

Political Television and Perceptions of American Politics

Complex Negotiation of National Identity in *The Americans*

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Ambiguity is usually considered a value in contemporary literary and film criticism, and often it is a vital component of TV shows engaging in narrative complexity. Whether we look at anti-heroes like Dexter Morgan, Don Draper, or Walter White or sympathy-creating antagonists like Stringer Bell, Nicolas Brody, or Petyr Baelish, moral ambiguity tends to be read as aesthetic complexity and is thus valued. Within political TV shows such moral ambiguity usually comes with an abuse of power and corruption, often for selfish reasons but rarely does it cause Americans to turn against their country. Patriotism remains a value that holds strong across genres. There may be corruption within the government (such as in *House of Cards* or *Scandal*), or a subversive force taking over government structures only to be overcome by our brave hero, but rarely do we see the very basic American ideology questioned, what Lauren Berlant has called the “national fantasy.” The cultural imaginary of individuality and equality, of liberty, and justice that pervades popular culture may get challenged and battered but it is rarely questioned in its entirety. US television and film tends to tell us again and again that maybe the system is flawed, but the core values of our national identity remain the only option.

Such a firm support of American ideology is all the more fascinating when considering that US politics has long lost whatever innocence it might have purported to have. It is difficult to ignore that we live in a world where a president can convince Congress to enter a decade long war over nonexistent weapons of mass destruction, the CIA uses drone strikes to kill purported US enemies, and the government monitors its citizens’ conversations. But maybe it is because of the corrupt and opportunistic leadership that US media cherishes the values the US Constitution promises. Arguably it is because US capitalist extortion all but created a worldwide economic disaster that writers attempt to distinguish the underlying values from its corruptions, never acknowledging that the values themselves might be at its center.

If anything, one would expect *The Americans* and its return to the days of the Cold War to clarify sides and establish good and evil. And yet the show succeeds at moral ambiguity in a way most contemporary political shows do not. They may question the tools when people in power do bad things, and they may question the motivations, when greed and selfish lusts and desires drive politicians to become corrupt. They never question the basis of American patriotism, however. *Homeland*, which may come closest to attempting to disturb the us versus them dichotomy ultimately presents Brody’s conversion and support of Abu Nazir as a Stockholm syndrome from which he gets cured. Likewise, *Sleeper Cell*—though clearly sympathetic to the sleeper agents—ultimately takes clear sides with Darwyn al-Sayed as the unambiguous protagonist and point of view character.

In contrast, Philip and Elizabeth Bennings question the idea of Americanness through their very existence. The show never allows us to root easily with or against our nation, instead undermining any emotional connection as well as any nationalist feelings. This moral complexity and shifting expected viewer allegiances is most obviously played out in their similarities to Stan Beeman, their friendly neighbor and political antagonist. Beeman, who’s been undercover himself recently, parallels the political virtues and psychological dangers of

undercover work. By flipping back and forth between the two families, viewers are asked to identify with both, neither minimizing nor simplifying either political belief system. The comforts of US life are acknowledged by all the Soviets on the show, but they are not portrayed as the most important or only value.

Where shows such as *Battlestar Galactica* or *Games of Thrones* employ science fiction or fantasy to shift setting in order to expose the ambiguity and corruptness of any political process and any sense of identity, *The Americans* looks toward the seemingly simpler times of the Cold War to showcase all the more just how naïve most representations of US politics really are within American media. And yet it might be the filter of history—even if it is only three decades—that allows the show to question the values of American ideology. After all, we know that the Soviet Union was defeated and that capitalism beat communism. When the challenges to the center stones of capitalism and liberty come from a side that already self-defeated, it may be easier to discuss than if we actually had to confront the value of Abu Nazir's plight or any of the random terrorists who tend to be non-white non-English, non-speaking cannon fodder in the network or cable's latest spy thrillers.

Works Cited:

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