September 11, Jacques Derrida observed, had by October 2001 already become “a date or a dating that has taken over our public space and our private lives.” The very process of naming transformed the attacks of the previous month into “an event that truly marks, that truly makes its mark, a singular and . . . unprecedented event.”

Ten years later, the terrain has changed. It is harder now simply to repeat the mantra “9/11,” like a recurring nightmare or a conjuring spell, “over and over again as if its singularity were so absolute that it could not be matched.” Two important recent books on the impact of September 11 on film and popular culture—Stephen Prince’s Firestorm and Jeff Birkenstein, Anna Froula, and Karen Randell’s Reframing 9/11—demonstrate even in their subtitles that the single date is no longer enough to capture the complexity of the United States’ relationship with terror over the past decade, and that the black-and-white signifier of “9/11,” its digits so neatly recalling both the phone number for US emergency services and the formerly standing towers, is no longer enough to contain all the ethically gray areas within and around that opposition.

Prince’s volume covers not just 9/11 but “American Film in the Age of Terrorism,” while Reframing 9/11 repositions the once-monumental, singular date in broader terms of “Film, Popular Culture and the ‘War on Terror.’” From the cover onward, those quotation marks around “war on terror” retain a skeptical distance from the Bush administration’s attempt to narrate and justify its actions in terms of military urgency.


2 Ibid., 147.

It is now difficult, and rightly so, to talk of 9/11 as a singular, monumental, unprecen
edented, and unmatchable event—an event so unique and unnameable that it lies beyond
words and can only be gestured to through numbers. Prince declares in his opening pages
that he will study not just the attacks on the United States in 2001 but their “legacy—the
Iraq War, controversies over warrantless domestic surveillance, forcible rendition, Abu
Ghraib and policies of torture—how did American film respond to and portray these
issues?2 Reza Aslan’s foreword to Reframing 9/11, similarly, argues that the “simple story
of us versus them has become muddled. Wiretapping. Waterboarding. Constitutional vio
lations. The narrative that Americans constructed to help make sense of 9/11 no longer
seems as straightforward and uncomplicated as it so often does in the movies.”5

From these opening gambits, both volumes introduce a third factor into the dy
nymic. They will explore not just the relationship between the swift, shocking horror
of the 2001 attacks and the United States’ more sustained, but arguably no less brutal,
response, but also the relationship between this contemporary cultural territory and
the stories it tells about terror: the relationship between the horrific theater of Septem
ber 11 (which so many observers described as feeling “like a movie”6), the official and
unofficial narratives of the subsequent “war,” and the popular fictions that articulate,
reflect, negotiate, and even inform these real-world events.

That relationship is, as may already be clear, equally complex and open to debate.
Prince presents it in terms of cinema’s response to political issues: he describes the
“imprinting of the post-9/11 world onto American film,” the “absorbing” of “9/11
into existing story conventions,” and the ways in which a TV show “translates into
popular culture the political stance of the Bush administration.”7 The implied model
is of popular narrative as a willing, receptive medium, a cultural Silly Putty onto which
real-world events transfer themselves. Aslan suggests a politically loaded process of
transference, arguing that popular narratives translate and simplify to serve the domi
nant interests: “[I]t was cinema, and popular culture in general, that . . . helped cast
the disturbing events of 9/11, and the even more disturbing events that followed, into
an easily accessible, easily digestible story, one in which everyone had a role to play, as
either hero or villain, good or evil, ‘with us’ or ‘against us.’”8

Yet other accounts suggest a two-way dynamic. Director Robert Altman blamed
Hollywood for setting a template for the terrorists of September 2001 to follow, claim
ing that “these people have copied the movies.”9 Lance Rubin’s essay on adaptations of
Philip K. Dick after 9/11 argues that “the films . . . are not simply reflections of events
and conditions but participate in shaping audience judgments.”10 Other scholars see

4 Prince, Firestorm, 2.
5 Reza Aslan, foreword to Birkenstein, Froula, and Randell, Reframing 9/11, xii.
6 See, for instance, Karen Randell, “‘It Was Like a Movie’: The Impossibility of Representation in Oliver Stone’s World
Trade Center,” in Birkenstein, Froula, and Randell, Reframing 9/11, 141.
7 Prince, Firestorm, 285, 308, 246.
8 Aslan, foreword, xii.
9 Robert Altman, quoted in Aslan, foreword, xii.
stein, Froula, and Randell, Reframing 9/11, 183.
popular culture as a space of conflict and negotiation. John G. Cawelti’s afterword to *Reframing 9/11* credits the preceding chapters as “a vital part of that ongoing work” to “understand the ways in which dominant discourses prevail and alternative voices can be heard.” Alex Evans, in the same volume, suggests a metaphor closer to the combat zone than the negotiating table: a territory riddled with fault lines that create cracks in hegemonic meaning. “There are political battles of reading,” he proposes, adding, “I suspect they are so often so ferocious because it is realized that this is one very promising place where cultural change may happen.”

To map that minefield of conflict, interaction, and negotiation—the relationship between “9/11,” the “war on terror,” and popular culture, over a ten-year period—is well beyond the scope of this In Focus. Rather, this collection of six short essays has a more modest purpose: to examine closely a series of case studies from the science fiction and thriller genres (and from the overlap between those categories), across both film and television (again, with a significant overlap in texts like *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*), in the context of the September 11 attacks and their sociopolitical legacy.

These essays are short, targeted bursts, carefully aimed and tightly focused. Through close analysis of individual texts, they offer a provocative engagement with the broader issues raised above. Derek Johnson’s study of *24* (Fox, 2001–2010) refuses any easy answers—that the show is a reflection of post-9/11 anxieties, a product of conservative media, or, indeed, an influence on attitudes toward terror and torture—recommending instead that we “recognize a host of interrelated social, industrial, and historical phenomena in which culture emerges.” Bob Rehak, similarly, identifies a matrix of factors that shaped the reimagined ending of *Watchmen* (Zack Snyder, 2009). Like *Watchmen* itself, Rehak’s conclusion remains open to multiple possibilities, rather than closing down the interpretive options.

The other essays share an interest in popular fictions that engage with the ethical dilemmas of the past decade through various degrees of allegory, disguise, and remove: from the spacebound religious conflict of *Battlestar Galactica* (SciFi, 2004–2009), through the near future (and recent past) of *The Sarah Connor Chronicles* (Fox, 2008–2009), to the more “realist” contemporary thrillers *A History of Violence* (David Cronenberg, 2005) and the *Bourne* trilogy (Doug Liman, 2002; Paul Greengrass, 2004, 2007). These narratives place their viewers in the gray area between polar antinomies of good and evil, right and wrong, “us” and “them.” They leave us in the fog of Jason Bourne’s memories, a fog which, as Vincent M. Gaine suggests, clears only to reveal his own (and our own) guilt, and in the silent, strained family reunion at the end of *A History of Violence*, which, as Liz Powell notes, problematizes not just the protagonists’ present and future but also what we and they presumed of their previous lives. *The Sarah Connor Chronicles* plays explicitly with temporal loops, flashbacks, and flash-forwards that whittle away certainty into a multiple-choice, multiple-perspective view of truth and history. Many of the other stories considered here also recognize the repetitive nature of trauma prompted by the events of 9/11, and the experience of being caught between past

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terror and the fear of greater terrors yet to come. As Derrida noted, the trauma of September 11 was rooted not so much in a “past aggression” as in “the unpresentable future” and the sense that the worst could still lie ahead.\textsuperscript{13} 

Derrida, of course, would remind us that apparently binary oppositions and hierarchical pairings can be exposed, destabilized, and unbalanced: in the case of the Bush administration and its “with us or against us” war on terror, he suggests that the United States contributed to the attacks on its territory, both by welcoming, arming, and training the hijackers who would then strike against it, and more broadly by creating the politico-military circumstances that would shape those hijackers’ allegiances and harden their resolve.\textsuperscript{14} The terrorist acts of 9/11 were, in turn, countered by a war on terror that attempted to justify its own violations by instilling and perpetuating a culture of anxiety and impending threat. “Terror” was countered not by its opposite but by state-imposed fear (including “shock and awe,” “harsh interrogation,” forcible rendition, and domestic surveillance).

As Derrida notes, the dominant power picks the terms, legitimizes the vocabulary, and decides the official interpretation.\textsuperscript{15} The “other” terrorizes while the US fights terror. But the film and television narratives under consideration here work to question these assumptions. Not only do they force their characters, and by extension the audience, into a morally gray zone, they also show the interchangeability of the opposed positions on either side, switching black with white and white with black until any fixed binary seems arbitrary, its labels exposed as political convenience.

Thus, Jason Bourne wavers in his own perception between patriot and criminal; Tom Stall of \textit{A History of Violence} splits into two men, his double identity questioning definitions of “good” and “evil”; and an interrogation scene in \textit{Battlestar Galactica} suddenly shifts its polarities, associating its white, blonde heroine, Starbuck, with a musical theme resonant of “Islamic threat” stereotypes. The direct challenge that ends Karen Randell’s discussion of this scene—“Are you rooting for the wrong side?”—only echoes and amplifies the question implicit within the text itself.

Comic artist Art Spiegelman titled his graphic memoir of 9/11 \textit{In the Shadow of No Towers}. The absence of the World Trade Center, and everything its absence signifies, has cast a long shadow; a shadow at least ten years long. On every anniversary since 2003, though, the towers have reappeared, spectral but radiant, as twin searchlight beams stretching from Ground Zero to the sky. May these essays, casting their brief but intense illumination, stand similarly as a small monument to all those lost in the shadows of 9/11 and its legacy.

\textsuperscript{13} Derrida, interview with Borradori, \textit{Philosophy in a Time of Terror}, 98.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 95.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 105.
Neoliberal Politics, Convergence, and the Do-It-Yourself Security of 24

by Derek Johnson

Many scholars have been rightly skeptical about arguments that deploy the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, as a means of understanding media texts, concerned that they too often fall into the trap of identifying a singular catalyst for culture instead of developing more nuanced claims that recognize a host of interrelated social, industrial, and historical phenomena in which culture emerges. Premiering in the immediate wake of 9/11, the Fox network television series 24 (2001–2010) provided a lightning rod for such arguments and concerns. As it repeatedly rehearsed a “ticking clock” scenario, in which hero Jack Bauer prevents an imminent terrorist attack on American soil, 24 tempted many to read it as the urtext exemplifying the relationship between television, post-9/11 America, and the so-called war on terror. From this perspective, 24 has been commonly and often too simply understood as either a direct reflection of American anxieties, a piece of propaganda serving the interests of the conservative institutions driving American security response, or a shaper of American opinion and behavior in the course of that war.

For example, in depicting struggles between American protagonists and terrorist antagonists on television—and finding continued Nielsen ratings success between 2001 and 2010—the series has been claimed to tap into a consensus of fear, and a shared desire for decisive action, encouraging a popular acceptance of torture. The simplicity of such a claim lies in misrecognizing partial, selective representation as reflection, and in ignoring that while the ongoing series was certainly influenced by the war on terror, the development and production of the program began significantly earlier than September 11, 2001; 24 was not invented as a specific response to post-9/11 conditions. Of course, Bush administration officials and other conservatives very much wanted Americans to see the series as the social truth of a post-9/11 world, with Homeland Security’s Michael Chertoff arguing that 24’s presentation of counterterrorist action “reflects real life.”


2 Chertoff made this statement while participating in a forum called “24 and America’s Image in Fighting Terrorism: Fact, Fiction, or Does It Matter?” moderated by Rush Limbaugh and hosted by the Heritage Foundation in Washington, DC, June 23, 2006.
archconservative superfans like Rush Limbaugh, the political discourse surrounding co-creator Joel Surnow, and the industrial proximity between Fox and Fox News within the media empire of conservative Rupert Murdoch, this partial, selective representation of reality seemed to serve the political economy of post-9/11 conservatism.³

Yet this approach denies the participation of nonconservatives in production of the series (such as showrunner and registered Democrat Howard Gordon), as well as the significant economic incentives for a conservative media company to nevertheless accommodate socially liberal audience segments. Alternatively, instead of considering 24 as a definitive reflection of reality (or conservative views of reality), other claims have been made about reality’s increasing reflection of 24, thanks to its effects on the war on terror and public opinion post-9/11. In 2007, for example, Newsweek columnist Dahlia Lithwick identified Jack Bauer as “the prime mover of American interrogation doctrine,” as his torture of fictional enemies on-screen offered “inspiration” and “gave people lots of ideas” for security policy in the wake of 9/11.⁴ Both waterboarding and Abu Ghraib could be understood as effects of an administration and a public trained by television fantasy to accept torture as a legitimate policy. How and why 24 had the singular power to do this remains unclear; Lithwick herself offers an alternative interpretation of Bauer that deploys him as evidence of the folly of legalized torture, not grounds for its justification.

With cultural icons like Jack Bauer frequently figured as either the cause or the effect of post-9/11 politics, it is easy to perceive some kind of significant cultural dynamic at work, but neither one-way effects models nor structuralist critiques nor reflection theories suffice to capture the more complex relationship between 24 and the politics of post-9/11 America. Instead of trying to identify a causal relationship between the two (which risks positing a chicken-or-egg question in which we attempt to fallaciously explain which phenomenon drove the other), we should instead take a more productive, nuanced approach that seeks to identify a wider, diffuse set of cultural and political conditions that supported and generated both. Put another way, we can recognize that neither 24 nor the war on terror produced the other, but that both extended from and contributed to a third phenomenon (or set of phenomena), which is key to understanding the relationship between television and post-9/11 America. Both 24 and the war on terror emerged from a more diffuse reorganization of social life at the turn of the century, driven by a logic of participation shared by the increasingly dominant culture of convergence and the politics of neoliberalism. In his analysis of convergence culture, Henry Jenkins refers to participation as the cultural logic whereby the roles of producers and consumers in the early twenty-first century became blurred, and engagement with media culture meant taking up a role as a participant in it.⁵ Neoliberalism refers to an ascendant political logic

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³ In 2007, Surnow also produced The 1/2 Hour News Hour for the Fox News Channel, a satire that hoped to provide a conservative response to more liberal news satires like The Daily Show.


seeking to limit the size and role of government while relying on the free-market private sector to produce self-sufficient and self-governing citizens. As scholars like Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter argue, media play a key role in a neoliberal regime, as information and communication systems shape citizen, soldier, worker, and consumer subjectivities within it. We might arrive at more nuanced understandings of both post-9/11 television like 24 and the war on terror itself, therefore, by thinking about how the political logic of neoliberalism collided with the cultural logic of convergence to create a wider social matrix of participation.

Ironically, many media scholars have been quick to celebrate the participatory culture of convergence (or at least its possibilities) while at the same time criticizing the politics of neoliberalism. Yet Laurie Ouellette and James Hay crucially demonstrate how the two come together in popular television. Looking at reality programs that seek to improve the lives of both contestants and viewers, Ouellette and Hay recognize that the “spirit of personal reinvention endemic to the current spate of makeover television has gained visibility and social currency as part of the reinvention of government as a decentralized network of entrepreneurial ventures on the one hand, and the diffusion of personal responsibility and self-enterprise as ethics of ‘good’ citizenship on the other.” In the context of convergence and neoliberalism, commercial television steps in for the government as an agent of social welfare, instilling in contestants and viewers the ability to take care of themselves. Reality television operates not merely through ideology but also through what Ouellette and Hay identify as active participation, where “interactivity provides a framework for enacting entrepreneurial citizenship,” empowering citizens to take matters into their own hands. By participating in a series like The Biggest Loser through the “do-it-yourself” consumer experiences offered online and in other ancillary markets connected to the television series, viewers adopt positions as good citizens who can take care of themselves.

Ouellette and Hay’s analysis allows us to better see this do-it-yourself ethic as functioning at the intersection of participatory culture and neoliberal politics, and scholars like Marc Andrejevic have explored that cultural and political matrix further by critiquing interactive media engagement as a part of the neoliberal management of the war on terror. Andrejevic argues that in the heightened state of security normalized after 9/11, the US government invited citizens to participate in the policing process, identifying with and internalizing the needs of state security institutions. Moreover, in these neoliberal terms, good citizenship depended not on collective action and cooperation, but rather on an “individualization of defense” based on a do-it-yourself consumer ethic. Good citizens participated in the war on terror by purchasing duct tape and investing in surveillance technologies, protecting themselves rather than relying on government.

6 Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, Games of Empire (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xxiii, xiv.
The same social matrix of participatory culture and neoliberal politics shaping institutional ideals of “good citizenship” following 9/11 also shaped notions of “good television.” Undoubtedly, we could read the television text of 24 in terms of its neoliberal ideologies. Jack Bauer’s controversial heroism derives from his embodiment of a do-it-yourself ethic that leads him to take action individually when government institutions and policies fail. Even when acting as a direct agent of that government under the auspices of fictional offices like the Counter Terrorist Unit (CTU), Bauer takes the law into his own hands, going “rogue” to routinely torture terrorist suspects and rectify mistakes made by bureaucrats. Inevitably, Bauer finds his own friends and loved ones in danger, and rather than entrusting their security to authorities like CTU, he breaks protocol and takes personal responsibility to save them. Moreover, while much has been made of his extreme interrogation methods as an agent of the US government, Bauer actually spends just as much time throughout the run of the series as a private citizen participating in counterterror activities. Of eight seasons, only seasons one, three, and four depict Jack as a “career” agent; the remaining five seasons show Jack inserting himself privately into the national security apparatus, taking individual responsibility to right faltering institutional actions. When it comes to national security, Jack does it himself as a private individual. Furthermore, he often recruits other private citizens in his do-it-yourself schemes, such as the Arab American shopkeepers in season four who protect their own property by helping Jack and fellow enlisted civilian Paul Raines fend off a squad of enemy commandos descending upon their neighborhood.

A counter-hegemonic reading of the television narrative might focus on the costs of that personal responsibility. Jack fails to prevent the murder of his wife at the end of season one and spends the rest of the series alienated from his daughter. Jack’s continued participation in national security sees subsequent love interests, Audrey Raines and Renee Walker, similarly incapacitated or killed. For his trouble in joining Jack’s do-it-yourself civilian security force, Paul Raines too ends up dead. Season three opens with Jack having become addicted to heroin in the line of duty, and ends with him openly weeping. Seasons four and eight both end with Jack disavowed by the government and on the run as a fugitive. Yet while the television text left room to question do-it-yourself ideologies, the deployment of 24 within the patterns of convergence culture accorded further privilege to the ideal of participation.

Building on prior experiments like the WB’s “Dawson’s Desktop,” 24 was one of the first television series to offer its viewers an online experience that extended and offered new modes of engagement in addition to serving promotional ends. The online component gave viewers access to the fictional space of the series, allowing them to participate in its world by maintaining surveillance over fictional characters’ e-mail, for example. Additionally, regularly updated “Research Files” provided viewers with more background information on some piece of each successive episode. These files adopted a didactic tone, promising to share scientific, historical, or political knowledge from the social reality on which the series drew. For instance, when the secretary of defense was captured by terrorists in season four, these files offered a history of terrorist

hostage videos. In frequently linking the television series to a parallel war on terror in the real world, moreover, the online space framed participation in the television culture of *24* in terms of taking personal responsibility as a citizen-consumer for participating in a political culture of safety, security, and surveillance. With the television narrative focused on a weaponized virus in season three, the accompanying research file educated consumers on how to take everyday steps to protect themselves from the hantavirus. Similarly, after Jack survives a plane crash in season two, the research files coached citizens on how to survive in-flight emergencies by managing their consumer choices: avoid synthetic fibers that might “melt into your skin in the event of a fire.”

In framing consumer-participants in the television culture of *24* simultaneously as citizen-participants in a ubiquitous war on terror, this official website also turned that civic and political participation back to media marketing ends. Viewers maintaining surveillance over Jack’s inbox in season two, for example, found messages about a tell-all book publicizing events of the previous season—conveniently available “at any bookstore.” Pitching itself as a piece of investigative journalism, the paperback in question, *The House Special Sub-Committee’s Findings at CTU*, treated the first season of the series as a matter for serious public inquiry by soberly presenting declassified testimony transcripts and autopsy reports. Participation in television fantasy was thus framed in terms of a do-it-yourself culture of surveillance and security—and one in which consumers should pay to participate. This is, of course, only one set of articulations, and certainly the vast majority of viewers would not have visited the website or sought out the book. However, these articulations demonstrate the compatibilities between *24* and the war on terror: both emerged from and fed back into a shared political and cultural matrix of participation.

In the shadow of events as monumental as those of 9/11, it is easy to understand *24* as somewhere between a reflection of social mores after the attack, a product of increasingly conservative media, and a cause of unjust behavior in the war on terror. The problem with explaining the war on terror and a television program in terms of one another, however, comes in trying to do so without identifying the cultural and political logic that produced and sustained them both. One key to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between 9/11, the war on terror, and programs like *24* is to recognize the compatibility of participatory logics within both consumer culture and neoliberal politics. Even if we want to hang on to the notion that there was a more direct, deterministic relationship between *24* and the war on terror—as both officials at West Point and activists at Human Rights First maintained in their 2007 claims about the effects of the series on the extralegal behavior of US military personnel—it is only by shifting analysis to the notion of participation that we might understand how that relationship worked. The series created an attractive fantasy world in which consumers wanted to participate, but we have to understand that fantasy in relation to

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a neoliberal politics interested in citizens (and soldiers) who “do security” themselves. At the same time, we might come to recognize that our response to 9/11 has not been merely a product of political ideologies and institutions, but has also been motivated by a cultural logic of participation. The important questions to ask are not about whether 24 determined the war on terror or the other way around, but instead about the shared cultural and political protocols that laid the foundation for both.

Adapting Watchmen after 9/11

by BOB REHAK

Every generation has its own reasons for destroying New York.

—Max Page, The City’s End

Released in March 2009, Zack Snyder’s film version of Watchmen was a very ambitious experiment in hyperfaithful cinematic adaptation. Taking its source, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’s 1987 graphic novel, as script, storyboard, and design bible, the production vowed it would treat the famously complicated narrative “like an illuminated text, like it was written 2,000 years ago.” And for the most part, that’s precisely what the movie did, marshaling the many resources of digital blockbuster cinema to reproduce as closely as possible scenes, settings, costumes, even specific shots as laid out in the graphic novel’s panels.

Snyder, whose 2006 adaptation of Frank Miller and Lynn Varley’s graphic novel 300 (1998) had marked him as something of an auteur in the translation of other authors’ works, took on Watchmen with the stipulation that he would keep the story’s original setting, letting the book guide production down to the last detail. The mission of the production thus became mimesis, an increasingly common approach in the era of previsualization, digital backlots, and performance capture that has produced, alongside Snyder’s own 300, films such as The Polar Express (Robert Zemeckis, 2004) and Sin City (Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez, 2005). Such filmic adaptations are stylish and uncanny hybrids, poised somewhere between live action and animation, printed page and filmed frame, cult object and mainstream commodity.

3 On exceptionally faithful approaches to film adaptation, see Thomas Leitch, Film Adaptation and Its Discontents: From “Gone with the Wind” to “The Passion of the Christ” (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 127–150.
In one crucial respect, however, the film of *Watchmen* diverges from the book. In the original ending scripted by Moore and drawn by Gibbons, millions of New York City residents die in an attack that is bizarre even by comic-book standards: with a blinding flash, a gigantic squidlike creature appears in Times Square, dying on arrival but releasing a “psychic shockwave” that rips through the city, killing half its population; this is the culmination of a plot to frighten the world’s superpowers into unification against a common enemy. In the movie, the attack no longer centers on New York. Instead, cities around the world are struck by spherical explosions of blue light that disintegrate buildings and leave smoking craters. As for the squid creature, it is simply gone: excised by a screenwriter’s pen, omitted from the meticulous preproduction artwork, and unmentioned in the making-of texts surrounding the film’s release, save for occasional references to Snyder’s “reimagined ending.”

As Sara J. Van Ness observes, “Squidgate” sparked a major controversy among fans, for whom tampering with the 1987 source marked a breach of trust all too common in Hollywood’s treatment of material cherished by subcultures. In response, Snyder defended the new ending as an elegant solution to the problem of having too much material to include in a two-and-a-half-hour movie, pointing out that to retain the squid and its numerous subplots would mean cutting other elements of the book, as well as creating an unworkably long film. For their part, the movie’s screenwriters emphasized the need to update the climax for a wider audience whose lack of familiarity with the graphic novel would make it hard to accept a giant teleporting squid as the metaphorical equivalent of nuclear Armageddon.

Reasonable as these explanations were, they failed to address an obvious question: how did the filmmakers’ willingness to alter something central to the book’s identity—its ending—square with the absolute fidelity they lavished on the rest of the adaptation? While the squid creature was dropped from development efforts as early as 1989, there is no overriding reason Snyder couldn’t have reinstated it, given his decision to emulate the rest of the source material so exactly. His embrace of the altered ending, breaking his loyalty oath to the source material, can be read most coldly as a slippage along the economic fault line faced by any cult object transformed into a blockbuster: how do you compromise between small but fervent fan audiences and mainstream appeal? But the altered ending can also be read as a response, if a deflected and cryptic one, to the events of September 11, 2001—in particular, the collapse of the World Trade Center’s Twin Towers and the scarring of Manhattan—and to the vexed protocols of visualizing a fictional disaster after real-world events have overtaken it.

Published as a limited series of twelve issues by DC Comics between 1986 and 1987, and collected in a single volume many times thereafter, *Watchmen* is a dystopian reworking of superhero mythology and an undisputed key work in the canon of comic-book literature, winning a Hugo Award in 1988 and named by *Time* magazine one of the one hundred most important English-language novels of the twentieth century. Set in a parallel-universe version of 1985, *Watchmen* follows costumed crime fighters like the masked vigilante Rorschach, the Batman-like Nite Owl, and the mercenary

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Comedian (among others) as they unravel a conspiracy involving the polymath industrialist Adrian Veidt—himself a costumed hero called Ozymandias—and his plan to trick the world’s superpowers into laying down their nuclear arms. In the story’s climax, Veidt reveals that he has designed a monster in the form of a genetically engineered squid, which, placed at the center of a lethal attack on New York, will convince the governments of Earth that they are under attack by a malevolent alien force and that they must unite to defend themselves.

The cold war backdrop, in which the United States and Soviet Union stand at the brink of mutual assured destruction, is only one of the ways in which the original Watchmen held a dark mirror to its times. The book’s gritty, downbeat take on the question “What if superheroes really existed?” is expressed less through its plot than through the very premise of its diegesis, an alternate reality in which Richard Nixon is entering his fifth term as president and the United States has handily won the Vietnam War with the help of Watchmen’s one true superbeing, Dr. Manhattan, a glowing blue entity whose godlike power over space and time—and complicit relationship with the US government—makes him his own form of doomsday weapon.

The book weaves this tapestry through densely rendered artwork, geometric layout grids, and intricate crosscutting that carries the reader back and forth in time: clues, symbols, and symmetries large and small are best discovered in multiple rereadings and prolonged study of panel details. Thus tied to the comic-book format in which it originated, Watchmen presented a challenge to the producers and directors (among them Joel Silver, Terry Gilliam, and Darren Aronofsky) who sought to turn the book into a movie almost as soon as it had been published.⁵ In addition to the problem of condensing the graphic novel’s four-hundred-plus pages of material, screenwriters wrestled with whether to maintain the book’s period setting or to update it to reflect more current concerns, a decision that—especially as the Soviet Union neared the point of collapse in the late 1980s—forced an early reconsideration of the original ending.

In his 1989 script, Sam Hamm rejected the squid as simply too outlandish for audiences to accept, saying in an interview, “While I thought the tenor of the metaphor was right, I couldn’t go for the vehicle.”⁶ In Hamm’s new ending, Veidt opens a time portal to 1959 in an attempt to assassinate Dr. Manhattan at the moment of his origin, thereby undoing the superhuman’s negative effects on history. Although Veidt fails, Dr. Manhattan grasps the soundness of his logic and erases himself from the timeline. David Hayter’s 2003 script ends with Veidt bombarding New York City with concentrated solar radiation, killing a million people in order to install himself as benevolent world dictator. Once more, Veidt fails, but in a denouement nearer the original’s, his hoax is allowed to stand. The post-9/11 change from Hamm’s time-travel paradox resolution to one involving New York’s destruction suggests an attempt to bring the ending more in line with contemporary reality.

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⁵ Disappointed by previous Hollywood incarnations of his work and insistent that no adaptation of Watchmen could recreate the formal properties of the comic-book medium, Moore removed his name from the Warner Bros. production.

The script eventually offered to Zack Snyder, by Hayter and Alex Tse, blended elements of all the previous versions: from his arctic hideaway, Veidt triggers explosions in cities around the world, framing Dr. Manhattan for the attacks using a manufactured “energy signature” that emits blue bursts of radiation. Dr. Manhattan, seeing that Veidt’s gambit has worked and that to remain on Earth would expose the hoax, exiles himself. The run-up to and aftermath of the engineered catastrophe are identical to those of the book; only the signifiers of apocalypse have changed. Like earlier attempts to adapt Watchmen, Hayter and Tse’s script was set in the present day. Snyder’s decision to shoot the film as a period piece would require one more draft, its details taken directly from the book, except for the ending. The adaptation that finally made it to the screen thus spliced together two versions of Watchmen: one imported from 1987, the other from a post-2001 world.

The impact of 9/11 on representations in film and other media is well documented. In the months following the attacks on New York City and Washington, DC, some films were pulled from release, while others had the Twin Towers digitally scrubbed from their imagery. Within a few years, this self-imposed ban gave way to more sober visualizations, such as United 93 (Paul Greengrass, 2006) and World Trade Center (Oliver Stone, 2006), whose pseudodocumentary approaches invested their computer-generated re-creations of the burning towers with borrowed indexical gravity: less representation than simulation.

But the adaptation of Watchmen faced a different problem. Staying slavishly true to its source in every detail would mean bringing to the screen a dated vision of New York’s destruction, out of step with 9/11’s altered threat landscape. Darren Aronofsky alluded to this danger in a pre-9/11 interview on the challenge of making the 1987 material speak to a current context. Updating the story, he said, would involve generating “some kind of new threat that an audience of today would actually buy. . . . The biggest threat is that the plane you’re on is going to be blown up by terrorists. I guess you could create something like a Middle East meltdown, where people take sides, but that overall conceit of nuclear war is gone, you’d have to figure out something else.”

Seen this way, the reimaged ending was a more believable parallel to contemporary political reality; its multiple, distributed attacks recalling the fears of late 2001, when any frightening, unexpected event, from plane crashes to anthrax-laced mailings, seemed a potential part of some larger, planned aggression. But while in some ways this final version of the ending—filtered through the distorting lens of science fiction, and freed from the template set by the book—engaged with the decentralized and diffused nature of contemporary urban and global threat, it also distanced itself from both the original text and the events of 9/11 by de-emphasizing New York City as “ground zero.”

For all its perverse inventiveness, then, the original ending may have been rejected because it came too close to actual events, albeit in metaphorical form. The work of...
Moore and Gibbons prefigured 9/11, not in its particulars, but in its affective impact and corresponding geopolitical consequences. Just as the squid releases in death a lethal psychic shockwave, so did the emotional effects of the terrorist attacks ripple outward: at first in a spectacle of trauma borne virus-like on our media screens, and later in the form of a post-9/11 mindset notable for its regressive conflation of masculinity and security. Ten years on, it remains highly debatable whether US actions after 9/11 resulted in a safer or more unified world; we seem in many ways to have ended up back where we started, poised at a tipping point of crisis. But in the initial glow of late 2001 and early 2002, it seemed briefly possible that the new reality we confronted might turn out to be, in the words of the graphic novel’s closing chapter, “a stronger loving world”—or at least result in a coalition of those willing to come together to engage in a war against terrorism.

That mass deception underlies Veidt’s plan now seems an ironic commentary on 9/11 to those who believe the attacks enabled the US government to define the responsible forces as a shadowy network whose conveniently elastic boundaries could both dilate to encompass whole cultures and contract to enable the torture of individual suspects. The Bush administration’s response to the attacks, as played out in suppressions of liberty and free speech in the United States, in bellicose pronouncements of righteous vengeance in the World Court, and ultimately in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, was like a cruel proof of Veidt’s concept, conjuring into simultaneous existence a fearsome if largely fictional enemy and a “homeland” united in public avowal, if not in actual practice.

Although the Twin Towers are never foregrounded in the graphic novel, they do appear prominently in the movie in two scenes. The first is at a funeral, where they stand in the rainy sky beyond a cemetery as the Comedian’s coffin is interred. The second is in Veidt’s office, where they are part of the skyline behind the character as he speaks of growing nuclear fears and his desire to “make war obsolete.” Invoked in this fashion—an elegiac mode similar to the concluding shots of Munich (Steven Spielberg, 2005) and Gangs of New York (Martin Scorsese, 2002)—the towers signify on multiple levels: as markers of their own absence, adumbrations of what is to come, and subtle interventions by Snyder and his scenarists in a text intended to pass in every other respect as the nearest possible approximation of a work designed in another medium and another time.

The long and detour-riddled journey of Watchmen from page to screen embodies the many paradoxes of contemporary blockbuster film production, so capable of outré visualization yet so constrained in its operations. It would be simplistic—and, given the historical record, inaccurate—to conclude that the reimagined ending was prompted solely by the events of 9/11; multiple concerns converged to motivate the change, from the desire to streamline an unruly narrative to the fear of alienating potential audiences. The matrix of factors from which this grand but incomplete experiment in hyperfaithful adaptation emerged should remind us that Hollywood’s “state of the art” is never just a performance of technological prowess, but instead a complexly overdetermined mutation of texts across time and intermedial borders, balancing
the preservation of some original artistic aura with the pursuit of new forms of cultural resonance and relevance. The tragically ineradicable stamp of September 11 on Watchmen’s cinematic incarnation may be less about what is absent or altered than about how difficult it has become to read the film otherwise.

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Remember Everything, Absolve Nothing: Working through Trauma in the Bourne Trilogy

by Vincent M. Gaine

The Jason Bourne trilogy constitutes an interesting example of mainstream Hollywood cinema attempting to engage critically with contemporary political issues following the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Although the critique is constrained by commercial and generic expectations, The Bourne Identity (Doug Liman, 2002), The Bourne Supremacy (Paul Greengrass, 2004), and The Bourne Ultimatum (Greengrass, 2007) nonetheless intersect with debates about terrorism, trauma, and the war on terror. This essay discusses the tension between the franchise’s attempt at political critique and its commercial context of romantic sentimentalization.

Generically, Jason Bourne (Matt Damon) shares much with James Bond and other secret agents such as Jack Ryan and Harry Palmer, but the trilogy expresses discomfort with the role of the spy as an unproblematic agent of his government. This is significant in relation to 9/11, as since the attacks there has been significant cultural debate about the appropriate response. The political and military response presented a binary opposition between “us” (the United States) and “them” (terrorists), which avoided critical analysis. Similarly, although 9/11 provided what Susan Sontag called “a monstrous dose of reality,” the response was, for some, a replacement of politics with psychotherapy, indicating more concern with treating the traumatized “victims” than with identifying the motivations for the attacks. However, various popular entertainment texts did

1 Richard Jackson, Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics and Counter-Terrorism (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2005), 69.

undertake a form of political criticism, as noted by Liz Powell in her contribution to this In Focus. The Bourne franchise is such a text, and one of the most significant because the franchise explicitly intersects with some of the debates in post-9/11 culture.

For the purposes of this essay, the major concerns of the Bourne franchise are the concepts of trauma and responsibility. Jason Bourne is presented as a damaged hero, as evidenced by his amnesia and trauma over his past as a CIA operative. Anna Froula quotes, in her contribution to this section, Cathy Caruth’s characterization of trauma as “repeated intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts.” Bourne, and the films’ viewers, experience these intrusions as flashbacks, specifically flashbacks to his assassination missions and, in the final film, his training.

The flashbacks stand out from the rest of the films’ visual style through lower lighting, over- and underexposure, and unsteady cinematography. These intrusions serve to illustrate the inescapable nature of trauma, creating a parallel between the traumatized hero and the traumatized viewer. Bourne is traumatized, much as Western society, specifically the United States, was by 9/11. Bourne can thus be seen as a surrogate for the American viewer. Just as those who saw the collapse of the Twin Towers either in person or through the media are likely to be haunted by the images, so is Bourne haunted by the images of his past experiences.

There is a further parallel, however, between Bourne and the Western viewer: both are implicitly culpable. The Western (again, particularly American) viewer of both 9/11 and the Bourne trilogy can be seen as tacitly or overtly supportive of the US foreign policy that, arguably, provoked the terrorist attacks. If the public who supported US foreign policy experienced the results of certain policies on September 11, 2001, and therefore bears some responsibility for its own trauma, Bourne is similarly responsible for his trauma, since he was a willing participant in policies of assassination. The franchise does not present Bourne as a passive victim in his trauma but rather as at least partially responsible for what has happened to him. In doing so, the Bourne trilogy stresses responsibility and culpability for what Paul Greengrass describes, in his DVD commentary for Ultimatum, as the current “paranoid culture.” At the same time, though, Bourne is presented as a sympathetic protagonist whom the viewer is meant to support. While this tension could undermine any political critique in the films, it is also the means by which a political message is expressed. If Bourne is responsible for his own trauma, so is the audience—the electorate for the (successive) governments who provoked al-Qaeda. These are the viewers at whom the franchise aims a political critique, suggesting their culpability for 9/11 and the subsequent war on terror.

The political critique made by any Hollywood release is inevitably tempered by commercial constraints, which usually take the form of romanticization, with the proven wisdom of popular storytelling dictating the inclusion of a sympathetic protagonist. The figure of the lone spy carrying out dangerous work for his country is a romantic figure, but in Identity, Bourne’s former handler Terry Conklin (Chris Cooper) strips the sentiment away by describing Bourne as “a malfunctioning $30 million weapon.” The franchise consistently maintains the tension between Bourne’s romanticized role as a sympathetic protagonist and his status as a weapon of questionable US policy.

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The awareness of and eventual confrontation with Bourne’s past constitutes the franchise’s political critique, most emphatically in *Ultimatum*. In *Identity*, the CIA’s concern is to limit exposure of Bourne’s botched assassination of a former African president. In *Supremacy*, a corrupt CIA official and a Russian businessman frame Bourne to distract attention from themselves. In *Ultimatum*, post-9/11 concerns are more overt: much of the film takes place in cities that have suffered terrorist attacks, including London, Madrid, and New York; Bourne’s flashbacks of his training feature hooded prisoners that recall scenes from Abu Ghraib, while the training itself involved immersion, reminiscent of waterboarding. In his DVD commentary, Greengrass describes his intention to give the film a “strong contemporary edge,” but his attention is focused not so much on the threat of terrorism as on the paranoid culture and “focused brutality” of antiterrorism that have become familiar in the post-9/11 landscape. Bourne’s enemy in *Ultimatum* is CIA counterterrorist division Blackbriar, successor to the Treadstone program under which Bourne previously operated. Blackbriar’s supervisor, Noah Vosen (David Strathairn), describes its official mission using terms that have become familiar during the war on terror, such as “rendition,” and, crucially, Vosen justifies Blackbriar’s actions: “You’ve seen the raw intel. . . . You know how real the danger is. We need these programs now.” The debate over this “need” is a major one in the war on terror: how far is too far? Later, Pamela Landy (Joan Allen) asks Vosen, “When does it end?” only to receive a rebuke: “It ends when we’ve won.”

*Ultimatum* refutes this justification of extreme measures in the war on terror, declaring that it needs to end now. Blackbriar demonstrates a significant falsehood, the concept of, as Susan Willis puts it, “a world where traumas and dire inequality happen (and are contained) elsewhere.” Bourne’s case file demonstrates that the trauma caused by the CIA is far closer to home, as it details targets assassinated by Bourne, including US citizens. Eventually, Vosen as well as Dr. Albert Hirsch (Albert Finney) are arrested for their involvement in Treadstone and Blackbriar, and it is implied that CIA director Ezra Kramer (Scott Glenn) is next. Bourne and Landy’s exposure of Blackbriar to the attorney general is a clear declaration that, as far as the film is concerned, the “focused brutality” has to stop, as it serves only to perpetuate trauma and injustice.

E. Ann Kaplan discusses various representations of trauma, arguing that popular genres (in her example, the melodrama) register and negotiate cultural traumas through “‘quiet’ or ‘common’ trauma.” Bourne’s amnesia represents the common cultural trauma experienced in the post-9/11 world, an inability to make sense of what has happened. The behavioral modifications of Bourne’s training distanced him from his actions, making him the ideal weapon, and his journey centers on reconnecting with what he has done and attempting to take responsibility for his actions. A crucial aspect of this journey involves feeling shame and guilt for the deaths and suffering that he has caused. It is significant that agents still working for the CIA, such as Paz (Édgar Ramírez) and Desh (Joey Ansah), receive instructions electronically, hardly speak, and act without question, barely registering as people. David Bordwell complains that


6 Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*, 69.
“[t]he villain in the average Charlie Chan movie displays more psychological continuity than the nasty agents in Bourne Ultimatum,” but these “assets,” as Vosen describes them, are perfect weapons precisely because their personalities have been suppressed. These are the stoic “manly men” who will do whatever is necessary to defend the United States, yet, in doing so, they cease to be human. Bourne’s search for his identity and his past, including his guilt, ultimately serves to rehumanize him.

Not that he is absolved. As the trilogy emphasizes responsibility is also a reclaiming of morality. It can be argued that he gets off lightly, not having to stand trial for his Treadstone operations but instead escaping; the franchise thus maintains the romanticization of its hero despite its concern with culpability. This sentimental preservation of Bourne’s status as hero can be read in terms of generic and commercial constraints on the ability of mainstream cinema to engage critically with serious political topics. A polemical film runs the risk of alienating its primary audience, Western viewers who are accustomed to the hero’s triumph, so Ultimatum tempers its political critique with the preservation of Bourne’s hero status as he dives into the East River in New York, his immersion suggesting absolution and rebirth. Had Bourne been arrested, his condemnation would have made the political critique the central point of the film, possibly alienating audiences. But the point of the Bourne trilogy is not to condemn its protagonist: it is to show his culpability and, crucially, his acceptance of and willingness to live with his guilt. It can be argued that the sentimental preservation of Bourne’s hero status dilutes the political critique, but as Kaplan asks, is it essential that “critical political debate be opposed to a discourse including empathy for those who suffer trauma and hurt?”

Does the sentimentality of Bourne’s escape completely negate the trilogy’s political criticism?

Rather than offering an outright condemnation, the conclusion of Ultimatum suggests a way of dealing with trauma. Bourne’s traumatized state is one of confusion, and his endeavor to find out where he came from, acknowledge what he has done, and experience guilt can be read as an attempt to understand and, therefore, work through trauma. Trauma cannot be escaped from—wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have only exacerbated tensions between the United States (as well as Britain) and the Middle East, while Homeland Security and the increasing power of the Right in the United States have created a culture of fear. But reviewing involvement critically, accepting culpability and even guilt for what has occurred, can enable, in Kaplan’s terms, “a certain working through.” Bourne “works through” back to where he started, learning along the way about what he has done and attempting (in vain) to apologize. At the end of Supremacy he apologizes to Irena Neski (Oksana Akinshina) for killing her parents. His apology is futile and pathetic, and crucially so; he cannot be absolved for what he did, but he can accept shame, as he does after killing Desh in Ultimatum, and he can live with that shameful knowledge. Similarly, we, the Western viewing and voting public, can

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8 Faludi, The Terror Dream, 148.
9 Kaplan, Trauma Culture, 16.
10 Ibid., 37.
regard 9/11 and the war on terror as something we have nothing to do with, or we can regard ourselves as bearing some responsibility for what our leaders do, and act against them through democratic processes. Greengrass seems to agree, as his conclusion to the Bourne trilogy strongly suggests a notion of responsibility, a sense that we can “do something about it,” as Bourne says to Landy. The opportunity he gives her is one that the public has as well. Greengrass and Damon express this belief more explicitly in their subsequent collaboration, Green Zone (2010), which declares outright that the Bush administration blatantly lied about the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq to justify the US invasion.

Susan Faludi notes that, in times of crisis, American culture resorts to old notions of archetypal frontier heroism, but that an alternative is “learning to live with insecurity, finding accommodation with—even drawing strength from—an awareness of vulnerability.” This is the sensibility represented by Jason Bourne. He is not an unquestioning agent of clarity but, rather, a person like us in the post-9/11 landscape: no longer able to be an unproblematic hero or patriot, but confused, uncertain, and traumatized. In order to work through this trauma, he must become reflective, penitent, and capable of reconciliation, and acknowledge his own culpability.

The climax of Ultimatum can be read as an illustration of the notion, often attributed to Edmund Burke, that “all that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.” Bourne, as well as Landy, prove themselves to be good by doing something, but the task is not complete. The final scene can be read as metacinematic: much as Bourne formed a substitute for the traumatized member of the American public, so Nicky Parsons (Julia Stiles) forms a substitute for the film viewer, watching the events unfold on a screen. Actual accountability in intelligence services must be pursued by the public, by demanding inquiries into the Iraq War and the treatment of prisoners at Guantánamo Bay, for example. The final image of Bourne stirring back to life and swimming away is a romantic wish fulfillment—he is our hero so we want him to survive—but as he swims away, he leaves the responsibility with us. The films suggest an understanding of the current sociopolitical climate: an understanding and acceptance of uncertainty and danger, combined with a notion that we have a responsibility, and an ability, to influence what happens.

* Faludi, The Terror Dream, 286.
In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the broadcast media were saturated with evocations of the Western. It is perhaps unsurprising that this genre, which centers on myths of national identity and which held significant cultural currency throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, should be employed at a time of intense national crisis; the familiar heroic characters and themes of victory and triumph typical of the western provided traumatized citizens with a means to make sense of, and find comfort in, the aftermath of 9/11. The extent of this turn toward the imagery and narratives of the Western is documented in some detail by Susan Faludi in her book on post-9/11 broadcast media, *The Terror Dream*. Observing how journalists “cast city firefighters as tall-in-the-saddle cowboys patrolling a Wild West stage set,” and deciphering the explicit frontier rhetoric surrounding the instigation of the “war on terror,” Faludi declares the narrativization of 9/11 in the broadcast media as a “reenactment of the fifties Western.”\(^1\) At the heart of this nostalgic turn toward the Western was an often crude binary opposition of good (the United States, “us”) and evil (those against the United States, “them”) that, as Richard Jackson notes, failed to critically question either the narrative of 9/11 or the proposed political and military response to the attacks.\(^2\)

With ten years having passed since 9/11, temporal distance has allowed for a more nuanced consideration of these issues of morality and culpability. Furthermore, these years have been shadowed by media scandals revealing the abuse and torture of Iraqi prisoners at the hands of US soldiers, severely undermining the construction of the United States as innocent victim that underpinned the cultural narrative of 9/11. A number of films produced during this time have attempted, in varying degrees, to challenge the binary oppositions that pervaded post-9/11 political rhetoric. For example, *Rendition* (Gavin Hood, 2007) and *Redacted* (Brian De

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Palma, 2007) reveal the racial discrimination, abuse, and torture that have taken place in the name of the war on terror. A similar political awareness can be identified in Michael Moore’s high-profile documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11*, which critiques the political and military response to 9/11 and overtly mocks the heroic cowboy persona adopted by George W. Bush. In these examples, however, there seems to be an effort to either resolve these controversial issues or to adopt an alternative but equally crude perspective on the US response to 9/11.

A more ambiguous critique of the simplistic, polarized views of good and evil, victim and perpetrator, that dominated post-9/11 broadcast media and political rhetoric can be identified in David Cronenberg’s *A History of Violence* (2005). The film tells the story of Tom Stall (Viggo Mortensen), a typical all-American male, married with two children and his own business, whose true identity is revealed to be that of Joey Cusack, a violent gangster from Philadelphia. Although the film never explicitly references 9/11 or the war on terror, Cronenberg has highlighted the evocation of the Western by the Bush administration and its potential consequences as an inspiration for the film: “We thought of the Western—and yes, of course, how political do you want to get? When westerns are mentioned by the President as part of his foreign policy, when Osama bin Laden is wanted ‘dead or alive,’ you have to seriously think about the ‘interblending’ of genre, myth and *realpolitik*, which, I guess, is not that real.”

Evidence of this direct influence can be identified in the character of sheriff Sam Carney (Peter MacNeill), who echoes President Bush’s rhetoric in phrases such as “This is a nice town. We have nice people here. We take care of our nice people.” This notion of a heroic, generous, and selfless American identity, in opposition to a villainous other who is indifferent to human life and suffering, is introduced in the opening two sequences of the film. However, as the film progresses, the boundaries between these identities become increasingly blurred, resulting in an image of American masculinity that is simultaneously heroic and villainous.

The film begins at a rural motel as two men prepare to leave. Leland (Stephen McHattie) goes to check them out of the motel; when he returns, he tells Billy (Greg Bryk) to fill up a container from the water cooler inside. When Billy enters the office we discover that Leland has murdered the manager and a maid, leaving their bodies sprawled in pools of blood. Despite the horrific scene before him, Billy appears unmoved and casually wanders around the desk to the cooler. As he begins to fill up the container, a young girl enters through a door to his left. Billy stands and turns toward her, pulling a gun from the back pocket of his jeans. Then, crouching, and putting a finger to his lips as a sign for the girl to stay quiet, he raises the gun and shoots her without hesitation.

Two things contribute to the coding of Billy and Leland as evil in this sequence. First, the lack of motivation for the murders places them within a framework of what

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4 One example of this kind of rhetoric, emphasizing the good nature and unity of US citizens, can be found in George Bush’s address at the National Day of Prayer and Remembrance on September 14, 2001. In his speech, Bush praised the “generous and kind, resourceful and brave” qualities of the American character and emphasized how, in the aftermath of the attacks, “Americans showed a deep commitment to one another and an abiding love for our country.” http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbush911prayer&memorialaddress.htm (accessed April 2, 2011).
it is to be evil that has particular resonance within the film’s post-9/11 context. Jackson highlights the widely accepted notion that “evil people do what they do simply because they are evil,” which became central to the cultural narrative of 9/11, with the attacks consistently referred to as meaningless and without cause. Closely related to this is the complete lack of affect within the film’s early murder scene. The juxtaposition of extreme violence with a sense of calm detachment aligns Billy and Leland within Hannah Arendt’s concept of “the banality of evil”: a failure to think that leads to a complete disregard for humanity and a total absence of remorse that is marked not by the “perverted [or] sadistic,” but rather by the “terribly and terrifyingly normal.”

The depiction of evil in the opening sequence stands in stark contrast to the initial representation of the film’s central protagonist, Tom, who is introduced in the film’s second sequence as he rushes to comfort his young daughter, who has awoken, screaming, from a nightmare. The dramatic change in the moral framing of the characters is emphasized by the abruptness of the editing. Significantly, however, matching the shot of Billy pulling the trigger to a close-up of Tom’s daughter screaming creates an unsettling sense of continuity between the two very different scenes, foreshadowing the moral complexity that develops later in the film.

The framing of Tom as the counterpoint to the evil depicted in the opening sequence is continued throughout the first part of the film. Tom is not only an attentive father but also an upstanding, churchgoing member of the community, and a businessman who runs a friendly diner. He even picks up litter in the street. Tom is elevated to the status of local hero after Leland and Billy turn up in his diner and Tom shoots them both dead when they threaten to kill his staff and customers. Unlike the murders in the opening sequence, Tom’s killing of Leland and Billy is framed as both justified and necessary. Central to this oppositional framing of Tom is the emphasis placed on the threat posed to the female waitress and the two teenagers in the diner. This scene explicitly illustrates what Iris Marion Young terms “the logic of masculinist protection,” in which “the gallantly masculine man faces the world’s difficulties in order to shield women from harm,” a logic which, Young argues, underpinned post-9/11 political discourse. Thus, Tom speaks to a cultural imagination preoccupied with notions of masculine power and justice; his character establishes a visual and thematic reference point from which the narrative can begin to critically explore the foundations of this icon of national identity.

Discussing how the image of the strong, caring, and righteous American has suffered during the war on terror, Henry A. Giroux argues that, “like Oscar Wilde’s infamous picture of Dorian Gray, the portrait of American patriotism was irrevocably transformed into its opposite.” This same transformation can be identified in three key


7 Iris Marion Young, “Feminist Reactions to the Contemporary Security Regime,” Hypatia 18, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 224.

moments in *A History of Violence*. The first occurs immediately after Tom kills Leland and Billy. Slumped against the counter, Tom looks down at the dying Leland. The camera cuts from a graphic close-up of Leland’s horrific injuries, confronting both the spectator and Tom with the devastating reality of his action, to a shot of Tom’s face. He looks down at Leland and then at the gun in his hand, seemingly taken aback by the violence of his own actions. As a result of the ensuing media attention, Tom is approached by Carl Fogarty (Ed Harris), who claims to recognize him as Joey Cusack. Tom’s son Jack (Ashton Holmes) becomes anxious and asks his father what they will do if Fogarty turns up at the house looking for trouble, to which Tom replies, in the second key moment of transformation, “We’ll deal with it.” As he speaks he cocks the shotgun he is holding in his hand, and again the camera cuts to a medium close-up of his face and the barrel of the gun. This time, however, there is no fear or surprise in Tom’s expression, and he now appears more than comfortable holding a weapon and contemplating its uses.

Tom’s transformation becomes complete when, in a third scene, Fogarty and his men visit the family home. Tom fights with and kills Fogarty’s two henchmen before taking on Fogarty himself. During the fight Tom indirectly admits to being Joey Cusack when he tells Fogarty, “I should have killed you back in Philly.” A gunshot sounds and Fogarty slumps to the ground, revealing Jack standing on the grass with his father’s shotgun in his hand. Tom/Joey stands up, and at this moment he is barely recognizable as the friendly family man from earlier in the film. The camera stays fixed on his face for a long, silent moment. His face contorted and sprayed with blood, the quiet hero Tom Stall has morphed into the grotesque villain Joey Cusack. Tom/Joey then embraces his son, but this protective, fatherly gesture is undermined by the awkward stiffness of their bodies and their shocked facial expressions as they are forced to confront their violent behavior; it is this image that most clearly represents the blurring of boundaries between hero and villain.

Through Tom’s transformation, the film begins to question the notion of redemptive violence that seems central to the evocation of the Western in the political response to 9/11. This is particularly notable in the increasingly tense relationship between Tom/Joey and his son Jack. Following the incident at the diner, Jack, who has previously fought his high school battles with words, retaliates against a bully and puts him in the hospital. When he is confronted by his father about his behavior, Jack makes it clear that his father’s recent violent outbursts undermine both his authority and his integrity:

Tom: Listen, smart mouth, in this house we do not solve our problems by hitting people.
Jack: No, in this family we shoot them.

[Tom slaps Jack, and Jack runs off]

The irony of this exchange highlights the problematic nature of justifying one act of violence while condemning another. The film refuses to adopt a fixed moral standpoint on either Tom’s or Jack’s behavior; instead, both of their uses of violence are held up for the spectator’s critique. Thus, it would seem that the film responds to Slavoj Žižek’s recommendation “not to include [the 9/11 attacks] in some wider narrative of the Progress of Reason or Humanity, which somehow, if it does not redeem them, makes them a part of an all-encompassing wider consistent narrative,” but instead
to “question our own innocence, to render thematic our own (fantasmatic libidinal) investment and engagement in them [the attacks].”

The film’s uncertainty regarding the morality of the masculine protector is sealed in the closing scene, when Tom returns from his killing spree and silently joins his family at the dinner table. Steve Zimmerman compares this scene with heart-warming dinner-table tableaux from numerous films from the 1930s to the 1950s, which establish an iconography for the same values of family togetherness and traditional gender roles championed in the cultural narrative of 9/11. He writes of the film’s final image, “From the aching way they look at each other we get a sense that they’ve reached an understanding between them and that everything that was once their warm, loving family will again be as it was.” However, the cool tones, the sustained silence, and the almost pained looks of all four characters suggest that the family’s turmoil is far from resolved. In contrast to the tightly framed image of the family gathered on a single bed at the beginning of the film, we now get only a brief shot of the four of them each sitting on his or her own side of the table. As the camera cuts from one to the other we realize this is now a family torn apart, strangers to one another, and the unsettling feeling this creates is emphasized by the overhead lighting, which casts shadows on their faces. When Edie (Maria Bello) finally looks up, there are tears in her eyes, and as Tom meets her gaze he shakes his head. Without dialogue it is unclear precisely what this gesture means but the fear in his wide-eyed expression suggests that this is the moment in which he surrenders to the truth. Poignant and moving, this scene marks the realization that not only can they not go back to the glossy image of all-American life in which they lived previously, but they must acknowledge that their previous life was, indeed, only an image.


“Now the Gloves Come Off”: The Problematic of “Enhanced Interrogation Techniques” in Battlestar Galactica

by KAREN RANDELL

I realized that if we re-do this today, people are going to bring with them memories and feelings about 9/11, and if we chose to embrace it, it was a chance to do an interesting science fiction show that was also very relevant to our time. —Ronald D. Moore, co-creator of Battlestar Galactica
We don't sit around saying “let’s do an Abu Ghraib episode” but we’re informed members of society and we watch the news—these things seep in.

—David Eick, co-creator of *Battlestar Galactica*¹

*Battlestar Galactica* (SciFi, 2004–2009) was a zeitgeist sci-fi series that critiqued the post-9/11 American political landscape. This essay considers one key episode, “Flesh and Bone,” from the first season, to interrogate the ways in which the series engaged with its cultural context. As Susan A. George has noted, *Battlestar Galactica (BSG)* “consistently addresses hard human issues” and “does not shirk at showing the worst of the human condition.”² Launched three years after the events of 9/11 and a year after the invasion of Iraq by US and coalition forces, the reimagined *BSG* is an erudite and politically motivated space opera.³ The traditionally Manichean sci-fi plot is problematized on a weekly basis as the series narrates the lives of approximately fifty-five thousand human survivors of the Cylon (human-made androids) attack on the Twelve Colonies.⁴ The survivors are forced to live a nomadic life in space as they search for a mythical destination: Earth. Each episode opens with the surviving-human roll call, a poignant reminder of the numbers of those dead and wounded not reported during the “war on terror” and the attacks in Iraq and Afghanistan. As commander of the Afghanistan operation General Tommy Franks stated, “You know, we don’t do body counts.”⁵ By contrast, the roll call of the number killed at the World Trade Center on 9/11 has been ritually counted and annually commemorated. *BSG* offers an echo of all of those lost, counted or not.

C. W. Marshall and Tiffany Potter state that the “resonances between *BSG* and the American experience at home and abroad in the early twenty-first century operate on a number of levels and are evident in nearly every episode.”⁶ The episode under consideration here explores the notion of civil and human rights when torture is used to obtain information. Cylon Leoben (Callum Keith Rennie) is apprehended hiding aboard the only battleship that appears to have survived, *Battlestar Galactica*; when


³ The original series was created by Glen A. Larson and aired on ABC from 1978 to 1979.

⁴ Twelve planets—called the Twelve Colonies—exist in a galaxy populated by a humanoid race that has migrated from its original planet of Kobol. The humans created a cybernetic race called the Cylons, who, over many decades, have evolved to imitate human form, emotionally and physically. They war with the humans and eventually carry out a devastating attack (with the aid of human Gaius Baltar).


captured, he states that he knows where a nuclear warhead has been placed among
the fleet, and that the warhead is set to explode at 18:30 hours. The episode considers
the techniques used to extract information from the enemy in such a “ticking bomb”
scenario. Sci-fi critic and blogger Martin Anderson has argued that “‘Flesh and Bone’
is about human torture [and] not about cybernetics,” and that “its tacit acceptance
of torture is a ratification” of this interrogation technique: “The torture is justified
because Leoben says he has information about the nuclear warhead.” Anderson finds
this narrative unacceptable (“Am I the only one person in the world who stopped
watching BSG . . . when Starbuck tortured a Cylon?”) because this is a “transparent
simile of the motives behind rendition in our current society.”

In BSG, torture becomes a pragmatic approach to civilian safety. This, I would
argue, is exactly why this episode is so important. The issues dealt with—but not re-
olved—in “Flesh and Bone” draw attention to the behavior of the US government
in the post-9/11 moment. As John Ip has pointed out, “[V]ersions of the ‘ticking
bomb’ scenario have [also] appeared in Bush administration documents and official
statements that asserted the legality of torture and various coercive interrogation tech-
niques.” Anderson observes that “what most offended me about ‘Flesh and Bone’ was
not that it sought to rationalise torture but that it took the validity of such an inter-
rogation procedure for granted and immediately went on to lesser issues.” And this is
exactly my point: How could one rationalize torture? And why would one want to ra-
tionalize torture? By implying that torture (near drowning) is the only way to discover
the whereabouts (or really the nonexistence) of the bomb, BSG asks its viewers to bring
to the episode all that they understand of the handling and mistreatment of prisoners
at Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo, and Bagram detention centers.

There are two explicit issues concerning torture that “Flesh and Bone” consid-
ers: first, the use of near drowning as a form of torture, and, second, the presence
of a female interrogator. Waterboarding was used on three Iraqi detainees under the
jurisdiction of the CIA in 2003 to obtain information about the World Trade Center
attacks. This torture technique was prosecuted as a war crime by the United States
before 2001, so its post-9/11 use was glossed over by government sources. It was even
made light of, most infamously by Vice President Dick Cheney, who stated that “it
was a no-brainer” to give a prisoner a “dunk in water,” as a WDAY radio host put
it to him, “if it saved lives.” In May 2004, Donald Rumsfeld, commenting on the
abuses uncovered at Abu Ghraib, undermined the seriousness of prisoner treatment:
“My impression is what has been charged thus far is abuse, which I believe technical-
ly is different from torture . . . and therefore I’m not going to address the ‘torture’

/captainsblog/5996/when_good_guys_torture.html.
8 John Ip, “Two Narratives of Torture,” Northwestern University Journal of International Human Rights 7, no. 1
(Spring 2009): 2.
11 Dick Cheney, radio interview with Scott Hennen, quoted in Dan Eggen, “Cheney Says Using Water in Questioning a
Here, the “tacit acceptance of torture” is problematized by the language of necessity and civilian safety, playing out at the highest level of political rhetoric. *BSG* uses this language as well, but also pushes back against it to consider the philosophy of torture: Can it be useful? Does it work? Most problematically, what does it look like?

The presence of a woman interrogator in “Flesh and Bone” does not carry the weight of gender obligations one might expect from a violent female character. She does not have to retain a phallic symbol (no guns or knives), nor does she have to “give up” or play to her femininity. Rather, Starbuck (Katee Sackhoff), Sarah Conly suggests, “exemplifies the changes in our conceptualization of women that de Beauvoir believes necessary—probably sufficient—for women to reach equality with men. . . . [T]his vision of equality [in *BSG*] rests largely on the premise of sameness between men and women.”

Thus, arguably, in *BSG* women take on commanding roles without the gender baggage attributed to women in the “real world.” For instance, President Laura Roslin’s (Mary McDonnell) ability to lead is questioned not because she is a woman but because her only previous experience in government had been as secretary of education. However, the torture scene does play on the gender difference of Leoben and Starbuck, not through the narrative line but through a cinematic intimacy that draws the audience into the psychological game play of the Cylon prisoner and the tension around Starbuck’s feminine subjectivity. This is not a torture scene of macho aggression, but instead one of discussion, empathy, spirituality, and ultimately frustration.

The torture scene takes place in a brightly lit interrogation room—more reminiscent of a cop-drama police cell than of the stereotypical dark, dank torture chamber. Leoben is first seen framed through a glass door, with his head on a table in the middle of the room. No physical damage is apparent yet, although he is tired, and his eyes are red and swollen from lack of sleep. Starbuck and a guard consider his condition. The conversation takes place in whispers, and the camera is close, with their faces in profile and the image of Leoben beyond. This visual and aural intimacy sets the initial tone of the interrogation. Leoben and Starbuck sit opposite each other; Leoben refuses to answer her questions, instead asking her name. As she gets up to leave, tired of this insubordination, he asks, “Are you Lieutenant Starbuck?” The camera here captures Starbuck in midshot as she freezes and Leoben sits at the table behind, triumphant in his knowledge. They are equally caught here within the frame, and this intimate spatial relationship continues throughout the interrogation scene until Starbuck authorizes water torture.

When the guards leave to bring the water bucket, Leoben breaks free from his chains and pins Starbuck to the wall. The camera shows them in extreme close-up, his hand...
under her chin, with her weaker gender position highlighted by her inability to fight back (to break out of the frame) and her need for the male guards to return and restrain him. As he is pulled away, a swelling of music heralds Starbuck’s aggressive proclamation to Leoben: “You frakked up, pal. Now the gloves come off.” This statement is a direct reference to the testimony of Cofer Black, the “counterterrorism coordinator” who, while being questioned during the 9/11 investigations in 2002, stated, “All I want to say is that there was ‘before 9/11’ and ‘after 9/11.’ After 9/11 the gloves came off.” It is also at this point that the soundtrack evokes what Corey K. Creekmur suggests is the sound of the war on terror: a pseudo-oriental reed pipe and drum instrumentation that is a “reductive yet evocative sound of the threat of Islam.” This is a fascinating aural shift, because it is the “good” human who is the torturer, and the music evokes her space, not that of the alien enemy. Thus the “Islamic threat” is associated with Starbuck and not with the terrorist prisoner. BSG demands that its audience engage with exactly this problematic.

Throughout the near drowning—when Starbuck instructs Leoben to be “dunked” four times—he continues to discuss religion and philosophy, and to demonstrate his knowledge of her life. He tells her, “You are damaged, I know . . . . You were born to a woman who thought pain was good for the soul.” This information about her past, her mother’s abuse, and her relationship to pain and suffering unnerves Starbuck and allows Leoben to “get into [her] head,” as another character had warned. Leoben’s narrative also alludes to the notion that those who torture have a pathology that enables them to do so. Starbuck, then, is a damaged woman who understands the necessity for pain. This link between childhood abuse and adult behavior was also made in the case of Specialist Lynndie England, whose photographed image showing her posing and smiling with naked Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib (in 2004) caused public outrage and initiated a military investigation. As Anna Froula has argued, media images of England have demeaned her and stereotyped her as a “crude, ignorant . . . ‘red-neck,’” an un-American “trailer trash side show anomaly” whose background predisposed her to disrupt the patriarchal order of imperial incarceration. Her overt sexuality (she was four months pregnant when charged with abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib) allows the “U.S. public to absolve itself of responsibility for the carnage and abuse . . . in Iraq.” Thus, class and gender become a way to excuse abusive behavior by military personal as essentially pathological, and in the case of England and Starbuck, such abuse is based in female pathology. If female soldiers are able to torture, it appears there needs to be an “abnormal” subjectivity in evidence.

Germaine Greer states that “for even the most determinedly pacifist feminist, there can be no question of rescinding a woman’s right to choose a career in warfare. If we are to have armies, women should have the right to be in them.” This is equality, but we have to ask: is torture and abuse what we want our soldiers to be doing? Starbuck’s behavior suggests that there are no barriers to what women can do in a world where

essential notions of femininity are negated for the right to torture and maim, but must women engage with the patriarchal notion of sovereign power over our captives? Instead, wouldn’t the triumph of postfeminism be to change the status quo: to shift the margins from the inside? Simone de Beauvoir argues that “superiority has been accorded in history not to the sex that brings forth, but to that which kills.”¹⁹ This is something that President Roslin understands. When she enters the interrogation room and questions Starbuck about the validity of her techniques, it is initially clear that she occupies the morally superior position. She reprimands Starbuck, “[Y]ou spent the last eight hours torturing this man, this machine, whatever it is, and you don’t have a single piece of information to show for it,” reminding the BSG audience that, as reported by Philip Shenon, “in intelligence circles, testimony obtained through torture is typically discredited, [and that] research shows that people will say anything under threat of intense pain.”²⁰ Roslin promptly gains Leoben’s trust, but once he admits that there is no nuclear warhead, she orders that he be blown out the air lock, effectively executing the potential terrorist before he can harm civilian lives.

Later, over a whiskey, Adama (Edward James Olmos), the ship’s commander, tells Roslin, “[T]hat’s a helluva risk you took today, care to tell me why?” She replies, “The interesting thing about being president is that you don’t have to explain yourself to anyone,” a sobering reminder that in times of war, laws can be reinterpreted.²¹ It’s a prophetic conclusion to the episode, for in 2006 President George W. Bush signed a bill outlawing the torture of detainees in which he included a “signing statement, declaring that he would view the interrogation limits in the broader context of his broader powers to protect national security . . . [and] an official cited as an example a ‘ticking bomb scenario’ in which a detainee is believed to have information that could prevent a planned terrorist attack.”²² As Leoben says to Starbuck, “[A]ll this has happened before, and all this will happen again.” The problems and the pleasures for the BSG audience rest in this constant narrative dilemma: the series offers philosophical debates rather than easy answers played out to resolve our contemporary problems. In “Flesh and Bone” the discussion about what constitutes the rights of those under interrogation is not determined. As John Hodgman states, “[F]or a genre often derided as escapist, science fiction has a long tradition of social commentary.” He quotes one of BSG’s co-creators, Ronald D. Moore, with a list of some of the questions the show addresses: “What does it mean to be free in a society under attack? What are the limits of that freedom? Who’s right? Who’s wrong?” And most problematically, “Are you rooting for the wrong side?”²³ Well, are you?

I would like to thank James McColl and Josh Harding for their brilliantly insightful conversations about BSG over cups of tea, and for the loan of their DVD collection. This essay is for you: may you never have to witness an event like 9/11 again.

²¹ Bob Woodward, Bush at War (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002). Bush said, “I’m the commander—see, I don’t have to explain—I do not need to explain why I say things. That’s the interesting thing about being President.”
“9/11—What’s That?”: Trauma, Temporality, and Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles

by Anna Froula

Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles (T:SCC) ran on Fox for two seasons, from January 2008 to April 2009. The television series continues but significantly problematizes the storyline from The Terminator (James Cameron, 1984) and Terminator 2: Judgment Day (James Cameron, 1991). Narratively, T:SCC occurs before the third installment, Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines (Jonathan Mostow, 2003), which kills Sarah Connor with cancer and ends on “Judgment Day,” when the machines unleash the world’s nuclear arsenal.1 T:SCC follows the efforts of Sarah (Lena Headey) to prevent the creation of Skynet, a sentient computer-controlled military industrial complex that declares war on humans, and to protect her son, John Connor (Thomas Dekker), the future leader of the resistance. Within the Terminator mythology, “future John” sends both humans and specially programmed cyborgs through time into the narrative’s ever-traumatic present to protect the Connors and to assist them with their mission.

T:SCC mediates the US national trauma of 9/11 on allegorical and structural levels. Allegorically, the protagonists fight the product of the military industrial complex’s hubris. Skynet was built to protect the United States and its interests, but it turns on its human creators, a parallel to US-funded allies who have become enemies. This analogy becomes less straightforward because Sarah, who has trained for this impending war in the jungles of Central America like a freedom fighter, must operate underground like a terrorist, and is indeed labeled a terrorist by the show’s media spokespeople and law enforcement officials. She is a thief, a carjacker, and a torturer of humans in league with the machines, and she blows up buildings in her mission to stop Skynet.

What is most compelling about the series is the way in which its formal properties operate as a traumatic framework by fragmenting time and memory. From the franchise’s Reagan-era movie origins in 1984 to the 2008 series, Sarah has fought to prevent war. Time travel makes what would be flashbacks (memories of war) into flash-forwards (memories of future war), resulting in a temporal confusion that is characteristic of

1 The series ended before the release of Terminator Salvation (McG, 2009), the fourth film in the franchise.
trauma. In the *Terminator* franchise, trauma has always originated in the imminence of future catastrophes that the Connors continually experience in the present, but which are animated by Kyle Reese’s (Michael Behn) “memories” of future events. Theorists have argued compellingly that the structure of trauma imposes a recursive process of reliving the past. The cognitive processing of trauma, as Cathy Caruth writes, designs “a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or set of events, which takes the form of repeated intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts, or behaviors stemming from the event.” The pathology is structural, she notes: “[T]he event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it.”

What differentiates *T:SCC* from the rest of the *Terminator* franchise is the multidimensional structure of trauma, which parallels the preemptive revenge narrative that drove the Bush administration’s international and domestic policy. After 9/11, the show’s flash-forwards invoke both past terror and future horror for an American audience still working through a culture of fear induced by threats that the Bush administration promised and then promised to prevent.

In the shadows of 9/11, the television show’s flash-forwards to Los Angeles as toxic rubble under siege by an inhuman enemy eerily take on the contours of the crumbled World Trade Center being circled by helicopters. Combat trauma from John and Sarah’s past and present—and from resistance fighters’ future memories—conflates the anxiety from the United States’ failure to prevent 9/11 with the fear of greater horrors to come. Thus, John and Sarah’s trauma exists in the recirculating “logic” of the preemptive strike as war strategy. In theory, a preemptive strike is a calculated first move. But, when writ large as a strategy of war—against terror in the contemporary United States or against machines within the fictional universe of *T:SCC*—it must repeatedly premise itself on an always already imminent and abstractly large threat (terrorism/genocide) that has no discernible end point, only a series of variously specific manifestations, each of which must be stopped “first.” But the first-ness of this preemption becomes a ruse in practice, since it preempts whatever may happen next over and over again. It is, in effect, the “logic” of traumatic repetition in a culture of fear. Rather than being a simple repetition of a past event, Sarah’s trauma parallels that of the post-9/11 world, since it is also stuck in a state of anticipation of a future (Armageddon) that is much like the past.

Sarah and John cycle through trauma that is both post-traumatic (informed by the horrors of the past) and preemptive (anticipating the terrors of the future) through their own memories of past encounters with terminators, through the violence of their present, and through the threat of future nuclear annihilation. Moreover, the protagonists exist in the continual “ticking bomb” scenario that the Bush administration used to justify the use of torture against suspected terrorists. They must use

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3 Caruth, *Trauma*, 4–5.

4 As the original terminator (Arnold Schwarzenegger) tells John (Nick Stahl) in *Terminator 3*, “Judgment Day is inevitable.”
any means necessary both to protect John from the inexhaustible supply of terminators and to prevent the technology that is always on the verge of igniting a nuclear apocalypse. The protagonists operate under Bush’s preemptive antiterrorist policy via Sarah’s mantra, “No one is ever safe.” Following the logic of Cheney’s “one-percent doctrine,” in which the Bush administration would take seriously a threat that had only a one-percent chance of developing as a certainty, Cameron (Summer Glau), a reprogrammed terminator sent from 2027, will kill anyone who could become a threat to John.5 T:SCC’s ever-present culture of fear actualizes the Bush administration imaginary in which citizens must sacrifice civil liberties to live in a state of color-coded terror. Indeed, the threat level for Sarah and John only ever vacillates between two colors: burnt orange and blood red.

Significantly, the show skips over the real-life events of 9/11, setting the first episode both before and after the terrorist attacks. In the pilot, set on August 24, 1999, a terminator pursues Sarah and John. When it appears at John’s school, Cameron saves him and takes the Connors to hold up a bank, where they assemble components of a time machine held in safety deposit boxes maintained by resistance fighters. They then travel to 2007, entering a post-9/11 America without the direct knowledge of what that means. They miss the national trauma and its federal response, only to enact the Bush administration’s preemptive policy of the ticking bomb scenario throughout the series.

Though the pilot begins with the visual horror of Sarah’s apocalyptic nightmares, the series does not revisit the now iconic images of American terror. The viewer never even hears what Sarah is told about it, since characters depict the events through pantomime. In the second episode, Sarah learns about 9/11 from gang members from whom she procures false identification papers. When she insists that $20,000 is “extortion” for the documents, her supplier, Carlos (Jesse Garcia), responds, “[W]ar on terrorism make us the front lines, lady. Some raghead gets fake papers out here, we’re all going to Guantánamo. 9/11 double [sic] prices overnight.” “9/11,” responds Sarah. “What’s that?” The men laugh at her confusion, and the show then delays the revelation by crosscutting outside to a waiting Cameron. Moments later, the scene flashes back to Carlos and his associate explaining the attacks with hand and facial gestures depicting explosions, fireballs, and falling towers. “I cannot imagine the apocalypse,” her voiceover begins over their voiceless narration. “No matter what Kyle Reese told me or others who have come back. I cannot imagine three billion dead, but I can imagine three thousand. I can imagine fire. If I would have witnessed it, if I would have been here, I’m sure I would have thought the end was near. I’m sure I would have thought, we have failed.” Just as Sarah did not need to be there to understand what it means, the episode does not need to reproduce the now iconic and commodified traumatic visual record. Instead, we witness the human performance that defamiliarizes the event in both the cultural milieu of the aftermath and the Connors’ own ephemeral combat successes, which only ever add up to perpetual failure and another subsequent preemption of Judgment Day.

Throughout the franchise, Kyle’s memories have haunted Sarah’s future as apocalyptic nightmares. “Like a Pandora’s Box, he unpacked every horror, every evil,” she remembers (“Dungeons and Dragons”). The flashbacks and flash-forwards that structure T:SCC operate like a traumatized consciousness, because the threat of the war against the machines is never eliminated but instead is fought in a narrative loop that connects the present to the future. The protagonists also live in the anticipatory moment, not of the next traumatic trigger as is characteristic of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but of the future that only they know and have the power to stop: T:SCC’s narrative is an endless permutation of forestalling the final apocalypse. They are traumatized by encounters with terminators that pursue them relentlessly—even by Cameron, when a chip malfunction causes her to “go bad” and hunt John in the “Samson and Delilah” episode. Also, flash-forwards from memories of characters, such as Kyle Reese (Jonathan Jackson), his brother Derek (Brian Austin Green), and other members of the resistance, rupture the show’s present in the form of images of US fighter jets streaking overhead to unleash weapons of mass destruction and human skulls littering miles of ground zeros. These ominous references to the invasions conducted in the name of the war on terror—and to their grisly aftermath—hint at the experiences of the bombed Afghani, Iraqi, and Pakistani citizens that US news outlets have sanitized for their audiences. The show also portrays such memories of the future as an American allegory of the human cost of the war on terror, specifically rendition and suicide. We learn that Derek was tortured in the future and almost “ate his gun” after experiencing the loss of many of his fellow soldiers in “The Tower Is Tall but the Fall Is Short.” Like the veterans currently returning from Afghanistan and Iraq, the resistance fighters of the future return to a United States that is generally unaware of the horrors of war.

Battle-scarred by combat against machines, the return to the present for freedom fighters Derek, Jesse (Stephanie Jacobson), and Riley (Leven Rambin) is like the return of contemporary combat veterans of the war on terror, with one significant difference. Instead of attempting to assimilate into peacetime society and cope with combat PTSD, they exist in an unending moment of pre- and post-traumatic stress induced by a future they have already experienced and are perhaps destined to live through again. Their traumatic memories of the future collide with the violence and terror of the present as they struggle to prevent what has already scarred them. Their war is never over, nor, like a war declared on an abstraction, can it ever be over. The ways in which these characters survive trauma, then, as an unending overlapping cycle of meta-traumatic disorder, mirror a United States that is haunted by memories of 9/11 in the anxious present of the war on terror and its government-stoked fear of another attack.

“Trauma is narration without narrativity,” writes E. Ann Kaplan. “That is, without the ordered sequence we associate with narratives. Images are repeated but without meaning; they do not have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Rather they erupt into cinematic space, unheralded in the story as in an individual’s consciousness.” The second-season episode “Complications” particularly embodies Kaplan’s sense of “narration without narrativity” in its portrayal of memories of torture that interrupt episodes

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of present torture conducted in revenge for the future. Derek and Jesse interrogate a “gray,” a human war criminal aligned with Skynet. Jesse has beaten, abducted, and tied up a man she recognizes from the future: Charles Fischer (Richard Schiff), who claims to be “Paul Stewart.” Initially, Derek doesn’t remember Fischer from the future, but he notices the captive’s tattoo, indicating that he has served part of a life sentence and was freed from prison by Skynet in order to work for the machines in the future. Jesse leaves and returns, having kidnapped the much younger, present Charles Fischer (Adam Busch), and reveals that they have identical birthmarks. Gently, she tells Derek he needs to beat him to get him to talk. In response, Derek turns to the younger Charlie and starts pulling out his fingernails with pliers. To stop Derek from ripping another nail from the younger Charlie, the gray admits his true identity and asks that they let his younger, innocent self go. He claims that Skynet has sent him back not for a mission but as a reward. With a self-satisfied smile, he says, “I learned what makes people tick,” pleased by his service to the machines; he’s become a source of information on the human enemy, a walking, talking science fiction version of Raphael Patai’s *The Arab Mind*.

Outside, Derek asks what Fischer did to her, and Jesse explains that his job was to torture the human prisoners in order to teach the machines “how to talk to people, how to get information from people, how to beat people.” Her explanation becomes a voiceover as the scene shifts to a flash-forward of Jesse restrained on an operating table while Fischer injects her arm with drugs and lectures to an audience of terminators. “It was a kind of perverse theatre, like...like he was teaching them,” she continues. It went on for “weeks, months. There were drugs and starvation. And he’d talk to you for hours, for days. Just to break you down. Just to get you in a... to get to you.” When Derek asks how she got out, she responds, “I don’t know. You never told me. ... It wasn’t me Fischer had, baby. It was you.” After this revelation, the flash-forward changes to show Derek sweating and screaming through Fischer’s lesson. Jesse’s narration over alternating images of herself and Derek being tortured by a white American male who instructs terminators how to “get to” prisoners conjures the horrors of Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo Bay, and extraordinary rendition.

In the present, even though Derek doesn’t remember, he moves to shoot the younger Fischer, but Jesse is faster, sparing him by shooting the gray. After they bury him, Derek tells Jesse he remembers nothing, to her astonishment: “It was all we talked about, Derek. What he’d done. ... You were obsessed. It was a trauma. You blocked it.” The instability of Derek’s memory of his future illustrates Thomas Elsaesser’s conception of “trauma’s non-representability” as “both subjective (trauma makes failure of memory significant) and objective (trauma makes of representation a significant failure).” The episode is ambiguous about whether Derek has blocked out or actually prevented this particular trauma. Because the *Terminator* franchise is based on the

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8 Elsaesser, “Postmodernism as Mourning Work,” 195.
premise that humans and machines sent from the future can actually change it, the possibility exists that Derek in the present evaded this moment of torture (though other flash-forwards confirm that he has been tortured in other contexts). The episode nevertheless recycles the possibility of Fischer teaching torture to machines, because it ends with young Fischer in the Department of Homeland Security’s solitary confinement after another flashback reveals to the viewer that the older used the younger’s employment credentials to infiltrate “all primary military industrial complex computers” in service to Skynet. Present Fischer is imprisoned just as future Fischer was on Judgment Day, further reinforcing that the ongoing and impending wars against the machines are only forestalled, not foreclosed. For the protagonists, evading one specific trauma changes little if anything, because the violence that would stop that trauma only begets another.

*T:SCC* thus fictionalizes and replicates American trauma in the twenty-first century for a country haunted not only by the memory of 9/11 but also by ongoing anxiety and the perpetual threat of future terror. As Vincent M. Gaine notes in this issue, cultural texts that attempt to work through the trauma of 9/11 implicate the viewer for the ways in which national response has exacerbated trauma globally. Sarah’s closing voiceover in “The Tower Is Tall but the Fall Is Short” reminds a wartime audience that “the cruel reality of war is that there is no return home. No return to innocence. What’s lost is lost forever.” For this contemporary Lysistrata-cum-Cassandra, the fight to prevent the proliferation of war is unending, but for an audience on the margins of its own unending war on terror, her campaign ended with the show’s 2009 cancellation. In the absence of a sustained and informed national discourse about working through the trauma of 9/11 and the kinds of trauma the national response to it has unleashed, *T:SCC* remains a critical cultural index for the ways in which war trauma seldom ends on the battlefield, but rather continues to haunt its veterans and survivors.

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