

# 9/11 REVISITED: REMEDIATION AS A TOOL TO REWRITE THE CULTURAL MEMORY OF THE TERRORIST ATTACKS OF 2001

11 DE SETEMBRO REVISITADO: REMEDIAÇÃO COMO FERRAMENTA  
PARA REESCREVER A MEMÓRIA CULTURAL DOS ATAQUES  
TERRORISTAS DE 2001

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## ABSTRACT

Over the last two decades, 9/11 established itself as an object of interest for academia, news outlets, and the arts, generating a multitude of cultural artifacts that allow us, collectively, to revisit the event, reread it in different circumstances, and, ultimately, rewrite it. Employing rewriting as a metaphor for a continuous process of representation and revision, this article explores the remediation of the terrorist attacks of 2001 and how representations of the event across time and different media help consolidate its place in cultural memory. With this purpose in mind, it analyzes John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006) and TV series *Designated Survivor* (2016) and discusses them as after-effects of 9/11.

*Keywords:* rewriting, cultural memory, remediation, terrorism

## RESUMO

Ao longo das últimas duas décadas, o 11 de setembro tem-se afirmado como objeto de interesse para a academia, para os meios de comunicação e para as artes, gerando uma série de artefactos culturais que nos permitem, coletivamente, revisi-

tar o evento, voltar a lê-lo em circunstâncias diferentes e, finalmente, reescrevê-lo. Utilizando a reescrita como metáfora para um processo contínuo de representação e revisão, este artigo explora o fenómeno da remediação dos ataques terroristas de 2001 e a forma como representações do evento ao longo do tempo e em diferentes meios ajudam a consolidar o seu lugar na memória cultural. Com este objetivo em mente, o artigo analisa a obra *Terrorist* (2006) de John Updike e a série de televisão *Designated Survivor* (2016) e discute-as enquanto efeitos pós-11 de setembro.

*Palavras-chave:* reescrita, memória cultural, remediação, terrorismo

The attacks of September 11, 2001, deeply impacted recent American history and inaugurated an era marked by terrorism as a key global issue. Unsurprisingly, over the last two decades, 9/11 established itself as an object of interest for academia (in several different fields that range from Cultural to Literary or Media Studies, Political Science, Sociology, and Anthropology, just to name a few), news outlets (television, newspapers, radio, and Internet) and the arts (literature, film, photography, painting, and sculpture, among others). Representations circulating since 2001 have both fortified the role of 9/11 as a “site of memory” (Nora, 1989), and allowed the Western world in particular to constantly revisit this “watershed moment” (Dudziak, 2003), reread it in different circumstances and through different lenses, and, ultimately, rewrite it.

In this article, rewriting functions in a twofold manner: on the one hand, it can be perceived as the repetition, over and over again, of the act of writing (re-writing) – in this particular case, the use and reuse of narratives and images associated with 9/11; on the other hand, rewriting can also be understood as the act of writing something again to change it – to be more precise, to revise terrorism narratives. The purpose of this article is, thus, to employ rewriting as a metaphor for the process of representation and revision that resulted from 9/11.

Above all, I propose to explore how representations of this catalytic event<sup>1</sup> across time and different media have consolidated its place in cultural memory.

The process of formation of the meaning of the event and inscription in cultural memory started with the very name used to refer to it: September 11 or 9/11.<sup>2</sup> The “date and nothing more” (Borradori, 2003: 85) helped sell the event’s status as iconic and a staple in collective memory (Leavy, 2007: 2). However, this status is not fixed but constantly negotiated and rebuilt whenever the event is mentioned and represented. To understand the effects of this continuous recalling and representation, I intend to, first, discuss the concept of cultural memory and its close relationship with the process of remediation, i.e., the constant re-presentation of events; and second, analyze John Updike’s novel *Terrorist* (2006) and David Guggenheim’s TV series *Designated Survivor* (2016) as after-effects of 9/11, illustrative of how terrorism has been rewritten over the years.

*Terrorist* and *Designated Survivor* were chosen for three main reasons: first, the important role terrorism plays in the narratives. Updike’s novel ends with a failed attack on the Lincoln Tunnel in New

<sup>1</sup> For a broader discussion of 9/11 as an event, please see Jacques Derrida’s interview to Giovanna Borradori (Borradori, 2003) and Jean Baudrillard’s *The Spirit of Terrorism* (2003).

<sup>2</sup> Even though “Patriot Day” and “National Day of Service and Remembrance” have been adopted as the official designations (Public Law 107-89; Public Law 111-13), the “name-date” (Redfield, 2009: 1) has become instead the shorthand for the attacks of September 11, 2001. Derrida justifies this choice, namely in the early post-9/11 period, with the collective “powerlessness to name in an appropriate fashion, to characterize, to think the thing in question, to get beyond the mere deictic of the date” (Borradori, 2003: 87). Over time, it has stuck in people’s minds, separate from other September 11 from different years or geographical locations. Two distinguishing factors are the North American date format and its coincidental overlap with the American emergency phone number 911.

York; in contrast, Guggenheim's show opens with a consummated terrorist attack on the US Capitol. Second, their strong focus on the figure of the terrorist as an "Other". Finally, third, temporal distance between the two works of fiction. The ten-year gap between the two works helps demonstrate the transition identified by Paul Petrovic from a first to a second wave of post-9/11 texts. The first was centered on the traumatic event and "individuals' ruminations on the psychic damage wrought from the attack" (Petrovic, 2015: xvi); the second expands on those themes while focusing on working through trauma, exploring the repercussions of the war on terror, and offering "many disparate perspectives, from national exceptionalism to surveillance, from Muslim stereotypes to cultural bridge-making" (2005: xvi-xvii).

#### THE AFTERLIFE OF DISASTER: REMEDIATION AS A TOOL TO CREATE AND PRESERVE MEMORY

When an event like 9/11 takes place, two different phenomena are triggered at the same time: one at the individual level, and the other at the collective level. As far as the former is concerned, when someone goes through something, big or small, life-changing or ordinary, directly or indirectly, memories are necessarily created. These memories, which may take the shape of images, sounds, smells, ideas, and feelings, are stored in the person's brain and can either be preserved as an internal process or externalized through verbalization and material objects.

When it comes to the collective level, the shared experience of an event produces a specific type of memory that, even though connected to individuals, results from a collective movement. In this case, the preservation of memories cannot be limited to individual archiving acts; rather, it requires collective forms of registering and recollection. In essence, the story of the event, its memory (what it is and what it means), is constructed, stabilized, and reproduced

through different written, visual, and audio media. This process of collective remembrance ensures that, on the one hand, an important common event is not forgotten and, on the other, that it helps shape a group's culture and identity (who they are, how they perceive themselves and are perceived by others).

One could say that a society that does not remember is a society without knowledge of its past, of itself, and of others. In Paul Connerton's words: "We experience our present world in a context which is causally connected with past events and objects, and hence with reference to events and objects which we are not experiencing when we are experiencing the present" (2003: 2). This implies that remembering the past is a requirement for living the present and, I would add, preparing the future. That said, it does not negate the importance of forgetting parts of the past, as remembering operates in parallel to forgetting. Not only are there limits to how much we can remember, biologically and technologically, but some memories are also either irrelevant or too violent or traumatic to revisit. This means that some things deserve to be kept alive, while others are better left in the past. Aleida Assmann distinguishes, in relation to this, between active and passive memory: the first is related to a process of preserving the past as present; the second is related to preserving the past as past (2008: 98).

In this article, I will focus specifically on collective memory, even though individual memory will not be rejected or neglected. Considering that the bulk of what one remembers tends to match what is recorded and reproduced the most, it is reasonable that we talk about the influence of collective memory over individual memory; still, individual memory feeds collective memory as well through "individual forms of participation such as reading, writing, learning, scrutinizing, criticizing, and appreciating" (Assmann, 2010: 44). Furthermore, what appears on the media or is reflected in

the arts, literature, or cinema, is not produced in a sterile vacuum, uncontaminated by its surroundings. It is inescapably affected by the personal experiences and perspectives of their producers. In this regard, collective and individual memories are intrinsically connected, and both play a part in why and how certain experiences are remembered (some more than others; some to the detriment of others). Bearing in mind this relationship, it is relevant to concentrate on collective memory to understand how fiction might contribute to the construction, expansion, or readjustment of the narratives sparked by 9/11.

The notion of collective memory was first introduced by Maurice Halbwachs (1925), who defended that individual memory is shaped by social structures and relations. However, Halbwachs left out the cultural dimension, which was later developed by Cultural Memory Studies scholars interested in investigating the production and conservation of memory and discussing cultural memory as a sort of living, mediated memory “supported by public awareness and validation by cultural institutions and the public media” (Assmann, 2010: 44).

Cultural memory, as a form of collective, shared memory that transmits and shapes cultural identity (J. Assmann, 2008: 110), is also, according to Astrid Erll, a term that not only brings together culture and socio-cultural contexts but also emphasizes that relationship (2008a: 4). Erll talks about memory as a transmedial phenomenon, that is, a phenomenon “not tied to one specific medium” and “represented across the spectrum of available media” (2008b: 392). This links with Ann Rigney’s understanding of memory as a process or practice of remembrance that implies “repeated acts of recall” to ensure a memory’s cultural significance (2016: 68). Rigney claims: “The key to memory is not in storage (the fact of information being archived) but in the capacity of a particular story to stimulate its

own reproduction in a new form: to procreate” (68). In this context, Rigney is talking about the “active” dimension of memory and how mediation – sharing and circulating over and over again – warrants a memory’s continual presence in society.

Memory, in this sense, is not static but dynamic; it is not closed off but permeable; it is made and remade. This is true when it comes to individual memory, which, over time, becomes prone to alterations, distortions, and reinterpretations;<sup>3</sup> but it is also true in regard to collective memory, which, as already stated, resorts to certain “carriers” (J. Assmann, 2008) or “vehicles” (Zelizer, 2004) of memory to transport memories across time and space. This act of remembering looks for echoes in the past but is primarily anchored in the present: “it is always in and of the present” (Huysen, 2003: 3). Memories are, as a result, recalled and retrieved, activated and made current, because of the needs of the present:

*Re-membering is an act of assembling available data that takes place in the present. Versions of the past change with every recall, in accordance with the changed present situation. Individual and collective memories are never a mirror image of the past, but rather an expressive indication of the needs and interests of the person or group doing the remembering in the present. (Erl, 2011: 8)*

<sup>3</sup> For example, even though a person might remember experiences in full, sometimes they recall but small glimpses; they might remember something that they experienced personally or information they gathered from someone else; other times, the way they remember might change due to the contamination of present ideas and emotions. Endel Tulving’s (1972) distinction between semantic and episodic memory is useful to understand the different ways in which memory systems process and store information. Semantic memory provides a general framework of knowledge to make sense of the world, while episodic memory allows the recollection of specific events and experiences that make up personal histories.

The preservation and circulation of memory—or memories—is facilitated by multiple different media(tors), among them, news articles, illustrations, paintings, photos, sculptures, diaries, novels, theater plays, songs, movies, or TV series. They create a platform for memories to be “transferred from one situation to another and transmitted from one generation to another” (J. Assmann, 2008: 110–111), thus allowing an event to live beyond its time. Borrowing the concept from Media scholars Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999), Astrid Erll calls this process of recurrent recollection and recycling of information, “remediation”. When using the term, Erll refers to:

the fact that memorable events are usually represented again and again, over decades and centuries, in different media (...). What is known about a war, a revolution, or any other event which has been turned into a site of memory, therefore, seems to refer not so much to what one might cautiously call the ‘actual events’, but instead to a canon of existent medial constructions, to the narratives and images circulating in a media culture. (2008b: 392)

Erll brings attention to two aspects: 1. that a substantial part of what we know about an event reaches us indirectly via cultural artifacts, which eventually replace our “real memories”;<sup>4</sup> 2. that the

<sup>4</sup> This is especially relevant when those who experienced the event first-hand pass away and the number of people who have no personal memory of the event (because they were too young or not yet born) grows significantly. Marianne Hirsch proposes the term *postmemory* to refer to “the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right” (2012: 5). This reliance on secondary forms of remembrance is also explored by Alison



multiplication of stories and pictures of a specific event is inherently connected to its cultural impact and significance. Events, one can argue, matter only if – and as long as – they are remembered. They are “memorable” because of the stories and pictures they generate, which, in turn, are repeated in different media. Repetition, or remediation, ensures that a certain event is kept alive and relevant, that is, that its memory persists. When remediation stops, the event tends to fall into oblivion.

9/11 is an example of an event that has produced many remediations. Given its status as one of the most photographed and filmed disasters of all time, this does not come as a surprise. The large number of pictures fueled a strong impetus to talk and hear about it, to show and to see it. From news pieces and articles to academic monographs and edited books, novels, poems, documentaries, and movies, many were – or have been – the formats used to remember and represent the event. As a result, there are certain images one expects to see when 9/11 is mentioned,<sup>5</sup> as well as certain words<sup>6</sup> or themes<sup>7</sup> one necessarily associates with it.

These recurrent visual and linguistic tropes have played a pivotal role in shaping how 9/11 is remembered. They bring attention to the fact that media and memory not only work together but they transform each other. José van Dijck proposes the concept of mediated memories to talk about the role of memory and media

Landsberg, who developed the notion of prosthetic memories. These memories “circulate publicly, and although they are not organically based, they are nevertheless experienced with a person’s body as a result of an engagement with a wide range of cultural technologies” (Landsberg, 2004: 25-26).

<sup>5</sup> E.g., the Twin Towers burning, people falling from the towers, the ashes left by the collapsing towers, or the ruins.

<sup>6</sup> E.g., disaster, attack, war, infamy, bin Laden, and Al-Qaeda.

<sup>7</sup> E.g., terrorism, evil, trauma, loss, heroism, and patriotism.

beyond mere reservoirs, carriers, or vehicles: “Mediated memories are the activities and objects we produce and appropriate by means of media technologies, for creating and re-creating a sense of past, and future of ourselves in relation to others” (2007: 21). Van Dijck is referring, above all, to private memory objects and how they can impact collective remembrance. In a similar vein, Marita Sturken, describes objects, images, and representations as “technologies of memory, not vessels of memory in which memory passively resides so much as objects through which memories are shared, produced, and given meaning” (1997: 9). Sturken focuses, however, in the entanglements between cultural memory and history.

What can be extracted from both van Dijck and Sturken is that media and remediations do not passively transport memories across time and space. They are not innocuous. Rather, they are tools for memory construction and transformation: “From this angle, everything we see, say and write about the catastrophe of 2001 (or any other catastrophe as a matter of fact) is but some kind of rewriting, of retelling, of reconstruction of the reality, in other words, some kind of remediation” (Gonçalves, 2016: 63). Mediation and remediation, in these circumstances, can be viewed as a form of re-membling: of putting something back together (recollecting facts, data, and episodes), and, given the time-lapse, putting things together in a different way (recollecting them differently).

The remediation and reinterpretation of 9/11 will then be addressed in the coming pages. I propose to explore two fictional works, the novel *Terrorist* and the TV series *Designated Survivor*, to reflect on terrorism after 9/11 and how it has, simultaneously, been repeated and changed over time. In the following sections, I will first discuss the novel as a tool to make sense of the attacks and to write the story from the perspective of the Other; after that, I will examine

the TV series to understand how time has permitted opening up alternatives for the type of terrorism 9/11 inaugurated.

#### MAKING SENSE OF 9/11: WRITING THE PERPETRATOR

*Terrorist*, by John Updike, was first published in 2006 and became a best-seller, despite receiving mixed reviews. The book tells the story of Ahmad Ashmawy Mulloy, an 18-year-old Arab American born to an Egyptian father and an Irish American mother, who is persuaded into taking part in a plan to blow up the Lincoln Tunnel in Manhattan and recreating the impact of 9/11.

Updike, one could reason, goes against the grain and, instead of focusing on the traumatic aftermath of 9/11 and the desolation left by the event (in the likes of Don DeLillo or Jonathan Safran Foer), decides to write about a would-be terrorist, or as Kristiaan Versluys puts it, the “ultimate Other” (2009: 16). The decision to build a story from the perspective of the perpetrator is nothing new;<sup>8</sup> yet, doing it so soon after an event of the magnitude of 9/11, and specifically in the context of a terrorist attack, turned out to be a very difficult challenge and generated great controversy.

9/11 marked a shift in the way Americans, and the Western hemisphere, viewed Muslims and Islam. When Al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for the attacks, Islamophobic and Orientalist (Said, 1979)<sup>9</sup> ideas started to (re)emerge almost instantaneously. As Ulla Kriebner explains: “Ever since 9/11, people perceived as *Muslim*

<sup>8</sup> An example would be Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, first published in *The Russian Messenger* in 1866.

<sup>9</sup> In his book *Orientalism*, first published in 1978, Said talked about the representation, and misrepresentation, of the Orient, arguing that “Orientalism is more particularly valuable as a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient than it is a veridic discourse about the Orient” (1979: 6).

or *Arab* run an even higher risk of being associated with terrorism” (2011: 216). This phenomenon of prejudice, hatred, and fear against an Other, specifically the Muslim or Arab, perceived not only as different but as an opposite, was instigated by the “good versus evil” narrative created by the Bush administration and replicated by the media. The “good” (America) stood for liberty and civilized behavior, whereas the “evil” (terrorist) was equated with savagery and barbarism. As a result, a very clear binary division between an “us” and a “them” was created – with “us” meaning against “them”, and vice-versa.

Versluys argues that Updike’s novel constitutes an attempt “to deal with the question of alterity in the context of global terrorism” and “seeks fully to illuminate the viewpoint of the Other” (2009: 16). Still, the effort to put oneself in someone else’s shoes is one of the most contentious aspects of the novel. Some have argued that Updike was unable to detach himself from his vision of the world (Simpson, 2008: 218, 219) and that his background prevented him from being able to fully understand the other side (Randall, 2011: 143) – or the side of the Other –, thus leading to a less than stellar story (Gray, 2011: 34). Others have nevertheless defended that Updike has not “been given sufficient credit” (Herman, 2015: 699) and commended him for being the only one, among the novelists tackling 9/11 in the first few years after the attacks, “that attempts a sustained presentation of the perspective of a terrorist” (Colgan, 2009: 126).

Aware of his positioning and lack of knowledge regarding the Other he wanted to write about (McGrath, 2006), Updike found a loophole of sorts: in his venture to go to the roots of terrorism and look at it from a different viewpoint, he creates a character amid an identity crisis who occupies a liminal state, a “third space” (Bhabha, 1994). Born and raised in New Prospect, New Jersey, Ahmad feels a disconnect with the American materialistic and hedonistic culture, personified by the easy-going, shameless, lustful high schoolers

around him. In turn, the absence of his Muslim father pushes him to get to know that faith better and gives him a purpose when he feels adrift. From the very first line of the novel, Ahmad struggles with his place within American society and sees it as trying to shake his sense of moral rectitude and take him away from the right path: “*Devils*, Ahmad thinks. *These devils seek to take away my God*” (Updike, 2006: 3). The teenager demonstrates a clear preference for one part of his hyphenated identity and chooses to be called Ahmad Ashmawy instead of Mulloy. Still, the use of his European-American surname for official matters does grant him some benefits, including “mak[ing] him a bit less suspicious for the Bureau of Homeland Security” (Kribernegg, 2011: 221).

Even though Ahmad favors his Arab background, he is also unable to fully integrate into that community. Ahmad started visiting a Mosque when he was 11 to connect to his absent father. In Shaikh Rashid, he finds, on the one hand, a kindred spirit (someone who harbors the same kind of aversion to the American way of life) and, on the other, the potential father figure he is missing (a spiritual and moral guiding compass). However, this self-converted boy is never completely accepted by Shaikh Rashid, who views Ahmad as a product of his broken family and misguided upbringing: “To him, Ahmad is American. No amount of zeal and Qur’an studies can change his mother’s race or his father’s absence. The lack of fathers, the failure of paternity to keep men loyal to their homes, is one of the marks of this decadent and rootless society” (Updike, 2006: 145). This assessment is further justified by Ahmad’s decision not to explore his Middle Eastern roots beyond religion. As mentioned in the novel: “his exploration of his Islamic identity ends at the mosque” (99). This results in Ahmad occupying a space that is neither “here” nor “there”, and therefore feeling like he does not truly belong anywhere.

It seems that Ahmad's radicalization in this coming-of-age novel derives from a deep-seated wish to fit in, to have a purpose, and to, finally, understand his true identity. He is recruited by an Islamic fundamentalist group to take a truck full of explosives to the Lincoln Tunnel in New York, "Satan's heart" (Updike, 2006: 293). The goal of the carefully designed plan is to detonate the explosives where the tunnel is more structurally vulnerable and magnify the fallout.

Ahmad is eventually incapable of executing the plan and avoids catastrophe at the very last second. The outcome is, in part, determined by the target itself: the tunnel. On the one hand, the "narrow one-directional space" (Savin-Baden, 2020: 52) reinforces the idea of Ahmad's fixed path and the inevitability of disaster; on the other hand, its "multiple entrances and exits" (52) promote a transformative "re-view of the world and one's place within it" (52). The scene in the tunnel works as a "rite of passage" (Van Gennep, 1960) on two different levels: it is meant to symbolize spiritual purification and sacrifice, but it becomes a moment of personal change and social and religious repositioning.

The change of heart is also motivated by the fact that Jack Levy, his meddling high school counselor, manages to get in the truck with him. Levy talks to Ahmad and, without forcing his opinions on him, plants a seed of doubt in the young man's mind. First, by offering a place for Ahmad to belong to when he declares "Hey, come on, we're all Americans here. That's the idea, didn't they tell you that at Central High? Irish-Americans, African-Americans, Jewish-Americans; there are even Arab-Americans" (Updike, 2006: 301).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> According to Birgit Däwes, Updike fails to promote pluralism or multiculturalism (2011: 264). Instead, Däwes contends that "*Terrorist* is, in the end, a text that fuels dichotomies and confirms stereotypical notions of the Other" (265). A similar idea is put forward by Richard Gray, who talks about Updike's failure "to find an appropriate speech for his Arab-American

Contrary to his beliefs, Ahmad is not alone in his hybridity. Second, by both confusing and giving clarity. Levy's nonchalant behavior – even going to the point of telling Ahmad to “do it” while he is going to “just relax” (306) – is mind-boggling to Ahmad: “*He wants to die*, Ahmad thinks. *He taunts me to do the dead for him*” (306). However, it is Levy's attitude that propels Ahmad to reflect on the fifty-sixth sura and how “God does not want to destroy: it was He who made the world” (306). This aha moment forces Ahmad to reconsider his view of the world and the others around him. His change is evident in the way he starts looking at the children in the car in front of him. His realization humanizes them and creates a simple connection that precludes Ahmad from carrying out his plan: “he lifts the fingers of his right hand from the steering wheel and waves them (...). Recognized at last, the children smile, and Ahmad cannot but smile back” (307).

The fact that the attack does not occur highlights the struggle novelists experienced initially when it came to openly dealing with the issue of terrorism. But it can foster yet another interpretation. The ending offers the possibility of rewriting the 9/11 narrative by replacing certainty with contingency, hence, opening the possibility of (re)imagining the event as never having taken place. *Terrorist*, despite not being a novel directly about 9/11, uses it as an evident backdrop by means of the plot, the space where the events unfold, as well as time: a terrorist attack that consists of destroying a tunnel in Manhattan around the time “an anniversary [is] coming up, in September” (Updike, 2006: 201). In this sense, as argued by David Simpson, “9/11 subsists in *Terrorist* as the prototype of a second

protagonist: what is meant to sound different but authentic too often comes across as artificial, even stereotypical” (2011: 80).

event which in the end does not happen” (2008: 216). This reasoning places *Terrorist* as a double remediation of 9/11: as a re-presentation of the event in a different time and medium (as a re-writing of the event); and as a remedy<sup>11</sup> for what happened and a way to correct, reform, and, finally, rewrite history.

#### REWRITING THE TERRORIST, RETHINKING HISTORY

*Designated Survivor* is a much more recent example of a fictional story dealing with the issue of terrorism. Having aired from 2016 to 2019 (first on ABC and later on Netflix), the TV series created by David Guggenheim differs from *Terrorist* in its very premise. The show starts precisely with a terrorist attack on American soil and the American government, the largest since 9/11. Unlike *Terrorist*, the catastrophe is not avoided but serves as a story driver. The attack on the Capitol, an alleged target of the 9/11 perpetrators, takes place during the State of the Union, a moment that traditionally congregates almost the entire US government under the same roof. In such circumstances, a cabinet member in the presidential line of succession is taken to a secure and undisclosed location to guarantee the continuity of the government in the unlikely case something happens. That person is named “designated survivor”.<sup>12</sup>

After the successful terrorist attack, the main character, Tom Kirkman, takes the place of the late President, despite his clear lack of political preparation. With most of the government wiped

<sup>11</sup> Remediation, according to Bolter and Grusin, “derives ultimately from the Latin *remederi* – ‘to heal, to restore to health’” (1999: 59).

<sup>12</sup> The practice of selecting a designated survivor or designated successor whenever the US government is gathered in one place started in the 1960s, when the fear of a nuclear attack was very present. After the fading of the threat, the practice was conserved and is still in place today, even though some people might not know about it or give it too much thought.



out by the explosion of the Capitol, the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development unexpectedly appears as the next in the line of succession. Kirkman, whose idealistic contributions had always been undervalued by President Robert Richmond's administration, had, in fact, been fired on the day of the Capitol bombing. His nomination as a designated survivor was not out of respect but an actual punishment and a sort of demotion.

The first episode of the first season starts with Tom Kirkman and his wife in an office building room talking to their daughter on the phone while watching the State of the Union address on TV. Suddenly, the live coverage is interrupted and a Secret Service agent rushes into the room. Realizing that something is happening, Kirkman goes to the window and sees the Capitol in flames. This initial scene is of paramount importance, as it establishes the tone of the show. The connection to 9/11 is obvious: an attack turned "media event" (Dayan and Katz, 1994) that both interrupts and deeply changes regular life. There are, nonetheless, two big differences in relation to 9/11 and its coverage: first, unlike what happened in 2001, especially with the attacks on the Twin Towers, the screen Kirkman is watching turns black once the explosion takes place. The spectator is cut off from the event. Second, the show decides to focus primarily on the backstage of political processes. As viewers, we are spared the more gruesome images of the catastrophe. Because we have seen them before in real life, we are led to see this new event, indirectly, through someone else's perspective. We experience the Capitol bombing and its aftermath through Kirkman, who moves from a passive role, a mere observant, to become the decision-maker, the President of the United States of America.

The fact that Kirkman is a political outsider—an expendable lower-cabinet member—but not entirely an ordinary citizen—he holds a position in the US government—puts him in an in-between position.

Similar to Ahmad in *Terrorist*, Kirkman occupies an intermediate space that makes it harder to truly belong: for those in the political sphere, his capacity to act as US President is questioned. Kirkman is viewed as a scholar without much practical political experience. In contrast, for civil society, his legitimacy is contested because he takes office as an unelected President. He is seen as a kind of usurper or, at least, an opportunist. For some, he is not enough of a politician; for others, he is too much like them.

The beginning of Kirkman's presidency is characterized by the effort to rebuild a whole government despite political and popular wariness and find an appropriate response to the devastating event. Many parallels can, indeed, be established between Kirkman's and Bush's actions: defining the event, finding the perpetrators, supporting the survivors, and reconstructing what was destroyed. For example, concerning the latter, the second season, which picks up one year after the attack, showcases the record-breaking reconstruction of the Capitol and the importance of rebuilding such a symbolic structure. Here, due to the political, historical, and cultural role of the building, reconstruction does not imply the replacement of the building by something different (e.g., the substitution of the Twin Towers with the One World Trade Center, 9/11 memorial and museum); rather, the building is rebuilt in the image of what used to be there, replacing it with sameness. While standing in the Capitol's rotunda, Kirkman and Secret Service agent Ritter talk about the importance of the reconstruction:

Tom Kirkman: They broke ground here in 1793. The British burned it down in 1814, but we rebuilt it. Patrick Lloyd [the person responsible for the Capitol bombing in the show] blew it to pieces. We rebuilt it again. It's just masonry and paint. Why do you think it means so much?

Mike Ritter: Because it's a symbol, sir.

Tom Kirkman: A symbol that nearly bankrupted us. You honestly think that this glorified office building's worth \$7 billion?

Mike Ritter: No, sir. I think it's worth a whole lot more.

Tom Kirkman: Damn right. (2x01, 1:23)

The need to grasp the effects of the terrorist attack dominates its aftermath. This is evident in Kirkman's first address to the nation as US President, in which he tries to both explain the event and use it as a motor for further action: "My fellow Americans, tonight our way of life came under attack. This act of cowardice was meant to cripple our nation. But as before, America will show the world that we will not bow down to fear, that we will fight back, that we will persevere" (1x02, 1:53). His words resonate with those of George W. Bush on September 11, 2001:

Today, our fellow citizens, our way of life, our very freedom came under attack in a series of deliberate and deadly terrorist acts. (...) These acts of mass murder were intended to frighten our nation into chaos and retreat. But they have failed; our country is strong. (...) Today, our nation saw evil, the very worst of human nature. And we responded with the best of America. (Bush, 2001b)

Both speeches follow a similar structure. First, they position the perpetrators as opponents to America's ideals and values, i.e., its way of life; second, they label the attacks as acts designed to weaken America; and third, they reinforce America's capacity to bounce back. We can, hence, argue that Bush's statement serves as a blueprint for Kirkman's.

But the similarities between the real and the fictional terrorist attacks, the real and the fictional Commander-in-Chief, do not end here. In another scene from *Designated Survivor*, we are taken back

to 9/11 when George W. Bush visited the World Trade Center site and directed some words to those tirelessly working there:

I want you all to know that America today -- that America today is on bended knee in prayer for the people whose lives were lost here, for the workers who work here, for the families who mourn. This nation stands with the good people of New York City, and New Jersey and Connecticut, as we mourn the loss of thousands of our citizens. (...) I can hear you. The rest of the world hears you. (...) And the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon. (...) The nation sends its love and compassion to everybody who is here. Thank you for your hard work. Thank you for making the nation proud. And may God bless America. (Bush, 2001a)

This speech from September 14, 2001, came to be known as “bullhorn speech” after the object used by Bush to project his voice. In the TV series, Kirkman adopts an identical strategy, even though his solidary act is, to a large extent, re-placed or re-packaged by the media as a publicity stunt. Kirkman goes to the rubble of the Capitol and borrows a megaphone to address the people there:

I’ve come down here because I wanted to thank each and every one of you for the work that you’re doing here and let you know that America mourns. This... This was an act of madness. This was an act of terror. Yesterday, we saw the worst in humanity. Today, I see its best. I know you’re all tired, scared. I know you want answers, someone to blame, someone to fight against. I need you to know that I want that, too. (...) Those who we’ve lost are leaders, family members and loved ones. I swear to you, they will not have died in vain. This place where we stand right here, right now... will forever be hallowed ground, and we must always respect the incredible sacrifice that was made here. (1x02, 28:45)

While paying tribute to the victims, both Bush and Kirkman similarly praise all the workers trying to find survivors and showcase a strong resolve to take down the terrorists.

Another layer can, additionally, be read into Kirkman's speech. The chosen rhetoric resembles uncannily another historical speech: the Gettysburg Address by Abraham Lincoln, delivered in 1863 during the American Civil War. In the same place where the battle was fought and a cemetery was erected, Lincoln tried to make sense of the war that divided fellow Americans. He compelled his listeners to honor those who perished by finishing their fight and giving a purpose to their death. The employment of Lincoln's famous speech as a model is meaningful, in that it introduces Kirkman's speech as a double remediation of sorts: a simultaneous nod to 9/11 and the Civil War. Above all, the remediation process endows Kirkman's speech and the Capitol bombing with cultural significance, lending them a certain iconicity. On the one hand, Kirkman and his words are placed side by side with other prominent presidential responses from the past; on the other, a purposeful link with pivotal moments in American history is established. By recovering both the Civil War and 9/11 – periods of great change for America – and using them as inspiration, the authors of the show reinforce the exceptionality of the Capitol bombing and inscribe it as a turning point as well.

Another interesting element when it comes to Kirkman's speech in the middle of the Capitol ruins has to do with the fact that it can be read as presaging the outcome of the search for the perpetrators. As mentioned before, one of Kirkman's first actions as the new President of the United States was to take on the task of finding the culprits, restoring order, and building up confidence and a new sense of security. However, Kirkman ends up discovering that, contrary to 9/11, the Capitol bombing was a domestic attack orchestrated by a group called True Believers. The goal of the attackers was to relieve

America from corrupt and weak politicians and make it strong again – make it “great again”, to use here Donald Trump’s famous election slogan. This plot twist is reminiscent of the circumstances leading to the American Civil War, an insurrection from within that resulted in the victimization of fellow citizens, but it also transports the viewer to the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, a domestic terrorist attack on an American federal building.

It is noteworthy that the group True Believers was not part of the initial list of suspects. Immediately after the attack, different theories suggested Mideastern terrorist cells as plausible authors of the attack, the “usual suspects” (1x02, 00:58) as one of the characters defines them, more specifically Al-Sakar an “offshoot of Al-Qaeda” (1x02, 21:05). As a result, an upsurge of Islamophobia takes place, with the news reporting attacks on the Muslim community:

Police imposing a curfew on predominantly Muslim neighborhoods and ordering residents to obey it or face arrest. These are citizens who have not been charged with any crimes, who are simply targeted because of their religious beliefs. The American Civil Liberties Union denounced the actions by Dearborn police as a violation of the citizens’ basic civil rights. But in the wake of the attack on the Capitol, some are saying this is just the type of policing this country needs. (1x02, 10:08)

Moving away from the “usual suspects” and presenting the attack as an inside job constitutes a shift from how terrorism has been viewed since 9/11 and, to a degree, a rewriting of the terrorist. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that one of the survivors, Congressman Peter MacLeish, was affiliated with True Believers and related to the attack. Radicalization, in this case, is not derived from a religious belief but from political convictions. The significant political and social division in America fosters the creation of a new Other who

is not characterized by racial, ethnic, or religious differences but by having an opposing understanding of what is best for the country.

Despite the changes to the figure of the terrorist, the show does fall into the trap of stereotyping and reducing the Muslim or the Arab to a “variation of a familiar character” (Khadem, 2015: 67), similar to what Updike was accused of doing. A case in point is episode eight from season two, which revolves around Kirkman’s secret trip to Afghanistan to meet Mullah Fayad and Mullah Bahri. When Kirkman learns that one of the warlords is planning an attack on America, he must decide who to believe in: “if we get this wrong, we could be responsible for our nation’s next 9/11” (2x08, 7:14). The choice between Fayad and Bahri is rushed by a coordinated attack resulting in American casualties. Bahri, who appeared to be the more reasonable out of the two, turns out to be the real enemy and gives Kirkman the opportunity to vindicate, even if on a small scale, the terrorist attacks of 2001. Their conversation quickly moves from the attacks on Afghan soil to the attacks on America and Afghanistan’s responsibility for harboring terrorists:

Tom Kirkman: You killed Americans! And for that you will pay. You will never see your precious sunlight again.

Mullah Bahri: You come to our country... desecrate it... and you expect to be welcomed like heroes? You are invaders. And invaders deserve death.

Tom Kirkman: This is the part you always get wrong. You provided sanctuary and assistance to the people who attacked *my* country: September 11, 2001. Take him into custody. (2x08, 34:59)

By the third season, the essence of terrorism changes again and moves further away from the hyper-explored post-9/11 idea of the Middle Eastern terrorist. This season recaptures the domestic

threat storyline but diverges from the previous two by introducing a different kind of menace, a racially motivated deadly viral outbreak. Inspired by Project Coast, a 1980s program in South Africa (Rice, 2020), the series explores yet another type of “inside job”: an attack that starts from the inside of one’s body. The bioweapon targets people with dark-skin pigmentation and provokes flu-like symptoms that eventually cause sterilization. Given that the effects of the virus are felt by a specific group of people, an “us” versus “them” philosophy is reinstated, evocative of the racial segregation period in the US and the apartheid in South Africa.

Despite the subplot’s potential, it appears somewhat out of the blue and is not properly developed into a cohesive and coherent storyline about biological warfare and the type of terror it ignites. On the one hand, not much is said about the origins of the virus, created as a political strategy to counter the growing strength of minority votes and increase the number of white voters. On the other, the threat is dealt with before it becomes public knowledge. The show, therefore, fails to develop the idea of an undesired Other and explore its dramatic effect. Instead, the story gets lost in the middle of the primary plot related to the presidential electoral race.<sup>13</sup> Notwithstanding, the subplot does add a different layer to the narrative of terrorism by offering genetic manipulation as a possible weapon in the present and the future. This new element cements the role of *Designated Survivor* as both a premediation and remediation of 9/11: it anticipates scenarios that guide future action

<sup>13</sup> The bioterrorism subplot was not warmly welcomed by many viewers and reviewers, even if it gained renewed interest once the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Ed Power (2019), for example, in an article about the show, criticized the out-of-character bioterrorism subplot, labeling it “bizarre”.



(Grusin, 2010: 47) while also recapturing the sense of fear and insecurity that characterized the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS: TIME HEALS ALL?

Considering the arguments presented in this article, it can be said that the time that separates *Terrorist* from *Designated Survivor* is of paramount importance. Temporal distance has allowed the TV series to move away from the image and idea of the Muslim (the *Other*) as a terrorist, frequently employed in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 and used as a blueprint for many fictional stories. Whereas *Terrorist* clings to the type of danger and terrorist profile produced by 9/11, to a certain extent, *Designated Survivor* expands that idea of terrorism. The show presents a multitude of threatening agents, both from within and outside the US, but focuses primarily on domestic terrorism, on an internal enemy (an *Us*) connected with the American government. It also showcases a wide variety of threats that range from bombs to bioterrorism. This generates a diffused sense of fear: anything and anyone can pose a risk. *Designated Survivor* is thus representative of the shift Deborah Pless identifies in the portrayal of terrorism, which has moved from “simplistic, external-threat narratives (...) to more nuanced, darker stories that feature internalized threats to national security” (2015: 119). What Pless alerts to is that the paranoia subsists, even if it takes up a different shape: “While we were originally told to be afraid of those who are different from us (xenophobia), now we are told to be afraid that those who are different from us have infected those who are like us, rendering no one safe and creating a fear not just of outsiders but also of our neighbors and friends (sociophobia)” (124).<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> This erasure of difference between an “us” and a “them” is also reinforced in the series by Kirkman’s speech during his election campaign. He mentions the American motto *E Pluribus*

Another important difference facilitated by temporal distance is the concretization of the threat. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, fiction was focused on trauma and reflecting the general sense of shock, disbelief, and anger (Araújo, 2015: 1), with New York City as the epicenter (19). As time moved on, the initial reluctance to address terrorism head-on and the subsequent fixation on post-9/11 revenge shifted as well. Later fictional works tend to comment on US politics and its effects on individuals and society, as well as to treat terrorism as part of global life. Terrorism becomes more manageable and less disruptive. In *Designated Survivor*, for example, all menaces are dealt with quickly and resolved completely and, as such, do not add to the trauma.

Post-9/11 fiction, as this article discussed, (re)inscribes the terrorist attacks of 2001 in “cultural imagination, ensuring [them] a place in collective memory” (Gonçalves, 2016: 63). The repetition of the story, or stories, of 9/11 – even if in different contexts and with different contours – ensures the event’s longevity and breadth and plays an important role in the ongoing reformulation of identity, both at the individual and collective levels. *Terrorist* and *Designated Survivor* are examples of such processes and add to the ever-growing and ever-changing cultural memory of 9/11. Even though they do not address 9/11 directly, they recover recognizable collective symbols and narratives that act as important cultural templates: for example, the figure of the terrorist, the destruction of national landmarks, as well as the “good versus bad” or “us versus them” narratives. However, remediations such as *Terrorist* and *Designated Survivor* do not merely replicate symbols and narratives; they offer the

*Unum* and stresses: “Black, white, Latino, Asian, we are all immigrants, or descendants of immigrants, and we are America!” (3x09, 34:01). These words resonate with those by Jack Levy in *Terrorist*.

opportunity to rethink, change, amplify, and revise them according to new circumstances, concerns, and audiences. In essence, they contribute to keep 9/11 relevant and memorable, to keep it present.

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