

## Continuum: simple plot twist, complex moral dilemmas

I love *Continuum*, the Canadian science fiction production that tells the story of Kira Cameron, a Protector (cop) from 2077 stranded in our present time. Time travel theme? Yeah, I'm all over that.

They recently gave the plot a twist that I think is simple but provocative. I'll be talking about that in this post, but if you haven't seen the show yet and plan to, be forewarned that there are SPOILERS from here on out after the cut.

Kira Cameron, played by Rachel Nichols, is sent back through time to our present era when terrorists escaped execution through time travel, and she got swept along for the ride. As she says in her voice-over intro to the show, if things change too much in the present, she doesn't know what future she'll get back to. And that would be a tragedy, because she's a young mother with a son she misses terribly, and a happy marriage, and now she is separated from those people and her entire life by 65 long years.

But though we see how much she was loving her life, we can't help but be dubious about the future-world she calls home. The future that we see depicted creates a certain amount of cognitive dissonance and hence emotional tension. Because Kira is framed as the protagonist and is a sympathetic character, we're inclined to like her. She is clearly one of the "good guys," (or at least thinks of herself that way), working to fight crime and battle terrorists that threaten the peaceful urban masses. Then we learn that what those terrorists are fighting are the Corporations that run this future world. Elected government has long since vanished. Economic hegemony is the power politics of the day, and corporations and their power elites rule it all.

So, although Kira and her fellow peace-keepers are styled "Protectors", you can't help but notice that what they are doing by default is protecting corporate interests. This is a society of haves and have-nots: the well-to-do living in protected enclaves, the disenfranchised marginalized and living literally on the fringes of society, struggling to survive in a setting rife with crime. Their actions are criminalized while those of the elites have a blind eye turned to them.

The modern cautionary note is plain: It is what we could be, if you took our present-day Citizens United political and corporate dysfunctions to their extreme. It is not amiss to note that the seeds of that dystopia are already in place; in fact, this is central to the Continuum premise, for the "terrorists" want to overthrow the corporations that govern everything, and plan to do so by gaining temporal power in the past (our present day) so they can change the future that results.

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Obviously Kira can't allow this "change the past" plot to succeed, for it will likely wipe out her future and her family, as well as everything else that is the world as she knows it. So this is the first basic conflict in the show: the clash of goals between protagonist and antagonists.

Now, along the way we also meet Alec Sadler, who is a computer genius in present time and by 2077 will become much more. He is, as a character later describes him, "Zuckerberg, Jobs, Buffet, and Gates all rolled up in one. You're like a king." A king by virtue of the world-changing tech he has developed, and the economic and corporate leverage it gave him to shape the world into his vision of a capitalist empire. Sadler and his company SadTech (a little heavy-handed symbolism in that name) have essentially created the Protectors, who are hardwired into coms and info grids, and wear super-suits that enhance their abilities and include such cool tricks as being bulletproof and having a stealth mode no agent should be without.

Thing is, Sadler arranged for Kira to be on the prison detail in the room affected by the time-travel device during the terrorists' escape. In essence, he planned for her to be sent back into the past. And along the way he embedded a message to his past self in her tech, which teenage genius-Alec eventually discovers.

And herewith comes the twist: Old Alec tells his younger self that he has taken the world down the wrong path, and only he, his younger self, can prevent this dark future from happening. Now Young Alec, who has become Kira's friend and tech guide, realizes that his decisions are shaping a future that his later self regrets. Will he comply with the request? What kind of future will he shape? If he creates something different, Kira will never be able to return home, or not to a home she recognizes. Yet if he continues to help her in her work, **her** goal is to stop alteration of the past so the future remains intact.

Do we want Kira to get back to her loved ones? Yes. do we want that dark future to exist? No. But this dissonance was already on the table, throughout season 1: the conflict between protagonist cop and antagonist terrorists. Now, by episode 2 of season 2, we see Alec is a major player: he did not "just happen" to create the future he did: he was creating a vision with fully mindful intention. And now he urges himself not to allow this to happen.

This simple twist--the message from future power-player to nascent power-player--adds layers of complexity to the plot and the character interactions themselves. It certainly complicates the goal/conflict formula previously established. How will it resolve? Who knows. What is clear so far is that this show is willing to treat "bad guys" as having good moral cores, and "good guys" as being on ambiguous moral grounds, and they are getting good mileage out of raising the stakes by ratcheting things up as they have in Season 2.

A scene shown in early episodes and reprised in the opening credits is that of a massive skyscraper collapsing as a result of a terrorist attack, "killing thousands of innocents." Nothing could be more iconic and evocative of 9/11, and naturally that sets the viewer up to hate the terrorists--until we see that the corporate heartlessness and stranglehold on society is, it seems, something actually despicable and worth opposing.

What an uncomfortable place to put viewers in, mentally and emotionally. The show is

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challenging for this sort of reason: rich in moral ambiguity, with a choice for an "obvious" good being, perhaps, a vote for a strategic evil. And that dichotomy applies pretty much no matter what direction you are viewing your moral choices from. If you like challenging science fiction that takes quandaries beyond the ordinary ho-hum "good versus evil" trope, this is a refreshing rain in the desert. And happily it has recently been renewed for a third season. I am hoping that, like with *Fringe*, the writers will have enough time to work through the various plot lines and dilemmas they have set up so there is a proper conclusion to the entire story arc--for some value of "proper," that is.

*Continuum*, on [SyFy Channel](#). This show has earned a big [Five Dinosaur Stomps of Approval!](#) The Lizard Lair deems this Must-See TV for thoughtful science fiction fans.