoritative response "I'm the President, Mike. You don't call me by my first name." The shot makes us the other addressees of this reminder – not that *we* need to be reminded, since Jack himself always respectfully calls Palmer "Mr. President" or "Sir".

All of episode 2.21 plays on the split screens emphasizing the "window of opportunity" closing for Palmer, as Jack fails to find sufficient proof that someone in the White House is indeed behind the bomb. It also, more anomalously, plays on the multiple, inset screens, as the cabinet and Palmer are connected at a remove – in a visual pun on *removal* – through videoconferencing. Throughout the vote on Palmer's ability to discharge his duties, 24's hallmark split-screen translates political upheaval: the VP dominates the upper half of the frame, visually suggesting that he is "upsetting" the legitimate order, and more traditional vertical split screens emphasize that members of the cabinet are seizing undue power to unseat the one who made them part of the executive in the first place. This feeling of turmoil is reinforced, too, by nauseating handheld camera movements and accelerated zooming in and out that create blurred images, as well as by the sheer number of inset screens that convey an image of fragmentation, rather than unity. Split screens and split votes echo split loyalties – the Secretary who casts the decisive vote professes utter respect for the President even as he deposes him. As the roll call of Secretaries proceeds, and each votes "yes" or "no", eerie sound effects highlight suspense, and a clash of cymbals punctuates each vote; the total being tallied on a computer screen in "real time". This set-up, whereby the computer screen, the inset screen and ours all reflect each other, emphasizes urgency, but paradoxically makes the process "unreal", and game-like; especially since, in keeping with its use of commercial breaks as narrative ellipsis, 24 cuts to when most of the votes have been tallied, in favor of Palmer's being ousted. When Mike Novick closes his computer in a *game over!* image and we see Prescott at a remove, standing before the Eagle, we share Palmer's vision that this is a "coup," even if the secret service agent protects the series' staging of the 25<sup>th</sup>, in his cue "I'm no lawyer, sir, but it seems to me the Constitution's been followed." In reality, like the villains Jack pursues, the Constitution has been "followed" but lost track of – in real life, the Congress must be notified before, not after, deposing the president.

*TWW* proved more accurate, although quite as unrealistic, when, in the cliffhanger to season 4, aired just 5 days before the episode of 24, Jed Bartlet's daughter Zoe was kidnapped by Islamic terrorists and Bartlet chose to invoke the 25<sup>th</sup> for fear of giving in to their demands out of fatherly love. Not only did this reintroduce an element of "classic" soap, (Bartlet could not be father to his daughter

and to country both), but in a more complex twist on the 25<sup>th</sup>, Bartlet's Vice-President having resigned due a few weeks before, and no replacement having been named, the Speaker of the House, a Republican, was next in line. In typical *TWW* patriotic lyricism, the narrative set-up is the opposite of *24*'s: Jed Bartlet reads section 3 of the 25<sup>th</sup> amendment from the Constitution to his Cabinet; as he asks for a unanimous vote to support his decision, in a continuous voice-over, we crosscut to shots of anonymous feet marching to the roll of drums (the Republican Speaker and his bodyguards, arriving at the White House) back to the quiet visual emphasis on emblems of presidential *grandeur*. A bust of Lincoln (left), and a portrait of Washington (center) are cast as so many historic echoes and *remediations* of what it means to be one of the *great* presidents, placing the fictional Bartlet within this pantheon of historical figures – and through this *mise en abyme* of sculpture and painting, the series simultaneously makes its own claim to being a contemporary (political) art form, and not merely entertainment.





As Bartlet calls out each secretary's title, the roll call of the "ayes" – as opposed to *24*'s protocol-less "yes" and "no" – is cast to coincide with the Republican Speaker's arrival. Having reached dramatic climax, the screenwriters break the tension of the moment, both intra and extra-diegetically, by having the Speaker tell the staff (and the viewers): "Relax everybody. Breathe regular", in a form of wry comic relief, even as the political suspense remains: how will this "acting president" *act*? Have the Democrats in the executive just committed collective political suicide?

Because the 25<sup>th</sup> amendment is so often connected to narrative anxiety and institutional chaos, it seems all the more remarkable that, with the exception of the series *24*, it is the only way for a woman to reach the highest political office...

#### **4. The 25<sup>th</sup> amendment and women presidents**

Like Laura Roslin, an ex-teacher turned Secretary of Education who becomes President in *Battlestar Galactica* only because the entire executive of her planet has been wiped out, Mackenzie ("Mac") Allen becomes president only because the President dies – and she does so against his dying wishes. The deathbed scene in which he emphasizes that she was "never meant to be president" and that she does not share his political views is followed by an immediate flashback to how Mac found herself on the ticket in the first place. The flashing lights of her motorcade allow a transition into the memory flash, which starts in black and white to show it is now part of the "archives" of memory –

and symbolically, of History<sup>27</sup>. The scene is intensely gendered, and follows the codes of a marriage proposal, as candidate Bridges<sup>28</sup> shows up at the University of Richmond where Mac is Chancellor: Mac is all in white, Bridges comes “hat in hand,” asking her to be his “running mate”. The deal he is about to put on the table (the framing of the table-top during the first part of the scene emphasizes this metaphorically) is introduced by praising her presidential qualities: her *leadership* as University Chancellor, her *expertise* on the Middle East, and her performance on the Shanghai ranking index, as a recruiter of future Nobel Prize Winners<sup>29</sup>.... While she picks at her feminine low-calorie lunch, he bites into a hamburger, showing the “hands-on”, macho cowboy values associated with the presidency during the *Debya*<sup>30</sup> years; perhaps also an allusion to his symbolically wolfing down “Mac” (as in “Big Mac”). The paternalism of his calling her “champ” and “kiddo”, the quip about his “raw need for power opening a door for a woman” all highlight the connection between gallantry as a mask for men’s domination, and his conviction that her becoming “the first woman Vice-President” would be historic change enough. His sarcasm about the value of experience, when Mac objects she only had one term in Congress, and his listing Watergate, Irangate and WMD-gate – a direct allusion to George W. Bush, the sitting president – as disastrous examples of where “experience got us”, seems spoken directly by the screenwriters to their left-wing viewers, in a break from verisimilitude, no matter how “plainspoken” this GOP contender is meant to be<sup>31</sup>. Although Mac sees his real motive and points it out – he needs her to close the gender gap in votes – she does not realize that the door to actual power is being slammed shut in her face – the sound we hear as the flashback ends as Mac is literally called back to reality by the door of her car slamming shut.

Although at this point, Mac is prepared to step down, she changes her mind when Speaker Templeton overplays his hand. As he

<sup>27</sup> *TWW*’s title credits feature a similar montage of black and white close-ups of the main characters’ faces, against the backdrop of the White House and the US flag, in color turning to black and white, as if these were historic “newsreels” rather than fiction.

<sup>28</sup> It seems that Rod Lurie was reworking some of the material of his long-feature drama *The Contender* (2000) featuring a Vice-Presidential contender played by Joan Allen caught in a sex scandal but defended by the President played by Jeff Bridges. In a wink to his previous work, Lurie makes “Allen” Mac’s surname and similarly alludes to Jeff Bridges’s embodiment of the president, by calling *CC*’s president Theodore Bridges.

<sup>29</sup> This is probably a cross-series joke too: Mac may not have won a Nobel Prize like Jed Bartlet, but she picks staff who do...

<sup>30</sup> “Debya” is the Texan reading of the “W” in George W. Bush, and was thus shorthand for the 43<sup>rd</sup> president.

<sup>31</sup> G.O.P. stands for “Grand Old Party” and refers to the Republican Party—its symbol is the elephant, while Democrats are represented by a donkey. It seems out of character for a Republican candidate to quote only Republican political scandals, from Watergate on: “Irangate” refers to the Iran-Contra scandal during the Reagan administration; “WMD” is the acronym for Weapons of Mass Destruction, the rationale proposed by the Bush Administration for launching War on Iraq.

scoffs at “social advances for the sake of social advances”, which Mac sarcastically translates as “a woman in the Oval Office?”, his sexism increasingly comes out in a number of inappropriate replies (counter-shots emphasize Mac’s dismay and disapproval). As the dialogue unfolds, we notice the portraits of Native Americans adorning Mac’s study: they can be read as her vision of America, embracing “origins” beyond the Founding Fathers (in a rejection of white patriarchy). The very explanation Templeton gives, of the “intention” underlying her presence on the ticket (“it was theater”), is reminiscent of conservative readings of the Constitution, emphasizing the *intentions* of the Founding Fathers, rather than contemporary context. When Templeton condescendingly says “*you can see that*”, as he lists her *disqualifications* for the office – “you’re a female; you’re an Independent; you’re a *teacher*” – his speech is obviously meant to also address female viewers extradiegetically, and rile them. The sustained metaphor of “pure theater,” by which Mac is invited to step offstage while the audience still loves her, functions ironically, since the series is merely beginning, and we are eager to watch a female presidency spread its (Eagle) wings<sup>32</sup>. When Templeton’s overconfident crescendo goes from insult (“a whole lot of nothing”) to sexist insult (“silly” is used only for women and children) to the very vocabulary of the “Islamic heads of state” he claims to stand against (“the adulteress”, “a lady who couldn’t keep her legs together”), Mac *literally* stands up to defend women’s rights. The swell of music introduces her setting aside the script wherein she was to resign, as she folds the letter of resignation, and informs “Nate” (deliberately using the diminutive form) that she will take the oath of office<sup>33</sup>.

Perhaps in an effort to outdo *TWW*’s screenwriters’ finale to Season 4 – what would happen if the president were incapacitated and there were no VP? – *CC* became *the* series that invoked the 25<sup>th</sup> *twice* in its sole season, in the pilot and in Episode 16, *The Elephant in the Room*, which aired on May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2006. In the latter, President Mackenzie Allen, in a gender-bending version of Harrison Ford in the action movie *Air Force One*, fights not terrorists, but a burst appendix, on the presidential plane. Knowing she will have to undergo sedation, she invokes the 25<sup>th</sup>, thinking the Senate Leader will become acting president, but she underestimates her arch-nemesis, Republican Speaker Templeton, and his ambition. The episode puts the emphasis

<sup>32</sup> The Eagle is quite prominent in images of Mac in the Oval Office, and most obviously in the title credits.

<sup>33</sup> When this pilot episode was aired in September 2005, no one realized how ironic it would seem from 2008, where the odds (estimated at 3 to 1) that McCain would be incapacitated during the course of his first term, were he to win the election, and that Sarah Palin, whose presence on the Republican ticket was indeed a political stunt, might actually become president, prompted a number of voters, Independent and Republican, to vote Obama/Biden.



on Templeton placing power and his image before the love of country, as he gets photographers in for the swearing-in photo op, hence one meaning of “the elephant in the room” (the elephant as symbol of the GOP but also of Templeton’s massive ego and determination to take overstep his role as mere “acting president”). Mac, on the other hand, although grievously ill in body, literally puts country first: “how is the country?” she asks her husband and children, pale and make-up-less, just before going under the scalpel:



If the potentially catastrophic nature of the 25th is emphasized here, when the Acting President is not truly presidential material, this seems to serve to highlight just how right Mac was to become president by availing herself of the 25<sup>th</sup> in the first episode<sup>34</sup>.

The only series to have imagined a woman being *elected* to the presidency is *24*. The TV film *Redemption* (broadcast Nov 23, 2008) is doubly a “day of *transition*”: between Seasons 6 and 7 of *24* and between outgoing male president and incoming female president. We see the conflict between idealism and cynicism being played out here too, along gender lines. When Alison Taylor speaks her will to intervene in a fictional African country, the outgoing president comments “I appreciate your idealism,” prompting the response “I can’t say the same for your cynicism” – a conflict played out in the Oval Office and in front of the American flag, showing how the identity of the nation itself is thus determined by presidents’ values.

<sup>34</sup> See: “Feminist Fantasy: Geena Davis in the Oval Office”, Alessandra Stanley, *The New York Times*, September 11, 2005; (last consulted July 2011)  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/11/arts/television/11stan.html>



Although the election itself has taken place in the ellipsis since the end of Season 6, the result is too remarkable to go without comment: as Taylor arrives for her Inauguration ceremony, her chief of staff marks the moment with the words “it’s been a long journey, Madame President”, in an eerie echo of Barack Obama’s “it’s been a long time coming” in his Nov 5, 2008 victory speech.



The series protects itself from disbelief by having Taylor answer her daughter-in-law’s “Madame President” with the comment “it doesn’t seem quite real”; whereupon her son answers, “it will, soon, you’ll see”:



The metafilmic dimension of the “real” and “unreal” underlies all of these fictions. The emphasis put, in the case of women presidents, on their having been chosen for their image and their presence on a ticket being a “gimmick” or a “publicity stunt” is only a negative spin on what the series all show us, all along: that politics are a form of show, of theater, and that series about the White House simply reveal politics for what they are. The stage, and the pan shot showing the crowds at Taylor’s inauguration highlight the “spectacle” that an inauguration

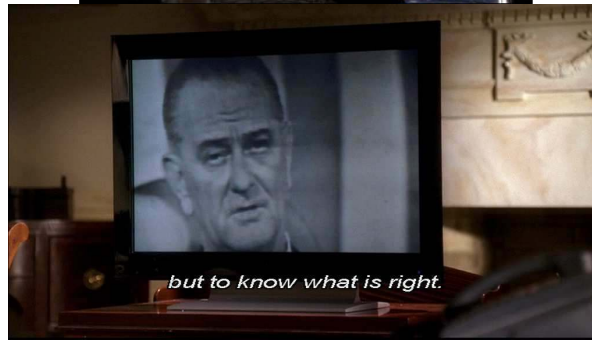
always is – so that the “theatrical” reality and unreality of such events cuts both ways.



Though overall, these series operate in antithetical ways, in a “realist” but sometimes, too insider-targeted portrayal of politics (*TWW*), in an undermining of trust in political institutions (24), or in

the celebration of leaders to come (*CC*), in the episodes featuring the 25<sup>th</sup>, they do appear quite similar in one respect. Even as idealized presidents are portrayed as vulnerable, and even as they are momentarily removed from the presidential stage, their authority is never undermined. Despite an “ensemble” cast, these series *do* cast the president as leader, even when not in the “lead role” (even if the more naïve *CC* insists on that dual reality in its title). A comparison of the opening credits in fact shows similarities between *CC* and *TWW*, with the emphasis on the symbols of presidential power (the White House, the flag, the red, white and blue); both also show the main character’s back to the camera, emphasizing that they must shoulder the responsibilities of their office and do not seek power for themselves (images). While both *TWW* and *CC* introduce some irreverent humor, *CC* imagining the official title for a woman president’s husband – FGOTUS, for “First Gentleman of the United States”, instead of the usual FLOTUS, for “first lady” – and although it makes the cute joke “POTUS interruptus” when Mac and her husband are denied their marital intimacy by one of their children’s stepping into their bedroom – both series, like presidential biopics or films on fictitious presidents, reinforce the “authority” of the presidency by placing their fictitious characters in line with famous presidents. Typical *topoi* include the president standing before a portrait of one of the most celebrated presidents (Lincoln or JFK), and later, picking the artist for their own official portrait; reviewing their predecessors’ State of the Union speeches before delivering their own; taking command in the Situation Room; and so forth. In *CC*, when Mac is preparing for her first State of the Union Speech and (unsurprisingly, for a liberal president) views JFK’s, but also Lyndon Johnson’s:





... and even Jimmy Carter's and Ronald Reagan's, in a rapid montage, one is given a lesson both in political representation – a few snippets as to what the president's role is, and what his or her role versus Congress may be ("not rivals for power" as JFK puts it). In a more theatrical metaphor, it reminds us that the president must stand before Congress and the nation (via television), once a year, and how this aspect of his or her role must be learned, acted, rehearsed. It reminds us that if Mac is a president/viewer, in the Oval Office, of these speeches, the *mise en abyme* implied by our situation of viewers guarantees us a shot at being president ourselves; and implies, too, that TV, watching, "screening" presidents, as in putting them under scrutiny, rather than setting up screens to hide them, is a form of democracy that the series itself enforces.

Each of these fictional presidents does appear as a counter-text to G.W. Bush; but how far can series go in promoting "unlikely" representations of presidential power? If Jed Bartlet's multiple sclerosis might seem a "counter-image" (is physical handicap not antithetical to power?), his never being portrayed in a wheelchair complicates this message (bringing to mind similar issues in representations of Franklin D. Roosevelt, the president who had had polio). Similarly, much can be said about the gender-bending women presidents: Mackenzie Allen's doubly masculine name balances her

glamorous femininity, for instance. But gender is portrayed as central<sup>35</sup> to *CC*: its last episode, in June 2006, when it was already known there would not be a Season 2<sup>36</sup>, stages Mac reviving the Equal Rights Amendment, which in real life, was dropped in 1982 after falling short of the 38 states needed to ratify it. Creator Rod Lurie and lead actress Geena Davis chose to go out with a bang, rather than following the Matt Santos pattern of “not being the minority candidate.” This last episode, relevantly entitled “Unfinished Business”<sup>37</sup> in a political and metafilmic pun, also mirrors Geena Davis’s real-life commitment to promoting strong roles for women, through the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media – roles which are still marginal on TV<sup>38</sup>. In *CC* it meant heroics redefined as picking a black VP, not firing a gay and HIV-positive adviser, and defending all minorities. Unfairly, where a *soap* subplot involving the president’s children always tends to humanize a male president primarily defined by leadership (whether Palmer or Bartlet), the same soap elements “re-feminize” female presidents in ways that undermines their authority. It is true that *CC*, unlike *TWW*, did not have also a team of ex-Clinton speechwriters writing for it; and that it pushed the “family” soap of the presidency too far by having Mac’s mother as live-in-parent at the White House and putting too much emphasis on domestic issues in ways that seemed trite to viewers of, say, *Desperate Housewives*...

In *BSG*, a woman president meant displacing the political conversation from “military heroics” to the ethical questioning of issues of power and resistance, authority and rebellion, within an existential redefining of “us” and “them”, human and Cylon, with an ethnically diverse and somewhat gender-bending<sup>39</sup> cast. *BSG*’s ideology was

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<sup>35</sup> Gender of course affects every aspect of portrayal – when Mac wakes up nauseous in Episode 16, we see the screenwriters playing with the idea of a pregnant president – that was the other reason for the title “The Elephant in the Room”, since her mother asks “are you sure you’re not...?” without speaking the actual word.

<sup>36</sup> Fans immediately understood this when ABC announced that it was going to “shelve” the next episodes after episode 12, aired on January 24, 2006. Broadcasting of Episode 13, “State of the Unions” – which would of course have been immensely topical if broadcast some ten days after Bush’s own State of the Union speech, was in fact pushed back to April 13, 2006, completely breaking the “counter-discursive” effect of the fictional Presidency.

<sup>37</sup> While *TWW* did stage men’s resistance to women’s ascent to power, and deliberately paired macho White House staffers with militant feminists, or offset the mainly male staff with a strong figure like C.J. (Claudia Jean) Cregg, as women writers became more prominent in the last seasons of the series, C.J. rose to become Chief of Staff, and Josh’s long-suffering assistant Donna became his rival.

<sup>38</sup> <http://abcnews.go.com/Video/playerIndex?id=4210205&affil=wftv>

<sup>39</sup> The form this gender-bending takes, however, has raised controversy, particularly concerning the depiction of gay and lesbian characters (see Matthew Jones 2010 and Roz 2010). The Starbuck-Apollo couple, however, can be seen as gender-bending the way the Neo-Trinity couple is in *The Matrix* (1999): with an inversion of male and female “dominance.” Similarly, the love story between Roslin and Adama (the military commander who initially mocks her for being a “schoolteacher” can be seen as the victory of gender equality, as well as an allegory of the military and the political “commanders” having to

infinitely more complex (and thus, more realistic) than *CC*'s, showing the inherent contradictions to any extreme political situation. It thus portrayed a liberal woman president's about-face on women's right to choose in the name of collective survival; her trying to force another woman to abort (again, in the name of the human species); and her acceptance of election-rigging, torture and/or political assassination, in her fight to retain her authority, and fight the Cylon enemy.

### 5. The Re-viewing or Later Viewing Warp

When the pilots of *Battlestar Galactica* (2004) and *CC* (2005) aired, no one realized how a woman VP rising to the presidency through the 25<sup>th</sup> amendment might seem less progressive in 2008 – and that both series, used as a counter-text to Bush's reelection in 2004, might actually become *cautionary tales* as we move towards 2012:



Beyond the *retrospective* warp, a *groundhog day* warp emerged too. As in the summer of 2010 I viewed the first season of *TWW* all over again, it seemed more “real” than when I’d first seen it in 2002. This

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“merge”, announcing the US Constitution that makes the President Chief Executive *and* Commander-in-Chief.



time, it *was* the year of the decennial census; all that was said within the dialogue was being echoed in real life (how the census itself creates federal jobs for nine months, what its uses are, etc); more uncannily, like Jed Bartlet – *TWW* starts *in medias res*, after Bartlet's first 18 months of office – President Obama was about to face his first midterm elections since taking office and the Republicans *were* ahead in the polls; in real life and in fiction, *Don't Ask Don't Tell*<sup>40</sup> was at the heart of a presidential dilemma; the president *had* just chosen the first Latino... better, *Latina*, Supreme Court nominee... and in both reality and fiction, *health care reform* and a single term presidency were making headlines. Just weeks ago, while Republicans were refusing to vote the budget, I was experiencing *déjà vu* as I watched Season 5 Episode 8, "Shutdown", which originally referred to the federal shutdown of 1995, seemed now to herald our immediate *future* instead....

How *could* such *time-has-run-full-circle* viewing of *TWW* be possible? Is our contemporary History something of a perpetually rewound *Groundhog Day*? In a pessimistic analysis, does this mean that *TWW* was right to make walking around in circles (as part of its "walk and talk" technique) its dominant visual image? This was more than the eternal return of scripted events within the institution – from campaign stumping to inauguration ceremony, through Thanksgiving episodes, or the State of the Union speech. Had I become so "inside the beltway" by subscribing to the *Washington Post's* "Who Runs Government" columns that I was actually seeing parallels between Jed Bartlet and Barack Obama? Was it all in my head? No... it was actually *worse*! Rahm Emanuel, who had inspired *deputy Chief of Staff* Josh in *TWW* had become the *real* Chief of Staff in the 2009 White House – until he resigned in the summer of 2010 to become mayor of Chicago, in a *The Wire*-like twist...

If on the one hand, *TWW* seemed just as actual as ten years before, on the other, as a viewer, it was impossible not to see its casting of women and of minorities in systematically ancillary roles (spouse, personal secretary/spiritual mother like Mrs Landingham or personal aide like Charlie) as a throwback to pre-2001 – no longer was it possible to see the "lead man" in color-blind or gender-neutral terms. Beyond, however, was the 9/11 warp, which affected all presidential series in different ways.

## 6. The Hidden Subtext of 9/11

*TWW*, 24 and Commander-in-Chief, all keep 9/11 in their subtext. In the case of *TWW*, this was a deliberate ideological choice, an episode

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<sup>40</sup> A law negotiated as a compromise under Bill Clinton and allowing gay and lesbians to serve in the military as long as they hid their sexual orientation.

having been devoted, outside the series' diegesis, to the catastrophic event. Although *TWW* thus shut out any direct representation of the war in Iraq, it found a subterfuge, with the invention of Kumar as enemy nation; as Joseph Belletante argues, the *zeitgeist* of the series changed with Season 4; suddenly, the virtuous president was authorizing covert assassinations, and viewers came to see Barlet in the Situation Room almost as often as in the Oval Office (see Parry-Gilles, 141-150 on *TWW*'s "militarized nationalism"). Although Fox's *24*, in many ways a propaganda machine for the War on Terror, reflects the post-Patriot Act USA and the systematic upholding of national security above civil liberties associated with the Bush administration<sup>41</sup>, President David Palmer ironically refuses to declare war, in an episode aired the month before Bush declared war on Iraq in 2003. *24* does repeatedly stage the trauma of 9/11, in a form of "virtual trauma" as defined by Marc Redfield (Redfield, 2009, 13-48) – trauma mediated by spectacular images seen on TV as opposed to lived in the flesh, for the vast majority, and trauma that haunts because the very repetition of the images of the attacks suggests the iterability of the event itself. By imagining nuclear bombs that do detonate in Los Angeles, biological attacks that do spread within the city, a president imposing martial law, and so forth, *24*, from its Season 3 onwards, indeed "reiterates" 9/11, as did disaster films such as *The Sum of All Fears* (2002). But the presidential series that made both terrorism and the War on Terror central to their storylines and unfolding characterization were those most removed from "realist" conventions: science-fiction series. Sustained allegories of "Others" to be viewed as the enemy saturate post-9/11 series like *Lost*, *Heroes*, or *BSG*; because the events of 9/11 were an irruption of the *real*, in the Lacanian sense of the term, perhaps it was foreseeable that series in which nothing could be called "unthinkable" would best stage the paradoxes of war *v* democracy, us *v* them, security *v* civil liberties, occupation or martial law *v* armed resistance. Because *BSG* so aptly captured the *zeitgeist* of the War on Terror by displacing the presidency in time and space, as Jennifer Stoy (2010) and Steven Rawle (2010) have pointed out, the more "realistic" series (*TWW*) lost some of their pertinence, in the comparison. This aspect added a new level of warping to the time-space conundrum that lies at the heart of the series (are the voyagers of the Battlestar future generations, or our ancestors?): after having watched *BSG*, *24*, or *Heroes*, *TWW* was somehow unreal. Where was, if

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<sup>41</sup> I fully agree with Slavoj Žižek and Christian Salmon on this point; see Monica Michlin, "Narrative and Ideological Entrapment in *24*: Plotting, Framing, and the Ambivalent Viewer", in Sarah Hatchuel et Monica Michlin (eds) *Les pièges des nouvelles séries télévisées américaines: mécanismes narratifs et idéologiques*, GRAAT online # 6, December 2009  
<http://www.graat.fr/backissuepiegesseriectv.htm>



not the outer, the *inner* darkness? Like Neo after he has taken the red pill in *The Matrix*, the Oval Office in this idealized form seemed staged, stagy, constructed – reality seemed that of our worst nightmares.

Post-9/11 series have presidents that authorize torture – this is true even of idealists Laura Roslin and David Palmer, and later, of Alison Taylor; they stage presidents caught lying (Logan), taking orders from top corporations – any resemblance with Richard Nixon or Richard Cheney is of course, *coincidental*. Beyond the staging of the abuse of power, *BSG* in philosophical terms, and *Heroes* in a remediation of *comics*, grapple with the central issue of *us and them*, *self and other*, in terms of the *other within ourselves*: they rethink “sleeper cell” terrorism in terms of the very cells that make our identities (what is a Cylon? What is a mutant human being?) and make us see our “warped” post-9/11 worldview of “others”, in actual, diegetic, time warps, in a sustained cautionary allegory.

### 7. Time Warp

At the start of *Heroes*, we have a first glimpse of the near future (a month ahead) if Hiro, the Japanese time-traveler and geek/samurai does not prevent the destruction of Manhattan by a (white) terrorist:



The image is an obvious replay of 9/11, much like the pilot scene of the short-lived series *Flashforward* which aired late September 2009.



In the countdown to the end of Season 1, we suddenly make a five-year leap; in Episode 1.20, “Five Years Gone” we see that in this version of the future, the bomb *had* gone off five years earlier:





In this dark future, a main character who was campaigning to be Senator has become President and is fighting a war on terror; at his service, another character, good cop Matt Parker, has turned into a bad one. In this episode, in a conversation with the geneticist who has been tracking people with special abilities – the terrorist who blew up the city was one of them – the president calls for the *extermination* of *all* those who have supernatural powers. The irony is that he is one of those “others”, having the ability to fly. In 2004, the actual dialogue – “rip it out of him”, “if you can’t do it I’ll find others who can”, “one solution is the extermination of one species for the survival of another”, “should I march you off to the gas chamber as well?” – could only call to mind both Nazi Germany and contemporary America as reflected by Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo and other scandals connected to rendition and secret imprisonment. The fact that this warped presidency is seen in a diegetic time-warp but in the “normal” setting of the Oval Office, and with what seems to be a Ground Zero tattered American Flag in the painting hanging on the wall behind the president reinforces the political allegory.



Perhaps what most riveted most viewers, though, was the subtext of the dialogue (“we let a man set off a bomb 5 years ago”) which echoed conspiracy theories about what the Bush administration knew before 9/11 and the possible allowing of a terrorist act to justify the subsequent War on Terror.

Post-911 series suggest, in fact, that everything is possible, either in the name of *realpolitik* – and sometimes, in fact, it is hard to distinguish between “fiction, facts, and the real”, to quote the title of this conference. When the White House announced in the first week of May 2011 that Osama Bin Laden had been killed and his body disposed of at sea, the sole photos the world saw of the event were these two:



On Wednesday May 4, a *Washington Post* column headline summed it up thus: “Bin Laden Killing Poses Narrative Challenge For the White House – Just What Did Happen?” The article (which has, unfortunately, been removed from the Washington Post website, but can be found at other links such as the one given here<sup>42</sup>) then used the image of “presidential stagecraft” to speak of these photographs “portraying the president and his national security team watching intently at an unseen screen as the raid unfolded 7,000 miles away”. Although one would hate to be associated with the paranoid right-wing *Birthers* of 2011, one can only wonder: how could this *mise en abyme* of TV viewing without the images *not* prompt questions? How could one not think, too, that Jack Bauer had just been sent on that mission to Pakistan? Where does the spillover of fiction into reality stop? It doesn’t, say the satirists, in this “Jack warns President Obama” spoof: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rmm2RfN5brk>

This sums it all up, perhaps: when it comes to series, whether in soap, in thriller, or in realist mode, the line between fiction and reality necessarily blurs. On the one hand, series present us with representations of presidents with the avowed intent of prompting us to think about politics, policy, war on terror, war, and the value or the dangers of compromise or of *realpolitik*. Even as they praise idealistic leaders, or denounce the abuse of power, however, these series, because they bring the president into our living rooms weekly, over years on end, reinforce the institution and its legitimacy. Though this may serve progressive purposes, preparing the collective subconscious for a black, a Latino, or a woman president, it also reinforces the “lead man” or “lead woman” aspect, both politically and narratively. Not only do symbols of power from the Oval Office to the Situation Room, from the Eagle to the presidential Seal, saturate these televisual narratives, but there is often an insistence on protocol and authority, even in *TWW* – “you serve at the president’s pleasure”; “when the president of

<sup>42</sup> (consulted July 2011)

<http://www.navytimes.com/news/2011/05/ap-raid-poses-narrative-challenge-for-white-house-050411/>

the United States enters a room, no one remains seated” – that reminds us that there is nothing “democratic” about the presidency ... Except for this one, essential, fact: that *we the viewers* are not trapped within the story, and that we have both the pleasure and power of *oversight* often denied us in real life. More often than journalism, political fiction points to our role as citizens: as Martin Sheen wrote in a March 2003 open letter to the L.A. Times: “I am not the President. Instead, I hold an even higher office, that of citizen of the United States”<sup>43</sup>.

These presidential representations were variously intended as thinly disguised rewritings of the *recent past*; as a prophecy of what was yet to come, or as depictions of parallel realities very much like our own – but do they not risk seeing their meaning warped by later viewing? On one level, then, presidential series thus seem caught in the time warp of predicting the future, while mirroring our present, and our past, in a performance of *Battlestar*’s metatextual axiom – “everything has happened before and will happen again.” On another, this creates a “realist” time warp, in which political rituals like the State of the Union Address or elections are repeated, but where specific events, that one might have thought unique, repeat themselves too. The *groundhog day* aspect of seeing *TWW* again from the vantage point of 2011 is also reinforced by the now dated aesthetics of the first three seasons, with their episodic structure and light music even at the close of a dramatic episode. Ironically, the “walk and talk” aesthetic that seemed so vibrant then seems clichéd now that we have gotten used to split screens and the nervous use of the handheld camera in *24*. Even if *TWW* remains unique in its depiction of intelligent, articulate, political debate in the service of idealistic values, its optimism, and its refusal to put the War on Terror at the center of its narrative make it slightly surreal. In a way, it is as if *TWW* and not *BSG* were taking place on another planet. Even if *TWW* and *CC* create a war with fictitious countries (much as *Redemption*, between Seasons 6 and 7 of *24*) the absence of the darkness and paranoia that define *24*, *Heroes*, and *BSG*, makes them either throwbacks to a more “innocent” era, or a harbinger

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<sup>43</sup> “The star of *The West Wing* and a winner of a Golden Globe award for his role on that show, where he plays U.S. President Josiah Bartlet, Sheen has used his fame to call attention to many causes. Recently, he was one of the most visible celebrities against the U.S. war against Iraq. ‘I am not the President. Instead, I hold an even higher office, that of citizen of the United States,’ Sheen wrote in *The Los Angeles Times* on March 17. ‘War at this time and in this place is unwelcome, unwise, and simply wrong.’ Sheen says that NBC executives have told him they’re ‘very uncomfortable’ with his activism, although NBC denies this.” *The Progressive*, Interview with Martin Sheen, July 2003. [http://www.progressive.org/mag\\_intvsheen](http://www.progressive.org/mag_intvsheen) last consulted July 2011.



of days to come. The fact that presidential series, with the exception of *CC*, are hard on women presidents, and tend to sacrifice them – the last season of *24* stages the return of manipulative former president Logan who manages to “warp” Alison Taylor’s idealism – can be seen as a fundamental distrust in those who hold the highest executive office. On a subconscious level, is it possible that series far removed in time and space like *BSG* perhaps address our sense of the *real* more fully, by playing on a feeling of entrapment within an era of endless war, rising paranoia and hatred towards vilified “others”? But *BSG* is also the series that most questions political and philosophical choices, and in the end, its message is that it depends less on the president, be she Laura Roslin, than on each and every one of us. I will thus end on an image of JFK speaking out to his real audience of January 1962, to the fictional President Mackenzie Allen, and to each and every one of *CC*’s viewers, as an emblematic image of what these series ultimately have to say, bearing in mind that despite the “acting” involved, on multiple levels, by those who utter these words, the future of a democracy does depend on its citizens:

