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Metaphors of the future and the power of images in the British TV drama *Spooks*

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ABSTRACT

Our analysis of metaphors of the future in the British TV drama *Spooks* is situated within the phenomenon of television as a complex narrative and global media product at the time of the proclaimed war on terror. We claim that the conceptualization of the future is shaped by the notion of the conflicts between civilizations, in which various Others are produced by media and military discourses as a threat to western civilization. The dominant discourses in *Spooks* involve the manageable future (as a destination and a framework) and the future as judgment and apocalypse (which can be avoided through the process of macro-securitization that relies on predictive analysis and the efforts of competent individuals). We explore the anticipatory aspect of the series since it predicted geopolitical trends such as 7/7, the Ukrainian crises and the negative perception of Russia. *Spooks* deconstructs the notion of a homogenous Western alliance and exposes the hypocrisy of the war on terror which includes the violation of civil rights. Our analysis suggests that the series has transformative potential by offering alternative future perspectives of the different sides in the conflict.

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1. Introduction

We live in an unstable multipolar world in which powerful states fight for domination in the global field of power relations. Globalization, which refers to the world's connectedness, also includes constant crises, whether economic, political, military or environmental. Therefore, Beck (2010) writes about global society as a “risk society” and in the last two decades or more, theorists have generated various narratives on globalization. Some authors have emphasized “the clash of civilizations” (Huntington, 2010), focusing on cultural differences, rivalry and conflict (Pieterse, 2009). Others, like Ritzer (1996), have explored the homogenization of contemporary societies through westernization and “hybridization” or cultural mixing (Pieterse, 2009). All this suggests that we live in a complex moment in history, which engages the questions and fears about the future at the individual, collective and global levels.

We chose to analyze urgent issues concerning the future in the British TV series *Spooks* (2002–2011) because it charts the emergent future in a very specific post 9/11 era, focusing on new social trends, particularly the growing influence of the secret services in western countries. The other reason for our interest in *Spooks* is the new status of television series, which have become the dominant media genre, surpassing the importance and influence of films. Television series can be understood as a part of a *mediascape*, a term which refers to “the distribution of electronic capabilities to produce and

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disseminate information”, which are immediately available throughout the world (Appadurai, 1996). Images have always been important in various areas such as politics, warfare and collective perception about the shape and the meaning of the past, present and future (Mitchell, 2011). As Polak (1973) aptly noticed, “the future lies concealed in today’s images of the future” and it is precisely this time-dimension of the future that is the dynamic force in the workings of all images.

With this in mind, in our analysis, we point to two aspects of the future that we find interesting in *Spooks*. The first is the thesis that we live in the future *Spooks* anticipated, based on the fact that seven years ago the series featured certain trends in the geopolitical arena that are now evident. The second aspect, and the most complex one, is related to the dominant discourses and metaphors related to the future which are activated in *Spooks*, particularly those originating from the Western cultural context.

While focusing on future paradigms and the metaphors embedded in them, we have found useful Inayatullah’s (1990) discussion on two approaches to the future, predictive-empirical and culture-interpretative as well as his Causal Layered Analysis method (CLA) which encompasses four different levels of analysis, having in mind the fact that “the future is constructed by language and that embedded in our forecasts are various power interests.” (Inayatullah, 1990). In connection to this Inayatullah’s statement, we will constantly have in mind Mitchell’s notion of the performative *power of images*, i.e. the importance of visual language and not just the verbal, because images can also “influence human behavior” (Mitchell, 2011). Since we live in a world dominated by media images, they have to be understood as statements themselves (Koltermann, 2014). They could be seen as having a performative function which instigates us to action and the images always enter the battlefield of contemporary discourses and practices, today especially regarding terrorism.

2. Contexts, discourses, and predictive aspects of *Spooks*

Certainly science fiction is the most dominant media genre associated with the future since it deals with the interconnectedness of science and technological development, as well as the influence of modern technologies on the lives of people. Science fiction as a hybrid form often includes utopia, dystopia and the elements of disaster. For example, movies and series like *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Dr Who*, *The Hunger Games*, *The Walking Dead*, *The Terminator* and *Blade Runner*, deal with the future in various ways. *Spooks* presents a major difference in this respect which makes it interesting for analysis. Although it is primarily defined as espionage drama and does not contain any elements of science fiction, it is heavily engaged with the future. Espionage drama thrived during the first part of the Cold War era, but became marginalized in the 1960s. However, after 9/11 and 7/7, it has been successfully revived in television series like *Spooks*, *24*, *Alien*, *Homeland* and many others. They usually deal with patriotism, questions of citizenship, identity, as well as “the role of the intelligence agencies in democratic society” (Keckman, 2005, p. 180). Choosing to focus our attention on *Spooks*, we investigate the ways *Spooks*’ metaphors and narrative structure rest upon the dominant discourse of manageable future, i.e. how events could be predicted and dealt with, as will be discussed later in the article.

Spooks can be understood as a work of television fiction that is produced in the context of the contemporary complex, creative and innovative television storytelling (Mittell, 2015). As any other media product, television series have a complex relation to what we call ‘reality’ and it can be said that they anticipate a specific kind of future. *Spooks* established tight relations with the sphere of politics and everyday life on the different levels of its representational strategies. It prides itself on plots that are inspired by the most recent events featured in the news, which gives it a contemporary appeal. But we must never forget that “the notion of social reality is always discursively constructed” (Rojek, 2009). Instead of being merely mediums for transmitting political and general cultural values, television series also “structure the conditions under which political participation can take place, as well as affect public discourses about who should and should not be properly counted as a citizen” (Kackman et al., 2011). That is why we also need to point out the global environment of the war on terror and securitization in which this program was created reflecting the post-9/11 moment, the time of increased surveillance, regulation and censorship in culture (Derksen, 2009). Another trend related to this was the criminalization of marginalized groups, especially Islamic ethnic communities, which became suspicious as potential terrorists. Ortega Breton remarks that Western culture now is “highly sensitized to its own perceived vulnerability which is socially constructed through dominant, mainstream representations, in particular, broadcast television and national presses.” (2011) In his discussion of the process of securitization in *Spooks* and *24*, Coşkun (2012) notes that television dramas play an important role in constructing narratives in the macro processes initiated by global hegemonic powers.

Spooks foregrounds the conflict of civilizations through the problematization of the war on terror and its discourses. It has an element of a self-fulfilling prophecy since the creators claimed that they carefully followed the geopolitical situation in order to be able to anticipate future events in the series (Johnson, 2006). It constructs reality which resembles the reality outside of the series, and we could therefore state that we are living in the future that *Spooks* predicted. For example, the series’ creators filmed an attack on the London transport system two months before 7/7 happened. Due to the similarities between the real attack and the one constructed and represented in the show, BBC One producers debated cancelling the episode, but settled instead on a heading that warned viewers of the disturbing content (Jones, 2015). It could also be claimed that the series predicted the present day perception of Russia as a threat, especially given the current conflicts of the European Union, the US and Russia in relation to the civil war in Ukraine. For example, episode 2 in season 8, features aspects of the Ukrainian crises since it involves negotiations between the British government and a rogue state Tazbekstan after a gas processing plant in the UK explodes and the whole country faces a serious shortage of gas supplies. While six seasons deal primarily with Al-Qaeda and similar predominantly Muslim terrorist organizations, seasons seven to ten feature Russia as

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