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Prime Time Television and American Culture: A Critical Look at Some of T.V.'s Top Narratives

If one were to watch a few hours of American prime time television narratives, what would the viewer learn about dominant American culture? To find out, one must critically examine prime time programming with a variety of tools from cultural studies and media literacy studies. Cultural studies "offers interpretations of these stories, messages, and meanings that circulate throughout our culture," say cultural studies scholars Richard Campbell, Christopher R. Martin, and Bettina Fabos (Campbell et al. 532). Campbell et al. continue:

Cultural studies research has focused on how people make meaning, understand reality, and order experience by using cultural symbols that appear in the media. This research has attempted to make everyday culture the centerpiece of media studies, focusing on how subtly mass communication shapes and is shaped by history, politics, and economics. Other cultural studies work examines the relationship between elite individuals and groups in government and politics and how media play a role in sustaining the authority of elites and, occasionally, in challenging their power." (Campbell et al. 527)

Media literacy is "the ability to choose, to understand—within the context of content, form/style, impact, industry, and production—to question, to evaluate, to create and/or produce and to respond thoughtfully to the media we consume," says the National Telemedia Council (qtd. in

Silverblatt et al. 4). Expanding on this, media literacy scholars Art Silverblatt, Andrew Smith, Don Miller, Julie Smith, and Nikole Brown say that "media literacy promotes the critical thinking skills that enable people to make independent choices with regard to 1) which media programming to select and 2) how to interpret the information they receive through the channels of mass communication" (4). With this in mind, Silverblatt and his colleagues identify several tools, their Keys to Media Literacy, that can be applied to media presentations to analyze programs' messages (15). Taken together, tools from both cultural studies and media literacy can help determine what kinds of messages are portrayed about dominant American culture through prime time television narratives.

Prime time television consists of television presentations broadcast between the hours of 7 and 10 p.m. Central Time, and television narratives are T.V.'s fictional comedies or dramas ("Week 9"). One could choose to view dozens of prime time narratives, but in this analysis, these narratives include two situational comedies and two dramas: *New Girl*, *The Big Bang Theory*, *The Blacklist*, and *Marvel: Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* *New Girl*, a Fox production, is a television situational comedy that takes a modern look at friendship and romance through the "interconnected romantic exploits" of a group of friends and "their often hilariously misguided attempts to find their respective places in the world" ("*New Girl: About the Show*"). Like most modern sitcoms, *New Girl* follows a formulaic sitcom plot and setting: following a group of beautiful friends—single 30-somethings Jessica, Nick, Winston, Schmidt, and Cece—through their days and relationships, primarily outside of work within their home in the city; (Silverblatt et al. 149-154; "Helmet"). *The Big Bang Theory*, a CBS production, is another situational, domestic comedy about a group of friends living their lives at home and at work; scientist friends Leonard, Sheldon, Howard, and Raj, who are "geniuses in the laboratory but socially challenged

everywhere else,” are accompanied by their female love interests, Penny, Amy, and Bernadette (“About *The Big Bang Theory*”). *The Blacklist*, an NBC Universal production, is a law enforcement thriller/drama focusing on the cases of rookie FBI agent Elizabeth Keen and criminal mastermind Raymond “Red” Reddington (“Pilot,” *The Blacklist*). On Agent Keen’s first day on the job with the FBI, the elusive Reddington walks in to the FBI office and surrenders; he offers to work with Agent Keen to catch members of The Blacklist, Reddington’s list of high-profile criminals with whom Reddington also holds a grudge (“Pilot,” *The Blacklist*). *Marvel: Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, a Marvel and ABC law enforcement spinoff of several Marvel superhero movies including *The Avengers*, follows Agent Coulson and his team of S.H.I.E.L.D. agents; S.H.I.E.L.D. is the government homeland security department tasked with keeping American interests and the world safe from aliens and those with access to alien technology (“Pilot,” *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*). Coulson is accompanied by special operations Agent Ward, scientists Agents Fitz and Simmons, pilot and ex-special operations Agent May, and civilian computer specialist Skye (“Pilot,” *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*).

Ideology, according to Silverblatt et al., “refers to the system of beliefs characteristic of an individual, group or culture. An ideology contains assumptions about how the world should operate, who should oversee this world, and the proper and appropriate relationships among its inhabitants” (101). A message analysis of *New Girl*, *The Big Bang Theory*, *The Blacklist*, and *Marvel: Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* is not a comprehensive analysis of American prime time programming, nor is it an exhaustive look at dominant or alternative American culture and ideology. Yet, these four prime time television narratives each come from a different major media network—Fox, CBS, NBC, and ABC—and include two sitcoms and two law enforcement dramas, providing a somewhat varied sample. An analysis of these programs first suggests that,

according to prime time narratives, America is the dominant world force; whatever the United States chooses to do is what is correct, as the ends justify the means. Second, women now occupy and should be accepted as occupying the traditional gender roles of both men *and* women, but men should keep to traditional male roles.

In the United States, culture is dominated primarily by conglomerates (Gerbner). “Cultural decision making is now out of democratic reach. It’s highly centralized and run by an invisible Ministry of Culture of people whose names we don’t know, who have never been elected, and who are supported by a form of taxation without representation. . . . That is why I call these conglomerates a private government. . . .” (Gerbner). Conglomerates have one motive underlying all of their choices and secondary motives, that motive being corporate profit. This influences media because media are concentrated into the hands of a few large conglomerates (Bagdikian). To make matters worse, the media, owned mostly by some of these conglomerates, has become inextricably linked with other industries, including that of parent company, its subsidiaries, its advertisers, and the government, the last of which has the power to regulate media and allow or disallow media conglomerates to create oligarchies (Bagdikian). As Bagdikian says:

“The dominant concern is that the five huge media conglomerates, for all realistic purposes, now control what the American public learns - or does not learn - about its own world. It was once possible to consider excessive concentrated control of the mass media as a distinct entity on its own, a formidable force in the national economy and politics. But it is no longer possible to separate the media giants from other major industries. Ownership of media is now so integrated in political orientation and business connections

with all of the largest industries in the American economy that they have become a coalition of power on an international scale." (Bagdikian)

This most obviously applies to news media, but this relationship also exists with entertainment media. These inextricable relationships are much to do with why shows like *Marvel: Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, *The Blacklist*, *The Big Bang Theory*, and *New Girl* to varying degrees support dominant culture.

First, two of these shows support the United States as an entity that can do no wrong. *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* follows the exploits of one team of the American S.H.I.E.L.D. agency, the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division ("Pilot," *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*). Despite its name, which implies the organization is concerned only with the American homeland, S.H.I.E.L.D. acts like a global organization ("The Hub"). It regularly intervenes in other countries without their support and without significant consequences ("0-8-4"). "You stay in your borders, I'll stay in mine," says Comandante Reyes of the Peruvian military police, the Policia Militar de Peru; Coulson replies, "Those borders are disappearing. Aliens descended on New York, remember? They don't care whose colors you wear, they just care who's in the way" ("0-8-4"). Regardless of Agent Coulson's intentions, he's implicitly arguing that his American S.H.I.E.L.D. team is justified in taking action in other countries regardless of the country's wishes. His argument about the aliens isn't logical, however; the hostile aliens are no longer a threat, as they were defeated in the Battle of New York in *The Avengers* movie. A similar situation occurs in the episode "The Asset." Corporate CEO Mr. Quinn kidnaps Dr. Hall and takes him to the Republic of Malta ("The Asset").

HALL. S.H.I.E.L.D. can't come after you here. . . .you've finally found a place where the watchdogs can't touch you.

QUINN. “Not without [S.H.I.E.L.D.] breaking international law. (“The Asset”)

Yet, Agents Coulson and May find a way to breach international law without risking too much international retribution (“The Asset”).

COULSON. They'll never allow a strike force into Malta. Plus, this weekend, Quinn

Worldwide's got its annual shareholders gathering. We'd risk global outrage. But—”
MAY. If we go in alone—

COULSON. S.H.I.E.L.D. can disavow us. (“The Asset”)

S.H.I.E.L.D., an agency of the Marvel-universe U.S. government, thinks the rules don't apply to them. In another episode, “Girl in the Flower Dress,” S.H.I.E.L.D. acts as an assumed global police force as they track a missing “gifted,” someone with superpowers, in Japan. Then, in “The Hub,” the area of Ossetia wants to use a weapon to declare their independence from Russia and Georgia. S.H.I.E.L.D. intervenes because the alleged weapon could cause a pulse that could allow the rebels to take over use of American Weapons (“The Hub”). These four episodes make it clear that leadership of the American agency, S.H.I.E.L.D., thinks international rules need not apply as long as a mission meets the S.H.I.E.L.D. definition of helping or protecting people.

This point is poignant because S.H.I.E.L.D., the Strategic Homeland Intervention Enforcement and Logistics Division, is metaphoric for the real-life Department of Homeland Security (“Pilot,” *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*). Following 9/11, America was thrown into chaos and Americans lived in fear of the next terrorist attack on American soil. One year after 9/11, the U.S. government integrated 22 federal departments and agencies into the new Department of Homeland Security, DHS (“History”). DHS was created with a mission, as stated on the department website, “to secure the nation from the many threats we face . . . our goal is clear - keeping America safe” (“About DHS”). Likewise, S.H.I.E.L.D., according to Agent Ward,

“protect[s] people from things they aren’t ready to hear. And when we can’t do that, we keep ‘em safe” (“Pilot” 5:25-7:21). History of Marvel comics also demonstrates the metaphor between the Marvel-universe S.H.I.E.L.D. and the real-life Department of Homeland Security. S.H.I.E.L.D. has existed since the 1960s but was given a new acronym meaning for *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, specifically inserting the word “homeland” (McMillan). S.H.I.E.L.D. originally stood for “Supreme Headquarters, International Espionage, Law-Enforcement Division,” and then later for “Strategic Hazard Intervention Espionage Logistics Directorate” (McMillan).

The Blacklist also shows evidence of the dominant cultural ideology of American government agencies doing as they wish. *Blacklist*, however, frames this message more with the program’s use of production elements. Reddington explicitly holds an ends-justifies-the-means worldview. “I will do whatever it takes to protect you,” Reddington says to Agent Keen toward the end of “Wujing.” By the second episode, Harold Cooper, the FBI agent overseeing Agent Keen and Reddington, already holds some trust in Reddington. “The truth is, we have no idea who Reddington may be involved with,” says Cooper; “Then why should we trust him?” asks Diane Fowler, the head of the FBI (“The Freelancer”). The immediate cut-away and the lack of an answer lets audience members presume an answer was given, though audience members don’t know what the answer is (“The Freelancer”). This sets up audience members to trust Reddington. Next, Reddington is typically dressed in warm browns and whites; when he wears a black and white tuxedo, his tie is blue and orange (“The Freelancer”). “Warm colors, like red, orange and yellow, tend to make us feel happy, secure, positive, and intensely involved. Cool colors, like blue or violet, make us feel calm,” says Silverblatt et al. (172). The lighting over Reddington is almost always soft (“The Freelancer”). Hard lighting can be used to create a pessimistic worldview, and, conversely, soft lighting makes Reddington seem a bit more innocent and

trustworthy (176). The camera angle often tilts slightly up toward Reddington (“The Freelancer”). “Shooting up at a person makes the subject appear larger, more important, and powerful, and his or her position or attitude as legitimate. . . . The choice of angle can also affect the audience’s attitude toward the subject,” say Silverblatt, et al (184). Finally, the background noise and music always quiet when Reddington speaks, suggesting that audience members should take heed of his words (“The Freelancer;” Silverblatt et al. 198). These color, lighting, angle, and sound elements further set up Reddington as a trustworthy character. The creators of *The Blacklist* chose to make Reddington, a notorious criminal, one of the protagonists. If Reddington has a my-way, ends-justify-the-means worldview, then this suggests that the FBI, a government organization does, too.

Alternatively, the other two analyzed programs, *New Girl* and *The Big Bang Theory*, are situational comedies and have minimal mention of current events or politics, real or fictitious; *New Girl* has a single allusion to real-world events and *The Big Bang Theory* has no such mentions (“Helmet;” “Comic-Con Conundrum”). According to meaning-making theory, active viewers use media to create their own meaningful experiences, such as enhancing mood (Baran and Davis 25). The sitcoms’ lack of mention of real-world issues isn’t surprising, as comedic narratives are often used as cathartic breaks for audience members. However, this lack of challenging of dominant ideology can be read as tacit approval. “In some cases, audiences might develop interpretations in direct opposition to a preferred reading. In that case, they are said to engage in oppositional decoding,” say mass communication theorists Stanley Baran and Dennis Davis (219). William Gamson and his team agree; “. . . messages provide a many-voiced, open text that can and often is read oppositionally, at least in part” (Gamson et al. 373). If a text is not criticizing an ideology, it can be seen as approving of it. In this case, the dominant American

ideology not challenged in *New Girl* or *Big Bang Theory* is America's our-way-is-the-right-way mass mindset.

The second dominant ideology found in *New Girl*, *The Big Bang Theory*, *The Blacklist*, and *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* is the idea that women now occupy and should be accepted as occupying the traditional gender roles of both men and women—but men should keep to traditional male roles. *The Blacklist* stars a female FBI agent, Agent Keen, working cases with criminal Raymond Reddington (“Pilot,” *The Blacklist*). While Reddington helps Elizabeth, he’s also manipulating her, as he does in the second episode: “It was Reddington. He hired the freelancer. . . . The coat-check attendant. Think about it. The coat check didn’t leave the picture in Red’s hat. Red left it for him. He was signaling the hit. . . . Pointing out The Freelancer was a distraction” (“The Freelancer”). This makes it seem like Reddington is completely in charge and perhaps Agent Keen is not apt to deal with him. However, other scenes show Elizabeth as a smart, savvy female agent. For example, the viewer see her undercover infiltrating a Chinese spy ring with Reddington, and she performs flawlessly (“Wujing”). The viewer also hears her analyses on criminals, including Reddington, and get a peek at her cunning (“Pilot,” *The Blacklist*). She keeps her cool and doesn’t let her face betray her, even under the direst of circumstances (“The Stewmaker”). Though she’s less polished than some of her compatriots, this is due only to her inexperience. She begins to crack when her husband is assaulted in episode one, but she doesn’t let it happen again; we see her improving at a fast pace (“Pilot,” *The Blacklist*). Reddington’s choice of bodyguard also demonstrates the show’s women-can-do-anything ideology. He chooses two guards meant to keep him safe from physical harm. One is a large man and one is an average-build woman (“Pilot,” *The Blacklist*). On the other hand, the show does little to expand gender roles for men. In episode two, we see that Reddington’s second

body guard, a large, muscular man, with the symbol of a sex-trading cartel branded in his skin (“The Freelancer”). This points out that men and boys can also be victims of sexual assault and sex trading—a step in the right direction toward gender equality. Second, agent Keen’s husband, Tom, is a fourth-grade teacher—a break in gender stereotyping (“Pilot,” *The Blacklist*). This initially also appears to be a step toward gender equality. Yet, Tom is captured and assaulted in the very first episode (“Pilot,” *The Blacklist*). Since Agent Keen’s husband gives the only example, in the four episodes of *Blacklist* examined, of intentionally breaking gender stereotypes, and he is assaulted soon after audience members learn of his career, this suggests that men intentionally breaking traditional gender roles can’t protect their family and aren’t quite as appropriately masculine as men who stay in their defined roles.

The Big Bang Theory, like *The Blacklist*, sends mixed messages about gender roles. On one hand, Bernadette says her husband, Howard, can only go on a week-long trip and leave her alone with their infant for a week if he gets ahead of both his and Bernadette’s chores before he buys tickets for the event; Bernadette expects Howard to have an equal share in the childcare (“The Comic-Con Conundrum”). On the other hand, Howard is shown as reluctantly agreeing to the terms, accompanied by canned laughter from the audience; this undermines their supposed childcare equality (“The Comic-Con Conundrum”). When Bernadette needs a night off from work and childcare, two male friends, Raj and Stewart, offer to watch her and Howard’s baby while she has a night out with the girls and while Howard works (“The Locomotion Reverberation”). Again, however, the progress from the breaking of gender roles is undermined as Raj and Stewart, bumbling, call Bernadette because they wake the sleeping baby and then can’t get the baby to stop crying (“The Locomotion Reverberation”). In two positive notes for women, the characters of *Big Bang Theory* discuss breastfeeding as a normal, positive part of

motherhood, and the female characters include two female scientists, one who behaves in a stereotypically smart-but-awkward manner and the other who behaves both smart and socially forward (“The Locomotion Reverberation”).

Marvel: Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. provides evidence of society’s movement toward gender equality for men. Of the six team members, there are two fighters, two scientists, the commander, and a hacker (“Pilot,” *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*). One fighter is male and one is female; one scientist is male and the other female; and one of the remaining two agents is male and the other female (“Pilot,” *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*). Furthermore, each of the team members, both male and female, are portrayed as excellent in their respective jobs—support for equality for both genders. In “F.Z.Z.T.,” Agent Fitz, the male scientist, begins to put on a parachute to jump out of the plane to catch Agent Simmons, his female colleague; Agent Ward, the male fighter, grabs it from him and jumps out instead of Agent Fitz. After Agent Simmons is safely back on the plane, Agents Fitz and Simmons talk:

FITZ. I was going to do it.

SIMMONS. I know you were.

FITZ. I had the antiserum, the chute, everything. I just couldn’t get the straps on.

SIMMONS. Fitz, please.

FITZ. And, you know, maybe I couldn’t have done the whole James-Bond-in-midair type of thing.

SIMMONS. Fitz, shut up. Please, just—Ward did an amazing thing, yes, but it wasn’t Ward by my side in that lab searching for a cure. It wasn’t Ward giving me hope when I had none. It was you. You’re the hero. (“F.Z.Z.T.”)

When Agent Simmons redefines the traditional meanings of “bravery” and “hero,” traditionally words ascribed to men, she also redefines masculinity; she tells audience members that there is more than one way to correctly be a man. Concerning gender equality, *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* depicts an alternate ideology to dominant culture.

New Girl has similar gender breakthroughs. The plot of “Road Trip” involves a “manly” bachelor party road trip that directly results from Schmidt feeling emasculated. The most poignant scene involves a private conversation between roommates and lifelong friends Nick and Schmidt:

NICK. Ever since I've known you, you've been there. Okay, you're always there. Even when I don't want you there, you're there. That's what a husband does. You fight for me. That's what a husband does. You care about what I eat. That's what a husband does. You cook for me, even when I don't ask. That's what a husband does. When I pass out, you comb my hair so there's no knots in it. That's what a husband does. So, guess what. You're gonna be a great husband to Cece . . . (“Road Trip”)

In the following episode, “A Chill Day In,” Jess and Cece, also roommates and lifelong friends, have a mirrored conversation about Cece’s fears of not being able to properly care for her future husband:

CECE. What does that say about me if I can't even take care of a bread maker? What if Louise [Schmidt’s mom] was right? What if I can't take care of Schmidt?
 JESS. How can you say you don't take care of people? You've been taking care of me my entire life. You're fierce and you are strong, and you would stand up for anyone that you love. You're like a big, scary mama bear...You're my mama bear, Girl. (“A Chill Day In”)

In redefining a “good husband” and “good wife,” Nick and Jessica redefine traditional gender roles. *New Girl*, therefore, supports an ideology of gender equality for both women *and* men.

Analyzing a few episodes each of four prime time television narratives cannot provide a comprehensive answer for what such narratives say about American culture. Yet, such an analysis can still give a good idea about dominant culture in the United States. By looking at several episodes of *New Girl*, *The Big Bang Theory*, *The Blacklist*, and *Marvel: Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*—two comedies and two dramas, each from a different major network—from a cultural perspective and using elements from media literacy, one can identify two patterns. First, say these prime time narratives, America is the dominant world force, and whatever the United States chooses to do is what goes; for America, the ends justify the means. Second, women are undoubtedly capable of doing anything men can do and do it well; however, men should keep to traditional men’s roles.

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