

SERIAL SURVEILLANCE: NARRATIVE, TELEVISION, AND THE END OF THE WORLD

Catherine Zimmer

Everyone is talking about TV. It is a commonplace suggestion now that popular Hollywood cinema has become the domain of spectacular digital effects, while narrative experimentation and emotional immersion have moved over to serial form in the expansive marketplace of postnetwork television.¹ While there is ample reason to endorse such an assessment, the significant overlap of and interplay between spectacle and narration in popular film and television are commonalities that allow differences to be articulated with greater consequence. Such interplay is easily found in the myriad forms of surveillance that define contemporary times—from Facebook to border control, from Alexa and Google Maps to home security and reality TV.

Much recent research and discussion centers on the technological and ideological intersections of cinema and surveillance, but surveillance tropes and aesthetics in cinema have become formally and logically inseparable from those of television. Surveillance cinema is frequently defined by the incorporation of video/televsual technologies, while television narratives often employ surveillance in the aesthetic and thematic forms of film, thus providing further evidence of the inextricability of cinematic and televsual constructions of surveillance. Yet this inextricability also demands a consideration of divergences: as earlier critical analyses have registered, surveillance not only defines contemporary times but indeed serves to structure time at narrative, technological, and ideological levels.²

These narrative temporalities are crucial to understanding how surveillance and cinema have become increasingly co-defining in recent years, alongside the nonlinear storytelling and other explicitly temporal excursions that are now exemplary of the narrative maneuvers associated with contemporary seriality. Even when television narratives use tropes of surveillance in ways that seem to vary little from

their cinematic versions, serial storytelling by definition presents a different register of narrative time, and thus different functions of surveillance within it.

The systems of surveillant time in serial narration are structural, but also function affectively as part of the broad landscape of despair surrounding television's new "golden era."³ Surveillance is more than a thematic concern: in shows such as *24* (FOX, 2001–10, 2016), *Person of Interest* (CBS, 2011–16), and *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011–), surveillance is a fundamental characteristic of the narration. Its narrative power has intensified as the television serial has become the centerpiece of contemporary storytelling. Increasingly complex, bleak, epic shows like *Westworld* (HBO, 2016–) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (Hulu, 2017–) have become synonymous with "prestige television" and, in their focus on dystopic worlds of totalized surveillance, point to many of the grimmer elements of surveillant narration less evident in cinema.

Similarly, the increasingly bleak postmillennial security state in the United States, through every governing administration of the last twenty years, has consistently been structured around and through surveillance. Predicated on the same temporal logic as surveillant narration, the security state emerges through (and as) seriality. The specificity of the serial form of surveillant narration reveals the temporal logic of surveillance as a form of apocalyptic thinking: narratives of "end times." As surveillance works in the service of increasingly sophisticated forms of serial narration, its deployment is accompanied by a trend toward broad affective devastation: the ostensible masteries of narrative and surveillance intertwine with a rapturous embrace of chaotic violence and profound loss.

"[Mankind]'s self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order."⁴ Walter Benjamin's penultimate comment in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" is increasingly appropriate as a stand-alone description for a broad and varied American culture of consumer capitalism and liberal democracy, while his much-cited conclusion (that communism and fascism respond to

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The ticking clock and split screen of *24*'s real-time aesthetic.

this situation inversely—fascism by aestheticizing politics and communism by politicizing art) seems increasingly immaterial. Communism doesn't appear on the list of options anymore, and the culture of American liberal democracy—the mainstream whiteness that has ignored the constitutive racial biopolitics of the United States—is stupefied by the emergence of its own uniquely repulsive brand of fascism.

One of the most fundamental and oft-noted temporal formations of surveillant narration is the notion of “real time.”⁵ The series *24*, which spanned the first decade of the new millennium (2001–10, with a spinoff/reboot in 2016), in many ways epitomizes the logic of surveillance and “real time.” Not coincidentally, it is also a privileged instance of narrative experimentation in seriality. The twenty-four-episode season of one-hour episodes is intended to present, as well as represent, an action-packed day in the life of American counterterrorist agent Jack Bauer. Time stamps punctuate each episode repeatedly, along with video cameras and monitors, satellite imaging, GPS, drones, and numerous other surveillance technologies functioning to mark the sophistication of the fictional American “CTU” (Counter-Terrorist Unit) and, more importantly, to support a sense of real-time connectivity and contingency within the episodes and the urgency of Bauer's missions.

24's use of surveillance technologies is not specific to the show's real-time conceit but rather is representative of the now commonplace incorporation of satellites, GPS, mobile phones, closed-circuit television, and so on into increasingly elaborate chase scenes in action thrillers both in film and on television. Such scenes use surveillant mechanisms to reify the crosscutting techniques that have defined chase scenes since the beginning of narrative cinema. With multiple surveillance and tracking tools functioning as literal mediations between the chaser and the chased, crosscutting no longer functions on its own as the cinematic language of simultaneity, established by the principles of editing as the structure of the “meanwhile.” Such scenes have been recognizable since *Enemy of the State* (Tony Scott, 1998), standardized with *The Bourne Ultimatum* (Paul Greengrass, 2007) and the rest of the *Bourne* franchise, and are now almost unavoidable in any contemporary chase scene. The incorporation of a surveillance operation center and its multiple technological arms into a parallel action sequence connecting disparate people and places in “real time” has restructured the otherwise largely associative principle of parallel editing into a function of surveillant mediation and narration.⁶

These forms of surveillance-mediation define the action sequences of *24*, and have spread into a range of television political action thrillers, from *Alias* (ABC, 2001–6) and *Person*

of *Interest to Homeland*, largely operating in “real time” at the level of scene and spectacle.⁷ Since there is little differentiation in these scenes between feature film and television episode, this type of surveillant narration is rarely affected by the longer narrative arc. *24*, then, is the exception that proves the rule. While each episode of *24* supposedly offers an hour of the twenty-four-episode season in “real time,” these hours incorporate multiple ellipses in which the show departs regularly from what has generally been meant by “real time” in media studies.⁸ As the centrality of the series’s surveillance-enabled action sequences reveals, the “real time” that is the claim of the narration and the appeal to the spectator is a fabrication that exists primarily as affect and aesthetic, a trampoline for the acrobatics of high-speed action and high-stakes deadlines that constitute the vast majority of the show.⁹

The idea of “real time” is but one of many ways that surveillance has become an established device to play with narrative temporalities, indicative of a broader use of surveillance to restructure narrative time in ways that often correspond to the ideological premises of real-world surveillance. Despite the charge of the aesthetic and narrative pace and the apparent simplicity of the formula, diegetic invocations of “real time” surveillance are in fact indicative of a larger ambiguity, instability, and even a contradictory temporality within surveillance narratives.¹⁰ This undertow is already apparent in numerous feature films that incorporate video surveillance as crucial plot pivots by exploiting the misrecognitions and slip-pages between prerecorded media and “live” broadcast (e.g., *Saw II* [Darren Lynn Bousman, 2005], *Ocean’s Eleven* [Steven Soderbergh 2001], and *Vacancy* [Nimród Antal, 2007]). Other films disrupt narrative stability entirely with the introduction of surveillance (as in *Lost Highway* [David Lynch, 1997] and *Caché* [Michael Haneke, 2005]). Still others use science-fiction surveillance technologies in stories of the prediction and prevention of future calamities and occasionally in stories of literal time travel (*Source Code* [Duncan Jones, 2011], *Déjà Vu* [Tony Scott, 2006], and *Minority Report* [Steven Spielberg, 2002]).

Narrative iterations of surveillance reveal that, despite the urgent presence of real-time narration, surveillant temporalities engage equally with affective registers that are both proleptic and morbidly resolved. Serial narration, when bolstered by surveillant structures, often reveals a languid despair lurking beneath the surface. Despite the general fetishization of “real time” from traffic cams to Instagram, surveillance narratives often point to a more pernicious melancholia within the American cultural imaginary. This logic has defined security policy in the

United States since September 11, 2001, as well as the discursive strategies of Donald Trump’s 2016 election campaign and administration.

In their essay in *Theorizing Surveillance*, Gary Genosko and Scott Thompson argue that contemporary surveillance and its discourse can be characterized—at least in part—by three modes of time: a (troubled) past, a (fragmented) present, and a (future) past.¹¹ At the same time, recent television scholarship has pointed to numerous television series that, Melissa Ames argues, “include experimental temporality and center their plots on anxieties concerning time: the longing to correct mistakes of the past, the panic of living in a hypersensitive present, and the fear of the premediated future.”¹²

Both characterizations of temporal modes are instructive for understanding how narrative works within the politics and practices of surveillance, but it is the “(future) past”—grammatically, the future perfect tense—to which surveillance narratives in film and television have returned somewhat compulsively in recent years, serving to construct it as a “premediated future.”¹³ The assumption or invocation of the future as an already established past event has clear resonance in a security state that is increasingly based on the logic of preemption.¹⁴ In an accumulating number of ways, surveillance and security practices, with their ever-anticipatory nature, construct the facticity of the present and past in relation to a disastrous future that has not yet transpired.

A melancholic imperative underlies these temporalities, perhaps most legible in the science-fiction fantasies of surveillance technologies that prevent terrorist attacks that *will have* happened, as exemplified by *Déjà Vu*, *Source Code*, and *Minority Report* in film, and on television most explicitly by *Person of Interest*.¹⁵ The cinematic versions present a narrative elaboration of how the future perfect necessitates an undoing, even a refusal, of past loss. *Déjà Vu* and *Source Code*, for instance, are narratives that begin at the end (traumatic loss) and use surveillance technology as a narrative device that allows them to circle back around to end at a new beginning—a beginning in which the loss has been prevented. Within this story trajectory, the functions of satellite and GPS imagery that typically structure geopolitical relations through the parallel editing of simple action sequences now emerge as a richer, action-filled, but fragmented present invested with the affective force of a disavowed past recast as a premediated, and preventable, future.

Such narrative constructions resonate strongly with surveillance and security practices in the contemporary United States. Barbara Biesecker argues that the discourse of the “war on terror” is primarily a “carefully crafted and meticulously



Surveillance as “operational aesthetic” in *Person of Interest*.

managed melancholic rhetoric,” one of the main features of which is the “discursive transfiguration of a historic and political catastrophe into the harbinger of an epochal Act ‘to come’ and, hence, the ubiquitous deployment of the future anterior.”¹⁶ Biesecker points out that the post-9/11 speeches of George W. Bush functioned rhetorically as the call to a national mission to disavow loss: “an incomparable, Absolute loss that will have been ours were we to refuse to answer it.”¹⁷ The architectures of surveillance and security descended from that national mission statement over the past seventeen years have served to produce America as an idealized object that can now be claimed and represented in narrative form precisely because it has (not yet) been lost.

The more recent and much more broadly sweeping formation of the Trump 2016 campaign slogan—“Make America Great Again”—includes a similar imperative to install greatness retroactively, with the fear of terrorism now unleashed as the pure racist aggression of an imagined status quo ante. Such configurations install loss itself as the object around which the entire formation turns, a mystification that

underlies the repeated invocation in American politics of traumatic events to bolster policy shifts. At least part of the Trump administration’s shock value is its abandonment of disavowal as a necessary element. Instead, its rhetoric involves an almost gleeful insistence on America’s devastation and the creation of imaginary (past) disasters, exemplified by Kellyanne Conway’s bizarre references to a nonexistent terrorist attack—the “Bowling Green Massacre”—as a rationale for the executive order barring travel and immigration from seven Muslim-majority countries.¹⁸

Such constructions, while indeed outlandish, are in fact consistent with the already established reactionary politics of the post-9/11 security state in the United States. While many of the television series cited here are either explicitly or implicitly critical of a surveillance state, the narrative imaginary manifests itself similarly to those cheering extreme counter-terrorist actions, with differences largely a matter of branding. It is not insignificant that *24*, a Fox Network show popular with conservatives in its “by whatever means necessary” (torture included) approach to securing the country

against terrorism, overlapped almost exactly with the George W. Bush presidency, whereas the defining surveillance/counterterrorism series during the Obama years was *Homeland*, an HBO show emblematic of “quality television,” with its ostensibly nuanced explorations of the “moral ambiguity” of counterterrorism.¹⁹ The two shows (like the two presidents) appear at first to have radically different approaches to their subject matter, but the series share producers and “creative DNA.”²⁰ Howard Gordon, cocreator and showrunner for the majority of *24*’s run, is also a cocreator and executive producer on *Homeland*, which was tellingly adapted from an original Israeli series. Ultimately, the two shows have little that would distinguish them politically.

It is easy to locate at the heart of television serials what at first glance is the same thematic and structural melancholia that one finds in film. The protagonist, usually profoundly affected by an as-yet-to-be-revealed traumatic loss, engages with surveillance operations in ways that both disavow and attest to a foundational loss that is often the basic principle either of the narrative or of the characterization of the primary character or characters. This engagement is consistent across such seemingly different variations as *Person of Interest*, *Homeland*, *Mr. Robot* (USA Network, 2015–), and *24* itself. The melancholic structure often serves as the logic for experimentation with nonlinear narrative, but unlike the closed circularity of the cinematic examples, the serial form allows the contradictions at the heart of melancholic temporality to expand exponentially and become affective rather than organizational, creating an intersection with another broad trend in television: apocalyptic doom.²¹

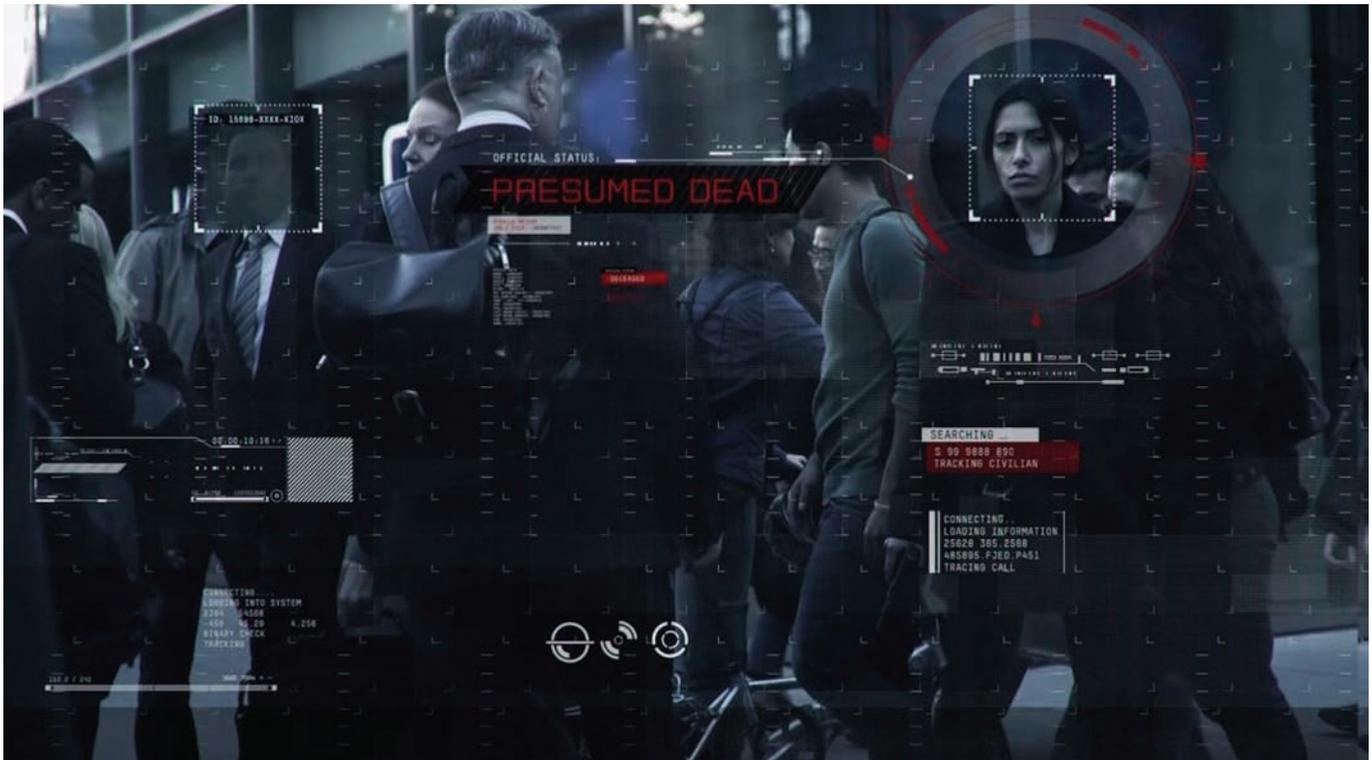
This intersection is a significant element of contemporary “complex TV,” Jason Mittell’s unwieldy but now ubiquitous term for the poetics of contemporary television narrative, which notably parallels the increasing use of surveillance as a structuring narrative mechanism. In Mittell’s account, complex TV, also referred to as “digital era” or “post-network era” television, is characterized not just by increasingly complicated storytelling strategies, but by attending to its own formal strategies in what in a cinematic context would be called reflexive, metacinematic, or, more broadly, metatextual. Mittell uses an even broader analytic framework—that of “narrative complexity.”²² Mittell rests his argument on the notion of an “operational aesthetic” that “encourages us to simultaneously care about the story and marvel at its telling.”²³ What is notable in this context is the increasing frequency with which the imagery and tropes of surveillance cinema have come to serve the purpose of an “operational aesthetic,” one that both carries over the logic of surveillance cinema and transforms it at the level of temporality.

While his broad attribute of “narrative complexity” is not a particularly helpful analytical model, his term “operational aesthetic” has tremendous use value for its emphasis on functionality—not just for narrative, but also for its reification of surveillant connectivity as narrative logic. The use of surveillance as operational aesthetic functions as a form of metanarration (and vice versa) that forms part of inter- and cross-referential systems that undergird the narrative and extranarrative economies of television.

There is a shared technological and cultural background for both television and surveillance that has only expanded in recent years, as both frameworks become more defined by digitality and by a “temporal index” that becomes a point of departure for narrative (and spectatorship).²⁴ Surveillance narratives have become increasingly ubiquitous in part because surveillance serves so well as a narrative device or operational aesthetic in nonlinear storytelling, since it facilitates or even substantiates the narrative logic of many of the temporal shifts introduced by recent television series.²⁵

Person of Interest is both the clearest example of a surveillance-based series and the one most directly comparable to the preemption fantasies of surveillance cinema. The show’s technological premise is science-fictional, but in concept it resembles the “Total Information Awareness” program introduced by the U.S. Department of Defense in 2002.²⁶ In *Person of Interest*, this program is manifested as “The Machine,” an artificial intelligence (AI) that accesses every camera, database, satellite, and so forth in order to predict and prevent terrorism. The series, however, focuses on the “back door” of this system that gathers all the nonterrorism related murders predicted by The Machine, which the government declares “irrelevant.” These files become the vigilante project of two melancholic protagonists: the architect of the AI, Harold Finch (Michael Emerson) and an ex-CIA black ops agent, John Reese (Jim Caviezel). Reese and Finch share no past, but each comes to this mission informed by prior traumas, forming a sullen odd couple in a scenario heavily reliant on flashbacks, even as the premise of the series is future focused.²⁷

Person of Interest has both episodic and serial elements. Episodes generally begin with the introduction of a new murder-to-come that the pair must solve and attempt to stop, but they are working with a projected future punctuated by flashbacks from prior lives. These connect the protagonists to the present episode in some clear way but also are used to structure longer arcs that explain how the two became their troubled selves, how The Machine came to be, and how the conspiratorial elements that formed around all



The surveillant perspective of artificial intelligence in *Person of Interest*.

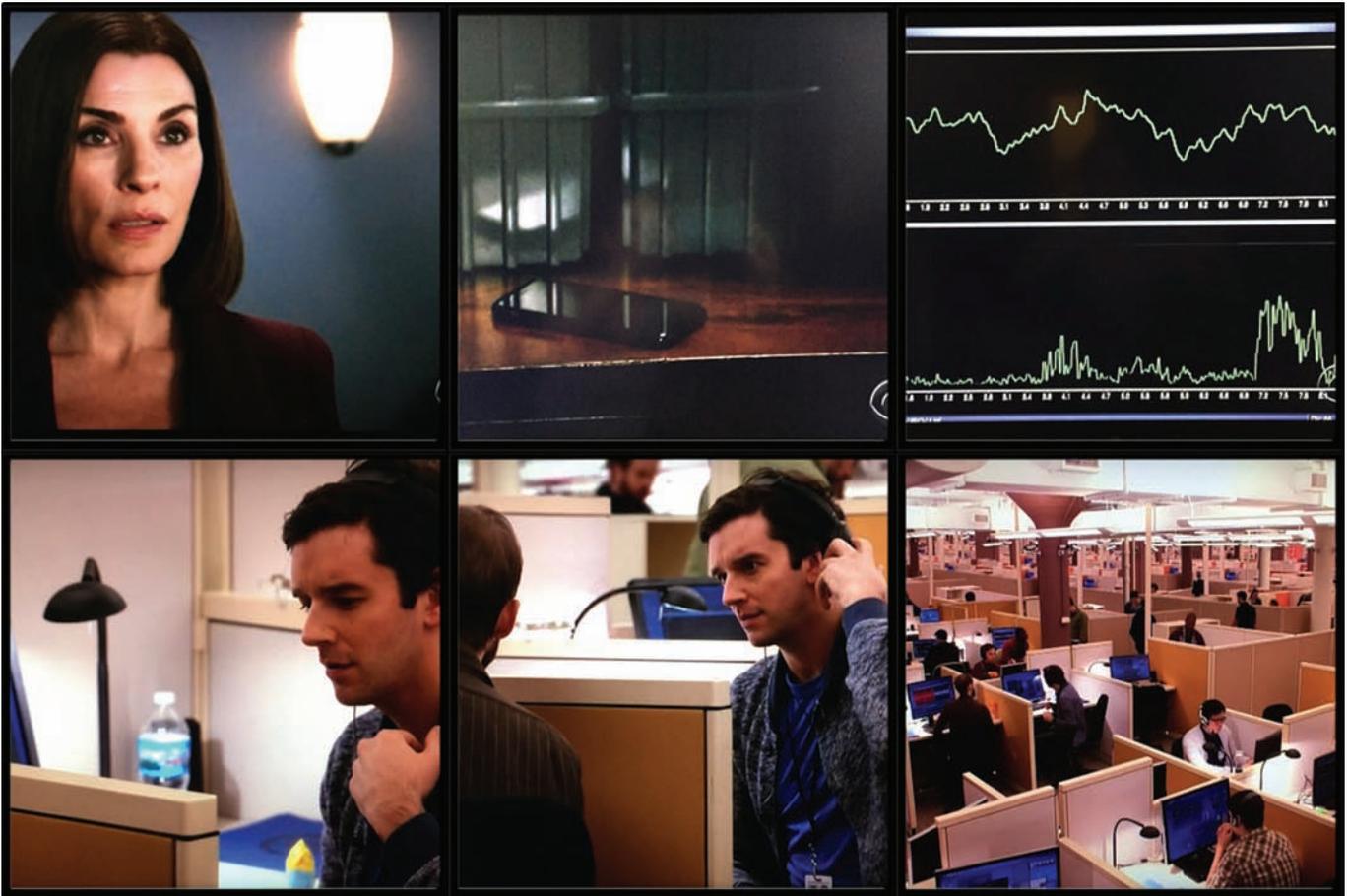
of this now anticipate and project the series-spanning problems and conflicts of the show.

Thus, on numerous levels *Person of Interest* functions in both story and plot within the surveillance temporalities identified by Genosko and Thompson in their essay in *Theorizing Surveillance*: the troubled past, fragmented present, and future past. Additionally, the show's assemblage aesthetic of surveillance imagery is used rhythmically as the transitional device between scenes as well as the motivating aesthetic for establishing shots and flashbacks. Rather than simply cutting to another location in time or space, the show uses sped-up montages of urban video surveillance as a bridging device between scenes and as a digital-time rollback to move to flashback, implying that there are no real temporal or spatial gaps or ellipses between scenes in a show in which the diegetic world (including the psychic interiority of the characters) is sutured together by an inescapable web of surveillance technologies.

Other examples of almost entirely surveillance-based shows, all with slightly different variations of surveillance and narrative directions, include such programs as *The Wire* (HBO 2002–8), *Homeland*, *Mr. Robot*, the television reboot/sequel of *Minority Report* (FOX, 2015), *CSI: Cyber* (CBS, 2015–16), and *Major Crimes* (TNT, 2012–18). Some significant series are not explicitly predicated on surveillance but

have narrative worlds that are defined by surveillant structures, including *The Americans* (FX, 2013–18), *Westworld*, *The Man in the High Castle* (Amazon Video, 2015–), *Marvel's Agents of Shield* (ABC, 2013–), *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *The Colony* (USA, 2016–18). Surveillance has also become a common narrative and stylistic device in numerous shows not explicitly surveillance oriented, ranging from *Lost* (ABC, 2004–10) and *Heroes* (NBC, 2006–10) to *Pretty Little Liars* (Freeform, 2010–17), suggesting how much surveillance has become implicated in narrative complexity as well as daily life.

Perhaps more tellingly, when shows not known for their narrative complexity do experiment with nonlinear storytelling, surveillance is often imported to serve that function. In its final three seasons, for instance, the legal/political drama *The Good Wife* (CBS, 2009–16) incorporates episodic stories of “ripped from the headlines” NSA surveillance. At the same time, in its long arc, it keeps the protagonist, attorney Alicia Florrick (Julianna Margulies), under NSA surveillance in a constantly running parallel universe to which the show periodically calls attention. *The Good Wife* returns to this universe not so much circularly, but instead by using a momentary instance of surveillance as a kind of narrative wormhole back to the NSA story line from earlier seasons and episodes as well as the parallel narrative threads that those seasons and episodes reference.



The Good Wife uses surveillance as a narrative wormhole to an earlier season.

A notable example occurs in season 7, episode 15, “Targets,” two seasons after the NSA surveillance was a focus of the story line: Alicia has just emerged for a break from an ultrasecret meeting in which she is inexplicably now serving as a civilian legal advisor on an ad hoc committee convened to vote on approval of preemptive drone assassinations. She puts down her phone, and the camera abruptly zooms into the phone’s face and remains on a black screen for a moment. When it zooms back out, it has become a close-up of a computer screen with audio-monitoring graphics; the next shot situates the audience back within the cubicles of the familiar Snowden-esque civilian NSA contractors from two seasons earlier, who are currently listening to Alicia through the phone’s microphone, and who have, as this interlude suggests, been watching her all along with both government authorization and an obsessive fandom. “Uh-oh,” one of them utters, “Alicia’s in trouble.” Their investments in Alicia’s personal dramas allow these techs to represent the show’s spectators as well, and thus signal yet another parallel universe: the extradiegetic narration of the show’s fan base.²⁸

Numerous other shows similarly use surveillance as a device to weave together complex narrative structures with tricks of time. At times surveillance technology is used to speed up or slow down (sometimes simultaneously) the narratives, such as in *Mr. Robot*, a show that maneuvers time and often uses the unreliable narration of its neurodivergent, drug-addicted computer hacker Elliot to represent a human subject attempting to function within the temporality of digital information and exchange.

In procedurals, surveillance functions as repetition and difference, as in *Major Crimes*, where video recordings of crime scenes are replayed to locate evidence not legible in the initial investigation; and *Person of Interest*, which uses the device of computer simulation in multiple episodes to show events repeating with different outcomes. One such episode of *POI* also includes a hyperspeed element: the entirety of the episode, in which an attempted escape of several characters from a desperate situation is repeated numerous times with different outcomes, is revealed to be The Machine merely running different virtual scenarios in order to provide the best escape plan. The thirty or so minutes spent watching

these multiple options translate diegetically to a millisecond, showing the narrative time of the AI to be simultaneously compressed and extended.

Surveillance as an operational aesthetic in these shows is both common and variable. Its operation is often technologically ideological, functioning to manipulate the temporality of the narrative structure and engage in the logic of preemption and retroaction that these shows share with surveillance cinema, while also serving as a reification of the televisual qualities of “immediacy” and “real time.” In some cases, surveillance can up the ante of televisual elements through, for instance, the excessive action of *24*, the wormhole of *The Good Wife*, or the hyperspeed and space-time bridge of the surveillance montages in *Person of Interest*—all of which in different ways make the gaps and ellipses of complex seriality a domain that appears recuperable and perhaps even mastered by surveillance.

But it doesn't work.

In many cases, underlying the operational aesthetics that create the fabric of contemporary television is a narrative complexity that is defined not by mastery, nor by the elaborate constructions that fashion narrative sense, but by an attempt to reflect impossible stories and stories of impossibility: systemic breakdowns, nonexistence, absolute loss. Impending doom, in fact, has been one of the most dominant thematic trends in television ever since *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (The WB, 1997–2001; UPN, 2001–3), one of the first shows to receive extensive scholarly consideration and one that offers repeated and deeply affecting instances of profound loss and existential crisis amid an overarching threat of apocalypse(s).²⁹

In the transitional era of postnetwork TV, the pervasiveness of impending doom exceeded its narrative frames and began to emerge in the television industry's assessment of its own status, with Les Moonves, the (now former) president of CBS, declaring in 2003, “The world as we knew it is over.”³⁰ Serial television, as much as it shows off the genius of complex storytelling by weaving together multiple narrative threads and displaying masterful orchestrations of connectivity and continuity, has simultaneously and significantly developed as an attempt to represent an unimaginable terminus: the *end*.

While complex television in many instances has utilized surveillance as an operational aesthetic to provide bravura performances of technological and narrative connectivity—turning time forward and back and around itself to produce and then avert disaster—other shows have been defining complex television in what might seem an oppositional form, spending an entire series working through loss, death, and radical absence.³¹ More recently, surveillance and loss have increasingly intertwined as narrative threads in ever-

darker scenarios, exemplified by shows like *Westworld* and *The Handmaid's Tale*.³²

What to make of these two parallel and corollary trends in narrative complexity: surveillant mastery and unfathomable loss? It does attest to the melancholic logic underlying the post-9/11 rhetorics of security and its narrative iterations, but the thematizations of loss go beyond a return of the repressed. Certainly these trends map onto the American cinematic and literary propensity for apocalyptic scenarios that, while clearly not new, surged at the turn of the millennium. Still, that does not account for the multiple ways that surveillance and apocalypse function together as complex narration in the serial form.³³

As the paradigmatic example of serial surveillance narrative, *Person of Interest* not surprisingly also provides the most explicit relationship between surveillant mastery and apocalyptic doom. This turn is a bit of a surprise, given that the show began as what seemed to be a facile version of surveillance as preemptive security force, even as its focus on deaths deemed “irrelevant” by the government is an implicit critique of the security state. Instead of conforming to the circularity evident in cinematic iterations, *Person of Interest* uses its melancholic temporality to create a show that is now entirely different from where it began, explicitly weaving together threads of total control and complete loss, and even providing some understanding of their relation to each other.

A cut to a surveillant point-of-view shot (from *The Machine*) punctuates the end of *POI* season 1 and becomes its turning point, introducing ubiquitous surveillance as an actual character in addition to its use as the show's narrative logic and thematic focus. Surveillance as operational aesthetic becomes even more centralized, but in a way that undoes the usual effect of explicitly technologized narration. With the principle of omniscient narration reified as a surveillant operation in the series, beginning in season 2 artificial intelligence moves from being the operational aesthetic of the show to become more like a first-person narrator. Surveillance and narration develop together over the course of the show as intertwined, increasingly elliptical, sometimes misleading, and ultimately deeply troubled and troubling.

With this shift to narration as a function of artificial intelligence, the affective force of *Person of Interest* intensifies. The plot and dialogue become more explicitly about loss and the impossibility of processing it, both in terms of *The Machine*'s ability to use algorithms to manage a preventable outcome and in terms of understanding death and nonexistence. Perhaps the presentation of narrative as algorithm produces in the spectator a particular access to the affect of loss precisely by pointing to the impossibility of relating loss as a



The affective possibilities of loss, in *Person of Interest*.

story. The Machine—an AI that is the assemblage of all known surveillance technologies and all available data—becomes in effect a part of an ensemble cast that deviates radically from the initial centralization of two heroic masculine melancholics.

The show's gradual development of a compelling motley crew produces more-complex forms of relationality, as well as more-affecting possibilities of loss. Reese and Finch find an ally in the police department: the intrepid Detective Carter (Taraji P. Henson), who constitutes the moral and emotional center of the show as well as a structuring principle of the narration in terms of its legal, political, and extrajudicial systems of security and justice. Carter's death in season 2 marks a turning point in which loss is no longer confined to revisiting past attachments through flashback.

Death has now decisively entered the present. The show becomes increasingly bereft as a result, defined by a pronounced loss (for the spectator as well) that the narrative builds upon, not by recuperating but by multiplying it. Another two women join the team: Root (Amy Acker),

initially a villain who seeks to establish a relationship with and worship at the altar of The Machine; and Shaw (Sarah Shahi), an ex-CIA assassin who begrudgingly signs on to the team as its missions become more complex and the narrative arcs lengthen. And then there is the dog: the one character to whom each of the other sullen, distant heroes allow themselves to express affection.

Over the course of successive seasons, the two women, Root and Shaw, become perversely endearing characters, perhaps best described as Queer Sociopaths with Hearts of Gold; their violent/flirtatious relationship with each other develops into the romantic center of the show. Simultaneously, Root becomes increasingly identified with The Machine, serving as its human avatar and mouthpiece, until her death, at which point the AI takes on her voice more literally, and the two cease to exist as discrete characters, turning surveillance seriality explicitly into an intriguingly "posthuman" vision of narration. This merging is the culmination of the narrative's suggestion that the characters might exist only but eternally as part of The Machine's memory and programs. It underlines

the increasing humanization/subjectification of the artificial intelligence and of the narrative itself.

As *Person of Interest* grows more complex, it also becomes irretrievably bleak: “victory” becomes more and more implausible, the possibility of control or even survival fades away, and the narrative becomes increasingly incoherent. At the same time, the affect of the relationship between Root and Shaw—and between The Machine and the other characters—grows stronger and more centered on love and/as loss. One by one, with an affective force that seemed inconceivable for this show when it began, these characters love and lose each other, repetitively and wrenchingly.

Yet even with this melodramatic turn—or perhaps because of it—the show focuses on systemic collapse (in this case, of surveillance) as both narrative structure and exercise of power.³⁴ In its final seasons, the show becomes a battle between two surveillance AIs and the systems of people and technology that surround them, one “good” and one “evil.” As the two forces work against each other, the status of the narrative and characters becomes more unstable. The show’s focus rests on the desperate attempts of The Machine’s cohort to survive and save each other, as the broader narrative “world” fades into the background even as its very existence is at stake.

At times, the *POI* story line seems like a desperate mess, but it also functions as a sublime implosion of the surveillant narrative: humanity dying at the hands of its own visibility.³⁵ As the narrative develops into one of AIs at war with each other, the show becomes a totalizing vision of apocalyptic destruction. It eventually becomes apparent that the characters are not just subjects who have lost, but subjects who have themselves become the objects of loss for each other and for viewers, especially those who have watched the show unfold and have developed attachments to the characters over a period of years.

The voice-over of the character Root, with which this season begins—as a flash-forward rather than a flashback—turns out to be a recording left behind. So is the show itself. Its characters were (always) already dead. The fantasies of preemption and total security with which the series began are instead revealed as visions of inevitable doom. Thus the final season of *Person of Interest* begins at the end, in its “(future) past,” but not in the recuperative mode of films such as *Déjà Vu*; rather, it ends with an affective indulgence in the losses that the show has worked for five seasons to build up and defer.³⁶

A few of the protagonists survive to the end of the series (including the dog, most importantly, and the AI). One character will even be provided with what would otherwise be a

traditionally “happy ending” of a reunion with a lost love. But the show’s finale refuses comfort and instead emphasizes futility and heartbreak. There will be some form of continuity, or so the final shots seem to convey, as Shaw (with the dog) answers a call from The Machine. But the missionary impulse with which the series began has been replaced with an awareness of the longer arc of inevitable failure. As a final shot from the point of view of The Machine’s surveillance apparatus and the voiceover of a now-dead character indicate, the show’s futurity may include posthuman eternal life, queer romance, and the love of a dog, but it carries with it the grief of a narrative world.

POI’s creator, Jonathan Nolan, has continued to explore the relationship between narrative and artificial intelligence as cocreator (with Lisa Joy) of the HBO production *Westworld*, which—in very different form—focuses even more explicitly (and intricately) on temporality and loss as the defining elements of both storytelling and the humanization of artificial intelligence. This time the AIs are placed at the heart of the story in more ways than one, with android robots (indistinguishable from human beings) serving as props (“hosts”) in a vast theme park that functions as a gaming space tailored to the desires of wealthy clients seeking to role-play in the mythological past of the “American West.”

The narrative structure of the show’s first season follows several hosts’ journeys to self-awareness, journeys that themselves mirror the structural elements built into the artificial space and history of the *Westworld* theme park. This coming to consciousness, which happens amid the intense violence and abuse in the *Westworld* scenarios, involves numerous repetitions in the form of flashbacks that restage the “stories” in which the hosts have participated, although their memories are meant to be wiped clean every time. These stories and characters parallel and intersect with those involved in the creation and operation of the “park,” contrasting the dusty open spaces of *Westworld* with a highly technologized corporate labyrinth of labs, offices, and an advanced surveillance security center centered on a digital topography of the entire park.

The show’s narrative complexity is based primarily on the logic of the temporal shifts arising in the unseen mechanisms of the characters’ (artificial) intelligence, rather than on the logic of the surveillant operations that are part of the same digital system. Both viewers and characters struggle to understand the meaning of the repetitions, the location in time of events, and the identities of themselves and others. As with *Person of Interest*, *Westworld*’s narrative enunciation becomes increasingly synonymous with the technology that supplies the premise of the show. Metanarrative elements



The staging of loss in *Westworld*. Courtesy of John P. Johnson/HBO

dominate as it becomes more and more unclear how much of the plot is itself a scenario programmed by the “creator” within the story.

Despite the intellectual effort involved in the complex layering of plots, the revelations that emerge are deeply affective. The hosts’ self-discovery is inextricable from their loss of self, amid realizations that they have lived their (artificial) lives hundreds of times, and died perhaps just as many. These discoveries result in massive failures in the surveillance of both the park and the operations center, as the vengeful rage and counterplotting of the hosts explodes into deliciously spectacular violence. “The Well-Tempered Clavier,” season 1, episode 9, contains a deeply satisfying and explicitly sexualized version of “burn it all down.” While *Westworld* at first glance appears to offer even more meticulously controlled and surveilled spaces, its actual narrative, like that of *POI*, involves the systemic breakdown of this control and the correlated production of emotional intensity for characters and spectators alike, including the gloriously painful devastation of their worlds.

Westworld’s theme-park version of an imaginary postbellum American West in season 1 brings to the fore the willful

postracial fantasies of most surveillance narratives (including those discussed above), which are at odds with the consistent use of surveillance in reality to construct and target specific racial subjects.³⁷ *Westworld* tries to have it both ways: on the one hand it appears to aspire to color-blind casting, with people of color occupying nonracialized roles in both the show and the theme-park narratives. On the other hand, certain racialized characters from the common stockpile of Westerns are offered as part of the park’s mise-en-scène and story lines (including that of a suave “bandito” and indigenous “savages”), and the Civil War is referenced abstractly through villainous rogue Confederate soldiers. Even with multiple black actors in leading roles, blackness specifically is literally unseen within this world, playing no part in a slavery narrative where AI functions as chattel. As its synthetic humans suffer terribly and repetitively in the service of guests in the park playing out their most violent (or valiant) fantasies of power, *Westworld* develops into a show about American slavery without racism.³⁸

Thus while many science-fictional dystopias show admirably diverse casting practices, they also often produce yet another forceful disavowal: this time, of the production and



Hector the “Bandito”: the racial mise-en-scène of a postracial *Westworld*.

targeting of racialized subjects that has been at the core of state surveillance in the United States, from slavery to immigration policy to the “War on Terror.” Such an erasure is central to these narratives of total surveillant control that want to insist that everyone would be equally subject to the same omniscient system, a fantasy world in which surveillance is not a racializing project.

Whether dystopian or utopian, there is a corollary to the supposed mastery of surveillance and the generativity of complex narrative, a thin veil between the conceit and aesthetics of technological omniscience and a rapturously destructive (and self-destructive) embrace of apocalyptic chaos. Surveillance television is not the only form such narratives take, but it is one where an “operational aesthetic” is so visible that it illuminates the grimmer “complexity” of complex TV. It is episodic television that is in part defined by engaging mechanisms that are doing the work of grieving the storytelling process and trying to love a world that is collapsing in on itself. Here is embedded a strange reworking of Linda Williams’s assessment of contemporary serial television’s “fundamental paradox.” As she posits: “By parceling itself out in small ‘parts’ it gains ‘world enough and time’ to spin longer stories over possibly many social worlds.”³⁹ The serial format, and the temporal play it allows, represents an exceptional type of world making. However, in numerous instances it is a world making of a very particular kind: worlds made to self-destruct. If “world building needs duration,” then seeing that world through to its end requires even more.⁴⁰ Revelation is, after all, the ostensible project of apocalypse, of surveillance, and, ultimately, of narrative.

Thus the work of art in the age of surveillance manifests, and is exceeded by, a serialized immersion in the tight grip of shows from *Lost* to *The Leftovers*, *Buffy*, and *Breaking Bad* to *Heroes*, *Fringe*, *Person of Interest*, *Mr. Robot*,

The Walking Dead, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Westworld*, and so on (and so on). Serial television narrative becomes an experiment in affective devastation as a way to convey how many worlds—narrative worlds, social worlds, ideological worlds, environmental worlds, lifeworlds—while still here, are already gone. All that’s left is to enjoy the show.

Notes

1. Such assertions were popularized several years ago with items like the coining of the term “post-plot cinema” in Steven Zeitchik, “‘Guardians of the Galaxy’ and the Rise of Post-Plot Cinema,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 4, 2014, www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/moviesnow/la-et-mn-guardians-galaxy-movie-theaters-box-office-20140804-story.html; and the “listicle” “10 Reasons Why Today’s TV Is Better Than the Movies,” *The Guardian*, October 23, 2013, www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2013/oct/23/10-reasons-tv-better-movies, which featured “Longform Storytelling” at no. 1.
2. The importance of time to surveillance narratives was initially articulated by Thomas Y. Levin in “Rhetoric of the Temporal Index: Surveillant Narration and the Cinema of ‘Real Time,’” in *CTRL[SPACE]: Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother*, ed. Thomas Y. Levin, Ursula Frohne, and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 587–93. Levin’s analysis suggests that as digitality came to undermine the primacy of analog logic and reorganize media as information, cinema began increasingly to incorporate a “temporal index” that posited “real-time” surveillance as aesthetic and narrative technique.
3. For the purposes of this essay, “television” refers to both broadcast and streaming serials, though in a discussion of narrative time it is important to note the differences in the viewing experience of a series with one episode broadcast weekly versus a streaming network that makes an entire season available immediately.
4. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 242.
5. See Levin, “Rhetoric of the Temporal Index.”
6. See Catherine Zimmer, *Surveillance Cinema* (New York: NYU Press, 2015), chaps. 3 and 4, for a full discussion of these types of sequences in the cinematic context.
7. Only some signature Shondaland productions (e.g., *How to Get Away with Murder* [ABC, 2014–]) seem able to maintain a hysterically frenetic pace without the constant injection of surveillance, though certainly *Scandal* (ABC, 2012–18) has used the device liberally.
8. Most obvious are the gaps necessitated by commercial breaks, since the show originally aired on network television.
9. The show’s initial eight-season run spanned the period of time that saw television viewing habits shift through the availability of TV-on-DVD and DVR. The real-time conceit of *24*, in combination with its liberal use of cliffhangers, lends itself to the more recent development of binge viewing,

- allowing viewers to behaviorally mirror the adrenalin-fueled urgency of the narrative through their form of spectatorship. See Todd Sodano, "Television's Paradigm (Time)Shift: Production and Consumption in the Post-Network Era," in *Time and Television Narrative: Exploring Temporality in Twenty-First Century Programming*, ed. Melissa Ames (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2012), 27–42; Amanda Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionised*, 2nd ed. (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 73–74; Mareike Jenner, "Binge-Watching: Video-on-Demand, Quality TV, and Mainstreaming Fandom," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no. 3 (2017): 304–20; and Chuck Tryon, "TV Got Better: Netflix's Original Programming Strategies and Binge Viewing," *Media Industries* 2, no. 2 (2015): 104–16; among several others.
10. See the introduction to and chap. 1 of Zimmer, *Surveillance Cinema*, for a more detailed discussion of the ambiguities of surveillant temporality.
 11. Gary Genosko and Scott Thompson, "Tense Theory: The Temporalities of Surveillance," in *Theorizing Surveillance: The Panopticon and Beyond*, ed. David Lyon (Devon, UK; and Portland, OR: Willan Publishing, 2006): 123–59.
 12. Melissa Ames, "The Fear of the Future and the Pain of the Past: The Quest to Cheat Time in *Heroes*, *FlashForward*, and *Fringe*," in *Time in Television Narrative: Exploring Temporality in Twenty-First Century Programming*, ed. Melissa Ames (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 111.
 13. Ames's use of the term "premediation" refers to Richard Grusin's formulation derived from the media's post-9/11 management of the future. Grusin, *Premeditation: Affect and Mediality after 9/11* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
 14. Elsewhere, media theorists Greg Elmer and Andy Opel suggest that with the rising dominance of preemptive approaches to security and surveillance "through the pre-emptive lens the future has become an inevitable series of events, elevating 'fate' to an agent of historical evolution." Greg Elmer and Andy Opel, "Surviving the Inevitable Future," *Cultural Studies* 20, nos. 4–5 (2006): 477–92, 480. Formulating the problem somewhat differently, but with similar structural consequences, Joseba Zulaika has argued that the discourse of counterterrorism has become a self-fulfilling prophecy, which "substitutes the spectacle of a constant 'waiting for terror' for actual historical temporality." Joseba Zulaika, "The Self-Fulfilling Prophecies of Counterterrorism," *Radical History Review* 85 (2003): 192–93.
 15. These cinematic examples are discussed in detail in "Temporality and Surveillance I: Terrorism Narratives and the Melancholic Security State," chap. 4 of Zimmer, *Surveillance Cinema*.
 16. Barbara Biesecker, "No Time for Mourning: The Rhetorical Production of the Melancholic Citizen-Subject in the War on Terror," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 40, no. 1 (2007): 152.
 17. Biesecker, "No Time for Mourning."
 18. This is the order referred to frequently as the "Muslim Ban."
 19. See Christopher Orr, "The Politics of '24,'" *New Republic*, May 15, 2006; and Seth Millstein, "Hillary Clinton Is a 'Homeland' Fan Just Like Obama & They Probably Like the Show for One Distinct Reason," *Bustle*, November 30, 2015.
 20. John Jurgensen, "Art and Life Collide in 'Homeland' and '24: Legacy,'" *Wall Street Journal*, January 11, 2017.
 21. In a related argument, Aris Mousoutzanis has written about a television subgenre that he calls "trauma sci-fi," to which many of the shows discussed here clearly belong. Though viewing these narratives through the lens of traumatic pathology would seem to demand a character-based and/or psychoanalytic approach, Mousoutzanis notes that such shows are also self-conscious and metatextual, which lends them well to the present discussion. Aris Mousoutzanis, "Temporality and Trauma in American Sci-Fi Television," in Ames, *Time and Television Narrative*, 97–109.
 22. Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 53.
 23. Mittell, *Complex TV*, 46.
 24. Levin, "Rhetoric of the Temporal Index."
 25. 24, the "real time" conceit par excellence, also demonstrates that within the hyperbolic insistence on the real-time structure, there are numerous other elements that complicate the performance of "real time." The "real time" narrative requires both the expansion and contraction of time: even if the twenty-four-hour-per-season story did match an approximately twenty-four hours of telling, it also slowed down that time such that those twenty-four hours last over the period of months it takes to broadcast a once-per-week show. And within each episode, time is sped up so that the hour takes place over about forty-three minutes to incorporate commercial breaks. The spectator's experience of the show involves a similar acceleration and suspension: the enormous amount of action crammed into this supposed hour of time is punctuated by a lengthy deferral (at least in its initial broadcast) to the next adrenalin burst, usually in cliffhanger form. Viewing the show postbroadcast via DVD or streaming now also allows the real-time experience to assume the lost-time experience of the binge-watch.
 26. John Markoff and John Schwartz, "Many Tools of Big Brother Are Now Up and Running," *New York Times*, December 23, 2002, www.nytimes.com/2002/12/23/business/technology-many-tools-of-big-brother-are-now-up-and-running.html.
 27. The show's suggestion that the government has declared non-terrorism-related murders to be "irrelevant" is in itself a critique of the fetishistic fixation on counterterrorist security, especially given the infinitesimal percentage of total deaths represented by victims of terrorism.
 28. The fact that the show jumps through her phone and into the NSA cubicles in the episode in which Alicia is also serving an extralegal political purpose in the war on terror itself highlights how surveillance and spectatorship might serve to connect the show's liberal feminism to the broader biopolitics of the contemporary security state.
 29. The introduction of apocalyptic threat happens so consistently in the series that it becomes a reflexive joke that would also be apt for today's television landscape:
 - Giles: It's the end of the world.
 - Buffy et al.: Again?

30. Moonves should perhaps have saved this proclamation for the reckoning that would come in 2018, since he was fired after sexual assault allegations became public (along with numerous other stories of his misogynistic and unethical behavior as a network executive). Quoted in Lotz, *Television Will Be Revolutionized*, 10. Lotz gives a detailed and invaluable account here of the industrial context out of which Mittell's "complex TV" emerges, and shows the "scale of the transitions that took place as the multi-channel transition yielded to new industrial norms characteristic of a post-network era" (10).
31. To name just a few: *Six Feet Under* (HBO 2001–5), *Lost* (ABC 2004–10), *The Returned* (A&E, 2015–), *The Leftovers* (HBO, 2014–17), *Fringe* (FOX, 2008–2013), *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008–2013), *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010–), and *The OA* (Netflix, 2016–).
32. [Editor's note: For more on *Handmaid*, see Heather Hendershot, "The Handmaid's Tale as Utopian Allegory: 'Stars and Stripes Forever, Baby,'" *Film Quarterly* 72, no. 1 (Fall 2018): 13–25.]
33. Cf. Kristin Moana Thompson, *Apocalyptic Dread: American Film at the Turn of the Millennium* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007); and Monica Germanà and Aris Mousoutzanis, eds., *Apocalyptic Discourse in Contemporary Culture: Post-Millennial Perspectives on the End of the World* (New York: Routledge, 2014).
34. Linda Williams posits melodrama as a crucial—and misunderstood—framework through which to understand the power of numerous recent television dramas. See Linda Williams, *On "The Wire"* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014). Seen in this light, surveillance science-fiction shows such as *Person of Interest* can be usefully reread as fundamentally melodramatic, and perhaps at their most intriguing when, as does *POI*, they embrace melodrama as it is more popularly understood as emotional excess.
35. Apocalyptic chaos as sublime vision is itself a return to earlier Romantic literary and artistic traditions, described most famously by Morton Paley in *The Apocalyptic Sublime* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986). See also Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnick, "The Apocalyptic Sublime Then and Now," in Germanà and Mousoutzanis, *Apocalyptic Discourse in Contemporary Culture*, 57–70.
36. As Aris Mousoutzanis writes, "Whereas conventional attempts to convey traumatic belatedness within narrative resort to the flashback [which of course is the lifeblood of *POI*'s narrative] in order to signal 'the return of the repressed,' at the same time, these attempts miss a major implication of belatedness, the reversal of ordinary causality: the trauma is experienced only when it is remembered, in the future, in a temporal structure that reverses the relationship between cause and effect." Mousoutzanis, "Temporality and Trauma in American Sci-Fi Television," 100.
37. Christian Parenti, *The Soft Cage: Surveillance in America from Slavery to the War on Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 2007). The fantasy plays out differently in season 2 with the introduction of a different historical period and location as the park's theme.
38. Which is not to say racism doesn't exist in the depictions: though appearing only occasionally in season 1, an indigenous tribe performs the most explicit role of racial otherness, presented as horrifying and dangerous painted bodies who appear from and disappear into the wilderness like ghosts.
39. Williams, *On "The Wire,"* 48.
40. Williams, *On "The Wire,"* 74.