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Overinterpreting Television *Rubicon* and the Limits of Viewership

Although cancelled after only one season, AMC's *Rubicon* (2010) offers an example of a televisual text that challenges viewers by presenting little in the way of narrative explanation, alongside a complex plot structure that plays with contemporary fascinations with conspiracies and the flow of global power. Following a group of intelligence analysts at the API (American Policy Institute), *Rubicon* portrays the actions and decisions of the members of the think tank as they attempt to track a previously unsuspected individual, who they quickly decide is the central agent within an international ring of fundamentalists, mobsters, and foreign intelligence agents. Here, the show draws on larger cultural anxieties over power, information, and terror.

What the thirteen episodes illustrate is twofold: the first is a model of paranoia and overinterpreting information that is at once the content of the show as well as its form, inviting the audience to participate in the fantasies, theories, and anxieties of the lead characters; the second is a critique of the function of power in the twenty-first century. These two qualities work in tandem to invite the audience into the narrative of *Rubicon*, allowing viewers to partake in a process that critiques power while being impotent in the face of its labyrinthine machinations. Without the current configuration of global power, the form of overinterpretation and paranoid reading in which the show participates would only be a pathological form of interpreting the world. With it, we see *Rubicon* as a critical text that reflects the anxieties and uncertainties created by immaterial and amorphous systems of political decision-making. At our current historical juncture, a paranoid reading is both a highly entertaining and a critical reading of the world. One cannot simply dismiss a paranoid reading of power and information when the current structure of power engenders such a reading. Two semiotic concepts, or models, from Umberto Eco—the open work and overinterpretation—will serve as a foun-

ation for the following analysis. With these semiotic (perhaps even psychological) concepts, we can understand the problems that audiences pose to a text and its own act of reading. In addition, Gilles Deleuze's concept of control, as well as N. Katherine Hayles' information theory, will serve to investigate the manner in which the complexity of the digital age forces us to rethink the nature and function of power.

Rubicon demands the audience to take on the position of the lead character, Will Travers (James Badge Dale)—an intelligence analyst with API who, as we quickly learn, has led a half-life since the deaths of his wife and daughter on 9/11. Travers tries to unravel a series of common references planted in six major international newspapers. As the series unfolds, we assume the role of interpreter: the one who must figure out how the various events and actions can be composed into a narrative. The audience then suffers the same level of paranoia as Will while he moves toward either truth or madness. In part, our interpellation as active viewers is foisted upon us by the lack of narrative intervention on the parts of the writers, directors, and characters.

This invitation to interpretation offers us an example through which we can understand the limits of television shows that base their following on an integrated and interactive model of viewership. Through its paucity of narrative closure over the season, *Rubicon* was unable to develop a sustained mass audience. The formal elements of *Rubicon* illustrate a logic of intense and committed viewership that invariably fails given that it offers us no cathartic resolution, nor a geo-political picture predicated on a threatening other (e.g. *Homeland* [2011-]).

As with shows such as *Lost* (2004-2010), the *X-Files* (1993-2002), and *Fringe* (2008-2013), the audience is offered an overarching narrative that bases its appeal on the possibility of a truth that will be revealed. *Rubicon* differs

in its lack of hyperbole or fantasy. The world of *Rubicon* is one of the banally ordinary and the characters are anything but powerful or heroic. They are neurotic, weak, and compulsive in their behaviors. As intricate and conspiratorial as *Rubicon* becomes, the actual conspiracy at work—that the very institute that the analysts work for is part of a conspiratorial body that seeks to impose a specific interpretation of the truth upon the global politics—is not a radical conspiracy by either the standards of television or American popular culture. In the end, the goals of the conspirators are revealed to be nothing more than self-interest and the continued geo-political strength of the American empire.

Rubicon provides us with a forum through which we can understand how power functions in the new world order and how this generates a paranoid reaction on the part of the viewer, which is what Eco refers to as textual overinterpretation. It is through Eco's concept of the open work that we can initially read *Rubicon*. What *Rubicon* offers viewers is the possibility of engaging with a field of meaning, instead of being limited to a specific, determined chain of symbolic and formal meanings. Eco argues that every work of art is inherently an open work in so much as its semiotic nature demands an act of interpretation on the part of the audience. This act is admittedly one that follows prescribed practices of interpretation. In the twentieth century, however, Eco sees an extension of this general pattern of openness. He writes:

In every century, the way that artistic forms are structured reflects the way in which science or contemporary culture views reality. . . . Hence, it is not overambitious to detect in the poetics of the "open" work . . . more or less specific overtones of trends in contemporary scientific thought. . . . Perhaps it is no accident that these poetic systems emerge at the same period as the physicists' principles of complementarity, which rules that it is not possible to indicate the different behavior patterns of an elementary particle simultaneously. . . . Hence one could argue, with Bohr, that the data collected in the course of experimental situations cannot be gathered in one image but should be considered as complimentary, since only the sum of all the phenomena could exhaust the possibilities of information. (1989, 13-16)

Here, the text does not simply exist as a determined system of meaning that we must give into, but rather an open system we must add to in order to produce its full meaning. Although Eco prioritizes scientific discourse as the inspiration of interpretative strategies, he certainly leaves room to consider cultural and technological models as influences for the radical openness of the post-modern. Our contemporary moment of complexity and digital communication

multiplies the initial level of indeterminacy that lies behind all meaning.

Rubicon treats the openness of its text as the very object of its paranoid reaction to complexity. Its adherence to a level of realism that avoids the open appeal to the extraordinary, the fantastic, or the supernatural, curtails any utopian or transcendental possibilities. This realism forces us back upon our own world and marks it as a televisual text that engages with contemporary anxieties over power, information, and surveillance. Here, we move away from the utopian impulse of Eco's open work and transition to the realities of interpretation that he discusses in *Inter-*



pretation and Overinterpretation, in which he analyzes the ramifications of his earlier concept as one that necessarily produces improper readings. In particular, he focuses on those readings that interject the reading subject and his or her interests into the text. Eco argues that such a model of overinterpretation produces a form of paranoid reading.

For Eco, the paranoid reading does not distinguish between the internal relationship of a reader to a text, and the external relationship of a reader and the text to the social world. In the act of interpretation, the paranoid reader is unable to make distinctions between various registers of meaning, types of texts, and forms of symbolic expressivity. This inability to mark distinctions is witnessed in the obsessive inclusion of the reader within, not only the act of interpretation, but within the text itself. All symbols turn back upon the reader, who finds necessary meaning in even the most contingent of chances. There is always a reason that explains the workings of chance:

[T]he difference between the sane interpretation and the paranoiac interpretation lies in recognizing that this relationship is minimal, and not, on the contrary, deducing from this minimal relationship the maximum possible. The paranoiac is not the person who notices that 'while' and 'crocodile' curiously appear in the same context: the paranoiac is the person

who begins to wonder about the mysterious motives that induced me to bring these two particular words together. The paranoid sees beneath my example a secret, to which I allude. (1992, 48)

Suspicion is, for Eco, the very force that drives the paranoid, but it is not necessarily a pathological one as it is also the force that drives all intellectual investigations. The problem is one of economy. Where the sane person looks for the most economical, simple explanation to any interpretive situation, the paranoid finds the least economical, least obvious explanation to be the correct one. In other words, the paranoid rejects Ockham's razor: the most economical explanation is *not* the correct answer. The expansive and the over-produced are where truth can be found. Suspicion falls upon the very act of explanation, which involves a removal of superfluous details.

The paranoid reading is not a pathological inability to read signs and symbols practically. There is something healthy about paranoia, or, to be a little less aphoristic, paranoia is the natural response to a discursive system in which most—if not all—experience is placed within a system of meaning that opens up beneath our feet. It is a response appropriate to a world of visual experience, limited by digital media and communication to such a degree that they become the arbiters of truth. To Eco, paranoid reading is not necessarily a form of error as it points out an underlying cynical relation to the structures of truth. These structures are external and autonomous entities that control the experience of truth. Here, paranoia is not simply the reaction of the narcissistic subject to its own impotence. Paranoia gives birth to a drive to see external connections that undermine the truth, or, transform the economy of truth into one of infinite productivity.

We find in *Rubicon* an example of this overinterpretation of information, based on the seemingly innate desire to construct patterns out of clues, random and anomalous data, and suspicion. In a pivotal scene, Will goes to discuss his theories with Ed Bancroft (Roger Robinson), a burnt-out analyst considered to be the most gifted reader and designer of codes. When Ed does not answer the door, Will enters his house to find his dining room wall covered in notes that detail every last event in the growing series of communications and clues that Will and Ed have collected. What we see, through Will's eyes, is a seemingly random collection of papers that we read as paranoid pastiche. At this point, we are also encountering a common symbol of the past twenty years of cinema and television: the textual collage of information collected in order to draw connections that could not be made without these visual cues. This inter-textual collage is instantly recognizable as a sign of mental lack (amnesia), or mental overproduction (para-

noia). Will's reaction suggests that he is concerned for the health of his friend, whose precarious mental state has always defined his brilliance. The significance of this scene comes from Ed, who has given away the plot of the series. The connections between the various go codes, the history

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of the mysterious Donald Bloom (Michael Gaston), the troubles in Nigeria, and the threat to Houston are all real within the narrative. Ed stumbles across the reality of the *Rubicon* plot and yet, his reasoning is dismissed by us, given our suspicion of his mental and emotional instability. Will's lies to Ed are also significant: he claims that they have been pursuing the wrong Donald Bloom when, in fact, they have been pursuing the correct target.

Throughout the series, Will and his colleagues have an ambiguous relationship to the institution they work for and the military industrial complex it reports to. In the previous episode, Will goes to Washington along with Truxton Spangler (Michael Cristofer), the head of API, to appear before the funding board at the NSA (National Security Agency). In a darkened room across from the various heads of the United States' military and intelligence organizations, Spangler argues for the importance of an independent voice in the intelligence industry. In particular, he draws attention to the silent Will, whom he praises for his excessive intelligence (comparing him to a computer) as well as his absolute indifference (suggesting his pseudo-autistic nature). The effect of Spangler's speech is the continuation of their funding, but it also moves Will away from his conspiratorial pursuits and, for a while at least, back into the folds of the intelligence industry. Will lies to Ed because he has once again been drawn in by the promise of knowledge and power that his work at API (including his recent promotion) has granted him.

Will's ambiguous relationship to his work, his employer and his supervisors is due to the models of power that define the shift from an industrial, institutional society to the one defined by models of digital information and surveillance. This shift in the deployment of power is what Deleuze referred to as the movement from a society of discipline to one of control. As Deleuze argues in "Postscript on the Societies of Control," what distinguishes control from discipline is the difference between open and closed systems. Control functions on a general level in which it

provides the logic through which every institution or site of power also functions; it is more totalizing in that it creates a society in which all forms of communication and expression are reducible to a single system or form of power. For Deleuze, control functions according to a digital logic in which power can distribute and duplicate itself at any point. Power is, therefore, nowhere and, potentially, everywhere. He describes the distinction between discipline and control through its virtuality and immanence:

“Control” is the name Burroughs proposes as a term for the new monster, one that Foucault recognizes as our immediate future. Paul Virilio also is continually analyzing the ultrarapid forms of free-floating control that replaced the old disciplines operating in the time frame of a closed system. (Deleuze 4)

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The conflict between these two forms of power comes across in the inter-agency conflicts that emerge throughout the series as various intelligence groups protect their own information and fret over the security of classified paper documents. It also comes across in that electronic surveillance is regarded as the background noise of the entire narrative. What we see in the world of *Rubicon*—in the world of our twenty-first century—is the reduction of individuals, bodies, and the world to information. Here, Hayles’ discussion of information as the new paradigm can be used to understand the forms and functions of knowledge:

It is a pattern rather than a presence, defined by the probability distribution of the coding elements comprising the message. If information is pattern, then non-information should be the absence of pattern, that is, randomness. This commonsense expectation ran into unexpected complications when certain developments within information theory implied that information could be equated with randomness as well as with pattern. Identifying information with *both* pattern and randomness proved to be a powerful paradox, leading to the realization that in some instances, an infusion of noise into a system can cause it to reorganize at a higher level of complexity. Within such a system, pattern and randomness are bound together in a complex dialectic that makes them not so much opposites as complements or supplements to one another. Each helps to define the other; each contributes to the flow of information through the system. (70)

Reading Hayles’ account of pattern and randomness against Eco’s discussion of overinterpretation allows us to understand how both pattern and randomness are not polar op-

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posites, but involved in a symbiotic relationship that allows them to produce information at new levels of complexity. This suggests that Eco’s notion of the paranoid reading should not be read pathologically, but exceptionally. The paranoid is the one who can see and create new models of information that go beyond the intended or regulated sense of a specific text.

Unlike the image of the autonomous computer tasked with supervising unruly human populations, in *Rubicon* we see a decidedly low-tech approach to intelligence. In the API, we have an institution that relies on the work and communication of individuals who analyze data and propose actions of geopolitical import. We do not find a group of normal individuals, but a collection of excessive personality types, united by their seemingly uncanny ability to work through complex problems. The people at the API stand in for digital technology and its potential; they are able to interpret data and determine its meaning, pattern, or probability. It is the exceptional human mind that is able to process information, not as a set series of rules that must be followed, but as a creative field. However, this creative field is also at risk as it is tied to mania, compulsion, and instability. Deleuze argues that the computer represents the perfect technological description of our age:

Types of machines are easily matched with each type of society—not that machines are determining, but because they express those social forms capable of generating them and using them. . . . [T]he societies of control operate with machines of a third type, computers, whose passive danger is jamming and whose active one is piracy and the introduction of viruses. (6)

One could use Deleuze’s description of computers in order to read Will, Ed, and all the analysts in *Rubicon* as susceptible to a series of active and passive threats, based on their own eccentric genius that seeks to pursue connections and codes. Eco’s earlier discussion of the relationship between scientific discourse and cultural practices of interpretation adds to Deleuze’s analysis of technological metaphors. The link between science, technology, communication, and power is one not easily broken in a contemporary digital society.



It is with power as a form of organizing information that we might find the greatest sense of instability. When Spangler presents his closing remarks to the funding committee, we have a sense that he exposes the impotence of government institutions: they do not know what they are doing or why they are doing it and wait for people like Spangler to tell them what they must do. As pointed out by Deleuze, the age of the state is over:

But everyone knows that these institutions are finished, whatever the length of their expiration periods. It's only a matter of administering their last rites and of keeping people employed until the installation of the new forces knocking at the door. (Deleuze 4)

The irony is that the API is the new force kicking in the door of the state's traditional institutions. It is also the force that uses intelligence to facilitate a terrorist attack in Houston in order to disrupt the flow of oil into the US. The model of power used by the API is one based on a global deployment of force and coercion through its interpretation and creation of information. Will's paranoia emerges when he realizes that the intelligence he and his team analyze has a definitive pattern—one that bears the hallmark of their own particular brand of analysis. Our suspicion is generated by the openness of this conspiracy as it is offered within the show's narrative. The audience is not presented with clear signs, symbols, patterns, or clichés. Instead, what is seen is a series of random codes, events, shots, and scenes that we suspect to have meaning and intention behind them. Unlike Eco's claim that this is what the spectator projects onto a text, we also understand that, in an age where power can manifest itself anywhere in the world in order to destroy or confine, we have a right to suspect coincidence as coincidence can be read as part of a larger pattern (even if this pattern is not

discernable to us). *Rubicon* succeeds in engaging us, as an audience, in a pattern of overinterpreting political reality. Although the final judgment of this act of interpretation is correct (*i.e.*, there is a conspiracy at the heart of the intelligence community), its method and form is one marked by uncertainty, instability, and paranoia—all of which render it unable to act in order to challenge, or change the “ultra-rapid forms of free-floating control” that exemplify power's manifestations (Deleuze 4). *Rubicon* offers no consolation to this post-modern anxiety. The conspiracy comes off and no one is able to stop it. We once again witness the world through Will's eyes as something out of control. It is something that cannot be predicted, but only interpreted after the fact, a mute and indifferent fact in the face of which we are powerless to act.

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