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Of heroes and victims: Jess Walter's *The Zero* and the satirical post-9/11 novel

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Of heroes and victims: Jess Walter's *The Zero*
and the satirical post-9/11 novel

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Abstract

This dissertation analyzes a typically overlooked novel within the corpus of post-9/11 fiction studies, Jess Walter's *The Zero* (2006), and puts forward some hypotheses for this under-examination. It suggests that the debates that arose in the United States in the wake of 9/11—regarding the status of fiction in the face of tragedy, the theses about the demise of irony and satire, the high expectations put on canonical authors to give meaning to the event, and standardized interpretations of what a “good 9/11 novel” should be—all contributed to construct readings of *The Zero* that fell within the somewhat prescriptive approaches established by the first wave of post-9/11 fiction studies, and thus overlooked the subversive potential of Walter's novel. While recent academic output is starting to explore *The Zero* in innovative ways, early reception of the novel failed to examine it conceptually and formally, favoring as it did a trauma studies approach that resulted in a bland analysis of the discursive exploration that the novel carries out. On the other hand, the novel's use of satirical humor has been mostly ignored, and this is partly explained by the currency of outdated theoretical conceptions of what constitutes a satirical novel. Therefore, this dissertation carries out a revision of the theoretical corpus on narrative satire and proposes its renewal through the theories of carnivalization of Mikhail Bakhtin. Approaching the novel through the notions of satirical carnival, dialogism, and intertextuality reveals how satire is a very effective way of exploring and questioning the discursive apparatus that mobilized in the United States after the attacks. Such is the object of the novel, the interaction with, the representation and the eventual subversion of a nationalist discourse that was underpinned by its appeal to foundational myths and cultural themes and that was highly accepted by the general population, which allowed the Bush administration to respond to the attacks in military terms and to suspend certain rights and freedoms on the domestic front, under the premise of promoting security. This dissertation seeks to demonstrate how satire understood this way is especially suited for constructing a dialogical, polyphonic and inquisitive narrative that not only questions but also dialogues with the American nation after 9/11.

Resumen

Sobre héroes y víctimas: *The Zero*, de Jess Walter, y la novela satírica post-11-S

La presente tesis explora una novela poco estudiada del corpus de ficción post-11-S, *The Zero* (2006), de Jess Walter, y propone algunas hipótesis que puedan explicar esta falta de atención. Se sugiere que los debates que se originaron en los Estados Unidos tras el 11-S—respecto al estatus de la ficción frente a la tragedia, la supuesta falta de adecuación del humor satírico e irónico para explicarla, las grandes expectativas depositadas en los autores canónicos para que dieran sentido al hecho, y las interpretaciones un tanto prescriptivas y normativas por parte del campo de los “post-9/11 fiction studies”—contribuyeron a determinar ciertas lecturas de *The Zero* dentro de los parámetros establecidos por la primera ola de ficción post-11-S, pasando por alto el potencial subversivo de la novela de Walter. La recepción temprana de la novela ha tendido a desatender el análisis formal y conceptual de *The Zero* al favorecer una aproximación desde los estudios del trauma que resulta en un análisis insustancial de la exploración discursiva que la novela lleva a cabo. Por otra parte, se ha ignorado casi por completo su uso del humor satírico, y ello en parte se explica por ciertas concepciones teóricas un tanto parciales y anticuadas sobre qué es una novela satírica. Por lo tanto, la tesis lleva a cabo una revisión del corpus teórico sobre la sátira narrativa y propone su renovación a través de las teorías de carnavalización de Mikhail Bakhtin. La aproximación a la novela desde las nociones de carnaval satírico, dialogismo, e intertextualidad revela como la sátira es un modo muy efectivo de explorar y cuestionar el aparato discursivo que se movilizó en Estados Unidos tras los atentados. Tal es el objeto de la novela, la interacción con, representación y eventual subversión de un discurso nacionalista que se sostuvo por la apelación a mitos fundacionales y temas culturales de alta aceptación entre la población, lo cual permitió una respuesta militar y el abandono de ciertas libertades en el frente doméstico con el fin de garantizar la seguridad. La tesis busca demostrar como la sátira entendida de este modo es especialmente idónea para construir un relato dialógico, polifónico e inquisidor que no solo cuestione sino que dialogue con la nación estadounidense tras el 11-S.

0. Introduction

Over a decade and a half after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 one of the most intriguing aspects of the events remains the extent to which the Bush administration was successful in framing the attacks as *acts of war* committed against Western civilization as a whole and “all freedom-loving people everywhere in the world” (Bush 2001, “Photo Opportunity,” n.p.), effectively casting the event as a conflict between civilization and barbarism that demanded an appropriate military response.¹ This particular framing of the event as war—rather than as crimes or terrorist acts perpetrated by a specific group of people (al-Qaeda) against specific targets with a powerful symbolic force (the center of capitalism and the center of the US intelligence and military), acts that were designed to send a particular message to the US government—served to convince a large majority of Americans and Western nations that the institution of a state of exception under the Patriot Act (2001), the legitimization of the doctrine of preemption, the invasion of Afghanistan, and the war against Iraq were not only justified but necessary. The framing was, in every sense, a rhetorical success.

As I will try to argue throughout these pages, this particular framing of 9/11 and its aftermath was shaped and upheld by a carefully constructed narrative, and it is precisely the awareness of a narrative at play that justifies this study’s approach to the post-9/11 landscape from a discursive standpoint. While it is true that any approach to the 9/11 crisis (and by crisis I mean both the build-up to 9/11 as well as its aftermath) would certainly need to take into consideration geopolitics and history—to say the least—as well as the cultural impact of the event on society—which would include, by necessity, an exploration of the notion of trauma, both on the cultural and private levels—this study seeks to explore the moment that precedes such investigations; that is, the moment when the narrative framework from which all others are derived and depend causally is articulated: in this case, **the narrative of 9/11 as an unprovoked aggression with traumatic and worldwide implications and a necessary response as war**. This is, in a nutshell, the basic message that was put across, and my intention is to analyze the cultural referents that underpin it and that guaranteed its discursive success, and to explore how they are addressed and queried in the novel that is the object of this study, Jess Walter’s *The Zero* (2006).

There is a substantial amount of literature that delves into the historical, political, and economic issues involved in the build-up to the attacks—all of which attest to the

¹ In many ways, official discourse revived Samuel Huntington’s 1992 theory of “The Clash of Civilizations,” casting the conflict as one of irreconcilable cultural difference, as will be argued later in this chapter. However, in the Bush administration’s rhetoric, this difference is augmented to the level of a conflict between “civilization” and “barbarism.”

widespread effort to understand not only the causes that led to them but also the implications of future policies. Likewise, trauma-centered approaches have been among the most prolific in the first years after 9/11, addressed from the critical, theoretical, literary, and artistic fields, as they have sought to understand the effects of the attacks on the population on a cultural and affective level. In this context, I believe we are still pending a sound discursive approach to the events, especially when discussing the growing corpus of post-9/11 fiction, which in many cases has tended to replicate the official narrative of lost innocence, trauma, and loss, while in many others it has sought to problematize the widespread and mostly uncritical acceptance of said discourse. What is significant, however, and what justifies this study's discursive approach, is that even in these latter cases—works of fiction that problematize the official narrative—their reception has tended to fall in line with the official version of the event—centering on the traumatic nature of the event and its quality as a “watershed” moment—and has often missed the problematizing and subversive potential of the works in question, a potential that informs, I contend, a large part of the post-9/11 fiction corpus.

The felt reality of a nation under the effects of trauma has been one of the most disseminated and widely accepted versions of the 9/11 narrative, one that has often overridden other insightful and necessary considerations. While the experience of psychic trauma was very real for many individuals, it also became entangled with wider notions of “collective” and/or “cultural” trauma, defined by Sonia Baelo-Allué as “a wound on group consciousness as a whole” that unsettles the sense of collective identity (Baelo-Allué 2012, 64).² Without negating the reality of this collective experience of trauma, both Jeffrey Alexander (2004) and Neil Smelser (2004) draw attention to its cultural constructedness, that involves distinct stages that go from the experience of the event, to the labelling and dissemination of the event as traumatic, and subsequent efforts to make sense of it. As a culturally shared and accepted memory of an event that is “regarded as threatening a society's existence or violating one of its fundamental cultural presuppositions” (Smelser 2004, 44), Smelser also describes the various communal effects that cultural trauma can have, among them the

² Baelo-Allué provides a useful distinction between psychic and cultural trauma in the wake of 9/11: “Cultural trauma occurs when members of a community feel they have been subjected to a dreadful event that affects their group consciousness to the extent that it marks their memories and changes their future identity in fundamental ways (Alexander 2004: 1). Cultural trauma is socially mediated and power structures and social agents play a very important role in the process of its construction: there is a painful injury to the collectivity, victims are established and responsibility is attributed (22). As a result of this type of trauma the community's sense of identity may either solidify or be disrupted. However, 9/11 was not just a symbolic cultural trauma for the nation; it was also a psychic trauma for many people in New York City. According to Cathy Caruth, psychic trauma is a wound inflicted upon the mind that breaks the victim's experience of time, self and the world and that causes great emotional anguish in the individual (1996: 3-4). In the case of 9/11 the degree of traumatic psychic response was different for those that watched it on TV, those that witnessed it live outside the towers and those who were inside the towers. It is important to bear in mind that personal/psychic trauma and collective/cultural trauma work in different ways and have different effects. Whereas psychic trauma is a wound on the mind, cultural trauma is a wound on group consciousness as a whole” (Baelo-Allué 2012, 64).

mobilization of the citizenship and the strengthening of solidarity, and the “deification of heroes fallen in rescue efforts” as part of an effort to demonize the attackers (Smelser 2004, 69). Solidarity and mobilization, Smelser notes, can in turn promote “the emergence of primordial cultural themes” (Smelser 2004, 269), as was the case in the American reaction to September 11, to which Smelser attributes “a certain old-fashioned quality” (Smelser 2004, 270). He finds this quality in the “reassertion of the virtues of nation and community; unashamed flag-waving patriotism; a feeling that we, as Americans, under attack, were one again; and a feeling of pride in the American way of life, its values, its culture, and its democracy” (Smelser 2004, 270). As a result, the discussion of other relevant or potentially divisive political and cultural themes recede into the background.

In line with this culturally-constructed understanding of trauma, Marc Redfield goes a step further in *The Rhetoric of Terror* and introduces the notion of “virtual” trauma after 9/11, as the “mediated, technically produced, not properly real” (Redfield 2009, 2) nature of a collective affliction that surpasses the boundaries of time and place and is, to a large extent, a by-product of the insistent retelling of the official narrative of loss by the government and, especially, by the media.³ The use of “virtual” in this sense does not aim to minimize or disavow the traumatic experience or the feelings of terror and pain felt by the population; rather, it seeks to underscore how, added to the large number of people traumatized by the events in the clinical sense of the term—people who indeed suffered and may continue to suffer traumatic psychic damage—, there was an even larger majority who was not present at the site, who did not suffer personal losses but who, given the unprecedented nature and impact of the attacks and the way they were relayed by the media, was traumatized in a “virtual” way.⁴

What Redfield’s “virtual” also alludes to is the way that those in charge of managing the aftermath—the government and mainstream media—insistently evoked something not yet real; added to the incontestable reality at the World Trade Center site they successfully conveyed to the population that there was a threat of “something worse to come” (Redfield 2009, 45). And as Brian Massumi contends in “The Future Birth of the Affective Fact: The Political Ontology of Threat,” the feeling of being under threat is such a powerful experience that it can override any other factual consideration, and although it may refer to something “not yet real” and only

³ Cf. Redfield 2009, 42-48.

⁴ I do not mean to imply that one has to be physically present at the site of the attacks to develop symptoms of trauma. As Caruth points out, there are different degrees of traumatic response and there is also a distinction to be made between psychic and cultural trauma, as previously noted. However, research by Silver et al. demonstrates that the influence of the 9/11 attacks on the mental state of Americans was substantial, whether or not the survivor actually experienced the event, watched it on live TV, or did not learn of the event until after it took place (Silver et al. 2004, 136). What Redfield’s “virtual” trauma points at, then, is at the impact that public and media discourse had on magnifying the experience of trauma, whether it was psychic or cultural.

potentially forthcoming, the threat is ontologically real in the present precisely because of its nonexistence. Thus, public fear was not constructed by the Bush administration—it already existed after September 11—but the government and especially the media were crucial in amplifying public fears of terrorism after the attacks (DiMaggio 2015, 20). This was possible because, as Barry Glassner argues in *The Culture of Fear. Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things*, American culture is especially fertile ground for the “peddlers of fear” (mostly the media, politicians, and advocacy groups) who manipulate Americans’ perceptions and profit from the resulting anxiety. In this cultural context, the aftermath of 9/11 saw the government profiting from said anxiety, as the exploitation of fear of a future threat—the anthrax scare⁵ of 2001 served as looming confirmation—granted the Bush administration a certain *carte blanche* in the implementation of drastic surveillance measures at home through the Patriot Act and the legitimation of the doctrine of preemption in foreign affairs. The perpetrators of the attacks were not cast as a single and identifiable group of individuals but as a vast, hidden network of terrorists operating by stealth who could strike again anytime and anywhere. While this characterization is in part true (for instance, the terrorist attacks of Madrid, London, Paris, Nice, and Manchester are proof of such extremism), so much emphasis was placed on the fact that they were “everywhere,” even at home, that when the “Terror Alert Code” was implemented in March 2002 it added to Americans’ anxiety at living in a permanent state of alert. And the affective responses generated were crucial in justifying the war against Iraq under the pretense of finding Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction.⁶ Even after the WMD narrative was publicly revealed as a hoax—as there were no weapons to be found, an information the government had

⁵ The 2001 anthrax attacks took place over the course of several weeks beginning on 18 September 2001 and ending on 9 October 2001. Letters containing anthrax spores were mailed to two news media offices (*New York Post* and *NBC News*) and to two US Senators (Democrats Daschle and Leahy), killing five people and infecting seventeen others. The text of one of the notes read: “09-11-01 You can not stop us. We have this anthrax. You die now. Are you afraid? Death to America. Death to Israel. Allah is great.”

⁶ From now onwards and for brevity’s sake, I may refer to the narrative about Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction as the WMD narrative.

from the outset—the felt reality of a threatening future, as Massumi characterizes it, was enough to clear the Bush administration of later charges.⁷

What is truly perplexing is that in this atmosphere of fear and threat, the Bush administration saw it fit to call for an end to the process of mourning and demanded the swift reactivation of American economy (Bush 2001, “Airline Employees,” n.p.; Giuliani in *ABC News* 2001). The coexistence of these two narratives is, I believe, a discursive achievement, as Americans were openly told that spending and getting life “back to normal” had become their patriotic duty. It is relevant, then, to explore how the Bush administration was effective in the management of people’s affective responses, and how in a context of overarching and inescapable fear and anxiety it became difficult to articulate anything outside the boundaries established by the discourse of a nation both collectively traumatized and eager to get back at its aggressors. This is, in a few words, the main justification for not approaching this study from a trauma theory perspective: the government’s narrative of 9/11 as a traumatic event that justifies a response as war is so well-knit and coherent that it not only exceeds the normal reactions of cultural trauma described by Smelser (and noted above) but it also seems antithetical to the very notion of trauma, which resides precisely on the difficulty in narrating the traumatic experience. Although it is true that there are several gaps and voids that the narrative has not been able to fill—and this is what fuels the vast corpus of conspiracy theories—, the way the narrative has been construed attempts to present it as homogenous, unquestionable, and common-sense. Thus, my approach will depart from clinical, geopolitical, or perhaps more “tangible” considerations and explore instead the discursive aspect of 9/11 and its aftermath in hopes of demonstrating how a thorough understanding of the discourse at play is necessary in order to be able to problematize it, or even to be aware of when and how it is being questioned, as—I will argue—the novel that is the object of this dissertation does. As it will be shown in chapter 2, one of the premises of ironic and satiric humor is

⁷ Massumi explains how fear was mobilized in an effective way to legitimate the invasion of Iraq and the assassination of Saddam Hussein under the pretense of destroying Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction, weapons that not only did not exist but, as was soon demonstrated, could not exist. Despite the evidence against the existence of the weapons, fear was used to justify the attack and, later, when the United Nations inspectors had already delivered their negative report, fear was used again—in a veiled way this time—to legitimate the attack as responding to an impending threat. In other words, the feeling of being under threat legitimized the institution of preemptive action: “We did not find them, but they exist” was turned into “they don’t exist but they have the capacity to produce them.” As Massumi argues, the non-existence in the present of the fact that originates the feeling of being under threat (threat is always future) is even more real than past events or concrete realities in the present that could support or refute the threat, because threat does not require that type of legitimation. “Threat is not real in spite of its nonexistence. It is superlatively real because of it.... The future of threat is forever” (Massumi 2010, 53). The Bush administration’s reasoning was that if Iraq had no weapons, it could build them; if it didn’t have the capacity to do so, it could develop it: the invasion of Iraq will always be justified, because “*in the past there was a future threat*. You cannot erase a ‘fact’ like that. Just because the menace potential never became a clear and present danger doesn’t mean that it wasn’t there, all the more real for being nonexistent” (Ibid., 53; emphasis in the original). Therefore, the preventive action will have always been correct because, according to Massumi, the threat “*will have been real for all eternity*” (Ibid., 53; emphasis in the original) because it was felt as real.

the existence of two levels of reference, and that in order to “get” the joke one has to recognize the hidden or backgrounded referent which, in the case of Walter’s novel, is precisely the *mediated* quality of the aftermath. The novel does not deal with the attacks *per se* but with a society’s reaction to them, which is deeply affected by media and government discourses; as Walter suggests, this is a novel about September 12. In the “Journals” he kept while writing the novel, Walter clearly states his purpose:

What exactly am I trying to do? Describe the way we are... trading liberty for security, demanding our own propaganda. Party to our own deception. The propaganda of distraction, of triviality. Endless process of moment, overcoming, forgetting, nostalgia. A nostalgia factory. (Walter 2007, “Journals,” 14-15).

Therefore, the first chapter of this dissertation is concerned with the speech acts, the lexicon, the keywords, the metaphors, the hyperboles, the slogans used and the *topoi* invoked in the construction and the retelling of the collective narrative of 9/11. In other words, the rhetoric that was employed to construct a narrative that would explain and give *meaning*⁸ to 9/11 and to promote the War on Terror, which, as Adam Hodges convincingly argues in *The “War on Terror” Narrative*, became “naturalized as a widely accepted, ‘common sense’ way for viewing and talking about 9/11 and America’s response to terrorism” (Hodges 2011, 7). In particular, I will focus on how the 9/11 attacks and the government’s response to terrorism have been formulated within the framework of war—which also makes way for patriotic calls to heroism—when the attacks could have been framed, alternatively, as terrorist acts committed by individuals, and the government’s response as an investigation into criminal acts with the objective of bringing the culprits to justice.⁹ Reflecting on this matter only eleven

⁸ I am deeply uncomfortable with the use of the word “meaning,” as I would rather refer to “meanings,” “possible explanations” or any other phrasing that does not suggest a categorical statement. However, in order to underscore how the Bush administration and the culture in general were searching for a univocal and fixed interpretation for the event and its aftermath, I will use “meaning” between quotation marks or, occasionally, in italics.

⁹ Such was the case, for instance, in the terrorist attacks against the American embassies in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and Nairobi, Kenya in 1998: while the US response was heavily militarized, launching missiles into Sudan and Afghanistan, then-president Clinton never referred to the US response as a global war, even if “Bin Laden publicly vowed to wage a terrorist war against America.” In his address to the nation after the airstrikes, Clinton talked specifically of “law enforcement,” “American law,” and “trial,” and referred to the US involvement as a “battle against terrorism” in an “ongoing struggle between freedom and fanaticism, between the rule of law and terrorism.” As regards the causes for being the target of terrorist attacks, Clinton stated: “America is and will remain a target of terrorists precisely because we are leaders; because we act to advance peace, democracy and basic human values; because we’re the most open society on Earth; and because, as we have shown yet again, we take an uncompromising stand against terrorism” (Clinton 1998, n.p.). While the same cultural tropes and exceptionalist ethos are invoked, Clinton was much more moderate than Bush in personifying the United States as freedom and democracy.

days after the attacks, Noam Chomsky drew an analogy between September 11 and the ways in which other national governments had dealt, previously, with terrorism:

Every case is different, but let's take a few analogies. What was the right way for Britain to deal with IRA bombs in London? One choice would have been to send the RAF to bomb the source of their finances, places like Boston, or to infiltrate commandos to capture those suspected of involvement in such financing and kill them or spirit them to London to face trial. Putting aside feasibility, that would have been criminal idiocy. Another possibility was to consider realistically the background concerns and grievances, and to try to remedy them, while at the same time following the rule of law to punish criminals. (Chomsky 2011, 94)

What Chomsky's reflection makes manifest is that there is always, at least, a second course of action that governments can choose to take. Thus, and as Hodges suggests, it is possible to consider the discourse on 9/11 and the War on Terror as "only one story (among other potential possibilities) about the world since September 11, 2001" (Hodges 2011, x). For instance, for a few days the attacks were considered a matter of international security, in which case the International Court of Justice (ICJ) would have intervened to prosecute the culprits. Secretary of State Colin Powell did suggest on 13 September 2001 that the attacks could be treated as a problem of international security that had to be dealt with "political action, diplomatic action, economic action, legal action, law enforcement action, and if necessary, [...] military action" (Powell 2001, n.p.), although he later reinforced the war schema.

As Hodges points out, the reactions and the debates that the United States and the broader world entered about the nature and the *meaning* of 9/11 are "interpretive acts achieved through discourse," because the 9/11 events do not—as any other event, I would argue—"intrinsically contain their own interpretation" (Hodges 2011, 3). These interpretations, as I will try to show in the following sections, construed 9/11 as a "watershed" moment, as the moment when the United States "lost innocence," and, crucially, as an unprovoked "act of war" that demanded an appropriate military response against foreign nations. As Hodges argues, these ideograms had a lasting influence on society's perception of the attacks in the context of US history, they were crucially amplified by media rhetoric, and they enabled the subsequent construction of the "War on Terror" narrative that justified and permitted the military and political measures undertaken since then. It is precisely this discursive landscape that is dissected, deconstructed, queered, and queried in Jess Walter's *The Zero*. Therefore, by considering the 9/11 and War on Terror discursive apparatuses as narratives, my

analysis will approach these discourses as the main intertexts that this satirical novel interpellates, plays with and, ultimately, subverts.

Querying the official 9/11 narrative does not amount to assessing its adequacy (or lack thereof) as an accurate explanation of the event and its aftermath. Rather, by stressing its narrative quality, I seek to draw attention to the ways in which this specific discourse brings into existence a particular “truth” about 9/11, or, in Michel Foucault’s terms, a particular “*régime* of truth” that establishes the boundaries of what can be meaningfully said about it, so much so that both the supporters as well as the critics of the “truth” in question are bound to speak in the terms established by the *régime*.¹⁰ Even if only discursive, the *régime* of truth has very tangible effects in the real world, regardless, as I have noted, of whether the “truth” established by the *régime* can be verified as true or not.

Perhaps the most illustrative instance of the establishment of a *régime* of truth in the aftermath of 9/11 is the WMD narrative mentioned previously, that gave way to the invasion of Iraq and the assassination of Saddam Hussein. The “truth” established by the WMD narrative, even if its veracity was soon and inexorably discredited, still bound the media, the public, and international organizations like the United Nations to speak within the terms established by the *régime*—i.e., to speak about (non-existent) WMDs. As Massumi suggests, even when the existence of the WMDs was soon proved false, the then-present reality of a threat in the future was enough of a “fact” to legitimate the invasion and could not be erased. Even if the weapons were nonexistent, the narrative bound one to speak about WMDs or, as Damon Young (2008) called them, “weapons of mass distraction.” In short, what I wish to underscore is that, as Foucault points out, truth is not “the reward of free spirits” or the product of personal illumination, but it “is *produced* only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint” (Foucault 1980, 131; emphasis added), of exclusions, omissions and/or distortions, and, as such, it “induces regular effects of power” (Ibid.). This is what, ultimately, the novel problematizes: the possibility of, as well as the difficulty in, seeing through the constructed nature of widespread, common-sense and apparently self-evident “truths.”

With these considerations in mind, this dissertation is an exploration of how the novel under discussion engages in a dialogue—at times comical, at times grim—with the official narrative of 9/11 as trauma and the War on Terror as a righteous act of national defense, and how it questions it, challenges it, probes its limits, and turns it

¹⁰ In Foucault’s words, a *régime* of truth consists of “the types of discourse which [a society] accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with what counts as true” (Foucault 1980, 131). For Foucault, “[t]ruth’ is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements” (Ibid., 133). Cf. Foucault 1980, 131-133.

upside down without hinting at any other unquestionable and substitute “truth.” The aim of the novel seems to be not so much the denunciation of the alleged falsity of the narrative, but the revelation of its constructed nature, and, hence, of the fact that it is open to challenge. Against the univocal, black-and-white rationale of the official narrative, the novel suggests the possibility of alternative and open-ended discourses.

In order to lay the groundwork for the novel’s analysis, the first chapter will rely on several texts that range from the level of discourse analysis into the more general field of American cultural studies. Hodges’s sociolinguistic study, in particular, offers a thorough analysis of the speeches delivered by George W. Bush over a period of seven years (11 September 2001 to 19 March 2008) and exposes how, from a discourse-analysis perspective, the basic elements of the narrative are discursively established, and how these elements “accumulate into a larger cultural narrative shared by many within the nation (and beyond)” (Hodges 2011, 4). It is precisely the insertion of the narrative within a continuum of larger mythical structures shared by a culture that renders it powerful and apparently legitimate. As Gearoid Ó’Tuathail and John Agnew point out when discussing the way that politicians, political advisors and the media create “geopolitical discourses” in the context of US sociopolitical life, it is important to note that

One of the great powers of the Presidency, invested by the sanctity, history and rituals associated with the institution—the fact that the media take their primary discursive cues from the White House—is the power to describe, represent, interpret and appropriate. It is a formidable power, but not an absolute power, for the art of description and appropriation must have *resonances* with the Congress, the established media, and the American public. The generation of such *resonances* often requires the repetition and re-cycling of certain themes and images even though the socio-historical context of their use may have changed dramatically. One has the attempted production of *continuity* by the incorporation of “strategic terms,” “key metaphors” and “key symbols” into geopolitical reasoning. Behind all of these is the assumption of a power of appropriateness in the use of certain relatively fixed terms and phrases. (Ó’Tuathail & Agnew 1992, 195-6; emphasis added)

Therefore, before analyzing the Bush administration narrative, the chapter will explore what are these resonances and continuities and how they are invoked in the post-9/11 landscape, in order to show how the effectiveness of the Bush

administration's narrative of 9/11 and the War on Terror was to a great extent dependent on the proficient and systematic establishment of resonances and correspondences with **national myths and cultural tropes that society at large recognized**, was touched by, and could identify with. Furthermore, the—in my view, unquestionable—success of this narrative originally established by the Bush administration was also dependent on its amplification by the media who, as Hodges shows, recontextualized it for the citizenry and cultural actors (Hodges 2011, 9).

In my estimation, however, the media did more than merely recontextualize the Bush narrative and, rather, played a large part, vis-à-vis the government, in identifying certain cultural themes or *topoi* that were crucial for its subsequent construction and consolidation. Besides the hyperbolic language that would soon be used in the following days, one of the first indicators of the active role that the media would play in the articulation of the narrative are the newspaper headlines in the days immediately following the attacks that suggest an act of war, with phrases such as “America Under Attack” and “US Attacked” even before the Bush administration had referred to them as “acts of war.” As Anthony DiMaggio demonstrates in *Selling War, Selling Hope*, polling from mid-September showed that 79% of Americans situated their response within a war framework and described the 9/11 attacks as “acts of war” (DiMaggio 2015, 18), and while it is difficult to objectively quantify the influence exercised by the media, the contrary is also true—that is, to what extent people were *not* influenced by the media's framing of the event. What is clear is that there is enough evidence of a consistent and coherent narrative taking place in public discourse. Furthermore, and as Neil Smith argues, the media's framing helped to quickly transform an event that was markedly local and at the same time global, into a “national ‘tragedy’” (Smith 2001, 631; emphasis in the original),¹¹ with headlines such as the ones below that stress not only the *casus belli* but the exceptionality of an attack which is, also and by nature, external.¹²

¹¹ Neil Smith comments on the ways in which the events and their aftermath led to a struggle over various scales and notes that “amidst the discursive hysteria after September 11, the silences are as important as the frenzy. National indignation fastened on the World Trade Center, while the destruction of one wing of the Pentagon fell from focus” (Smith 2001, 632).

¹² It is very interesting to examine the different covers of American weekly and monthly magazines during the months of September and October 2001 for, as *magazine.org* points out, “[i]n times of crisis, the magazine cover has the power to capture a complex moment in a way that is sometimes visual, sometimes verbal, oftentimes both.” See a compilation in “9/11 Magazine Covers” at <http://www.magazine.org/asm/magazine-cover-contests/9/11-magazine-covers>



Headlines from two of the major media outlets in the United States, CNN and The New York Times, on 11 September 2001.



Covers of newspapers on 11-12 September 2001. Source: Clément Chéroux, « Le déjà-vu du 11-Septembre », *Études photographiques* 20 (June 2007): 148-173, composition by Spencer Platt, Getty Images.

In the following days major newspaper editorials announced the need to support the president in the cause of war, with the editors of *The New York Times* declaring on 15 September that “[f]or now, at least, the one state where American military power might be effectively used is Afghanistan, where the Taliban-led government is host to Osama bin Laden” (*The New York Times*, “War Without Illusions,” n.p.), while *The Washington Post* editors declared that “military force must certainly play a role in the coming campaign, and Afghanistan now looks like one place where it may be needed. The United States can no longer allow Osama bin Laden to operate there—much less his training camps for aspiring terrorists” (Chhor 2001, n.p.). Moreover, and as DiMaggio argues,

Support for a military response was justified by appropriating the rhetoric of hope—with references to “American exceptionalism” and the United States’ supposedly unique efforts to fight terrorism. Television and newspaper editorials embraced American exceptionalism through

moral proclamations of “U.S. virtue” and “condemnations of evil enemies.” (DiMaggio 2015, 21)¹³

However, and as DiMaggio suggests, there was considerable public interest in antiwar views, which “raises the question of whether support for war would have been as strong if alternatives to war were explored in the media” (DiMaggio 2015, 22). The same can be said of the emotional aftermath of the attacks, as several critics have suggested that the media actively shared into a “discursive hysteria” in the treatment of 9/11, what Fredric Jameson referred to as an “amalgamation of media sentiment and emotion” (Jameson 2003, 55) that made it very difficult to get at the core of what was being relayed. As Jameson suggests, “even to get at the emotional reaction, one would have to make one’s way through its media orchestration and amplification,” which struck many, “from the outset, as being utterly insincere” (Ibid.). Thus, the role of the media in the construction of the 9/11 narrative cannot be downplayed; in fact, it is unquestionable nowadays that the media plays an active role in the construction of sociopolitical reality. In an era of “post-truth”—defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as the “word of the year” in 2016, as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”—, it is relevant to understand what triggers our beliefs and emotions.

With this aim, the first section of chapter 1 of this dissertation will explore the cultural aspect that both precedes and sustains the construction of the 9/11 narrative, and in order to do so it will rely on the work of several cultural theorists and critics that have tried to answer the same question I pose at the beginning of this introduction: How, in the post-9/11 atmosphere of “mandatory patriotism,” official discourse becomes so powerful so as to manage to discredit any dissenting voice as un-American. Some of these cultural actors have been long exploring the intricacies of American sociopolitical and cultural life, and they have become invaluable voices at a time when the discursive landscape seemed to be homogenous by decree. This section will rely on works such as Richard Slotkin’s *Regeneration Through Violence* (1973), Susan Faludi’s *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America* (2007), Marita Sturken’s *Tourists of History* (2007), William V. Spanos’s *American Exceptionalism in the Age of Globalization* (2008), Marc Redfield’s *The Rhetoric of Terror* (2009), David Holloway’s *9/11 and the War on Terror* (2008), Donald Pease’s *The New American Exceptionalism* (2009), and Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Frames of War* (2009), among many others.

¹³ *Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty* elaborated a report on 19 September 2001 detailing how major newspapers around the world positioned themselves regarding the US response to the attacks (Khatya Chhor, “Western Press Review: Debating A Response To The U.S. Attacks” <https://www.rferl.org/a/1097459.html>). For further information on how the American media embraced the war and how it reported it positively to the detriment of more humanitarian views, see DiMaggio 2015, 20-22.

These works all contribute to an understanding not just of the mythical and cultural underpinnings of the narrative—which enable its resonance and to a certain extent guarantee its perceived legitimacy—but also of the very real effects that the narrative has. Through these works, I seek to identify some key elements of the 9/11 narrative that, far from original, are recurrent in American political discourse: the notions of exceptionalism, innocence, violence, victimhood and hero-worship, and how this lexicon of heroes and victims, Good and Evil, and necessary violence is redeployed once again in the wake of 9/11. As I will try to show, the resort to violence is justified in many different ways, and in American cultural history it goes hand in hand with the notion of regeneration and perpetual innocence. Furthermore, the transformation of the victim into hero is all too frequent in mainstream political discourse, the media and popular culture, and I contend that the figure of the hero has a key ideological function within the construction and the upholding of the US national narrative. Therefore, in the analysis of the narrative of 9/11 and the War on Terror, chapter 1 seeks to delineate the cultural referents of these key concepts, to reflect on what is brought to mind when we speak of heroes, victims, violence, and innocence from an ideological and cultural point of view, by considering how the hero and violence have been used throughout history, and especially and in very specific ways, in post-9/11 United States.

As Faludi argues in “The Heroics of Futility,” the years following the attacks of September 11 have been “an era of pumped-up heroics” by which she refers “not to the courageous men and women on the ground but the leaders who inflate themselves at their expense” (Faludi 2007a, n.p.). This is very much the context that Walter’s *The Zero* describes; in fact, the novel can be said to take the shape of a satiric mock-heroic¹⁴ where the main character—a hero by decree, according to the 9/11 narrative, insofar as he is a police officer—, fails to reach heroic status and is debunked. Therefore, an exploration of the notion of the heroic is especially relevant for an understanding of the post-9/11 landscape as well as for an analysis of the novel, and one of the main aims of chapter 1 is to understand what the notion entails and why it commands such emotional power in American culture.

The figure of the hero—the frame of reference of which goes back to Classical Antiquity—is one of the most recurrent and culturally-engrained notions in Western culture, a figure that throughout the centuries keeps being transformed and repurposed, from Greek mythology to heroes in comics and film releases, as Joseph Campbell’s seminal study *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* illustrates. In American

¹⁴ I do not intend to use this term in a narrow way, as a style usually associated to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literature. Rather, I want to underscore the guiding principle of the mock-heroic style that can be found both in Classical literature and in modern-day works: a form of satire that applies the epic tone or the conventions of the epic form that is being parodied to treat a subject in an un-heroic way. I argue that *The Zero* uses the conventions of early post-9/11 fiction to set a certain tone, as well as the widespread discourse of heroism, and turns them upside down, resulting in a hero whose heroic status comes under question.

culture in particular, the hero is a prominent figure in the constant re-shaping of the national myth, “a hallmark feature of American public life” (Faludi 2007a, n.p.), and the aftermath of 9/11 is no exception. Faludi elaborates at length on this premise in *The Terror Dream. Fear and Fantasy in post-9/11 America*, showing how the aftermath of 9/11 saw a redeployment of the heroic figures that have traditionally shaped American identity through history (the frontiersman, the cowboy, the different embodiments of Cold-War virility, the soldier fighting abroad, the comics superhero, etc.), now refurbished in the shape of virile firefighters, ruthless (and unexpectedly sexy) politicians, and helpless women that are desperately in need of rescue.¹⁵

In this sense, the first section of chapter 1 also seeks to understand why the figure of the hero—which one would tend to intuitively associate to fantasy and fiction—is so instrumental in the framing of many national crises in the United States, and what ideological function it serves. In this respect, Slotkin’s theses in his seminal volume *Regeneration through Violence* provide insight into the American hero’s recurrent resort to violence in the resolution of conflicts throughout history. Away from stressing Edenic notions of the United States as a Virgin Land, Slotkin’s notion of regenerative violence illustrates how in American mythogenesis “violence is an essential and necessary part of the process through which American society was established and through which its democratic values are defended and enforced” (Slotkin 1998, 352). In the process of seeking regeneration (of their fortunes, of their careers, of their religion, etc.) the American colonists made “[r]egeneration ultimately bec[o]me the means of violence, and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience” (Slotkin 2000, 5), a violence that, nonetheless, needs to be erased or sublimated (Rogin 1990). Updating the concept into the ever-popular world of superheroes, Jason Dittmer’s *Captain America and the Nationalist Superhero* illustrates how these iconic figures contribute to “our contemporary understandings of national identity, the righteous use of power, and the role of the United States” in the world (Temple UP blurb).

Part of what makes American mythogenesis so interesting is the apparent contradiction in its structuring myths; for instance, the fact that regenerative violence coexists with notions of radical innocence. According to Ihab Hassan, “[t]he disparity between the innocence of the hero and the destructive character of his experience defines his concrete, or existential, situation” (Hassan 1973, 7), and this contradiction shapes innumerable works in American fiction. In fact, *The Zero* can be read as one such instance where the “hero” is torn between a radical innocence (or amnesia) and the exercise of extreme violence. It wouldn’t be too farfetched to think of the novel’s

¹⁵ Faludi’s argument in *The Terror Dream* verifies how the process of associating masculinity with US identity in the post-9/11 context is a recurrent strategy, and resonates with a similar argument made by Susan Jeffords for the Reagan era in *Hard Bodies. Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (1994).

main character as an American Adam (in R.W.B. Lewis' conceptualization, 1955), a radical innocent dissociated from history and whose Edenic and undisturbed pre-9/11 world is shattered to pieces without him knowing what part he plays in the present as regards the perceived unravelling of that mythical past.

The belief in radical innocence as constitutive of the national ethos partly explains why, as Sturken contends, "virtually every traumatic event of twentieth- and twenty-first century US History, [...] has been characterized as the moment when American innocence was lost" (Sturken 2007, 16), an idea that is easily coopted by the general public and which renders the nation's history of violence invisible. As Sturken points out, innocence is constantly renewed in the process of being lost; innocence was lost in Pearl Harbor, in Vietnam, in the Columbine shooting—and all subsequent high-school shootings—in the Oklahoma City bombing, and in the terrorist attacks of 9/11, when "innocence lost" became one of the defining tags in mainstream media, as the nation perceived it had sadly come of age by the effects of an unprovoked violence that hit "out of the blue." The notion that the violence suffered is always unprovoked and almost always comes from outside the borders of the nation, as well as the fact that the United States always conducts its wars abroad, are deeply engrained in the foundational myth of exceptionalism (Spanos 2008; Pease 2009).¹⁶ At the risk of oversimplifying, exceptionalism can be understood as the foundational myth that, so to speak, contains all others; as Spanos defines it, exceptionalism is

an *ontological* interpretation of the American national identity whose origin lay in the American Puritans' belief that their exodus from the Old World and their "errand into the wilderness" of the New was, on the prefigurative analogy of the Old Testament Israelites, divinely or transcendently ordained and which became hegemonic in the course of American history with its secularization as Manifest Destiny in the middle of the nineteenth century and as the end of history and the

¹⁶ However, the "outside" of this violence is deeply problematic and is contested by the innumerable cases where the violence is exercised by American citizens, as in the Oklahoma City bombing by Timothy McVeigh or in the abuse and torture of prisoners by American military personnel at Abu Ghraib. While these two cases are radically different because the victims of the first are American and the victims of the second are not, in both these cases this "internal" violence—i.e., committed by Americans—is framed as "exceptional" and out of the norm, as generic to some deviant individuals who are extremely evil or as responding to a glitch in the system, but it is seldom used to question the history that has made the resort to violence a norm. On the contrary, this type of exceptional violence is pictured as "not reflect[ing] the nature of the American people" (Bush qtd. in Rhem 2004, n.p.), as George W. Bush argued about the abusers at Abu Ghraib. Furthermore, and as Jasbir Puar contends in "Arguing Against Exceptionalism," the reaction of outrage in high-profile cases like these should be read as the reinforcement of the exceptionalist ethos rather than as a sign of an unambiguous ethical stance: the implication is that any moral deviation is literally unthinkable and, therefore, it triggers intense reactions that exclude said subjects from US normality.

advent of the New World Order at the end of the twentieth century.
(Spanos 2008, 188; emphasis in the original)

The attacks of September 11 offer a valuable case study for American cultural studies as an instance of these myths and their apparent contradictions coming into play and, true to their foundational worth, seamlessly making the transition from one to the other and back. One of the main paradoxes that I will analyze is how the official narrative needed to constantly remind Americans of their vulnerability, as the inviolable “homeland” had been breached, and, at the same time, the Bush administration sought to constantly remind the world of the mighty power of the United States to strike back at the aggressors.¹⁷ In this respect, it is especially interesting to compare how the notion of vulnerability has been used in the post-9/11 context in ways that stand at discursive extremes: from Butler’s formulation of vulnerability as an ontological condition that makes us expose ourselves in our care for Others (Butler 2006; 2009) to George W. Bush’s constant reminders of the United States’ “enduring vulnerability” as a justification for violence against Others (Bush 2002, “Homeland Security”). Through a reflection on the coexistence of vulnerability and victimhood with other formulations of state power, I seek to reflect on the ethical implications of vulnerability and how, on occasion, this vulnerability is circumscribed to particular understandings of victimhood that become useful as a condition that can justify a nation’s aggressive policies and military power. In other words, a victimhood that is constantly redeployed as the moral justification for a strong, military position¹⁸

¹⁷ What is even more surprising is the ease with which the government’s aggressive and jingoistic rhetoric was unproblematically reproduced by the mainstream media. For instance, *Time* magazine published a special issue with an editorial by Lance Morrow entitled “The Case for Rage and Retribution” (12 September 2001) and which argued for “a policy of focused brutality” in which the nation needed “to relearn why human nature has equipped us all with a weapon (abhorred in peacetime societies) called hatred” (Morrow 2001, n.p.). That same year *Newsweek* published a piece by Jonathan Alter entitled “Time to Think about Torture” (5 November 2001). *The Atlantic’s* October 2003 issue included a feature by Mark Bowden entitled “The Dark Art of Interrogation” that argued that captured Al Qaeda operatives “pose one of the strongest arguments in modern times for the use of torture,” and cynically affirmed that “the Bush Administration has adopted exactly the right posture on the matter. Candor and consistency are not always public virtues. Torture is a crime against humanity, but coercion is an issue that is rightly handled with a wink, or even a touch of hypocrisy; it should be banned but also quietly practiced” (Bowden 2003, n.p.). As noted, these arguments were distributed by mainstream outlets with a wide readership, not just by some obscure far-right site.

¹⁸ Idith Zertal’s *Israel’s Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood* (2005), although well beyond the scope of this dissertation, has provided a valuable blueprint for analysis.

helps to understand how and why, only twenty-two days after the 9/11 attacks, president Bush signed the orders to invade Afghanistan.¹⁹

In short, chapter 1 seeks to illustrate how the official narrative of 9/11 and the War on Terror was successfully articulated within the continuity of national myths, thus enabling a “credible” explanation of 9/11 for the American people. As Peter Mayell contends, “by framing the attacks in familiar (and therefore powerful) terms of a good, civilised, internal ‘Self’ assaulted by an evil, uncivilised, external ‘Other;’ of narrating the unknown in terms of the known” (Mayell 2005, 88),²⁰ the Bush administration succeeded in containing the crisis but also, and more importantly, in advancing its own geopolitical agenda of war, which, in many cases, had been decided beforehand, as can be concluded from the image below. It is an excerpt from the talking points arranged by then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld for his meeting with Central Command chief Tommy Franks on 27 November 2001 in order to discuss a new plan for war with Iraq, revealing that the intention of declaring war on Iraq already exists in 2001, even before the WMDs scandal of 2003, contrary to what the Bush administration had long maintained:²¹

¹⁹ While the Bush administration’s original arguments for the invasion of Afghanistan relied heavily on the theme of vulnerability (for which Osama bin Laden had to be punished, al-Qaeda weakened, and the Taliban removed from power), around November 2001 the justification began to be re-framed, in retrospect, as responding to humanitarian causes: freeing Afghan women and children, who were victimized by the Taliban. This, as Nancy W. Jabra’s insightful essay (2006) shows, is an effective redeployment of a deeply-engrained Orientalist trope: that of white men rescuing brown women from brown men. For more information on how gender and Orientalist tropes were used to justify military action, see Nancy W. Jabra’s “Women, Words and War: Explaining 9/11 and Justifying U.S. Military Action in Afghanistan and Iraq” (*Journal of International Women’s Studies* 8.1 [2006]: 236-255).

²⁰ Mayell argues that the articulation of the War on Terror discourse consisted of four phases: First, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the US government obscured the geopolitical context in which the attacks had occurred; second, this obscuration served the purpose of legitimizing the WoT as the hegemonic discourse; third, the US government attempted to use this hegemony to establish the WoT as the “new world order,” but proved unsuccessful in the face of significant and diverse resistance; and, fourth, the failure to establish this “new world order” rendered the war with Iraq controversial and unjustifiable, as opposed to the widespread approval of the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 (Mayell 2005, 75-76).

²¹ According to president Bush, his administration had not decided to invade Iraq until the days before the invasion actually began and it did “everything” it could to “avoid war in Iraq” (Bush 2003, “Leave Iraq,” n.p.). Bush even claimed that the “American people can know that every measure has been taken to avoid war.” (Ibid.). But as reporting by *MNSBC* revealed, the Bush administration national security team actively debated an invasion of Iraq immediately following the attacks. A memo written by State secretary Rumsfeld dated 27 November 2001 considers a US-Iraq war, as shown in the image in the opposite page, and lists multiple possible justifications for it. See “‘Building Momentum for Regime Change’: Rumsfeld’s Secret Memos” (*MSNBC* 23 June 2001), and “Newly-Released Memo by Donald Rumsfeld Proves Iraq War Started On False Pretenses” (*Washingtonsblog.com* 20 February 2013).

- How start?
 - Saddam moves against Kurds in north?
 - US discovers Saddam connection to Sept. 11 attack or to anthrax attacks?
 - Dispute over WMD inspections?
 - Start now thinking about inspection demands.

Memo by Donald Rumsfeld dated 27 November 2001. Franks is charged by Rumsfeld to start thinking for a justification to invade Iraq. The document was released through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in 2010.

Chapter 2 begins by addressing another important discursive aspect of the post-9/11 years, namely, the temporary ban on humor in the form of irony and satire. By exploring the implications that such a ban had—and its almost unanimous rejection in the cultural sphere—, the chapter puts forward possible motives for the perceived inadequacy of irony and satire in the face of tragic events, and finds the most probable causes in an outdated understanding of what satire is and does, and in the dialogical nature of satiric humor. This dialogical nature is explored through Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalized text, that shows how satire can function both to inquire and to dialogue. When the discursive ground seeks to be homogenous by decree, satiric humor makes more evident the faultlines therein and the possibility of alternative discourses. Chapter 3 will then analyze the novel through the characteristics put forward by the Bakhtinian carnivalesque in hopes of providing a new reading of the novel that exceeds the narrow interpretations found in the first reviews and in the early criticism of post-9/11 fiction. As I will suggest, a Bakhtinian reading of the novel shows how the official narrative of 9/11 and the War on Terror can be queried and subverted and, more importantly, put in the perspective of past and future conflicts.

1. The context

1.1. The American monomyth: a history of violence

In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes defines myth as the manner in which a culture grants meaning to the world around it, the way in which a culture processes experiences to make them symbolic of a particular ideology or ethos.²² In Barthes' semiological approach myth is a language (Barthes 1972, 11), a type of speech and a mode of signification (Ibid., 109) within a system of communication that, when analyzed, can explain what is otherwise understood as "the falsely obvious" in social phenomena (Ibid., 11). In other words, for Barthes myth is a way of saying things that interpellates the audience by "assum[ing] the look of a generality" and by making itself look "neutral and innocent" (Ibid., 125) through second-order signification; myth's function is to distort by making visible, obvious and natural that which is in fact a cultural activity that implies an ethos or ideology (Ibid., 121). Myth empties the meaning of the original signifier (i.e. the event itself) and replaces it by a new, emotionally based, fixed, cultural concept while at the same time it conceals its artificiality: by fixing a stable meaning—that is the product of culture and not of the individual's engagement with the signifier—myth gives the impression that it is derived from the natural order of things and thus validates its reality and veracity. While it is beyond the scope of this section to enter into the details of Barthes' semiotic analysis of myth, I want to underscore how in this formulation myth can be understood as the reiterative performance—i.e. re-affirmation—of the "truths" of a given culture; that is to say, myth's central function is the creation and propagation of "truths" disguised as elements of a factual system, when in fact they are a semiological system: that is to say, "a system of values" (Ibid., 131).

Alternatively, we can also think about myths as "mental boxes" (Reich 2005, n.p.), recurrent story frameworks that, because they are known and easily understood by the public, are contemporized and filled in with the particulars, values, and "truths" of any given situation. As Robert Reich notes in "Story Time," these mental boxes are used to construct arguments because the public readily identifies the roles involved (e.g. the villain, the hero, the damsel in distress, etc.) and can translate them to the situation at hand. For Reich, in the United States "[t]here are four essential American stories," where two are about hope and the other two are about fear: the Triumphant Individual,

²² In Barthes' understanding of myth everything is liable to become mythologized (for instance, cars, soap-powder, toys, the face of Greta Garbo, etc.) and *Mythologies* is a practical and theoretical reflection on how current cultural thinking still operates within a mythologizing structure in the more quotidian sense.

the Benevolent Community, the Mob at the Gates, and the Rot at the Top.²³ As Reich argues, “[s]peak to these four stories and you resonate with the tales Americans have been telling each other since our founding—the two hopeful stories rendered more vivid by contrast to the two fearful ones” (Reich 2005, n.p.). Framing a political or social argument within these storylines has the effect of giving the argument a certain direction, of making it easy for the public to understand the issues involved and to be inspired by and involved in it (Lakoff 2011, 209).²⁴

With these considerations in mind, the following section will analyze from a cultural studies perspective how stories that are as culturally engrained as those identified by Reich become deployed, in the wake of 9/11, to validate a particular political and cultural narrative. The aim is to show how the mythic apparatus of the United States functions as a value system that reflects and legitimizes a specifically US worldview, and how this worldview is articulated into concrete cultural artifacts—mythic stories that shape and are shaped by the national cosmovision. Ultimately, the aim is to show how these stories are translated into the discursive management of the aftermath of 9/11 in order to support and legitimate a specific response within the framework of war.

As observed by archetypal myth criticism, the heroic story is the most universal of myths, the one that functions best to connect the individual experience to a collective identity. As Slotkin notes, a myth that ceases to evoke “this sense of total identification and collective participation, ceases to *function* as myth” (Slotkin 2002, 8; emphasis in the original). In American cultural mythology, as Slotkin, Faludi, and many other cultural theorists have noted, “the myth of the heroic quest, [...] is perhaps the most important archetype” (Slotkin 2000, 10), the one that is materialized more often into concrete, American hero-myths. As cultural artifacts, hero-myths “appear to be built of three basic structural elements: a protagonist or hero, with whom the human audience

²³ The Triumphant Individual is the classic American dream, the tale of “the little guy who works hard, takes risks, believes in himself, and eventually gains wealth, fame, and honor” (Reich 2005, n.p.). In other words, the story of the underdog, or the self-made man, who succeeds. The Benevolent Community is the counterpoint to the individualism of the previous narrative, the story of “neighbors and friends who roll up their sleeves and pitch in for the common good” (Reich 2005, n.p.), painting a folksy—and egalitarian—picture of small-town United States. The Mob at the Gates invokes the fear that is implicit in the image of the United States as “a beacon light of virtue in a world of darkness, uniquely blessed but continuously endangered by foreign menaces” (Ibid.). The basic assumption is that the United States is “the good guys” and has a moral obligation to set things right in the world arena. Finally, The Rot at the Top illustrates how The Triumphant Individual can go wrong, especially when the principles of the Benevolent Community are ignored. It is a tale about “the malevolence of powerful elites. It’s a tale of corruption, decadence, and irresponsibility in high places—of conspiracy against the common citizen” (Ibid.).

²⁴ Reich published his essay “Story Time” in 2005 to decry how the Republicans, by seizing these storylines, had succeeded in framing issues to their advantage, and how Democrats needed to understand the underlying rhetorical challenge in order to be able to recast their ideas and “win back the heart and soul of the electorate” (Reich 2005, n.p.). As Lakoff argues, in the context of a culture of war, progressives were cast as the villains (an elite “rotting at the top”), conservative citizens as the victims, and Republican leaders as the heroes; in the specific context of the War on Terror, these stories functioned to cast the war as a self-defense narrative against Saddam Hussein that, when the WMDs were revealed as non-existent, was recast as a story of liberation of the Iraqi people (Lakoff 2011, 209).

is presumed to identify in some way; a universe in which the hero may act, which is presumably a reflection of the audience's conception of the world and the gods; and a narrative, in which the interaction of hero and universe is described" (Slotkin 2000, 8). The following pages will briefly explore how this myth was shaped in the American experience and how its different cultural articulations through the centuries put forward specific "truths" that are constitutive of a specifically American cosmovision.

Despite its centrality in popular culture, from the last decades of the twentieth century the figure of the hero has come under increasing scrutiny, with some critics arguing that we live in a post-heroic age where heroes "are for debunking and deconstructing" (Jones & Watkins 2000, 1). Especially, because the traditional concept of heroism "seems to operate on decisively masculine terrain" (Hall 1996, 116) and to be irrevocably associated to gendered notions of "macho posturing, manliness, celebrations of physical bravery (often in the context of imperial conquest) and a consequent devaluing of what are often seen as feminine qualities" (Jones & Watkins 2000, 1). It seems like the hero, in general terms, is increasingly considered unable to keep up with current cultural contexts and social developments. Some critics (Boorstin 1961; McGinniss 1976) have even argued that the United States is a post-mythical society, since the heroes of old are hard to find and those that do remain do not conform to the universal archetype of heroic myth.

While these observations might accurately describe the inadequacy of the heroic figure in contemporary society, I argue that heroic figures continue to serve a key ideological function in American culture and history, and scholars in American cultural studies have produced robust formulations of the American mythic imagination. Slotkin's *Regeneration Through Violence* and *Gunfighter Nation*, as well as more recent works like *The Myth of the American Superhero* by John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, and Dittmer's *Captain America and the Nationalist Superhero*²⁵ all demonstrate the currency of the heroic myth in American culture and contribute to an understanding of the American cultural mythology as an articulation of foundational themes in the American experience that are actualized and recontextualized in each distinctive historical moment. The importance of understanding these myths lies in the fact that, as Slotkin states, "[a] people unaware of its myths is likely to continue living by them, though the world around that people may change and demand changes in their

²⁵ Lawrence and Jewett develop their theory of "an American formula of the standard superheroic character" (Lawrence & Jewett 2002, 5) that involves "motifs of superheroic redemptive violence" (Ibid.), while Dittmer looks into the subgenre of the nationalist superhero in hopes of shedding some light into what he considers common understanding: the superhero genre as "a proxy for American geopolitical identity" (Dittmer 2013, 2), as superheroes tend to be understood "as simplistic, brawny, and reflecting a uniquely American understanding of power and morality" (Ibid.), as "crystallizing a relationship between power, authority and violence that contributes to both traditions of American exceptionalism and exclusivist state-centrism" (Ibid., 6). It is this widespread and "common sense" understanding that he seeks to problematize. While Dittmer has a valid point and demonstrates finds faultlines through his exploration of several superheroes, it is my view that the iconic Captain America remains the embodiment of the ethos that Dittmer seeks to problematized.

psychology, their world view, their ethics, and their institutions” (Slotkin 2000, 4). Such was the case of the aftermath of 9/11, when the mythic apparatus was redeployed in the framing of the 9/11 and the War on Terror narratives and thus prevented a different perspective in face of a conflict that was revealing a changing geopolitical scenario. The fixing of a particular cultural framework by the re-inscription of certain *topoi* and metaphors had several tangible effects, the most salient of which was enabling the perpetuation of violence.

Because the focus of this dissertation is a specific moment in American history where the American mythic apparatus was consciously put to work, it would be beyond the scope and capacity of this section to account for the massive corpus of scholarship on myth theory, since cultures have been thinking and theorizing myth-making since Classical times, and the myriad ways in which the notion has been analyzed goes hand in hand with the developments in the history of thought: in other words, the corpus of mitocriticism is too diverse to be even referenced here.²⁶ For my purposes, I will simply point to two aspects of myth theory in the twentieth century that will serve to shape my observations on the heroic figure in the following pages: the theory of archetypes, with Campbell as its main proponent, and the cultural approach to myth by Slotkin, with its specific focus on American culture.

Although it has to be noted that the concept is not exclusive to this period, the theory of archetypes²⁷ elaborated in the twentieth century stems from a symbolic

²⁶ Myth has been studied from fields as diverse as religion (Campbell 1949; Eliade 1957), literary studies (Frye 1957), structural anthropology (Lévi-Strauss 1955, 1958, 1964), semantics (Wheelwright 1955), philosophy (Cassirer 1923), and semiology (Barthes 1957), to name but a few. The following is a very brief selection of some of the scholarship on myth theory published in the past fifty years: José Manuel Losada and Antonella Lipscomb (eds.), *Myths in Crisis: The Crisis of Myth* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015); Sara Molpeceres Arnaiz, *Mito persuasivo y mito literario. Bases para un análisis retórico-mítico del discurso* (Valladolid: Universidad de Valladolid, 2014); Eric Csapo, *Theories of Mythology* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005); Joseph Mali, *Mythistory: The Making of a Modern Historiography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Frederic Monneyron and Joel Thomas, *Mythes et littérature* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002); Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1999); Robert Ellwood, *The Politics of Myth: A Study of C. G. Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Joseph Campbell* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999); Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth* (New York: Columbia UP, 1998); Thomas J. Sienkewicz, *Theories of Myth: An Annotated Bibliography* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 1998); Robert A. Segal, *Structuralism in Myth: Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Durnezil, and Propp* (New York: Garland, 1996); Gilbert Durand, *De la Mitocritica al mitoanálisis: figuras míticas y aspectos de la obra* (Barcelona: Anthropos, 1993); Marc Manganaro, *Myth, Rhetoric, and the Voice of Authority: A Critique of Frazer, Eliot, Frye, and Campbell* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992); Adolf Guggenbilhl-Craig, *The Old Fool and the Corruption of Myth* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1991); Northrop Frye, *Words with Power* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1990); James Jakob Liszka, *The Semiotic of Myth* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1990); Leszek Kolakowski, *The Presence of Myth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Ivan Strenski, *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth-Century History: Cassirer, Eliade, Lévi-Strauss and Malinowski* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987); Marcel Detienne, *The Creation of Mythology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Paul Veyne, *Les Grecs ont-ils cru a leurs mythes? Essai sur l'imagination constituante* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1983); Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Myth and Thought among the Greeks* (London and Boston: Routledge, 1983); Eric Gould, *Mythical Intentions of Modern Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981); Albert Cook, *Myth and Language* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1980); Gilbert Durand, *Figures mythiques et vi-sages de l'oeuvre* (Paris: Berg International, 1979); W. Taylor Stevenson, *History as Myth* (New York: Seabury, 1969).

²⁷ As Jung himself notes, archetypal theory is by no means his own invention, as the notion of the archetype can be traced back to Classical times (Campbell 2008, 13).

interpretation of myth that was deeply influenced by German Romanticism and by what can be loosely termed “symbolic philosophy”—in opposition to traditional rationalist thought that dismisses the role of symbols, images, myths, and the unconscious—; this includes the work of thinkers as diverse as Carl Gustav Jung, Ernst Cassirer, Hans Blumenberg, Martin Heidegger, Paul Ricoeur, Vattimo, Manfred Frank, and Gilbert Durand, to name but a few (Molpeceres 2014, 39). In particular, it is Jung’s theorization of the psychoanalytical roots of myth—where myth emerges from the collective unconscious—and his systematization into a theory of archetypes that becomes deeply influential and paves the way for subsequent archetypal myth criticism starting in the 1930s (Bodkin 1934; Lord Raglan 1936; Knight 1941; Campbell 1949; Ferguson 1949; Frye 1957 & 1963; Chase 1949 & 1957; Graves 1961; Wheelwright 1962; Fiedler 1955 & 1962; Pratt 1981; Schreier Rupprecht 1985).

The main tenet of archetypal criticism is that because myths derive not from individual experience but from the inborn, collective unconscious, they are transnational and transhistorical, common to all peoples of all times, and they can thus be systematized into archetypes (from Greek, meaning “original pattern from which copies are made”). While this is debatable, and whether we agree on archetypes being inborn or socially learnt, I briefly comment on archetypal criticism because it provides the groundwork for later myth criticism, which to a large extent will be prompted by this distinction. According to Jung, archetypes are the concrete products of the symbolic imagination, collectively-inherited unconscious ideas, patterns of thought, images, etc., that are universally present in individual psyches. These images can account for the universality of certain human behaviors; that is to say, the primigenious and immemorial images that myths keep repeating again and again (Durand 1993, 11-13). As Lévi-Strauss contends in “The Structural Study of Myth,” “what gives the myth an operational value is that the specific pattern described is timeless; it explains the present and the past as well as the future” (Lévi-Strauss 1955, 430). Despite its timelessness, Jung observes that archetypes remain operational or not depending on the different historical and cultural moments, and moments of deep crisis may propitiate the activation of archetypes that have otherwise remained inactive for some time.

The most universal and ancient of archetypes is, according to Jung, the hero, an archetype that has remained active throughout the centuries in American culture and which, if anything, the aftermath of 9/11 has caused to be reinforced and to multiply into various hero myths, as I will later seek to demonstrate. After Jung’s formulation of archetypal theory, the most influential works on archetypal myth criticism are Campbell’s *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* and Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism*. These two scholars belong to two different disciplines—working in the field of literary studies, Frye argues that literature and other art forms are manifestations of universal

myths and archetypes; from the field of comparative mythology, Campbell is most credited for his elaboration of a pattern of mythic progress—but both underscore the transhistorical and transcultural significance of the hero. The hero, for Campbell, is “the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms” (Campbell 2008, 14) thus becoming an “eternal man—perfected, unspecific, universal” (Ibid., 15).

The main critique against this approach refers to its cultural essentialism for, as Slotkin argues, it attempts “to reduce all literary narrative to paradigmatic archetypes, obscuring all authorial and cultural differences and all distinctions of literary artistry and aesthetic response—in effect, reducing all the varieties of myth and literature to a single psychological or anthropological datum” (Slotkin 2000, 9-10). Aiming to bridge these inadequacies, the cultural approach places emphasis on the constructed, culture-specific nature of myths, which are not only shaped by historical circumstances but that are also central to the shaping of history, while at the same time acknowledging that “myths are archetypal or universal to the extent that certain conditions of life and psychological states or concerns are universal among men. [...] differing in particular details but not in their structural patterns” (Slotkin 2000, 10). In Slotkin’s words,

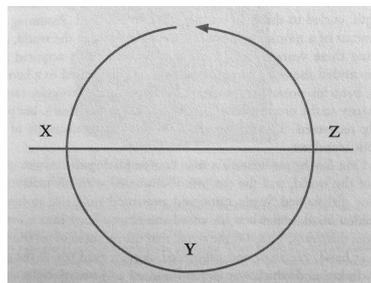
Myths [and the heroes therein] are stories drawn from a society’s history, which have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society’s ideology, and explicating the meaning and direction of its history. A society’s mythology is, in effect, its memory system. Myths usually develop around cultural crises or moments of collective shock or trauma, when events challenge the belief system on which the society has hitherto operated. The most durable myths develop around issues or problems that are fundamental to the society’s organization and persistent in its history: for example, the problem of kingship and succession in premodern societies, and the tensions between individual rights and social authority in modern nation-states. As a society experiences the stress of events, its cultural leadership recalls and deploys mythologized “memories” of the past as precedents for understanding and responding to contemporary crises. Over time, through frequent retellings and deployments as a source of interpretive metaphors, the original mythic story is increasingly conventionalized and abstracted, until it is reduced to a deeply encoded and resonant set of symbols, “icons,” “keywords,” or historical clichés. (Slotkin 2007, n.p.)

Thus, the most salient difference between archetypal theory and Slotkin's cultural approach is the emphasis the latter places on sociohistorical circumstances as the origin of myth, and the contention that myth-making can be understood simultaneously as a psychological and a social activity (Slotkin 2000, 8). Despite these differences, it can be affirmed that both approaches posit the notion of myth as the structuring principle that organizes a culture's experience, a principle that remains potentially operational as long as it is timeless. Slotkin does acknowledge the relevance of Campbell's formulation of the mythic archetype in revealing the structuring pattern in mythogenesis, that is to say, "the one, shape-shifting yet marvelously constant story"(Campbell 2008, 1) that is the point of origin for all subsequent myths. Monomythic narratives can be understood as those stories that, despite their differences in plot and argument, are all structured according to this more or less universal pattern of heroic progress—the archetype—, and in so far as particular cultures interpret the archetypal myth and create acculturated myth-metaphors which reflect their own particular approach to life and respond to the psychological and social needs of said cultures, "myth provides a useful tool for the analysis of the particularity of a human culture" (Slotkin 2000, 15). So while Campbell's formulation holds true for many cultures and is the basis for much myth criticism, a culture-specific approach like Slotkin's is more apt to explore and explain specific traits of the American mythic apparatus and to reveal their significance by tracing the continuity of a mythic story from its originating moment and by translating it into our current times.

The cultural approach includes a body of work that is too broad and diverse to be referenced here, as each work explores certain cultural specificities that include not only location but time;²⁸ thus, for our purposes, Slotkin's works in the field of American studies are pivotal in demonstrating how, in the American experience, the venture of the Puritans into the New World, the hardships of taming the wilderness, and the expansion of the Western frontier have shaped the archetype into a specific national monomyth—the defining metaphor that shapes the culture's sense of its own identity—and it is this specificity that is repeatedly invoked with the passing of time. Slotkin's work demonstrates how the American national monomyth of the hero is

²⁸ For instance, Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (London: James Frazer, 1841) was deeply influential in popularizing the "Great Man theory" of the nineteenth century, according to which history can be largely explained by the impact that great men, or heroes, have in shaping it. Some decades later the social darwinist Herbert Spencer refuted this theory in *The Study of Sociology* (1896) arguing that what Carlyle called "great men" were merely products of their social environment and that their actions would be impossible without the social conditions built before their lifetimes. This counter-argument has remained influential throughout the twentieth century to the present, although there were still works supporting the Great Man theory such as Sydney Hooks' *The Hero in History: A Study in Limitation and Possibility* (1943). Nonetheless, most current approaches to the figure of the hero place emphasis on context as a decisive shaping factor; see, for instance, Rafael Argullol's *El héroe y el único* (Barcelona: Acantilado, 2008) on Romanticism and tragic heroes, Michael Bell and Peter Poellner's edited volume *Myth and the Making of Modernity: The Problem of Grounding in Early Twentieth-century Literature* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998) focusing on Modernism, and Susan Mackey-Kallis' *The Hero and the Perennial Journey Home in American Film* (Philadelphia: Penn Press, 2001).

constructed within American history and what central, symbolizing function it plays in American culture, and this cultural specificity becomes evident when it is compared to Campbell's archetype of universal myth. In Campbell's formulation, the heroic archetype usually involves rites of initiation, which take the hero away from the community, and this removal purports to train the hero in social responsibility for a life of service to the community to which he will eventually return. According to Campbell, the universal story pattern follows the formula represented in rites of passage, which involve the phases of separation, initiation, and return; thus, Campbell describes the "standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero" (Campbell 2008, 23) as follows:



A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder (x): fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won (y): the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man (z). (Campbell 2008, 23)

According to Slotkin, early American literature follows this universal pattern, where

myth-narrative follows a variation of the initiation into a new life or a higher state of being or manhood that is a myth-theme as old as mankind. The boy's coming of age, the fall, the Christian conversion, and the success of the myth (the American dream of perpetual self-improvement and transcendence) are variations of the basic theme. (Slotkin 2000, 22).

But as the American monomyth develops through time it starts diverting from this universal archetype and acquires its own specificity. In Lawrence and Jewett's

formulation, the American monomyth as reflected in the materials of popular culture can be described as follows:

A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition; the superhero then recedes into obscurity. (Lawrence & Jewett 2002, 6)

The most significant difference between Campbell's archetype of heroic progress and the American heroic monomyth is that the American heroes (epitomized by the Western hero and the 1940s superheroes) do not, typically, serve the community *within* the community, as they are most typically lonesome figures who appear to save a community and then "recede into the sunset" or anonymity until they are needed again. Some theorists have read this lack of integration of the American hero as enunciating a "desire for liberation from society's shackles" (Dittmer 2013, 11) that reflects the tension between an inherently individualistic nature and the constraints imposed by civilization and domesticity, a tension that runs through American fiction from its earliest examples to the twentieth century, from *Rip Van Winkle's* (1819) liberation from his nagging wife by his foray into nature, through *High Noon's* (1950) dramatization of the dangers brought about by domesticity and the softening of men,²⁹ to hyper-masculine (and mostly socially awkward) superheroes like Superman and Batman, who continue to represent the tension between their integration in society and their power, even if it may be argued that they do it in increasingly more nuanced

²⁹ In his essay "To Protect and to Threaten: Gary Cooper and the Gender Politics of *High Noon* (1952) [sic.]" Steven T. Sheehan offers a nuanced, gendered reading of this 1950 Western starring Gary Cooper as reflecting the tensions of Cold War masculinity and gender policies. The long-sought-for "domestication" of the town of Hadleysville (that has made it suitable for families and children) turns out to be its biggest threat, as no man will stand to defend it now that they have "wife and kids." The chapter is included in the volume edited by Lisa DeTora, *Heroes of Film, Comics and American Culture. Essays on Real and Fictional Defenders of Home* (Jefferson & London: McFarland and Co., 2009).

ways.³⁰ This lack of integration, that can be read as an inside/outside tension, is consubstantial to the American monomyth. In Dittmer's view, and from a geopolitical standpoint, it has clear links to the notion of American exceptionalism, where the United States is both within and without, both exemplar and exempted from the rule of law (Dittmer 2013, 12). As Dittmer points out, the notion of "internal externality" developed by Pease—one of the most relevant theorists of New Americanism—is an apt concept to explain this paradox, where the state

occupie[s] the position of internal externality of the exception. For in order to defend the order it also represent[s], the state [i]s first required to declare itself an exception to the order it regulate[s]. The State of Exception is marked by absolute independence from any juridical control and any reference to the normal political order. (Pease 2009, 24)

This "internal externality" is central to the American heroic myth and to the American cosmovision, as I aim to make clear in the following pages.

The specificity of the American monomyth—with the hero's lack of integration in the community—is the product of several stages of development, influenced by key historical circumstances and cultural themes.³¹ Foundational motifs such as the New World as a garden of Eden, the Puritan colonists as predestined New Israelites, the expansion to the West as a land of freedom, opportunity, and plenty, and Americans' Manifest Destiny—to name but a few—all become actualized through and accommodating of continuing historical developments. It would be beyond practicable to give a full account of the ways in which these themes have been accounted for and analyzed in scholarship, but in the following sections I will briefly explore some of these ideas—the notion of America as an undisturbed Eden, the legitimation of vigilante justice, the idea of Americans' intrinsic innocence, etc.—as well as the hero

³⁰ The evolution of the superhero as regards his integration in the community and the cultural representation of masculinity, from its origins in 1938 as hyperbolically masculine to its adaptation to newer trends regarding masculinity after the 1990s, and an alleged recent return to hyper-masculinity in the twenty-first century, has been extensively studied by both comics specialists and the field of masculinity studies, which due to its vastness falls outside the scope of this dissertation. For further reference, see Jeffrey A. Brown, "The Superhero Film Parody and Hegemonic Masculinity" (*Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 33.2 [2016]: 131-150) and "Comic Book Masculinity and the New Black Superhero" (*African American Review* 33.1 [1999]: 25-42); Julianna Aucoin, "The Superhero Diversity Problem" (*Harvard Political Review* 24 October 2014); Yann Roublou, "Complex Masculinities: The Superhero in Modern American Movies" (*Culture, Society & Masculinities* 4.1 [2012]: 76-91); Peter Coogan, "The Definition of the Superhero" (*A Comics Studies Reader*, eds. Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009); Valerie Palmer-Mehta and Kellie Hay, "A Superhero for Gays?: Gay Masculinity and Green Lantern" (*The Journal of American Culture* 28.4 [2005]: 390-404); Mark Best, "Domesticity, Homosociality, and Male Power in Superhero Comics of the 1950s" (*Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 6 [2005]: online).

³¹ Cf. Slotkin 2000, 3-24; Lawrence & Jewett 2002, 21-48.

myths that they inform, and point at their currency as shaping metaphors of the national ethos in the twenty-first century, especially when considering the practical implications they have in the wake of 9/11. In order to do this I will follow the revisionist work undertaken by New Americanism—scholars in the field of American studies whose aim is to “displace the preconstituted categories and master narratives of an earlier American studies, and provide a new focus for scholarship” (Duke UP, “New Americanism”)—, and especially the work of Spanos, Kaplan, Sturken and the already-mentioned Pease.

1.1.1. Foundational myths

In *The Quest for Paradise: Europe and the American Moral Imagination*, Charles Sanford argues that the Edenic myth “has been the most powerful and comprehensive organizing force in American culture” (Sanford 1961, iv), giving meaning to the journey of the first settlers into the New World, understood variously as an eternal return into the Biblical Garden of Eden and as a promised land to which the Puritans were predestined in order to do God’s will. The notion of paradise on earth was popular at the time of the Protestant Reformation—the main cause behind the emigration of the first Puritan settlers—, as it had been also in Columbus’ description of America as the Garden of Eden. The American Puritans shared in this expectation of a paradise on earth and believed that America had been singled out as the site for the Second Coming, which would reveal itself once their journey into the wilderness—full of dangers and evils—had been completed (Lawrence & Jewett 2002, 23). In the next century, and under the influence of the Enlightenment, there is a more optimistic vision of America’s Edenic potential, as can be found in the writings by Franklin and Jefferson that reflect increasing hope in human progress and the perfectibility of man, which would contribute to the creation of a “paradise on earth” (Lawrence & Jewett 2002, 24). The idea of predestination (i.e. Winthrop’s “City Upon a Hill”) becomes secularized into the notion of Manifest Destiny as “a sense of mission to redeem the Old World by high example [...] generated by the potentialities of a new earth” (Merck 1963, 3) for building an agrarian heaven in America, and made possible by the exceptional virtues of the American people and their institutions.

A second stage of development of the monomyth involves the theme of a chosen people living in a paradise that is under threat by the intrusion of an Evil Other, articulated in the Indian captivity narratives which, according to Slotkin, “constitute the first coherent myth-literature developed in America for American audiences” (Slotkin 2000, 95). These narratives typically follow the storyline pattern of

a single individual, usually a woman, stands passively under the strokes of evil, awaiting rescue by the grace of God. The sufferer represents the whole, chastened body of Puritan society; and the temporary bondage of the captive to the Indian is dual paradigm—of the bondage of the soul to the flesh and to the temptations arising from original sin, and of the self-exile of the English Israel from England. In the Indian's devilish clutches, the captive had to meet and reject the temptation of Indian marriage and/or the Indian's "cannibal" Eucharist... (Slotkin 2000, 94)

The idea of the siege of paradise by an Evil Other becomes central to what many cultural theorists have unambiguously identified as a pose of perpetual innocence by the United States which, as Lawrence and Jewett point out, is already reflected in a secularized way in the Declaration of Independence, where the American colonists are portrayed as repeatedly under the "perfidious attack by an unjust King" (Lawrence & Jewett 2002, 26), attacks which are totally unprovoked: "In every stage of these Oppressions we have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble Terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated Injury" (Declaration of Independence, 1776). However, much of the hardship that colonists had to face came from nature itself and not from the outside, exposing the inconsistency of the idea of an American paradise on earth. This results, according to Slotkin, in "the tendency to account for any evil which threatened the garden empire by ascribing it to alien intrusion. Since evil could not conceivably originate within the walls of the garden, it must by logical necessity come from without" (Slotkin 2000, 187).

After 1865—the date that marks the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the Reconstruction period—the theme of the defenseless community seems to gain force and shape, at a time when "the expected Eden of the West was suffering repeated setbacks" (Lawrence & Jewett 2002, 30) with ongoing Indian Wars³² and economic distress but, as Henry Nash Smith points out, "the myth affirmed the impossibility of disaster" (Smith 1996, 188). Thus, western expansion was translated into a journey to the garden of plenty, an image which hardly depicts the harsh realities that homesteaders would find in these lands. According to Richard Bridgman,

As the frontier moved westward, leaving behind land now available to be worked, the political imagination of Americans began to develop an

³² The "Indian Wars"—a blatantly colonial term that obliterates the agency of the Europeans—were the different conflicts between colonists, settlers—and, eventually, Americans—and the native peoples of the North American continent, but refer especially to those occurred as a result of the policies of Indian removal in the nineteenth century, fueled by the popular notion of the United States' Manifest Destiny to expand across the continent, during and after the Civil War until the closing of the frontier at the turn of the nineteenth century.

abstract conception of its inhabitants that went back at least as far as Crèvecoeur and Jefferson—that of the yeoman farmer, the freeholder whose job and pleasure it was to cultivate this earthly paradise. (The South, whose system was built on much larger agricultural units, worked by slaves, concurrently developed an alternative myth of the plantation pastoral.) On the whole, even if he appeared regularly in political rhetoric, the sturdy yeoman resisted translation into fiction, for he lacked the adventurousness associated with the men of the frontier.

The territory that the yeoman inhabited came to have an equivalent myth—that of a garden, an agrarian paradise of fertile soil, blessed with a balanced outpouring of sun and rain. Such images appeared regularly in legislative speeches, even though the reality was quite different. (Bridgman 1987, n.p.)

Indeed, as Americans moved westward, what they encountered was not a garden of plenty but a succession of treeless prairies and agricultural blights like tornadoes, dust storms, drought, and locusts. Later, the expansion of the railroad West meant that huge expansions of land were granted to speculators, and the advances in farming technology meant eventually that the land would be cultivated with tractors and machines, but, despite all these evidences to the contrary, the idea of the simple farmer in an agrarian utopia remained.

In short, the mythic notion of America as an Edenic land maintains significant purchase in the foundational cultural apparatus of the United States, and is probably best conceptualized in Henry Nash Smith's notion of Virgin Land in *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*³³ as "the vacant continent beyond the frontier," the enormous expanse of land that is free for Americans to tame, to exploit, and in which to carry out their Manifest Destiny (Smith 1996, 4). What this notion bypasses—as Smith himself acknowledges in a later work, "Symbol and Idea in *Virgin Land*"—is an adequate consideration of the violence of westward expansionism and the fact that the

³³ *Virgin Land's* signal contribution was its analysis of the powerful myths generated by the encounter of the European culture of the colonists and settlers with the vast expanse of the American West. Smith considers two dimensions of the westward migration: the mental conceptions/misconceptions that inspired individuals to cross the frontier and appropriate the "new" land; and the mental constructs that were prevalent once the territory began to be settled (Bridgman 1987). These conceptions are, according to Smith, most clearly exemplified in Turner's "frontier thesis" as the guiding interpretation of American identity, a mythology that he aims to deconstruct. *Virgin Land* is organized in three sections that reflect the development of the notion through the years: first, seen as a "Passage to India," which illustrates the myth of "Manifest Destiny;" then as the land of the "Sons of Leatherstocking," where Smith discusses the myth of the Western hero, and finally as "The Garden of the World," where he analyses the notions of the idealized farmer, the West as regeneration, and the theme of nature versus civilization. Smith's work influenced several important American Studies classics with a landscape or environmental focus, including R. W. B. Lewis' *The American Adam* (1955), Perry Miller's *Errand into the Wilderness* (1952), and Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* (1964).

“free land” was actually taken from the native peoples. As Bridgman notes, Smith also points to some of the large-scale consequences that the myth of the garden had, among them “a characteristic American isolationism, encouraged by the conception of self-sufficiency available in the protected heartland” (Bridgman 1987, n.p.), and the idea of free, fertile land out West as a safety valve, “the sustained assumption that, if things were unsatisfactory, then one could always move westward,” thus masking conditions of labor strife and unemployment (Ibid.).

This mythic understanding, with the idea of eternal return at its center, reverberating optimism and regeneration, has resulted, on the one hand, in “American cults of newness, rebirth, virtue, the sublime, industrial capitalism, and reform” (Baritz 1962, 733). But, on the other, and as Loren Baritz notes, when faced up with reality, the myth has also resulted in “a growing disillusion that [i]s a consequence of the enormity of the illusion” (Ibid.), a nostalgia for a greatness that is always located in the past and that has its correlate in “a sense of loss, a conviction that the Eden [that] Americans deserve to inhabit is now besieged by insoluble problems” (Lawrence & Jewett 2002, 25). As I will later argue, most of the setbacks in US history have always been characterized as the moment when “innocence was lost,” as if Americans were still living in an Edenic paradise that is disturbed by the intrusion of several forms of evil or by “insoluble problems” which have their origin in foreign intervention, moral corruption, or government incompetence.

Nonetheless, it is this conceptualization of the United States as Virgin Land that underpins one of the most familiar interpretations of the American past, Frederick Jackson Turner’s “frontier thesis” (1893), the success of which lies, according to H. N. Smith, in the fact that it found echo in ideas and attitudes that were already current at the time when Turner offered his conceptualization. Briefly, what Turner argues in “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” is that American character and democracy were shaped by the experience of the American frontier, which provided Americans with the liberty to release themselves from antiquated, corrupted and dysfunctional European mindsets, customs, and systems, as the frontier needed no standing armies, established churches, aristocrats or nobles controlling the land. Frontier land was free for the taking, offering and facilitating the continued social dynamism that would shape American character, its push for innovation and democratic ideals. “The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development” (Turner 1893, n.p.), Turner wrote; and yet, this inherent dynamism was soon disappearing, he warned, as the frontier had been officially declared “closed” by

the 1890 US Census.³⁴ Turner's thesis was, in a sense, a nostalgic vision of a soon-to-be fading past, although he firmly believed that the frontier experience would continue to impact American society and culture since it had given rise to a national character that could only lead to greatness (Walle 2000, 188). Indeed, the deep influence of Turner's "frontier thesis" in American studies and culture—in fact, in its mythic consciousness—is such that it would be invoked again in the 1960s by president Kennedy in his appeal for "a new frontier," a concept which easily found an echo in the public mind. At his speech on 15 July 1960 at the Democratic National Convention accepting the presidential nomination, Kennedy called out to the American people to be "new pioneers on that New Frontier," which he defined as "the uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered pockets of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus" (Kennedy 1960, n.p.). Kennedy's call echoed the famous call by the newspaper editor Horace Greeley in 1865, "Go West, young man," relating Western expansion with the notion of Manifest Destiny.³⁵

Seen in this light, the "frontier thesis" with its attendant heroic figures—the pioneer, the cowboy, and the farmer—is celebratory of American individualism and of its spirit of adventure, its resilience and competitiveness, its freedom-loving, hard-working nature. But if analyzed from a different perspective, as Slotkin proposes, the frontiersman and the cowboy can be read, rather than as the precursors of a freedom-loving, individualistic and democratic nation, as the figures that sanction a national violence that is always understood as regenerative. As Walle points out, "[t]o a large extent, Slotkin's writing is a reaction against that of Henry Nash Smith's upbeat and positive portrayal of the American West as a garden of Eden" (Walle 2000, 183), and his work seeks to explore the "other side of the coin" of the American mythic apparatus.

The success of Turner's "frontier thesis" was due, as noted above, to the fact that it made explicit in a very clear and concrete way themes and attitudes that were otherwise prevalent in the American psyche, and also to the fact that it was embraced by the American elites as a self-assertive mythology that allowed Americans to feel on par with Europeans, proud of the skills and distinctiveness they had developed and achieved as Americans (Walle 2000, 188). Furthermore, and as noted by Sara Molpeceres (2014), the myth of the West is inextricably related to the origins of the nation, a mythology that explains the nation's geographical and cultural development

³⁴ In 1890 the US Census Bureau announced that the frontier was closed because a frontier line, understood as a point beyond which the population density is less than two persons per square mile, no longer existed. Although the frontier was far from "closed" in a practical sense, the announcement motivated Frederick Jackson Turner's delivery of the paper "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" in 1893.

³⁵ Although usually credited to Greeley, the phrase was first used by John B.L. Soule in an 1851 editorial in the *Terre Haute Express*, "Go west young man, and grow up with the country." Greeley later used the quote in his own editorial in 1865 (*Encyclopedia Britannica*).

and the collective success of the group against the difficulties imposed by historical and geographical circumstances: in other words, the mythology of the West explains the story of a nation triumphing against adversity (Molpeceres 2014, 154). In Walter's *The Zero*, the centrality of this foundational myth is made complex by reference to all the native and immigrant peoples unacknowledged by the frontier expansion, and given an ironic twist that brings to mind the US imperial policies:

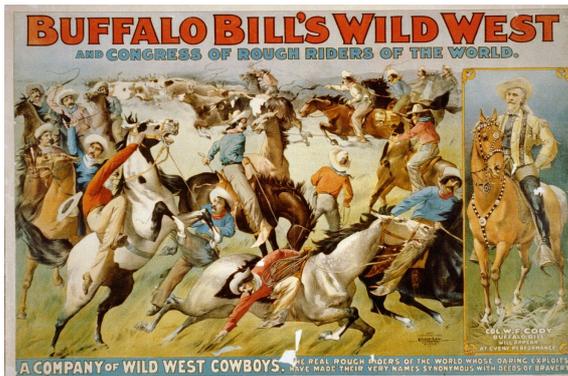
So many countries in this one country, [...] nations spilling out into nations, bordered by mountain ranges and great rivers. I sometimes think that people here used to believe that when one country disappointed them, they could simply move west and find another one. But then you ran out of room. (Walter 2007, 127).

1.1.2. The cowboy

In light of these considerations, it is only natural that the quintessential figure of the frontier and of “the men that made America,” the cowboy, be the main heroic figure in American culture, a hero myth that with the advent of cinema and television will become global. Western narratives involving cowboys were extremely popular during the nineteenth century—with dime novels and Wild West shows—³⁶ but it is the release in 1929 of *The Virginian* starring Gary Cooper—one of the first sound-films in the industry—that marks a turning point in the expansion and continuing shaping of the myth. The film was so successful and influential that the text that it was based on—the already popular 1902 novel by Owen Wister—would remain in school curriculums for decades to come, and the filmic tradition of the Western—still in vogue and evolution today—can be said to have been inaugurated by this film. Following the monomythic story pattern of a defenseless community that cannot get rid of an evil character (in this case, the ringleader of a band of cattle rustlers named Trampas), and where institutions have failed to provide protection and safety, *The Virginian* not only articulates the “frontier thesis” worldview in fictional form (Walle 2000, 188) but establishes what many believe is the seminal and paradigmatic cowboy hero myth: it is the story of an Everyman (a man with no name, *The Virginian*) who is cast into the role of savior despite his selfless restraint (for five years he avoids Trampas in order not to shoot

³⁶ Wild West shows were traveling vaudeville performances, the first of which was *Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show*, formed in 1883 and lasting until 1913. The shows introduced many western performers and personalities, and a romanticized version of the American frontier to a wide audience that included the United States and Europe. The dime novels were the evolution of the “Leatherstocking” type of popular fiction that followed from Fenimore Cooper's phenomenal success, but, as Wright contends, they simplified the complexity of Cooper's Western stories into a formulaic pattern of doubtful literary quality, “mythologizing frontier life, infusing it with a simple narrative of good versus evil that proved to be hugely popular” (Wright 2001, 82).

him), a story where vigilante justice is moralized by means of dramatic opposition between good and evil and where the hero's namelessness requires the audience to judge him solely by his present actions—since his past is unknown (Lawrence & Jewett 2002, 34-35).³⁷ Once the redemption of the community is achieved, *The Virginian* marries his sweetheart—a school teacher, symbolizing the reconciliation of the wild frontier and civilization—and paradise is restored.³⁸



Circus poster of Buffalo Bill's Wild West including a portrait of Col. William F. Cody (Buffalo Bill). Image c.1899 by Courier Litho. Co., Buffalo, NY.



Gary Cooper and Mary Brian in *The Virginian* (Paramount, 1929).

Several critics have noted the historical incompatibility between the cowboy myth, the closing of the frontier that Turner had declared in 1893, and the social developments at the turn of the century, with the onset of urban economies and corporate capitalism. For instance, in the field of gender studies Michael Kimmel (1996) has explored the rising tensions between this atavistic American ideal of masculinity, embodied by the cowboy and the self-made man, and the more dependent conditions of wage earning fostered by industrialization and increasingly bureaucratic societies, what has come to be known as the bread-winner model of masculinity. But despite the growing cultural anxieties caused by the perceived loss of vitality, independence, and virile manliness among middle-class men, and in conjunction with new market economies, the tension only lead to the romanticization of the American West and the glorification of the American cowboy (Holt & Thompson 2004, 426). Accordingly, Lee Clark Mitchell (1996) suggests that “a growing middle class veneration of efficiency, bureaucracy, and professionalization [...] contributed to the enthusiasm with which Wister’s *The Virginian* and Potter’s *The Great Train Robbery* were received” (Mitchell 1996, 26). Thus, against Frederick Taylor’s notion of “efficiency experts” and the bread-

³⁷ For a detailed analysis of *The Virginian* and its deep influence in the shaping of the cowboy myth, see Lawrence & Jewett 2002, 31-35.

³⁸ The film concludes after the shooting of Trampas with the reunion of *The Virginian* and his sweetheart; the novel describes their marriage and honeymoon and hints at *The Virginian*’s economic success in the future.

winner model of masculinity, the cowboy retained its currency as it “represented a throwback to the idea of precorporate capitalist structure” (Mitchell 1996, 26), even if that idea was increasingly obsolete.

Later years will see variations of this cowboy paradigm, for instance, with the emergence of the fatalistic cowboy story and the antiheroic cowboy that develop after the Second World War and during the counterculture of the 1960s. These subgenres understand that—against Turner’s frontier thesis and Wister’s cowboy hero—individualism does not necessarily lead to success and can even be counterproductive; thus, they use the figure of the cowboy as a vestigial symbol of heroic and noble ideals that also make him “ill-equipped to function in the modern world” (Walle 200, 194).³⁹ Both the fatalistic Western and the antiheroic cowboy, with their accommodation of shifting worldviews, play an important role in the renewal of the Western genre, and they reflect trends that are also present in the absurdist fiction of the 1960s (as will be explored in chapter 3).

But even if superseded by shifting genres and other models of masculinity and heroism, the mythologized idea of the cowboy retains plenty of currency in American culture, as it always harks back to a “presumably more satisfying pre-corporate mode of masculinity” and personal freedom (Holt & Thompson 2004, 426)⁴⁰ and evokes essential features of the American monomyth: “rugged individualism, an adventurous spirit, risk-taking, displays of physical prowess, and most of all, a high degree of personal autonomy” (Holt & Thompson 2004, 425). In other words, the cowboy embodies a set of individualistic ideals that is not only prominent in American public rhetoric, with the commendation of the active role of the individual citizen, but that is also a steady feature in American culture and fiction, even if its relevance may be diminished in post-agrarian, industrial societies. In *The Wild West: The Mythical Cowboy*

³⁹ As Walle notes, in the 1960s “the fatalistic and antiheroic innovations of the cowboy story, unacceptable from the 1920s to the 1950s, emerged as viable products. The fatalistic Western used the cowboy to symbolize a vestigial remain that might be noble and heroic but is ill-equipped to function in the modern world. Perhaps the classic and most popular example of the genre is Paul Newman and Robert Redford’s *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. [...] In this highly regarded blockbuster film, the lives of two rough and tumble, devil may care Western individualists face an encroaching civilization. Increasingly unable to compete in the modern world that is emerging, the heroes [...] retire to vestigial hinterland retreats. Mass civilization, however, relentlessly pursues them and they are finally unceremoniously gunned down by an army of lackluster automatons. Although individually, Butch and Sundance are portrayed as superior to the ‘organization men’ who destroy them, their death is depicted as the inevitable result of their refusal to adjust to changing times” (Walle 2000, 194). It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to explore the evolution of the Western genre, but I am interested in further exploring the subject, especially through the following works: Will Wright, *The Wild West: The Mythical Cowboy and Social Theory* (London: SAGE, 2001) and David Simons, *The Anti-Hero in the American Novel from Joseph Heller to Kurt Vonnegut* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

⁴⁰ Schouten and McAlexander trace this same paradigm in “the Harley subculture,” i.e. the large community of Harley-Davidson motorcycle owners, who construct themselves as an “outlaw” group of men who live for the autonomy of the open road and are free from the constraints of society, a mystique that is akin to the idealized frontiersman of the West. See John W. Schouten and James H. McAlexander, “Market Impact of a Consumption Subculture: the Harley-Davidson Mystique” (*European Advances in Consumer Research* 1 [1993]: 389-393).

and *Social Theory*, Will Wright notes how “[m]ost American popular stories [...] are in some sense versions of Westerns, because they are always versions of individualism” (Wright 2001, 9). It is only natural, then, that when the Bush administration repeatedly invoked the cowboy myth—especially in relation to the invasion of Iraq (Bush 2001, “Leave Iraq”)—this did not, in any way, sound anachronistic or out of touch with public sensitivities, as will be explored in the last section of this chapter.

1.1.3. The superhero

The release date of the filmic version of *The Virginian*—1929—also marks the Wall Street Crash and the beginning of the Great Depression, a period that would see the development of yet another heroic myth, that of the superhero. As Lawrence and Jewett point out, the period 1929-1941—what they refer to as the axial decade—sees the evolution of the myth from mere heroism to superheroism, which is also decisively shaped by the emergence of serialization: “Comic books and radio programs required a heroic format with traditional appeals of adventure and redemption but without marital resolution at the end” since otherwise “it would entail creating a new redeemer figure for the next episode” (Lawrence & Jewett 2002, 36-37). As a result of this need for constant conflict resolution, “miraculous redemption [...] came to replace the blissful union of married partners as a fitting expression of Eden’s restoration” (Ibid., 37). While serialization helps to explain in part the shift in the heroic pattern, the same shift can be observed in the Western, with countless examples of John Wayne walking into the sunset and leaving behind women and any invitation to domesticity. Thus, the shift seems to respond mostly to sociocultural trends, although it is reinforced by the serialization of the comic superhero. It is during the axial decade that figures such as The Lone Ranger, Tarzan, The Shadow, Superman, and Flash Gordon appear, marking another stage of development of the monomyth yet maintaining its continuity. As Lawrence and Jewett write, the superheroes

provide a secular fulfillment of the religious promise articulated in the endings of *The Birth of a Nation* and *The Virginian*. They cut Gordian knots, lift the siege of evil, and restore the Edenic state of perfect faith and perfect peace. It is a millennial, religious expectation—at least in origin—yet it is fulfilled by secular agents. The premise of democratic equality is visible in that superhuman powers have to be projected onto ordinary citizens, yet their transformation into superheroes renders them incapable of democratic citizenship. Moreover, total power must

be pictured as totally benign, transmuting lawless vigilantism into a perfect embodiment of law enforcement. (Ibid., 46)

As can be seen, the conventions of the monomyth are adapted yet maintained, and the most salient feature of the superhero myth is, according to Lawrence and Jewett, that it seems to dismiss “that every gain entails a loss, that extraordinary benefits exact requisite costs, [...] that injury is usually proportionate to the amount of violence employed” (Ibid., 47), and that moral infallibility usually requires the use of intellect (Ibid., 48). In a variation of the cowboy monomyth, the superhero may not physically move from community to community but still refuses “to be bound by societal authorities, as evidenced by the secret identities and the occasional cooperation with, but not subordination to, legally constituted authorities” (Dittmer 2013, 11).

1.1.4. The nationalist superhero

Just as the superhero that emerges out of the Great Depression is characterized by a particular spatio-temporal context, also influenced by the place of production—New York City—that crystallizes in the myth’s conventions regarding power, morality, and authority, the beginning of the Second World War and the subsequent entry of the United States into the conflict gives rise to and shapes what Dittmer labels a subgenre within the superhero myth: the nationalist superhero. Compared to the ordinary superhero, the nationalist superhero bears the burden of embodying the nation-state (Dittmer 2013, 8), freighted with the discourse of American Exceptionalism and the centrality of American foreign policy. The paradigm of the nationalist superhero is Captain America, a super-soldier created by the US government who turns into a self-proclaimed embodiment of the American Dream (Ibid., 7).⁴¹

While embodying the idea of the nation-state and the “relationship between power, authority, and violence” (Ibid., 6), the nationalist superhero does not, however, suppress the inherent tension between these elements and the individual’s will to act; in a sense, the nationalist superhero reflects Pease’s notion of “internal externality” (Pease 2009, 24), both bound by the law and exempt from it. As Captain America says in the volume “The Drums of War” (2006), the nation was “founded on breaking the law. Because the law was wrong” (Brubaker & Perkins 2006, 13). Borrowing from Ó’Tuathail’s analysis of the film *Behind Enemy Lines* (2001), Dittmer further makes the point that the nationalist superhero addresses the frustration that may derive from an unclear and complex geopolitical position on the part of the nation

⁴¹ The subgenre has also given way to a large number of parodies and subversions that react to its often stifling policies and conventions, among them *Clash\$war* (Rob Williams, 2002-2004), *Watchmen* (Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, 1986), *The American* (Mark Verheiden, 1987-1992), and *Captain Confederacy* (Will Shatterly and Vince Stone, 1986-1992). Cf. Dittmer 2013, 160-180.

and “delivers on the desire for a Manichean world of clarity and moral certainty. Action and righteous violence are made possible by a clarified world where there are recognizably othered enemies and adversaries” (Ó’Tuathail 2005, 370). When positions are not defined in univocal terms, when the lines between “us” and “them” are not clear-cut, this desire turns into a “kind of cathartic violence” (Dittmer 2013, 13) that seeks to appease any sense of moral relativism.

Insofar as superheroes can be understood as “a discourse that can be called on by politicians, pundits, and everyday people to make sense of the world around us and our role in it” (Ibid., 183-184), the nationalist superhero can be read as a proxy for the US geopolitical identity. As I will argue later in the analysis of the Bush administration discourse after 9/11, the nationalist superhero was invoked because it could help to relay in clear terms the kind of geopolitical rhetoric that it sustains: a “simplistic moralistic framing of its foreign policy with its near limitless capacity to inflict violence on others in a way that simultaneously illustrates the enormity of this power and belittles it” (Ibid., 2).



Number 1 (March 1941). Although the United States has not entered WWII yet, the cover features Captain America punching Hitler in the face, a very apt supervillainous figure according to the creators.



Volume 1, Number 13 (April 1942). The attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese has already taken place (December 1941) and the cover features Captain America punching an Asian man.



Volume 4, Number 1 (June 2002). The story opens with the 9/11 terrorists in one of the hijacked planes, and the cover alludes to (and seems to call for) war, in a vintage style that is reminiscent of the Second World War.

1.1.5. The presidential myth

Besides the cowboy and the two superhero myths, there is yet another noteworthy heroic figure in the American mythic apparatus, and it is the myth of the president of

the United States. The presidential myth has a long tradition in factual history, with the founding fathers fighting the War of American Independence and figures like Lincoln at the end of the Civil War or Roosevelt during the Second World War portrayed as heroic. The figure, however, is complex, since in order to fit into the monomyth some discrepancies need to be accommodated, especially those dealing with the Presidency as a democratic institution and the validation of vigilante justice and extralegal measures implicit in the monomyth. As noted, the communities that need saving in the national monomyth are typically at the hands of failed or incompetent governments who are unable to protect them (think, for instance, of Batman's Gotham, or of the desolate towns with cowardly or corrupted sheriffs in Westerns), and this justifies the hero's need to resort, on occasion, to extralegal measures outside the democratic system. As Lawrence and Jewett point out, it is indeed paradoxical that in a nation that prides itself as the home of democracy, the monomyth usually depicts "impotent democratic institutions that can be rescued only by extralegal superheroes" (Lawrence & Jewett 2002, 8).

The myth of the presidential hero should not, thus, mislead us into believing that the mythification of the Presidency equals a mythification of democratic institutions. Rather, the presidential myth finds a way to justify the need to resort, on occasion, to unconstitutional or unlawful measures in the defense of the greater good of the nation. President Lincoln is an able embodiment of these contradictions, a "legitimate law breaker" at times of war who revoked *habeas corpus* and civil liberties, arrested newspaper editors, blockaded ports and issued the Emancipation Proclamation on his sole authority as commander-in-chief (Lawrence & Jewett 2002, 131) and is famously quoted as saying, in an interview with the secretary of the Treasury Solomon P. Chase (over an issue that Chase feared might be unconstitutional):

These rebels are violating the Constitution to destroy the Union. I will violate the Constitution, if necessary, to save the Union, and I suspect... that our Constitution is going to have a rough time of it before we get done with this row. (Piatt 1887, 109)

The complexity of the presidential myth has led to a scarce presence of fictional representations until the end of the twentieth century, but it has not prevented what is sometimes perceived as popular fascination with and reverence for the figure of the president of the United States. As Molpeceres points out, perhaps one of the most illustrative representations of the presidential myth can be found in Norman Mailer's *The Presidential Papers* (1963), a collection of essays, interviews, poems, open letters to political figures, and magazine pieces where Mailer explores the idea of the politician

as hero. Mailer's political hero is a savior that feels responsible for humanity and that, rather than fight against the system, saves it, a figure that is best incarnated by the late president Kennedy (Molpeceres 2014, 155). Just as the homesteaders needed a cowboy hero in order to keep moving westwards, so, Mailer argues, does the United States need a heroic president in order to move forward. According to Mailer, Kennedy was

a hero that America needed, a hero central to his time, a man whose personality might suggest contradictions and mysteries which could reach into the alienated circuits of the underground, because only a hero can capture the secret imagination of a people, and so be good for the vitality of the nation. (Mailer 1964, 41-42)

More than any other hero myth, the presidential hero is especially complex as it does not have powers superior to the common man—although this is not inconsistent with other heroic figures, who sometimes have their powers humanized as exceptional qualities—and yet, he must be a larger-than-life figure that can capture the people's imagination.

As Lawrence and Jewett point out, representations of the presidential myth tend to oscillate between the poles of credible representation of democratic leaders and superheroic fictionalizations. For instance, in the last decades of the twentieth century, "fantasies about the president as a violent superhero—a man who can bare-handedly strangle the nation's enemies" (Lawrence & Jewett 2002, 126) start to develop in cultural production. Although the presidential hero had already appeared in film in *Gabriel Over the White House* (1933) and *The Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939), films such as *Independence Day* (1996), *Air Force One* (1997), and *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* (2012) picture the president in extreme situations where humanity is a stake and which justify his resort to violence. There are also fictionalizations that further complicate the myth by portraying not a superhero president, but a villainous one with great powers of manipulation, such as *In the Line of Fire* (1993), *Absolute Power* (1997), and *Wag the Dog* (1997). Perhaps this has to do with the ingrained suspicion of government as an element that limits individual freedom, only a replacement for the tyranny of the king, which starts to be articulated immediately after the end of the war of independence. But it can also be related to the fact that, as Susan Drucker and Robert Cathcart (1994) observe, "the political hero, particularly on the order of 'Presidential hero,' is virtually impossible in the wake of post Watergate-Iranganate media scrutiny and with a public that, in opinion polls, reveals a preference for image and personality over action and courage" (Drucker & Cathcart 1994, 3). It might be part of the appeal that then-

presidential candidate Trump had among voters, the promise that an outsider to the political system could “drain the swamp” of a corrupt and bureaucratic Washington.

At the other end of the pole, there is a fairly recent trend of screen representations of presidential figures that attempt to make them more humane and conflicted, to show them as individuals torn between the choices and decisions they have to make in the course of events. I am referring, for instance, to television series like NBC’s *The West Wing* (1999-2006) and HBO’s *John Adams* (2008), and to films like Oliver Stone’s *JFK* (1991), Jay Roach’s *All the Way* about president Lyndon Johnson (2016), Steven Spielberg’s *Lincoln* (2012), or even Pablo Larraín’s *Jackie* (2016), most of them post-9/11, as can be seen. The latter is especially interesting because it focuses on the three days after the assassination of president Kennedy and on how Jackie Kennedy arranged an interview with a journalist for *LIFE* magazine, Theodor White, which she meticulously stage-managed in order to launch the embellishing myth of the Kennedy administration as the Camelot era, “where goodness reigns supreme” according to the Broadway musical, and which Jackie rephrases as “for one brief shining moment there was Camelot—and it will never be that way again” (White 1963, n.p.; emphasis in the original).⁴² Jackie’s idyllic portrayal of the brief Kennedy administration in mythological terms disavowed the many frustrations and challenges that the presidency had faced, such as a volatile civil rights scene, the flagrant racial inequality, the disastrous outcome of the Bay of Pigs (1961) and the rising tensions of the Cold War, among others.

Regardless of the complexities that any stable characterization of the president as myth entails, what I want to underscore is that the figure of the president of the United States is, in and of itself, a figure that feeds from “the sanctity, history and rituals associated with the institution” of the presidency (Ó’Tuathail & Agnew 1992, 195) and that, as such, it has a special power to evoke certain reactions, feelings, and opinions in a given situation. In the wake of 9/11, the portrayal of president Bush in heroic terms certainly fed from the power of evocation that the presidency has—and by this I mean not only the quasi-mythical notion of the president of the United States as “the most powerful person in the world,” but also the “fatherly” role that, in a sense, any presidency has, especially when a nation faces tragedy. Lawrence and Jewett also ascribe it to a post-9/11 trend to reinterpret ordinary citizens—firefighters, police officers, rescue workers, volunteers—as heroes, and, furthermore, they suggest that this trend may contribute to “the development of healthy democratic myths” (Lawrence & Jewett 2002, 362).

⁴² Of course, the Kennedy administration has its many detractors, but the myth of Kennedy as the slain prince in a reign of beauty and goodness—initiated by Jackie—retains its hold in popular culture. Seymour Hersh devotes *The Dark Side of Camelot* (1997) to dismantling the myth, while Don DeLillo’s *Libra* (1988) deconstructs the official version of Oswald as the lone wolf responsible for the assassination and the idea that Kennedy’s death represented a loss of innocence, the latter trope also questioned by Christopher Hitchens, Noam Chomsky, and Gore Vidal in several interviews and essays.

It is my view that these authors' proposition is overly hopeful and optimistic, and may be partly explained by a lack of emotional distance due to the publication date of their study (2002), too soon after September 11. In my estimation, the reinterpretation of ordinary citizens as heroes—which was, indeed, profuse, oversensitive, and hyperbolic—responds not only to the generic convention of the citizen-turned-hero and current processes of celebrification, but is also, and more importantly, a manifestation of the deep imbrication of the monomythic cosmovision in American culture that has made “hero” be a recurrent term in American daily usage. In other words, the widespread labelling of citizens as heroes after 9/11 is, in my view, not a shift in the monomyth but one of its manifestations. It is because the heroic myth is central to American culture that people are consistently called heroes for actions nowhere as remarkable as those carried out by rescue workers on 11 September 2001 and the days that followed.

As Teresa Fernández Ulloa (2003) notes, the power of a given myth lies in its capacity to offer an unambiguous vision of the world, where the categories of good and evil are clearly defined, and for this to happen there has to be an organization charged with promoting and preserving the myth and the ideals derived from it (Fernández Ulloa 2003, n.p.). Rather than help in developing democratic myths, the framing of the narratives of 9/11 and the War on Terror within the frameworks provided by the common mythic apparatus reinforced the role of the United States as a vigilante hero in the world arena, with citizens cast alternatively as innocent victims and as heroic survivors, whose patriotic duty also included, let us not forget, shopping.⁴³ The next section is an exploration of how the Bush administration resorted to the evocation of the hero myths described above in order to contain and manage the crisis: president Bush will alternatively enact the presidential hero who can comfort and single-handedly save the nation, the cowboy hero who can reestablish justice in a

⁴³ The expression “go shop” became widespread in political and social commentary after several public figures in the Bush administration delivered messages in that regard. The most notable of these, perhaps, was then-mayor of New York City Rudy Giuliani’s advice to New Yorkers on 12 September 2001: “The advice that I would give to people today, if they’re home from work, is to go about a normal day, take the day as an opportunity to go shopping, be with your children, do things, get out, don’t feel locked in” (ABC News, “Giuliani, Go Shopping”). The Bush administration insisted in subsequent days that American citizens could help by reactivating the economy, and somehow framed the flow of capital as a patriotic duty and as a way of fighting terrorism on the home front. One of many instances when this message was conveyed was then-president Bush’s address to airline employees at O’Hare airport on 27 September 2001, where Bush stated that “America knows that, and we appreciate—we appreciate your steadfast willingness to fight terror in your own way. You stand against terror by flying the airplanes, and by maintaining them. You stand against terror by loading a bag or serving a passenger. And by doing so, you’re expressing a firm national commitment that’s so important, that we will not surrender our freedom to travel; that we will not surrender our freedoms in America; [...]. And one of the great goals of this nation’s war is to restore public confidence in the airline industry. It’s to tell the traveling public: Get on board. Do your business around the country. Fly and enjoy America’s great destination spots. Get down to Disney World in Florida. Take your families and enjoy life, the way we want it to be enjoyed. And we’ve got a role, the government’s got a role. Not only do you have a role to play, which you’re playing in such fine fashion, but the government has a role to play, as well. We’ve got a significant responsibility to deal with this emergency in a strong and bold way. And we are doing so” (Bush 2001, “Airline Employees,” n.p.).

world arena that has turned lawless, and the nationalist superhero who can rid the world of villainous evil-doers. The mythic, official interpretation of September 11 begins when the Bush administration divorces the attacks from any geopolitical, factual causes and affirms that these have been committed against the United States because it is “the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world” (Bush 2001, “Attack on America,” n.p.), and depicts “Osama bin Laden and his supporters as committed to dismantling the cherished freedoms of the American people” (DiMaggio 2015, 18).

1.2. The heroic as an everyday occurrence

As noted previously, the narrative of 9/11 and the War on Terror as framed by the Bush administration, by a large sector of the mainstream media, and by many products of popular culture relied heavily on the evocation of certain themes deeply engrained in the national ethos that are reflected quite straightforwardly in the national monomyth that I have described in the first sections of this chapter. While the mythic structure underlying the official narrative placed remarkable emphasis on heroic redemption, it has to be conceded also that the term “hero” is very common in American usage—somewhat akin to being a sports or media celebrity nowadays—, and that this might in part explain how “hero” became the natural way to refer to firefighters, police officers and ordinary citizens involved in rescue operations on September 11 and after. In other words, what the following section seeks to explore is how, besides the undeniable cultural significance of the notion of heroism in the American cosmovision, “hero” is such a common term in American public discourse that its occurrences might not always be derived from the mythic dimension that I have been arguing so far. For instance, saying that someone is a “hero” nowadays might in fact be a simple expression of admiration or even be confused with more diffuse notions of celebrity. Nevertheless, I will seek to show how, in the context of the 9/11 aftermath, even this widespread and everyday interpretation of the term “hero” served to reinforce and sustain the mythic underpinnings of the national narrative.

If we analyze the notion of “hero” in its original sense in Greek Classicism, it used to designate “a mortal who had done something so far beyond the normal scope of human experience that he left an immortal memory behind him when he died, and thus received worship like that due the gods” (LaBarge 2000, n.p.). In this understanding, morality is not necessarily involved, as “heroes were not necessarily good, but they were always extraordinary; to be a hero was to expand people’s sense of what was possible for a human being” (Ibid.). For instance, Oedipus and Medea were also considered heroes and received divine worship. As Scott LaBarge notes, today “it is much harder to detach the concept of heroism from morality; we only call heroes

those whom we admire and wish to emulate” (Ibid.). In a sense, the current concept of heroism serves to “define the limits of our aspirations” (Ibid.), the individuals in sports, entertainment, politics or ordinary life that display qualities that society considers worth celebrating and emulating.

And yet, current understandings of what constitutes the “heroic” can get increasingly confused with definitions of “celebrity,” understood as a person that is famous or well-known for a variety of reasons that, nowadays, may well range from noteworthy actions to trivial scandals. In their study of the connection between heroism, celebrity status, and media practices—that is, the heroic from a communication studies perspective, as opposed to anthropological, historical or literary approaches—Drucker and Cathcart verify the emergence of an ongoing process of celebrification in American culture which they attribute to current communication practices. Because the nature and the function of the hero in society are communication phenomenons, they argue that the notion of hero is rapidly changing in today’s digital age, resulting in the existence of “a plethora of celebrities and a dearth of traditional heroes” (Drucker & Cathcart 1994, 1) that has disrupted the traditional links between the hero and the community. This is where the definition of “hero” gets complicated, given that a “person who chooses Martin Luther King or Susan B. Anthony as a hero is going to have a very different sense of what human excellence involves than someone who chooses, say, Paris Hilton, or the rapper 50 Cent” (LaBarge 2000, n.p.). The ideals to which a society or the different individuals in that society aspire to differ greatly, and the media collaborates to a large extent in making citizens confuse heroism with celebrity. In any case, what I want to underscore is the communicative power that the figure of the “everyday hero” has, and how the elevation of an ordinary citizen to hero serves to put across a given set of values or ideals that, granted, may vary greatly in ordinary circumstances, but that in the context of a tragic event with national implications, may serve to evoke a set of values that are perceived as community-binding—a reaction that may well correspond to Smelser’s description of the effects of cultural trauma.

As Slotkin suggests, myths may be used in two ways, “either deliberately, in an effort to make propaganda for [a] cause, or unconsciously, under the compelling association of perceived event and inherited mythology” (Slotkin 2000, 8). Although Slotkin’s categorization seems clear-cut, I believe it is hard to determine when a myth is exclusively the product of a political and/or commercial maneuver deployed with a persuasive aim⁴⁴ and when it is the product of a feeling widely shared by the public; in

⁴⁴ Molpeceres stresses the importance of “persuasive myths” in political discourse as follows: “La elección de un mito en un discurso político es clave para atraer la aceptación del electorado, ya que todo entramado mítico tiene un componente ideológico, y en el caso del discurso político hablamos de la ideología de un grupo, de un partido, de una nación, y de la creación ideológica de su identidad. Si el mito elegido es el adecuado, si encaja con el marco ideológico e interpretativo de la audiencia, las propuestas del político, sus ideas y su imagen parecerán legítimas y serán aceptadas” (Molpeceres 2014, 151).

most cases the two circumstances are intertwined. As Molpeceres argues, sometimes what the use of certain themes, metaphors, and ideas actually reveals is the existence of an underlying mythic cosmovision (Molpeceres 2014, 151). The following section glosses over some government and media instances—some unrelated to 9/11—where the use of the term “hero” to refer to ordinary citizens may be considered the product of an inherited cultural cosmovision rather than a politically-motivated decision, others where the existence or not of a persuasive aim cannot be clearly determined and, finally, one instance of hero-building unquestionably moved by political motivations. Nonetheless, even in this latter case, I argue that what makes the hero story effective is an underlying cosmovision centered on the notion of heroism; as Faludi contends, hero-worship is “a hallmark feature of American public life” (Faludi 2007a, n.p.) and it has become so natural as to sometimes divest the term “hero” of any extraordinary qualities, making it more apt to refer to people whose actions are deemed inspirational or newsworthy.

After the World Trade Center bombing of 1993 an ad campaign was launched by the Department of State asking for civil collaboration in providing relevant information on the whereabouts of one of the missing bombers, Ramzi Ahmed Yousef. The first ad showed an image from the day featuring a woman on the verge of collapse while she is aided by police officers. As a side note, I cannot help but wonder at the significance of the victim pictured being a woman—even if the police officer on the left is also a woman and even if the image is a real image of that day. The second ad was a reward poster for information concerning the missing bomber. The number to call on both these posters is 1-800-HEROES, a semantic choice that is not only easy to remember but that in very simple terms conveys a very powerful idea: that you can be a hero just by doing your civic duty, that is, collaborating with the authorities.



Ad campaign for civil collaboration after the World Trade Center bombing of 1993. In both cases, the number to call is 1-800-HEROES. Photo credit (left): Joe Tabacca, AP. Source: Department of State.

A very similar notion of heroism lies behind the CNN Heroes initiative, launched in 2006, in which citizens can nominate ordinary people as the CNN Hero of the Year. The aim of the initiative is to make visible “ordinary people changing the world” and to reward their “extraordinary efforts to improve the lives of others” (CNN Heroes, n.p.). Most nominees are people who run nonprofit organizations with diverse goals, such as teaching children how to swim, counseling teenage mothers in Colombia, providing support, education and housing to the children of incarcerated parents in Nepal, providing free education for girls in Afghanistan, finding homes for senior dogs, and so on (Ibid.). While in most cases the efforts that these nominees make are indeed extraordinary, this use of the term “hero” corresponds not to a mythological understanding of the term but is used to designate a selfless citizen with outstanding commitment to social/humanitarian causes. The same principle underlies the different “Young Heroes” awards sponsored by numerous institutions around the country. In order to mark the tenth anniversary of the CNN initiative in 2016, the program announced a “CNN SuperHero,” a former CNN Hero of the Year “whose outstanding work continues to best embody the spirit of the CNN Heroes campaign” (Ibid.). Here, the use of the term “superhero” clearly departs from its traditional understanding in American comics culture and seems to signify, merely, the “best” among these everyday heroes. In short, the CNN initiative points at how in everyday American usage the term “hero” has come to signify a person whose extraordinary work is inspirational to others. And this use is extremely common.

Another interesting case where the term “hero” takes on a slightly divergent semantic route is the True American Heroes Act, passed in 2003 by Congress and designed “[t]o posthumously award congressional gold medals to government workers and others who responded to the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon *and perished* and to people aboard United Airlines Flight 93 who helped resist the hijackers and caused the plane to crash, to require the Secretary of the Treasury to mint coins in commemoration of the Spirit of America, recognizing the tragic events of September 11, 2001” (True American Heroes Act; emphasis added).⁴⁵ What I find significant is that in this case it is the vulnerability of those addressed by the law—the mortal victims—that makes them qualify as heroes. Rescue workers who performed the same courageous acts but did not pay the ultimate price (even if they may be now permanently disabled) are not addressed by this law, nor are the passengers of United

⁴⁵ It is also interesting to note how the law condones the widespread association of the United States and American institutions with freedom and democracy. Section 102.a.5 states: “The effort to resist the hijackers aboard United Airlines Flight 93 appears to have caused the plane to crash prematurely, potentially saving hundreds or thousands of lives and preventing the destruction of the White House, the Capitol, or another important symbol of freedom and democracy” (True American Heroes Act, 102.a.5; emphasis added).

93 who did perish but did not participate in the resistance.⁴⁶ In this understanding of hero, bravery and commitment require also extraordinary sacrifice.

Sometimes the widespread use of the term “hero” to refer to ordinary citizens behaving bravely escalates into media stories as said media recognize their potential. If analyzed from a communication studies perspective, we might also find an explanation for the current conflation between hero and ordinary citizen; as Drucker and Cathcart suggest, “[w]hat constitutes the heroic and who becomes the hero is a function of cultural priorities and values, and, most significantly, is related to the communication medium utilized for presenting and preserving information about heroes” (Drucker & Cathcart 1994, 2). The role of the media in the building and dissemination of the hero myth in today’s digital age turns increasingly to ordinary people as heroic figures, and many of these heroic stories would never become so if the media did not dedicate its undivided attention to narrating and disseminating them.

For instance, during the Boston Marathon bombing of 2013, among the many horrific images of maimed bodies and blood-stained streets, one image became iconic: that of Carlos Arredondo running alongside a wheelchair with a maimed victim on it. Arredondo became undisputedly a hero in the public eye and was referred to as such in news coverage.⁴⁷ Several factors contributed, in my view, to Arredondo’s image gaining the spotlight: on the one hand, the power of the image showing the horror in the victim’s pale face; on the other, no doubt, Arredondo’s selflessness, the fierce look of determination in his face, and, I might suggest, the cowboy hat on his head (which became his trademark signature, if it wasn’t so before). The image of Arredondo as a cowboy-hero became iconic because it evoked, in just one frame, such a heroic narrative: a hero who comes to the rescue in the midst of chaos and horror. Later, the life story of Arredondo himself would provide ample material to fill in another narrative: it was the story of an American citizen of Costa Rican origins that seemed custom-built as the embodiment of the American dream, a success story coming true

⁴⁶ As difficult as it seems to establish this information with absolute certainty, it was determined by the phone calls passengers had with their loved ones and by the conversations registered by the cockpit voice recorder, which also caught the famous “Let’s roll” by passenger Todd Beamer before storming the cockpit. The events have been reconstructed in several books, such as *Among the Heroes: United Flight 93 and the Passengers and Crew Who Fought Back* by Jere Longman (2003), *The Eleventh Day* by Anthony Summers and Robbyn Swan (2011), and *Flight 93: The Story, the Aftermath, and the Legacy of American Courage on 9/11* by Tom McMillan (2015). An investigation by the FBI based on analysis of the recordings from the cockpit and disclosed in Congressional hearings in 2003 disputed the commonly-held account that it was the passengers who crashed the plane, and concluded that while the passengers managed to get into the cockpit, they never took control of the plane from the hijackers. Families of the victims contest the FBI investigation.

⁴⁷ A Google search of the terms “carlos arredondo + hero” turns 91,000 hits. Most news coverage featuring Arredondo refers to him as the “Boston Marathon hero,” “the hero in the cowboy hat,” and “the man in the cowboy hat.”

after much hardship.⁴⁸ Arredondo has rejected the title of hero claiming that he was just an ordinary person trying to help another human being in a terrible situation, by pure instinct (ABC News 2014), but his status as hero and pop icon is confirmed, and people have been seen dressed as Arredondo (with the cowboy hat and the “Boston Strong” T-shirt) at the Boston Comic Convention 2014 (Khvan 2014, n.p.).



Carlos Arredondo helping Jeff Bauman during the Boston Marathon bombing of 2013. Photo credit: Charles Krupa, AP.



Carlos Arredondo, activist. Photo credit: Ashley Falucci.

The case of Carlos Arredondo contrasts with another case of hero-building that, in this case, turned awry or, rather, a case where the hero narrative and its conventions were put to the test. During the Cleveland abductions case of May 2013, when three abducted girls were rescued after living locked up in a derelict house for over a decade, the media coverage followed the normal causeways and soon found a hero: The man who rescued them was Charles Ramsey, a neighbor who, in his own words, was “eating his Mc Donald’s” when he heard the screams of one of the girls (Amanda Berry) from inside the house and ran to her aid. The construction of Ramsey, a working-class African American, as a national hero would soon demand an extra effort on the part of the media, already suggested by Ramsey’s declaration on live television that he knew “something was wrong when a little, pretty white girl ran into a black

⁴⁸ Arredondo’s tragic story includes the death of two sons: His eldest, Alex (age 20), was killed in 2004 in a sniper attack in Iraq while serving with the US Marines, while his youngest, Brian (age 24), who had been struggling with depression since his brother’s death and was due in court for brushes with the law, committed suicide in 2011 two days before he was summoned. When the US Marines came to Arredondo’s home in Florida to inform him of Alex’s death, Arredondo took a hammer, gasoline, and a torch, and destroyed the Marines’ van. He suffered second- and third-degree burns in 26% of his body, had to be hospitalized, and attended his son’s funeral on a stretcher. He then joined the now defunct organization Gold Star Families for Peace and became a peace activist, with speaking engagements all around the country, speaking to parents about his personal tragedy and the methods recruiters use to enlist youth. On 12 December 2006, Arredondo became a US citizen, as he became eligible for citizenship under a 2004 bill which allows parents of those killed in action to become legal immigrants (Levin 2012). In 2015 Arredondo launched the Arredondo Family Foundation (www.arredondofoundation.org) to help military families that have lost relatives to suicide or otherwise. For more details on Arredondo’s story, see Michael Mayo’s piece for the *Sun Sentinel* “Fame in a Flash” <http://interactive.sun-sentinel.com/bostoncarlos/>.

man's arms" (Levs, Gast & Almasy 2013, n.p.). That was, for Ramsey, a "dead giveaway" that something was not right.

Ramsey became a media sensation with numerous interviews and even a call by president Obama's office, with most media outlets referring to him as "the hero neighbor." But as the media started digging into Ramsey's past, it soon found and exposed Ramsey's criminal record for domestic violence and some stints in jail,⁴⁹ and immediately reported on the story of a fellow neighbor, the Dominican Angel Cordero, who claimed that Ramsey was a fake hero as it had been he who had, in point of fact, burst the door open for Amanda Berry to come out (while he did admit that Ramsey was also at the scene). The public statements made by the too-vocal Ramsey after this point did not help in building his case as hero. For instance, in an interview with Snoop Dog he asked the rapper if he would keep his back while he beat Cordero up: "Hey...if you could just watch my back while I beat the fuck out this nigga when I get back to Cleveland. I think it'd look real good if Snoop watched me beat this so called 'Hero' up" (Allard 2013, n.p.). He also unabashedly declared that he would like to get the abductor pregnant five times and punch him until he miscarried (what the abductor did to one of the victims, Michelle Knight). As a result, the uplifting story of an inspirational "hero neighbor" who could be a role model for the community became unsustainable for the media to uphold, and the hero story was dropped within days. If Ramsey was referred to as a hero at all, it was in between inverted commas. Nonetheless, in the blogosphere Ramsey remained a pop icon, with a Facebook fan page, memes, T-shirts, and even an auto-tune on YouTube that went viral ("Dead Giveaway!").



Charles Ramsey, hero neighbor, interviewed by Anderson Cooper. Source: CNN.

One of the most interesting discussions of Ramsey's hero status took place in the show *Tell Me More* on National Public Radio (NPR) on 10 May 2013, where a panel

⁴⁹ *The Smoking Gun* broke the story on 8 May 2013. <http://www.thesmokinggun.com/documents/cleveland-hero-charles-ramsey-8702415>

discussion was held on whether Ramsey's criminal record was relevant or not to his by-now-dubious hero status ("Does It Matter That 'Hero' Charles Ramsey Has A Criminal Past?"). The participants mostly agreed that Ramsey's actions were not exceptional, as he did what every other neighbor would have done in similar circumstances—actions that, I argue, would have been enough to grant any other individual instant hero status—, and that what rendered him an internet star was his "gregariousness" and his vocal way of telling the story. One of the commentators, cultural critic Jimi Izrael, even pointed out that his celebrity status owed much to the fact that "this is a guy from the side of the tracks that most people watching him on the news would cross the street to avoid. And this was an opportunity to kind of look and marvel at this cultural attaché from the dark side" (NPR 2013, n.p.). But for Neil Minkoff, speaking on the same show, Ramsey had become a celebrity because his persona gave the chance "of focusing on the case without focusing on the horror" (Ibid.). Minkoff contended that the buzz around Ramsey was "the ultimate feel-good distraction," a way of deflecting attention from the real issue:

So if we focus on, is he a hero or isn't he a hero, or is he a great interview or is he kind of out there, we don't need to pay attention to what happened in this horrific basement in conditions we can't possibly imagine that shouldn't be happening next door to anybody, we'll just focus on the sideshow. (Ibid.)

Minkoff certainly had a point, and I would also underscore that the "sideshow" distracted the public not only from the horror but also from the implications that could be derived from Ramsey's spontaneous and crude statement about the nature of interracial relations in the history of the United States.⁵⁰ What Charles Ramsey's case illustrates is that it is not the elements in the story nor the acts that are performed therein (i.e. redemption from a horrific situation) that renders it hero-building material, but whether the potential hero has the qualities that conform to our normative understanding (and desire) of what constitutes a hero.

The last case I want to address, however, exceeds this everyday usage and involves the staging of "highly embellished heroic dramas" (Faludi 2011), a more mythical understanding of heroism as a powerful narrative that, by appealing to a shared mythic consciousness, can be used for political gain, something that, as Rogin, Faludi

⁵⁰ For comments on Ramsey's statement on racism, see "Heroes and Colorism in America: Charles Ramsey Goes Viral" by Bella Vida Letty in *Latino Rebels*, posted 9 May 2013. http://www.latinorebels.com/2013/05/09/heroes-and-colorism-in-america-charles-ramsey-goes-viral/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=heroes-and-colorism-in-america-charles-ramsey-goes-viral

and many others have noted, is a recurrent strategy in American political culture. I will refer briefly to the Jessica Lynch case of 2003, as it illustrates in clear terms how those who manipulate and amplify heroic stories are aware of the myths at play, especially when they are related to military service and war stories in general.

In April 2003, the capture of Private Jessica Lynch by Iraqi militias after an ambush and her subsequent rescue nine days later by American Special Forces turned her into a Rambo-like all-American heroine, with the media indulging in headlines such as “She Was Fighting to the Death” (*The Washington Post*) and “Lynch Kept Firing Until She Ran Out of Ammo” (*Pittsburg Post-Gazette*). Media reports held that Lynch “fought fiercely and shot several enemy soldiers after Iraqi forces ambushed the Army’s 507th Ordnance Maintenance Company, firing her weapon until she ran out of ammunition” (Schmidt & Loeb 2003, n.p.). The story of the 19-year-old private, who had been kept a prisoner in an enemy-held hospital, kept media interest for weeks during April 2003, at a time when the news arriving from Iraq were, otherwise, mostly negative for US troops.⁵¹ According to the Pentagon, “Lynch had stab and bullet wounds, and [...] had been slapped about on her hospital bed and interrogated” and it was only thanks to an Iraqi lawyer, Mohammed Odeh al-Rehaief, that the American command learnt of Lynch’s whereabouts (Kampfner 2003, n.p.). The story fed the public’s taste for heroic narratives and soon she became a cult hero, with internet auction sites listing “at least 10 Jessica Lynch items, ranging from an oil painting with an opening bid of \$200 to a \$5 ‘America Loves Jessica Lynch’ fridge magnet” (Kampfner 2003, n.p.). As Daphne Eviatar argues, “[t]he Pentagon was selling a patriotic tale [and] it found many eager buyers” (Eviatar 2003, n.p.).

⁵¹ Robin Andersen’s 2007 article “‘Mission Accomplished,’ Four Years Later” crudely exposes the way the American media attempted to boost morale once the American casualties began to flow: “On the afternoon of March 23, 2003, the Arab-language TV network Al Jazeera aired video footage of the bloodied bodies of dead American soldiers sprawled carelessly on a slab floor. With the capture and killing of Americans, the war had suddenly become a problem. Almost overnight, the tone of media coverage flipped from what CNN’s Aaron Brown admitted was a ‘gee whiz’ attitude to a tempered anxiety about ‘another messy, frustrating combat situation.’ By Tuesday, March 24th, the *New York Times* noted, ‘An image of awesome American firepower had been replaced by pictures of vulnerability.’ To bolster morale, Fox News featured ‘public diplomacy’ veteran Oliver North, embedded with the Marines in the Iraqi desert. Sean Hannity told North on April 1, 2003, ‘There’s a lot of negative reporting out there Ollie.’ But the Marines have gone ‘so far, so fast, with so few casualties, all the munitions you need, all the supplies you ever wanted, all the gasoline. When people hear it from you, because you’re there, it means more than anything I can tell them.’ As Hannity spewed positive spin, the Pentagon Combat Camera crew prepared for the rescue of Jessica Lynch” (Andersen 2007, n.p.).



Special Operations forces take Jessica Lynch, on a stretcher, from Saddam Hussein Hospital in Nasiriyah, Iraq, to the safety of a Black Hawk helicopter.

‘She Was Fighting to the Death’

Details Emerging of W. Va. Soldier’s Capture and Rescue

By SUSAN SCHMIDT and VERNON LOEB
Washington Post Staff Writers

Pfc. Jessica Lynch, rescued Tuesday from an Iraqi hospital, fought fiercely and shot several enemy soldiers after Iraqi forces ambushed the Army’s 507th Ordnance Maintenance Company, firing her weapon until she ran out of ammunition, U.S. officials said yesterday.

Lynch, a 19-year-old supply clerk, continued firing at the Iraqis even after she sustained multiple gunshot wounds and watched several other soldiers in her unit die around her in fighting March 23, one official said. The ambush took place after a 507th convoy, supporting the advancing 3rd Infantry Division, took a wrong turn near the southern city of Nasiriyah.

“She was fighting to the death,” the official said. “She did not want to be taken alive.”

Lynch was also stabbed when Iraqi forces closed in on her position, the official said, noting that initial intelligence reports indicated that she had been stabbed to death. No official gave any indication yesterday, however, that Lynch’s wounds had been life-threatening.

Several officials cautioned that the precise sequence of events is still being determined, and that further information will emerge as Lynch is debriefed. Reports thus far are based on battlefield intelligence, they said, which comes from monitored communications and from Iraqi sources in Nasiriyah whose reliability has yet to be assessed. Pentagon officials said they had heard “rumors” of Lynch’s heroics but had no confirmation.

■ Lynch’s call answers prayers. | Page A36

See RESCUE, A36. Col. 1

The original article by Schmidt and Loeb in The Washington Post, the one that broke the story in 2003.

The hero narrative was soon revealed to be a fiction when British forces working on the ground, who feared for their own safety as a consequence of American actions and the unreliability of the information shared with them, decided to make public their own version of the facts to a BBC reporter. The story broke in *The Guardian* on 15 May 2003, where the Jessica Lynch case was called “one of the most stunning pieces of news management yet conceived” (Kampfner 2003, n.p.). According to the version relayed to reporter John Kampfner, Jessica Lynch had been injured in a road accident when her patrol took a wrong turn, then the patrol was ambushed and, later, due to her injuries, Lynch had been left by the Iraqi militia in a local hospital. The hospital was, indeed, full of Iraqi combatants. However, the need for a rescue was questionable. As Kampfner reports, just two days before the Americans stormed into the hospital, the doctor that was treating Lynch had attempted to deliver her to the American troops, and he “put her in an ambulance and instructed the driver to go to the American checkpoint. When [the driver] was approaching it, the Americans opened fire” (Kampfner 2003, n.p.) and the driver was forced to return to the hospital with Lynch still in it. Two days later, when all Iraqi combatants had already left the hospital (an information that Americans had, according to Kampfner’s report), the American rescue took place. Everything was taped by the American troops, who would later deliver an edited copy of the rescue to the press. As one Iraqi doctor recalled, “[i]t was like a Hollywood film. They cried, ‘Go, go, go,’ with guns and blanks and the sound of explosions. They made a show—an action movie like Sylvester Stallone or Jackie Chan, with jumping and shouting, breaking down doors” (qtd. in Kampfner 2003, n.p.), restraining doctors and handcuffing a patient to a bed even if there was no resistance or enemy fire. The operation had all the elements of a Hollywood action movie and was derided by some as “the most daring and macho made-for-TV moment of the war by elite teams of hunky US Army Rangers and US Navy SEALs” (Morford 2003, n.p.). The rescue also had epic appeals to patriotism that Lynch herself described at a

Congressional hearing: “a soldier came into my room, he tore the American flag from his uniform and pressed into my hand, and he told me, ‘We’re American soldiers, and we’re here to take you home.’ As I held his hand, I told him, ‘Yes, I’m an American soldier, too’” (Lynch 2007, n.p.).

On returning home Lynch was upset at the use that the US Military was making of her war experience and repeatedly voiced her discomfort in interviews. She admitted that during the ambush she hadn’t fired “a single shot” as her rifle had got jammed in the chaos, and that she had passed out for three hours and woken in a hospital bed. Interviewed by Diane Swayer in November 2003, she stated: “I did not shoot, not a round, nothing. [...] I went down praying to my knees. And that’s the last I remember” (ABC News 2003, n.p.). The doctor that had treated Lynch at the Iraqi hospital confirmed that she had not been involved in shooting of any kind: “I examined her, I saw she had a broken arm, a broken thigh and a dislocated ankle. Then I did another examination. There was no [sign of] shooting, no bullet inside her body, no stab wound—only RTA, road traffic accident [...]. They want to distort the picture. I don’t know why they think there is some benefit in saying she has a bullet injury” (qtd. in Kampfner 2003, n.p.).⁵² Lynch further declared: “They used me to symbolize all this stuff. It’s wrong. I don’t know why they filmed [my rescue] or why they say these things” (ABC News 2003, n.p.). Four years later, during the hearings conducted by the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform in Washington, she still expressed confusion at the Army’s manipulation of her case: “I am still confused as to why they chose to lie and tried to make me a legend when the real heroics of my fellow soldiers that day were, in fact, legendary” (Lynch 2007, n.p.).

One way of looking at it is that the manipulation of the Jessica Lynch story provided the US Military and the Pentagon with the opportunity of influencing public opinion about the war in Iraq in a positive way, at a time when attention needed to be diverted from the rising death toll of American soldiers and the reigning chaos only a month into the war.⁵³ Critics have also noted how the media was biased in favor of Lynch to the detriment of fellow female soldiers who were also ambushed in the same attack—Shoshana Johnson and Lori Piestewa, with Piestewa being killed and Johnson taken prisoner. Lynch was young, blonde, and white, while Johnson was black and Piestewa a Hopi, and both single mothers. The media usage of their stories suggests that they

⁵² For more information on how the story was made up, see Sharockman 2014 and Chinni’s chronology and analysis of the case for the Pew Research Center (2003).

⁵³ The war against Iraq—officially named Operation Iraqi Freedom—was launched by an American-led coalition on 20 March 2003. It was justified on the grounds of Iraq’s delay in complying with UN Resolution 678 regarding WMDs inspections. The United Nations did not see any violation to the cited Resolution, recommended that Iraq should be given more time, and strongly opposed the invasion. By April 2003, and despite its “shock and awe” tactics and the fall of Baghdad on 9 April 2003, the country was experiencing massive civil disorder and increased crime, with militias looting and getting hold of large amounts of ammunition.

believed audiences would more readily identify with the mainstream image Lynch conveyed.

In Edward Helmore's view, the Jessica Lynch story can be read as "a metaphor not for the heroism of pretty young Americans captured by a devilish foreign enemy, but for the confusion that has marked Bush's Operation Iraqi Freedom from the start" (Helmore 2003, n.p.). The same confusion that caused the death by friendly fire of Corporal Pat Tillman in 2004, and which the US Army covered up and also turned into a hero narrative. The Army initially claimed that Tillman's death was the product of "devastating enemy fire" and gagged fellow servicemen who had witnessed Tillman's death. They, thus, withheld the truth for weeks after Tillman's nationally televised memorial service, during which he was lauded as a war hero for dying while engaging the enemy.⁵⁴ As Andersen reflects, "[i]nstead of dignifying Patrick's life with the truth about what happened, the Army fabricated a hero myth, claiming he was killed by enemy gunfire as he led his team to help another group of ambushed soldiers. They even went so far as to award him a Silver Star for battlefield valor" (Andersen 2007, n.p.).



The debunking of a myth and the creation of a new one: Jessica Lynch gives her version of the facts in an AP report by Erin McClam in 2003, and Pat Tillman is hailed as a "true hero" by the Daily News in 2004. Note how Tillman was already labelled a "hero" as a football player.

⁵⁴ Tillman's stature as hero was augmented by the fact that he was a football player who walked away from a huge contract with the NFL's Arizona Cardinals in order to enlist in the US Army. According to the investigation by the US Army Criminal Investigation Command (CID) released on 19 March 2007, Tillman was killed by his own platoon; as a consequence of a vehicle breaking down, the platoon had split into two groups, and one group of soldiers fired upon the other in confusion after nearby gunfire was mistakenly believed to be from enemy combatants. The manipulation of the story began with members of Tillman's unit, who violated protocol with the aim of hiding what had really happened, and was followed by extensive coverup by the military command in an effort to withhold information from Tillman's family. According to Tillman's parents, "[a]fter it happened, all the people in positions of authority went out of their way to script this. They purposely interfered with the investigation; they covered it up. I think they thought they could control it, and they realized that their recruiting efforts were going to go to hell in a handbasket [sic.] if the truth about his death got out. They blew up their poster boy" (qtd. in White 2005, n.p.). On 4 March 2006, the US Defense Department Inspector General directed the Army to open a criminal investigation of Tillman's death with the aim of determining whether Tillman's death was the result of negligent homicide. For further reading on the inconsistencies between the facts of the Lynch and Tillman stories and the amplification by the Bush administration and the American media, see Helmore 2003; Tran 2007; Farsetta 2007; Greenwald 2007; Vizcarrondo 2010.

As Andersen notes, Lynch and Tillman were real soldiers “who were transformed by the Pentagon image machine into advertisements for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan” (Andersen 2007, n.p.), advertisements that the media did not question but helped to disseminate, and I am fully cognizant that these are not isolated instances as much of the war effort involves propaganda on the domestic front. Even the revelation that Lynch’s rescue was delayed for a day for publicity purposes, is not surprising.⁵⁵ What I find relevant in these stories—in the context of this dissertation—is how these fabricated stories are illustrative of gendered myths, myths about masculine valor and feminine helplessness. Even if Jessica Lynch was turned into a Rambo-like heroine, the most relevant part of the story—the tape that could be consumed by audiences on TV—involved her rescue from a hospital bed. Thus, what I want to underscore is how when the Pentagon and the US Army create fictional narratives in the service of war, they call forth the same old myths that are articulated in the national monomyth that I have described in the previous section, which involves a damsel in distress and a hero savior who needs, reluctantly, to resort to violence. This same myth was used, in retrospect, by the Bush administration to shape a humanitarian cause that justified the invasion of Afghanistan: the liberation of Afghan women from the grip of their Taliban oppressors. While the oppression of Afghan women and the general population is a known, undisputed fact, the way that the “save the women” card was played sought to appeal to a mythic consciousness in the most basic of terms, with then-First Lady Laura Bush as its main advocate. In a radio address on 17 November 2001, the then-First Lady spoke of how “[l]ife under the Taliban is so hard and repressive, [that] even small displays of joy are outlawed—children aren’t allowed to fly kites; their mothers face beatings for laughing out loud. [...] the Taliban threaten to pull out women’s fingernails for wearing nail polish. ” (L. Bush, “Radio Address” 2001, n.p.). If we take into consideration the fact that one of the NGOs that funded campaigns in Afghanistan was the cosmetics company Avon, which purported to turn make-up into a sign of female empowerment, the mention of nail polish by Laura Bush is not gratuitous.⁵⁶

American fiction has shown in the past to be acutely aware of how myths are put to play for political gain and has readily engaged with similar storylines. A case in point

⁵⁵ During the Congressional hearing of 2007, the chairman of the committee, Rep. Waxman declared that “[t]he military had an opportunity to rescue you, when you were captive for ten days. But there was a whole day, before they captured you, when they were preparing not just to rescue you, but to videotape the rescue. [...] Well, maybe you understand it. I come from Hollywood. I expect show business in Hollywood, not from the military and not to support a story that was a fabrication. Our staff interviewed Jim Wilkinson, the director of strategic communications at CENTCOM (US Central Command). He informed us of the plans of your rescue operation. He informed the press operation a full day before it happened” (transcript included in Lynch 2007, n.p.).

⁵⁶ I am thankful to Prof. Cristina Alsina at the Universitat de Barcelona for pointing out this “fun fact.”

is Barry Levinson's 1997 movie *Wag the Dog*, a political satire that shows how a spin-doctor (Robert De Niro) and a Hollywood producer (Dustin Hoffman) working for the White House can fabricate a virtual war and create a hero out of the blue to deflect attention from a sex scandal that involves the president of the United States. The film is doubly interesting not only because it debunks the presidential myth (as noted in section 1.1.5) but because the climax of the fabricated war involves the orchestration of the heroic redemption story of rescue and return of an American POW (prisoner of war). In need of a hero who will not compromise the heroic narrative by having moral qualms about it, the spin-doctor and the producer arrange for the release of a soldier they did not know was mentally-deranged and a sex-offender; the hero story turns awry when the soldier escapes custody and commits violent acts. The two experts are put to the test, but the spin-doctor's masterful command of the media apparatus succeeds in turning it to the government's profit, precisely because the public have remained unaware of the constructed nature of the heroic story, of the fact that there is no war and that the war images were staged in the producer's studio, and have readily consumed all the media stories and the merchandise that has been produced.

Post 9/11 fiction has also engaged with the way that the spectacle of heroic effect is marketed and merchandised in order to gain support for the war. Ben Fountain's novel *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2012) is an apt portrayal of what Thomas Pynchon has described in his fiction as the spectacle of War with a capital W, war understood as a cover-up, a "diversion from the real movements of War" which is, in fact "a celebration of markets" (Pynchon 1973, 122). Briefly, Fountain's novel deals with a group of American soldiers, among them the title character Billy Lynn, who are temporarily back in the United States from Iraq for a government-sponsored "Victory Tour," an oversized media spectacle that reaches its apotheosis during the half-time of a football game, with an outrageous musical show not unlike the ones we are used to seeing during each year's Superbowl. The "Victory Tour's" main aim is, of course, to gain support for the war and to help in the enlistment effort. The novel portrays the soldiers' difficulty in facing their fellow-Americans' prosaic enthusiasm for the war, their display of patriotic paraphernalia—that flag that speaks, in Susan Willis's words, "for a form of patriotism raised to the level of religion" (Willis 2005, 16)—their constant repeating of the 9/11 buzzwords—"terRist, freedom, nina leven, wore on terrRr"—and their felt need for conceptual closure, which makes them fall victim to state and media propaganda. Immersed in the massive spectacle of American heroics, Billy Lynn has recurrent flashbacks of violence and death in Iraq, something that the spectacle is set to repress and forget. The doubling of the narrative line, on the one hand the narration of the bizarre and oversized media spectacle; on the other, Billy's "blackouts" and memories of the past and the war serves to underscore the chasm between the main character's perception and the public's view of the war as just too big to breach. It is

the portrayal of two colliding worlds in which the presumably “objective” information about the war is shown as filtered through a massive apparatus of profit, mythic rhetoric, and cynicism, war as a sideshow, a distraction, in which discourse is constructed, repetitive, simulacral, and void of any spontaneity. As in Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Fountain’s novel suggests that “the real business of the war is buying and selling” whereas “[t]he murdering and the violence are self-policing, and can be entrusted to non-professionals” (Pynchon 1973, 122), in this case, to a naïve, working-class 19-year-old soldier, Billy Lynn.

Billy Lynn’s depiction of the American cult of the hero could have been extracted from the real cases of Jessica Lynch and Pat Tillman, and I find it extremely relevant that post-9/11 fiction—especially second-wave post-9/11 fiction, that is closer to the fallout of the War on Terror—, so poignantly addresses and debunks the rhetoric that lead to the war in the first place. I believe that the novel continues the critical work initiated by early post-9/11 fiction novels—like *The Zero*, but not exclusively—to examine American society post-9/11 and, especially, society’s acquiescence to the use of violence and the justification for war. As I will argue in the last chapter of this dissertation, what these two novels put forward is a disturbing portrayal of the United States post-9/11 as completely and successfully delusional, a nation that rewrites catastrophe as apotheosis through a “strenuous interpretive effort” (Bersani 1989, 99), one that reads 9/11 and the War on Terror as instances of epic and triumphant heroism that uphold the exceptionalist ethos of the United States.

1.3. Analyzing the 9/11 and WoT narratives

However heady the appeal of a call to arms, however just the cause, we should still shed a tear for all that will be lost when war claims its wages from us. Shed a tear, and then get on with the business of killing our enemies as quickly as we can, and as ruthlessly as we must.

Senator McCain. “No Substitute for Victory:
War Is Hell. Let’s Get On With It”

1.3.1. The attacks as an act of war

The previous sections have sought to trace and illustrate the recurrent themes and myths that underpin the American cosmovision, and to underscore the central status that the notion of the hero holds in American culture. It has also demonstrated how these themes and myths can be used persuasively for political or commercial gain. The following section aims to demonstrate, through the analysis of several speeches made by president Bush, how political rhetoric about 9/11 and the WoT was also consistently

supported by the evocation of common themes and shared myths which gave it credence, appeal, and legitimation among the general population, and how this discursive strategy crucially allowed the Bush administration to pursue its own hawkish agenda.

The formulation of the United States' response to 9/11 within the framework of war was, as Hodges points out, a discursive achievement (Hodges 2011, 23), because in the face of several other discourses competing to become the official narrative of 9/11, the government succeeded in consolidating the idea that the attacks were unexpected and unprovoked acts of war, what Mayell calls the "surprise attack" storyline.⁵⁷ More importantly, it served to establish a discursive scenario which was accepted and made function as true, and which served to frame public discussion on the United States response to the attacks in military terms. As can be surmised from newspaper covers on 12 September (featured in the Introduction), the idea that the 9/11 attacks could be considered acts of war was already in the collective imaginary even before the government modulated it as discourse. However, it is the argumentation by the Bush administration that serves to consolidate and legitimate the idea, and to gain overwhelming public support for military intervention.

An analysis of the first speech Bush gave regarding the attacks of September 11 ("Attack on America") and of subsequent speeches on 12 September ("Photo Opportunity"), 14 September ("Prayer and Remembrance"), and 20 September ("Congress") shows how the discursive field moves progressively and unambiguously from "crime" to "war" by the careful choice of lexical correspondences.⁵⁸ In his first address, Bush refers to the attacks alternatively as "terrorist acts," "acts of terror," and "terrorist attacks," thus invoking a criminal frame that entails a legal response, the search for the culprits and "bring[ing] them to justice" (Bush 2001, "Attack on America," n.p.). However, there is also a reference to "acts of mass murder" which is, according to Hodges, indicative of a veering towards the "war" framework, since

⁵⁷ The "surprise attack" storyline is usually understood in opposition to what has been termed the "blowback discourse," following Chalmers Johnson's argumentation in his 2000 volume *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*. In the preface to the 2002 edition, Johnson notes how he had predicted that "many aspects of what the American government had done abroad virtually invited retaliatory attacks from nations and peoples who had been victimized," and although he "did not predict the events of September 11, 2001 [...] I did clearly state that acts of this sort were coming and should be anticipated" (Johnson 2002, vii). According to Mayell, the "blowback discourse is conceptualised as a conflicting discourse because it sought a more critical understanding of the violence of the 'Other' and lost the contest, such as it was in the US, and became the subservient explanation of 11 September 2001" (Mayell 2005, 80). As a consequence of the hegemony of the surprise attack discourse, the discursive critiques deployed by various critical commentators presenting a dissident explanation of 9/11 came to be grouped, somewhat, as "blowback" theories. As Mayell further notes, the apparently opposing surprise attack and blowback storylines were not the only two possible explanations, and varying degrees of complexity can be applied to both. Jacques Derrida, for instance, proposes a type of blowback discourse that figures the terrorism of September 11 as analogous to an autoimmune disease that is both part of and attacks the system that creates and sustains it (Borradori 2003, 20-21).

⁵⁸ Cf. Hodges 2011, 27. See, in particular, Table 2.1 "Lexical correspondences associated with war frame and crime frame."

“mass murder” is usually in the capacity of states to commit, rather than of criminals (Hodges 2011, 24). In this way, the references that bring to mind a “crime” framework (“victims,” “emergency response,” “local rescue efforts,” “injured,” “safety/security,” “law enforcement,” “bring them to justice,” as well as four mentions to “attacks”) start mingling with terms that correspond lexically to a “war” framework (“under attack,” “retreat,” “defend,” “targeted,” “military,” “allies,” “war against terrorism,” “enemies”). However, overall, in this first address the “war” framework does not dominate over the “crime” framework.

The 12 September address (“Photo Opportunity”) is a brief yet key intervention as it marks the beginning of the systematic construction of the war narrative by the Bush administration, which will be perfected in later addresses. Bush unambiguously states that the attacks were “more than acts of terror. They were acts of war,” and it is also in this address that Bush characterizes the enemy for the first time, using language that has come to be known as the “hunting metaphor:” an enemy who “hides in shadows,” “who preys on innocent and unsuspecting people, runs for cover,” and “tries to hide.” More importantly, the war is defined as “a monumental struggle of good versus evil” where, no doubt, “good will prevail.” In the 14 September address (“Prayer and Remembrance”), Bush states that the United States’ “responsibility to history” is “to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil,” an objective that in its hyperbolic ambition reinforces the mythical dimension of the narrative already announced on 12 September (“a struggle of good versus evil”). In the 14 September speech, delivered at the National Cathedral in Washington D.C., the lexical connections to the “crime” framework mix with more subdued religious references that are appropriate to the setting; however, these are overall outweighed by those that refer to “war:” “casualties,” “uniform,” “died at their posts,” “war has been waged against us by stealth and deceit,” “conflict,” “enemies,” “[t]hey have attacked America,” “defender.”

By 20 September (“Congress”) any ambiguity is gone as Bush declares that “enemies of freedom committed an act of war against our country” and that the United States is now “awakened to danger and called to defend freedom.” The president makes the case for war focusing specifically on Afghanistan, al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, and the Taliban. Bush also marks the exceptionality of an act of war on home soil and makes reference to one exception, “one Sunday in 1941” (Pearl Harbor), but the “exception” does not so much as mark a contrast by opposition, but serves to designate September 11 along a continuum of historic causes (the Second World War; the Cold War) in which

the United States is forced to intervene and to engage in war.⁵⁹ From then on, the “war” framework dominates the president’s speech: “enemies,” “war,” “casualties,” “[w]ho attacked our country?” “demands,” “negotiation,” “war on terror,” “fascism,” “Nazism,” “totalitarianism,” references to the Gulf War and to Kosovo, “retaliation,” “strikes,” “battle,” “campaign,” etc. are but some of the most frequently used terms.

In short, these first speeches reinforce, through their lexical choices, a particular ideological interpretation of the 9/11 attacks as war, which necessarily ignores the geopolitical causes and historical precedents for 9/11 which were taken into consideration not just by the terrorists but by many commentators as well. As Fairclough points out, the use of “[d]ifferent metaphors imply different ways of dealing with things” (Fairclough qtd. in Hodges 2011, 27): one might arrive at a negotiated settlement with an “opponent” while that would not be possible when facing an “irrational and inherently evil foe;” therefore, the framing of the terrorists as ruthless enemies in a war preempts the possibility of any “negotiated settlement,” as terrorists have “to be eliminated, cut out” (Fairclough 1989, 120 qtd. in Hodges 2011, 27). This particular framing, which is “simply seen as a ‘common sense’ interpretation or just ‘the way things are’” (Hodges 2011, 28), is fundamental in the advancement of a military response perceived as *the* appropriate response, a perception that is a by-product, in my view, of the effectiveness of the tightly-knit official interpretation, which we find neatly summed up in the following excerpt from Bush’s 12 September address:

The deliberate and deadly attacks which were carried out yesterday against our country were *more than acts of terror*. They were *acts of war*. This will require our country *to unite in steadfast determination* and resolve. *Freedom and democracy are under attack*. The American people need to know that we’re facing a different *enemy* than we have ever faced. This *enemy hides in shadows*, and has *no regard for human life*. This is *an enemy who preys on innocent and unsuspecting people, then runs for cover*. But it won’t be able to run for cover forever. This is *an enemy that tries to hide*. But it won’t be able to hide forever. This is an *enemy that*

⁵⁹ In *9/11: Was There an Alternative?*, a collection of essays “conceived, produced, and published as an act of protest” (Ruggiero in Chomsky 2011, 9), Chomsky has forcefully contested the analogy of Pearl Harbor as “misleading” (Chomsky 2011, 43): “On December 7, 1941, military bases in two U.S. colonies were attacked—not the national territory, which was never threatened” (Chomsky 2011, 43). The national territory, argues Chomsky, has not been under attack since the War of 1812, after which “the U.S. annihilated the indigenous population (millions of people), conquered half of Mexico (in fact, the territories of indigenous peoples [...]), intervened violently in the surrounding region, conquered Hawaii and the Philippines (killing hundreds of thousands of Filipinos), and, in the past half century particularly, extended its resort to force throughout much of the world. The number of victims is colossal” (Chomsky 2011, 43-43). What makes 9/11 dramatically different for Chomsky is that “[f]or the first time, the guns have been directed the other way” (Chomsky 2011, 44).

thinks its harbors are safe. But they won't be safe forever. This *enemy* attacked not just our people, but *all freedom-loving people everywhere in the world*. The United States will use all our resources *to conquer this enemy*. *We will rally the world*. We will be patient, we will be focused, and we will be *steadfast in our determination*. This *battle* will take time and resolve. But make no mistake about it, *we will win*. (Bush 2001, "Photo Opportunity," n.p.; emphasis added)

The italicized segments of the excerpt are the main ideas that serve to establish the justification for the United States' military response and to sketch the guiding principles of their intervention for at least the next decade. Besides clearly stating that the 9/11 attacks are not just terrorist acts but acts of war, the insistent repetition of the term "enemy" (seven times) helps to reinforce the war scenario. The hunting metaphor of hiding and preying reinforces the animalistic characterization of an enemy who has "no regard for human life." In contrast, the United States is more than a country, for it is the personification of "freedom and democracy". In this light and in view of the government's "steadfast determination,"—repeated twice—, the rest of the world has no choice but to join in the fight, as not to do so is to be on the side of the barbarians. In this way, the "us versus them" dichotomy is effectively put in place, where "us" includes "all freedom-loving people everywhere in the world." The use of such a metaphoric and mythic language is supplemented by a clear, unambiguous declaration that "[e]very nation, in every region, now has a decision to make: either you are with us or you are with the terrorists" (Bush 2001, "Congress," n.p.). As DiMaggio notes,

Such language was uncompromising in creating a binary between good and evil. US military campaigns across the globe must be supported with no reservations by allied countries, lest they be labeled supporters of terrorism. Bush's warning allowed no room for allies to support the goal of fighting terrorism, while resisting specific military campaigns deemed incompatible with that goal. (DiMaggio 2015, 19)

Furthermore, Bush states how the War on Terror will go on indefinitely, turning it into more of a superheroic quest than an actual military campaign with definite goals and timelines: "Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end *until every terrorist group of global reach* has been found, stopped, and defeated" (Bush 2001, "Congress," n.p.; emphasis added). Despite these unrealistic goals, 80% of Americans polled after the 20 September address felt the president's speech made them feel "more confident in this country's ability to deal with this crisis"

(DiMaggio 2015, 22), and thus DiMaggio concludes that “presidential rhetoric helped increase war enthusiasm among an already supportive public” (DiMaggio 2015, 23). That there was ample support for the war solution does not mean, in any way, that there was not also a strong opposition, both to the war and to the government’s rhetoric, as will be explored in the last section of this chapter, “Dissenting un-Americans.” But before proceeding in that direction, the next section will explore how the narrative described above, which was a proficient reenactment of American national myths—i.e. the United States called on to pursue its Manifest Destiny for the good of the world—, became solidified in the public mind by a clear-cut characterization of both the enemy and the heroic defenders of America in accordance with the national monomyth. As such, its most renowned heroic figures were deployed in the construction of president Bush’s post-9/11 public persona: the cowboy, the superhero, and the mythic president of the United States. And as in any good story, the stature of the hero was defined by the stature of its antagonist, and so the narrative resorted also to characterizing the enemy as extremely evil, cunning, deprived, immoral, and, crucially, extremely cowardly.

1.3.2. Creating the enemy: barbarians, the Wild West, and the super-villainous “evil-doers”

It’s an enemy that likes to hide and burrow in, and their network is extensive. There are no rules. It’s barbaric behavior. They slit throats of women on airplanes in order to achieve an objective that is beyond comprehension. And they like to hit, and then they like to hide out. But we’re going to smoke them out.

Bush 2001. “Employees at the Pentagon”

The first time Bush refers to the people responsible for the 9/11 attacks with some degree of precision (20 September, “Congress”) he refers to “a collection of loosely affiliated terrorist organizations known as al Qaeda” which is “to terror what mafia is to crime” and which is present “in more than 60 countries.” Regardless of their loose affiliation in different territories, the president argues that they can be targeted by attacking one precise place in the world: Afghanistan. Bush builds an argument over why Afghanistan has to be intervened: this is where the terrorists are trained, al Qaeda has great influence over there, and “[i]n Afghanistan, we see al Qaeda’s vision for the world” (Bush 2001, “Congress,” n.p.). Finally, he states clearly that “[o]ur enemy is a radical network of terrorists, and every government that supports them,” and argues for the need to embark on a “war on terror.” Favoring the term “terror” over “terrorism” adds to the grandiloquence and mythic underpinnings of the narrative;

terror as a universal human sentiment—as old as humanity itself—that exceeds the particularities and modern resonances of the term “terrorism.”⁶⁰ Declaring a war on “terror” has the same effect as declaring “Evil” the enemy; as Terry Eagleton contends in *Holy Terror*, by elevating the conflict to metaphysical terms the Bush administration forecloses the possibility of any historical exploration into the causes (Eagleton 2005, 116), rendering the alignment with “us” an unquestionable ethical stance that exceeds historical or geopolitical particulars. Some may argue that “terror” really stands for “terrorism” in the 9/11 context, but I am convinced, together with Eagleton, that the semantic choice is not circumstantial. Needless to say, Bush is not the first president to define an enemy in such terms, and the bombastic phrasing has its own precedents in recent history: for instance, during the Clinton presidency, then-president Bill Clinton stressed that “[o]ur target was terror” (rather than specific terrorist organizations) when he justified the airstrikes against a chemical factory in Sudan and training camps in Afghanistan as a response to the bombings of the American embassies in Tanzania and Kenya in 1998.

Whether it is terrorism or terror, war is declared against an enemy that is not a real, tangible army, but a human emotion, a mind state that cannot be straightforwardly beaten in a battlefield (Lakoff 2011, 63). The diffuse nature of this enemy creates anxiety and fear, as the source of threat cannot be precisely located and contained (even if Afghanistan is singled out, there is reference to over sixty countries). This, as Massumi convincingly argues, is what heightens the feeling of being under threat and what legitimates the violence that will be unleashed. As Massumi defines it, fear is “the anticipatory reality in the present of a threatening future. It is the felt reality of the nonexistent, looming present as the *affective fact* of the matter” (Massumi 2010, 54; emphasis in the original). In other words, even if the existence of what is feared cannot be proved, the experience of being under threat is ontologically real and justifies any measures taken as a consequence of it. Fear spreads not only among American citizens but also among the West; as Bush declares, “[t]he civilized world is rallying to America’s side. They understand that if this terror goes unpunished, their own cities, their own citizens may be next. Terror, unanswered, can not only bring down buildings, it can threaten the stability of legitimate governments. And you know what—we’re not going to allow it” (Bush 2001, “Congress,” n.p.).⁶¹

If identifying the war’s objective as “terror” legitimates a never-ending struggle (“a lengthy campaign, unlike any other we have ever seen”) because an emotion cannot be

⁶⁰ Cf. Terry Eagleton, *Holy Terror*, 2005, pp. 115-127.

⁶¹ In hindsight, and in view of the constant percolation of terrorist attacks in Europe, this characterization is not entirely wrong. However, one is left to wonder what the circumstances might be if western countries were not engaged in military operations in the Middle East. I am not implying that the West should look the other way and not intervene; perhaps all that I am saying is that the matter is too complex to be addressed with simplistic rhetoric.

beaten or apprehended in a battlefield, identifying the enemy as “Evil” is to construct, as Redfield argues, “a para-religious struggle” (Redfield 2009, 45) that involves the very notion of humanity itself. It is also an invocation of the national monomyth, as the United States is pictured as having to rid the world of Evil, which amounts to restoring the world to its Edenic origins of absolute goodness. More importantly, the metaphysical, diffuse, yet easily identifiable evil enemy becomes an inclusive category extendable to “anyone that supports them” or, in other words, anyone who is not supporting the United States: “you’re either with us or you’re with the terrorists” (Bush 2001, “Congress,” n.p.) warned Bush. In this way the enemy, which in the first addresses had only been inferred as a “them” that could be derived by opposition to the pervasive use of the first person plural (“we” “us” and “our”),⁶² is now clearly, yet diffusely, identified and interpellated.

In contrast to the characterization of the enemy as pure Evil, the United States is personified as freedom, as the 9/11 attacks reveal a new world scenario “where freedom itself is under attack” (Bush 2001, “Congress,” n.p.). This idea had already been expressed in the 12 September address, where the president had stated that “[f]reedom and democracy are under attack” (Bush 2001, “Photo Opportunity,” n.p.). As Mayell contends, the notion of the United States as the mythological home of freedom and democracy harks back to foundational myths, as “[t]he principle of *liberty* distinguishes the United States from the ‘Old World’ of Europe” and is enshrined in the Declaration of Independence (Mayell 2005, 84; emphasis in the original). Bush brings to the foreground the notion of the United States as a beacon of light, bringing to life the metaphor which is otherwise fossilized in the Statue of Liberty, and establishes resonances that go back to the founding of the republic: “We stand for a different choice, made long ago, on the day of our founding. We affirm it again today. We choose freedom and the dignity of every life” (Bush 2002, “State of the Union,” n.p.). Thus, Bush’s particular phrasing serves to strengthen the belief that the decision to *not* join the United States in its war against the terrorists is to abandon one’s belief in freedom, democracy, and human dignity, which is precisely what the terrorists lack.

The candid question of “Why do they hate us?”, which could have triggered an honest and necessary process of soul-searching, turns out to be a missed opportunity as Bush characterizes the terrorists as belonging to a culture that is not only deprived of freedom and democratic values but that hates these very notions: “They hate what we see right here in this chamber—a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other” (Bush 2001,

⁶² Bush’s first address on 11 September 2001 begins with the repetition of the possessive “our” three times in the first sentence: “Today, our fellow citizens, our way of life, our very freedom came under attack in a series of deliberate and deadly terrorist acts” (Bush 2001, “Address to a Joint Session,” n.p.).

“Address to a Joint Session,” n.p.). The Bush administration simplifies the reasons behind the attacks, reasons that the secretary of State Colin Powell had referred to as “very, very complex” (Powell 2001, n.p.) on 13 September 2001:

they don't like our value system. They don't like the system that treats every individual as a creature of God with the full rights of every other individual. They don't like our political system, our form of democracy. They don't like who some of our friends are in the Middle East and the fact that we are strong supporters of Israel and will remain so. They resent, in many instances, our successes of society. (Powell 2001, n.p.)

Even if Powell cites “very, very complex” reasons, he does not explore that complexity and, rather, subscribes to the official version of presenting the conflict in simplistic terms, as a civilizational clash that in many ways revives and augments Huntington's 1996 theory,⁶³ where the United States and the West stand squarely in the face of a barbaric culture that is stuck in pre-civilized times, that embraces “tyranny and death as a cause and a creed” and that sends “children on missions of suicide and murder” (Bush 2002, “State of the Union,” n.p.). Through a careful discursive process, the Bush administration constructs a hegemonic binary vision of the world that is expressed through the War on Terror; as argued by Coline Jacquelin (2012), there is nothing natural in this constructed, “artificial, self-fulfilling dichotomy” that depicts war as “a clash between two antagonist sides, leading us to believe that 9/11 occurred because of the essential nature of the attackers and against the essential nature of the targets” (Jacqueline 2012, n.p.).

With the onset of the invasion of Afghanistan, presidential addresses will reinforce “the hunting metaphor,” where the US forces are pictured as hunters and the enemy

⁶³ Samuel P. Huntington was an American political scientist, erstwhile director of the Institute of Strategic Studies at Harvard, who in 1993 published an article entitled “The Clash of Civilizations?” where he first expounded the arguments that he was to develop by 1996 in the volume *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. In these works, Huntington argues that, after the bipolar world order of the Cold War, a new multipolar order has arisen, based on what he designates the world's seven or eight “major civilizations,” which are mutually antagonistic. The antagonism, based on more or less immutable characteristics such as history, language, tradition and, above all, religion, is of such magnitude as to constitute “fault lines” that will be the cause of inevitable clashes. The theory was deeply controversial when first published, especially for its primordialist approach (vs. constructivism, e.g. Anderson's *Imagined Communities*), but gained a degree of credibility after 9/11 as many argued that Huntington had predicted the attacks and that the War on Terror was proof of its validity. Many others, however, argue that Huntington's theory was used to shape the War on Terror discursively—presented as the “war between civilizations” predicated by Huntington—in order to advance pre-existing policies and ideas. Among the most notable rebuttals of Huntington's theory is Said's “The Clash of Ignorance,” published in October 2001 in *The Nation* (<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20011022/said>), and Todorov's *The Fear of Barbarians. Beyond the Clash of Civilizations* (Malden: Polity Press, 2008).

combatants as animalistic,⁶⁴ as Bush reiterates how the Taliban like to hide in burrows and caves and how the US forces will “smoke them out of their holes” (Bush 2001, “Whatever it Takes,” n.p.). The portrayal of the enemy as animalistic and naturally irrational helps to reinforce the idea that the violence exercised by the 9/11 terrorists was “cowardly, irrational, unprincipled, unjustified, and unadulteratedly evil” (Ehrenreich 2002, 47), against which the violence that the United States will unleash comes out as “brave, rational, principled, justified, and noble” (Ibid.). As Lakoff argues, this framing also relies on an extended notion that the wars the United States conducts are always based on principle and are always just (Lakoff 2011, 67).

The oppositional, binary representation of the two sides of the conflict also allows for the deployment of patterns of heroism established by the American monomyth which, through decades of dissemination in popular culture and cinematic representation, have established American heroism as eminently white, male, and heteronormative. As Michael Connor argues, there is an argument to be made regarding the continuity of this highly racialized, classed, and gendered pattern in “narratives of crisis and heroism between the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the War on Terror” (Connor 2009, 100).⁶⁵ For Connor, in the aftermath of 9/11 this pattern of heroism becomes co-opted by right-wing causes, to a large extent validated by the fact that the overwhelming majority of the members of the Fire Department of New York (FDNY) are white (Connor 2009, 93): of the 343 firefighters who died at the World Trade Center, only about a dozen were black and a dozen were Hispanic, according to official estimates. As Derek Rubin and Jaap Verheul (2009) suggest, this fact is used to “discredit the ideal of multiculturalism and present the predominantly white New York City firefighters as quintessential American heroes and models of ideal American citizenship” (Rubin & Verheul 2009, 14). It is also this demographics that sparks the “statue controversy” when the Fire Department of New York (FDNY) decides to commission a commemorative statue modeled after the iconic photo of three firefighters raising an American flag in the ruins of the World Trade Center—an image that became iconic because, among other things, it was reminiscent of another iconic image, that by Joe Rosenthal of US soldiers raising an American flag at Iwo-Jima on February 1945—but recasts the firefighters as white, Hispanic, and African-American.

⁶⁴ Cf. Bermúdez de Castro (2012), Todorov (2008).

⁶⁵ For a brief analysis of heroic whiteness on film before 9/11, see Connor 2009, pp. 97-100. Connor offers a reading of *Armageddon* (1998) as illustrative of heroic whiteness, and signals *Independence Day* (1996) as a project that predicated the opposite, focused on multicultural heroism. The recent remake of the classic western *Magnificent Seven* (Antoine Fuqua, 2016) is also a good example of heroic whiteness transitioning to multicultural heroism: the 2016 film turns the group of seven (mostly white males in Sturges’ 1960 film) into a multicultural group made up of an African American leader, a female co-lead, an Asian, a Native American, a Mexican, and two white Americans.



This generates discomfort within the FDNY, where firefighters accuse the FDNY of abandoning historical accuracy for political correctness, and bitter debates then played out in the media (Connor 2009, 93-104; Roza 2009, 113-116). The controversy can be interpreted in part as the reluctance by a large sector of society to give up a notion of heroism that is inherently white,⁶⁶ and also suggests an evident failure in dispelling the widespread perception that 9/11 is mostly a white man's trauma, and that it has not "united" white Americans and African Americans in any significant way.⁶⁷ But as Connor suggests, the emphasis on "[w]hiteness enables the imagining of an American 'us' that provides clarity of purpose by directing anger towards 'them'—while obscuring the divisions that plague 'us'" (Connor 2009, 100). Thus, the emphasis on the 9/11 terrorists as dark, rage-filled, and death-loving barbarians serves to underscore by

⁶⁶ In relation to this, it is interesting to read Puar's research on how the construction of heteronormative white heroism also relies on the construction of terrorists as homosexual and monstrous. See "Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots" (authored together with Amit S. Rai, *Social Text* 20.3 [2002]: 117-148), and *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, Duke UP: 2007).

⁶⁷ Many prominent non-white Americans voiced this impression and generated heated debates in the media; among them poet laureate Amiri Baraka with his poem "Somebody Blew Up America," and actor Will Smith who, interviewed by a German newspaper and asked if 9/11 had changed anything for him personally, answered the following: "No. Absolutely not. When you grow up black in America you have a completely different view of the world than white Americans. We blacks live with a constant feeling of unease. And whether you are wounded in an attack by a racist cop or in a terrorist attack, I'm sorry, it makes no difference" (Smith qtd. in *Frankfurter Allgemeine* 2004, n.p.). In a similar line, novelist Walter Mosley noted in 2002 that although 9/11 was a horrific attack, black Americans "were not surprised by it in the way that white America was. That is a crucial, and determining, difference. It tells you a lot about America, and how it sees itself" (Mosley qtd. in O'Hagan 2002, n.p.). In 2015, Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* offers a historical account of how that divide came to be, exploring the blatant racial injustice and the lack of freedoms in the United States for African Americans. Coates seeks to answer "the question of how one should live within a black body, within a country lost in the Dream" (Coates 2015, 12), and brings back, among other circumstances of the past, the forgotten history of southern Manhattan and the WTC site ("Ground Zero") as a place where black bodies were auctioned and buried (I address this briefly in section 3.6).

The idea that 9/11 is a white man's trauma is reinforced by the fact that most cultural production about 9/11 involves white protagonists as victims and that, even in some cases, African American protagonists have been turned into white, as is the case of Jason Thomas in Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* (2006). In its edition dedicated to the 10th anniversary of 9/11, *Time* magazine published "Beyond 9/11: Portraits of Resilience," a photo-rich commemorative that featured no identifiable African Americans in its sixty-four pages.

opposition the overwhelming “whiteness” of the American victims and heroes, thus stressing the Manichean nature of the conflict.

The construction of national heroism as inherently white and male is also intersected by a gender bias that dictates it to be naturally heteronormative. In *The Terror Dream* and in *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Susan Faludi and Jasbir Puar, respectively, have most forcefully analyzed the hero-worship of firefighters, police officers, and rescue workers after 9/11 as consubstantial to a heteronormative, nationalist project that finds its counterpart in the demonization of terrorists and suspected terrorists as monsters and homosexuals. The revelation of the sexual abuses of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere by American forces provides indisputable clues that such a rationale is at play. As Puar and Rai argue in “Monster, Terrorist, Fag,” initial post-9/11 reactions “focused narrowly on ‘the disappearance of women’” (Puar & Rai 2002, 117) but then turned increasingly to the glorification of heroic men and the normalization of “an aggressive heterosexual patriotism” which implied “processes of quarantining a racialized and sexualized other” (Ibid., 117). While Puar and Rai locate this response as part of an Orientalist construction of the Other, for Faludi this type of reaction to the events of 9/11 responds also to an initial “suspicion that the nation and its men had gone ‘soft,’” as if the United States were “lacking in masculine fortitude” (Faludi 2007b, 8) and this were the cause of the nation’s vulnerability. Thus, Faludi contends, the United States embarked on the project of reverting the perceived emasculation of the American man (and, by extension, of the nation), falling into “cultural paroxysms” that led to the creation of compensatory fictions centered on virility and aggressive policies (Ibid., 295). There were precedents for this project in the 1980s, with the process of re-masculinizing America undertaken by Hollywood: as Susan Jeffords demonstrates in *Hard Bodies*, filmic production and public discourse of the Reagan era make evident an effort to revert the perceived softening of manhood during the counterculture. Similarly, and as Faludi argues, after 9/11 the United States reacted not by interrogating the causes of 9/11 but “by cocooning ourselves in the celluloid chrysalis of the baby boom’s childhood” (Faludi 2007b, 4); that is, the return of Cold War society, one of “neofifties nuclear family ‘togetherness,’ redomesticated femininity” (Ibid., 3), and the return of the “manly man,” a new John Wayne masculinity, as an article by Peggy Noonan in *The Wall Street Journal* preconized: “Welcome Back, Duke: From the Ashes of September 11, Arise Manly Virtues” (Noonan 2001, n.p.).

While the overemphasis on the virility of the firefighters and rescue workers can be interpreted as a regression towards gendered archetypes of heroic, manly men and helpless, fragile women in need of rescue (Faludi 2007b), the invocation of John Wayne (famously nicknamed “Duke”) in public discourse signals also to the irruption of the Wild West mythology and the cowboy hero as a way of delineating positions in the

geopolitical arena, where the cowboy myth will be histrionically incarnated in the figure of the president of the United States. As Lawrence and Jewett note, in the immediate aftermath of the attacks there were “increasing signs that in international affairs, the nation is tempted to move with mythic footsteps towards ‘cowboy stances’” (Lawrence & Jewett 2002, 14), an observation that was confirmed by the Bush administration’s deployment of the Wild West mythology as a way of relaying its foreign policy, especially during the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and as a way of shaping public opinion. The Wild West myth was used as part of the larger narrative of heroes and victims that also included the superhero and the presidential myths, as will be explored in upcoming sections.

While to a non-American observer the deployment of the Wild West mythology in the post-9/11 scenario—with its evocation of bandits, evil-doers, and sheriffs—might seem anachronistic and inadequate, the way that this myth effectively played out is proof of the deep imbrication and the currency of the national monomyth in the national cosmivision and of its ability to establish resonances within the population at large. The rhetorical strategy employed by the Bush administration is, therefore and as I have been arguing so far, part of a continuum of similar strategies employed by previous administrations, which had already played that cultural wealth to their advantage. For instance, several scholars have argued that the American War in Vietnam was resignified as a “frontier” conflict and that it redeployed several cultural myths.⁶⁸ Whether this resignification was a conscious, deliberate process or an unconscious, culturally-motivated one, is not clear; it is, at the end of the day, impossible to have the former without the latter. As Slotkin notes, language reminiscent of the Indian Wars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was commonly used in Vietnam between soldiers, journalists, and high command, even by Congressmen back home trying to explain the war effort (Slotkin 1994, 70-73). Slotkin writes,

The war in Vietnam sometimes seemed so alien to American experience and expectations that it might have been happening on some other planet, and it had its own special lingo whose words and rhythm were native to its ordered lunacy. [...] The language of Cowboys and Indians ‘game’ was one way to get a handle on experiences too terrible, too upsetting to be morally acceptable. The invocation of the game is a reaching for a rationale, a figurative mode of explanation that can at

⁶⁸ Among others, John Hellmann in *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: Columbia UP, 1986), Walter H. Capps in *The Unfinished War: Vietnam and the American Conscience* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982), and Loren Baritz in *Backfire: American Culture and the Vietnam War* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985).

least give a precedent for what is happening, tie it to something familiar, normal, understood. (Slotkin 1994, 71)

In *The Wars We Took to Vietnam. Cultural Conflict and Storytelling*, Milton Bates argues that the way that US military operations and teams in Vietnam were named was clearly reminiscent of the frontier period (Bates 1996, 9)—an argument also shared by Spanos, who describes American soldiers calling Vietnam “Indian country” and accommodating to “the stereotypical narrative of the Hollywood western” (Spanos 2008, 214). Several factors contribute to this particular framing. For Bates, the association of Vietnam with the frontier experience can be explained, among other things, by the physical realities that the soldiers would find in South East Asia, associating Vietnam’s jungle and the enemy therein to the notion of “wilderness” so present in American cultural mythology. Drawing from Roderick Nash’s study on the wilderness in American cultural history, Bates notes how “wilderness” is more of a mythic than a literally physical term, applied to any terrain that evokes feelings of bewilderment and dread, an “actively hostile environment” (Bates 1996, 9).⁶⁹ For Spanos, the Kennedy administration’s response to the widespread anxiety over the health of the American body politic—perceived as “soft” in face of an impending Cold War—highly contributed to envisioning Vietnam as the “New Frontier,” whereby Americans would be recalled “to their ideal of simple, vigorous, manly self-reliance that motivated the frontiersmen of America’s glorious past” (Spanos 2008, 214). However, as Spanos notes in his “Preface” to *American Exceptionalism in the Age of Globalization. The Specter of Vietnam*, the United States’ brutal conduct of the war signified “the self-destruction of the ontological, cultural, and political foundations on which America had perennially justified its ‘benign’ self-image and global practice from the time of the Puritan ‘errand in the wilderness’” (Spanos 2008, ix). It is precisely this contradiction to the traditional exceptionalist self-representation as redeemer nation that needs to be transformed and purged through “the tellingly insistent remembering” of the Vietnam experience (Spanos 2008, 243), effectively turning Vietnam into a landscape of myth (Bates 1996).⁷⁰ In short, and as a recent article by Simon Waxman for *The Washington Post* (2014) shows, whatever the motivations this

⁶⁹ In *The Wars We Took to Vietnam. Cultural Conflict and Storytelling* (1996), Bates follows on the work initiated by the critics mentioned above and traces how other armed conflicts in American history were brought into the retelling and contextualization of the Vietnam experience.

⁷⁰ As Spanos notes, the resignification of Vietnam as a venture into frontier wilderness “inadvertently produced a counterhistory” (Spanos 2008, 215); while Turner’s “frontier thesis” had absolutely ignored the effacement of the Native American population by the expansion into the West, the “determined resistance by the Vietnamese people, who succeeded at the site of the dissemination of information in demonstrating to the world that America’s representation of its errand as ‘defense’ was in fact aggression” (Spanos 2008, 215) refused to conform to the exceptionalist narrative. However, the United States, “with the confidence of the righteousness of its divinely or History-ordained global errand, pursued the inexorable logical economy of its exceptionalism to its self-destructive fulfillment” (Ibid., 216).

trend is ongoing, as Waxman decries the “U.S. military’s ongoing slur of Native Americans” in the naming of equipment and artillery:

In the United States today, the names Apache, Comanche, Chinook, Lakota, Cheyenne and Kiowa apply not only to Indian tribes but also to military helicopters. Add in the Black Hawk, named for a leader of the Sauk tribe. Then there is the Tomahawk, a low-altitude missile, and a drone named for an Indian chief, Gray Eagle. Operation Geronimo was the end of Osama bin Laden.

Why do we name our battles and weapons after people we have vanquished? [...] because the myth of the worthy native adversary is more palatable than the reality—the conquered tribes of this land were not rivals but victims, cheated and impossibly outgunned. (Waxman 2014, n.p.)

In the aftermath of 9/11, the Wild West mythology was effectively reinstated and actualized by president Bush when he hanged a price on the terrorists’ heads. On 17 September 2001, in an off-comment to journalists at the Pentagon when discussing the possibility of bringing bin Laden to justice, Bush solemnly declared: “There’s an old poster out West, as I recall, that says, ‘Wanted: Dead or Alive’” (Bush 2001, “Dead or Alive,” n.p.). This statement was later disseminated and replicated by the media—both favorable and unfavorable to the Bush administration—who ubiquitously portrayed president Bush as a cowboy: in some cases it became “a potent means of coalescing support for George W. Bush as a fast-acting, straight-shooting, brave president” (Dodwell 2004, n.p.); in others, it served to depict the former president, and by extension the United States, as a trigger-happy and violent loner.⁷¹

⁷¹ The White House even promoted a docudrama, *DC 9/11: Time of Crisis* (2003), which was lavish in championing Bush’s post-9/11 courage; the film’s poster featured an image of Timothy Bottoms as George W. Bush, an American flag, and the Twin Towers, all under a suggestive caption: “After the tragedy... Comes the bravery.”



The covers of several newspapers and magazines, as well as posters posted in New York, reproduced the Western-inspired threat made by Bush on 17 September 2001.

The reincarnation of the cowboy myth in the persona of president Bush was the most visible and tangible staging of the Wild West mythology. While I do not want to attribute more significance than is due to the innumerable occasions when then-president Bush is pictured wearing boots—rather than shoes—and a Stetson hat after 9/11, especially because several US presidents have been pictured styling cowboy hats—for instance, Reagan, Clinton, and Obama—and also because Bush had been honing his down-South, cowboy persona since the 1990s when, as Governor of Texas, he cast himself as a plainspoken guy who can get the job done: “the straight-talking cowboy, that lonesome dove, the white man full of backbone, bravery, and bravado” (McMahan 2011, 668).⁷² Still, the evocation of the cowboy myth by the president of the United States is, I argue, a conscious rhetorical and political move. As Leigh Clemons claims in *Branding Texas*, Bush resorts to a performance of “the Texan tradition associating articulate, educated speech with aloofness and snobbery,” making “good use of the brand’s appeal to ‘regular guys’ who value both plain speech and ‘frontier’ forthrightness” (Clemons 2008, 113). The deployment of the cowboy myth aims to unambiguously portray the United States on the side of Good in a geopolitical scenario that has been previously defined as black-and-white and where there is no room for hesitation about what needs to be done. Bush’s cowboy swagger did not go unnoticed and commentators highlighted that it seemed as if the nation itself was assuming the role of the Western hero, conducting itself in international affairs in a unilateral way, while at the same time expecting, in a “sentimental” way, “that others can see our dominating military power as motivated by purely defensive objectives that will protect the innocent” (Lawrence & Jewett 2002, 15).

As one commentator observed, Bush’s declaration on 17 March 2003 that “Saddam Hussein and his sons must leave Iraq within 48 hours. Their refusal to do so will result

⁷² For an analysis of Bush’s impersonation of the Texan cowboy, see Coleman 2008 (pp. 112-115) and Michael Lind’s 2002 study *Made in Texas: George W. Bush and the Southern Takeover of American Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).

in military conflict, commenced at a time of our choosing” (Bush 2003, “Leave Iraq,” n.p.) “aroused a multitude of commentary in editorials and news articles that depicted George W. Bush as a cowboy sheriff who told outlaws to get out of town or face the consequences” (Dodwell 2004, n.p.). *Arab News* (relying from Reuters) referred to the unease that Bush’s demand generated in the Middle East in a piece titled “High Noon for Cowboy Era” (19 March 2003), a very interesting choice of words that made explicit reference to one of the most acclaimed Westerns in American filmography: the classic starring Gary Cooper (*High Noon*, 1950) that tells the story of a town’s sheriff who is denied assistance by the same townspeople he has served and protected for years. The egotism, blandness, and hypocrisy of the citizens force the heroic sheriff to face, all by himself, a showdown with the evil bandit that has been terrifying the town. The most enduring image of this classic is the sheriff walking down empty streets, from house to house, trying to get citizens’ help in vain. Even the judge (and, symbolically, the law) flees the town, and the heroic sheriff remains at his post willing to sacrifice himself for his ungrateful neighbors, facing a more than likely death. Whether the title of the *Arab News* article is ironic or not, I honestly cannot tell.⁷³



From left to right: “The President’s War Posture” (Kal, *The Economist*, 2003). President Bush depicted as a trigger-happy cowboy on a brick wall in Sydney, Australia. Gary Cooper as Marshall Will Kane in the classic poster image of *High Noon*. Caricature of president Bush as Will Kane in *High Noon*.

Several other news outlets in the Middle East and Asia referred to Bush’s “cowboy style of leadership” and criticized “American cowboy policies” (Dodwell 2004, n.p.), making reference not just to the cowboy myth but specifically to the bad cowboy myth. As Joe Frantz and Julian Choate explain in *The American Cowboy: The Myth and the Reality*, the cowboy myth has two variants—the bad cowboy and the good cowboy—which alternatively represent both a desire for violence and recklessness and also the pursuit of heroism and integrity. The line between the good, white-hat cowboy and the

⁷³ The article does not make explicit any editorial line and merely quotes a number of Middle Eastern citizens reasoning about the convenience of Saddam Hussein’s exile and lamenting American interventionism. <http://www.arabnews.com/node/229401>

bad one is ambiguous because the cowboy's will to act, often violently, is sometimes seen as an honorable trait while other times it is deemed despicable.

In this sense, while some news outlets referred to Bush's impersonation in positive terms, most ran editorials that were critical of the Bush administration's foreign policies—remarking how Bush's "frontier lingo" fed the image abroad of the president of the United States as an inarticulate, trigger-happy cowboy—and still others underscored the positive traits of the cowboy hero but criticized Bush's performance of the role as opportunistic. For instance, in a piece for the *Village Voice* entitled "George W. Bush A'int No Cowboy," Eric Baard lamented Bush's appropriation of the figure:

George W. Bush is a fake cowboy. From media accounts, you'd reckon that the president was a buckaroo to the bones. He plays up the image, big-time, with \$300 designer cowboy boots, a \$1,000 cowboy hat, and his 1,600-acre Prairie Chapel Ranch in Crawford, Texas. He guns his rhetoric with frontier lingo, saying that he'll "ride herd" over ornery Middle Eastern governments and "smoke out" enemies in wild mountain passes. [...]

This is about more than having a big ranch. Like the knight, the cowboy is an ideal to which people aspire, Wheeler says, regardless of its mundane historical origins. And Autry's code still carries resonance in red states. Voters there, including the Wild West swing states of Colorado and Nevada, might want to think twice about returning a soft-handed wannabe to the White House. Here's how Bush stacks up against the Cowboy Code (Baard 2004, n.p.)

Baard then proceeds to enumerate ten traits of the mythic cowboy figure, and argues why Bush fails in all of them.

In short, the deployment of the cowboy myth is just one illustration of how, as David Holloway argues, "[f]rom the very beginning, '9/11' and the 'war on terror' were so appropriated by storytelling and mythmaking that the events themselves became more or less indivisible from their representation, or simulations, in political rhetoric, mass media spectacle and the panoply of other representational forms" (Holloway 2008, 5). While the cowboy myth was significantly used in building and maintaining the case for war, it coexisted with other formulations of male power with similar deep imbrications in American popular culture that, as Holloway diagnosed, became indivisible from political rhetoric, effectively establishing a quasi-mirror-image relation between the representation of the event in cultural products and the political speech

about the event. The superhero comics genre—in itself another formulation of the national, heroic monomyth, as I have argued previously—not only engaged with the events of 9/11 and its aftermath (especially DC Comics and Marvel), but was an inestimable source of rhetoric. Just as the cowboy myth brought into 9/11 discourse the ideograms of outlaws, sheriffs, and vigilante justice, the nationalist superhero genre helped to frame the public discussion in terms of evil-doers and retributive justice, ideograms that were already safely locked in the public’s imagination—due to both the popularity of the comics genre and the history of American foreign policy—and which served to frame the United States’ position in the conflict in understandable and unambiguous terms. My observations in the following sections regarding the use of superhero rhetoric for promoting a right-wing nationalist agenda are not a comment on the politics of the superhero genre as a whole, as it has repeatedly shown in recent years to be a healthily complex ideological terrain.⁷⁴ Rather, they take cue from traditional understandings of nationalist superheroes like Captain America.

The Bush administration’s decision to have the president resort to quite simplistic comics rhetoric was, surprisingly, not objected to by the media but faithfully reported. In the build-up of the war with Iraq, the superhero genre became instrumental in molding public discourse around the invasion; as the artist Tanya Ter has noted, “[t]he way the conflict was being portrayed in the US media reduced it to the level of comic book fantasy or video game, an imaginary world where the good guys (‘us’) always triumph over the bad guys (‘them’)” (Ter qtd. in Dittmer 2013, 1). Bush’s reference to the terrorists and to terrorist organizations as super-villainous “evil-doers” became pervasive, as well as the reference to an “axis of Evil” aligned against the United States and the West.⁷⁵ In several speeches during 2001 and 2002 Bush announced that the United States “will rid the world of the evil-doers” and “can’t be cowed by evil-doers” (Bush 2001, “Upon Arrival,” n.p.); he also declared that “this is good versus evil. These are evil-doers” (Bush 2001, “International Campaign,” n.p.) and that the United States would punish “the evil-doers who devised and executed these terrible attacks. Justice demands that those who helped or harbored the terrorists be *punished*—and *punished severely*” (Bush 2001, “Prayer and Remembrance,” n.p.; emphasis added). Note how the use of the verb “punish” reinforces the idea of a superhero giving a villain his due, of retributive justice, rather than of criminal proceedings and the rule of law. Bush also calls on the world to join the United States in the global War on Terror,

⁷⁴ I am referring, for instance, to the latest representations of Batman as *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008 & 2012), or the comics *Captain Confederacy*—a subversion of Captain America that pierces through race and gender issues without complexes.

⁷⁵ The designation of “axis of Evil” gave way to numerous jokes and commentary, and even to the creation of a comedy group, the Axis of Evil Comedy Tour, that started touring in November 2005. The group featured four Middle Eastern comedians and special guest comedians, and gained notoriety in the United States, where they aired in Comedy Central and were featured by several news outlets. The group dissolved in 2011.

because “by helping, you stand squarely in the face of the evil-doers that hate America” (Bush 2002, “Job Creation,” n.p.), among them Iran, Iraq, and North Korea, “who constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world” (Bush 2002, “State of the Union Address,” n.p.). The cause for these enemies hating the United States is, once again, simplified as being pure evil, as is often the cause for the drive that moves super-villains:

The people who did this act on America, and who may be planning further acts, are evil people. They don't represent an ideology, they don't represent a legitimate political group of people. *They're flat evil. That's all they can think about, is evil.* And as a nation of good folks, we're going to hunt them down, and we're going to find them, and we will bring them to justice. (Bush 2001, “FBI Needs Tools,” n.p.; emphasis added)

It is hard for me to imagine the government of any other Western nation rallying the world by deflecting geopolitical analysis and attributing the causes of the attacks solely to the existence of “evil-doers.” A point of comparison can be found in the speeches by José María Aznar and Tony Blair—the only two leaders who participated in Bush's coalition against the “axis of Evil”—when responding to the terrorist attacks in Madrid (2004) and London (2005). Although it is not my goal to analyze here how they responded to the attacks in political terms, and admitting to the fact that they, too, have been ridiculed in the media for their dealings with then-president Bush (see, for instance, the treatment of Aznar by the Spanish satiric press), I could not find evidence of their using the term “evil-doers” or any superhero-related term (except for “axis of Evil”) in their public addresses. One would presume that they intentionally avoided them, and it is not hard to imagine the public's bewildered reaction if they had resorted to such terms. Granted, the different rhetoric does not imply a difference in their political decisions, but what seems clear is that the arguments presented to the Spanish and British people and their parliaments had to be constructed in a different way that was devoid of the mythic elements evident in the American case. In short, the use of lexical markers that resonate with superhero overtones is not discordant in American political culture, while it certainly would be in the European context.

While arguing for the deep imbrication of the superhero comics genre in American public life when analyzing the aftermath of 9/11, I am also aware that this is only part of the explanation, as the immediacy of the comics format (not available to other forms of artistic production) allowed it to quickly engage in the debates that were taking place within the nation regarding the need for national unity and the role that the United States should assume thereafter. Some of these debates seemed “custom-made”

for the superhero comics genre; for instance, in the buildup to the invasion of Iraq—a decision that enjoyed wide popular support—,⁷⁶ political discourse closely mimicked the rhetoric of the superhero, and the adequacy of the genre to convey the government’s position regarding the military solution was unproblematically assumed. While this does not in itself explain the use of superhero-related terms in political discourse—which, as I have argued, responds to a deeper, cultural tradition—what I want to suggest is that the comics genre—whether implicitly or explicitly—did help to frame certain arguments, and was at the same time influenced by the debates that were taking place. A very good illustration of this is Vol. 4 No. 1 of *Captain America*, published June 2002, which addressed, among other issues, the spike in violence against Muslim or Middle Eastern-looking citizens in the wake of the attacks. In a scene where Captain America stops an assault on an Arab-American man, Cap also lectures the assailant on the importance of national unity in order to remain faithful to the exceptionalist image of “America”:

We can *hunt them down*. We can scour every bloodstained trace of their terror from the Earth. We can turn every stone they’ve ever touched to dust, and every blade of grass to ash. And it won’t matter. We’ve got to be stronger than we’ve ever been... As a people. As a nation. We have to be America. *Or they’ve won*. [...] I understand *you want justice*. This isn’t justice. We’re better than this. Save your anger for the enemy. [...] We’re going to make it through this... We, the people. United by a power that no *enemy of freedom* could begin to understand. We share... We are... The American Dream. (Rieber & Cassaday 2002, n.p.; emphasis added)

The first volumes to respond to the September 11 attacks were collective volumes dedicated to crowdfunding for 9/11 victims; in December 2001 the first collective volume came out: *9-11: Artists Respond, Volume One* was a cooperation between three comics syndicates—Dark Horse Comics, Chaos! Comics, and Image Comics—, followed by a second volume, *9-11: The World’s Finest Comic Book Writers & Artists Tell Stories to Remember, Volume Two* by DC Comics, published in January 2002. Alternative Comics published *9-11: Emergency Relief*, and Sirius Entertainment published *I Love New York*. Also in December 2001, Marvel published the volume *Heroes*, followed by *A Moment of Silence* in February 2002.

⁷⁶ A 2003 poll by *The Washington Post* and *ABC News* showed that “[i]n the early stages of the Iraq invasion, more than nine in 10 Republicans and seven in 10 independents said the effort was worth the costs. Just half of Democrats said it was worthwhile” (Craighill & Clement, 2013, n.p.). This trend would radically change in the course of the following years and, as of 2013—the tenth anniversary of the invasion of Iraq —, it remained highly unpopular and divisive (Ibid.).



What these first post-9/11 comics initiate, according to Paul Constant, is a “pro-government cooperation trend” that is still in place more than a decade later and that also percolated into the film versions of the comic books. As Constant notes, before 9/11, “superheroes—especially the ones published by Marvel Comics—were freaks and anti-establishment loners who had, at best, a testy relationship with government agencies” (Constant 2014, n.p.), very much in the vein of the cowboy myth that I have examined above. This loner/outsider position changes radically after 9/11, when comics superheroes get co-opted by government forces, usually under the guise of super-secret organizations. These six collective volumes share a common concern and sensitivity, and seem to imply that the times require for superheroes to stand by the government in the enormous task that lies ahead. But none of these volumes is as fascinating and problematic as the two volumes by Marvel. As Stefanie Diekmann forcefully argues in her article “Hero and Superhero” for *The Guardian*, the implications that can be derived from *Heroes* and *A Moment of Silence* are disquieting in the way that they replicate, almost word-by-word, the official narrative of 9/11 and the War on Terror as I have characterized it so far: a narrative that safely secures the notion that the violence that will be unleashed is justified and necessary, and that any dissent is unacceptable.

The cover of *Heroes* announces humbly that the volume is a tribute to the people who were at Ground Zero—“The world’s greatest super hero creators honor the world’s greatest heroes”—and as such the volume features many of Marvel’s famous characters alongside the unwilling protagonists of 9/11: firefighters, police officers, and other rescue workers. In some images, the hierarchy between superheroes and ordinary humans is reversed, in order to show that humans were the true heroes of the day and that superheroes have been rendered powerless to stop the massacre. For instance, there is a scene where Captain America is almost broken down at the sight of the devastation in Lower Manhattan and he is comforted by a fireman and a police officer who pat his back, “thus becoming a subordinate cooperater in the struggle against the horrors of Ground Zero” (Diekmann 2004, n.p.). This idea is reinforced in

the second volume, *A Moment of Silence*, which includes an introduction written by the mayor of New York Rudy Giuliani, who declares: “I think we all now realize that we do not have to read fiction to find examples of heroism. The real heroes in American life have been with us all along. Our firefighters, police officers and other rescue workers put their lives on the line every day to protect the rest of us from danger” (Giuliani 2002, n.p.).

What is truly interesting in this amalgamation of human heroes and superheroes in the first Marvel volume is that two superheroes figure more prominently than the rest, and for a good reason, as we shall see: Captain America (a soldier conceived as a super-weapon against Nazi Germany in the 1940s), and the Hulk (a timid scientist who turns extremely violent when “made angry”). As Diekmann argues, the choice of these two characters seems to lie on their adequacy “for driving home the notion of yet another historic cause, stressing the connection between anger and justified violence without having to depict anything more than a well-known and well-respected protagonist” (Diekmann 2004, n.p.). The urgency of the historic moment demanded reactions, and the cruelty of the unprovoked aggression had made the Hulk (or the United States), extremely angry. Thus, the awakening of “a mighty giant” (in Bush’s own phrasing) will unleash violence of unpredictable consequences.

The second Marvel volume, *A Moment of Silence*, focuses on images rather than on words; in fact, there are no words at all other than “Quiet!” in a vignette where rescue workers are looking for victims under the debris. The absence of words has been presented as an example of wordless commemoration, the idea that no words can do justice to the heroic deeds of those present at Ground Zero, and that no words can express the horror and the pain that September 11 signifies. While it is possible to read this as a reflection on the inexpressibility of traumatic experience, I concur with Diekmann that wordlessness here also “becomes a policy that is not restricted to the question of how to respond to the heroic deeds (and deaths) of ‘that day,’ but aims at discrediting discourse and discussion about 9/11 in general” (Diekmann 2004, n.p.). As will be argued in section 1.4, expressing nonconformity became extremely difficult in the months that followed 9/11, as there was hardly any room for dissent and its exercise was extremely risky. If we read *A Moment of Silence* in conjunction with *Heroes*—the premise of which is that 9/11 demands citizens, organizations, and institutions to unite in support of the government’s handling of the crisis—then wordlessness can be read as marking “speech (aka debate, discussion, questioning) as a totally inadequate response to the attack” (Diekmann 2004, n.p.). Furthermore, because the volume seems to establish “an act-first-talk-later notion of heroism” (Diekmann 2004, n.p.), discourse is understood as a state of helplessness, or as a hindrance to action, or, even worse, as an escapist form of reaction, as Diekmann suggests.

I also want to point out, without being able to comment on the particularities of comics production in the United States, that the production by American comics artists⁷⁷ in relation to 9/11 ranged from this superheroic endorsement of the Bush doctrine to highly subversive and critical reflections on the aftermath, such as Art Spiegelman's volume *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004). But, in general, the treatment of 9/11 in the superhero genre—whether we believe that it was shaped by public discourse or instrumental to it—can be read as a faithful reflection of what was the most widespread public sentiment at the time, amalgamating the categories of hero and citizen unproblematically. To call firefighters, police officers, and civilians “heroes” became the editorial norm.

This trend was also evident in political discourse, where the heroic stature of ordinary citizens on 9/11 became so tall that on 12 September 2001, in an address to the Armed Forces and the civilian employees of the Department of Defense, the secretary of Defense Rumsfeld harangued the military to live up to the example set by citizens on 9/11:

Let us never forget what this great institution is about. [...] this building is *a place dedicated to the ethos of heroism*. Heroes have gone before us. Here at the Pentagon yesterday, heroes were here again. I know I am speaking to many now, especially those of you in the field, those of you who wear the uniform of our country, who will in the days ahead also be called heroes. I salute each of you for your conduct and commitment. And without hesitation, I ask you now to stay the course in the challenging days ahead. A nation stands behind you. (Rumsfeld 2001, n.p.; emphasis added)

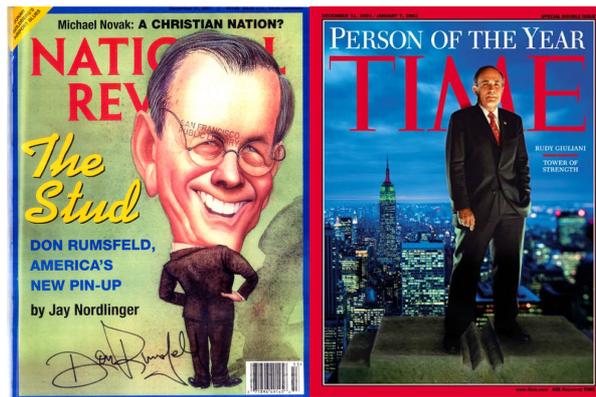
Bringing civilians to the height of the heroism housed by the Pentagon building (“a place dedicated to the ethos of heroism”) and, consequently, asking the military to live up to the deeds of heroic civilians suggests, in my estimation, an amalgamation of military and civilian roles where every American citizen is called upon to defend the nation that is under threat. In his Address to the Nation of 8 November 2001 at the World Congress Center in Atlanta, Georgia, president Bush effectively merges these

⁷⁷ There is a fair amount of consensus among people in the field that “graphic novel” is mostly a publishing/marketing term—devoid of any implication of value—that serves to distinguish the serialized format of the comic books from the book-length structure of the graphic novel, and that the designations “comics” and “comics artists” are acceptable. However, the distinction between comic books and graphic novels has somehow come to be used as implying a matter of value—i.e., graphic novels are more “artistic,” “literary,” and “profound.” This is misleading and I choose to avoid making the distinction whenever possible.

two groups, defending how every American has a significant role to play in the nation's defense:

We have gained new heroes: Those who ran into burning buildings to save others, our police and our firefighters. Those who battled their own fears to keep children calm and safe—America's teachers. Those who voluntarily placed themselves in harm's way to defend our freedom—the men and women of the Armed Forces. And tonight, we join in thanking a whole new group of public servants who never enlisted to fight a war, but find themselves on the front lines of a battle nonetheless: Those who deliver the mail—America's postal workers. We also thank those whose quick response provided preventive treatment that has no doubt saved thousands of lives—our health care workers. (Bush 2001, "World Congress Center," n.p.)

As noted earlier, the heroization of ordinary citizens and civil servants can be read, on the one hand, as the product of the complex semantic load of the term "hero" in American culture and, on the other, as part of a process of providing images of male power and assertion in a post-9/11 context, particularly if the attack is understood as a symptom of weakness, as noted by Faludi. Therefore, heroization was aimed at not only ordinary citizens and rescue workers (including police officers and firefighters) but political leaders as well. Among the most relevant processes of "manly supersizing" (Faludi 2007b, 74) was that of the secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who came to be known as "Rumstud" and was included in *People* magazine's list of sexiest men in 2002. The mayor of New York City Rudy Giuliani was also consistently portrayed as heroic, and *Time* magazine named him "Person of the Year" in December 2001, featuring a powerful and suggestive image of Giuliani standing on a rooftop at night which, in my view, brings to mind images of vigilante justice like that of Batman watching over Gotham.



Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld pictured as “The Stud” in the National Review, and mayor of New York Giuliani pictured as the 2001 “Person of the Year” by Time. Both issues were published on 31 December 2001.

The president of the United States, of course, was also consistently portrayed as heroic, sometimes by the president’s own media operation. Besides the determined and threatening speeches to the world that I have delineated above, Bush performed what came to be known as the “Top Gun stunt” and became an impersonation of the much-remembered character Maverick in the film *Top Gun* (1986). With the occasion of delivering the Mission Accomplished speech—when Bush declared that major combat operations in Iraq were over⁷⁸—on board an aircraft carrier off the coast of San Diego, the Bush administration saw an opportunity to capitalize from the president’s arrival in a fighter jet. In an elaborate photo-op, many pictures were taken of Bush descending from the fighter jet wearing a flight suit, and sharing what seemed like moments of camaraderie with the sailors on board. Then he changed to a regular suit and tie to deliver the speech, but the image of the president as Maverick was safely sealed in the public’s mind and many newspapers referred to this association. In the film, Maverick is, as his name indicates, “an unorthodox or independent-minded person” (*Oxford Dictionary*) that fits the prototype of the American hero in his non-conformity to the rules. His intrinsic nobleness and courage lead him to constantly defy a military system that, in the film, is portrayed as bureaucratic, rigid and, on occasion, counterproductive to heroic performance. Maverick is a hero because, when necessary, he bends the rules.

⁷⁸ According to General Tommy Franks, there were eight objectives for the invasion: “First, ending the regime of Saddam Hussein. Second, to identify, isolate, and eliminate Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction. Third, to search for, to capture, and to drive out terrorists from that country. Fourth, to collect such intelligence as we can relate to terrorist networks. Fifth, to collect such intelligence as we can relate to the global network of illicit weapons of mass destruction. Sixth, to end sanctions and to immediately deliver humanitarian support to the displaced and to many needy Iraqi citizens. Seventh, to secure Iraq’s oil fields and resources, which belong to the Iraqi people. And last, to help the Iraqi people create conditions for a transition to a representative self-government” (Sale & Khan 2003, n.p.). Most of these objectives were far from “accomplished” on 1 May 2003, when Bush made his announcement.

The performance of president Bush as Maverick was, however, not quite as successful as expected, as in later weeks many news outlets commented on how absurd the whole staging had looked. For instance, nobody missed that president Bush was playing this Maverick role from a carrier a few miles off the coast of San Diego that could have been reached by helicopter. It was also noted that the famous banner with the “Mission Accomplished” message was totally misleading—as argued in the footnote below. However, the combination of these two elements sought to give the message that the mission had been accomplished because a non-conforming heroic maverick of a president had been courageous enough to perform this feat against all odds and restrictions. It was simple, effective, and maybe too blunt, but it would take some time before it was ousted as the theatrical “stunt” that it was in mainstream media (the blogosphere, on the other hand, got at it straight away). Although Paul Krugman criticized the act in an op-ed in *The New York Times* the following day, he noted how “US television coverage ranged from respectful to gushing” (Krugman 2003, n.p.). Krugman decried that “nobody seemed bothered that Mr. Bush, who appears to have skipped more than a year of the National Guard service that kept him out of Vietnam, is now emphasizing his flying experience” and related how the British journalists at the site had been amazed at the performance: “A US-based British journalist told me that he and his colleagues had laughed through the whole scene. If Tony Blair had tried such a stunt, he said, the press would have demanded to know how many hospital beds could have been provided for the cost of the jet fuel” (Krugman 2003, n.p.).



Tom Cruise as Maverick in the 1986 film Top Gun (left) and president George W. Bush arriving at the USS Abraham Lincoln on 1 May 2003 (right).

To conclude, the “Top-Gun stunt” can be interpreted as one instance of the deployment of the presidential myth described previously, and what is most striking in the framing

of the 9/11 narrative and the War on Terror with its resort to the three heroic myths described so far is how its heroic tone was ostensibly in conflict with the overwhelming vulnerability that the attacks laid bare. What the hero myth and the widespread labeling of first responders, policemen, firefighters, and civilians in New York City as “heroes” somehow veiled was the fact that they were very much the victims, too. Not only because they experienced the event and its aftermath and suffered the consequences of their involvement in recovery operations, but because their acclaimed heroic status would not even grant them adequate and well-deserved health benefits from the government.⁷⁹ This double-standard is difficult to understand and suggests that the labelling of these citizens as heroes was—at least in political terms—more of a rhetorical operation than a true sentiment with any tangible effects.

As I will argue in the following section, it is possible to write a wholly different narrative about 9/11 and its aftermath, one that speaks of vulnerability, of inexpressible loss, of exclusion, of the necessity of rethinking American geopolitics, and of the need to construct a non-amnesiac and non-mythical memory of the event. As Lawrence and Jewett point out, the hero-worship of ordinary citizens and political leaders can easily be turned into a metaphorical figuring of the nation as heroic, and when the nation itself is conceived in such superheroic terms, “the tendency toward total, violent solutions so easily slips into the public” (Lawrence & Jewett 2002, 339) that statements such as the ones delivered by the Bush administration are unproblematically assumed. The reenactment of the Wild West mythology and of the superhero genre in political and public rhetoric reveals a specifically American drive

⁷⁹ The City of New York faced several lawsuits from first respondents due to its inadequate management of safety and health issues at Ground Zero which, plaintiffs argued, led to an increased exposure to toxins resulting in health issues. The City in many cases failed to acknowledge the impact of this exposure on the respondents’ condition, and many workers were left without treatment as private insurance argued their illness was work-related and caused on the job. As of 2006, state and federal legislation to compensate first respondents begins to be passed, but it still leaves too many hurdles to overcome, as shown by the James Zadroga 9/11 Health and Compensation Act (passed on 22 December 2010). James Zadroga was a NYPD officer who died of a respiratory disease caused by his participation in rescue and recovery operations at the WTC site, and was the first NYPD officer whose death was officially attributed to exposure with toxic chemicals at the site. Satirist and TV personality Jon Stewart has been among the most vocal of activists to demand lifetime health care for first responders, something which was achieved only recently (December 2015). Still, numerous workers remain without proper care or compensation. For further information, see “9/11 First-responders Face Deadline in Lawsuits over Ground Zero Health Effects” http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2011/12/911_workers_face_deadline_in_1.html, “Congress Set to Extend Lifetime Health Care Benefits for 9/11 First Responders” <http://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/congress-set-extend-lifetime-healthcare-benefits-9-11-first-responders-n480706>, and the September 11th Compensation Fund <https://www.vcf.gov/genProgramInfo.html>.

towards fantasy, something which is—if we follow the theses of Rogin, Spanos, and Faludi—a cyclical strategy throughout the history of the United States.⁸⁰

And it is precisely because the epic, mythic tone of the official narrative overrode such considerations (while at the same time and paradoxically insisting on the notion of trauma), and because mandatory patriotism sought to silence critical dissent, that I seek to underscore the value of the *The Zero* as a place for dissent and for thinking otherwise. In light of the context that I have described so far, the choice to write a satiric mock-heroic seems an apt form to question and problematize the widespread use of the term “hero” in the post-9/11 context, with all that it entails. Perhaps no image can better sum up the thesis of this dissertation than the painting *Massacre in Haditha* (2007) by British-Jordanian artist Tanja Ter, who, in the wake of the Haditha killings in Iraq in 2005—when a group of US Marines killed twenty-four unarmed Iraqi civilians at close range, allegedly as retribution for a prior attack on a convoy of Marines—, aptly reinterpreted Picasso’s *Matanza en Corea* (1951) featuring a host of superheroes. As Ter herself explained,

the powerful imagery of the superhero is a reference to the jingoism and propaganda deployed by governments and western media commentators when reporting the conflict. The US government in particular needed to establish and convince the public—in the most simplistic terms—that their soldiers are the “good guys.” [...] The way the conflict was being portrayed in the US media reduced it to the level of comic book fantasy or video game, an imaginary world where the good guys (“us”) always triumph over the bad guys (“them”). (Ter qtd. in Dittmer 2013, 2)

⁸⁰ This same resource was put in practice, for instance, in the wake of the American War in Vietnam. The rewriting of Vietnam, with the deployment of what Jeffords called “hard bodies” in Hollywood films (those hard-bodied and paternalistic heroes like John Rambo who seem to defend “us”—the vulnerable, voiceless public embodied in underprivileged groups, women and children, or even trusting military troops—from “them”—foreign entities, an inefficient US administration and/or internal “bad seeds” who threaten US autonomy [Jeffords 1994]), started during the Reagan administration, which at the same time got involved in atrocious guerrilla wars in Nicaragua and El Salvador, as if nothing had been learnt from the Vietnam experience other than how to improve the military techniques used. As Faludi points out, “the domestic fantasy in which we have dwelled since the attack wasn’t improvised just to deal with 9/11. It was much older” (Faludi 2007b, 200). Thus, by refurbishing the narrative according to each historical moment, policies can remain unchanged.



Pablo Picasso's Matanza en Corea (1951) reinterpreted by Tanja Ter's Massacre in Haditha (2007).

1.4. Dissenting un-Americans

The narratives of 9/11 and the War on Terror stand out as discursive achievements because they manage to establish an apparently homogenous discursive ground, where abiding by the government's position and preserving national unity are perceived as a patriotic duty. Phrases and sayings like "united we stand," "never forget," "America under attack," or "a nation challenged" circulated widely in mainstream media in the days after the event, and they are all indicative of the prevailing mood: it was not the time to question politicians or the government, it was not even the time to question the causes behind the attacks: it was the time to stand together as a nation. This "imperative patriotism" (to borrow Steven Salaita's term) leads, in many cases, to self-censorship and to a certain "political correctness" on the part of the media, as argued by Rachel Smolkin in her piece "Are the News Media Soft on Bush?" (2003). Smolkin claims that in the post-9/11 years the press largely abdicates its watchdog role, as "the terrorist attacks transformed the nation's mood and heightened media restraint" (Smolkin 2003, n.p.). Questioning the government is a dangerous stance that can easily be perceived as un-American—a notion that I will explore in this section—, so much so that the Democratic Party (not in office in 2001) circulated an internal memo entitled "Politics After the Attack," setting the party line in the aftermath of 9/11: "It is important to support the president and set a tone that lacks a sharp partisan quality" (qtd. in Rosenbaum 2001, n.p.). As Rosenbaum argues, the Democratic Party faced the challenge of "criticizing Bush's policies without attacking Bush" (Rosenbaum 2001, n.p.), whose popularity sky-rocketed after 9/11 as the country supported him on the War on Terror.⁸¹

However, this does not mean that the narrative is "formulated within a

⁸¹ The Democrats' strategy was not a selfless gesture but had a specific goal in mind, which was, as Rosenbaum points out, "winning control of Congress in next year's elections and positioning themselves for challenging the president in 2004" (Rosenbaum 2001, n.p.). What is significant is that the general mood of 2001-2003 required that, in order to achieve said political goal, one had to show support to one's rival, something that is not common in the United States' highly bipartisan political scenario.

vacuum" (Hodges 2011, 28) and that there is no alternative discourse taking place within the nation; rather, the narrative is formulated on a discursive ground where a sort of dialogical network is established, with political and media discourses "connected interactively, thematically and argumentatively" (Leudar, Marsland & Nekvapil 2004, 245). Despite the apparent solidity of the narrative, it had its faultlines, and many questioned the "fiction of a united American front" (Kauffman 2009, 647). This section seeks to introduce some aspects of the "other" side of the narrative, for instance the vulnerability exposed by the attacks—ostensibly at odds with the heroic undertones that I have described so far—, and how the defenders of alternative explanations about what happened and the consequences thereof criticized how this vulnerability was alternatively made hyper-visible or invisible in a truly remarkable discursive management. It is precisely these faultlines that, I will contend, *The Zero* seeks to expose through its satiric depiction of a post-9/11 anti-hero, as will be explored in chapter 3.

As noted, part of the success in making the narrative seem homogeneous and solid lied in the policing and condemnation of any voice expressing dissenting views, and on the indiscriminate attribution to said voices of the seemingly worst accusation one can beget as an American citizen: that of being unpatriotic or un-American. Among the most notable voices to speak up against the official narrative of war and national trauma that was already taking shape in the first days, is a wide group of progressive media and cultural critics like Susan Sontag, Gore Vidal, Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, Judith Butler, Donald Pease, and Cornel West, to name but very few of those who were very vocal in calling for a nuanced and informed analysis of the background concerns for the attacks and for the government's response; religious leaders such as Jeremiah Wright with his much-debated sermon about "America's chickens coming

home to roost,”⁸² TV hosts like Bill Maher deconstructing the argument that the terrorists were “cowards,”⁸³ and poet laureate Amiri Baraka with his highly politicized free verse “Somebody Blew Up America.”⁸⁴ What all of these voices have in common is that they situate the attacks in a much wider historical context and challenge both the underlying ideological position of exceptionalism that the WoT narrative represents and the militarized policy that it entails, as well as question the nature and definition of that “America” that is being eulogized. In order to avoid being repetitive and to advance towards the next two chapters, I will not delve in detail with these critics’ stances in this section, as they will be interweaved in my analysis of the novel in chapter 3. What this section focuses on is on the process by which the official narrative and media discourse sought to silence or delegitimize these dissenting voices.

Sontag, in particular, was virulently attacked and labeled a “fifth columnist” and a “quisling” (Bronski 2002, n.p.) for her prescient denunciation of “[t]he disconnect between last Tuesday’s monstrous dose of reality and the self-righteous drivel and outright deceptions being peddled by public figures and TV commentators” (Sontag 2001, n.p.). She lamented how this “startling” and “depressing” narrative seemed to be

⁸² This phrase is loaded with meaning and context, as it was famously used by Malcolm X in his speech of 4 December 1963, entitled “God’s Judgement of White America (The Chickens Come Home to Roost)” where he referred to the assassination of president Kennedy as a case of “chickens coming home to roost” (Malcolm X 1963, n.p.). The idea of retribution for past actions was voiced by many after September 11, before “political correctness” came into play, and many of them made use of Malcolm X’s analogy. Among others, Native American activist and University of Colorado professor Ward Churchill published, on 12 September 2001, an essay entitled “Some People Push Back: On the Justice of Roosting Chickens,” an essay ignored at the time but for which he was dismissed from the University of Colorado in 2007. In a visceral sermon delivered on 16 September 2001 entitled “The Day of Jerusalem’s Fall” that called for self-examination, Jeremiah Wright paraphrased US Ambassador to Iraq Edward Peck—who had commented on the perils of the geopolitical situation in the Middle East after years of US involvement, in an interview on Fox News on 15 September 2001—as a case of “America’s chickens coming home to roost”: “‘Violence begets violence. Hatred begets hatred. And terrorism begets terrorism.’ A white ambassador said that, ya’all. [...] An ambassador whose eyes are wide open, and who’s trying to get us to wake up. And move away from this dangerous precipice upon which we are now poised.” (Wright in McClure 2016). Controversy resurfaced in 2008 when an ABC News report made it known that Wright was the former pastor of then-presidential candidate Obama, and excerpted parts of his sermons which were subject to intense media scrutiny. Obama denounced the statements in question, but critics continued to press the issue of his relationship with Wright. In response, Obama gave a speech titled “A More Perfect Union” (18 March 2008), in which he sought to place Wright’s comments in a historical and sociological context. Eventually, Obama would resign his membership in the church where Wright preached. A transcript, as well as the audio, of Wright’s full sermon is available in McClure 2016. For Churchill’s essay and the controversy that emerged in 2005, see <http://www.kersplebedeb.com/mystuff/s11/churchill.html>.

⁸³ Maher objected to the widespread framing of 9/11 as a conflict between “heroes” and “cowards” on his show *Politically Incorrect* on 17 September 2001. I address this controversy in further detail in section 2.1.

⁸⁴ An audio of Baraka’s poem recited in February 2009 is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUEu-pG1HWw>. For an analysis of Baraka’s poem and the controversy that ensued, see Roza 2009 and Piotr Gwiazda, “The Aesthetics of Politics/The Politics of Aesthetics: Amiri Baraka’s ‘Somebody Blew Up America,’” *Contemporary Literature* 45. 3 (2004): 460-485. Also, Baraka’s self-defense in “The ADL Smear Campaign Against Me. I Will Not Resign, I Will Not Apologize,” *CounterPunch*, 7 October 2002, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2002/10/07/the-adl-smear-campaign-against-me/>, where he argues “that Black people feel we have always been victims of terror, governmental and general, so we cannot get as frenzied and hysterical as the people who ask us to dismiss our history and contemporary reality to join them, in the name of a shallow ‘patriotism,’ in attacking the majority of people in the world, especially people of color and in the third world” (Baraka 2002, n.p.).

a “campaign to infantilize the public” (Ibid.) and took issue with the then-dominant claim that the terrorists were cowards: “if the word ‘cowardly’ is to be used, it might be more aptly applied to those who kill from beyond the range of retaliation, high in the sky, than to those willing to die themselves in order to kill others” (Ibid.). The same argument, if I may point out, that got Bill Maher fired from ABC and his show *Politically Incorrect* cancelled. Chomsky suffered fortunes similar to Sontag’s for stating that although the terrorist attacks were “major atrocities,” in scale they did not reach “the level of many others, for example, Clinton’s bombing of the Sudan with no credible pretext, destroying half its pharmaceutical supplies and killing unknown numbers of people” (Chomsky 2001, n.p.). As Hansen writes, “[t]o many, it seemed Chomsky was shrugging off the Sept. 11 attacks on the United States because our country commits atrocities just as terrible and often worse” (Hansen 2002, n.p.); an instance of this is an article published by Horowitz in response to Chomsky on 27 September 2001—“The Sick Mind of Noam Chomsky”—, which accused Chomsky of being “a pathological ayatollah of anti-American hate” and “the leader of the treacherous fifth-column Left” (Horowitz 2001, n.p.).

As a result, and as Hansen argues for *Salon*, “Noam Chomsky and Susan Sontag will always be remembered as the two leading American intellectuals who said the wrong thing after Sept. 11” (Hansen 2002, n.p.), with “Chomsky-hating” becoming “a national pastime,” according to Bronski (2002). But as Bronski notes,

The attacks on [Sontag, Chomsky, and Vidal] are not simply, as some have claimed, the panic reaction of a culture that has been deeply shaken by unexpected events in geopolitics, but the full flowering of a strain of anti-intellectualism intrinsic to US culture. What we are witnessing here is a full assault on the dwindling structures of intellectualism—both academic and public—in American life. It is less about the events of 9/11 than about the ascendancy of a deeply conservative campaign aimed at creating a national culture that values nationalism over individualism and physical and military might over open-ended dialogue. (Bronski 2002, n.p.)

This “national culture” that Bronski refers to is the one that usually lashes out with the charge of “un-Americanness” against voices that beg to dissent. It is difficult to pin down exactly what is implied by the notion of “un-Americanness,” even though it has a long tradition in US political and cultural life and can be traced back at least to the anti-Communist hysteria that swept the United States in the 1950s, with the

establishment of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC).⁸⁵ Although no such committee exists anymore, and although there is not much scholarship on what exactly constitutes un-Americanness, the notion of “Americanness” as a shared public sentiment is strong in the public consciousness—see, for instance, the “rally-round-the-flag effect” described by Willis (2005)—, and seems to encompass what the majority understands to be the founding principles of the American nation. For instance, one can find news headlines on both sides of the political spectrum (Republican and Democrat) referring to un-Americanness, such as “9/11 Responders: GOP Resistance to Permanent Zadroga Act Is ‘Un-American’” (CBS) and, recently, “Trump’s un-American Campaign: Unleashing the Worst” (*The Washington Post*) and “Trump’s Worst Positions Aren’t ‘Un-American.’ They’re Flashbacks To Our Ugly History” (*The Huffington Post*). It is also easy to find instances where even symbolic acts by public personalities cause them to be queried in the media for disrupting a seemingly prescriptive notion of patriotism: for instance, Colin Kaepernick’s anthem protest—the San Francisco 49er’s quarterback refuses to stand up during the playing of the anthem before each game, in protest for racial oppression and inequality—continues to generate extremely polarized debate. While Kaepernick’s protest—started in August 2016—has received support by some NFL players, reactions have included calling him un-American, fans burning Kaepernick’s jersey, and the Republican congressman Steve King declaring that Kaepernick’s protest is “sympathetic to ISIS” and is “undermining patriotism” (Tesfaye 2016, n.p.). In the same interview King suggested that Kaepernick had an “Islamic girlfriend” and that this might be the cause for his sudden un-Americanness (Tesfaye 2016, n.p.). President Obama, on the other hand, has defended Kaepernick’s right to political protest, and so have great numbers

⁸⁵ The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), established in 1938, gained force especially with the onset of the Cold War as a result of growing tensions with the Soviet Union after the end of the Second World War. From the outset the HUAC was a source of political discord, as many valued the revelations it produced and others claimed that citizens were targeted not for having committed crimes but for their political beliefs or for exercising their right to free speech, and that it was effectively used as a tool to discredit then-president Roosevelt’s New Deal programs on the charge of “socialism.” The committee generated an intimidating atmosphere wielding its subpoena power as a weapon to call citizens to testify in high-profile hearings before Congress, alleging that Communists disloyal to the United States had infiltrated federal government agencies, schools, the entertainment industry and many other areas of American life, and that some of these well-known citizens were carrying out subversive actions. Subjects of HUAC investigations were grilled in Congressional hearings, although they had the option of invoking their right to avoid self-incrimination under the Fifth Amendment, but “pleading the Fifth” created the impression that they were guilty of a crime and prison terms could be imposed on them under the charge of contempt. In addition, those who refused to cooperate were often blacklisted by their employers. HUAC’s controversial tactics contributed to the fear, distrust and repression that existed during the anticommunist hysteria of the 1950s. HUAC’s work served as a blueprint for the witch-hunt tactics employed by US Senator Joseph McCarthy in the early 1950s, who led an aggressive anticommunist campaign of his own that made him a powerful and feared figure in American politics. His “reign of terror” came to an end in 1954, when the news media revealed his unethical tactics and he was censured by his colleagues in Congress. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, HUAC’s influence was in decline, but its operations continued until 1975 (Source: history.com). In June 2016 Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich called for the creation of a new House Committee on Un-American Activities, invoking the body as a blueprint for weeding out American ISIS adherents and sympathizers (Krieg 2016, n.p.).

of US Veterans.⁸⁶ Similar debates followed gymnast Gabby Douglas' neglect to put her hand over her heart during the playing of the Star-Spangled Banner at the 2016 Rio Olympics.⁸⁷ In short, what I am suggesting is that if these virulent reactions take place in 2016 over sports, it is easy to imagine the lengths of acrimony and commentary that dissenting views over post-9/11 politics would generate in 2001 and subsequent years. In other words, I want to highlight how, despite the rich intellectual life of the United States, expressing dissenting views as regards "America" is always a risky act, and more so in the wake of 9/11 and the nationalist discourse that emerged.⁸⁸

Thus, what I want to suggest is that the success of the 9/11 and WoT narrative relied, to a large extent, on the Bush administration's "rhetoric of containment by annihilation" (Bloodsworth-Lugo & Lugo-Lugo 2010, 20) through the reinforcement of a series of oppositional pairs like good/evil, us/them, barbarism/civilization, and, crucially, American/un-American, with the aim of suppressing dissenting views and collapsing them into "a unified public discourse [that] fueled the illusion of a unified American public—a society of supposed like mind(s) and opinion(s)" (Bloodsworth-Lugo & Lugo-Lugo 2010, 13). As these authors argue in *Containing (un)American Bodies*,⁸⁹ the significance of the Bush administration's rhetorical maneuvers resided in that

- (1) they established and clarified a clear dichotomy between what is American and what is not American; and (2) they became official discursive tools that would be employed by other social agents and the

⁸⁶ Among many other things, Kaepernick was accused of disrespecting US Veterans, but there is great support for Kaepernick among members of the Armed Forces who sustain that as servicemen they have pledged to defend Kaepernick's right to express himself freely. Kaepernick has refused to stand up during the anthem on the grounds that "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color. To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder." A post by blogger and US veteran Jim Wright defending Kaepernick soon turned viral (<http://www.stonekettle.com/search?q=kaepernick>).

⁸⁷ A good analysis of Douglas' gesture can be found in Dave Schilling's piece for *The Guardian* "Gabby Douglas's Lesson from the US National Anthem Outcry: Conform or Else," 11 August 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/blog/2016/aug/11/gabby-douglas-hand-heart-anthem-gymnastics>

⁸⁸ A very clear illustration of this is the status that Chomsky holds in Europe as a "dissident superstar" (Kirby 2002, n.p.), while in the United States he is mostly sidelined as "an irritant who has dared to undermine [the American political establishment] at a time when national unity and community of purpose are the most favoured answers to political problems" (Kirby 2002, n.p.). The sidelining of Chomsky did not occur as a consequence of his post-9/11 views—it was already in place since the 1990s—but his uncompromising stance after the attacks certainly contributed to perpetuating it.

⁸⁹ The main thesis in Bloodsworth-Lugo and Lugo-Lugo's *Containing (un)American Bodies: Race, Sexuality, and Post-11 September 2001 Constructions of Citizenship* is that the mindset, rhetoric, and strategies employed during the Cold War—one of them being the putting in motion of the notion of un-Americanness—were replicated in the post-9/11 era, where they find striking parallelisms between "the similar positioning of communists and homosexuals, during the Cold War, and terrorists and lesbians/gays, in the discourse surrounding the War on Terror" (Bloodsworth-Lugo & Lugo-Lugo 2010, 19).

general public during subsequent years. These maneuvers would inform the way the nation came to understand itself post-9/11 and its relation to other(ed) countries and peoples. (Bloodsworth-Lugo & Lugo-Lugo 2010, 7)

Delimiting the boundaries of un-Americanness and putting the category in the spotlight of public discourse implied, according to these authors, reversing Americans' illusion of the world as an open and global society, resulting from the pervasive diffusion of the US capitalist/military culture. The undermining of this illusion by the 9/11 attacks caused the United States government and its citizens to begin "a speedy—and perhaps brutal—process of shutting out the world, [becoming] reluctant to engage with a newly-revealed *uncontained* world" (Ibid., 8; emphasis in the original). Thus, measures aimed at security and containment were swiftly enacted, as is the case of the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security (a massive surveillance agency) and the passing of the Patriot Act.⁹⁰

Through the magnification and distortion of the threat, the insistence on the importance of standing united against external aggression, and the construction of a post-9/11 Americanness—a concerted effort to protect "America" by containing un-Americanness—certain bodies, ideas, religions, and individuals came to be deemed as threatening and in need of being "contained," and "[p]atriotism and citizenship became linked to 'those in favor of the war against terrorism'" (Ibid., 1). The categories "enemy combatant," "illegal immigrant" and "Muslim" were all racialized and constructed as "terrorizing," and the discursive strategies employed "had a direct influence on the United States public's perception of 'the other,' especially given the heightened state of patriotic fervor that developed among Americans after 9/11" (Ibid., 19). The government and the media insisted on a newfound vulnerability that put the nation on a permanent terrorist-attack alert, and political rhetoric easily used it to

⁹⁰ As part of the War on Terror on the domestic front, the administration established the Department of Homeland Security in order "to enhance our protection and reduce our vulnerability to terrorist attacks" (Bush 2002, "Homeland Security," n.p.). Bush defined Homeland Security as "a shared responsibility" and rallied the "entire society" to collaborate in the challenges to come. Said collaboration included the acceptance on the part of citizens of the suspension of certain civil rights, which effectively turned ordinary citizens into suspects under the provisions of the Patriot Act. The Patriot Act was passed in October 2001, only forty-five days after the 9/11 attacks. The methods provisioned include, but are not limited to, the suspension of the right of being notified before your house, apartment or office is entered and searched (provisioned by the Fourth Amendment); the issuing, without a judge's approval, of NSLs (National Security Letters) which bind the recipient—who may or may not be suspected of unlawful behavior—to disclose the information required (phone and computer records, credit and banking history) and to remain silent about having received the letter; the expansion of the official definition of terrorism, so that many domestic groups that engage in certain types of civil disobedience can find themselves labeled as terrorists; the granting permission to government agencies to monitor, without probable cause, Internet traffic and e-mail communications on any Internet service provider; and the indefinite incarceration of immigrants and other non-citizens under the mere suspicion of their being engaged in terrorism. As I will later argue in chapter 3, *The Zero* depicts all of these measures as they are applied to the novel's characters, and widens even more the Bush administration's already shifting category of terrorists to include government's agents.

justify violence, as preemptive self-defense (what came to be known as the “Bush Doctrine”) was deemed the most appropriate response.

As I have suggested before, the insistence on an impending threat and the hyper-visibility of the newfound vulnerability coexisted with other efforts to make this vulnerability less visible. While Bush’s constant reminders of America’s “enduring vulnerability” (Bush 2002, “Homeland Security,” n.p.) posed it as a justification for violence against Others—in sharp contrast to Butler’s formulation of vulnerability as an ontological condition that makes us care for Others (*Precarious Life*, 2004)—, the harsher version of the events of September 11, the one that spoke of the United States’ vulnerability in its most human as well as symbolic sense, was not only discursively overwritten by the triumphal collective tale of American heroics and military power, but was also literally concealed in the censorship of certain images—both of the 9/11 jumpers and of the repatriation of dead American soldiers from Iraq—, an issue excellently explored by Tom Junod’s “The Falling Man” (2003) and by Jeffrey Melnick’s chapter “Rising” in his volume *9/11 Culture* (2009).⁹¹ As Sontag argues in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, “photographs are a means of making ‘real’ (or ‘more real’) matters that the privileged and the merely safe might prefer to ignore” (Sontag 2004, 6) and of exposing “the outrageousness, the insanity of war” (Ibid., 12).⁹² Added to the discursive and literal invisibilization of the human toll of 9/11 and the WoT, many critics have also commented on the highly visual nature of the 9/11 event (Baudrillard 2002; Sontag 2003; Žižek 2003) as actually impeding a clearer field of vision, an aspect that I consider very relevant given *The Zero’s* engagement with the motifs of vision and perception. As Diana Taylor argues in “Lost in the Field of Vision; Witnessing 9/11,”

What I most remember of the months following 9/11 is all about seeing,
about the failure to understand what I was seeing with my own eyes, to

⁹¹ Junod retells his quest to establish the identity of the man featured in the iconic photograph of the same title by photographer Richard Drew, which shows a man falling headfirst, arms at the sides, and one knee slightly bent. For the author, the interest of the photograph lay (beyond its aesthetic, testimonial, or emotional value) on the resistance the image produced and on the ensuing banishment of similar images from the public record. Briefly, the reasons behind this turn to invisibility were that many questioned the ethics of showing the images, talked about respecting people’s privacy, and demanded the media not to strip victims of their dignity in their dying moments. But, as reporter Tom Leonard argues, resistance also stemmed from the difficulty in admitting the possibility of suicide: in fact, the word “jumper” was cast aside and substituted by the less agentive “falling” and the office of the New York chief medical examiner ruled those deaths as homicide. As the spokesperson of the examiner said, “[j]umping indicates a choice, and these people did not have that choice,” and declared officially that “they fell from the 1,350ft tall, 110-floor skyscrapers. [...] The force of explosion and the fire behind them forced them out of the windows” (Leonard 2011, n.p.). As Melnick states in his study of post-9/11 cultural production, “[a] few years out from 9/11, the bodies would begin to fall more steadily in popular art” (Melnick 2009, 90), a fact that is validated through the inclusion, in the recently-opened 9/11 Memorial Museum at Ground Zero, of the most disturbing images of people jumping from the towers. However, these images are displayed in a separate viewing room, with a trigger-warning to visitors. Cf. Junod 2003 and Leonard 2011.

⁹² Therefore, writes Sontag, “all photographs wait to be explained or falsified by their captions” (Sontag 2004, 9).

make sense of the images in the media, and the downright prohibition of seeing and knowing imposed by the government. It wasn't just "ground zero" and popular protest that was blocked-out. Coverage of the US attacks on Afghanistan was highly censored; surveillance was turned back on the public at home. (Taylor 2003, 258)

I include Taylor's argument here because it succinctly lists all the types of constraints—natural or fabricated—imposed on "seeing and knowing" 9/11, on making sense of the events beyond the media and government narrative, on having access to the most disturbing images and the information. What is significant is that, in the face of these constraints, many works of post-9/11 fiction actually make this type of vulnerability visible, against the claims of many critics of post-9/11 fiction who suggest that this human tragedy is aestheticized and sublimated therein. Chapter 3 will demonstrate how Walter's *The Zero* is part—and perhaps a precursor—of a trend of fiction that rather than sublimate and aestheticize the events of September 11 and its aftermath—as so many critics have argued early post-9/11 fiction does—actively questions and subverts the official narrative about the aftermath of the events and the overarching depiction of its wake as a trauma that defies narration.

But before entering into these particulars, chapter 2 will explore what is perhaps *The Zero's* most subversive act; namely, the exploration of the post-9/11 United States through a form that was immediately banished after the attacks: ironic and satiric humor. Much has been argued about the "end of irony" and humor after 9/11, and much has been theorized about the early corpus of early post-9/11 fiction from the perspective of trauma theory. The chapter will begin by considering how both the corpus of post-9/11 fiction and its critical assessment have begun to shift over time to include other considerations, and point to *The Zero's* non-conformity to these early assessments, as well as discuss the reasons for the early—and failed—banishment of ironic and satiric humor after 9/11. The declarations about the end of irony and satire rely, to a great extent, on outdated critical notions of what satire can be and what satire can do. But there also might be the suspicion that satire is inherently dialogical, and a desire to shut down such an inquisitive form. Following recent trends that are increasingly recuperating Bakhtin's work on the satiric text (1963, 1965, 1981), I will put forward a more open-ended, dialogic, and subversive understanding of satire through what Bakhtin defines as the carnivalized text. Reading *The Zero* as carnivalesque satire, I suggest, widens the scope of the text's meaning and helps to bring to the foreground its critical and dissenting stance.

2. Writing in the aftermath

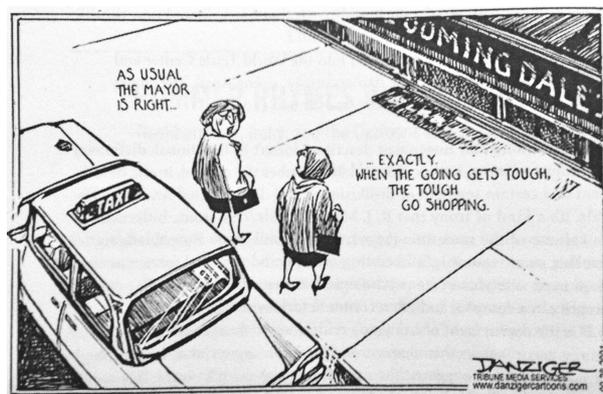
Over a decade after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 the corpus of post-9/11 fiction has diversified into previously unexplored areas, and so has criticism followed in these new tendencies. A “second wave of post-9/11 fiction”—as Petrovic labels the production after 2008—is characterized by “a newfound imaginative space founded on deconstructing the national exceptionalist fantasy” (Petrovic 2015, ii) that dominated the discursive landscape after 9/11, and that signified the attacks as a traumatic moment of rupture that meant the loss, yet again, of innocence for the United States. The first wave of post-9/11 fiction tended to be shaped by certain readerly and critical expectations that, in face of a speechless and shocked collectivity, demanded fiction writers “to give meaning”—in the complex and intricate ways that fiction permits—to what felt like a national, collective trauma. As novelist Jay McInerney acknowledged, there was a shared desire “to have a novelist such as McEwan or DeLillo or Roth process the experience for us” (McInerney 2005, n.p.). While fiction writers would oblige in due course, Don DeLillo’s harrowing essay “In the Ruins of the Future” anticipated already in December 2001 that response became a question of “responsibility” and that these first attempts at “understanding” 9/11 would be tentative at best. Writers’ challenge was, as DeLillo wrote, “to set into our frame of practiced response” the “massive spectacle that continues to seem unmanageable, too powerful” (DeLillo 2001, 35) and to give meaning while at the same time resisting the demand to provide a univocal and meaningful response or, as Marco Abel phrased it, the generalized demand to “declare what the event means” (Abel 2003, 1236).

It is in this horizon of expectations that the first wave of post-9/11 fiction would have to inscribe itself: a landscape dominated by trauma narratives that demanded a naturalistic portrayal of the effects of the attacks without falling into voyeurism, aesthetic escapism, domesticity, or its attendant danger of depolitization.⁹³ And all the while, those narratives had to paradoxically nod in recognition of the inexpressible nature of traumatic events. As Baelo-Allué points out, first wave post-9/11 fiction was often “trapped in narrowing conceptions of trauma and the impossibility of its articulation” (Baelo-Allué 2016, 169), with criticism often demanding political correctness in the portrayal of the traumatic event and at the same time decrying the limitations imposed by the narration of trauma. In fact, criticism became somewhat prescriptive (Worthington 2015, 3) of what a “good 9/11 novel” should be and repeatedly voiced the inadequacy of early texts to grapple with the event. In 2005, the media was clearly deploring these alleged failings in an article entitled “Truth Is

⁹³ These were some of the contentions against early novels such as Beigbeder’s *Windows on the World* (2004), Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) and DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007). See McInerney 2005; Kakutani 2007; Litt 2007; O’Hagan 2007; O’Keeffe 2007; Gray 2011; Randall 2011; Baelo-Allué 2012.

Stronger than Fiction” that declared that “no novels ha[d] yet engaged with the post-September 11 era in any meaningful way” (Donadio 2005, n.p.), a verdict that was restated in 2011 by Laura Miller’s piece for *Salon*, “Why We Haven’t Seen a Great 9/11 Novel.”

It was while critics and the public were still waiting for “the great 9/11 novel” to come out of the expected and canonical sources—in more or less the prescribed ways—that Jess Walter’s fourth novel *The Zero* was published (2006). While the novel received excellent reviews—“brilliant,” a “noir page-turner,” “scathing,” “the *Catch 22* of 9/11,” a “Kafkaesque parable” (qtd. in Walter 2007, n.p.)—and was a finalist for the 2006 National Book Award, it remained largely under the radar of critics and scholars alike, even as it shed some light on “what 9/11 has meant” and “what 9/11 has done to us”—the usual demands of critics of post-9/11 fiction. The lack of attention received by the novel within the corpus of post-9/11 fiction studies is surprising when considering that by 2006 roughly sixty-nine post-9/11 novels had been published and, of those, less than half were by American novelists; what I mean to say is that Walter’s novel was among the first attempts by American writers to respond to the cultural demand to give meaning to the traumatic experience through fiction. It might be argued that at the time Walter was relatively unknown to the general reading public, but I want to suggest that it was *The Zero*’s non-conformity to canonical expectations that made it pass under the radar. In a trauma-centered prescriptive scenario that called for the demise of ironic humor in the face of tragedy, Walter’s novel dissected through satire the discursive management of 9/11 by the Bush administration and American society’s acquiescence to the official discourse of collective grief, trauma, and heroism, to the demand to move on and “go shop,” and to the effective inauguration of a state of exception at home and abroad, as has been argued in the introduction.



Jeff Danziger, “Mayor Giuliani Urges Everyone to Come to New York and Buy Something” (28 September 2001).

As Duvall suggests, the publication of Walter's text in 2006—a time when the cultural climate was still prone to self-censorship and to political correctness, and when dissenters were easily accused of being un-American—was indeed a risky move (Duvall 2013, 280). Especially because the trauma discourse was so pervasive that it had permeated not only post-9/11 fiction but also political discourse as the means to safely accommodate the discourses of patriotism, innocence, and exceptionalism, as well as to justify the ideology of pre-emptive action (Baelo-Allué 2016, 167). This, together with academics in the field of trauma studies seizing upon the opportunity “to put into practice their own theories” (Ibid., 167), may partly explain the popularity of the trauma studies approach to early post-9/11 fiction and the demise of Walter's novel. However, I argue that Walter's unpopular choice to write a satirical novel makes him a front-runner in the exploration of the concerns that Petrovic attributes to the second wave of post-9/11 fiction; namely, the exploration of the cultural and geopolitical implications of the US exceptionalist response.

In 2013, John Duvall's analysis is the first among a small number of scholarly articles that have only recently begun to turn their attention to *The Zero*,⁹⁴ although it has to be noted that some generic studies on post-9/11 fiction and cultural production had briefly mentioned the novel—sometimes just as a footnote—from 2009 onwards (Melnick 2009; Crownshaw 2011; Däwes 2011; Gibbs 2014). Duvall's article was followed by relevant studies on the novel by Aaron Derosa (2013), Heike Schwarz (2013), Jason Dodge (2014), Anthony Flinn (2014), Kristine Miller (2014), and Marjorie Worthington (2015). While some of these analyses fall within the interpretive paradigms of early 9/11 studies by approaching post-9/11 fictions as explorations or representations of the traumatic experience, of how to engage ethically with the figure of the terrorist or fundamentalist Other, and of how to deal with a loss that is characterized as exceptional, some of these texts have also begun to investigate *The Zero*'s resort to satirical humor (Duvall 2013; Dodge 2014; Flinn 2014). Following in these steps, this chapter reflects on the significance of Walter's use of satire as a counter-discourse that exceeds the prescriptions of early criticism of post-9/11 fiction and negates the announcements of irony's and satire's demise as a valid outlook for the post-9/11 world. Against early media reception that seemed to miss the novel's high potential for ethical engagement, a brief survey of some of the textual and semiotic strategies employed by satire seeks to demonstrate the vitality of this allegedly “defunct” and “politically incorrect” form in the post-9/11 world, and how laughter can function not as negative mockery but as a tool for ethical engagement.

⁹⁴ Earlier studies include a conference presentation by Derosa (2011) and an MA thesis by Santin (2011). However, I take 2013 as the starting date when refereed journal articles or book chapters that focus specifically on *The Zero* begin to be published.

2.1. The recurrent deaths of irony and satire

Irony and satire are distinct terms but they are intrinsically related, as irony can be thought of as “one of the ways by which satire signifies” (Bowles 2015, 9). As Rosa Díez Cobo argues, “both modes, although operating on different levels, can be detected as in a symbiotic relation, supplementing and strengthening each other” (Díez Cobo 2003, 57); in other words, satire usually includes irony but not all irony is necessarily satirical, and it is satire’s intrinsic relation to irony that lies behind satire’s ambivalence. It is because of this symbiotic relationship that, in this first section, I will use the terms “satire” and “irony” sometimes interchangeably, because this is how they are used in some of the non-specialist texts—mostly from the press—that I address here (media outlets like *Time*, *Slate*, *Salon*, etc.); and also because, on occasion, cultural critics—Adorno among them—use both terms interchangeably when dealing with satire in general terms. Later sections will attempt a more specialized characterization of satire; for the moment what I want to underscore is how this chapter will seek to transition from a traditional definition of irony as “saying one thing and meaning another” (Bogel 2001, 67) to a definition that underscores the “double-voicing” postulated by Bakhtin and, later, by Hutcheon (1989) as “saying one thing that means two” (Ibid.). In Hutcheon’s understanding, which owes much to Bakhtinian notions of the dialogic nature of carnivalized satiric discourse, irony is defined “in terms of a dynamic relationship, a communicative process [...] where the semantic space is a space ‘in between,’ comprising both the spoken and the unspoken” (Hutcheon 1992, 220). It is this duplicity of irony and satire as discourse that I will eventually argue for Walter’s novel in chapter 3.

No study of post-9/11 fiction can bypass the grandiose announcements about the death of irony and satire in the wake of 9/11, and because these have been extensively documented,⁹⁵ and have also been quickly and unceremoniously contested, I will not delve into them here in too much detail; rather, what this section seeks to demonstrate is how the announcements about the end of irony and satire is a recurrent strategy in American cultural and political discourse. And as a consequence, the debate about satire’s vitality is a recurrent theme in literary studies. Since this dissertation is concerned with a novel that falls within the literary practice of the satiric,⁹⁶ it is relevant to explore how, specifically in the United States, these notions tend to be

⁹⁵ For a quick overview of the debates in the media over the end of irony, see Hirschhorn 2011 and Duvall 2013. See also Carter 2001; Dodero 2001; Rosenblatt 2001; Beers 2001; Kakutani 2007; Williams 2003; Newman 2008.

⁹⁶ It is important to state in advance that one of the first matters of contention one encounters in satire criticism has to do with categorization (whether satire is a form, a genre, a tone, an attitude, an effect...). In order to avoid the limitations that many of these labels bring with them (and which have in some cases constrained twentieth-century satire criticism), I will often refer to the satiric as a practice, discourse or effect, or refer simply to “satire.”

cyclically reevaluated in different historical moments—with September 11 being one such moment. From a discursive point of view, the debate is interesting insofar as it reveals the currency of modes of understanding ironic and satiric humor that may cast light on issues of censorship, political correctness, freedom of expression or dissent. In the aftermath of 9/11 the perceived inadequacy of humor in the face of a catastrophic historical event together with the pervasiveness of the trauma studies approach argued earlier served to construct readings for *The Zero* that ignored its satiric practice and that, in my view, explain the relative lack of attention that it received as part of the early corpus of post-9/11 fiction.

Apart from trauma becoming the overarching and inescapable paradigm of interpretation, a second condition arose in post-9/11 public discourse that reinforced the much-repeated mantra that “everything changed” on 9/11. The nation was plunged, as both Butler (2004) and Sturken (2007) have argued, into a melancholic state that, besides constraining a critical examination of the causes for the attacks and hampering the task of seeking alternatives to the government’s aggressive policies, gave traction to the trope of the end of irony and satire, as their attendant “lack of seriousness” was deemed an inadequate means to address the aftermath. The debate over the appropriateness of ironic humor after 9/11 was initiated by the editor of *Vanity Fair*, Graydon Carter, who declared that the terrorist attacks would bring about “a seismic change,” most clearly epitomized by “the end of the age of irony” (Carter qtd. in Beers 2001, n.p.),⁹⁷ arguments that were echoed by many other critics and cultural prognosticators who reflected that this was probably the “[o]ne good thing [that] could come from this horror” (Rosenblatt 2001, n.p.). Besides the repeated calls for cultural sensitivity in face of a shocked collectivity, the underlying question seemed to be whether the culture could keep engaging in irony and satire after tragedy, or whether, as Rosenblatt pointed out, the ironic mood that had characterized the 1990s, with its conviction “that nothing was to be believed in or taken seriously” (Rosenblatt 2001, n.p.) would, or should, be changed forever. Of these pronouncements, Camille Dodero’s was perhaps the most bitter in reflecting that the attacks could signify not just “the end of unbridled irony” but also a cultural change for her own generation: “Maybe a coddled generation that bathed itself in sarcasm will get serious” (Dodero 2001, n.p.). Without dismissing the stark differences in context, the perception that the attacks would bring about not just geopolitical and economic changes but also the

⁹⁷ It is interesting to note that Carter is no stranger to satire himself, being one of the co-founders of the satirical magazine *Spy*, which ran from 1986 to 1998. The monthly magazine was based in New York and specialized in irreverent and satirical pieces about celebrities, high society, the American media, and the entertainment industries. A regular feature of the magazine was “short-fingered vulgarian Donald Trump,” who was in the cover story of the first issue, “Jerks: The Ten Most Embarrassing New Yorkers” (October 1986). The article noted the “sheer cheesiness” of his buildings, his “noxious tactics with tenants he wishes to evict,” his “hustler-on-his-best-behavior manner,” and, especially, “the stupid things he says” (*Spy* 1986, 31). See Kurt Andersen, “Kurt Andersen on President-Elect Donald J. Trump: The Unbelievable Punchline to *Spy*’s 30-Year Joke” (*Esquire*, 6 November 2016. <http://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a50520/president-trump-kurt-andersen/>)

onset of a deep, cultural shift somewhat resonated with Theodor Adorno's disquisitions about whether one could keep writing poetry and engaging in cultural activity after Auschwitz, or whether the "barbaric" culture that had produced Auschwitz should be radically reconsidered. Contrary to popular perceptions that tend to read Adorno's words as an expression of traumatic shock,⁹⁸ Adorno's words sought to convey that the horrific events of the Second World War had to be signified, by necessity, as a moment of historical rupture. To continue to engage in the production of cultural artifacts in the same cultural matrix that had given way to Auschwitz was to participate in the perpetuation by denial of that barbaric culture. In other words, to unproblematically participate in its reification through cultural production had the effect, in Adorno's view, of making fundamental criticism of that culture literally unthinkable (Adorno 1983, 33-34). It is in this sense that I contend that the arguments could share a common concern, insofar as the pronouncements about the end of irony after 9/11 derived from a perception of the attacks as a moment of historical and cultural rupture, as a watershed moment that carried the implicit demand not to perpetuate the cultural order that had given way to 9/11 in the first place. But while these calls may be interpreted as the inauguration of a new period of cultural self-evaluation, with its attendant critical and dissenting stance, I argue that what they really concealed was an effort to silence the dissenting and critical potential of ironic and satiric humor in face of a monolithic and nationalist discursive apparatus about 9/11 that was already taking shape, and that I have described in the previous chapter.

It is this inquisitive potential of satire that this section seeks to explore by performing a reevaluation of traditional satire criticism through the lens of Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque. Despite the fact that satire is understood to be a generalized praxis in everyday discourse (Simpson 2003, 1-5) and that, contrary to the claims about its demise, it "continues to flourish in widely disseminated formats and media" (Alliker Rabb 2007, 570) such as periodicals, newspapers, blogs, TV shows, film, music, drama, and art, in critical scholarship satire tends to be ubiquitously defined in relation to literature, and it is this corpus that will be addressed.⁹⁹ Traditional criticism of narrative satire still exerts a deep influence over modern

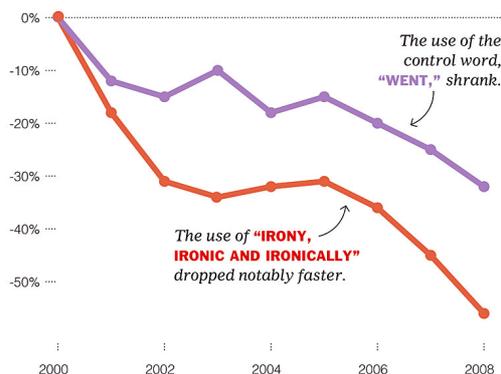
⁹⁸ Adorno's words are usually quoted out of context and interpreted as suggesting the impossibility of engaging in art after witnessing a dehumanizing and atrocious tragedy that renders us speechless. Note how, just as in the case of 9/11, the trauma approach takes precedence. While trauma may indeed figure as part of the argument, a conscientious reading of the passages in question reveals Adorno's intention: "Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter. Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely. Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation" (Adorno 1983, 34).

⁹⁹ Nowadays it is possible to find studies that approach satire from the fields of humorology and discourse analysis (Simpson 2003), legal studies (Condren 2011; 2012), or the media (Vidmar & Rokeach 1979, LaMarre, Landreville & Beam 2009), among others. However, the literary-critic approach is the most frequent, as well as the most diffuse (P. Simpson 2003, 48), and constitutes a theoretical corpus *per se*.

perceptions of what constitutes a satiric practice, and this is, in my view, wherein lies the issue. Many specialists and non-specialists still rely on outdated notions of what satire is—a closed, targeted and unambiguous discourse—; an evaluation that has little to do with current satiric practice—a discourse that underscores the faultlines and the gaps in discourse itself and that is uncertain about its own certainty. Thus, my analysis will begin with a brief reevaluation of the main tenets held by traditional satiric theory,¹⁰⁰ which help to explain the pervasiveness of a certain understanding of satire—evident in the debates mentioned above—that, when set in contrast to alternative, innovative formulations—such as Bakhtin’s theorization of the carnivalesque and of dialogism or Kristeva’s reworking of Bakhtin’s dialogism into the notion of intertextuality—and new trends in satire criticism in the twenty-first century—especially, the works of Fredric Bogel (2001) and Daniel Bowles (2015)—, reveal the satiric as a fertile ground for an inquisitive and critical cultural work.¹⁰¹

Of Course, There’s No Way to Chart ‘Irony’

But just in case that isn’t true, here’s an unscientific survey of the percentage drop in the use of the word “irony” in New York City daily newspapers, during a two-week period in November from 2000 to 2008. The New York Sun was not included.



The New York Times’s ironic take on the subject of irony on 21 November 2008.

¹⁰⁰ Here I am referring to the body of work produced in the second half of the twentieth century, especially those works that have a taxonomical, generalizing aim and that seek to define satire as a literary form or genre. Works that focus on specific satires of specific periods (e.g., Classical or Neoclassical satire) are, by necessity, too concrete and specialized to fit the needs of this research.

¹⁰¹ It is important to state that this section will be limited to satire in literature, and will not delve into satires produced in other cultural media, even as these were pivotal in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. Amid a unified discursive landscape, the instant involvement of satirical online publications like *The Onion* and television shows like Jon Stewart’s *The Daily Show* and Bill Maher’s *Politically Incorrect* played a crucial role in shaping, maintaining, or suggesting, through satire, the possibility of alternative discourses to the official narrative. This time frame was not available to literary works, which had to wait at least three years to see the light. It would be unwise to ignore the role of these other satirical media in the first years after 9/11, but any attempt to critically analyze these works would be complicated by the fact that each medium has its own traditions, contexts, and methodologies of analysis, all of which is beyond the scope of this study.

Even if postmodern cultural theory has elaborated extensively on the notions of irony and parody (for instance, Booth 1974; Fish 1989; Hutcheon 1985, 1992 & 1994; Jameson 1984; de Man 1983 & 1996; to list but a few), offering a much more complex—and interesting—view of these discursive phenomena, the pronouncements about the end of irony and satire after September 11 make manifest how the culture’s interpretation of these humorous practices is still rooted in outdated and rigid theoretical understandings—especially in the case of satire—and, also, in dismissive conceptions of postmodern attitudes—especially in the case of irony.¹⁰² As Beers contends,

Clearly irony is a vague enough concept to have been freighted with a wide collection of negative connotations. The word seems to represent, in the current public discourse, the nihilistic shrug of an irritatingly shallow smartass. [...] Somehow, irony has come to be a handy shorthand for moral relativism and self-absorption. (Beers 2001, n.p.)¹⁰³

Note how Beers identifies current perceptions of irony as eminently negative, as the expression of indifference and shallowness, while in her essay “The Complex Functions of Irony” (1992), Hutcheon had identified as many as nine functions of irony, each of them with positive and negative counterparts that depend on the inferences made by the interpreter (rather than on the intention of the ironist): emphatic vs. decorative, complex vs. ambiguous, playful vs. trivializing, distancing (perspective) vs. distance (indifference), self-deprecating vs. self-protective, provisional vs. evasive, subversive vs. defensive, oppositional (corrective-transgressive) vs. insulting (offensive-defensive), and inclusionary vs. elitist-exclusionary-attacking (Hutcheon 1992, 221). It is in the nuances and alternatives between and among these functions that a more complex understanding of ironic and satiric humor can be inferred.

On the other hand, and as Julie Webber argues in *The Cultural Set Up of Comedy*, the pronouncements about the demise of irony and satire may also be derived from a conception of irony as playfulness, and demonstrate “a kind of political and cultural truism about American culture and its relationship with youth,” whereby young

¹⁰² Although postmodern critics have referred to satire—mostly as a tangential part of other investigations, as is the case in Lyotard’s *Au juste* (1979, translated as *Just Gaming* [1985])—, it cannot be affirmed that postmodernism revised satiric theory in a significant way. It is only in the late twentieth century that new theorizations of satire begin to emerge (e.g. Kharperian 1990; Griffin 1994; Weisenburger 1995), but they are too diffuse to be considered a corpus of satire criticism that could replace the old.

¹⁰³ It is interesting to note how Beers identifies one function of irony, while Hutcheon (1992) provides nine functions, all of them with positive and negative counterparts. See Hutcheon 1992, p. 221.

people—and by extension, the perpetually young United States—are simply “playing around” until events force them to get serious (Webber 2013, 3). The proclamations about irony’s end after 9/11 seemed to imply that there was no place for the nation’s perennial youth and its attendant playfulness, for the ironic and satirical humor typically associated to them—since innocence had been, yet again, irremediably lost. What these reactions further reinforce is the widespread perception of irony and satire as fundamentally unserious, and it is this alleged lack of seriousness that renders them, in this view, trivial and inappropriate in certain historical moments. In a later interview in 2008, Rosenblatt—who had welcomed the alleged demise of irony in 2001—reflected that certain events “like 9/11, and perhaps Obama [...] are so big that they almost imply an obligation not to diminish it by clever comparisons” (Rosenblatt qtd. in Newman 2008, n.p.), and restated his view that irony was “a diminishing act” that depends on an “incongruity between what’s expected and what occurs” and that this “makes us smile at the distance” (Ibid.). Several assumptions can be derived from Rosenblatt’s statement: on the one hand, that laughter in certain situations is “diminishing” (hence, inappropriate) and, on the other, that this laughter takes place at a safe distance from the object that is being laughed at, so that the subject that laughs (the author/the reader) is clearly not identified with the object of laughter. Understanding ironic humor in such unambiguous terms of detached unseriousness is to miss the point of one of the central functions of irony, which consists in an ambiguous, non-finite “double-voicing.” But as Hutcheon points out, the double-edged seriousness and critical potential of ironic humor has tended to be ignored by cultural critics because “[t]he assumption seems to be that authenticity of experience and expression are somehow incompatible with double-voicing and/or humor” (Hutcheon 1989, 18-19). This view constitutes one of the central axes in the traditional and consensual understanding of satire that has dominated the second half of the twentieth century and that is still in place today: satire as essentially unserious, as a targeted aggression that places the satirist/reader at a safe distance from the object of humor, as a closed discourse that offers no faultlines or uncertainty regarding its moral/ethical positioning. While I do not deny that satire can be all of this, satire can also be so much more, and so it is evinced in a large majority of satirical texts. What needs reconsidering, and what I will explore in this chapter, is not satire per se, but the way in which we read it.

The pronouncements after 9/11 about the end of the age of irony also bring to the foreground an interesting paradox that is worth exploring: on the one hand, the cyclical recurrence of the trope; on the other, the fierce contestation it always elicits. Between calls for its demise and defenses of its vitality, ironic and satirical humor is a fertile battleground in the cultural sphere. Perhaps the paradox of satire’s repeated deaths and rebirths can be explained, as Richard Claydon (2016) contends, by the fact

that the United States has always had a complex (and productive) relationship with irony and satire vis-à-vis politics—see, for instance, Todd Thompson’s study on Lincoln as “the National Joker” (2015), the development of a particular genre of anti-war satires in the nineteenth century, which led to the term “laughing dove” (Winter 2009 & 2011), Marc Twain’s standing as an incisive chronicler of postbellum United States through his satirical writings (including his anti-war satires), the fact that most recent studies on post-9/11 American satire (in its various forms) are usually related to politics; also, if one conducts a random search on the internet of the phrases “death of satire” and “death of irony” for the past year, it yields a large number of hits: the latest pieces deal with then-presidential candidate Donald Trump as representative of post-ironic politics, and with fellow Republican Sarah Palin (“Donald Trump: The Post-Ironic Leader” [Claydon 2015]; see also “Sarah Palin Backs Donald Trump, Murders Irony” [Nuzzi 2016]).¹⁰⁴ The trope is common in political analysis, together with the extended notion that Americans do not “get” irony (Claydon 2016, n.p.). Also widespread is the belief that humor can have beneficial and healing effects in times of grief, but only as long as it does not upset long-held moral beliefs (Kuipers 2011, 26).¹⁰⁵ So while the cultural media insists on declaring the onset of a post-ironic age, it also responds fiercely to its negative prognosis, as was the case in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 when journalists, pundits, and critics in the major newspapers responded to the end-of-irony thesis and argued for the continuation of ironic and satiric engagement even in the face of tragedy, or precisely because of it.¹⁰⁶ Jon Stewart’s defense of satire in the first broadcast after 9/11 of *The Daily Show* is a clear example of the complexities involved, as he effectively identified irony and satire as manifestations of Western

¹⁰⁴ An internet search with the terms “death of satire + America” turns 219,000 results. Among the most relevant and recent are “The Death of Satire” (2015) <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/07/25/the-death-of-satire.html>; “Stephen Colbert, *Late Night*, and the Death of Satire. Rip: ‘Air’ Colbert” (2014); “Jon Stewart and the Death of Satire in America” (2015) <http://www.johnabrahamwatne.com/blog/jon-stewart-and-the-death-of-satire-in-america>; “Political Correctness; the Death of Satire and Critical Thought” (2015) <https://rudhro.wordpress.com/2015/08/11/political-correctness-the-death-of-satire-and-critical-thought/>; “The Death of Satire: Riverkeeper Honors Governor for ‘Environmental Advocacy’” (2010); and “The Death of Satire?” (2015) <http://sheilakennedy.net/2015/05/the-death-of-satire-2/>. See also Richard Claydon, “Donald Trump: The Post-Ironic Leader,” *Writer Beat*, 18 December 2015, <http://www.writerbeat.com/articles/8215-Donald-Trump-The-Post-Ironic-Leader>. Olivia Nuzzi, “Sarah Palin Backs Donald Trump, Murders Irony,” *The Daily Beast*, 20 January 2016, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/01/19/sarah-palin-backs-donald-trump-murders-irony.html>.

¹⁰⁵ In research published in 2002 (“Media Culture and Internet Disaster Jokes”) Kuipers accounts for approximately 450 jokes (visual and verbal) collected on American-based sites between October 2001 and March 2002, although in later research (2011) she notes that most of these humorous references to 9/11 “were of a specific sort of humor: benign, nonhostile, solidarity-building humor” (Kuipers 2011, 26). While she does not dispute that this is one of the critically recognized functions of humor, Kuipers suggests that humor cannot be restricted to healing or coping functions, as there are many instances where humor does other than that. For instance, she notes that the jokes about the World Trade Center “started at exactly the same time as the humor moratorium, when humor was felt to be most inappropriate” and that in these circumstances “the completely amoral tone of these jokes does not seem very healing. The open hostility of some of these jokes also does not seem to support the notion that the main function of these 9/11 jokes is to cope with trauma” (Kuipers 2011, 43).

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Poniewozik 2001; Wellman 2001; Kakutani 2001, among others.

democracy and freedom, as akin to free speech, and as “luxuries” that we can afford and that we need to uphold:

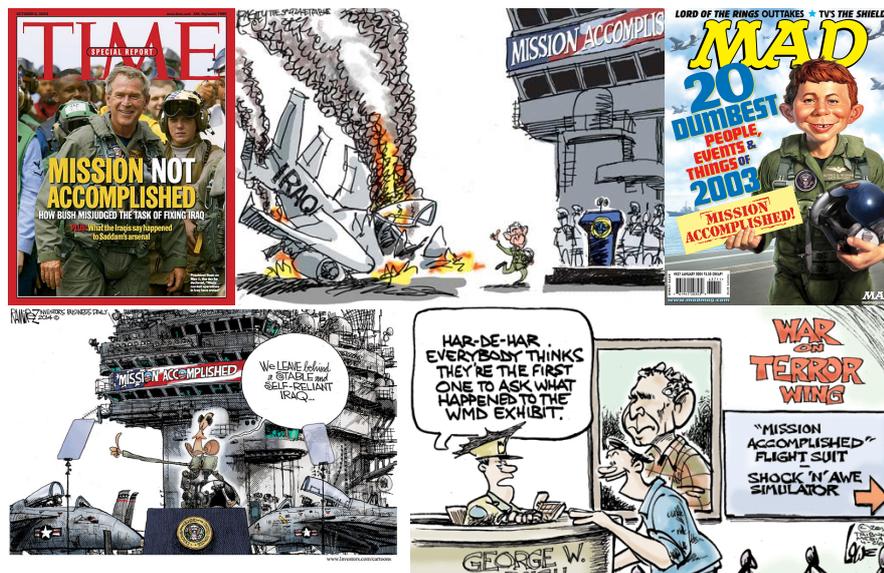
Even the idea that we can sit in the back of the country and make wisecracks... which is really what we do. We sit in the back and throw spitballs—but never forgetting that it is a luxury in this country that allows us to do that. That is, a country that allows for open satire. (Stewart 2001, n.p.)

As is to be expected, the satirical publication *The Onion* had already given its take—as soon as 26 September 2001—on what was then-mainstream political discourse about the need to go to war in its piece “U.S. Vows To Defeat Whoever It Is We’re At War With.” But it was more than just *The Onion* who kept engaging in humor despite its temporary suspension, and Giseline Kuipers notes how of the many 9/11 jokes that emerged in the immediate aftermath, a significant number were not of the “benign” or “healing” type of humor that would normally be accepted (Kuipers 2011, 43). Cultural products like *South Park* and *Family Guy* also addressed 9/11 as early as 2001.¹⁰⁷ In my view, that a large portion of the public and the cultural scene was willing to keep engaging in irony and satire as valid *critical* outlooks in “serious” situations—especially pointing to the “sandwiching” of discourses of grief and patriotism between commerce and entertainment in the media (Kuipers 2011, 23)—became most evident in the way that the media and the blogosphere read satirically the failed performance of “Mission Accomplished” by president Bush—the “Top-Gun Stunt” that I have referred to in the previous chapter.¹⁰⁸ The death toll in Iraq and the evident failure in restoring

¹⁰⁷ The first post-9/11 volume of *The Onion* (Vol. 37, Issue 34, 26 September 2001) identified early-on the faultlines in the official narrative that was then under construction: “Bush Sr. Apologizes To Son For Funding Bin Laden In ‘80s,” “Arab-American Third-Grader Returns From Recess Crying, Saying He Didn’t Kill Anyone,” “God Angrily Clarifies ‘Don’t Kill’ Rule,” and “American Life Turns Into Bad Jerry Bruckheimer Movie.” A few months later, *South Park* produced one of the edgiest forays into post-9/11 satire with its first episode to air after 9/11, “Osama bin Laden Has Farty Pants” (November 2001), which revolves around the United States’ invasion of Afghanistan; later, in the episode “Mystery of the Urinal Deuce” (October 2006), Kyle sets out to prove that 9/11 was not a government conspiracy and actually uncovers a government conspiracy to create a conspiracy. Likewise, *Family Guy* unabashedly resorted to its usual black humor when dealing with 9/11; the episode “Baby Not on Board” (November 2008) features a scene in which the Griffin family visits Ground Zero, which Peter erroneously believes is “where the first guy got AIDS,” and in the episode “Back to the Pilot” (November 2011), Brian and Stewie take a trip back in time during which Brian tips off his past self about 9/11 so that the old him can play hero and stop the terrorist attacks. This causes George W. Bush not to be re-elected and the start of a second Civil War that leads to nuclear attacks on the Eastern Seaboard. While the film industry has tended to produce epic stories about the attacks, some films have also approached the events with humor; the film *Postal* (Boll 2007) opens with a scene about fictional 9/11 hijackers, suggesting that they flew into the North Tower of the World Trade Center by mistake, while *Harold and Kumar Escape From Guantanamo Bay* (Hurwitz & Schlossberg 2008) follows two best friends as they’re detained and sent to Guantanamo Bay, after a paranoid fellow plane passenger mistakes Kumar’s bong for a bomb.

¹⁰⁸ See the last section of chapter 1.

peace were no laughing matter, but faced with the blatant clumsiness in staging the announcement as pompously as possible on board a ship carrier off the coast of San Diego, and the way the media relayed this photo-op, gave way to countless memes, jokes, and humorous reversals. As late-night show host Stephen Colbert declared, the Top Gun stunt could be read as an instance of how, “no matter what happens to America, she will always rebound—with the most powerfully staged photo ops in the world” (Colbert qtd. in Gournelos & Greene 2011, 119).¹⁰⁹ The American public understood the stunt as what it was because, as Kuipers suggests, “[t]he ability to play with something is the highest proof of one’s grasp of the matter” (Kuipers 2011, 41).



From left to right, clockwise: Time magazine on 6 October 2003. Pat Bagley for the Salt Lake Tribune on 5 March 2007. Mad magazine’s cover for May 2013. Chan Lowe for the Sun Sentinel on 25 April 2013. Ramirez for the Investors Business Daily, 2014. The timespan seeks to illustrate the popularity of the joke, especially on the ten-year anniversary.

Besides the defenses of irony and satire in the media after 9/11, in the academic sphere scholars working in various fields “have produced intellectually robust defenses of irony [...] that demonstrate how irony continues to be a salient feature of manifold cultural discourses and articulate myriad reasons why democratic societies don’t just seem to like irony but *need* irony” (Stratton 2013, 1-2; emphasis in the original). The trope has even been turned on its head in post-9/11 cultural studies; as

¹⁰⁹ Colbert mocked president Bush about the 2003 episode at the White House Correspondents’ Association dinner of 2006, with the following lines: “I stand by this man [president Bush]. I stand by this man because he stands for things. Not only does he stand for things, he stands on things. Things like aircraft carriers and rubble and recently flooded city squares. And that sends a strong message: that no matter what happens to America, she will always rebound—with the most powerfully staged photo ops in the world” (Colbert qtd. in Gournelos & Greene 2011, 119).

Gournelos and Greene argue in *A Decade of Dark Humor: How Comedy, Irony, and Satire Shaped Post-9/11 America*, “humor, irony, and satire were not only shaped by 9/11 and its aftermath, but were also pivotal in shaping responses to the events” (Gournelos & Greene 2011, xii; emphasis in the original). Indeed, and as Duvall argues, “to claim that irony died on 9/11 is to selectively read fiction published since 2002” (Duvall 2013, 280), as there are many early examples of 9/11 literary production where fiction writers make evident their willingness to engage with irony and satire in the post-9/11 world, such as Art Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004), Walter’s *The Zero* (2006), and Ken Kalfus’s *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* (2006), followed by later examples such as Christopher Grimes’ *The Pornographers* (2012) and Thomas Pynchon’s *Bleeding Edge* (2013). Arin Keeble (2014) has argued that Claire Messud’s 2006 novel *The Emperor’s Children* can also be considered a satirical narrative, very much in the style, I argue, of the light social satire that can be found in McNerney’s works and in his post-9/11 novel *The Good Life* (Baelo-Allué 2009, 169; 174).

However, this should not obscure the fact that humor in the form of irony and satire continues to be viewed as inadequate and sometimes inappropriate to address the aftermath of 9/11; as Duvall contends, the end-of-irony thesis still “has a certain resiliency in academic criticism” (Duvall 2013, 279), especially if one is invested in the prevailing discourse of trauma after 9/11, and some continue to argue that “irony never really did make a comeback after 9/11” (Hirschorn 2011, n.p.). Critics like Däwes observe how the themes taken up by post-9/11 novels, such as

[t]he solemnity of the atmosphere and the translation of the specific fear into various similar contexts of existential anxiety (McNerney), unforeseen intrusions into the urban or national space (Auster, Palahnuik, Cunningham), or deception and violence (Tristram) seem to confirm the widespread notion that September 11 marked the “end of irony.” (Däwes 2011, 122-123)

It is interesting to ask, then, what explains the persistence of the trope of the demise of irony and satire, when it is clear that the verdict is nowhere near unanimous. For William R. Jones, the cyclical reemergence of the trope is evidence that times of crisis tend to make more apparent the dialogical¹¹⁰ engagement of irony and satire with historical events, and it is precisely this dialogical and evaluative engagement that may be considered problematic and tends to be censored or repressed (Jones 2009, 27).

¹¹⁰ I will use the term dialogical in the sense expressed by Bakhtin, as deriving from the Socratic means of searching for truth *in dialogue*, “born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction” and “counterposed to *official monologism*, which pretends to *possess ready-made truth*” (Bakhtin 1999, 110; emphasis in the original). For Bakhtin, human thinking is dialogical by nature.

Indeed, and as I have argued previously, censorship out of political correctness was a fact in the aftermath of 9/11, whether that censorship was self-imposed or externally motivated,¹¹¹ and the repeated claims about satire and irony's demise after September 11 can be interpreted as manifestations of a desire to silence any questioning of the cultural and political narrative that was being constructed after the attacks. A case that illustrates this circumstance well is the veiled warning issued by then-press secretary of the White House Ari Fleischer to the satirist and political commentator Bill Maher in September 2001—on the day the controversial Patriot Act was passed—when he affirmed that “people have to watch what they say and watch what they do” (Fleischer qtd. in Jones 2009, 33). Fleischer was responding to the views expressed by Maher in his show *Politically Incorrect*, where Maher had objected to the widespread framing of 9/11 as a conflict between “heroes” and “cowards.” This view, which was commonplace in mainstream media and in political discourse, held that the 9/11 hijackers had been the latter, while Americans were undoubtedly the heroes. On his show on 17 September 2001, Maher had unambiguously protested that “[w]e have been the cowards, lobbing cruise missiles from 2,000 miles away... That’s cowardly. Staying in the airplane when it hits the building, say what you want about it, not cowardly” (Maher 2001, n.p.). Maher’s comments generated outrage in many spectators and later resulted in the withdrawal of funding from advertisers, the public scrutiny of Maher, and the subsequent cancellation of the show in June 2002. As one commentator wrote in YouTube, this was quite ironic in itself: “Imagine having a programme called ‘Politically Incorrect’ and getting fired for saying something too politically incorrect on it.” Maher himself would, some years later, satirically comment on the situation saying that

In fact, I was just trying to follow orders. Right after 9/11, President Bush said the terrorists would win if we didn’t go back to doing exactly what we were doing before the attack, and so the best way to show we were victorious was to not change a thing. And, like an idiot, I believed him, resuming my mandate to never pull a punch and live up to the title of my show at the time, “Politically Incorrect.” But the atmosphere in the fall of 2001 allowed for very little beyond singing “God Bless America” and buying a flag to put on your gas-guzzling, terrorist-funding car. (Maher 2006, n.p.).

Besides the irony that both the viewer and Maher read in the situation, I want to reiterate how the warning issued by then-press secretary Fleischer that “people have to

¹¹¹ See section 1.3, “Dissenting un-Americans.”

watch what they say and watch what they do,” marks the shift from an internally-motivated censorship of irony and satire out of (varying degrees of) cultural sensitivity and/or commercial constraints to the unambiguous acknowledgement of official scrutiny and censorship by the government. And this, crucially, results in the inscription of official and “politically correct” versions of the event and its aftermath, something which, as I have argued in the introduction, signified the event as an unprovoked act of war that justified an appropriate military response, a collective, national trauma that marked a moment of rupture in history, a watershed, a before and after the attacks in the West. As such, the official narrative of 9/11 and the War on Terror, in its apparent homogeneity and due to its status as the “common sense” explanation, effectively sought to silence divergent, oppositional and/or dissenting opinions which were expressed in many forms, among them, irony and satire.

But official censorship, political correctness, and a complex relationship with satirical humor are not the only factors that can explain its repeated demise. The “death of irony” in the cultural arena mimics closely the “death of satire” in the literary sphere, a debate that is, as Paul Lewis contends, “as old as satire, if not ridicule, itself” (Lewis 2006, 156). If one traces some of the pronouncements about the death of satire in the mid-twentieth century, one can begin to glimpse that the negative views of satire derive from the long-held notion of satire as a moral art. For instance, in 1946, and facing the devastating effects of the Second World War, the renowned satirist Evelyn Waugh declared that satire had no place in “the disintegrated society of today” (Waugh 1946, 60) because there were no homogeneous moral standards anymore, something without which, according to Waugh and mainstream understanding, satire could not work.¹¹² Similarly, W. H. Auden lamented in 1952 that satire could not “deal with serious evil and suffering” and could not flourish “in an age like our own” (Auden qtd. in Greenberg 2011, 7), where the satirist and the general reading public no longer shared the same views. Thus, for Auden, satire would be relegated to being trivial, as the lack of moral agreement between satirist and reader would diminish its power to establish a univocal moral standpoint. Adorno, in 1951, also reflected on the relevance of agreement as the “formal a priori of irony” (Adorno 2005, 211); however, in his view, “[t]he impossibility of satire today should not be blamed, as sentimentality is apt to do, on the relativism of values, the absence of binding norms” (Ibid.); rather, it was an *excess* of agreement that made satire impossible, since agreement had turned into a sort of “universal agreement of content”

¹¹² This is Waugh’s argument in full: “Satire is a matter of period. It flourishes in a stable society and presupposes homogeneous moral standards—the early Roman Empire and 18th Century Europe. It is aimed at inconsistency and hypocrisy. It exposes polite cruelty and folly by exaggerating them. It seeks to produce shame. All this has no place in the Century of the Common Man where vice no longer pays lip service to virtue. The artist’s only service to the disintegrated society of today is to create little independent systems of order of his own. I foresee in the dark age opening that the scribes may play the part of the monks after the first barbarian victories. They were not satirists” (Waugh 1946, 60).

where “the difference between ideology and reality, has disappeared” (Ibid.). Thus, for Adorno, satire became impracticable in a society that had become “monolithic” and in which dissent or critical engagement seemed unimaginable. Even if some feel today that the statements by Waugh, Auden, and Adorno about modernity are overly pessimistic (Greenberg 2011, 8), what these authors’ statements reveal is that hegemonic thought (in the shape of universal moral standards) is at the center of their understanding of satire, which, in their view, pivots on the identification, and satirizing, of that which is different. If there is no hegemonic thought, that which is different cannot be identified as univocally so (Waugh, Auden); if, on the contrary, society falls into a “universal agreement of content,” then there is no impulse to satirize and no targets to be satirized (Adorno). While Waugh and Auden seem to suggest that hegemony can be perceived as apolitical or unideological—disguising itself as if it did not exist—, Adorno’s argument, on the contrary, seems to anticipate Althusser’s notion of hegemony as a site where dissent and struggle are necessary for norms and values to be produced, disseminated, and maintained: in other words, hegemony understood not as a monolith of certainties and values—whether one is aware of its existence or not—but as a central space that is constructed precisely in the process of its contestation. In this understanding, acts of subversion and dissent become instrumental to hegemonic thought, as the existence of a periphery reinforces the existence of a center. To a great extent, this is what recent critics like Bogel (2001) suggest regarding the satiric, where satire becomes a way of *creating* a difference that is otherwise non-existent.

As I will seek to demonstrate in the upcoming sections, this understanding of satire as moral is what underlies dated—and widespread—perceptions of what satire is. And this is why my analysis will reevaluate traditional satire criticism through Bakhtin’s approach to the satiric (or, “the carnivalesque,” in his terminology). Bakhtin’s carnivalesque is much more optimistic in recognizing the value of the faultlines in hegemonic thought by and of themselves, as spaces where the ironic, the subversive, and the satiric can be inscribed, and how these subversive acts can become spaces of “negotiation” rather than of transmission of values. In “On the Borders of Bakhtin: Dialogization, Decolonization,” Graham Pechey illustrates how the notion of hegemony and decentralization can be applied to Bakhtin’s notion of “carnivalization”:

Any sociopolitical project of centralisation or hegemony has always and everywhere to *posit itself against* the ubiquitously decentralizing (centrifugal) forces within ideology. “Carnival” is the name Bakhtin gives to these forces in so far as they find expression in consciously parodic representations across a range of signifying practices... (Pechey 1987, 62-63; emphasis in the original)

As noted above, some might argue on a theoretical plane that these decentralizing forces of the satiric can be instrumentalized to reinforce hegemonic thought, but I will argue for the important cultural work that satire performs, regardless of the uses that it may (or may not) be put to. My focus will be on how the satiric, by articulating subversive voices within a text, can be a means for arriving at knowledge through textual dialogue. This is the main credit to Bakhtin's theory of the satiric and the reason why it is being recuperated in the last decades, a fact that also reveals how prescient Bakhtin was in his analysis.

2.2. The generative model of twentieth-century satire criticism

The view of satire as a normative, moralizing force owes much to the development of the theory of satire throughout the centuries, an arena where theorists have repeatedly debated, as I have noted, its alleged demise, attempted to prove its vitality, and to offer a stable categorization of such an unstable form. Especially during the 1950s and 1960s, the trope of satire's demise gained enough force to contribute to the emergence in the United States of a large corpus of critical works dedicated to the exploration of narrative satire which produced, as a result, a fairly homogenous theory of the satiric; a theoretical corpus that has been alternatively called conventional, traditional, or formalist, and that, as Weisenburger argues, puts forward a generative model of satiric practice.¹¹³

Although there were some early works that treaded unconventional paths, such as Wyndham Lewis's 1934 *Men without Art*,¹¹⁴ where Lewis lamented the limits imposed on satire and declared that "the greatest satire is nonmoral" and that "[w]e should after all only be laughing *at ourselves!*" (Lewis 1987, 92; emphasis in the original), there were other works that were far more influential, such as David Worcester's *The Art of Satire* in 1940 (which includes Worcester's downbeat suggestion that the cycle of satire "can go no further" [Worcester 1960, 168]). But it was Northrop Frye's declaration that satire had "gone stale and mouldy" (Frye 1944, 78) and his suggestion that it was unable to "speak to the twentieth century" (Ibid., 77) that opened the floodgates for twentieth-century satire criticism, and it is no paradox that Frye's words often feature

¹¹³ For Weisenburger, generative satire has an eminently corrective aim that turns towards an object that is identified as diverging from an established set of values, norms, etc. and that the satirist considers worth preserving. In contrast, Wesienburger develops the term "degenerative" satire to designate a semiotic practice that turns against the text itself, with no dependence on an extra-textual reality.

¹¹⁴ For Wyndham Lewis, art means satire, and his title (*Men without Art*) refers to the limits being imposed on what can be laughed at (see Lewis 1987, 85-93). Although Lewis wrote quite a number of satirical fictions and critical works on the theory of satire, he has remained largely understudied. For a study of Lewis' satirical fiction and rhetorical conception of satire, see Terrazas Gallego 2010.

as the opening lines in many modern “defenses” of the vitality of satire.¹¹⁵ The period 1950-1970 saw a remarkable outpouring of critical works on narrative satire, especially in the United States, by what came to be known as the Chicago and Yale schools—groups of scholars in these two American universities who held slightly divergent positions on the subject and who elaborated profusely on them. Despite their differences, both schools—under the influence of Formalism, New Criticism and, later, New Historicism—shared their conception of satire as unambiguously moral. Following Frye’s statement that “[t]o attack anything, writer and audience must agree on its undesirability” (Frye 1957, 224), both the Chicago and the Yale schools tended to consider the alignment between the satirist and the reader in their condemnation of the object of satire a formal requirement, but they diverged in the historical/ahistorical nature of the text.

The corpus of twentieth-century satire criticism builds on a prior corpus of satiric theory developed through the centuries which can be broadly classified in five main periods:¹¹⁶ first, Classical theory, which draws mostly from the texts written by Horace, Lucilius, and Quintilian and which remains influential through the Renaissance; second, Elizabethan theory in the sixteenth century, with works by Lodge (*Defence of Poetry*, 1579) and Puttenham (*Arte of English Poesie*, 1589), which were based on “insufficient knowledge of the distinction between the Greek satiric tradition and the Roman satira” (Griffin 1994, 11) and which contributed to the misrepresentation of

¹¹⁵ It has to be noted that Frye’s words are usually taken out of context, and that a conscientious reading of Frye’s 1944 text (“The Nature of Satire”) and the sections devoted to satire in his 1957 text (*Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*) reveals, on the contrary, a more nuanced interpretation. Frye is far from declaring the death of satire, and when he makes his statement about the staleness of satire he is analyzing a particular type of satire in the eighteenth century (the heyday of Anglo-Irish, Neoclassical, or Augustan satire) that, by being too deeply grounded in contextual or historical circumstances, *might* become “stale and mouldy” for a modern reader. As Frye argues, “the content of a great deal of satire founded on national hatreds, snobbery, prejudice, and personal pique goes out of date very quickly” (Frye 1957, 224). As a contrast, Frye offers the example of the satires written by Chaucer, Pope, and Swift, as well as the *Alice* books by Lewis Carroll, which possess such “vitality and power of survival” (Frye 1944, 78) and the immediacy of which is not lost even today. Much of the scholarship repeats Frye’s wording about satire’s “staleness” without providing the context in which it was phrased because it is a powerful statement that achieves an immediate effect, and this has led to establishing the idea that Frye declared satire to be an outdated form.

¹¹⁶ For a full discussion of the evolution of satiric theory from Classical to contemporary times, see Griffin 1994, pp. 6-34.

satire as a form related to satyrs.¹¹⁷ This period also includes works by John Donne who, against the then-pervasive, more aggressive Juvenalian tradition, recovers the Horatian tradition in his own works (that is, a less invective form of satire).¹¹⁸ Third, Renaissance theory, most notably Isaac Casaubon's *De Satyrica Graecorum Poesi et Romanorum Satira* (1605), which did not succeed in banishing the idea that satire had something to do with satyrs but which would become influential, especially, in later periods. Fourth, Dryden's theory of satire as elaborated in "Discourse concerning the Original and Progress of Satire" (1693) which, according to Griffin, was a compilation of previous theories "too narrowly based on formal verse satire" (Griffin 1994, 23) and the ultimate goal of which was to shape the reception of Dryden's own work, but which, nonetheless, remained influential until the nineteenth century (Meyer Spacks 1968, 14). Fifth, eighteenth-century theory of satire, which saw little development despite the abundance and variety of satire being produced at the time (Griffin 1994, 24), and in which satire was cast mostly as a didactic and moralistic art.

It has to be noted that, before the twentieth century, most theories or "defenses" of satire were usually written by satirists themselves, and they were less interested in elaborating on the properties of satiric discourse than in reshaping the thought about satire of their contemporaries, defending their own work, or even attempting to escape libel (Griffin 1994, 7, 20; Paulson 1971, ix; Simpson 2003, 48). Thus, this section will deal only with satire criticism starting in the twentieth century, when literary criticism

¹¹⁷ Nowadays scholars agree that verse satire was originally a Greek form, but the uncertain etymology of the term "satire" helps to illustrate the confusion that has traditionally dominated the field (for a full discussion of the etymology, see Elliot 1960, 102-104). Modern scholarship agrees that "satire" derives from the Latin word *satur* ("full, sated, having eaten enough") and that satire was traditionally figured as a *lanx satura*, a platter of diverse fruits offered to the gods that suggests, by derivation, a sense of medley, or the mixed nature of satire as a form. The sense of medley refers to the Latin tradition of merging, stylistically, the satire with the form that was being parodied, such as epodes and letters (Knight 2004, 20; Elliot 1960, 102; Griffin 1994, 9), already prefiguring satire's formal flexibility: as Bakhtin aptly pointed out, modern satire usually encroaches upon other forms, most successfully, the novel (Bakhtin 1999). During the Renaissance a common belief emerged that satire's etymology was a combination of terms that included the Greek term *satyr* alongside the Latin *satira* (Knight 2004, 19; Elliot 1960, 102; Griffin 1994, 9-11), and this derivation—already suggested by Diomedes in the late fourth century (Griffin 1994, 9)—took special force in this period, leading to what some have termed a literary "mistake" regarding the nature of Greek satyric drama: satire came to be regarded as a deeply invective form, where the satirist was figured as a moralist driven by scorn and a sense of moral superiority (Griffin 1994, 11; Knight 2004, 19; Elliot 1960, 102). The English satirists of 1590-1620—who were the precursors of the golden period of Anglo-Irish satire in the eighteenth century (also known as neoClassical or Augustan satire)—based their theoretical arguments, thus, on a profound misunderstanding of Greek satiric drama that served to encourage a particular form of invective satire (Elliot 1960, 102-103; Griffin 1994, 10; Bowles 2015; Quintero 2007, 6; P. Simpson 2003) of which the best examples are the Elizabethan satirists John Donne and Thomas Wyatt (Griffin 1994, 11-12). The significance of this misunderstanding is that these satirists/theorists, and the satires of the Augustan period in general, became the main referents on which twentieth-century satiric theory was based.

¹¹⁸ According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Juvenalian satire is "in literature, any bitter and ironic criticism of contemporary persons and institutions that is filled with personal invective, angry moral indignation, and pessimism. The name alludes to the Latin satirist Juvenal, who, in the 1st century AD, brilliantly denounced Roman society, the rich and powerful, and the discomforts and dangers of city life. Samuel Johnson modeled his poem *London* on Juvenal's third satire and *The Vanity of Human Wishes* on the 10th. *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) established Jonathan Swift as the master of Juvenalian satire. In the twentieth century, Karl Kraus's indictments of the "prevailing corruption" are also instances of Juvenalian satire.

becomes a discipline *per se*. With the onset of twentieth-century theory, the most notable development is the shift in the paradigm of literary analysis—which had formerly tended to read literary texts largely in relation to the author’s biography and to external reference, sometimes neglecting the text’s aesthetic qualities—brought about by the onset of formalist schools. In the United States, New Criticism inaugurated a conception of the literary text as a self-contained and self-referential aesthetic object, which gave way to the production of an extensive and varied body of critical work on—among other things—satire.

As I have already anticipated above, initial investigations include works by David Worcester (1940), Mary Claire Randolph (1942) and Northrop Frye (1944), after which satire criticism will see an extraordinary development undertaken mostly by the faculty of the English departments at Yale and Chicago universities. Of these works, Randolph’s “The Structural Design of the Formal Verse Satire” deserves special attention because it exercised great influence on subsequent works, even if the premises established therein were taken out of context and made to function on a general basis despite the fact that they talked exclusively about formal verse satire. Randolph proposes a bi-partite structure where a first element consists of the satirist’s attack of a vice and a second element—which is sometimes only implied—in which the satirist commends the opposite virtue.¹¹⁹ As Griffin notes “[u]nfortunately, the caution with which Randolph presented her synthesis was not usually remembered or emulated by the commentators that came after her” and her “praise and blame” model—which she herself had acknowledged was unstable—“hardened into dogma and was casually applied to satire of all kinds” (Griffin 1994, 28). Subsequent theorizations of satire during the 1950s and 1960s will rely on this “praise and blame” pattern as the basic structure of the satiric text and, as a result, “the narrow moral theory of satire, derived from Dryden and Casaubon, was confirmed” (Ibid.).

After the Second World War satiric theory undergoes a major development, starting with the works by theorists at Yale such as Maynard Mack (“The Muse of Satire,” 1951), Alvin Kernan (*The Cankered Muse*, 1959; *The Plot of Satire*, 1965), Robert Elliot (*The Power of Satire*, 1960) and Ronald Paulson (*The Fictions of Satire*, 1967; *Satire. Modern Essays in Criticism*, 1971). Deeply influenced by New Criticism, then dominant at Yale (Griffin 1994, 29), these theorists seek to abandon biographical approaches to the text and favor transhistoricist readings that view the text as an autonomous aesthetic work of art. Taken collectively, their works can be considered a “rhetorical theory of satire” (Ibid.) centered on explaining textual strategies. For the Yale theorists the text is

¹¹⁹ Randolph bases her study of formal verse satire on Isaac Casaubon’s and John Dryden’s definitions of satiric ontology and elaborates a schema for the satiric text that she herself acknowledges is extremely Manichean. Randolph also admits that oftentimes the satirist does not offer the alternative virtuous course of action and that some of the main precursors of formal verse satire did not follow this diagram, among them Dryden, Swift, Gay Addison, Steele, and Arbuthnot (Díez Cobo 2006, 78).

self-sufficient and self-contained, which is a remarkable improvement from previous criticism centered on the author's life to explain his works, but the downside of this more hermetic conceptualization of the text somehow contributed "to fossilize the text according to a series of formal parameters and categories"¹²⁰ (Díez Cobo 2006, 78). Critics "encouraged the abstraction of the literary work from [its] context in the interest of a criticism aimed at ascribing 'universal' (that is, largely ahistorical) significance to formal patterns of all kinds" (Bogel 2001, 6). For example, formalists tended to see the existence of a clearly defined object of attack as a formal requirement of the genre, "like the marriage at the end of a romantic comedy" (Ibid.), rather than as emerging from a real concern from the satirist/narrative voice regarding the object—a proposition which is, indeed, untenable in much of Classical and Augustan satire. This does not mean that the formalists did not consider that most satire addressed a referent in the real world—which could be a specific person or idea—, but this was somehow secondary to the formal prerequisite of an object. Thus, formalism concentrated mostly on "rhetorical, figurative and structural operations" (Ibid.), which was a significant shift from pre-formalist analyses and, as Griffin rightly notes, "[t]he Yale critics provided a valuable corrective in their time and ensured that henceforth satire would receive the same kind of careful and detailed critical attention" (Griffin 1994, 29) as other literary forms. In fact, this trend had already been initiated by Frye—not a New Critic himself—who, in his detailed yet willfully ambivalent *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), had elevated satire to the status of one of the four literary archetypes, together with comedy, romance, and tragedy.

Understandably, given the nature of satire, the somewhat ahistorical approach of the New Critics caused a reaction that undermined the independence of satire as an aesthetic work of art. Despite the deep impact and influence of New Criticism in the United States' cultural sphere, a "countermovement" arose, mostly deriving from New Historicism, that contended that of all genres satire was precisely the least fitted to be read without contextualization, since without the particulars that each satire addressed much of the satiric effect would be lost to the readers (Bogel 2001, 7). Funnily enough, this had been Frye's argument when he had famously declared in 1944 that a certain type of eighteenth-century English satire could go "stale and mouldy" if not read in relation to its context. During the 1960s there is a notable outpouring of critical works on satire by the faculty of the English department at the University of Chicago, among them Edward Rosenheim (*Swift and the Satirist's Art*, 1963), Sheldon Sacks (*Fiction and the Shape of Belief*, 1966), and Matthew Hodgart (*Satire: Origins and Principles*, 1969). For these theorists, satire is inescapably rooted in history in such a way that it "consists of an

¹²⁰ The translation from Spanish is mine: "El fundamento de este acercamiento metodológico que contribuye a fosilizar el texto de acuerdo con una serie de parámetros y categorías formales desempeñó, sin embargo, un papel fundamental en la superación de la marcada supeditación del texto satírico a la biografía de su autor, algo que tanto auge había alcanzado en épocas previas" (Díez Cobo 2006, 78).

attack by means of a manifest fiction upon discernible historic particulars" (Rosenheim 1963, 31; emphasis in the original). These scholars also insist on satire's generic identity, focusing on "the principles that make for coherence within and distinctions among the literary genres" (Griffin 1994, 30), thus constructing a schematic diagram that, according to Griffin and other later critics, "does not correspond to our intuitive sense of what actually goes on in satire" (Ibid.). For instance, the claim that satire addresses "*discernible, historically authentic particulars*" (Rosenheim 1963, 25; emphasis in the original) presupposes that there is an external referent that is always clear and unambiguous, while in point of fact satire is "often ambiguous, obscure, or double-edged" (Griffin 1994, 30), all of which leads the Chicago theorists to categorize many satires that do not fit their scheme as something "other than satire."

Despite these divergences, the body of work produced by the Yale and Chicago schools exhibits several coincidences that, as I have argued before, served to build a critical consensus on the theory of satire during the 1960s and 1970s. Contrary to Frye's classic characterization of satire, which some critics find "too abstract and overarticulated" (Griffin 1994, 31) but which was, nonetheless, nuanced and reluctant to make generic claims, the body of work in this period is perceived as fairly homogenous, as both schools share a deep belief in the ontological and generic entity of the satiric—which leads them to overarching and generalizing claims. Instead, Frye is adamant that in contemporary fiction satire is mostly found as a "tone or attitude" (Frye 1944, 76), rather than as a strict literary form, since by its own nature satire tends to combine with other forms and it is rare to find it on its own any more.

Starting in the late 1960s but especially in the 1970s under the influence of poststructuralism and postmodernism, in a theory-centered climate where traditional categories of authorial intention, formal unity or coherence, referentiality, and the notion of "author" and "authority" come under investigation (Griffin 1994, 2), there is "something of a retreat from large-scale theoretical claims" (Ibid., 31) on satire, and critics abandon the attempt to account for the genre as a whole. Instead, significant work is done on individual works or authors, particular periods or aspects of satire, and few scholars remain unaffected by the new trends in critical theory. However, the traditional corpus will maintain its standing; on the one hand, because there is no new critical consensus on satire to replace it; on the other, because there are areas—such as the large corpus of eighteenth-century Neoclassical English formal verse satire—that seem to comply easily with the tenets of traditional criticism and prove more resistant to newer theory (Bogel 2001, 5). Thus, traditional criticism preserves its currency during the 1970s and 1980s, thus impeding any new critical consensus, which becomes evident in the "absence of a significantly revised theory of satire" (Ibid.) since the 1970s. As a result, and as previously noted, "nonspecialists continue to rely on outdated assumptions" (Griffin 1994, 2), even if there are several works that, already in

the 1990s, have attempted a critical reevaluation of satiric theory, such as Griffin's 1994 *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* and Weisenberger's 1995 *Fables of Subversion*, to which I will refer in upcoming sections.

2.3. The main tenets held by traditional satire criticism

Tellingly, most scholars past and present agree on the difficulty of providing a definition of satire, and almost every critic warns the reader about this in his/her initial considerations.¹²¹ As Charles Knight aptly puts it, "completeness seems illusory in describing a form as various and shifting as satire" (Knight 2004, 10) and a definition can only be achieved at the cost of extreme simplification. But while acknowledging the elusiveness of a definition, the American formalists tended to dismiss the implications of this claim and set out to provide a generic justification of the form by isolating a series of elements by which the form could be easily recognized. As a result, what could have been a debate about the nature of satirical texts turned into a massive critical elaboration on formal satire—that is, satire as a literary form, with its attendant "rules" and conventions—which was based mostly, and by necessity, on Classical or Neoclassical satire, the only kind of satire that due to its formal characteristics gave the illusion that satire as a genre could be "contained." As Weisenburger argues, scholarship during the 1950s and 1960s elaborated on "[a]n interpretive strategy developed to contain the great ages of Classical and Neoclassical satire, and [thus] believed [it] to have transhistorical validity" (Weisenburger 1995, 15).

Basically, the consensus reached by satire criticism in the twentieth century seemed set on establishing the centrality of a moral positioning on the part of the narrative voice (mostly identified univocally with the author), the necessity of an alignment between author and reader, and an eminently corrective aim. This view held that satire is a moral art and that it is highly rhetorical, in the sense that it puts forward an argument and that it is persuasive in nature; its function is to attack "vice or folly,"¹²² as well as to propose a corrective or ameliorative course of action; it uses wit or ridicule and exaggeration in order to underscore the grotesqueness or absurdity of what is being denounced and, thus, persuade its readership; it engages in some sort of fantasy or fiction (a trait that distinguishes it from mere denunciation); its referentiality is anchored in "the real world;" and it always conveys some clear reference to moral standards or purposes (Weisenburger 1995, 14-23; Griffin 1994, 1; Bogel 2001, 5). In this light, traditional criticism on satire tends to revolve around four axes: (a) the moral

¹²¹ Cfr. Frye 1944 & 1957; Johnson 1945; P. Simpson 2003; Knight 2004; Alliker Rabb 2007; Greenberg 2011; Quintero 2007.

¹²² This phrase has become so standard and fossilized that it is still possible to find it in 2017, even when the term "folly" is hardly heard at all in everyday usage.

stance of the narrative voice (*qua* author); (b) the position or relationship between author, reader, and text (based on the centrality of a moral conflict); (c) the corrective or reformative aim; and (d) its generic stability (Bogel 2001, 3). From these, we can derive the main assumptions of conventional theories of satire as regards textual organization and function; as Griffin notes, traditional theory holds

(1) that the bipolar praise-blame pattern is the formal core of satire; (2) that the thematic center is some moral standard against which deviations are measured; (3) that the satirist appeals to, and thereby confirms and assumes [the reader] share[s], some traditionally sanctioned values; and (4) that the satirist works like a preacher-rhetorician to persuade his audience to virtue. (Griffin 1994, 37)

Although it has to be conceded that many satires do function this way, every one of these assumptions is open to challenge. To begin with, and as both Griffin and Weisenburger point out, the rhetorical nature of satire upheld by formalist criticism signifies satire as a rationalist discourse aimed at persuading a reader of a reality/truth outside the text, and that approach reduces much of the impulse of satire to a mimetic exercise. In this formulation, “rhetorical” signifies, in a way very similar to Classical understandings of the term, a means for detecting error; however, in traditional satiric theory the meaning of “rhetoric” has veered towards persuasion; in both cases, there is an assumption of a “truth” prior to the text and an eminently didactic aim. However, modern theories will take on Bakhtin’s understanding of the rhetorical art of satire as a “dialogical” work, a means to discover what remains to be known, rather than as a mere transmission of what we already know (Griffin 1994, 41-42), which means that the satiric gesture is also intra-textual rather than exclusively extra-textual. While for Bakhtin con-textual elements remain important, satire becomes in his view a self-reflexive mode that turns to its own signifying structures rather than, exclusively, to an external object (Weisenburger 1995, 17). The emphasis of traditional satire criticism on strict referentiality as the means to provide a univocal “meaning” regarding the object of satire—that is, an unambiguous moral stance—has also had consequences regarding the status of satire as a literary work. As Díez Cobo points out, the purely rhetorical conception of satire has sometimes blinded critics to the aesthetic qualities of the text, qualities that are otherwise recognized without question in other modes of literary writing (Díez Cobo 2006, 91), and the requirement of a moral positioning of the narrative voice in a positivist and universal way has, on the other hand, often confined satire to very conservative ideological positions (Weisenburger 1995, 95; Díez Cobo 2006, 95).

Secondly, the formal requirement of an extra-textual object of attack—inherent to the corrective aim—is in conflict with what is by now widely accepted after postmodernism: that “il n’y a pas de hors-texte” (Derrida) or, in other words, that notions of “truth” and “reality” are discursively constructed. This does not mean to say that there is no external reality (or character, for that matter) to which the text alludes to, but accepting that this referent is mediated in myriad ways by the readers’ own contexts, intertexts, and previous codified knowledge, as well as by the processes of representation and enunciation. All of this leads to the realization that the referent cannot be objectively identified as a unique, tangible, external reality (Weisenburger 1995, 18; Díez Cobo 2006, 92-93). In short, and as argued earlier, this amounts to shifting the focus from referentiality to reference; as Bogel suggests, the way that the issue of referentiality has been tackled is largely responsible for the evident gap that currently exists between traditional satiric theory and newer approximations, as well as with actual satiric practice. The undisputed belief in satire’s moralizing impulse goes hand in hand with the need to identify a reality that preexists the text, a reality that the satirist identifies as in need of change and that tends to be, in this view, always extra-textual (Bogel 2001, 12-13). As Bogel suggests, the notable unease starting in the 1970s (and led by New Historicism) with the idea of a formalist, asocial, and ahistorical reading of texts leads not to a reformulation of satire criticism but to “a relatively untroubled return to preformalist assumptions” (Ibid., 5), which render critical readings intent on identifying the historical particulars which are the targets of satire “in the real world;” for instance, whether the Emperor of Lilliput was George I in Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, or not. Contrary to this tendency, Bogel suggests that the transition from formalist and historicist approaches to newer readings could have been bridged if traditional satire criticism had identified the “textual constructedness” of the object of satire, distinguishing between “reference (a relation between this text and that object) and referentiality (a textual gesture outward, whether to a historical object or not)” (Ibid., 9) and allowing for the description and interpretation of, and the assignation of meaning to all the allusions and presuppositions that constitute the central conventions of satire (Ibid.). Automatically looking for particulars equals, for Bogel, to “searching for the real god invoked by an epic poet instead of investigating the nature and significance of the invocation” (Ibid., 10). In short, as Bogel contends, in satire “referentiality and factuality are essential conventions, products of certain rhetorical strategies, and the kind of historical analysis to which we have mostly been treated blinds us to the nature and significance of those strategies” (Ibid., 11-12). By focusing exclusively on a transparent outward referentiality, this type of analysis misses exploring other textual strategies; for instance, not what the text alludes to in the real world but how these allusions are presented in such a way as to create opposition and/or identification between the satirist and what is being satirized—resulting in Randolph’s “praise and blame” pattern—, or how these positions remain

ambivalent; in other words, focusing on strict reference distracts the reader from the constructedness of the text. As I will try to show in upcoming sections, Bakhtin's work on satire—which pre-dates the body of work produced by the Chicago and Yale schools—effectively bridges this gap by proposing a model of analysis that is both textual and grounded in socio-historical reality and that is, more importantly, dynamic. Bakhtin's understanding of the text as inherently dialogical puts forward a model where

the work and the world represented in it enter the real world and enrich it, and the real world enters the work and its world as part of the process of its creation, as well as part of its subsequent life, in a continual renewing of the work through the creative perception of listeners and readers. (Bakhtin 2011, 254)

Critics like Weisenburger have commented on the significant disconnect between theory and practice, where the “generative” model of the Chicago and Yale schools—satire as a “rationalist discourse launched against the exemplars of folly and vice, to rectify them according to norms of good behavior and right thinking” (Weisenburger 1995, 1)—was in conflict with what the literary field was producing since the 1940s: satires that were, on the contrary, “degenerative” in nature, that “function[ed] to subvert hierarchies of value and to reflect suspiciously on all ways of making meaning, including [their] own” (Ibid., 3). The “generative” model does not account for the nature of not only twenty-first-century works but of their own contemporary works, at even the most fundamental points, or even many classic satires belonging to the canon, such as the satires by Petronius and Swift (Griffin 1994). Clearly, Bakhtin was making the same point about Rabelais, as I will suggest in the last section of this chapter. But this did not hinder satire theorists, and they continued to apply their universal and transhistoricist model to satires of all periods, at the same time dismissing as the “oddity that confirmed the rule” the satires that did not fit the model. As a result, the influence of postmodernism in satirical writing was largely dismissed by satire criticism.

The main problem is not whether satire is/should be “generative” or “degenerative;” rather, it is acknowledging that the tension between satire's “generative” and “degenerative” impulses is intrinsic to satire itself. However, as Bogel argues, traditional criticism has functioned to contain this tension or to dismiss it altogether, effectively quelling the anxieties that satire may arouse (Bogel 2011, 5). In Bogel's view, it is this tension that makes satire interesting, difficult, and profound (Ibid., 4-5), but the traditional readings perform a labor of containment in which “the

elements of the satiric text have been kept in place and the position of the reader securely insulated" (Ibid., 31). As Bogel contends, traditional assumptions were "incorrect because incomplete" (Ibid., 4), as they dismissed satire's nature as a complex double structure that both assumes and subverts the tenets established by traditional theorizations, much in the way that Hutcheon refers to irony's "double-voicing." Despite the good intentions of formalist critics who explored satire with the aim of assessing the vitality of the form, their elaborations somehow cemented the notion of satire as an outdated form by setting a framework of interpretation that was too rigid, at odds with satire's own hybrid and flexible nature, and that constrained future readings of satire for years to come.

In American Studies in particular, the discrepancy between theory and practice was influential in the emergence of a new literary label in the 1960s, "black humor," that attempted to group together a number of diverse satirical works that were impossible to contain within the then-normative and formalist definition of satire. Among these were the novels by John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, William Gaddis, John Hawkes, Norman Mailer, Thomas Pynchon, Ishmael Reed, and Kurt Vonnegut which had, according to critics in the field, gone "beyond satire" (Weisenburger 1995, 2). The emergence of this type of satirical writing—a type of humor that, as Scholes defines it in *The Fabulators* (1967), has some faith in art but rejects all ethical absolutes and does not claim any moral certainty (Scholes 1967, 41)—was seen not as a sign of the evolution of satire into new forms under the influence of postmodernism but as a sign of writers dismissing satire altogether and engaging in something radically new (Weisenburger 1995, 2), which seemed to confirm the idea that from the ashes of an allegedly defunct satire "black humor" had emerged. Although these writers never defined themselves as "black humorists" and the term was more of a marketing label than a literary movement, Scholes notes how this type of humorous writing—despite its diverse styles and approaches—shared not only in their innovative postmodern quality but in drawing from the picaresque tradition in their compassionate depiction of antiheroes, as well as being influenced by European philosophical schools of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially as regards moral relativism, the exploration of the absurd, and the comedy of extremity (Scholes 1967). It is with this American tradition that Walter's satire establishes a continuity, as I will further explore in section 3.6.

On the other hand, as Thompson notes, there is a second factor that explains the emergence of the label "black humor"—to the detriment of "satire"—in American fiction. The fact that there is a prolific tradition of narrative satire in US fiction has tended to be downplayed in large part due to the overlapping of the term "humor" over "satire" in American usage. As Thompson argues in *The National Joker: Abraham Lincoln and the Politics of Satire* (2015), if we look at the history of American fiction from

the eighteenth century onwards, the term “satire” seems a newer occurrence in contrast to the term “humor,” and this has to do with the fact that in eighteenth-century United States the term “satire” was reluctantly associated with a British tradition—and this led to a favoring of the term “humor” over “satire” (Thompson 2015, 2-3). Thus, as Frye notes, there is a “kind of American satire that passes as folk humor,” appropriately “exemplified by the Biglow Papers, Mr. Dooley, Artemus Ward, and Will Rogers” (Frye 1957, 227), among others, and in later years the work produced by American satirists also tends to fail being identified as such.

The gap between theory and practice has further implications when one considers how American Studies scholars seem to agree that narrative satire is a minor form in the American literary tradition (especially when comparing it to the British), something which is counterintuitive in a culture with such a long tradition of satirical writing with pivotal figures in the twentieth-century literary arena,¹²³ the fact that political and social satire in the United States can be traced as far back as pre-revolutionary times—finding some of its finest and earliest examples in the writings of Benjamin Franklin—and the pervasive use of satire in every other American cultural media—which, as previously noted, is beyond the scope of this analysis. Whether it is due to a matter of usage of the word “satire” or to a stagnated critical corpus or both, the allegedly peripheral status of narrative satire in American fiction has resulted in little critical theorization of a specifically American satire, as compared to the remarkable amount of work done in satire criticism in general—which, as I have noted, owes much of its impulse to American scholarship—, or to studies on the British satiric tradition. It is within this lineage of American satirical writing that Walter’s *The Zero* inscribes itself, and it is in dialogue and intertextual play with this tradition (as well as with the works of European writers like Céline, Kafka, and Camus) that the novel finds its fullest ethical expression.

Thus, what I want to suggest is that what has been dead for a long time is not satire itself but our mode of reading satire, something which becomes evident not only in the texts by non-specialists but, tellingly, in the critical approximations of many scholars working in the field. For instance, it is still possible to find, in a study on Melville published in 1996, the following definition of satire: “satire may be defined as an attack on vice and folly by means of wit, irony, or ridicule; combining comic invention with moral judgment, humor with censure, satire presents a schematic, largely topical representation of individuals and societies corrupted by moral abuses” (Cook 1996, 15). This is an almost word-by-word transposition of Frye’s 1957 characterization of satire, and Cook pays due homage to Frye in the title of his book: *Satirical Apocalypse: An Anatomy of Melville’s The Confidence Man* (which alludes to, I presume, Frye’s *Anatomy*

¹²³ For a comprehensive analysis of American satirical writing in the twentieth century, see Weisenburger 1995.

of Criticism). Ten years later, Kercher's definition of satire in *Revel with a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America* (2006) is reminiscent of the notion of "invective" satire and dwells in the same paradigm: "By *satire* I refer specifically to forms of humorous expression that, by definition, deploy irony to criticize vice and raise awareness. Spurred often by anger or scorn and informed by serious moral concern, satire is humor with a social purpose" (Kercher 2006, 1; emphasis in the original), bringing to mind Frye's definition of satire as "militant irony" (Frye 1957, 223). Similarly, Snyder's *Prospects of Power: Tragedy, Satire, the Essay, and the Theory of Genre* (1991) sustains that satire uses "literary strategies for gaining moral, social, religious, or political ascendancy by reasoned demonstration" (Snyder 1991, 97). That some theorists seem to have never departed from traditional assumptions about satire is evident also in a volume published in 1991 by Test, *Satire: Spirit and Art*, where the author claims that "what the satirist disapproves tends to be clear-cut" and that there cannot be unintentional satire (Test 1991, 29). Even more telling is the fact that Hodgart's 1969 volume *Satire* was reprinted in 2010, unedited, with only its title slightly changed (*Satire: Origins and Principles*), as a student's manual. Traditional assumptions about satire still hold currency in academic criticism, and it is not surprising that in a study of the satirical paper *The Onion* published in 2011 the author relies on Test's 1991 text to describe satire's "playful, laughing yet aggressive and judgmental attitude," while at the same time, and paradoxically, referring to its "ambiguous, double-layered construction" (Warner 2011, 63). In short, these texts make manifest the enormous influence of the formalist understanding of satire which is also evident in the ordinary, non-specialist definition of satire that can be found in any regular dictionary and which, presumably, reflects what non-specialists understand as "satire": for instance, the OED defines satire as "[t]he use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues" (OED online), while Merriam Webster's dictionary still defines "satire" as "a way of using humor to show that someone or something is foolish, weak, bad, etc." or "humor that shows the weaknesses or bad qualities of a person, government, society, etc." (Merriam-Webster online). While these definitions might, on the surface, aptly work for a particular type of political satire that is widely popular in the United States—I am referring to late-night shows like the ones hosted by Stephen Colbert, John Oliver, Seth Meyers, or Bill Maher, whose political critique is extremely incisive and funny—they seem to leave no room for contemporary narrative

satire as I have been exploring it so far.¹²⁴ Hence, non-specialist definitions do not deviate from the postulates of traditional scholarship on satire, where satire is a corrective tale that rests on the alignment of the reader and the author against the satirized object, an alignment which, I argue, could be perceived as unacceptable in certain historical circumstances—as one would “satirically condemn” certain situations (e.g. the terrorist attacks of September 11) at one’s own peril. At the heart of this understanding of satire is a bergsonian conception of laughter whereby laughter is corrective and at the same time unserious and frivolous,¹²⁵ and while this does not result in any way in a decrease of satirical writing (quite to the contrary), it does explain why oftentimes satire is considered inadequate, inappropriate, and politically incorrect: when the referent has been identified as “serious,” frivolous and unserious laughter is out of the question. When the referent is ourselves and when the reference to us is seen as purely mocking and negative, one can begin to understand why people are immediately offended.

If the analysis of the satiric text goes beyond a fixed referentiality with a univocal moralizing aim then it is possible to see satire as problematic, open-ended, essayistic (vs. rhetorical), ambiguous in its relationship to history (vs. strictly referential), uncertain in its political effect (vs. unambiguous about its purpose), resistant to formal closure, more inclined to ask questions than to provide answers, and ambivalent about

¹²⁴ The rift between what widespread, traditional definitions of satire say and what satire actually does is never more evident than in a recent volume that, funnily enough, does not deal with satire *per se* and does not fall within academic scholarship. *¡Satiristas!* is a series of interviews with comic performers and writers with a satirical bent—in fact, the editors admit that “this book isn’t really about satire itself at all. But we had a cool title, so we’re goin’ with it anyway” (Provenza & Dion 2010, xx). In the introduction, Provenza offers the following definition of satire: “In the strictest, ancient-Greek-rules-of-drama-and-poetry sense of the word, it’s defined as—and I’m paraphrasing here, because it’s all really ancient Greek to me—mocking a point of view by embracing it so fully as to allow its absurdity to become self-evident. The clearest modern examples of this, I think, are Stephen Colbert and Sacha Baron Cohen’s Borat. A little further back, Jonathan Swift and Mark Twain are at the top of the list. Their writing and speaking come from a serious commitment to the very idea they want to mock. A little exaggeration later, and it’s hilarious” (Provenza & Dion 2010, xx). In my estimation, this comes closer to an inquisitive and open-ended form of satire than any of the definitions I have listed above. However, Provenza notes that “the more generally accepted definition is broader” and subsequently provides the Merriam Webster dictionary definition, noting also that the number of comedians that engage in this kind of satire is reduced to a minimum. *¡Satiristas!* is based on the premise that “we are living in a golden age of satire” where satirists have sometime replaced journalists as the preferred news source (front flap of the dust jacket); it is also noteworthy that most of the interviewed comedians reject any “corrective” intention on their part, and say that they just want to make people laugh.

¹²⁵ In 1900 French philosopher Henri Bergson published a series of essays collectively entitled *Le Rire. Essai sur la signification du comique* (translated as *Laughter. An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*) that aimed to provide a “scientific” explanation of the comic process, and from which a “bergsonian theory of laughter” was derived. Bergson posits that laughter is a human and social activity that usually requires detachment or indifference from sensibility and emotion—i.e. laughter is a product of the intellect—, because it is more difficult to laugh when one is fully aware of the seriousness of a situation. Thus, and at the risk of simplifying Bergson’s complex and influential analysis, it can be affirmed that the type of laughter he describes is emotionally detached and eminently corrective, which has resulted in a negative view of laughter. While I am not suggesting in any way that Bergson is solely responsible for laughter’s negative connotation—because it is possible to trace laughter’s “bad reputation” through the history of philosophy from Classical Antiquity to the twentieth century (Morreall 2016, n.p.)—his “theory of laughter” was deeply influential.

the pleasure it offers (Griffin 1994, 5). This is the reading that I propose for *The Zero*, as a novel that can—and should—be read in relation to the aftermath of 9/11 but that can also have wider implications regarding American culture, nationalist discourse, the nature of satirical texts, and the potential of literature for opening a space for debate and dissent. If read in exclusively referential terms, *The Zero* would be mere denunciation of the political and commercial management of the aftermath of September 11, disguised as fiction. But as Walter fiercely states, “THIS BOOK IS NOT ABOUT THEM. It’s about us” (Walter qtd. in Flinn 2014, 229; capitals in the original), stating clearly that this is not a satire focused on an external object of attack (the government? the terrorists?) that is separate from the enunciating subject but, rather, on an object of satire that includes both the object and the subject. Thus, the novel is, as its author suggests, about the way that *we* have deluded ourselves into a post-9/11 collective insanity. The satire in *The Zero* goes beyond allegory and seeks to engage readers in an open-ended, non-finite, and dialogic way that is crucially different from what traditional satire criticism would understand it to be. *The Zero*, I argue, does not merely “point the finger at” the government’s management of the aftermath of 9/11 but seeks to engage readers into self-examination and a recognition of their own complicity, and it achieves so by building empathic bridges with the reader through what Bowles terms the “satiric effect” (Bowles 2015).

Therefore, in order to offer an open-ended reading of the novel, the following section will aim at putting forward an alternative understanding of satire that may help to analyze the novel away from the prescriptions of early post-9/11 fiction. My analysis will be based on a number of texts that have sought to reevaluate satire criticism since the 1990s, and what all of them have in common is their recuperation of Bakhtin’s study of menippean satire. It is Bakhtin’s formulation of satire as “carnivalized discourse” which, without fully disavowing traditional satiric theory, enables a more nuanced and ambiguous characterization of satire that is, at times, at the opposite extreme from conventional understandings. In these scholars’ texts, Bakhtin’s notions of carnivalization and dialogism, together with Kristeva’s reworking of Bakhtin’s dialogism and ambivalence into the notion of intertextuality, are revealed as the most fruitful tools to reexamine satiric theory. Among the first of these reevaluations, Griffin’s *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* (1994) elaborates on a model of satire-as-inquiry, a satiric practice in which satire is

rather an “open” than a “closed” form, both in its formal features (particularly in its reluctance to conclude) and in its more general rhetorical and moral features, in its frequent preference for inquiry, provocation, or playfulness rather than assertion and conclusiveness. [Griffin’s] argument about satire-as-inquiry accords with the claim that

one of satire's pleasures is the speculation into which its readers are led.
(Griffin 1994, 186)

Weisenburger's *Fables of Subversion* (1995) approaches satirical novels¹²⁶ in the United States in the period 1930-1980 "as manifestations of intertextuality or 'dialogism' in the Bakhtinian sense, thus as counterpositionings not only of different voices in the narrative itself but also of anterior texts and the codified elements of language and culture in general" (Weisenburger 1995, 11). Weisenburger's thesis is that during this period there is a rise of a radically subversive mode of satire—which he also identifies as typically postmodern—and which stands in crucial opposition to corrective, normative satire and its legitimizing function (achieved through the creation of a consensus on values). On the contrary, the postmodern satires that Weisenburger examines participate in the oppositional, subversive work of much twentieth-century art, and it is this approach that informs his labelling these satires as "degenerative," as "a form of interrogating and subverting codified knowledge and revealing it as a dissimulation of violence" (Ibid., 12). Because he believes that Bakhtin's methodology is diffuse, he complements his methodology with notions by Barthes, Todorov, Genette, Culler, and Jameson, in order to bring textual dialogism into sharper focus.

Bogel's *The Difference Satire Makes* (2001) proposes honoring "the many valuable aspects of satire criticism from antiquity through the mid-twentieth century but trying to modify the features of that history that have impeded a fuller understanding of the satiric mode" (Bogel 2001, 41). His point of departure is a reconsideration of the "originating" moment of satire: instead of having a satirist who perceives an evil in the world and sets up to write a satire in order to attack it and, hopefully, have some reformatory effect, Bogel posits the originating moment of satire as the satirist's perception of "something or someone that is both unattractive and curiously or dangerously like them [...] something, then, that is *not alien enough*" (Ibid.; emphasis in the original). Bogel's innovative thesis relies in large part on Barthes's notion of the "disturbance in classification," as it is "not difference but erosion or annihilation of difference that requires ritual acts of boundary-policing and boundary-establishment: acts of purification, of reclassification, of sacrifice—acts among which we can include a sizeable number of satiric texts" (Ibid., 46). In Bogel's analysis, then, satire is not a text that targets a perceived difference but, on the contrary, it seeks to create *textually*, rhetorically, that difference and distance "that it pretends is already there waiting to be registered" (Ibid.). In this critic's view, then, satire ceases to be a mimetic act with a

¹²⁶ Weisenburger's study focuses on works by Nathanael West, Flannery O'Connor, John Hawkes, Vladimir Nabokov, William Gaddis, Kurt Vonnegut, Robert Coover, Thomas Pynchon, Mary McCarthy, Chester Himes, James Purdy, Charles Wright, and Ishmael Reed. While some of these authors are consummate satirists, others had not been previously considered in this context.

condemnatory aim and becomes an eminently rhetorical exercise by means of which a dialectic is established in an infinite game of difference and continuity (Díez Cobo 2006, 83).

The latest of these investigations, Bowles's *The Ends of Satire* (2015), demonstrates how looking at satirical writing from a semiotic point of view—that is to say, at how satire signifies—not only makes evident the pervasiveness of the satiric practices studied by Bakhtin such as inversion, dialogism, intertextuality, parody, citation, and mythification in everyday theoretical and fictional writing, but can help to better understand how the satiric effect works. While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to explore the influence and full ramifications of Bakhtin's and Kristeva's work for structuralism, post-structuralism and beyond, Bakhtin's exploration of the tradition of folk humor, carnival laughter, and the "carnival sense of the world" (Bakhtin 1999, 107) as the basis for the literary practice of carnivalization helps to understand the satiric as a literary gesture that permits a temporary suspension from monologic, authoritative discourses, thus opening up a small breach where alternative discourses may emerge. This, together with the newer formulations mentioned above, is the tool of analysis that I will apply to Walter's *The Zero*, in hope of providing an alternative reading of this early 9/11 novel that may contribute to the corpus of post-9/11 fiction studies and to a re-evaluation of the novel's weight in said corpus.

2.4. Reading satire through Bakhtin's carnivalesque

As mentioned earlier, any attempt at "containing" or defining satire remains elusive and much has to do with the fact that narrative satire has a literary history that, in the West, dates back to Classical Antiquity;¹²⁷ in this respect, the defenses by Latin writers Diomedes and Quintilian of an exclusively Latin tradition of verse satire that denied its Greek origins—especially Quintilian's famous claim that *Satura quidem tota nostra est* ["Satire indeed is wholly ours"] in *Institutiones Oratoris* 10.1.93—did much to blur the origins of the form (Griffin 1994, 9) and to maintain the confusion that has existed for centuries in the theoretical field regarding the Latin and Greek variations of satire in prose and in verse.¹²⁸ These blurred origins are just one indication of the many challenges that any elaboration of satiric theory has to undergo, as well as the overwhelming—and sometimes stagnated—body of work that critics have to go through, all of which underscores the relevance of Bakhtin's recuperation of the Greek

¹²⁷ Strong satiric traditions can also be found in the non-Western world, including China, India, and the Islamic world (see Feinberg 1971; Ball 2003; Freedman 2009; Hall 2014).

¹²⁸ For a detailed analysis of the characteristics of Latin satire and how the exclusively Latin origins were argued in Classical times, see Paul Allen Miller's "Introduction" to *Latin Verse Satire. An Anthology and Reader* (London & New York: Routledge, 2005: 1-34).

tradition of prose satire, the menippea.¹²⁹ Bakhtin's unique study of menippean satire and his development of the notion of carnivalization as a literary practice is, in my view, perhaps the most relevant contribution to satire criticism in the twentieth century, as it becomes pivotal to the new approaches that begin to be formulated after the 1990s and that enable the progressive—though still not complete—abandonment of traditional methods of analysis of satire. Furthermore, Bakhtin's notion of carnivalization brings to the foreground the fact that satire is *per se* an intrinsically postmodern text—even if this may sound anachronistic—because of the textual strategies it employs and the epistemological principle that underlies it: the “truth” expressed by the text is contingent, shifting, and not final, even if traditional criticism has sought to read it as exactly the opposite.

The recovery of the menippea for the Western canon is usually credited to Northrop Frye (1944, 1957) in part because the several and diverse constraints imposed on the publication of Bakhtin's works in Russia made him remain unpublished for decades, as well as not translated into English until the 1970s, thus remaining relatively unknown to the West until Kristeva's reelaboration of some of Bakhtin's theories in *Sémiotiké: recherches pour une sémanalyse* (1969). When set in contrast to Bakhtin's radical analysis, “previous” works on the menippea by Frye and C.L. Barber—although greatly influential—are revealed as fundamentally conservative in their approach. Bakhtin's approach, in contrast, brings out the ideological significance of the menippean satiric practice (Knowles 1998, 7). Bakhtin had first approached the menippea in his doctoral dissertation of 1929 (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Art*), an exploration that will be further developed in later works during the 1930s and 1940s (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, written in 1929, publ. 1963/trans. 1984, and *Rabelais and His World*, written in 1940, publ. 1965/trans. 1968). Although Bakhtin's work is not dedicated exclusively to satire, his examination of the menippea, with the carnivalesque as its logic and grotesque realism as its aesthetic, provides an exciting and fecund framework of analysis from which the notions of dialogism, heteroglossia, and ambivalence are derived, notions that are developed in more complexity in later works such as *The Dialogic Imagination* (a collection of essays written between 1934-1941, publ. 1975/trans. 1981). Although Bakhtin's writing on the menippea as an expression of textual carnival has been

¹²⁹ Though clearly distinct—the Latin tradition is mostly in verse, while the most relevant contribution of the Greek tradition is the prose satire developed by Menippus (also called menippea or menippean satire) —, scholars agree that prose or menippean satire, which is the natural antecedent of present narrative satire, developed from the practice of adding prose interludes into the verse satires (Frye 1957, 309), which ended up evolving into strictly prose satire. This form allegedly initiated by the Greek Menippus (third century BC) kept itself separate from the tradition of verse satire, which was mostly Latin. Menippus's works were lost but he had two great disciples in the Greek Lucian (AD ca. 120-ca.180) and also in the Roman Varro (116-27 BC). Hence, prose satire has come to be known as “menippean satire” and, in the Latin tradition, as Varronian. Varro's works survive only in fragments but his legacy was carried on by Petronius (27-66 AD) and Apuleius (124-170 AD). For further analysis of the menippean satire, see Bakhtin 1999; Kristeva 1986 (pp. 52-55); Mookerjee 2013 (pp. 16-17); Frye 1944 & 1957; as well as J. Relihan's *Ancient Menippean Satire* (1993) and H. D. Weinbrot's *Menippean Satire Reconsidered* (2005).

criticized as being deeply influenced and informed by the political situation in Russia at the time of writing (1930s, 1940s),¹³⁰ and for being utopian and not accurate in historical terms, his work still remains one of the most productive, original and influential contributions to literary theory, as I have already noted and hope to demonstrate in the following sections.

In order to avoid as much as possible generating confusion in my analysis—where I will sometimes refer to the menippea and other times to the carnivalesque—it is important to state beforehand that it is not easy to establish a clear-cut difference because neither Bakhtin nor Kristeva define these terms univocally. In fact, both are intrinsically interrelated, and maybe the best way to hint at a distinction is to note how both *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and *Rabelais and His World* deal with the menippea but engage with it through slightly different approaches. The first places greater emphasis on the menippea (and the polyphonic novel) as a linguistic and textual phenomenon (that is, through a detailed exploration of its textual strategies) while the second is more concerned with carnival as a cultural practice. In other words, the term “menippea,” while more grounded in Classical history, seems to imply more of a textual approach, while the carnivalesque seems to lead naturally to ideological and transhistorical considerations; still, it would be unwise (and irrelevant) to attempt to disengage the two, as the menippea can be considered an instance of carnivalized discourse and Kristeva will unproblematically refer to “menippean discourse.” Also, it needs to be noted that in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* “satire” is the term that Bakhtin uses to refer to a particular—and probably contemporaneous—type of monologic, closed-off, morally unambiguous satire that comes closer to the traditional understanding of satire that I have described in the previous section. So it is indeed possible to find negative statements on satire by Bakhtin, but these refer to the type of satire that is opposed to carnivalized, polyphonic, ambivalent discourse, which he also labels “satiric.” I have been using the term “satire” throughout these pages as, in my view, the distinction is a matter of understanding and not of terminology, and whenever I refer to one or the other it will be clearly noted.

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* Bakhtin recuperates the tradition of the menippean satire, a form “almost entirely unappreciated in scholarship—in the history of the development of European novelistic prose” (Bakhtin 1999, 119), and argues that this style of satiric prose writing is the natural antecedent of the novel, an argument that is shared by Frye in his analysis of the rise of the novel. Because the type of discourse to be found in the menippea is, according to Bakhtin, deeply related to the carnival

¹³⁰ Some critics have argued that Bakhtin's recuperation of popular carnival festivities as well as his formulation of the notion of heteroglossia are deeply linked to the Russian socialist project, as they effectively bring to the foreground the importance of folk people and the confrontation of hegemonic discourse. Be it as it may, his contribution is very relevant to literary studies, regardless of political inferences.

practices that permeate Classical Antiquity and the Middle Ages, the menippea is its main literary vehicle before the decline of carnival festivities in the sixteenth century, a decline that coincides with the rise of the novel in the seventeenth. Bakhtin posits the novel as the main site where the carnivalesque logic is preserved—even as it is self-evident that not all novels can be said to follow this principle, especially if we think of the realist novel—because the organizing principle of the novel, as well as the entry of vernacular languages into writing, signifies a break from former epic narratives and philosophical treatises that aimed at transmitting a unified and unquestionable voice. The menippea is, for Bakhtin, an early example of polyglottic discourse that relativizes the centralizing tendencies of monoglottic genres (such as the epic) and the supposed authority that they represent (Bakhtin 2011, 67); in other words, he observes in the menippea the same potential for calling into question the ideological cohesion of monologic discourse by the presence of multiple voices that he identifies in Dostoevsky's characteristically "polyphonic" novels in the nineteenth century.¹³¹

Although Bakhtin and Frye do not agree on the causes for the decline of the menippea—an impoverishment of carnival by the onset of bourgeois culture for Bakhtin; the ascendancy of the novel for Frye—what these otherwise diverging theories establish is that the menippea had an enormous influence "on the development of European literature and especially the formation of the novel" (Kristeva 1986, 52). Examples of menippean satire in Classical Antiquity include Petronius's *Satyricon*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Lucan's satires, and Hippocrates's *Novel*, to name but a few. After the fall of the Roman Empire, the menippea survives into the Middle Ages and greatly influences Christian and Byzantine literature (Ibid.), preserved mostly in the allegory and the *danse macabre* traditions which then live on into Elizabethan times. Starting in the sixteenth century, the menippea begins to merge with what was then an emerging genre, "producing various hybrids including the *roman à these* and novels in which the characters are symbols of social or other

¹³¹ According to Bakhtin, the polyphonic novel is a text that is characterized by a narrative voice that is not given preeminence over the characters' voices, which otherwise remain typically subordinate to the narrator in the text (for instance, what we would find in realist texts, considered "monologic" by Bakhtin). In the polyphonic novel the narrator's voice has the same status as all the other voices in the text, with which it engages dialogically, and does not claim to have the final "truth." Especially in Dostoevsky's novels, and even in cases where the narrator is the single voice to be heard, Bakhtin identifies a "double-voicedness" or the presence of an interlocutor, whether real or imaginary, that can be easily identified through an analysis of the linguistic structure. In Kristeva's interpretation, the polyphonic novel can be understood, then, as a text that "knows neither law nor hierarchy, since it is a plurality of linguistic elements in dialogical relationships" (Kristeva 1986, 55), and that "embodies the effort of European thought to break out of the framework to causally determined identical substances [i.e., the realist novel] and head towards another modality of thought that proceeds through dialogue (a logic of distance, relativity, analogy, non-exclusive and transfinite opposition)" (Kristeva 1986, 56).

ideas" (Frye 1957, 312).¹³² For instance, works such as Rabelais's *Gargantua et Pantagruel* (1534), Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pecuchet* (1881), Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly* (1511), and Voltaire's *Candide* (1759) can all be considered, according to Frye, as examples of early hybrid novels with a strong satiric impulse, especially because they engage with contemporary ideas in a playful way and have sometimes been called "encyclopedic" in that respect. This type of menippean had, for Frye, its greatest representative in English literature in the *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) by Burton, before the appearance of Swift, noted by many as one of the greatest satirists of all time, with remarkable satires such as *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and "A Modest Proposal" (1729), among many others. Cervantes's *Don Quijote* (1605 & 1615) can also be considered a satire or, according to Frye, a more intellectualized modulation of the picaresque (Frye 1957, 229). Don Quixote's figure embodies the satiric parody of an idealizing genre (the chivalric romance) while Sancho Panza brings in a contrasting and lowering materiality (clearly more subdued than the scatological extremes of Rabelais, but still in the style of grotesque realism), and it is the joining of the two what produces the novel's satiric effect (Palmeri 1990, 11). As Bakhtin argues, menippean discourse then encroaches upon the European novel of the eighteenth century and can still be found in Dostoevsky's "polyphonic novel" of the nineteenth and in the "carnivalized genres" of today (Bakhtin 1999, 107-113). For Kristeva, the novels of Joyce, Kafka and Bataille are also instances of this Bakhtinian understanding of the "carnavalesque genre, extraordinarily flexible and as changeable as Proteus, capable of penetrating other genres" (Bakhtin 1999, 113). As Knight notes, rather than a decline of menippean satire, what Bakhtin's work demonstrates is "the historical movement of satire into the novel," which results in an overlap that is difficult to sort out considering the broadness and vagueness of both genres (Knight 2004, 9). With the advent of postmodernism, argues Knight, a second, reverse movement takes place: now the novel moves into satire (Ibid., 9), which further complicates critical approximations.

Briefly, some of the formal characteristics of menippean satire described by Bakhtin include "an *extraordinary freedom of plot and philosophical invention*," the inclusion of fantastic or extraordinary elements "not for the positive *embodiment* of truth, but as a mode for searching after truth, provoking it, and, most important, *testing* it," the combination of "the free fantastic, the symbolic, at times even a mystical-religious element with an extreme and (from our point of view) crude *slum naturalism*," "a

¹³² Frye characterizes the menippea as follows: "The short form of the Menippean satire is usually a dialogue or colloquy, in which the dramatic interest is in a conflict of ideas rather than of character" (Frye 1957, 310). Dealing mostly with mental attitudes rather than with specific persons, the menippean satire has the ability, according to Frye, "to handle abstract ideas and theories, and differs from the novel in its characterization, which is stylized rather than naturalistic" (Frye 1957, 309). However, Frye cannot help but attribute a moralistic aim to satire: "The novelist sees evil and folly as social diseases, but the Menippean satirist sees them as diseases of the intellect, as a kind of maddened pedantry which the *philosophus gloriosus* at once symbolizes and defines" (Frye 1957, 309); in particular, "satire is the completion of the logical process known as the *reductio ad absurdum*," an extreme form of exaggeration that is designed to expose the absurdity or the incorrectness of a certain idea (Frye 1957, 233).

capacity to contemplate the world on the broadest possible scale [...] a genre of 'ultimate questions,'" "a representation of the unusual, abnormal moral and psychic states of man—insanity of all sorts (the theme of the maniac), split personality, unrestrained daydreaming, unusual dreams, passions bordering on madness, suicides, and so forth" (Bakhtin 1999, 114-121; emphasis in the original). This last characteristic is, in my view, especially relevant not only because it embodies, in a way, the instability or impossibility of monologic discourse, but because it is key for the analysis of the novel that concerns us here, as I will develop in the next chapter. Bakhtin writes,

These phenomena do not function narrowly in the menippea as mere themes, but have a formal generic significance. Dreams, daydreams, insanity destroy the epic and tragic wholeness of a person and his fate: the possibilities of another person and another life are revealed in him, he loses his finalized quality and ceases to mean only one thing; he ceases to coincide with himself. Dreams are common in the epic as well, but there they are prophetic, motivating, cautionary—they do not take the person beyond the bound of his fate and his character, they do not violate his integrity. Of course, this unfinalizability of a man, his noncoincidence with himself, are still rather elementary and embryonic in the menippea, but they are openly there and permit us to look at a person in a new way. This destruction of the wholeness and finalized quality of a man is facilitated by the appearance, in the menippea, of a *dialogic relationship to one's own self* (fraught with the possibility of split personality). (Bakhtin 1999, 116-117; emphasis added)

Indeed, this is the main narrative strategy employed by Walter's *The Zero*, where the main character's split personality—and his efforts to regain a sense of self—structure the narrative in such a way that the discourses represented—heroism, grief, patriotism, and so on—are undermined in the very act of their representation. The narrative structure of *The Zero* can thus be described in the terms used by Kristeva, as discourse "made up of contrasts," that "uses abrupt transitions and changes," "put together as a pavement of citations," the language of which "seems fascinated with the 'double' (with its own activity as graphic trace, doubling an 'outside') and with the logic of opposition replacing that of identity in defining terms" (Kristeva 1986, 53). It is in the midst of this pavement of citations—as the novel effectively echoes all the competing discourses that coexist in the aftermath, discourses that seek to justify profit, nostalgia, or retaliation, as well as honest and sincere feelings of loss and despair—that the main character attempts to understand what is the role of his "double" in

identitarian terms, as he remembers being formerly and unproblematically defined just as a police officer and a father. But this identification has now turned to be insufficient.

What these formal traits of the menippea analyzed by Bakhtin bring to the foreground is a type of discourse that is informed by “carnivalization,” a notion that Bakhtin will explore in detail in *Rabelais and His World*. As Bakhtin writes, carnival feasts, which can be traced back to the Roman Saturnalias, “celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order,” marking “the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed” (Bakhtin 1968, 10). This ambivalent and dualistic nature of carnival imagery (Bakhtin 1999, 126) is the basis for what Bakhtin calls the “carnival sense of the world” or “carnivalization.” Thus, Bakhtin explores the carnivalesque parodic energies of antique folklore as a dynamic mode of social contestation that permeates the serio-comical genres of Classical Antiquity and that he finds are extant in the novel once the carnival practices and the menippean satire decline.

Bakhtin’s characterization of carnival as liberating, regenerating, and anti-authoritarian has not gone, however, unchallenged. While some argue that Bakhtin’s account of Rabelais and carnival is willfully one-sided, betraying nostalgia for a time gone and downplaying the influence of humanism in sixteenth-century France, the main contention against Bakhtin’s portrayal is that carnival was not so much of a liberation from the authority of Church and State but, rather, a functional safety-valve licensed by these power structures that actually “reinforce[d] the bonds of authority by allowing for their temporary suspension” (Dentith 1995, 73). Carnival, claims Eagleton, was merely a “permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art” (Eagleton 1981, 148), precisely because it was licensed transgression. Likewise, in “The Frames of Comic ‘Freedom’” (1984), Umberto Eco challenges the view of carnival as subversive and argues that it was directed towards reinforcing the *status quo*. The fact that the elites also took part in carnival festivities goes against Bakhtin’s depiction of carnival as the true feast of “the people,” because in many cases these festivities were used to strengthen, rather than weaken, the enforcement of social norms.¹³³ Finally, Bakhtin’s description of carnival as “a second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance” (Bakhtin 1968, 9) is considered utopian in the extreme (Gardiner 1992, 1993), not only because this “binary

¹³³ For more information on this aspect, see Dentith 1995, 73-79. However, there are other works that contest this view of carnival as a festive safety valve and illustrate how carnival festivities, even if understood as ritualized rebellion, sometimes led to actual unrest. The most relevant in this sense is Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie’s *Le Carnaval de Romans, 1579-1580* (1980). Peter Burke’s *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (1978) also explores this matter in detail.

division into official/unofficial, low/high, dialogic/monologic echoes the principles of structuralism which Bakhtin was sceptical of and resisted" (Knowles 1998, 6), but also because it tends to overlook the violence that was endemic to carnival (Knowles 1998, 6). Some have suggested that *Rabelais and His World* is less about Rabelais and sixteenth-century France than "a coded attack on the cultural situation of Russia in the 1930s under Stalin" (Dentith 1995, 71; see also LaCapra 1984), where carnival can be read as opposing all that is Stalinist. In Knowles' reading, it is possible to draw a parallel by opposition between Stalinism/medieval officialdom and Bakhtin's formulation of the carnivalesque:

the dialogical voice of unofficial culture in the people resisted the theological monologism of the Catholic Church (and tyrannical communism); the grotesque body was celebrated, not condemned as sinful (or sanitized by canons of Soviet realism); collective laughter in broad daylight defeats eschatological terror (and laughter as sinful in Russia); vitalist primitivism replaces the ascetic and life-denying culture of celibate prelacy. The utopian freedom of permanent becoming transcends the prison house of dogma and Gulag of dissent. (Knowles 1998, 4)

However attractive, this suggestion would imply dismissing the remarkable historical basis of Bakhtin's study by treating it as an allegory of the Soviet regime with an exclusively political intention.

In fact, some cultural theorists have contested Bakhtin's account of carnival and medieval culture as historically inaccurate—and later scholarship on carnival culture has partly validated some of the contentions against it. It has to be borne in mind that at the time of writing Bakhtin had only restricted access to Western scholarship on European carnival as subject matter: however, his study still remains invaluable for scholars working on Rabelais and medieval/Renaissance culture.¹³⁴ With all its flaws, Bakhtin's study of carnival is considered to be fundamental, and unavoidable, both for scholars working in cultural and literary studies.

For the purposes of this analysis, I am deeply interested in Bakhtin's formulation of the notion of "textual carnival" or carnivalization as "a mode of understanding, a positivity, a cultural analytic" (Stallybrass & White 1986, 6). Understanding the text as carnivalized provides a potent framework for analyzing grotesque aesthetic and for

¹³⁴ Cfr. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (1965); Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (1978); Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Le Carnaval de Romans, 1579-1580* (1980); Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986).

exploring the subordinate voices that can be found in a text. The carnival sense of the world determines some of the basic features of satiric narratives, among them an “atmosphere of joyful relativity” (Bakhtin 1999, 107) that fundamentally alters the rhetorical principle: from rhetoric understood as a means for detecting error and for persuading the reader about the virtue/wickedness of a certain course of action, to rhetoric understood as a means of arriving at a temporary and contingent “truth” through dialogue. In other words, in Bakhtin’s formulation the carnival sense of the world provides a transition from the monologism of pre-established truths into the contingency of dialogism, always structured as ambivalence.¹³⁵ Of course, this transition in the mode of writing and reading can be applied to the reading of literature in general and is not limited to the satiric text. In face of an epic, distanced, closed off monologic discourse, carnivalesque writing is more prone to asking questions than to providing answers, effecting a weakening of any claims to the text’s one-sided rhetorical seriousness, rationality, singular meaning, and dogmatism (Bakhtin 1999, 107). As Kristeva notes, the world represented in these carnivalized texts “has no fear of incriminating itself” and so it “becomes free from presupposed ‘values;’ without distinguishing between virtue and vice” (Kristeva 1986, 53). This is not to say that carnivalized discourse is free from portraying values and binding norms; rather, the values that can be derived from these narratives are always contingent and conditional, and no claims to universality can be made from them (Díez Cobo 2006, 90). Approaching the satiric through the carnivalesque offers then a reading that is at the opposite extreme of traditional criticism’s pattern of praise-blame and the centrality it attributes to an unambiguous moral positioning: all discursive and symbolic practices that may uphold power structures and structures of domination come under suspicion, and alternative structures of signification are established through subversion, intertextuality, citation, exaggeration, parody, all sorts of excess and innovative narrative approaches, thus questioning any given discourse and exposing its arbitrariness. It is in this sense that the satiric, carnivalized text turns into a “social activity,” as a speech that is politically and socially free from historical constraints and that, according to Kristeva, “entails a thorough boldness in philosophical and imaginative inventiveness” (Kristeva 1986, 52).

What the notions of polyphony and the carnivalesque as textual practice bring to the foreground is the extent to which they are informed by Bakhtin’s overarching idea of dialogism as epistemological activity, as a means for searching for “truth” (with the caveat that this “truth” is not fossilized and fixed but is contingent and dynamic). The way Bakhtin formulates dialogism is derived from the Socratic means of arriving at

¹³⁵ Bakhtin illustrates how ambivalence is an essential component of the carnival sense of the world by providing an analogy with the carnivalistic ritual of crowning the king of fools (and the consequent uncrowning of normative authority). I will later use this analogy to analyze two scenes in the novel, in the section “Carnival scenes.”

knowledge *in dialogue*, “born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction” and “counterposed to *official* monologism, which pretends to *possess ready-made truth*” (Bakhtin 1999, 110; emphasis in the original). The notion of dialogism does not refer only to a rhetorical level, as it is based on a conception of language as inherently dialogical, although texts can be constructed in such a way that negates this dialogic quality. For Bakhtin, the minimal unit of language is the *living* word, a word that is defined by three dimensions (subject-addressee-context) set into a dialogical or ambivalent relation to each other, in such a way that the poetic word is always at least double, referring to one and the other (Kristeva 1986, 69). Thus, at the textual level, dialogism refers to a relational quality whereby the text enters in a dialogue not only with texts prior and future, but within itself in the process of being written and read, generating an open and inquisitive dialogue in which neither part attempts to arrogate to itself the final word. The dialogism of carnivalesque discourse functions from within the very interior of epic and monologic discourse—rather than in opposition to it—, resulting in an ambivalence that is, as Kristeva argues, “the novel’s inheritance,” if we understand the novel as “a system of surfaces that intersect” (Kristeva 1986, 61), where the authorial voice cannot be located other than in the act of linking the surfaces of all the voices that appear in the novel. Thus, what the dialogism of the carnivalized text and the polyphonic novel highlights is the notion of ambivalence as structuring principle, because the text is always “elaborating itself as ambivalent in relation to another text” (Ibid., 56-57).

Especially in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Bakhtin illustrates how the dialogic engagement is made apparent in Dostoevsky’s texts, providing a typology that underscores the differences between a discourse that presents itself as authoritative and monologic, that is, “the direct referentially oriented discourse of the author” (Bakhtin 1999, 200) and a discourse that is “double-voiced,” oriented towards someone else’s discourse and informed by this interaction (Ibid., 204-237). This type of dialogic or double-voiced discourse—that Bakhtin claims is characteristic of Dostoevsky’s entire *oeuvre*—is defined by an acute awareness of an interlocutor, by “the intense anticipation of another’s words” (Ibid., 205), even if the voice that speaks is singular and there is no apparent interlocutor or dialogue involved. It is, in other words, an “internally dialogized voice” (Ibid., 220). Even if there is a narrator, which is typically understood as having a superior status to the other voices of the text (especially if we think about the omniscient narrator) because of his/her function connecting and ordering the utterances of the characters, the dialogism that Bakhtin sees manifest in Dostoevsky places the narrator on a *par* and in interaction with the other voices of the text.¹³⁶ This is why, Kristeva notes, the novel has been considered an

¹³⁶ For a full account and textual analysis of dialogism in Dostoevsky, see the chapter “The Hero’s Monologic Discourse and Narrational Discourse in Dostoevsky’s Short Novels” in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1999, 204-237).

inferior genre by Neoclassicism and other similar regimes that favor a strong authorial and authoritative voice as the locus from which meaning emanates, and why it becomes the site of subversive texts as in the case of “major writers of polyphonic novels over many centuries—Rabelais, Swift, Sade, Lautréamont, Kafka and Bataille—to mention only those who have always been and still remain on the fringe of official culture” (Kristeva 1986, 56). The realist, monologic novel and the polyphonic, dialogic novel diverge in their guiding impulses: as Dentith suggests, where the monologic novel tends towards abstracted understanding, judgement, and an effort to explain and locate the other voices in the text, the dialogic novel’s impulse tends towards sympathy, solidarity, and the affirmation of the other’s voice (Dentith 1995, 101). While I am in no way suggesting that a parallel can be drawn between Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novel and Walter’s *The Zero*, I want to stress how Walter’s novel is based on the same principle of polyphony and dialogism: no voice in the text is given preeminence, not even the third-person narrator who conducts the narrative but who, for much of the novel, seems to remain at a loss as to the meaning or “truth” of what he is narrating. That the narrator does not “dominate” the narrative is reinforced by three main strategies: First, the voices of other characters are always heard in direct speech and are never mediated by the narrator; second, the narrative voice never relates a scene where the main character (Remy) is not present, and thus provides no additional facts and seems to have no prior knowledge—i.e., the narrative voice is not an omniscient narrator—; and third, because the narrator retells the experiences of a character that is “doubled” (as victim and enforcer), this in itself suggests that the narrator may be “doubled” as well. Whatever the narrator’s position, what becomes evident is that the novel is inherently “double-voiced,” and that the narrator speaks as if anticipating another’s voice. The following chapter will analyze the interaction between these voices and all the other voices of the text (which also include the discourse of the Bush administration) in greater detail.

As a textual strategy dialogism denotes “an instance of discourse that explicitly acknowledges that it is defined by its relationship to other instances, both past, to which it responds, and future, whose response it anticipates” (Shepherd 2011, n.p.). Thus, dialogism is an interesting tool of analysis when attempting to answer the question of who speaks and what sort of voice s/he has. Against humanist or Romantic conceptions of the “author function” as the originator of all meaning of a text, Bakhtin understands the author as an agent immersed in a linguistic system in which words do not exist in a vacuum but are already socially marked at the moment of utterance, which also implies a specific context at the moment of reception. Thus, the centrality of the social and historical ramifications of utterance are synthesized by Bakhtin in the notion of the “chronotope” (from Latin *chronos* [time] and *topos* [place]), a key concept in Bakhtinian thought that refers to “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and

spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (Bakhtin 2011, 84) or, in other words, to the interrelatedness of space and time at the moment of utterance.¹³⁷ This is, essentially, where Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism diverges from Kristeva’s understanding of intertextuality (and of later critics like Culler, Barthes, and Hutcheon), especially regarding the implications it has for the notions of authorship and referentiality: the historical grounding (or not) of the dialogic process.¹³⁸

Where Bakhtin stresses the locus of the text as—inevitably and irrevocably—socially and historically grounded, where history and society become texts that are read by the writer in the process of writing and inscribing him/herself in them, thus effectively rewriting them, Kristeva is more inclined to assign that place to textuality, as the text acquires meaning and significance as an intersection of textual surfaces. To borrow Dentith’s synthesis, for Kristeva “the production of meaning happens as a result of purely textual operations independent of historical location; the multiplicity of possible meanings in a text spring from that text and not from the multiplicity of possible occasions in which that text can be read” (Dentith 1995, 97). The consequence of this orientation is, as Hutcheon suggests, that “intertextuality replaces the challenged author-text relationship with one between reader and text, one that situates the locus of textual meaning within the history of discourse itself” (Hutcheon 2004, 126). While it is beyond my capacity to argue for or against these diverging positions, each offers an emphasis that is relevant for my analysis. On the one hand, intertextuality’s emphasis on the “history of discourse itself” (Hutcheon) and on how the text is constantly interacting with other texts and being constructed in the place of that interaction is extremely valuable for locating Walter’s novel within American cultural studies, the corpus of American fiction, and satirical writing in general. On the other, Bakhtin’s emphasis on the socio-historical location of the utterance is relevant when considering the fact that *The Zero* is not any novel but specifically a post-9/11 novel, and while this does not in any way exhaust its possible readings, it does provide a specific context for

¹³⁷ Bakhtin explains the notion of the chronotope in detail in “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel” in *The Dialogic Imagination*.

¹³⁸ Some critics like Dentith have claimed that Kristeva develops Bakhtin’s ideas into directions that are “uncongenial to his thinking” (Dentith 1995, 96), while many others have warned about the way that Bakhtin’s work has been appropriated by and adapted to postmodern thought and studies of popular culture, sometimes in ways that exceed Bakhtin’s own formulations (Turner 1990, 219; Eagleton 2007, 13). Indeed, the originality and prescience of Bakhtin’s thought has given way to numerous readings and adaptations that it would be beyond practical to account for here; as Eagleton claims in his review of Pechey’s work on Bakhtin, Bakhtin has been embraced by postmodernism especially when exploring current notions of “[d]iscourse, hybridity, otherness, sexuality, subversion, deviance, heterogeneity, popular culture, the body, the decentred self, the materiality of the sign, historicism, everyday life” (Eagleton 2007, 13). It is worth reading Eagleton’s argument in full: “That this once obscure Soviet philologist is now a star of the postmodern West is less surprising than it might seem. For there is hardly a hot postmodern topic that Bakhtin did not anticipate. Discourse, hybridity, otherness, sexuality, subversion, deviance, heterogeneity, popular culture, the body, the decentred self, the materiality of the sign, historicism, everyday life: this precocious post-structuralist, as Graham Pechey calls him, prefigured so much of our own times that it is surprising not to find allusions in his work to Posh and Becks. Since little of this culture is the direct result of his influence, one might claim that had Bakhtin not existed, there would have been no need to invent him” (Eagleton 2007, 13).

signification. As I have described in the introduction, the moment when *The Zero* was published, the position of its author, readerly expectations, the socio-historical context the novel engaged with and addressed, as well as the medium through which it chose to do so, among many other things, do provide a “con-textual” (in Bakhtin’s terms) richness where that dialogue that is so important to satire can take place.

Bakhtin’s emphasis on a text’s historical grounding—while it does not imply that the originating context of the text can provide a univocal reading or exhaust the possibility of subsequent readings—underscores how meaning occurs in the process of reading the text through historical distance: the negotiation of that distance and of the different contexts of utterance and reception is what opens up a space for dialogue and unrealized possibilities; distance is, as Dentith phrases it, “the condition for meaningfulness” (Dentith 1995, 99). Thus, and in Bakhtin’s own words,

Dialogic relationships are absolutely impossible without logical relationships or relationships oriented toward a referential object, but they are not reducible to them, and they have their own specific character... Logical and semantically referential relationships, in order to become dialogic, must be embodied, that is, they must enter another sphere of existence: they must become *discourse*, that is, an utterance, and receive an *author*, that is, a creator of the given utterance whose position it expresses. (Bakhtin 1999, 184; emphasis in the original)

In any case, and regardless of the potentially diverging paths of Bakhtinian thought and Kristeva’s reformulation of it, what I want to stress is how both Bakhtin’s and Kristeva’s understanding of dialogism and intertextuality, heteroglossia (literally “multispeakedness” in the Russian coinage, which refers to the competing “languages” within language) and polysemy (the capacity of any piece of writing to carry multiple and diverse meanings) give centrality to the “unfinishedness” of meaning, the open-endedness and “unfinalizability” of things, in Bakhtin’s own

terms.¹³⁹ For Bakhtin this condition arises from the fact that the word is a living thing—against any rationalist understanding of knowledge as fixed and final—in such a way that writing is also a re-reading or re-accentuation¹⁴⁰ of another’s word. As Dentith defines it, the living word is “the product of the multiplicity of determinations that act upon it and of which it speaks” (Dentith 1995, 99), so that it is always open to the future and to new significations. For Kristeva, on the other hand, the “unfinishedness” takes place within the text itself, which is constituted as a site for liberation, if only temporal, from bourgeois certainties and singular meanings, a notion later summed up by Barthes’ notion of *jouissance* (Ibid., 98).

If dialogism is the central strategy of the carnivalesque, Bakhtin posits that grotesque realism is its aesthetic, especially because in its combination of the tragic and the comic, the grotesque is also essentially “double-voiced” and alludes to all that is unfinished. In order to illustrate the arguments that will follow, let me just point out that Bakhtin considers Rabelais as the main precursor of the type of realism that is later to be found in Cervantes’ *Don Quijote*, as well as in Shakespeare, Stendhal, Balzac, Hugo, and Dickens (Bakhtin 1968, 52). Bakhtin explores grotesque realism as a style that, by bringing to the foreground the downward movement into the material and the bodily (in opposition to the elevating forces of the epic), becomes free from the laws of classic proportion and portrays that which is always in the process of becoming. As an interpretive strategy, Bakhtin underscores how, on a symbolic level, the grotesque realism of Rabelais is “a site upon which medieval religious and social hierarchies can be symbolically inverted” (Dentith 1995, 83) with a destructive force that, at the same time, renews and regenerates (it has to be borne in mind that Bakhtin’s stance is always positive, carnival is always regenerating). As I will argue in the following sections, Bakhtin’s grotesque realism—based on the idea of carnivalesque subversion—places

¹³⁹ Many critics have remarked on the connection between Bakhtin’s and Nietzsche’s work, mostly as regards the notions of unfinishedness, becoming, and the eternal return, the opposition between the Apollonian and the Dionysiac as akin to that of epic genres and grotesque realism, among others. The following are some of the works that explore the connection between Bakhtinian and Nietzschean thought: Michael Holquist and Katerina Clark, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984); Dragan Kujundzic, “Laughter as Otherness in Bakhtin and Derrida” (in *Mikhail Bakhtin*. Ed. Michael Holquist and Katerina Clark. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984: 39-60); James M. Curtis, “Michael Bakhtin, Nietzsche, and Russian Pre-Revolutionary Thought” (in *Nietzsche in Russia*. Ed. Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986: 331-55); Gary Shapiro, *Nietzschean Narratives* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989); Peter Zima, “Bakhtin’s Young Hegelian Aesthetics” (*Critical Studies* 1, 1989: 77-94); Graham Pechey, “Not the Novel: Bakhtin, Poetry, Truth, God” (in *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*. Ed. Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2002: 62-84); Mark Weeks, “Beyond a Joke: Nietzsche and the Birth of ‘Super-Laughter’” (*The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 27, 2004: 1-17); Chris Klatell, “Modernity and the Dinner Party: The Carnavalesque Nature of Eternal Return in *Zarathustra* Book Four” (unpublished paper. Williamstown: Department of Philosophy, Williams College, 1995: 1-24); Yelena Mazour-Matusevich, “Nietzsche’s Influence on Bakhtin’s Aesthetics of Grotesque Realism” (*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 11.2, 2009).

¹⁴⁰ Re-accentuation, as Bakhtin describes it in “Discourse in the Novel,” refers to the location of meanings within the historical process. It is this “uninterrupted process of their social and ideological re-accentuation” (Bakhtin 2011, 421) by different readers at different times, Bakhtin suggests, what might explain the persistence of classic works as meaningful texts, as they are constantly re-accentuated and re-evaluated, rather than some abstract and “ahistorical conception of human nature” (Dentith 1995, 98).

emphasis on laughter and play and their ability to turn the world upside down, while other notions of the grotesque—for instance, the “Southern Grotesque” that is so central to American fiction—while certainly not devoid of a comic element, seem to place greater emphasis on the duality and the tension between different elements that is characteristic of the grotesque. Therefore, while Bakhtin’s analysis of the bodily materiality in Rabelais is a central part of his analysis, I will not focus on it here, but place emphasis instead on how grotesque realism is an appropriate style for the combination of the tragic and the comic that is inherent to satire, and how the grotesque lends force to satire’s inquisitive potential through comic laughter. In order to reflect upon this dual structure I will refer also briefly to the two most classic studies on the grotesque—Ruskin’s *The Stones of Venice* (1851) and Keyser’s *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (1933)—as these tend to be almost unanimously referred to in most critical works on the grotesque. Although there is an ample body of scholarly articles and book chapters that explore the grotesque in specific works of fiction,¹⁴¹ there seem to be far less recent theorizations on the concept as such, other than Thomson’s *The Grotesque. The Critical Idiom* (1972), Harpham’s *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (1982), McElroy’s *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque* (1989), and Bloom’s edited volume *The Grotesque* (2009). All of these, as noted, make reference at some point to Ruskin, Bakhtin, and Kayser.

The term “grotesque” has a very solid theoretical base through centuries of use in aesthetic theory to designate a style of painting,¹⁴² but it has also been theorized about as a literary style from the seventeenth century onwards (it can be found, for instance,

¹⁴¹ A list of works dealing with the grotesque in fiction, spanning 1894-2003, can be consulted in David Lavery’s “A Grotesque Bibliography” <http://davidlavery.net/grotesque/Pages/grotesquebibliography.html>.

¹⁴² The origin of the word “grotesque” can be traced back to the late fifteenth century with the discovery of a series of unique Roman paintings in Nero’s unfinished palace in Rome, the Domus Aurea, inadvertently rediscovered during some excavations, after being buried for fifteen hundred years. Because the access to the corridors and rooms was made from above, with workers lowered on ropes, the rooms gave the impression of being caves (“grotta” in Italian), from which the adjective “grottesco” and the noun “grottesca” were derived to name the style. The paintings were unique in that they displayed an extravagant style combining many different orders of nature, sometimes juxtaposing dissimilar or discordant items, with its main tropes being doubleness, hybridity, and metamorphosis. The paintings sparked great interest and were imitated across Europe, and interest in this style of decorative painting was given further impetus in the eighteenth century by new discoveries of original Roman frescoes at Pompeii and other buried sites in the area of Mount Vesuvius.

in Montaigne, Boileau, and Dryden).¹⁴³ In literary studies the term refers to a particular aesthetic (grotesque realism) but it can also refer to a form of satire inflected by the grotesque; as such, critics usually identify three main variants: the satiric/comedic grotesque, the macabre grotesque, and the frightening/repulsive grotesque, although as Haar aptly argues these labels are somewhat misleading insofar as the comic element is already inherent in the term “grotesque” (Haar 1983, 135). What is relevant for my purposes, then, is that both uses—literary and aesthetic—allude to the combination of elements of different orders in a playful way, with no heed to symmetry and proportion, that also suggests something ominous and sinister (Kayser 1966, 21). As noted, among the large corpus of works dedicated to the study of the grotesque there seems to be critical consensus that Ruskin’s *The Stones of Venice* (1851), Kayser’s *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (1933), and Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World* (1965) are among the most illuminating theorizations, evident also in the fact that subsequent theorizations almost always tend to engage with them critically. Although each of these theorists places his emphasis differently—for instance, Ruskin’s study is mostly aesthetic, while Bakhtin’s study is literary—, all three give centrality to the notion of play, of “play with terror” (Ruskin) or of “a game with the absurd” (Kayser). As Kayser notes, the grotesque as a literary style is dependent for effect on the coexistence of the ordinary with something terrible or uncanny to create a feeling of estrangement in the reader, which implies feeling alien within the world and yet not so far removed from it that the narrative can be taken as either fantasy or tragedy; the world represented by the grotesque has to be our world, clearly identifiable yet strangely ominous, so that the reader can be moved and affected “because it is our world that ceases to be reliable, and we feel that we would be unable to live in this changed world” (Kayser 1966, 185). Ruskin had already pointed to the fact that both elements were necessary in order for the style to be considered grotesque; in the third volume of *The Stones of Venice* (1853), when describing the decline of Venetian art—a period when “[t]here is jest—perpetual, careless, and not unfrequently [*sic.*] obscene” (Ruskin 1907, 102-103)—, Ruskin writes what still remains one of the most enduring characterizations of the grotesque for fiction studies (McElroy 1989, 2):

¹⁴³ The following is a brief sample of some works published on the grotesque as a literary category from the seventeenth century onwards: John Dryden, “A Parallel of Painting and Poetry,” introductory essay to his translation of C. A. Du Fresnoy’s *De Arte Graphice* (1695); Thomas Wright, *A History of Caricature and Art* (1865); John Addington Symonds, “Caricature, the Fantastic, the Grotesque,” in *Essays Speculative and Suggestive* (1890); Walter Bagehot, “Wordsworth, Tennyson and Browning; or Pure, Ornate and Grotesque Art in English Poetry” (1895); Lily Campbell, “The Grotesque in the Poetry of Robert Browning” (1907); G. K. Chesterton, *Robert Browning* (1903); Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (1933); Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (1965); Arthur Clayborough, *The Grotesque in English Literature* (1965); Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque* (1972); Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (1982); Bernard McElroy, *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque* (1989); Harold Bloom (ed.), *The Grotesque* (2009), to list but a few.

First, then, it seems to me that the grotesque is, in almost all cases, composed of two elements, one ludicrous, the other fearful; that, as one or other of these elements prevails, the grotesque falls into two branches, sportive grotesque and terrible grotesque; but that we cannot legitimately consider it under these two aspects, because there are hardly any examples which do not in some degree combine both elements; there are few grotesques so utterly playful as to be overcast with no shade of fearfulness, and few so fearful as absolutely to exclude all ideas of jest. (Ruskin 1907, 115)

This dual nature is maintained in all subsequent characterizations of the grotesque; in fact, as Ruskin argues and as I have noted above, it is essential to it. Both Bakhtin and Kayser retain the elements of the comic and the fearful identified by Ruskin as central to their idea of the grotesque, although Bakhtin will place more emphasis on the grotesque as play: for Bakhtin grotesque realism is a central element of the carnival sense of the world as it distorts and defuses everything that is terrible by its subversive and triumphant laughter (McElroy 1989, 2). The grotesque is understood, then, as that which enables terrible things to be set out in the open in a way that allows it to be played with in a form that some critics understand as personal and cultural exorcism (Ibid.). Ruskin's characterization, however, seems to stress the "uncanny" feeling of estrangement, where this feeling is something other than fear, as in the combination of the playful with the fearful "the mind, under certain phases of excitement, *plays with terror*, and summons images which, if it were in another temper, would be awful, but of which, either in weariness or in irony, it refrains for the time to acknowledge the true terribleness" (Ruskin 1907, 128; emphasis in the original). While Ruskin's depiction stresses the playfulness inherent to the grotesque, it is somewhat more negative than Bakhtin's because the terror that Ruskin alludes to arises not from a specific situation but from the human condition itself. If we bear in mind that Ruskin is describing the grotesque as an architectural style—and in this case related to ecclesiastical buildings—the feeling he invokes becomes clearer: it is "the purpose of God that we should often be affected by Fear; not the sudden, selfish, and contemptible fear of immediate danger, but the fear which arises out of the contemplation of great powers in destructive operation, and generally from the perception of the presence of death" (Ruskin 1907, 125). While Ruskin seems to have in mind a Kantian idea of the sublime, what I want to emphasize is how in his view, however, the terrifying and the sublime remain balanced against the playful to make the grotesque really effective, as noted previously. Kayser's account of the grotesque, on the other hand, seems to place more emphasis on the terrifying, an emphasis that, in Bakhtin's view, makes Kayser's theorization questionable. Bakhtin suggests that Kayser reduces most grotesque

themes to the realization of an alien, terrifying, inhuman power (Bakhtin 1999, 49) that renders the grotesque flat and single-leveled (Ibid., 53). In fact, Bakhtin might be on point as most critics agree that from the twentieth century onwards the grotesque seems to have veered towards one of its poles and lost the balance between the elements that Ruskin had identified as key. Writing in the twenty-first century, Bruns argues that “[o]ur contemporary models of the grotesque tend to disregard laughing, playful, and sportive forms in favor of the claustrophobic, the uncanny, and the sublime” (Bruns 2014, 131). For Stallybrass and White (1986), on the other hand, this “neglect” is largely the result of a project by bourgeois culture, that since the Enlightenment has consistently rejected the carnivalesque because it was “an intensely powerful semiotic realm” (Stallybrass & White 1986, 202), an argument that is also suggested by Bakhtin’s study of the decline of carnival. Which brings me back to my opening argument of how ironic and satirical humor tend to be censored at times when a univocal and hegemonic message needs to be put through.

It is also important to note that the feeling of terror that the grotesque elicits is a fear not necessarily based on a tangible reality, but on the perception of the world being altered; as Mc Elroy argues,

the grotesque transforms the world from what we ‘know’ it to be to what we fear it might be. It distorts or exaggerates the surface of reality in order to tell a qualitative truth about it. The grotesque does not address the rationalist in us or the scientist in us, but the vestigial primitive in us, the child in us, the potential psychotic in us. (McElroy 1989, 5)

The self is awakened by the grotesque to the fear of aggression in human nature, “both the impulse to commit aggression and even more, the fear of being the victim of aggression” (McElroy 1989, 4). And this is what creates the feeling of uncanniness in the grotesque, the suspicion—not the confirmation—that something is really wrong. *The Zero* hints precisely at this idea of uncanniness, which in the novel is caused by the suspicion of violence—always suggested and implied but never fully shown—in face of a world that is portrayed as increasingly absurd. It is no coincidence, then, that Walter’s novel makes so much reference to Kafka’s works, especially those that depict impossibly absurd states of bureaucracy that cannot be breached. As Bruns suggests, Kafka’s works can be aptly considered grotesque, as they are “as much ludicrous and sportive as they are fearful and terrible” (Bruns 2014, 129), but Kafka’s comic sense seems to have been neglected by critics and readers, who have tended to read Kafka as

“a modern prophet of the most sublime and terrifying forms” (Ibid.).¹⁴⁴ While I concur with Bruns and Stallybrass & White on the reasons for this imbalance, I suspect that it also has to do with the fact that the laughter of the grotesque, because of its inherently dual nature, is typically tangential and not as readily evident as it would be in a comedy. But it is this tangential quality of the satiric laughter that makes it also so fearlessly inquisitive and double-voiced, as I will try to demonstrate in upcoming sections.

I would not like to conclude without referring to the long tradition of the grotesque as cultural representation in American fiction, as *The Zero* inscribes itself within this tradition that some critics have argued can be considered an American genre in its own right (William Van O'Connor, “The Grotesque: An American Genre,” 1962), most clearly represented in the works of Harry Crews, William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers, and Cormac McCarthy, among many others. Following the premises of the grotesque that I have described above, these works—mostly found in Southern literature, but not exclusively—are characterized by an impulse “to incorporate the antipoetic into the traditionally poetic, the cowardly into the heroic, the ignoble into the noble, the realistic into the romantic, the ugly into the beautiful” (Van O'Connor qtd. in Spiegel 1972, 426), thus constituting a category in itself, although Fielder (1964) prefers to restrict the definition of the grotesque to a “mode of expression” of the Southern Gothic. If a distinction needs to be made, I would suggest that the gothic may occasionally lean (though not necessarily) towards the fantastic and the macabre, while the grotesque is more typically grounded on realism, with hints at the uncanny. Fielder's distinction is not always taken into account and it is common for critics to refer alternatively to the Southern Grotesque or the Southern Gothic, but in essence this type of Southern literature has its roots in the nightmare visions of the nineteenth-century (think, for instance, of classics like *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, *Wuthering Heights*, or Edgar Allan Poe's stories), where fantastical elements and aberrant behavior are portrayed as breaking into a society otherwise characterized by pomp, civility, and formality. It has been argued that the reason that this type of literature becomes so characteristic of the American South is that the aristocratic Southern society of postbellum United States can also be understood as erecting a similar façade of gentility and custom that hides the ugly realities of everyday life. Thus, writers of the Southern Grotesque/Gothic contrast this rigid façade of customs with grotesque imagery and caricatures as a way of exposing the contradictions of Southern society. Taken collectively, this body of works holds a

¹⁴⁴ Bruns further argues that Kafka criticism tends to be dominated by the methodologies of Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche and their “intellectual offspring” (Bruns 2014, 133) and that “[i]t is perhaps the habitual privileging of this genealogy that has reproduced, time and again, ‘the transcendence of the law, the interiority of guilt, the subjectivity of enunciation’—what Deleuze and Guattari have described as the ‘three worst themes in many interpretations of Kafka’” (Bruns 2014, 133).

central place in American fiction, and I would not like to dismiss its relevance even if its Southern specificity may seem far removed from my present object of study.

This type of Southern literature can be easily identified by some of its characteristics. According to Flannery O'Connor, the grotesque usually involves the depiction of an uncanny experience, of something out of the ordinary, with gaps and skips in the narrative that are purposefully put there by the author (something that a realist narrative would not do), and where characters, although outwardly freakish, carry an inner coherence if not always a coherence to their social framework (O'Connor 1960, n.p.). In a similar line, Spiegel argues that what makes a fiction be labelled "Southern Grotesque" has not so much to do with a particular quality of the story, its mood or mode of expression, but with a "*type of character* that occurs so repeatedly in contemporary Southern novels that readers have come to accept—indeed, expect his appearance as a kind of convention of the form" (Spiegel 1972, 428; emphasis in the original). Typically, this grotesque character is a mentally or physically deformed figure; whether it is one or the other is not relevant; what is relevant is that this deformity never exceeds the humanity of the character, so that s/he remains meaningful and close to the reader. Grotesque characters seem to carry a burden that is excessive in relation to their deeds and that grants them an almost Christ-like quality, or that rings back to the figure of Adam fallen from paradise (Ibid., 429) or even to a prophet figure (O'Connor 1960, n.p.), quite alienated from society but speaking its truths to it. Both O'Connor and Spiegel seem to ascribe the appearance of this grotesque character to the deep sense of instability in Southern society and culture caused by the advent of modernity and a new social order in postbellum United States: while for O'Connor this instability results from being, still and largely, a theological, Christ-centered (or "Christ-haunted") society that can easily "recognize freaks" (O'Connor 1960, n.p.),¹⁴⁵ Spiegel reflects on how the deformity of the character symbolically refers to the instability of a modern world "without moral

¹⁴⁵ In an article published in 1960 ("Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction") Flannery O'Connor—a writer of grotesque Southern fiction herself—comments on how the term "grotesque" tends to be applied to any piece of Southern fiction, mostly in a pejorative sense, in her view, usually as a result of a widespread demand from critics and the public (at least in the 1960s) for fiction to be realist. Whether an author engages in realism or in grotesque realism depends, for O'Connor, largely on how s/he views life, on what the author considers is important to depict. The writer of grotesques is, for O'Connor, a "realist of distances," an author with an almost prophetic role, as some writers will be more interested in depicting what we don't understand rather than what we do. In that case the author needs to bridge a gap between what is readily apparent and what remains invisible to the naked eye but is equally real for the author. Thus, connecting these two points will inevitably lead, in O'Connor's view, to distortion, to a "wild vision that it is almost by necessity going to be violent and comic because of the discrepancies it seeks to combine" (O'Connor 1960, n.p.). While readers may perceive the characters depicted by the grotesque as freakish, for the author they are no different to any ordinary fallen man. O'Connor does acknowledge, nonetheless, that there is an evident tendency in Southern fiction towards the grotesque, and she provides some reasons for it, among them the fact that Southerners write about freaks because they are still able to recognize them, living in a society that remains largely theological and Christ-centered (or "Christ-haunted") and that there is a prevalence of good Southern writers, with figures of the stature of Faulkner among them, breathing the same scenes and moods, and so writers are forced to go out of their way not to do badly what has already been completed to perfection.

sanctions" (Spiegel 1972, 430) and where one can no longer rely on "spiritual or rational forces in the universe" (Ibid.) for security. Thus, Spiegel argues that what the grotesque represents is a "major change in epistemology" (Ibid.), standing at the center of the tensions between old and new world values, customs, and beliefs, being neither one or the other. As Spiegel writes,

whether [the grotesque character] represents the death of the old order or the aberrations of the new, the grotesque is always a thorn in the side of the society which produces him. His existence tells the society something about itself whether it wishes to acknowledge his presence or not. He informs the society that his deformity is real, that it is *there*, and will continue to be there because it is society's deformity (which produced it) as well as his own. His deformity insists that the pride, complacency, and willful ignorance of society cannot be justified. (Ibid., 431; emphasis in the original)

As can be seen, theorizations of the Southern Grotesque also refer to the representation of a duality, an ambivalence, a standing in-between, or what Bakhtin would refer to as an "unfinishedness." Thinking about the grotesque in all of these ways brings to the foreground some important questions regarding how and why *The Zero* can be considered a "new grotesque" for the post-9/11 world, as Flinn's insightful essay (2014) suggests: the characters in *The Zero* are all in fragments, mismatched selves trying to become whole again, which on a symbolic level refers to the United States's shattered sense of self (at least, according to official discourse). The self-righteous and noble discourses of heroism and victimization are not impermeable to other "ugly" and hidden realities—state violence, torture, unabashed economic ambition, etc.—that insidiously seep through the "official" version of the events. Likewise, the main character is also a shattered, doubled self, combining both of the grotesque extremes: the comic incompetent cop, husband, and father; and the terrifying, ruthless undercover agent who operates outside the law. On the other, the bodily materiality that Bakhtin argued for Rabelais's grotesque as a way of bringing all that is abstract and ideal down to the life of the flesh (Bakhtin 1968, 18-19) is evident in *The Zero*'s constant percolation of "jigsawed bits of people" (Walter 2007, 44)—a chin, a scalp, and a head are found in the debris; a body explodes like a water balloon on the sidewalk; and rescue workers at "The Place That Stunk" (Ibid., 17) play a game of "*name that piece*" (Ibid., 48, italics in the original)—going against the normative sanctification of all victims as heroes, the aestheticizing impulse of early post 9/11 fiction, and the general censorship of images of falling people, as argued in the introductory chapter. Finally,

and more importantly, thinking about the novel through the perspective of the grotesque brings to the foreground some important questions, as Mc Elroy suggests, about the kind of play and the kind of terror we are talking about, and also about the role of laughter in the face of violence and terror.

Which brings us back to the debates about the end of irony and satire in the aftermath of 9/11 that I have described at the beginning of this chapter. What I have been arguing is that the choice to write a satire after 9/11, and in this case, a satire shaped by the grotesque, does not result from a desire to run counter to mainstream expectations and sensitivity but from the potential for inquiry and empathy that both the satiric and the grotesque have to offer. I have noted how traditional satire criticism is unable to accommodate this view, especially because it relies on a negative definition of the laughter of satire. Looking back at some definitions of laughter from Classical times to the present, it is easy to see why laughter in face of “serious” issues may still carry a negative streak: from laughter as sugar-coating that makes truth more palatable (Horace), to satirical laughter as a metaphorical substitute for hanging (Swift), satirical laughter is oftentimes understood as “murder by language” (borrowing Barthes’ term). In any case, the view that laughter can effect a change for the better is dismissed by traditional critics like Test (1991) as extremely naive, although he partially admits that it could have had that function, but only in a ritualized way, in times bygone, and thus doubts the effectiveness of laughter to effect change today. While I will certainly not insist on Bakhtin’s carnival laughter as a communal and collective experience, some of the aspects he addresses are, in my view, still valid today, even if this experience may now be private or socially reduced. More importantly, what I wish to underscore is Bakhtin’s notion of laughter as epistemological praxis.¹⁴⁶

As described in *Rabelais and His World* and “Epic and the Novel” (*The Dialogic Imagination*), in the context of medieval festivities carnivalesque laughter served a number of purposes, among them contributing to overcoming the sense of fear that was otherwise fostered by religious and political officialdom (the all-encompassing idea of sin and the overwhelming presence of natural disasters, sickness, and death), underscoring the universal quality of laughter as a phenomenon that celebrates regeneration and renewal even in the face of death. I have already noted how Bakhtin’s idea of carnival is somewhat utopian at the cultural, historical level, but it is its

¹⁴⁶ I am aware that characterizing laughter in just one way may give the impression that I am ignoring that a great deal has been written on laughter. Quite to the contrary, I am aware that Bakhtin’s theory follows a sociohistorical approach and that laughter can be and has been approached and theorized about in many other different ways—e.g. behavioral sciences, philosophy, literary criticism, drama, folklore, to name but a few. It is impossible to account for all of these approaches here without diverting from my present object of study. In general, it is common for studies on laughter to delineate three main theories—relief theory, superiority theory, incongruity theory—but some critics like J. Y. T. Greig have claimed that as much as eighty-eight theories of laughter can be accounted for (*The Psychology of Laughter and Comedy*, 1923/1969). Each of these, in turn, aims to respond to different questions. See Morreall, John, “Philosophy of Humor,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016), Edward N. Zalta (ed.). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/humor>.

philosophical basis that interests me here. If the temporary and “festive” laughter of carnival functions as a rejuvenating and restorative force (Bakhtin 1968, 1999), this is precisely the type of writing—carnivalized writing—that can inquire into monologic discourses—such as the official narratives of 9/11 and all those “regulatory fictions through which the state exercises governmental rule” (Pease 2003, 205)—and eventually dispel the sense of paralysis that fear, political correctness, and censorship may cause. The restorative and rejuvenating function of laughter does not imply a return to a lost past or to notions of innocence; quite to the contrary, and as Bakhtin writes in *The Dialogic Imagination*, the power of carnivalesque laughter resides in its potential for inquiry:

Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it. Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it. Laughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically. (Bakhtin 2011, 23)

What is truly interesting in Bakhtin’s notion of carnival laughter is that rather than as a psychological or gut reaction, it pins it down as a form of perception, of inquiry. The fear and the piety that Bakhtin refers to can also be forms of perception but, he suggests, they can limit our understanding of the world by enriching or enhancing our view in just one direction. This is not to dismiss the value of “serious” thought, but to bring to the foreground how the carnival laughter of the grotesque is more apt to combine both poles by its dual nature, precisely because, as Bakhtin notes, “[t]he essence of the grotesque is precisely to present a contradictory and double-faced fullness of life” (Bakhtin 1968, 62).

Also, Bakhtin anticipates why a purely derisive, judgmental laughter, or a satire that attempts to be so (what he calls “the pure satire of modern times”), fails:

The people do not exclude themselves from the wholeness of the world. They, too, are incomplete, they also die and are revived and renewed.

This is one of the essential differences of the people's festive laughter from the pure satire of modern times. The satirist whose laughter is negative places himself above the object of his mockery, he is opposed to it. The wholeness of the world's comic aspect is destroyed, and that which appears comic becomes [*sic.*] a private reaction. The people's ambivalent laughter, on the other hand, expresses the point of view of the whole world; he who is laughing also belongs to it. (Bakhtin 1968, 12).

This conception of laughter survives until the Renaissance, and this is why Bakhtin singles out Rabelais—together with Cervantes and Shakespeare—as perhaps the last representatives of a worldview on the wane. As Bakhtin notes, “[n]owhere else do we see so clearly marked the lines dividing the Renaissance from the seventeenth century and the period that followed” (Ibid., 66) than in these three authors. Renaissance laughter “has a deep philosophical meaning, it is one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole, concerning history and man; it is a peculiar point of view relative to the world; [...]. Therefore, laughter is just as admissible in great literature, posing universal problems, as seriousness” (Ibid., 66). The view of irony and satire as essentially unserious is underpinned by a key opposition between serious and comic discourse, that Bakhtin and several other critics locate in a post-Renaissance process of carnivalesque decline, especially during the Enlightenment. From the seventeenth century onwards, laughter ceases to be considered “a universal, philosophical form. [...] That which is important and essential cannot be comical. Neither can history and persons representing it—kings, generals, heroes—be shown in a comic aspect” (Ibid., 67). The sphere of the comic is relegated to the private and literature that deals in laughter becomes relegated to the low genres as a light amusement “or a form of salutary social punishment of corrupt and low persons” (Ibid., 67).

With no intention whatsoever of making a giant leap from the seventeenth century to the post-9/11 context, I want to suggest that a similar issue is at the core of the debates over the appropriateness of ironic and satiric humor when dealing with the attacks of September 11. When humor is perceived as inadequate to address a moment of crisis, as if engaging in irony and satire were diminishing acts, or when humor is perceived merely as a safety valve, a cathartic exercise that involves nothing more than a therapeutic function, it is important to ask what is the nature of that comic effort. What I want to suggest is that *The Zero's* satirical approach puts forward an understanding of laughter that is akin to the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, a humorous engagement that is inquisitive, regenerative, and ambivalent. The novel probes the

limits of authoritative post-9/11 discourses through their temporary suspension, as the world is turned inside out through carnivalesque inversion: in the narrative universe of *The Zero* cowards become heroes, heroes become crooks, victims turn into victimizers and terrorists are revealed as innocent. More importantly, the state, the alleged source of “law and order,” becomes the main cause of terror. The text abounds with elements germane to carnivalesque subversion, with parodying doubles, unusual psychic states, inappropriate speeches and performances and a general sense of absurdity that is not acknowledged by the novel’s characters, and is only suspected by the main character, Remy. Temporality in *The Zero* is altered, as the “mythic progress of the hero,” understood as “that direct, linear progression which is ordinarily taken as plot” (Kernan 1965, 100) is disrupted and even inverted, full of loopholes, flashbacks, and gaps, which means, as Morson contends, that the narrative is “always directed forward but without teleology” (Morson 1994, 99-100). As García Caro points out in a different but relevant context, if this is understood at a symbolic level in relation to the nation, the disavowal of the narrative logic of national progression serves to refute the national claims of exceptionality and underscores the contradictions of the advances (García-Caro 2014, 16). Thus, by means of a “satiric disjunctiveness” (Kernan 1965), the narrative jumps from one scene to the next in *media res* and, in a final loop that (maybe) takes the reader back to the beginning (Remy shooting himself—Remy in a hospital bed), *The Zero* most effectively embodies the temporary breach, the small gap of transgression where the world has been turned on its head. Whether the narrative of *The Zero* is meant to be read as the product of a survivor’s traumatic recollection, or as an ailing man’s delusion or, on the contrary, as a long flashback by Remy the injured undercover agent about how he has arrived at his present situation, all of these interpretations lead us to reflect, through inquisitive laughter and a rich intertextual game, on the grotesque combination of extremes that the aftermath of 9/11 has brought about: the official discourse of pumped-up heroics that, at the same time, banks on a selective visibilization of vulnerability and victimhood, and the violent realities that the state of exception seeks to disguise.

3. A novel about September 12

Chapter 1 has delineated the socio-historical and discursive contexts in which Walter's *The Zero* inscribes itself.¹⁴⁷ Of said discourses I identified two as the most relevant for the present analysis of the novel: a) the official narrative about 9/11 and the War on Terror put forward by the Bush administration and embraced by a wide sector of the population and the media—in other words, what Walter has defined as “September 12”—, and b) the critical discourse about post-9/11 fiction, that put an emphasis on the notion of trauma and dismissed—mostly by its absence—irony and satire as valid approaches to 9/11. Seeking to understand why these discourses were so effective at a rhetorical and practical level, the chapter argued that a particular narrative about the attacks and the government's response to them was constructed by resorting to the American mythic apparatus, understanding that myth is a structuring principle of people's experience. Under the premise that myth can help to explain what is otherwise understood as “the falsely obvious” in social phenomena (Barthes 1972), the chapter carried out an exploration of some of the foundational myths in the United States mythic apparatus and traced them in the official narrative about 9/11 and the War on Terror. That allowed me to argue that the official narrative was framed in terms of the myths of innocence, heroism, the frontier spirit, exceptionalism, and the United States as a Virgin Land, among others. Chapter 1 also put special emphasis on the centrality of the hero-myth in American culture, and on how the specificity of the hero-myth in US culture puts forward specific “truths” about the American cosmovision that prevented other perspectives on 9/11 from being considered. For instance, the invocation of the “internal externality” (Pease 2009) of the hero that is consubstantial to the notion of American exceptionalism, or the theme of a chosen people living in a paradise that is under threat and which the hero will have to save. Finally, the chapter looked at how the hero-myth was framed and performed, in particular by the figure of president Bush. By relying on the American heroic monomyth, the Bush administration was able to offer an unambiguous vision of the world, where the categories of good and evil are clearly defined. The chapter concluded with a suggestion that this is precisely the heroic narrative that *The Zero* seeks to debunk by featuring a main character who is the prototypical 9/11 hero—a police officer who has survived the terrorist attacks—but turns out to be less black-and-white than the national monomyth

¹⁴⁷ In the previous chapters I have included author-year-page in each parenthetical citation with the aim of making reference easier to the reader, occasionally using “Ibid.” when appropriate. Given that this chapter deals with Walter's novel in detail, and that parenthetical citation of Walter's novel will be profuse, I will omit author-year whenever it is clear that I am quoting from the novel, and simply include the page cited. Because the 2007 volume also includes two additional sections at the end (“Journals” and “Conversation”) that do not continue pagination but start it anew, and in order to avoid confusion, when quoting from these texts the title of the section will be included in the parenthetical citation.

would have it be, and how the choice to feature an anti-hero is the way that the novel enters in dialogue with all of the discourses that this chapter introduced.

Dialogue is the key term that defines the novel's engagement with the post-9/11 world, and chapter 2 argued how this dialogue is established through a very specific genre, satire, in spite of the calls for an end to irony and satire in the post-9/11 world. The chapter suggested that these calls were partly based on a) the pervasiveness of the trauma approach to post-9/11 fiction, which was co-opted by official discourse to accommodate its nationalist and aggressive agenda; b) an outdated and limited understanding of what literary satire is and what it does; and c) a desire to limit the inquisitive and dialogic potential of satire at a time when a monologic official narrative was being constructed and upheld. Chapter 2 began by revisiting the traditional theory of literary satire and offered an alternative understanding through Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque, which stresses dialogue as the main function of satire and inquiry as its goal. Reading satire through Bakhtin's carnivalesque also brought to the foreground certain formal traits and rhetorical functions of this understanding of satire, such as the narrative's gapped and non-linear structure, the featuring of unusual psychic states, of a narrative voice that is doubled or internally dialogized, the presence of multiple voices that results in a general atmosphere of joyful relativity, the presence of parody, of a deep intertextuality that understands writing as a re-reading or re-accentuation of another's word, the identification of ambivalence as the structuring principle of the narrative, and of a polysemic intention of the text, capable of conveying multiple and diverse meanings. Finally, the chapter argued how this understanding of the satiric is best illustrated by the grotesque, and looked at some traits of the grotesque that not only confirm the characteristics mentioned above but stress the dual nature of satire and brings to the foreground a fundamental question about the role of satire in the face of violence and terror.

In this chapter I will analyze *The Zero* through some of the Bakhtinian notions developed in chapter 2 in order to show how this satirical novel performs its inquisitive and dialogic work, bringing to the foreground qualities that have been systematically neglected by the early reception of the novel and by post-9/11 fiction studies in general. It is these characteristics, I argue, that help the novel engage with the discourses described in chapter 1 in a dialogic and open-ended way, and that also demonstrate that satire is a valid and useful way, not necessarily trivializing, of engaging with tragedy. Especially, this chapter will analyze the grotesque, dual nature of the main character and how it is articulated through several textual strategies such as the allegorical framing, the gapped and non-linear narrative (which is a consequence of the doubled, paranoid or schizophrenic psychic state of the main character), the parody of the detective genre, and the use of satirical and ironic

humor,¹⁴⁸ among many other procedures that are indicative of the carnivalesque and prevalent in a dialogic text—as opposed to monologic, epic, and official narratives, such as the one described in chapter 1. This chapter will also look at the suggestive intertextual play that the novel offers as a way of conveying multiple and diverse “meanings,” thus stressing the novel’s willful ambivalence and inconclusiveness, both of which cast light on the faultlines in the victim-oriented rendition of the aftermath and the aggressive and hero-oriented response delineated in the first chapter. Finally, the chapter will explore the significance of *The Zero*’s tangential laughter in achieving a more empathic and critical approximation to the aftermath that may open up a space for an alternative public discussion about 9/11, and offer additional, contingent, and uncertain answers to the cultural demand to give meaning to 9/11, especially to “what 9/11 has done to us” and “what 9/11 has meant”—the usual demands of critics of early post-9/11 fiction. It is in both the embracing and the subversion of these conventions, I argue, that the novel’s ethical potential lies.

3.1. *The Zero*

*It's as if someone cleaned up hell
and put up a shopping mall.*

Jess Walter (qtd. in Flinn 2014, 231)

The Zero tells the story of Brian Remy, a police officer who in the first scene of the novel is lying on the floor of his apartment after having shot himself in the head. It will remain unclear if Remy has attempted suicide or has drunkenly shot himself by accident. As the novel progresses, it is revealed that, apparently, Remy has survived a terrorist attack in an unnamed city in the United States that has left chaos, destruction, thousands of victims and an enormous disaster scene called “The Zero.”¹⁴⁹ I use the term “apparently” because the event is not relayed or referred to as such and the novel relies precisely on the reader and the main character inferring or guessing much of the information that is missing or implied. In the aftermath of this tragic event, Remy is

¹⁴⁸ I have previously commented on the distinction between irony and satire as being a tenuous one, since one term contains the other. As Warner notes, “[s]atire almost always employs the double-edged nature of irony. In fact, almost all satire is ironic, but not all irony is satirical” (Warner 2011, 63). Warner refers to ironic tropes such as Socratic irony, situational irony, cosmic irony, and the irony of fate as non-satirical.

¹⁴⁹ From the outset we can imagine “The Zero” to be the World Trade Center site, New York City; the novel points in that direction through several textual references to the city’s landmarks in the surrounding area. The analogy with post-9/11 New York is further suggested by the invocation of rumors that were widespread in the post-9/11 days. See Walter 2007, 8-9.

discharged from the police force due to a disabling back injury; it is implied that some building collapsed during the attack while Remy was in it. However, he does not acknowledge any back pains and will spend the length of the novel dismissing this injury and insisting instead on his failing eyesight (which is affected by the intrusive presence of white specks), his memory gaps, and his losses of conscience, conditions that doctors will repeatedly ignore. These conditions are the basis for the novel's narrative structure, which relies on scenes not being connected causally, as they often begin midway and end elliptically—although a logical structure is gradually revealed as the story progresses.

Despite these ailments, Remy is recruited as an undercover agent in a counterterrorism government unit, the Documents Department of the Office of Liberty and Recovery, and this circumstance leads to a doubling of Remy as a character: in some scenes he will figure as a retired police officer, while in others he will be shown as an undercover agent. What is interesting from a narrative perspective is that, as noted, there is no obvious connection between the scenes where Remy is an undercover agent and those where he is a retired police officer other than Remy trying to figure out actions for which he has no memories but for which he keeps getting clues. Between the memory loss and his escalating eye problems, Remy has a hard time understanding his new position. As I will later argue, much can be made of this doubling of the main character and it is also a key element in Walter's satire, not only because it constructs Remy in grotesque, contradictory terms, but because much of the humor of the novel is caused by Remy's estrangement of his "other" self.

Remy's mission in the Documents Department is to find a missing woman, March Selios, whom the Department believes had been tipped off by her ex-boyfriend, Bishir Maidan, to flee the towers on the day of the attack. Remy's unit—lead by a ruthless and boyish-faced agent named Markham—has come to this conclusion after a recipe for pecan encrusted fish,¹⁵⁰ which they allege hanged on March Selios's office cubicle at the collapsed office building, has appeared on a bus in Canada. The unit's utter

¹⁵⁰ Food is a prominent feature in the novel, and it is Walter's way of satirizing, in a veiled way, post-9/11 incidents such as the "Freedom Fries" euphemism of 2003 (a campaign to boycott France for its opposition to the invasion of Iraq) and the Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) scandal of that same year, which is repeatedly referred to in the novel as "wasabi marinated duck" (Walter 2007, 182, 219, 220). When towards the end of the novel an undercover agent tells Remy that "[i]t's beginning to look like there never was any wasabi marinated duck" (220), Walter suggests that this is a commentary on the fact that by then the UN inspectors had confirmed there were no WMDs in Iraq. Other food references also insist on US military involvement; for instance, there is a scene where Remy and Markham are doing surveillance and the novel has Remy eating "Dolly Madison Zingers" which are made up of "spongy yellow cake with filling and frosting" (197): "DMZ" is the acronym for "demilitarized zone," an "area in which treaties or agreements between nations, military powers or contending groups forbid military installations, activities or personnel" (Source: Wikipedia), and "yellow cake" is the colloquial way to refer to enriched plutonium.

reliance on this small piece of paper evidence for launching a full-scale counterterrorist operation against Bishir and the missing March Selios—they go so far as to prepare the dish to prove the recipe’s veracity, in a comical scene where agents and presumed terrorists comment on its excellent quality—sets the tone for the covert-ops satire that will unfold. Documentation and whatever is “on paper” will take precedence over any other objectively (or potentially) verifiable fact, leading the characters into absurd situations and sometimes into committing cruel acts. The terrible consequences that are derived from this allegiance to documents and to knowledge that is fossilized on paper is yet another way by which *The Zero* will question the presumed authority and reliability of official, monologic, and fixed narratives.

While Remy’s small unit within the Department is inspired by a no-nonsense approach to finding terrorists—questioning, torturing and oftentimes framing them—, the alleged benign mission of the Documents Department is to recover and interpret the infinite scraps of paper that blanket the city after the attacks, in order to reclaim “our place in the world, our heritage, [...] gathering everything that was lost, recapturing the record of our people, and our commerce” (Walter 2007, 54). That is, to reconstruct the prelapsarian narrative that was in place before “everything changed,” before it was blown into fragments by the attacks. The person in charge of overseeing the Office of Liberty and Recovery, The Boss, states the strategic importance of the Documents Department’s mission: if we don’t recover our past position—obliterating the traces of the attacks—, “[t]hey win” (55). Thus, in vast airplane hangars, the Documents Department files absolutely “every receipt, every purchase order, every goddamned piece of paper” (54-55) found in *The Zero*, under inspirational billboard-sized signs that quote The Boss and the President: “Imagine the look on our enemies’ faces when they realize that we have gathered up every piece of paper and put it back!” (100); and also: “Our enemy are haters who hate our way of life and our abilities of organization! We will confound them!” (101). Thus, paper, whether scraps, falling paper, or figurative paper in the shape of flecks in Remy’s failing eyesight is one of the main motifs of the novel.

As part of the Documents Department’s counterterrorist operation, Remy embarks on a romantic relationship with March Selios’ sister, April, although this motivation is unknown to her and sometimes even to Remy himself. Other characters include Remy’s estranged wife Carla and their son Edgar, a real-estate agent named Nicole with whom Remy cheats on April, and Remy’s colleague at the police corps, Paul Guterak. Remy’s interactions with these characters run parallel storylines which somehow put across different discourses that were very much part of the post-9/11 discussion. The way in which these separate and distinct voices interact with Remy’s, with Remy barely having any effect or influence on them, can be analyzed as a manifestation of what Bakhtin defined as polyphony: “A plurality of independent and

unmerged voices and consciousnesses [...] a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world" (Bakhtin 1999, 6; emphasis in the original). These voices are combined but not merged in the unity of the narrative, and it is left to the reader to judge their validity or "truth."

For instance, Edgar's textual role is to query the discourse of collective grief that has swept the nation. In order to really *feel* pain in a more personalized and authentic manner, and despite Remy's protestations, Edgar pretends that his father is dead, wears a black armband, and even performs his loss in a one-act show at school—with everybody in the audience feeling sorry for him (including his mother Carla) and Remy watching in amazement. The intrinsic contradictions in Edgar's exploration of authentic grief through the performance of fake grief provide much of the novel's humor, especially all the scenes where Remy tries to dissuade him. But Edgar is so convinced by the internal logic of his narrative that he ends up enlisting in the US Army in order to "avenge" his father's fake death. Remy's girlfriend April is also shown to be extremely uncomfortable with the media discourses regarding loss and pain—having lost an ex-husband and her sister March in the attacks—and it is mostly through her that the novel voices alternative ways of processing and coping with loss. Opposite her, her boss Nicole's interventions are all about real estate and reconstruction, about the need to move on and get the economy back on track after the attacks.

As regards Remy's colleague at the police corps, Guterak, he represents the complexities of living up to the discourse of heroism that has been applied to rescue workers as a whole. Through Guterak the novel presents the experience of those who may not have been "brave enough," the experience of survivor's guilt, people's voyeurism in the face of death,¹⁵¹ and the pressure of having to live up to the expectations of a citizenry that is deeply influenced by emotional and hyperbolic media discourses about heroism. Deeply regretful that he did not run *into* the collapsing building like Remy but *away* from it (Walter 2007, 306), Guterak eventually realizes that there is always a commercial gain to be made out of tragedy, and gets an agent to help him get a contract to become the image of a new brand of cereal ("First Responder, the cereal of heroes" [285]) and to explore future opportunities in commemorative ceremonies, in spokespersonship for a tear gas company, and in future movies about the tragedy that will capitalize on nostalgia (150). For their part, Markham and The Boss are the mouthpieces of the government's discourse of aggrieved nationalism, security, preemptive action, and racial profiling. Both are

¹⁵¹ Guterak repeatedly laments how "[w]hen everyone is around, it's all respect and bravery and what-a-fuggin'-hero and thanks for your sacrifice, but the minute someone gets me alone, or the minute they have a drink in 'em, they get this creepy look and they ask me what the bodies sounded like when they hit the sidewalk" (Walter 2007, 85).

extremely confident in the self-righteousness of their mission; while The Boss comes out as more cynical regarding their work (the desired end result is, in his words, to transition successfully into the profits of the private sector), Markham's cynicism is revealed in his disdain for suspects and his sadistic enjoyment at being utterly ruthless.

The main counterbalance to these discourses is offered by Jaguar, a Middle Eastern man whom Remy believes is an informant but who eventually turns out to be the victim of a setup by the Documents Department. Jaguar is also presented as the only person in the novel with whom Remy can establish meaningful conversations that do not seem affected by jingoism, absurdity, or emotional overdrive. Even if it remains unclear what role Jaguar plays in the operation and what his motivations are, Remy feels "a strange urge to confide in this man" (Walter 2007, 224). The dialogues that Jaguar and Remy have resemble the type of dialogue that Bakhtin describes as dialogic, as a rhetorical means of arriving at temporary and contingent "truths," dialogues that are unresolved and reach no final answers. Even if Jaguar has a "steady lecturer's voice" (320)—which would suggest finality and certainty—and even if Remy remains silent for the most part, only asking a few questions now and then, most of the times Jaguar's voice comes off as an "internally dialogized" voice—in the sense argued by Bakhtin—, uttered as if in expectation of another's voice even when there is no interlocutor. This is markedly so in the scene where Jaguar speculates about the multiple possible meanings of "zero" (309-311) and which I will address in the last section of this chapter. As such, Jaguar stands in stark opposition to the type of discourse that emanates from The Boss, Markham, and Nicole, which is totally self-assured, monologic, and final.

As the novel comes to a close, the unit's counterterrorist operation turns into a disastrously mishandled situation, a "clusterfuck" (319) in Markham's own words, with "[t]wenty competing agents busting in doors and swinging through windows, dropping through vents" (319) and ruining each other's work. The investigation carried out by Markham and Remy's unit, which consisted in trailing an elusive terrorist cell, has led them circling back to their own unit. As I will later argue, this can be interpreted as the "carnival scene" of the novel, that culminates in an absurd festival of subversions. As Markham tells Remy in their rushed, last conversation, the only possible course of action now is to start shredding documents (documents that had been, until then, ridiculously precious) so as to eliminate any traces of their involvement in the flop. But Remy decides to go out to find Jaguar, the only "terrorist" that has gotten away. Remy finds Jaguar in a train station, where he is unable to prevent Jaguar from detonating the bomb that they themselves have provided. The next scene shows Remy in a hospital bed, apparently getting his memory back and getting flashes of scenes that can be interpreted as recollections of the blast at the train

station but that are deeply suggestive of the collapse of the World Trade Center on 9/11:

Nothing more than air at first. And it wasn't so bad. He'd read somewhere that buildings, too, were mostly air. Maybe *that* was the truly dangerous part: air. Maybe the rest was manageable, the steel and paper and people. Maybe it was the air you had to watch out for. It sucked inward, Remy with it, and then thrust out, like a bellows, the way the ocean gathers water for a crashing wave. When it came, the blast at Remy's back wasn't hot or cold. It had no qualities other than sheer insistence; noise filled every space, concussive and sharp, not a boom but a crack, heavy with glass, and accompanied a split second later by the deep thud he'd expected, a resounding bass thunder like someone trying to frighten him to death, and a blinding flash and then *finally*, when he could stand the noise no longer, the heat came—searing—and he was airborne, free, light... like paper, tossed and blown with the other falling bits and frantic sheets, smoking, corners scorched, flaring in the open air until there was nothing left but a fine black edge... then gone, a hole and nothing but the faint memory of a seething black that unfurled, that lifted him and held him briefly on the warmest current—(323; emphasis in the original)

It is because of this final image that the reader might suspect that the novel has been a fever dream of a 9/11 survivor, especially because of the evocative use of the words “steel” “glass,” “thunder,” “paper,” and “airborne,” the latter forcefully reminiscent of a free fall from a skyscraper. But it is also possible to interpret this paragraph as a description of the explosion caused by Jaguar, and to read the actions described throughout the novel as taking place after the terrorist attacks, where the opening scene of Remy attempting suicide anticipates a second attempt (at least in thought) which is the result of Remy's horror at the person he has become by his involvement in the counterterrorist operation. Whether the narrative structure is linear (the latter) or circular (a fever dream) remains unclear, as the sequence of events can be interpreted in different ways:

- a) Remy survives a terrorist attack and while he is recovering in hospital he has a wild dream about a counterterrorist operation, largely influenced by what he hears on TV while in and out of sleep. Several scenes in the text show Remy verifying with other characters whether he is awake. “Maybe we're *all* like people in dreams

now, [...] aware that something isn't right, but unable to shake the illusion" (103; emphasis in the original).

b) Remy survives a terrorist attack and as a consequence of PTSD has hallucinations about a double, an "evil" Remy. Remy wonders: "Is it at all possible... that this is... all an illusion, that this is all in our heads?" (210). "Sure. Why not. It's very common" (195), says Remy's psychiatrist unconvincingly.

c) Remy survives a terrorist attack, shoots himself, and then gets involved in the covert-ops, which makes him want to shoot himself again ("Maybe I should shoot myself," says Remy, to which Jaguar replies "You tried that" [310]).

A subtle clue that complicates the latter sequence and suggests a circular narrative instead is Remy's progressive abuse of alcohol, which begins mildly in the initial scenes and by the time of the suicide attempt (the opening scene) it has gotten to the level of extreme, with an empty bottle of whisky lying on the floor. But as the scenes don't follow a logical order, it is hard to tell. What remains clear is that in any of these scenarios the haunting and almost unreal landscape of the area called The Zero, the pervasive stink of which is felt all along the novel, finds justification as either a true depiction of the aftermath of the terrorist attacks or as the strange world that is the product of a fever dream. Whether the ending is interpreted as the traumatic aftermath of 9/11, or the result of post-9/11 life, the questions raised remain equally important: As Jaguar asks, "[d]oes a man ever realize that he has been the villain of his own story?" (321). The novel ends with Remy lying in a hospital bed, with a nurse removing the gauze from Remy's eyes and asking him to open his eyes, but Remy squeezes them as tight as he can in the hope that this is all a fever dream and that April—who was killed in the blast—will show up. The fact that it is March (April's sister) who appears in this scene opens the possibility that she is just an invention of Remy's traumatized imagination at the loss of the woman he loved, a way of clinging to an image of April.

3.2. The novel's early reception

As noted in chapter 2, the novel was received with accolades—"brilliant," "noir page-turner," "scathing," "the *Catch 22* of 9/11"—and was a finalist for the 2006 National Book Award, but it remained largely under the radar of critics and scholars. Of the many reviews published, most tend to be simple plot descriptions with scant critical analysis. Therefore, my observations on the novel's reception in the following pages are based on the small number of reviews from which a critical perspective can be

derived.¹⁵² Then I will turn to the scholarship that has been published on the novel which, at present, amounts to only six journal articles or book chapters. After establishing the main arguments that are put across by these analyses, I will conduct a reading of *The Zero* through the main ideas explored in chapter 2, in order to show how a Bakhtinian understanding of satire as carnivalesque subversion helps to offer a complementary and at times alternative reading not only of the novel but of the wake of 9/11 itself.

In his early writings about 9/11—the “Journals” he kept before and during the writing of the novel¹⁵³—Walter reveals how he “struggled to find a narrative shape for an allegorical satire about the aftermath of 9/11” (Walter 2007, “Journals,” 8). In general terms, an allegory can be understood as a figurative or symbolic representation of a subject matter in the guise of another, and it seems that most early reviewers of *The Zero* favored such an allegorical reading of the novel’s main character to the detriment, I argue, of the satirical element. As noted in chapter 2, the impulse to read early post-9/11 fiction within the discourse of trauma and the tendency to demand post-9/11 fiction to answer questions regarding the *meaning* of the attacks and its fallout—typically voiced as “what 9/11 has meant” and “what 9/11 has done to us”—somehow predisposed readers and commentators towards interpretations that fell in line with the prescriptions put in place by early criticism of post-9/11 fiction. Indeed, the novel’s narrative structure, with its fragmented, gapped, and impressionistic style, gets closer to an account of trauma than the more standard and mimetic styles of many post-9/11 novels (Worthington 2015), and it is not surprising then that *The Zero* could be read as a trauma narrative. In fact, in her chapter “It’s almost like there are two of me...” (2013), Schwarz argues that the novel is very accurate in the portrayal of a dissociative disorder, a common symptom of trauma.

However, as I will later argue, the novel somehow undermines—while it does not disavow—such a reading and winks in another direction, putting forward other interpretive possibilities that are directly related to its satirical intent. But early reviews of the novel typically read Remy as a traumatized “Everyman,” a universal figure that stands not just for the nation but for each US citizen, a shell-shocked collectivity after 9/11, thus reading Remy in exclusively allegorical terms as a metaphor for the United States’s prostrated self and its inability to make sense of the 9/11 events. According to

¹⁵² These include reviews published in media such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and *The New York Times*, as well as some reviews by readers in *Goodreads*, *Kirkus Reviews* and *Bookreporter*.

¹⁵³ A selection of journal entries is included as an annex in the 2007 edition of the novel. When citing from these entries, the parenthetical reference will be (Walter 2007, “Journals”). The annex also includes an interview with Jess Walter entitled “A Conversation with Jess Walter” that will be referenced as (Walter 2007, “Conversation”). All other references (Walter 2007) refer to the novel.

the review in *Booklist*, *The Zero* offers “the perfect metaphor for the way we experience today’s world” (Ott 2006, n.p.), while for the *Wall Street Journal* Remy’s “exhausted confusion [...] distills what many Americans have felt for the past five years” (Smith 2006, n.p.); these feelings include, for the reviewer in *The New York Times*, “denial and dislocation,” which have become “endemic in post-9/11 America” (Maslin 2006, n.p.). Even “Edgar’s insistence on rewriting reality is one schoolboy’s way of speaking for us all,” the reviewer claims (*Ibid.*, n.p.).

Without dismissing that the allegorical intention—acknowledged by Walter himself, and an important element in satire—is an interesting way of interpreting the main character, the way in which scholars have identified Remy as allegory of a traumatized national collective misses much of the novel’s subversive potential. I will argue that reading the novel in these allegorical terms is a movement that is, paradoxically, at odds with the story *The Zero* sets out to tell. As K. Miller argues, it is ironic indeed that “this reading of the novel pays no more attention to the traumatized cop than the mass media does: by identifying in the broken-down Remy a ‘perfect metaphor’ for national trauma, the reviews universalize his experiences in much the same way as the political allegory that treats the NYPD hero as a symbol for a crusading America” (Miller 2014, 30). Against the collective reading, the main crux of the novel is precisely how one individual, the *victim* Brian Remy, is overwhelmed by the *collective* media narrative of heroism and loss that is superimposed on him. What really dumbfounds Remy is how the retelling of the collective experience of pain fuses and obliterates private trauma and individual suffering and turns it into commercial gain and nationalistic rhetoric. In the novel, Remy as a concrete, specific victim has no significance whatsoever for any of the other characters (maybe only for his girlfriend, April) and his off-comments and genuine expressions of disbelief are celebrated by his colleagues as wisecracks, all of which adds to Remy’s sense of displacement. Against a generalizing discourse that, as Sturken (2007) argues, appropriates private grief for public uses that lead to ritualized and standardized formulations for the massive industry of public commemoration, and which is symptomatic of the ease with which the diagnosis of “collective trauma” (Jameson 2003, 55-58) was applied to the general population as a whole,¹⁵⁴ *The Zero* suggests that individual experience might leave room for unheroic acts, for unassuaged grief, for desperate and even cowardly acts, for ethical dilemmas, and for psychological collapse. Through what Bakhtin has called the “interior infinite” in carnivalized texts—a development introduced by Romanticism that recognizes “the interior subjective man with his depth, complexity, and inexhaustible

¹⁵⁴ As Jameson argues in “The Dialectics of Disaster” (2003), in the wake of the attacks, it was common to refer to the population as being collectively traumatized: “I can still vividly remember the suggestion of a clinical psychologist on the radio, not only that the survivors needed therapy, but that all Americans should receive it! [...] All Americans are now receiving therapy, and it is called war (or more officially, ‘the war on terrorism’)” (Jameson 2003, 57).

resources" (Bakhtin 1968, 44)—the allegory moves away from the collective narrative and into the intricacies of the personal experience. Remy, by his own contradictions, embodies the cracks in the tightly-knit hegemonic discourse of collective trauma and heroism. Therefore, I suggest that the allegory in *The Zero* refers not to Remy as a signifier of American society's experience of collective trauma, but to Remy as the embodiment of the need to go beyond traumatic paralysis and to dig into one's own complicity with the discourses of power. As K. Miller argues, the novel portrays how a paralyzing national trauma "has left many Americans feeling like passive victims of a dominant media discourse," where they would rather receive information than become truly informed (Miller 2014, 45-46), and this is the reason, in my view, why the novel extensively features television sets, remote controls, television shows, and even television scripts. The overload of "information" and media narrative, rather than inform, lulls citizens into a scripted narrative that prevents them from asking the uncomfortable questions that need to be asked.

Secondly, by focusing on Remy as the signifier of a nation under the effects of trauma these readings find a plausible "explanation" for most of the novel's narrative strategies—such as the ellipses, the leaps in chronology, the doubling of the main character, and so on—as symptoms of Remy's Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which include "[v]isions. Stress-induced delusions. Dissociative episodes. Maybe even Briquet's syndrome" (Walter 2007, 194). While these narrative techniques can indeed be interpreted as portraying the effects of a traumatized psyche and the impossibility of narrating trauma, the novel raises doubts about the significance of any of these symptoms by featuring four doctors—three of them with extremely suspicious literary names (Rieux, Huld and Destouches¹⁵⁵)—who keep contradicting each other but who are nonetheless adamant about their own conflicting diagnoses because they are written on paper and official reports. Dr. Rieux is certain that Remy's condition "is textbook PTSD" (194) and that Remy is "not working for some top-secret department, investigating whether or not [his] girlfriend's sister faked her death" (194-5). As Rieux argues, the "[s]ecret agents interrupting you on the toilet? Yelling at you in gypsy cabs, buying you lattes? Mysterious Arab men in wool coats?" (195) are all hallucinations, because "[s]urvivors can expect to experience delusions, persecution, paranoia. Delirium" (195). On his part, the eye surgeon, Dr. Destouches, claims that the memory gaps are the consequence of general anesthesia (265). And, at the same time, the unnamed general practitioner insists on reporting a (presumably) non-existent chronic back pain as the official "explanation" for Remy's retirement from the police corps, an injury for which Remy feels no pain, but for the doctor the important thing is "to get the paperwork flowing [...] A formality" (64). Remy's real medical concern—his

¹⁵⁵ As I will later develop, Rieux is the heroic doctor in Camus's *The Plague*, Huld is K.'s lawyer in Kafka's *The Trial*, and Destouches is Céline's real surname (Louis-Ferdinand Destouches).

faltering eyes and his memory gaps—are repeatedly dismissed. We do not know if Remy’s impaired vision is real, imagined, or metaphorical—although the assertions by the eye surgeon, Dr. Destouches, that he has “never seen such thin, tattered tissue on a human being that wasn’t a cadaver” (266) make us think it is real—but, ultimately, the problems in Remy’s vision can be interpreted as a forceful metaphor for the inability to understand the event in its full complexity. Guterak cannot even get Remy’s condition right, which he calls “muscular vicious disintegration” (26)—as opposed to macular degeneration and vitreous detachment—, although the reference to “disintegration” is consistent both with Guterak’s brutal honesty and as an accurate assessment of the nation’s condition (Flinn 2014, 226). It is because of this perceived disintegration that the nation finds itself relying on nationalistic rhetoric to explain the event and, as Walter laments, what leads it to eventually turn a blind eye to torture (Flinn 2014, 229) and to all the paralegal measures put into effect by the Patriot Act in October 2001. The fact that Remy’s doctors cannot be trusted—are they even real?—drives attention away from PTSD and suggests instead a general state of delusion. With varying degrees of unacknowledged humor, the doctors contribute to the overall sense of confusion and leave Remy and the reader even more dumbfounded. Therefore, following the cue of Walter’s choice of names for the doctors—and in view of the questionable procedures of the covert-ops game that the novel depicts—, we might conclude that these conflicting medical diagnoses are just another ruse, “a cover story” (Walter 2007, 196), explanatory discourses that fill in the blanks of what cannot be known or comprehended. I suggest that these diagnoses point to a desire to find logical explanations and closure for the 9/11 events, and the doctors, like everyone else, are shown as falling victim to these explanatory discourses.

Finally, early reception failed, in my view, to explore *The Zero*’s innovative approach to one of the main concerns of early post-9/11 fiction: the engagement with the figure of the terrorist Other. While these approximations have usually been embodied in Muslim or Middle Eastern characters, *The Zero* is perhaps the first to feature an American perpetrator, effectively subverting the convention of early post-9/11 fiction.¹⁵⁶ The novel does feature Middle Eastern characters that commit terrorist acts (albeit because they are framed into committing them), but their actions pale in

¹⁵⁶ Updike’s would-be-terrorist in his 2006 novel *Terrorist*, Ahmad, is also American, but Updike’s insistence on his mixed origins (Egyptian father and Irish mother) draws attention away from his American citizenship and seems to locate his alienation in his multicultural upbringing and surroundings. Birgit Däwes’ assessment of the novel’s shortcomings is, I believe, on point: “Instead of dialogically engaging with cultural difference, *Terrorist* thus leaves intact the boundaries between religious systems and ideologies, empathizing with the Other only to construct a clearer sense of Self, and eventually using this glance in the mirror to stabilize master narratives of the ‘clash of civilizations’” (Däwes 2011, 265). Many have read Chuck Palahniuk’s satirical novel *Pygmy* (2009) as a mocking response to Updike’s novel, due to its similar plot revolving around a failed, immigrant teenager terrorist.

comparison to those carried out by the government agents who, rather than combating terror, seem to be “cloning terror” (Mitchell 2011, n.p.) and producing more terrorists than existed in the first place. Most reviews missed exploring how *The Zero*’s subversion of the figure of the perpetrator—through Remy and the government agents—suggestively calls to mind the criminality of the United States at the overseas detention centers of Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib, where detainees are dehumanized conveniently outside the reach of US law. It is in this subversion, I argue, that the novel invites the reader to reflect on the role of American perpetrators in the context of the post-9/11 world, together with the inclusion of 9/11 within a continuum of war, death, and previous conflicts by means of the novel’s rich intertextuality.

Interestingly enough, most reviews somehow tiptoe around Remy’s paralegal use of violence, a fact that the novel itself obscures through the repeated leaps in chronology and ellipses, and through the narrative choice not to narrate or show Remy’s most violent acts directly, as these are simply implied and have to be inferred by the reader. This choice is not inconsequential, and it could point to the novel making a wider political claim “regarding the invisibility of American ‘counter-terrorism’ operations post-9/11, and the way in which American mainstream failed to discuss the ethics of such measures” (Gibbs 2014, 97). It is significant, and it validates Gibbs’s claim, that most reviews seem to overlook the implications of Remy’s secret activities in the service of the nation, and fail to speculate on why the novel obscures them. For Duvall, the effect of Remy not knowing the full implications of his own violence (or his not sharing them with the reader) points at a vast majority of American citizens not wanting to discuss or question their government’s installation of a virtual state of exception both at home and abroad, acquiescing, somehow, to then-vice-president Dick Cheney’s claim that “[a] lot of what needs to be done here will have to be done quietly, without any discussion...” (Cheney 2001, n.p.).¹⁵⁷ Cheney’s words confirm the vitality of a type of political narrative that “in the name of national security, justifies [the citizens’] exclusion from information and decision making” (Rogin 1990, 116), relying on the citizens’ “intentional ignorance” (Chomsky 2003, 42) to make it possible. Significantly, few, if any, reviews comment on that.

In short, early reviews of *The Zero* have tended to overemphasize the allegory of a traumatized collective identity, of the dislocation experienced by the nation as a whole as “everything changed” on 9/11, and they have been more reluctant to explore the

¹⁵⁷ This is Cheney’s argument in full: “We also have to work, though, sort of the dark side, if you will. We’ve got to spend time in the shadows in the intelligence world. A lot of what needs to be done here will have to be done quietly, without any discussion, using sources and methods that are available to our intelligence agencies, if we’re going to be successful. That’s the world these folks operate in, and so it’s going to be vital for us to use any means at our disposal, basically, to achieve our objective. [...] It is a mean, nasty, dangerous dirty business out there, and *we have to operate in that arena.*” (Interview on “NBC News’ *Meet The Press*: Dick Cheney,” 16 September 2001.)

wider implications of the main character's unknowingness, his framing as a hero and his use of violence, issues that resonate deeply with America's investment in the notions of innocence, amnesia and the newfound "enduring" vulnerability, in president Bush's phrasing. The satirical element has been overlooked and the novel's rich intertextuality neglected, the latter pointing directly to other works of fiction so as to satirically explore insanity, absurdity, the human toll of wars, and the oftentimes absurd rhetoric of a nation at war, effectively placing 9/11 within a continuum of transnational and transhistorical events.

3.3. Critical analyses

The positive reviews received by Walter's novel have not been matched by a significant output of academic criticism. As noted in chapter 2, several reasons may have contributed to this scarcity of critical engagement, among them the pervasiveness of the trauma approach to early post-9/11 fiction, the relative lack of notoriety of Walter as an author at a time when the culture was expecting its renowned authors to give "meaning" to the experience, and the widespread perception that humor, irony, and satire were not adequate means to address such a tragic and shocking event. As noted in a review in *Publisher's Weekly*, Walter's satire may have been "too much too soon for some [readers]" (qtd. in Dodge 2014, 153). More than a decade after the attacks, and several years after the publication of Walter's novel, Duvall's "Homeland Security and the State of (American) Exception(alism): Jess Walter's *The Zero* and the Ethical Possibilities of Postmodern Irony" (2013) is the first among a small number of recent academic writing—seven articles in total—that have begun to turn their attention to *The Zero*, although, as noted, some generic studies on post-9/11 fiction had briefly mentioned the novel—sometimes just as a footnote—from 2009 onwards (Melnick 2009; Crownshaw 2011; Däwes 2011; Gibbs 2014).¹⁵⁸

Inevitably, some of the arguments presented by these analyses fall within the interpretive paradigms of early 9/11 studies. By approaching post-9/11 fictions as explorations/representations of the traumatic experience, of how to engage ethically with the figure of the terrorist or fundamentalist Other, and of how to deal with a loss that is characterized as exceptional, some of these works bypass the novel's fundamental resort to satire as a mere stylistic choice. One such instance is the latest piece of critical work published on *The Zero*, Worthington's book chapter "Jess Walter's

¹⁵⁸ There are two earlier studies that include a conference presentation by Derosa in 2011 ("Nationalism and Alterity in Laila Halaby and Jess Walter") and an MA thesis by Santin on that same year ("Representing the Trauma of 9/11 in U.S. Fiction: Jonathan Safran Foer, Don DeLillo and Jess Walter"), both available online. However, I take 2013 as the starting date when refereed journal articles or book chapters that focus specifically on *The Zero* begin to be published.

The Zero: Satirizing the ‘Desert of the Real,’” included in Petrovic’s edited volume *Representing 9/11* (2015). Despite its suggestive title Worthington neglects to explore in what ways the “strategic”—in her own words—use of the satirical element operates, other than by cataloguing scenes of the novel that comically weigh in on real-life events. The “Desert of the Real” that is announced in the title is not mentioned, and the text delves instead on how, from a stylistic standpoint, *The Zero* is much more adequate than many other post-9/11 novels to convey the feeling of a traumatized individual attempting to construct a narrative of his/her traumatic experience. Worthington argues that the novel’s style and structure departs from the “surprisingly staid and standard narrative plots and structures” (Worthington 2015, 4) of most post-9/11 fiction and comes closer to fiction depicting trauma, with a gapped narrative full of repetitions and fragments, and where categories of time, space and memory are not relevant or even accessible (Worthington 2015). This is, in my view, a very interesting argument that could take the length of the analysis, but the author is somehow obliged by the title of her piece to turn to the novel’s humorous depiction of the aftermath of 9/11, which she does only timidly and with no true critical insight.

Dodge’s “September 11 and Public Grief: Grieving Otherwise in Jess Walter’s *The Zero*” (2014) relies on a conception of satire as invective and corrective, and therefore argues that Walter’s satire serves not only to ridicule certain aspects of the US response to the events of 9/11 but to offer alternative courses of action, especially as regards public grieving. Such a view of satire, which Dodge derives from Hutcheon’s *A Theory of Parody* (1985), understands that the “corrective aim of satire’s scornful ridicule is central to its identity” (Hutcheon 2000, 56) and this premise weighs down, in my view, on Dodge’s exploration of Walter’s satire, which comes out as quite somber and prescriptive. In contrast to Dodge’s, my analysis relies on a view of satire as inquiry, and aims to demonstrate how it can be a dialogic, open-ended, and playful exercise in speculation.

Kristine Miller’s “Reading and Writing the Post-9/11 Cop: Trauma, Personal Testimony, and Jess Walter’s *The Zero*” (2014) seeks to demonstrate how the novel, although largely reviewed as a trauma narrative, actually problematizes the usual tenets of trauma fiction (as defined by the likes of Caruth and Lays): that trauma is fundamentally “unspeakable and unrepresentable,” that it is defined by its “literality and nonsymbolic nature,” and that it is thus “absolutely true to the event” (Miller 2014, 29). By examining both *The Zero* and a series of interviews held by Columbia University’s Center for Oral History, the article explores how “the discursive terrain between private trauma and its public representation” can be navigated and “analyzes the variety of literary forms and figures that allow individuals to express their pain” (Miller 2014, 30). Miller’s essay is a significant step in contesting the usual critiques of early post-9/11 fiction—that it failed to capture the event, that it was too

domestic, that it could not convey the inexpressible nature of the event—and it further argues that fiction is “not tertiary but primary to understanding trauma” (Miller 2014, 31). As such, it lies beyond the scope of my analysis, as the essay pays no attention to the satiric other than by acknowledging that satire is the shape by which the novel contrasts the nationalistic allegory with what happens to Remy, “whose post-9/11 psychological collapse is far more traumatic than heroic” (Miller 2014, 29).

Finally, in her volume *Beware of the Other Side(s): Multiple Personality Disorder and Dissociative Identity Disorder in American Fiction* (2013), Schwarz devotes a chapter to *The Zero* entitled “It’s almost like there are two of me...”. While Schwarz shows good insight in her reading of the novel, the focus of her analysis leans greatly on the clinical, since the chapter seeks to contribute to the volume’s aim, which is to demonstrate that the controversial term “multiple personality disorder” (controversial because of the notion of multiple and autonomous selves coexisting, and recently renamed “dissociative identity disorder”) was in fact an invention shaped by psychiatry and fiction, and how “this reciprocal process created a genre fiction of its own that persists until today in a very distinct self-referential mode” (according to the publisher’s presentation). Thus, Schwarz’s analysis seeks to determine the accuracy of several representations of identity disorders in a wide range of over twenty American fiction works (from Hawthorne’s “Wakefield” [1835] to Siri Hustvedt’s *Sorrows of an American* [2008]) and in order to do so relies heavily on the field of psychiatry and the theoretical grounding of multiple personality disorder. As can be inferred, and as interesting as this study is, its focus is beyond the scope of this dissertation. It might be interesting to note, too, that Schwarz’s conclusion is that *The Zero* is an able representation of dissociation in terms of an identity disorder, as it is based on “a more contemporary scientific model of the traumatized psyche and the inner disintegration of DID” (Schwarz 2013, 21).

While the analyses by Worthington, Dodge, Miller, and Schwarz are all relevant explorations of the novel, my interest is focused on how some other works have begun to investigate *The Zero*’s resort to satirical humor (Duvall 2013; Dodge 2014; Flinn 2014), and have also turned their attention to how the novel adds complexity to the exploration of the Other (Derosa 2013). In line with these readings, I will argue that Walter’s novel deconstructs and subverts the collective heroic narrative of 9/11 and the War on Terror through satire, and questions the assumption that America is inherently innocent, that retaliatory violence has no ethical implications, and that every citizen has, according to the American tale, the potential to become a hero.

Duvall’s “Homeland Security and the State of (American) Exception(alism): Jess Walter’s *The Zero* and the Ethical Possibilities of Postmodern Irony” (2013) argues that the novel fully realizes the potential for ethical engagement that is intrinsic to post-9/11 fiction which, in his view, has been overshadowed by the resilience of two

main theses in academic criticism: on the one hand, the idea that September 11 changed everything and has meant the end of irony in cultural production and, on the other, the opinion that post-9/11 fiction has failed to address important issues by being too domestic. Duvall seeks to show how Walter's novel disproves these two theses mainly through the use of a postmodern irony that is especially suited (far better than realism, according to Duvall) to address the post-9/11 scenario. That is especially true because the Bush administration blurred fact and fiction in its presentation of the event, the same point that I have argued in chapter 1. Thus, according to Duvall, Walter manages, through the use of irony, to involve the reader in the main character's compromised innocence. Furthermore, Duvall suggests that the novel thematizes Judith Butler's notions of mourning and otherness to imagine "an ethical encounter with the other" (Duvall 2013, 283) that breaks away from the topical binary that is imagined in most post-9/11 fiction.

Derosa's "Alterity and the Radical Other in Post-9/11 Fiction" (2013) is the second journal article to turn its attention to *The Zero*, and it follows Duvall's insight on post-9/11 fiction's portrayal of the encounter with the Other in mostly topical terms. Together with Duvall, Derosa argues that *The Zero* is an able exploration of one of the main concerns of early post-9/11 fiction—the engagement with alterity and the terrorist Other—and claims also that criticism of this engagement "must be more sufficiently problematized" (Derosa 2013, 158-9). According to Derosa, the subject position from which this engagement usually stems is one of radical innocence, of a subjectivity shocked as "everything changed" on September 11, clearly figured in the iconic motif of the prelapsarian blue skies that are so common in book covers of early post-9/11 fiction.¹⁵⁹ As Derosa suggests, this trope tends to reify the binarism of the West vs. the rest and sometimes fails to distinguish between explorations of the fundamentalist Other and otherness in general (Derosa 2013, 158). Thus, Derosa argues that *The Zero's* contribution to the corpus of post-9/11 fiction is an engagement with alterity that eludes the typical exploration through Arab and/or Muslim characters and, instead, reconfigures terrorism not as a cultural phenomenon (i.e., terrorism as culturally marked, as the product of the "clash of civilizations" argued by Huntington's theory) but as an action that one decides to take (Derosa 2013, 159). Derosa draws on Homi Bhabha's notion of terrorism as a political decision (Bhabha 2001, n.p.) and it is in this sense that Walter's exploration of the home-grown terrorist,

¹⁵⁹ Derosa argues that the theme of the blue skies identified with a pre-9/11 reality in which the towers were still standing is a common feature in the book covers of early post-9/11 novels, such as Beigbeder's *Windows on the World* (2004), Updikes's *Terrorist* (2006), DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007), and Vintage's edition of O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008), among others, a matter that I develop further in the section "Undoing the Other through carnivalesque subversion." I understand, however, that book covers respond to decisions by publishing houses and do not always reflect the author's expressed intention or the novels' position regarding that matter.

of terrorism as an internally-motivated phenomenon, acquires significance. Derosa's final argument is that the post-9/11 United States is characterized by the institution of an Agambian state of exception—a "no-man's-land between public law and political fact" (Agamben 2005, 1), where the suspension of law itself creates "a situation in which the emergency becomes the rule, and the very distinction between peace and war (and between foreign and civil war) becomes impossible" (Agamben 2005, 22). And in an Agambian state of exception, according to Derosa, "we are all potential terrorists" (Derosa 2013, 171).

Besides Duvall's initial investigation of irony, the next text to explore *The Zero's* resort to humor is Flinn's "The New Grotesque in Jess Walter's *The Zero*" (2014). From a formal standpoint, Flinn's piece does not follow the usual conventions of an academic piece of writing, since the text is an interview with Jess Walter introduced by some commentaries on the novel by Flinn. Flinn reads the novel in allegorical terms—as Walter himself intended—where Remy's condition stands as a metaphor for the nation's cultural and emotional condition, which perceives itself as shattered (Flinn 2014, 221). While this reading somehow follows the trope of the "watershed," of 9/11 as a historical rupture that disrupts the US sense of self, Flinn's approach is innovative in that it is the first approach to the novel with due emphasis on its satirical element. Drawing from Harpham's study of the grotesque, which claims that "each age redefines the grotesque in terms of what threatens its sense of essential humanity" (Harpham 1976, 463), Flinn suggests a reading of *The Zero* as an example of new grotesque for the post-9/11 world, where the quest of the main character—and by extension, of the nation—is to reassemble a sense of self, to regain access to the memory of actions and motives, but all these efforts result in grotesque solutions because incompatible categories are fused and joined, such as the "false fusion of private feeling and commercialized expression, of grief with profit, of security with coercion" (Flinn 2014, 222-223), noble heroism with callousness, and so on.

My interest in Flinn's approach stems from his innovative understanding of the grotesque: where the grotesque is typically understood as an underlying condition that breaks into an otherwise homogenous, stable order—in the terms I have described in the previous chapter—, Flinn suggests exactly the opposite. In his reading, the prior order—or the belief in a prior order—has already been shattered by the attacks, and it is in the effort to reconstruct it that the grotesque is produced. Readers may wonder whether Walter's depiction of the aftermath presupposes a belief in the existence of such a prior order; in my view, the manner in which the characters are portrayed—as trying to become whole again and made grotesque in the process—, suggests that it is an untenable belief and that efforts to reestablish it are, thus, essentially grotesque.

3.4. Setting and formal aspects

Although there is no explicit reference to “New York” or “September 11,” *The Zero* univocally sets the action in post-9/11 New York by naming or portraying many of its landmarks and by describing well-known aspects of the aftermath: the analogy is clear and unmistakable. Several textual references throughout the novel help to identify the city as New York; for instance, Battery Park (Walter 2007, 26), the Heights (41), Fresh Kills (42),¹⁶⁰ Washington Square (73), Hell’s Kitchen (187), Wall Street (311), Penn Station (314), and Newark Airport (317), among many others. The analogy with post-9/11 New York is already suggested in the opening pages by the invocation of rumors that were widespread in the post-9/11 days: “For all we know the air might be combustible, [...]. They don’t tell us what’s in the smoke. [...] He says we’re wallowing in carcinogens. Soup of our own extinction” (6). And also, by the description of images of 9/11 that became iconic:

and then gray, endless gray, geysers of gray, dust-covered gray stragglers with gray hands covering gray mouths running from gray shore-break, and the birds, white—endless breeds and flocks of memos and menus and correspondence fluttering silently and then disappearing in the ashen darkness. (8-9)

As noted earlier in chapter 2, I am not suggesting that the analysis of the text should be limited to the referential connections that may be established to the context of production and reception or to the author’s expressed intentions. But I do suggest that the context of 9/11, both geopolitical and textual, is what grounds this particular novel and what serves to unleash its full ethical potential. The novel openly addresses this particular moment in history and it is the post-9/11 narrative frame of the United

¹⁶⁰ The reference to the Fresh Kills Landfill is interesting because it served as inspiration for Remy’s job as an agent for the Documents Department (Flinn 2014, 229). Fresh Kills Landfill is in Staten Island and it was used from September 2001 to July 2002 as a sorting ground for a third of the rubble retrieved from Ground Zero, as part of the “Evidence Recovery Operation.” In order for this operation to take place, the landfill was declared a “crime scene” on 12 September 2001 and thousands of detectives, agents from twenty-five different government agencies, and forensic evidence specialists were deployed to recover human remains, personal objects, and material evidence. 4,257 human remains were recovered from Fresh Kills, resulting in the identification of three hundred individuals. While researching this operation, I found it interesting that the T-shirt made for staff working at the ERO featured an image of an angel captioned “Saint Michael” with the inscription “Opus Dei / Staten Island / WTC Recovery,” suggesting that these operations were “God’s work” (*opus dei*). The Fresh Kills site is currently under transformation into a landscaped public park. Source: *Recovery: The World Trade Center Recovery Operation at Fresh Kills. A Traveling Exhibition by the New York State Museum*. <http://www.nysm.nysed.gov/exhibits/longterm/documents/recovery.pdf>

States understood in militaristic, commercial, and mythical terms that the novel seeks to challenge. Thus, it is by taking into account the aftermath of 9/11—especially as regards its discursive framing—as a relevant and necessary context that the intertextual play and dialogic engagement of the novel with previous contexts of war and death open up the text for multiple and new significations.

As noted earlier, the narrative progression of the novel cannot be determined univocally—although most critics understand it as a linear chronological progression—, but what is certain is that the trails that Remy follows in order to find terrorists will send him circling back to himself. The novel proceeds through third-person narration and Remy as internal focalizer; no scene is narrated where Remy is not present, so that the narrative offers no insight other than what Remy himself knows, which is little. The ellipses, gaps, and temporal jumps in the narrative closely mimic Remy's troubled psychological condition, which Remy summarizes as follows:

I can't keep track of anything anymore. I slip in and out of my own life. [...] I find myself in these situations. I don't know how I got there, or what I'm doing. I don't know what's going to happen until after it happens. I do things that I don't understand and I wish I hadn't done them. (128)

As the novel progresses, Remy seems to have more information but he still cannot connect the dots:

I'm a mess. I'm drunk half the time. I cheat on my girlfriend when I don't even want to. In fact, I'm not even aware that I'm doing it until it's over. I apparently have this job where I file paper and chase down dead people, but I don't have the first idea what it means. I do these things that make no sense, and people get hurt. I come home with blood on my shoes and... [...] my son won't even acknowledge that I'm alive. (224)

Scenes often begin or end midway by means of long dashes or ellipses, leaving the reader with the same (scant) insight that Remy has. It is important to note also that whenever Remy is about to commit a violent act the narrative is interrupted and readers never get to witness Remy exercising violence. Both the reader and Remy learn

about these actions in hindsight. Like a clumsy version of Leonard from the film *Memento* (2000),¹⁶¹ Remy keeps writing notes to himself,

pointed questions on index cards that he'd unearth in his briefcase or his pocket: 'What did you do today?' and 'Where did you go?' But he never seemed to answer the notes, or if he did, it was such a cryptic response—a partial number or an acronym or some other obscure piece of work product—that it almost seemed like a taunt. (Walter 2007, 181)

Unlike *Memento's* Leonard, Remy fails to work out any useful information from these notes, except when the notes, at some point, stop asking questions and start offering advice: "Don't Hurt Anyone" (181), to which another note cynically replies "Grow Up" (190). These notes, then, do not help Remy to gather any information but rather they confirm to him that there might be two Remy's, "one he knew and the other he didn't, and that these two men might be as different as—" (213). The dash indicates yet another loss of conscience, and the thought is not completed.

Duvall suggests that the interrupted and gapped narrative reflects Remy's unknowingness and also serves to implicate the reader in Remy's compromised innocence. He argues that the novel, by facilitating the reader's identification with an ignorant Remy who is unsure of his role or purpose, stages on a cultural level "the reader's complicity with the US state of exception" (Duvall 2013, 297) by getting the reader to "understand" the circumstances under which Remy exercises violence (i.e., he does not have all the information; he is unaware of his superior's ulterior motives, etc.). The reader's identification is further reinforced by a sympathetic portrayal of Remy which makes it hard not to feel sorry for him and be amused by his utter sense of dislocation, which ultimately raises questions about the reader's moral grounding that can turn to justification so unproblematically.

The novel is organized in three sections: Part One (pp. 3-140), Part Two (pp. 143-259), and Part Three (pp. 263-326). Part One is titled "Days After" and is suggestive of the confusion and shock caused by the attacks. The second Part is titled "Everything Fades" and transitions from the initial shock to an abundance of references to real estate operations and ongoing discourses of rebuilding and redevelopment, not only of Manhattan but of the nation as a whole. What is significant is that these discourses do

¹⁶¹ *Memento* is a film directed by Christopher Nolan and based on the short story "Memento Mori" by Jonathan Nolan. It tells the story of a man, Leonard, who as a result of a past trauma suffers from anterograde amnesia—the inability to form new memories—and short-term memory loss approximately every five minutes. He is searching for the persons who attacked him and killed his wife, and in order to do so he uses an intricate system of Polaroid photographs and tattoos to track information he cannot remember.

not actually clarify anything but, as the titles indicate, make the memory or the “truth” of the event eventually fade. Finally, Part Three, titled “The Zero,” is the one that is more externally focalized, and it is here that Remy starts to perceive that the world has changed and he seems to begin to have some clarity about what is really going on.

The first section places special emphasis on vision, with extensive references to the streaks and white spots that Remy has in his field of vision (the “flashers and floaters”) as a result of macular degeneration and retina detachment (a diagnosis we will learn about much later in the novel), to characters staring out to space or at somebody, and references to eyes and vision in general: to name but a few instances, there is a Vietnamese patient who stares at Remy in the ER, a “shell-eyed” ER volunteer, Remy constantly stares out of the police car, there is a raccoon-eyed firefighter (Walter 2007, 15), a soot-eyed firefighter (16), Markham “stare[s] holes into the restaurant owner” (115), even a dog stares at Remy until he has to look away (11) and the crushed cars at a collapsed subterranean parking garage stare at Remy “inscrutably” (90). This first section also includes Remy’s visits to an ophthalmologist who has bulging eyes and a manic look—like “Marty Feldman after corrective surgery” (76). Everybody seems to be staring, but more in confusion than in actual comprehension, and the sense of dislocation is pervasive.



Marty Feldman as Igor (pronounced “eye-gore”) in the film Young Frankenstein (Mel Brooks, 1974).

In contrast, Part Two, “Everything Fades,” stresses precisely the fading of the memory of the event—as well as of its physical traces by extensive reconstruction. Real estate and commercial interests take over. As Guterak notes at the beginning of the section,

We don't do many tours anymore. Too many people. They're building a goddam observation platform. Like it's the Grand Fuggin' Canyon. They got these apartments overlooking The Zero donated for the rescue workers, and the bosses are using 'em for parties, to bang their girlfriends and hand out drinks to celebrities. Billionaires and soap actresses. The whole thing looks different now. Every day, they take shit away and it just never comes back. Take it to Fresh Kills and squeeze it like orange juice until all the paper and blood comes out and they go back for another truckload. [...] They're gonna take it all away, Bri. All of it. The paper gets filed, bits of flesh buried, and you know who gets the steel? The mob. Goddamn bosses give all the steel to the mob. Everyone gets a piece of this thing. (154)

Throughout this section of the novel the references to reconstruction and profit are pervasive, mostly through the voice of Nicole, a real estate agent who pressures April into getting over her loss and starting to perform at her job and gaining assets for the company again, because "we're going to look back at this period as the dawn of a new age, an unprecedented period of growth in real estate wealth" (185). From Nicole's words, Remy can intuit a future "of glittering wealth and endless beauty, where there was no longer the need for cops or firefighters, only pink real estate agents, floating above the city on gusts of possibility" (187).

The section also features a tactless lawyer who advises April on how to get the maximum compensation for her ex-husband's death, explaining how the system can put numbers to human loss: "these are the breakdowns of deductions that the compensation board will factor from the total: for life insurance, pension plans, social security, and worker's compensation, the sum of which we've calculated to be about one-point-six million" (174). Then he shows Remy the bill that he will charge for his services, which include deductions for "Vicarious Trauma" and "Compassion Fatigue" (174). As Guterak anticipated, everybody seems to be getting a cut of everything. Later on, an organizer of a mud pit show where Guterak will make an appearance as "hero" explains to him why they do not need him to address the crowd, just show up and act the part: "Honestly, I don't think people want any more talking. For a while they did. But I think they've had enough of that kind of thing. I think we get it. No, all we need you to do is... look appropriate" (176-177).¹⁶²

¹⁶² A similar idea is conveyed by Ben Fountain's 2012 novel *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, where a group of American soldiers serving in Iraq, and who are briefly back in the United States for a "Victory Tour" that seeks to bolster support for the war, are asked to march silently during a spectacular football halftime while Beyoncé performs.

The fading of any physical and mental traces of the event gives way to Part Three, “The Zero,” where Remy starts “seeing” for the first time. This is not the result of an improved medical condition—the eye surgery under Dr. Destouches only serves to confirm that one of his eyes is dead—but of a rising awareness. In Part Three Remy starts perceiving how the world has, indeed, changed and that everyone seems to have changed too: they are either paler, or thinner or showing signs that Remy had not noticed before. For instance, Remy reflects on how his son, Edgar, “looked different” (275), how his colleague, Guterak, “looked thinner” (281) and, “[i]n the first light of dawn, he got the best look at [Jaguar] he’d ever had” (309). It is in this last section that Remy seems to arrive at some revelation about what has been going on, and this is maybe why he decides to keep his eyes shut at the end, “squeeze[ing] them as tight as he could” (326). It is also here that he is warmly heartbroken when he finds that his eye problem has not been corrected and that he can still “see the old flecks in his good eye” (326). As I will later suggest, these flecks provide an appropriate lens through which to see the post-9/11 world, and, in light of how everything has faded, Remy will cherish them as the only reminder of the experience. Utter realization comes at the end, and it is therefore not contradictory that someone who has spent the whole length of the novel concerned about his eyesight and taken pains to have it fixed, makes the final choice to keep them shut.

This is, in my estimation, the result of the novel’s two opposing movements, where, on the one hand, Remy transitions from utter confusion and unknowingness to an increased perception and awareness (which eventually leads to a desire to obliterate himself by drinking heavily), while, on the other, the nation is depicted as transitioning from the raw Real¹⁶³ exposed by the attacks (Žižek 2003) to a virtual trauma that will only increase the *perception* of danger and thus justify the violent actions carried out in retaliation. Similarly, while Remy seeks to retain the memory of the experience—and laments the erasure of The Zero—the nation is depicted as falling into willful amnesia, regardless of the mottos that call to “Never Forget.” There is a scene in the last section

¹⁶³ I am referring here to the “raw Real” argued by Žižek in “Welcome to the Desert of the Real” (2002), which refers to the unmediated reality that the attacks exposed, which will inevitably be interpreted through ideology to conceal the fact that “we live in an insulated artificial universe,” and that it is precisely this artificiality that “generates the notion that some ominous agent is threatening us all the time with total destruction” (Žižek 2003, 133): “It is precisely now, when we are dealing with the raw Real of a catastrophe, that we should bear in mind the ideological and fantasmatic coordinates which determine its perception. If there is any symbolism in the collapse of the WTC towers, it is not so much the old-fashioned notion of the ‘center of financial capitalism,’ but, rather, the notion that the two WTC towers stood for the center of VIRTUAL capitalism, of financial speculations disconnected from the sphere of material production. The shattering impact of the bombings can be accounted for only against the background of the borderline which today separates the digitalized First World from the Third World ‘desert of the Real.’ It is the awareness that we live in an insulated artificial universe which generates the notion that some ominous agent is threatening us all the time with total destruction” (Ibid., 132-133; capitals in the original).

of the novel where Remy visits The Zero and observes how it has all been swept away, as the city gets ready for real estate redevelopment. Remy reflects on how swiftly the culture moves on and “gets it all wrong”:¹⁶⁴

Remy turned from side to side, taking the whole thing in, feeling incomplete, cheated in some way, as if they’d taken away his memory along with the dirt and debris. Maybe his mind was a hole like this—the evidence and reason scraped away. If you can’t trust the ground beneath your feet, what can you trust? If you take away the very ground, what could possibly be left?

And yet that’s what they had done. He stepped back from the fence line and stared out over the place. They took it away. Nothing left here but a hole, a yawning emptiness fifty feet deep, football fields across, transit tracks cutting through the hole like hamster ramps, roads climbing the walls, excavation trails scratched across it, earthmovers and dump trucks, spotlights shining into the emptiness. God, they scraped it all away. No wonder they couldn’t remember what it meant anymore. No wonder they’d gotten it all wrong. How can you remember what isn’t there anymore? [...] It looked like any other place now, like the site of a future business park, or a small parking lot. (Walter 2007, 307-308)

When Remy becomes aware of how the reconstruction of The Zero signifies the erasure of the experience, he embarks on a quest to recover and retain its memory, in an attempt to elucidate what the experience can signify on an individual and collective level. Some readers have observed that the way amnesia is portrayed in the novel is not the way amnesia works, but this is precisely the point. The novel presents amnesia not as a medical condition but as a social and cultural condition. The unavailability of the past—or rather, the selective remembering of the past (what Toni Morrison called disremembering in *Beloved* [1987])—has consequences at the deepest cultural and personal levels, that in this context is shown as easily turning into nostalgia and melancholia with extremely violent results, as Butler has argued in *Precarious Life* (2004).

¹⁶⁴ “The speed with which the country moves on, digests even this” (Walter 2007, “Journals,” 18).

3.5. Paper and vision as the main motifs

As I have noted previously, the themes of paper and vision/perception are the two central motifs of the novel, and they are in fact intertwined in the central trope of Remy's failing eyesight, which is affected by constant flashers and floaters—an image that mimics the falling paper on 9/11. Hence, the image of falling paper *is* the lens through which Remy perceives the world. And it is precisely the condition of not seeing “properly,” I argue, that enables alternative narrative possibilities. While critics like Schwarz have taken on the pun that Remy is “someone with eye/I problems” (Schwarz 2013, 380) and have focused mostly on Remy's identity (“I”) problems, I believe that there is also much to be derived from the fact that Remy's physical and metaphorical vision is affected.

I have suggested elsewhere that this lens can be read as the remaining memory of the experience, an experience that Remy wants to hold on to as he witnesses how it is inexorably erased. In a way, Remy's condition can be likened to Oedipa Maas' tears in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965), in the way that Oedipa wants to hold on to those tears in a moment of deep realization. It is while contemplating a painting by Remedios Varo (“Bordando el manto terrestre,” 1961) that Oedipa realizes that she has woven herself into the very same trappings from which she wishes to escape, and as tears start flowing from her eyes she wishes that “[s]he could carry the sadness of the moment with her that way forever, see the world refracted through those tears, those specific tears” (Pynchon 2000, 13). Oedipa's tears, rather than a sign of weakness, are the reminders of a moment of full awareness and hence they can provide the strength to break free and to be renewed. They also serve as a reminder of the need to be compassionate for the plight of others—in this case, the women trapped in the tower in Varo's painting. Likewise, Remy's flashers and floaters, which can be perceived as an incapacitating medical condition, are the lens through which Remy will be able to retain the memory of the experience and to gain some perspective on it, while everybody else seems to be caught up in discourses of reconstruction, victimization, and retaliation. While in the initial stages of the novel Remy is truly dumfounded and concerned about the intrusive white flakes in his vision, as the story progresses he will deliberately seek them out and resort to them as a reminder of where he stands. There are many such scenes, but I will point out to three that I believe clearly illustrate the transition: the first one is Remy's discussion with The Boss about the wonders of the private sector, the second is Remy's “epiphany” in hospital, and the third is Remy's observation of a building the symbology of which he is unable to decipher.

Midway through the novel (in Part Two), there is a scene where Remy is self-consciously admitting to The Boss that he “may have done some... really bad things” (Walter 2007, 117) and The Boss dismisses his concern and rants about the importance of the job they are doing. Although now they may not be getting the credit

they deserve, The Boss tells Remy how, once their job is done, they—and the nation—will profit by turning to the “Private. Sector” (119). The Boss asks Remy to close his eyes to envision this lucrative future, but when Remy closes his eyes all he sees is

a kind of captured reality: a black screen with snowflakes falling and streaking, like crawling beasts beneath a microscope lens. Paper falling against blooming darkness. (119)

I believe this can be interpreted in two different—yet complementary—ways; on the one hand, Remy is still caught in the experience of 9/11, has not been able to process it and digest it, while The Boss and everybody else seem to have already moved on. On the other hand, the distance between Remy and the discourse that surrounds him generates in him legitimate stupefaction, hence the black screen, a void, where the intrusive flakes are the only hint at something meaningful. For Remy, the “meaning” of post-9/11 life has to be filtered through the experience of that day and not by the substitute discourses that aim to explain it away. The flashers and floaters are thus the lens through which Remy sees the world.

In Part Three of the novel this begins to change, with the scene of Remy’s epiphany introducing the reader to how the change will gradually crystallize. The scene begins with a nurse waking Remy up after Dr. Destouches’ surgical intervention, and Remy lamenting how the nurse’s intrusion

wip[ed] away the epiphany he was trying to have, just as Remy was putting words to it: *What if I’m the only one aware of this?* A lonely, chilling thought, and he wasn’t sorry to see it slipping away too—leaving only a momentary impression, like a print in sand, before it blew away. (264; emphasis in the original)

Of course, one does not “try” to have an epiphany, one simply has it (and this type of depiction is persistent in the novel, adding to the comic portrayal of Remy), but Remy is nonetheless really getting at the core of the problem: “Perhaps nothing made sense anymore (*the gaps are affecting everyone*) and this was some kind of cultural illness they all shared” (264; emphasis in the original), suggesting an inability to cohere. What is chilling for Remy about his revelation is that he might be the only one aware of it, which gives full meaning to the novel’s epigraph, where Bardamu is “[a]ll alone with two million stark raving heroic madmen” and asking himself “[c]ould I [...] be the last coward on earth?” (Céline qtd. in Walter 2007, n.p.). After Dr. Destouches informs

Remy that he has been unable to fix the retina detachment in one of his eyes and that, as far as he is concerned, “that eye is... gone. Black. Kaput” (266), the diminishment in Remy’s visual capacity—Remy will start wearing an eye-patch—will be revealed as an improvement in perception, as he reflects a couple of pages later:

He was getting used to seeing out of one eye, to seeing around corners. In some ways, he wondered if this wasn’t a more accurate view of the world, without the gap between his eyes, that little bit of distance that the brain corrected and covered. And he wondered about blind spots, if there weren’t things that only he could see now, things the binocular missed. (285)

What Remy’s epiphany reveals to him is that culture keeps “correcting” the gap between the eyes, what at the cultural level is the distance between the nation’s mythic conception of itself and the raw Real that the attacks have forced on it, creating those “counterfeit synechdoques” (Flinn 2014) that are meant to help regain a sense of wholeness. Remy’s eye problems, in contrast, can be read as an increased perception insofar as they cancel the correcting interpretation of culture and hence force him to keep staring at the Real. The next scene, which offers a description of a public building in downtown New York, illustrates well how the lens of Remy’s eyes eventually prevents him from understanding even the most basic of communally shared myths—in other words, Remy’s approach is “unfiltered.” The building catches Remy’s attention because an American mythology can be intuited from it, but Remy cannot decipher it:¹⁶⁵

He stood behind a tree and took in the face of the grand building, which he noticed now was like a coded map. Three arches on the first floor gave way to a row of three-story columns and then a wedding-cake topper lined with statues of men—famous men Remy didn’t recognize, men looking down on him in judgement, men waiting for history to occur. [...] Above the statues, gaudy dormers poked from the roof, home to cherubs and eagles and shields, a symbolic, indecipherable alphabet that sparked in Remy an old wish for more education, enough to illuminate the significance of the ship’s prow, or the soldier and maiden

¹⁶⁵ From the description offered in the novel, Walter is using the Alexander Hamilton US Customs House in Bowling Green as referent. The building is built in neoclassical style and has several statues and sculpture groups that trace a sort of history of the United States from the Pilgrim settlers onwards, “like a coded map” (Walter 2007, 289).

on one side and the Indian and Pilgrim on the other, staring down at him with a sepulchral patience that was as terrifying as anything he'd ever felt. (289)

While Remy's lack of understanding can be read as a way of looking at the historical past devoid of the interpretations of myth, yet his "wish for more education" can also point to a lack of historical knowledge. Note how the statues of the soldier, the maiden, the Indian and the Pilgrim "stare" down at Remy, as if "in judgement," with a centuries-old patience. Is this History judging the present? I cannot conclusively say whether this paragraph is intended in one way or the other, but I believe both readings are productive. On the one hand, Remy's lack of comprehension can be read as an increased "vision" (both in the sense of eyesight and epiphany) insofar as he remains excluded from a centuries-old "education" in common myths—the ones that the official discourse is invested in, as argued in chapter 1—, and that actually blinds people to a real reflection on the causes and possible solutions to the attacks. This mythological understanding of the nation's history frames the 9/11 event as a conflict between "good" and "evil," where the United States' inherent goodness is derived from a mythological conception of the nation that widens the chasm between normative conceptions of "us" and the Other, hinted at by the presence of the Pilgrim and the Indian. The way in which the scene ends, with Jaguar looking at the similarities between the Q'ran and the Bible, underscores how differences have been culturally constructed to such an extent as to make them seem irreconcilable.

On the other hand, the presence of these two figures can also evoke the moment of encounter between two cultures, and serve to "start the story earlier" (Butler 2006, 5), as Butler suggests, in such a way that a broader explanation for events can come to light. In this reading, Remy's wish for more education suggests that a better knowledge and memory of past history can prevent us from finding ourselves blindly engaged in undesirable activities—an argument that, as I have noted in section 1.4, was put across by many cultural critics in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Reviewing and examining our past actions—actions that tend to go uncovered or that are justified in self-defense—in no way means finding justification for the resort to terrorism and the indiscriminate taking of life. But it serves to understand the grievances and background concerns that, if not fully addressed, will continue to plague us regardless of how blunt and hawkish our response is. Starting the story earlier means abandoning the "first-person narrative point of view" (Butler 2006, 5), an explanatory framework that precludes any "relevant prehistory to the events of September 11" (Ibid.), and accepting instead that the "I" has been decentered, and that the narrative needs to start by expanding our understanding of how we have contributed to the current order of things. The novel underscores this premise by the depiction of a group of determined and aggressive agents and leaders

who, because of their deep investment in cultural prejudice and their proud and utter cultural ignorance, cannot begin to solve any of the problems that they so forcefully seek to address.

3.6. The intertextual game

As I have noted in chapter 2, Bakhtin's notion of dialogism—the key feature of carnivalesque or menippean discourse—is reformulated by Kristeva into the notion of intertextuality as “a mosaic of quotations; [whereby] any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (Kristeva 1986, 37). The intertextuality implicit in dialogism, where “poetic language is read as at least double” (Ibid.), is insisted upon in Walter's satiric novel through the inclusion of numerous intertextual references that serve to underscore the non-finality of the narrative at hand. Although the text is intended by the author as an “allegorical satire” (Walter 2007, “Journals,” 8) of the aftermath of 9/11 and makes explicit and implicit reference to this particular setting, the intertextual dialogue that the novel establishes serves to place the wake of 9/11 within both the history of the United States and prior contexts—not always, but often, related to the United States—of war, madness, and absurdity. This is achieved mainly by the introduction of a set of “literary” doctors that Remy has to keep consulting with, although the intertextual cues are not limited to these. As I have noted previously, it is possible to find nods to films like *Memento* (2000) and *Fight Club* (1999), although their influence is reflected mostly on a formal level—i.e. the existence of “two” Remy's, the memory gaps, the notes that Remy writes to himself as clues.¹⁶⁶ As I will argue later in this section, it is the “literary” doctors who, notwithstanding their brief appearances, open up and widen the intertextual game, as it is through them that the text will build upon, become mediated by, and establish a dialogue with other texts and other contexts. But *The Zero's* intertextuality also includes non-fictional texts, and by these I refer to many of the public and recorded statements by the Bush administration and then-mayor of New York Rudy Giuliani. It is mostly through the latter that *The Zero* will parody and expose the official narratives of 9/11 and the War on Terror. Therefore, the latter function in the novel not only as contextual background or external referents but also as intertexts where signification takes place. The speeches by The Boss, while they are not *verbatim* those of president Bush or mayor Giuliani, show significant parallelisms, univocally conveying the general idea that I have delineated in chapter 1.

The first text to appear (after the title page and the dedication to Walter's son) is a concise “Author's Note” that warns the reader that “This happened.” This assertive statement will be revealed as deeply ironic, as the reader will soon find out that the

¹⁶⁶ *Fight Club* was directed by David Fincher and it is based on the 1996 novel of the same name by Chuck Palahniuk.

utter unreliability of the narrative voice makes it difficult to discern what happened from what did not in the narrative universe of the novel. On the other hand, if taken only in strictly referential terms, then the reader might presume that the author needs, for some reason, to insist on the factual reality of the events described in the novel as corresponding to the events that followed the attacks of September 11, as if he meant to warn the reader against dismissing the events described as pure fiction. Any such assumption is counterbalanced by the “Acknowledgments” section at the end of the novel, where Walter writes: “This book is fiction. To those people whose real pain I witnessed five years ago, I hope there is real peace” (Walter 2007, 327). This note seems to establish is that the only real thing is pain, and that the rest is discourse; perhaps, then, the only thing that can be inferred from the initial Author’s Note is that “This” (i.e. the writing of *The Zero*) “happened” (i.e. took place) for the Author.¹⁶⁷ Whether the “Author” refers to Jess Walter of Spokane, Washington, or to a fictive author who either remains distinct from the main character through third-person narration, or is an internal focalizer for the main character, remains unclear.

In my estimation, an intertextual reading of this “Author’s note” is the most productive and interesting way of approaching it, as it can be related to other texts that have textualized the tension between documentary truth and fiction. For instance, Tim O’Brien’s short story “How To Tell A True War Story” (1990) opens with the lines “[t]his is true”¹⁶⁸ and then goes on to explore issues of credibility and verisimilitude and to reflect on how true stories are often contradictory, unbelievable, and non-moral, weaving these reflections with the telling of a war story. Another instance that comes to mind immediately—because of Walter’s professed admiration for Kurt Vonnegut—are the opening lines of *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969): “All this happened, more or less” (Vonnegut 2000, 1). If Walter’s lines are making reference to Vonnegut’s text, it is to insist on the non-finite nature of the narrative, where assertiveness (“All this happened”) is combined with uncertainty (“more or less”). Furthermore, it is worth noting also that Vonnegut’s novel is full of references to and citations from a wide and diverse range of works, and as a result of this intertextuality the novel’s signifying structure is widened and the text is opened in multiple directions. A similar strategy, I argue, is at play in *The Zero*, resulting in a polysemy that stands in direct contrast to what was then a monologic and unilateral national narrative about September 11.

Establishing this connection to Vonnegut’s text advances *The Zero*’s rich intertextuality and places its signification within a wider range of contexts that exceed the narrative worldview of September 11: Vonnegut’s text confronts the experience of severe trauma, death and loss in the American-British firebombing of Dresden during

¹⁶⁷ I am indebted and grateful to Prof. Cristina Alsina at the Universitat de Barcelona for this observation.

¹⁶⁸ I am, yet again, indebted and grateful to Prof. Cristina Alsina for this observation.

the Second World War, but it was published at the height of the American War in Vietnam (1969). Thus, Vonnegut's text also embeds the experience of Dresden within a wider context of signification, where the past experience can be read as saying something, also, about the American involvement in Vietnam. In this way, and already from the outset, *The Zero* hints that signification will be drawn from a multiplicity of texts and contexts—contexts of war, violence, madness and absurdity—by embedding the experience of 9/11 within a continuum of world conflicts—some of them with American involvement. This is not unique, of course, neither to Vonnegut or Walter, and a similar strategy is employed by other post-9/11 texts; for instance, Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004) and Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005).

As regards the latter, Saal (2011) argues that placing the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in relation to other historical conflicts—most prominently, the Holocaust—while it might serve to sketch a larger semantic field and to provide a decentering account of the experience (Saal 2011, 455), also runs the risk of elevating 9/11 “to the level of the mythical and the sacred” (Ibid., 456). While this is certainly a valid point that I share, I believe that Foer's novel is able to escape such a risk by placing the emphasis of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* not on the Holocaust but rather on the firebombing of Dresden and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima—both atrocities carried out by the United States—thus problematizing the boundaries between victim and perpetrator.¹⁶⁹ It is this same effect, I argue, that is sought in *The Zero* by placing 9/11 in relation to past US conflicts through the insertion of intertextual references to texts that relate to Vietnam and the two World Wars; such placement serves to destabilize any “elevating” reading—akin to the discourses that see 9/11 as a “watershed moment” in history—and to set the tone of the *The Zero*'s ethical engagement with the American response. That there is no such “elevating” intention becomes clear by the novel's satirical framing, that consistently undermines the discourses it seeks to represent.

The intent to rethink the aftermath of 9/11 in the context of prior conflicts is confirmed in one of the first scenes of the novel, where the victims of Vietnam are spectrally brought in: As Remy is waiting at a hospital Emergency Room (after shooting himself), a fantasmatic Vietnamese girl with a burned hand—fantasmatic because no one seems to see her but Remy—snaps her big eyes open and stares at Remy “as if she were waiting for the answer to some question” (Walter 2007, 8). The girl's burned hand evokes the US air raids with napalm, thus conjuring up the image of desolation that comes from the sky and reinforcing the parallelism that questions the binary victim-victimizer. The reference to Vietnam seems to be a reminder of losses

¹⁶⁹ Still, Saal argues that the Holocaust reference remains a spectral presence through the Dresden analogy (Saal 2011, 456), but I disagree. Although the connection is evident, the narration of Dresden through the painful memories of the Schell grandparents (which take almost half of the novel) are all too vivid to be merely an analogy of something else.

past and of the future losses that the United States will incur by pursuing a similar course of action in response to 9/11—history repeats itself—, launching military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. I would like to suggest that, as the novel progresses, the reflection on human “losses” includes also those that suffer the government’s negligence in the post-9/11 context, those that were not enshrined in the pantheon of the heroic dead: the survivors.¹⁷⁰ In the scene at the ER room, Remy is distressed about the inquisitive girl and mentions her to the hospital volunteer, but the latter dismisses Remy and continues to read from a book. This points at the failure of the system to care for its victims, which is insisted upon by the content of the book that the volunteer is so attentively reading: “*nothing more hopeless, than this freedom, this waiting, this inviolability...*” (Walter 2007, 8; emphasis in the original). These lines belong to Kafka’s *The Castle* (1926), a novel that is often understood as dealing with alienation, unresponsive bureaucracy, the frustration of trying to conduct business with non-transparent, malfunctioning and seemingly arbitrary controlling systems, and the futile pursuit of an unobtainable goal. The castle is the locus of ultimate bureaucracy, with copious paperwork that the bureaucrats maintain is “flawless” even though signs of its flawed nature are everywhere.¹⁷¹ It seems to me that the reference to Kafka, in conjunction with the reference to Vietnam, is a veiled commentary on the incapacity of the bureaucratic system (the government) to tend to the victims and to acknowledge the damage caused, something which, in my view, can apply to the Vietnamese victims and the US veterans of the American War in Vietnam, as well as to the neglected survivors of 9/11. Furthermore, the theme of paper and documentation that is so relevant in Kafka’s *The Castle* anticipates one of the main symbols in *The Zero*, as I have suggested earlier.

The second text of the novel after the “Author’s Note” is the epigraph, that unambiguously sets the tone of the narrative as a grotesque, both tragic and comic:

¹⁷⁰ It is public knowledge that the surviving firefighters, police officers, and rescue workers from the World Trade Center site found themselves having to take legal action against the government in order to obtain recognition of the health issues that resulted from their work at the site and receive appropriate medical coverage. And this stands in stark opposition to the framing of these workers as heroes—as described in chapter 1—suggesting that the framing is precisely this, a framing, and that it fails to translate into policies that accommodate the real needs of the survivors. This will be underscored by Remy’s sense of utter dislocation when confronted with a collective narrative that enshrines him as a hero but, at the same time, ignores him, manipulates him, and fails to care for him.

¹⁷¹ It is a flaw in the paperwork that has brought K. to the village where the castle is, and examples of malfunctioning include a servant destroying paperwork when he cannot determine who the recipient should be, and other such irregularities. Critics often talk of *The Castle* and *The Trial* in concert, highlighting in both the struggle—eventually, the impossibility—of the two main characters to gain access, whether to the bureaucratic system or to the law.

Could I, I thought, be the last coward on earth?
How terrifying! ... All alone
with two million stark raving heroic madmen
armed to the eyeballs ...

Céline,
Journey to the End of the Night

These lines from Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932; translated as *Journey to the End of the Night*)¹⁷² are the first among many references to Céline and one of the few that is explicitly quoted and attributed in *The Zero*. Céline's first and semi-autobiographical novel centers on the antihero Ferdinand Bardamu during and after the First World War. By means of a deeply cynical humor, the novel—which some have called nihilistic—portrays Bardamu's gradual and persistent pessimism regarding life and the human condition, which, as he reflects at the end of the novel, seems to become fully realized only in illness and war.¹⁷³ The choice to include Bardamu, an antihero, in *The Zero*'s epigraph prefigures that the story of Brian Remy, a New York City police officer—a hero by decree in the post-9/11 world—will not be one of heroism, thus offering a different perspective to the collective narrative of 9/11, as I have suggested in chapter 1.

Transposed into the context of the post-9/11 United States, Bardamu's feelings of dislocation can be related to the feelings of *The Zero*'s Remy, who shares in the impression of being surrounded by collective insanity. This insanity can be related (as the novel will make clear) to the American public's overwhelming support for the Bush administration's narrative of victimization and retaliation, which justifies the deeply aggressive and preemptive US military response by an oftentimes absurd logic: i.e., "they hate our freedoms," in president Bush's words. Thus, the "raving heroic madmen armed to the eyeballs" of the epigraph seems to refer not so much to soldiers acting on behalf of the US government but to the American public wholeheartedly embracing the patriotic and militaristic narrative which, in many cases, turns out to be unapologetically absurd. This distinction is especially relevant because I am putting forth a reading of satire as something other than "targeted denunciation" (in the traditional understanding of satire) where the satirist and the reader would share in "pointing the finger at" the object of satire (e.g. the US government); rather, the object of satire in this case is the same subject that enunciates: We. And this is why Walter's

¹⁷² Walter explains his choice for an epigraph in a journal entry for 19 August 2004: "need to connect that idiocy to us. Céline, maybe, is a better comparison than either Vonnegut or Heller. Absurdity—in the face of absurdity" (Walter 2007, "Journals", 13).

¹⁷³ As regards style, Céline makes extensive use of ellipsis and hyperbole, and his deeply cynical humor is said to have influenced Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*.

reference to our “complicity” is important to keep in mind in order to open up the novel’s dialogic and inquisitive potential.

As Walter writes in the “Journals” that he kept while writing *The Zero*, at the time of the attacks he was ghostwriting for the police commissioner of New York City Bernhard Kerik and this made him have immediate access to the WTC site and to spend time in New York City at a period that includes the time frame described in chapter 1 of this dissertation.¹⁷⁴ Thus, Walter was able to witness first-hand the experiences and reactions of firemen, police officers, rescue workers, politicians, and citizens both at the WTC site and in New York in general. Many journal entries reflect on Walter’s feelings of alienation and disbelief and acknowledge a sense of being “complicit in this delusional policy and world view” (Walter 2007, “Journals”, 20), a world view that understands military retaliation as the only possible response to the attacks on the part of the government, and consumerism as the patriotic duty of citizens to get the United States back to its place in the world.¹⁷⁵ While the government is the main source of this worldview that is amplified by the media, the basis for its success lies, as I have argued in chapter 1, on a shared cultural belief in American foundational myths and on the citizenship wholeheartedly embracing the government’s stance. This is where, according to Walter, complicity lies, and also what makes it somehow endearing: the fact that people cannot help but share this view because it touches down to the core of what the nation is understood to be in mythical terms. There is an unquestionable empathy in Walter’s satire, as I will later show, a compassionate feeling towards his fellow citizens and their beliefs, and at the same time an obvious bewilderment at the results thereof.

¹⁷⁴ The background for Walter’s writing of *The Zero* is interesting and in many cases provides insight into some of the narrative choices made. Walter has a past experience as a career journalist and, as noted, at the time of the 2001 terrorist attacks he was ghostwriting for the police commissioner of New York City Bernhard Kerik (Kerik’s autobiography *The Lost Son: A Life in the Pursuit of Justice* would be published in November of that year). It is while spending time regularly at the WTC site accompanying Kerik that Walter starts writing his “Journals” and where the idea of writing a novel starts taking shape. Kerik provided more than just access to the disaster scene and to the police corps, for I believe that he may have provided inspiration for some of the characters in the novel or their mannerisms. The reason I say this is because Kerik’s rise and fall after 9/11 is deeply suggestive in light of *The Zero*’s crooked, law-enforcing characters: during the invasion of Iraq, then-President Bush appointed him Interim Minister of Interior of Iraq (May-September 2003) and then nominated him as US Secretary of Homeland Security, a nomination from which he was forced to withdraw in December 2004 when several criminal allegations against him surfaced. Kerik faced a federal indictment and served time in prison after being charged with two ethics violations, conspiracy, corruption, tax fraud, making false statements, and lying to the White House. Walker’s relationship to Kerik is playfully inserted in the novel through the figure of a silent ghostwriter who accompanies The Boss, one of the novel’s most prominent and controversial characters.

¹⁷⁵ The entry continues: “We make four mistakes at once, every possible mistake, mutually exclusive mistake, contradicting mistakes—and the whole universe of fuckups and fallaparts” (Walter 2007, “Journals,” 20).

Bewilderment springs from the fact that the nation has indeed gone astray in its zealousness and push for military action—effectively closing the public debate on differing perspectives—and that Walter is aware that people’s reaction to the attacks is not inauthentic, and “in some ways the fact that they believed this shit was even more chilling” (Walter qtd. in Flinn 2014, 232). As Flinn suggests, this “chilling” feeling is best articulated through a specific type of satire, the grotesque. Feeling scared, petrified or alarmed when witnessing a ridiculous or absurd situation is akin to the “uncanny” that is characteristic of the grotesque: on the one hand, Walter seems to imply that underneath people’s spontaneous and authentic reactions after 9/11 there is an underlying narrative that triggers such reactions, an official narrative that he finds ridiculous and that he comically dismisses as “shit;” on the other, the fact that there is an overwhelming support for this narrative generates unease, even if he does admit to the legitimacy of the feeling that said support also makes evident. It is this combination of the two elements—something quite ludicrous and something fearful—enhanced by an honest, almost gullible belief, that makes the choice to write a satirical novel (rather than any other type of novel) so apt when dealing with the post-9/11 United States. An instance that illustrates well how Remy “understands” people’s desire to gullibly believe in alternative renditions is the scene where he is dining with Nicole and April. Remy, totally drunk, listens to Nicole talk about post-9/11 real estate speculation “as if he were listening to music” and “entranced by the melody” (Walter 2007, 187) of a fantasy world where real estate agents float like pink fairies “on gusts of possibility” (187). If we understand satire in the terms that I have delineated in chapter 2, as a genre that does not deal in judgement but fosters reflection and compassion, then the American public’s reaction is shown as somehow understandable and endearing, a compassionate portrayal of which Walter reminds himself in an entry on 19 August 2005 in his “Journals”: “Read with Sherman [Alexie] tonight. We were funny... A good point, not to get down on America too much, to remember humor. Vonnegut’s humor and humanism combine, a good example, love your characters, even the villain. Even The Boss” (Walter 2007, “Journals”, 19-20).

Walter’s well-documented admiration for Kurt Vonnegut’s fiction and its influence is clear in *The Zero*’s style, that attempts to follow Vonnegut in its intersection of tragedy with humor, comedy with despair, in striving to make the humanity of the characters stick out (regardless of their bad actions). And especially, in accepting the conclusion that “no matter what we do, we’re fucked” (Walter 2007, “Journals,” 20), somehow reminiscent of Vonnegut’s repeated “so it goes” in *Slaughterhouse Five*, a conclusion that in *The Zero* is translated into “[n]o matter what [Remy] did, [...] this

insanity was going to grind along and take him with it" (Walter 2007, 252).¹⁷⁶ Thus, the novel's epigraph from Céline is wisely chosen to convey from the outset a feeling of dislocation and uncanniness in face of an absurd world, as well as the humorous outtake that the novel will take, while at the same time the compassion with which Walter approaches his characters will be reinforced throughout the text by the inclusion of many other intertextual references that emphasize the "humanism" of this intention (rather than reflecting on a nihilistic type of absurdity). The wide choice of intertextual references throughout the novel—which are not limited to Céline, Kafka, Camus, and Vonnegut—all serve to build a genealogy of works that somehow nod in recognition to the premises that can be located in Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) and its exploration of existentialism and absurdism,¹⁷⁷ in Beckett's existentialist plays and in later proponents of the "Theatre of the Absurd,"¹⁷⁸ and in the influence these

¹⁷⁶ Towards the end of the novel, Remy reflects: "You can't beat this thing [...]. You can want to do the right thing; you can vow to pay attention, to focus, to connect the dots. But once you start down this path, it really doesn't matter. Every path leads to the same place, events like water circling toward a drain" (Walter 2007, 293).

¹⁷⁷ Sisyphus is a hero in Greek mythology who, having challenged the will of the gods, is condemned to unceasingly roll a rock to the top of a mountain, from which the stone repeatedly falls. Camus uses the analogy to explore the idea of the absurd and the choices that people have in face of a world that seems to have lost meaning: either be coherent, or run away. In Camus' analogy, Sisyphus' never-ending and arduous task, devoid of meaning and utility, symbolizes human existence, and depending on their choices, people can be classified in three categories: the absurd hero, who becomes reconciled, as it were, with the absurdity of existence, the suicidal character, who decides to make "the great leap" and thus escape absurdity, and the believer, who refuses to ask himself the question that torments all others. In the myth, Sisyphus decides to accept his punishment and assume his destiny, thus becoming master of it, this, for Camus, makes him an absurd hero. I believe that these three characters can be found in *The Zero*, where Remy is alternatively the suicidal character and the absurd hero, and every other character seems to be a believer.

¹⁷⁸ "Theatre of the Absurd" is a denomination coined in the 1960s by critic Martin Esslin and used to refer to the works by certain European and Latin-American playwrights in the 1950s and early '60s, among them Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter, Luigi Pirandello, Tom Stoppard, Miguel Mihura, Alejandro Jodorowsky, Václav Havel, and Edward Albee. Absurdist fiction, according to Esslin, seems to replicate Camus' assessment in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) that the human situation is essentially absurd and devoid of purpose. The impact of the Surrealist, Existentialist, and Expressionist schools and of the writings of Kafka is also evident in Absurdist fiction. Although no formal Absurdist movement existed as such, these playwrights shared a vision of humanity struggling vainly to find a purpose and to control its own fate, and how this leads to feelings of bewilderment and anxiety. Absurdist playwrights challenged most of the logical structures of traditional theater (notably, that of dramatic action and time), using a dislocated language that is often full of clichés, puns, repetitions, *non sequiturs*, and illogical arguments that stress the breakdown and inadequacy of human communication which, eventually, can lead to silence. As Esslin wrote in his 1965 volume *Absurd Drama*, the Theatre of the Absurd "aims to shock its audience out of complacency, to bring it face to face with the harsh facts of the human situation as these writers see it" (Esslin 1965, n.p.; emphasis in the original). This, however, does not seek to cause despair; rather, it seeks to bring out a liberating laughter. I further explore this matter throughout this chapter.

had in the American absurdist fiction of the post-1960s, all of which stress the futility of humanity's struggle to find a purpose and to control its own fate. The absurd, writes Camus, "c'est la confrontation de cet irrationnel et de ce désir éperdu de clarté dont l'appel résonne au plus profond de l'homme" (Camus 1994, 38), it is the confrontation of the non-rational world by that desperate desire for clarity which is one of man's deepest needs. For Beckett, "the contrast between desire and fulfillment, thought and action, constitutes an actual enactment of the absurd" (Bigsby 1967, 73), whereby man is a passive victim; for Ionesco, it is a rebellious gesture doomed to failure. Simmons notes how in American absurdist fiction of the 1960s, the absurd is an expression of the felt alienation between the individual and society. As Bigsby notes, Camus eventually turns to the idea of compassion as the only action that can, at least, give a provisional sense of meaning, although it requires an innocence that Camus believes untenable; in *Carnets 1942-1951*, Camus writes: "La fin du mouvement absurde, révolté etc., [...] c'est la compassion au sens premier, c'est-à-dire pour finir l'amour et la poésie. Mais cela exige une innocence que je n'ai plus" (Camus 1964, 200).¹⁷⁹ It is this humanistic stance that, Bigsby argues, is consubstantial to American fiction's approaches, a "specifically American vision which accepts the barrenness of the absurdist's world only to stress the compassion of man" (Bigsby 1967, 73) as the only means of transcendence, a vision that can be encountered in the works of Albee, Bellow, Heller, and Vonnegut, among others. It is also important to note how this "absurdist" vision in American fiction will give rise to an anti-heroic type of hero, what Galloway has called—following Camus—the "absurd hero" (Galloway 1970), and that Weinberg also identifies as belonging to a "Kafkan mode" in American fiction (Weinberg 1970). As Simmons suggests, "the emergence and proliferation of the anti-heroic form within the 1960s [...] mirrors the countercultural zeitgeist" of the 1960s (Simmons 2008, 1), and it is therefore within this long lineage of European and American fiction that *The Zero* inscribes itself. Following Esslin's characterization of the "Theatre of the Absurd," I would like to argue that the novel shares in putting forward a challenge that

is anything but one of despair. It is a challenge to accept the human condition as it is, in all its mystery and absurdity, and to bear it with dignity, nobly, responsibly; precisely *because* there are no easy solutions to the mysteries of existence, because ultimately man is alone in a meaningless world. The shedding of easy solutions, of comforting illusions, may be painful, but it leaves behind it a sense of freedom and relief. And that is why, in the last resort, [it] does not provoke tears of

¹⁷⁹ "The end of the movement of absurdity, of rebellion, etc., [...] is compassion in the original sense; in other words, ultimately love and poetry. But that calls for an innocence I no longer have" (translation by Philip Thody in the Hamish Hamilton edition, London, 1966, p.103).

despair but the laughter of liberation. (Esslin 1965, n.p.; emphasis in the original)

In a way, this is the spirit that shapes Walter's satire, as the assessment of the absurdity of much of post-9/11 life seeks to bring out in the reader not hopelessness, but a certain liberation from what was then a usual pattern of thought. Thus, and as I have argued previously, *The Zero* introduces the idea of being surrounded by a general sense of delusion through Céline's epigraph, with the aim of connecting "that idiocy to us," and portrays a main character that is facing "absurdity—in the face of absurdity" (Walter 2007, "Journals," 13). The feeling of dislocation is explicitly insisted on mainly through Remy's interactions with the informant Jaguar, where Remy clearly laments that he is "going crazy" and Jaguar replies: "don't you wonder if they're all crazy? [...] Sometimes I think I'm the last sane person on Earth" (Walter 2007, 291). Remy's fake girlfriend April also voices this feeling repeatedly: "*I couldn't walk around pretending any of this made sense anymore*" (264; emphasis in the original). Also, as a retired police officer, Remy has several appointments with the (unnamed) general practitioner who has discharged him from the police corps due to "chronic back pain," with a downbeat psychiatrist named Dr. Rieux who monitors his psychological condition, with a "wild-eyed ophthalmologist" (76) whose name is Dr. Huld, and with an eye surgeon, Dr. Destouches, who has a penchant for bad jokes about pain and cadavers. In the context that the novel describes, the function of doctors seems to be to add to the general sense of absurdity, confusion, and insanity by their conflicting medical diagnoses and their oftentimes strange behavior, at least on a superficial level.

But when we look at what is conveyed by their names—and in light of what I have discussed above—their inclusion points at the recurrence of certain human behaviors when facing different crises in history, thus calling for a wider reflection on the cultural and sociopolitical aftermath of 9/11. As noted in an earlier footnote, Rieux is the name of the doctor in Camus's *The Plague*, while Huld is K.'s lawyer in Kafka's *The Trial*, and Destouches is Céline's real surname (Louis-Ferdinand Destouches). Destouches, Huld and Rieux, together with references to Kafka, Camus, Vonnegut, Pynchon, O'Neill and others, bring in reflections on heroics and antiheroes, on human tragedy and death, on ignorance and suffering, on the madness and the absurdity of extremely bureaucratic systems, and on the isolation one can feel when witnessing collective insanity, ignorance or indifference. The vast web of contexts and possible interpretations made available by all of these authors and works is relevant because it provides alternatives to what was then understood, by a large sector of the American population and media, to be the only possible context of interpretation: the 9/11 events as an unprecedented watershed moment that violently uprooted Americans from a prior state of innocent bliss. As I have been arguing so far, *The Zero* challenges such an interpretation by

revisiting the aftermath in light of prior historical events—a strategy also used by other post-9/11 novels, as I have noted—and by portraying a hero/antihero that exposes that American idealism can no longer be sustained. The novel seems to debunk the ideal notion of the American Adam as a “figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities” defined by R. W. B. Lewis (Lewis 1959, 1), by placing the “innocent” Remy in concert with other figures of antiheroes that serve to intensify the signifying power of Remy’s un-heroic status.

Huld is the name of K.’s bedridden lawyer in Kafka’s *The Trial*, a cynical character who keeps reminding his clients that common sense is incompatible with the world of the courts. For Huld, a lawyer’s true function is to work outside the courts, influencing judges and other court officials by chatting them up when the opportunity arises. In all his duplicity and shadiness, Huld is truthful about the way that the court works in all of its illogicality, but his clairvoyance only contributes to the systemic madness and K. never gets a chance to get a trial or even know what he has been charged with. K. is stabbed by two unknown men and his last words are: “Like a dog!”. Critics usually read *The Trial* in concert with *The Castle*—which, as I have noted, is referred to in *The Zero’s* Emergency Room scene—because both portray impenetrable bureaucratic systems that are overloaded with rules and paperwork that impede any real progress for the characters involved. Kafka’s works also reflect on the inner sense of guilt that even an innocent person can feel. While I will not suggest that my interpretation can account for the infinite play of significations that can be derived from this intertextual reference, the inclusion of Huld in *The Zero* seems to point most obviously to the administrative opacity of the Documents Department, to its ineffectual reliance on paperwork, and to The Boss’ oversight of the whole operation, which seems to be based more on a personal agenda and subjective opinion than on a rigorous set of procedures. For instance, there is a scene where Remy is at the Documents Department (DD) observing a scorched document—presumably burnt during the towers’ collapse—that, coincidentally, has resulted in the shape of Australia. The employee that has processed it has deemed it necessary to forward it to the SECURE section of the DD, helpfully attaching a map of Australia and adding a note that reads: “Isn’t this uncanny? Doesn’t it look like Australia?” (Walter 2007, 177). Looking for hidden motives where there is none, the DD studies the burn patterns “[a]pplying models of randomness and linear motion probability,” thus partaking in the post-attacks “booming randomness industry” (178) that interprets partial documentation according to, as Markham explains to Remy, “[i]nvincibility and randomness patterns, assuming unreversed trajectories and nonpreferred directionality” (178-179). Unable to make any sense of it, and wary that Markham’s explanations will go on forever, Remy assents. Although at this point Remy’s ignorance is complete, he starts to suspect that despite his felt innocence, he might not be so innocent after all, which resonates with the

Levinasian notion of nonintentional/intentional consciousness, “a fear for all the violence and murder my existing might generate, in spite of its conscious and intentional innocence” (Levinas 1989, 82). It is the consciousness that one’s right to exist and one’s actions bear ethical responsibility for the destitution and the usurpation of the Other’s right to exist, a notion that also informs Butler’s *Precarious Life*.

The idea of bureaucratic opacity, together with an inner sense of guilt, is further reinforced by a reference to yet another novel that deals with the hardships imposed on citizens by bureaucratic systems, John D. Morley’s *In the Labyrinth* (1968), which some critics have argued follows in the style of Kafka’s *In the Penal Colony* (See 1986, n.p.). In a scene where Remy is called in to inspect a suspicious bag left in a subway station, he finds a book report on Morley’s novel (Walter 2007, 168). The novel is the fictionalized memoir of a Hungarian-born German businessman, Josef Pallehner, who spends seven years in a maze of eastern Czechoslovakian prisons in the wake of the Second World War due to bureaucratic inertia and his own guilty conscience. Pallehner does not admit to committing any crime, nor do his fellow prison mates; none has committed crimes against the state but they simply do not care about the state, “which to a certain kind of government is the very worst crime” (See 1986, n.p.). What is even worse, Pallehner is sentenced for something he not only did not do but cannot even begin to comprehend. According to See, the novel insists on the real and figurative prisons of life: “freedom comes only in being where you want to be and doing what you want. Why [...] are so many people of so many stripes so fanatically dedicated to withholding that freedom from those they have power over?” (Ibid.). The inclusion of Morley’s novel in *The Zero* serves, in my view, to suggest that in a state where freedom is enshrined as the paramount moral value—a value that separates “us” from “them” and that is under threat—it is paradoxically curtailed in the act of its defense.

Rieux is the doctor in Camus’ *The Plague*, who refuses to flee the locked-down town of Oran when the plague sets in; he keeps visiting patients despite the danger that this poses to himself. Over and over we hear Rieux say that his is not a tale of extraordinary heroism; it is merely the tale of a decent man doing his job and his only “certitude” lies in doing his job as he believes that it should be done. Just as his fellow neighbors, Rieux has incredible difficulty at first to even contemplate the possibility of the plague, but as the story progresses Rieux realizes that people have a great inability to comprehend the suffering of others:

Mais qu’est-ce que cent millions de morts? Quand on a fait la guerre, c’est à peine si on sait déjà ce qu’est un mort. Et puis qu’un homme mort n’a de poids que si on l’a vu mort, cent millions de cadavres semés à

travers l'histoire ne sont qu'une fumée dans l'imagination. (Camus 2007, 42)¹⁸⁰

As Rieux reflects, when one has waged war and seen too many dead, death becomes meaningless and all these dead will be just like a plume of smoke throughout history. One dead man has no significance, and a dead man is weightless unless one has actually seen him dead. Thus, Rieux reflects that maybe people could begin to understand the suffering of others only if one piled the dead where everyone could see them. This is extremely relevant in the context of the September 11 attacks, as an event that exposed the United States to a “pile” of dead bodies that—at least according to its hegemonic account of history—it had not previously experienced; not on home soil and in such a spectacular fashion. The number of deaths due to the slave system and the genocide of native peoples, although comparatively larger, has been safely insulated through a process of dis-remembering, thus permitting to think about the effects of 9/11 as an unprecedented devastation. Ta-Nehisi Coates has forcefully brought these deaths buried in history to the foreground in his 2015 volume *Between the World and Me*:

I kept thinking about how southern Manhattan had always been Ground Zero for us. They auctioned our bodies down there, in that same devastated, and rightly named, financial district. And there was once a burial ground for the auctioned there. They built a department store over part of it and then tried to erect a government building over another part. Only a community of right-thinking black people stopped them. I had not formed any of this into a coherent theory. But I did know that Bin Laden was not the first man to bring terror to that section of the city. I never forgot that. Neither should you. (Coates 2015, 86)

In this sense, the inclusion of Rieux in Walter's novel serves to remind of the dangers of amnesia, of how experiencing loss at such a large scale should serve as a reflection on the “pile of dead” that American policy—both domestic and foreign—has traditionally caused through political, commercial, and military intervention. The enormity of the “pile of dead” and its impact on citizens can also serve as a commentary on the

¹⁸⁰ “But what are a hundred million deaths? When one has served in a war, one hardly knows what a dead man is, after a while. And since a dead man has no substance unless one has actually seen him dead, a hundred million corpses broadcast through history are no more than a puff of smoke in the imagination” (translation by Stuart Gilbert in the Vintage edition of the novel, New York, 1991, p. 38).

attribution of “differential grievability” (Butler 2004), when, in contrast to the dead of 9/11, the daily trickle through the news of death by the hundreds in conflicts all over the world, or even the deaths of certain Americans (as Coates suggests), effectively diminishes their impact and significance.

The issue of death becoming visible is also made more complex by the fact that the “pile of dead” on 9/11 is largely metaphorical, given the fact that there are staggeringly few victims to be found among the ruins of the World Trade Center and given the efforts to conceal any images of the victims, both of September 11 and of the War on Terror. While I am in no way dismissing the factuality and the impact of the loss of human life on September 11, the way that this loss has been acknowledged and processed—resulting in conflicting discourses of victimization and celebrations of heroism—makes all the more interesting the reference to Camus’ Rieux and his comments on the visibility of the dead being directly related to the processes of grief. As Butler argues in *Prekarious Life*, the “abhorrence, mourning, anxiety, and fear” caused by the September 11 attacks should also “lead to a reflection on how others have suffered arbitrary violence at the hands of the US” (Butler 2006, xiv), and to consider how the differential allocation of grievability produces and maintains “certain exclusionary conceptions on who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death?” (Ibid., xiv-xv).

Thus, the inclusion of Rieux in the novel seems to bring along with it Rieux’s reflection that there are two great evils in the world: death and man’s ignorance of it. And as Rieux suggests, the worst kind of ignorance is to be unaware of one’s own ignorance. Rieux also offers a sharp contrast to Remy—Rieux being a character with high moral standards and who spends a great deal of the novel involved in philosophical quandaries about life, humanity, and his job; Remy is, in comparison, an antihero, a victim and perpetrator operating in the “grey area” of covert operations—and yet he also serves as a parallel. Especially because Rieux operates in a locked-down town that is being progressively devastated by death, while Remy operates in a city that has also been devastated by death and destruction. For Rieux the solution is to force his fellow citizens to acknowledge the inexorability of death; for Remy the solution lies in being able to process the experience in such a way that more death is not brought upon the world.

Finally, Destouches refers the reader to Céline, especially to his novel *Voyage au bout de la nuit/Journey to the End of the Night*, a semi-autobiographical work that describes the life of antihero Ferdinand Bardamu, because the latter “introduces us to the language and many of the themes that will shape Céline’s fictions” (Solomon 1992, 17). This 1932 novel begins with Bardamu as a young soldier during the First World War who, in face of the carnage and madness of war and man’s apparent enjoyment of killing, vows to survive at any price and espouses fear, cowardice and insanity as

positive values (Ibid., 20). Just by this premise, the attributed influence of *Journey to the End of the Night* on Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* becomes evident—one only needs to think of Yossarian's efforts to leave a regiment that is ruled by bureaucracy and absurdity, and where he is tormented by the constant reminder of his colleague Nately's "exploding" death (Nately is killed when another plane flies into his during a pointless mission)—and the web of connections that Walter establishes in *The Zero* and in his "Journals"—which includes Heller—is confirmed. Céline's story moves forward through the different stages of Bardamu's adulthood, from the trenches of the First World War to New York and Detroit and, finally to life as a failed doctor in Paris, and explores how he progressively abandons the bourgeoisie morality and optimism of youth and increasingly turns more cynical (Solomon 1992, 20), expressing an almost monotonous pessimism with regard to human nature, human institutions, society, and life in general. After all, Bardamu asks, "où aller dehors, je vous le demande, dès qu'on a plus en soi la somme suffisante de délire ? La vérité, c'est une agonie qui n'en finit pas. La vérité de ce monde c'est la mort. Il faut choisir, mourir ou mentir. Je n'ai jamais pu me tuer moi" (Céline 1975, 200).¹⁸¹ In *The Zero*, Remy comes close to this type of conclusion when he reflects that maybe it is best to abandon any attempt at making sense of life, and it becomes especially funny in light of his prior and failed suicide attempt:

Doesn't everyone react to the world as it presents itself? Who really knows more than the moment he's in? What do you trust? Memory? History? No, these are just stories, and whichever ones we choose to tell ourselves—the one about our marriage, the one about the Berlin Wall—there are always gaps. There must be countless men all over the country crouched in front of barbecues, just like him, wondering how their lives got to that point. (Walter 2007, 160).

What Remy's reflection underscores is that there is no single narrative that can "make sense" of life, that each person has his/her own personal stories and circumstances that bring in alternative and additional reflections; translated into the post-9/11 context, this seems to suggest that presenting the official narrative of 9/11 as the only possible explanation is untenable. I have already noted how several non-white commentators and critics pointed out how the aftermath of 9/11 is mostly a "white man's trauma" (see footnote 67), and how not all US citizens are unified in what 9/11

¹⁸¹ "And where, I ask you, can a man escape to, when he hasn't enough madness left inside him? The truth is an endless death agony. The truth is death. You have to choose: death or lies. I've never been able to kill myself" (translation by Ralph Manheim in the New Directions edition of the novel, New York, 2007, p. 173).

signifies—against the presumed “unity” that the official narrative purports to represent. As Coates writes, “looking out upon the ruins of America, my heart was cold. I had disasters all my own” (Coates 2015, 86).

Towards the end of Céline’s novel, Bardamu—who has become a doctor and is now working at a psychiatric hospital—remarks that the two most genuine realizations of human nature are illness and war: “je ne peux m’empêcher de mettre en doute qu’il existe d’autres véritables réalisations de nos profonds tempéraments que la guerre et la maladie, ces deux infinis du cauchemar” (Céline 1975, 525).¹⁸² As Sten Johnson contends, this pessimism is part of Céline’s project and it can be traced in all of his novels published between 1932 and his death in 1961, a project that aimed to “explore an alternate landscape, a project that he imagined as a ‘métro émotif’ or ‘emotional subway,’ in which raw experience is mediated by a brilliant observational mind and occasionally leavened by bleak humor” (Johnson 2007, n.p.). In all, Céline’s narrative project, his deeply cynical humor, as well as his narrative style full of ellipses and hyperboles in a vernacular narrative flow became influential to and celebrated by American counterculture authors and artists such as Henry Miller, William S. Burroughs, Kurt Vonnegut, Joseph Heller, Charles Bukowski (who considered Céline’s first novel as the “best book written in the last two thousand years” [Johnson 2007, n.p.]) and the rock band The Doors, whose song “End of the Night” (in their debut album, 1967) is said to be inspired in the novel. With no intention of artificially bridging the wide cultural gap that exists between the counterculture and the wake of 9/11, I believe that Walter’s novel inscribes itself willfully in this tradition, especially if we consider the counterculture’s anti-establishment ethos, its defense of individual freedom, and its denunciation of the American war in Vietnam. Transposed into the post-9/11 context, the influence of American counterculture fiction—as well as of the existentialist and absurdist works I referred to before—can be felt in the novel’s exploration of a man’s crux in face of a zealous war culture that has gone berserk, and that is presented as homogenous, as if no faultlines or alternative thoughts were possible.

In short, I have attempted to show in this section how the inclusion of Destouches, Huld, and Rieux in *The Zero*, as well as the veiled or explicit references to works by Vonnegut, Pynchon, O’Neill and a wide array of absurdist texts from the post-1960s, helps to conform a landscape of death and madness where the inconsistency and absurdity of human behavior are exposed not without humor and a feeling of compassion for its flawed characters. The novel is shaped by and makes meaning through the establishment of this web of intertextual references, thus making the scope

¹⁸² “I cannot refrain from doubting that there exist any genuine realizations of our deepest character except war and illness, those two infinities of nightmare...” (translation by Ralph Manheim in the New Directions edition of the novel, New York, 2007, p. 359).

of *The Zero* go beyond the usual tenets of traditional satire criticism—i.e. the novel as an invective against the Bush administration—and the prescriptions of early post-9/11 fiction studies—i.e., the concerns expressed by the novel’s reception. By setting the novel in dialogue with these earlier texts, wider and universal implications are derived, destabilizing both the reader’s understanding of the effects of satiric humor in the post-9/11 context and the expectations of post-9/11 literary criticism. By reframing earlier texts within its narrative, the text is also revealed as a dissenting stance against the normalizing and unifying discourses of war and reconstruction.

3.7. A parody of the American hardboiled detective

...it is a kind of seriously ironic parody that often enables this contradictory doubleness: the intertexts of history and fiction take on parallel status in the parodic reworking of the textual past of both the “world” and literature.

(Hutcheon 2004, 124)

In chapter 2 I have noted how parody is one of the defining elements in satiric discourse, although the terms parody and satire are usually confused as if they were equivalent. In literary terms, parody can be understood as a mocking imitation of a genre or style, or as Singer defines it, “the appropriation of the voice of another twisted to new motives” (Singer 1989, 76). Parody requires, as Hutcheon notes, that the reader detect the parodying intention at play, because it is perhaps the most intense form of intertextuality, offering “two texts within one.” As such, it is also intensely dialogical, featuring “two languages crossed with each other, two styles, two linguistic points of view—in short, two speaking subjects” (Paravisini & Yorio 1987, 182). This type of “inter-art,” “intramural” intertextuality is perhaps what distinguishes parody from satire; whereas literary parody is usually understood as purely textual in nature—its reference mostly limited to other texts—satire’s referentiality is usually understood as not limited to other fictions but as including other discursive realities that encompass the social and the moral (Matthews 1989, 38); for instance, political satire is a very good example of this. While in the previous section I have looked at the novel’s intertextuality with other works of fiction, I have also suggested that *The Zero*’s intertextuality is not limited to works of fiction and that it also includes post-9/11 political and media discourses. The way in which the connection with these discourses is established—through striking and playful parallelisms with well-known discourses by president Bush and mayor Giuliani—constitutes a parodic form of intertextuality. That being said, the following section will look at how *The Zero* carries out a parody of

genre and will argue that the novel enacts a loose parody of the detective genre, of the cop thriller, and of television cop shows.¹⁸³

As Paravisini and Yorio note in “Is It Or Isn’t It?: The Duality of Parodic Detective Fiction”(1987), in order to parody one has to know the rules of the genre, and no genre is perhaps more rule-laden than traditional detective fiction, of which the hardboiled detective is a typically American development, with its own alternative formula.¹⁸⁴ From its beginning, detective fiction has “contained within it the seed of its own metamorphosis” (Paravisini & Yorio 1987, 183), as authors are often comically aware of their adherence to formulaic patterns and this has even led to the emergence of a body of parodic detective fiction early on.¹⁸⁵ In fact, as Paravisini and Yorio argue, some contemporary works have incorporated parody “in such a way as to be often unrecognizable as parody” (Ibid., 181).¹⁸⁶ In short, parody has proven to be a useful strategy for writers of detective fiction to renew the genre—among other strategies, no doubt—and the rise in popularity of detective fiction in recent years is surely partly associated to its newfound flexibility and subversion of genre conventions. I make these observations about the existence of a body of parodic detective fiction—and about detective fiction often being parodic itself—in order to underscore that I am not claiming that *The Zero* can be considered a detective parody *per se*—especially, when such a body of work exists and often sticks to (and subverts) the well-established pattern of detective fiction. Rather, what I am suggesting is that *The Zero* incorporates

¹⁸³ Examples of cop thrillers include movies like *Heat* (1995), *We Own the Night* (2007), *L.A. Confidential* (1997), *Training Day* (2001), *Running Scared* (2006), *Pride and Glory* (2008), *U.S. Marshalls* (2008), *Dark Blue* (2002), *Seven* (1995), and *Internal Affairs* (1990), to name but the ten best-ranked cop thrillers in IMDb. It is very interesting to note that many of these works feature police officers/detectives whose moral code is put to the test when facing the “grey area” of reality. Examples of famous American cop shows include *21 Jump Street*, *24*, *Bones*, *Castle*, *CHiPs*, *The Closer*, *Cold Case*, *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, *Dexter*, *Fringe*, *Hawaii Five-O*, *JAG*, *Law & Order*, *The Mentalist*, *Miami Vice*, *Monk*, *NCIS*, *Perry Mason*, *Psych*, *Remington Steele*, *The Streets of San Francisco*, *Twin Peaks*, and *The Wire*, to name but very few of an extensive list of shows.

¹⁸⁴ It is not within the scope of this dissertation to discuss parodic detective fiction but, for instance, parodies of the hardboiled type often follow the genre in a very close way: first person narration, comments of the detective at the opening of every chapter, wise-cracking, cynical remarks, (Paravisini & Yorio 1987, 184), the description of “a dusty office in a dilapidated building,” the absence of clients, the sexy secretary “with whom the detective has a friendly, no-strings attached sexual relationship,” “the provocation of his thirst for vengeance by an act of unjustified and unexplained violence” (Ibid., 185), among other elements, and the inclusion of a wide range of characters that are often found in non-parodic examples of the genre, often leading to a sort of “humor by accumulation” (Ibid., 185).

¹⁸⁵ For instance, an early example of parodic detective fiction is Mark Twain’s “A Double Barreled Detective Story” (1902), which parodies the famous English detective Sherlock Holmes by placing him in the American West.

¹⁸⁶ This, in turn, has added a dimension to reader participation—whose function had usually been that of a “puzzle solver”—as the reader now has to determine whether the fiction s/he is reading is parodic or not (Paravisini & Yorio 1987, 181).

the parody of genre loosely—mainly through character development and the description of certain scenes—maybe because it is at the same time subverting the conventions of other type of texts, most notably early-post 9/11 fiction, and also parodying cop thrillers. In what follows I will argue that the parody lies in the way that the novel constructs Remy as a failed detective, especially of the hardboiled type, and how the novel’s plot is turned into a detective quest that is also, at the same time, a parody of a cop thriller.

I have noted before how paper, whether real or in the shape of flecks in Remy’s failing eyesight, is one of the main motifs in the novel, and how it goes hand in hand with the theme of vision and perception. Both tropes—paper and vision—help to shape *The Zero* as a detective story—albeit an unconventional one—where the main character’s quest—to find March Selios—is burdened by a failing eyesight and losses of conscience which, as the novel progresses, help turn the plot from detective investigation to an allegorical quest for knowledge. I have hinted at connections between *The Zero* and Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* and will further suggest that Remy’s quest for knowledge is akin to Oedipa Mass’ pursuit of knowledge, especially because of the deep satire that pervades it and of the way in which Pynchon approaches the theme of paranoid perception. Both Remy and Oedipa are unconventional “detectives” the quests of which turn out to reveal ugly truths about their narrative universes. In the following paragraphs I will argue how *The Zero*’s resort to the paper image is used at the novel’s opening to taunt readers into believing that this will be another post-9/11 novel focused on depicting the effects of trauma to then turn it into a parody of a detective tale.

Paper is the key element in Remy’s quest, as paper is alternatively the clue in the “detective tale,” the symbol of fragmentation, and the symptom of Remy’s condition (in his flashers and floaters). I have suggested elsewhere that the novel’s resort to paper, and especially to the image of falling paper as one of its main motifs, is especially relevant because this is one of the most revisited tropes in early post-9/11 fiction. The novel opens with such an image, thus leading on the reader’s expectations about *The Zero* as a post-9/11 novel, and then subverting all of its conventions. The image of falling paper on September 11 became iconic, featuring in many early post-9/11 works as a dominant image,¹⁸⁷ to a great extent for the obvious reason that paper was *everywhere* for days after 9/11. But criticism of early post-9/11 fiction has also interpreted the image in additional ways; while in my view the image is powerfully reminiscent of fragmentation, as of an explosion filmed in slow motion, critics have usually interpreted the image as a way of *not* talking about falling bodies: as I have argued in chapter 1, the defenselessness made evident by the falling bodies

¹⁸⁷ Walter himself wrote a poem about falling paper in October 2001, on which the opening lines of *The Zero* are based (Flinn 2014, 231).

gave way to several efforts to make them less visible. However, and despite the claims of early criticism, a closer look at the corpus of post-9/11 fiction reveals that the use of the image cannot be unanimously interpreted in this sense, as screen memory. As Melnick suggests, many authors of filmic and literary fiction have dealt with the falling motif in very poignant ways, engaging in images of falling people, falling paper, or falling ash as a way of resisting the urge to produce redemptive and uplifting narratives and have dismissed the existing taboos that structured the immediate responses to the attacks (Melnick 2009, 91).



An iconic image of 11 September 2001.

DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), typically considered the quintessential early post-9/11 novel and published a year later than *The Zero*, opens with such an image of falling paper and ash, and still, as anticipated by the title, refers both figuratively and literally to falling people, avoiding any censorship of such images. The following are some of the first lines of *Falling Man* that I believe establish how DeLillo uses paper as a first attempt to eventually narrate (rather than obscure) the falling of bodies from the towers:

It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night [...] with office paper flashing past, standard sheets with cutting edge, skimming, whipping past, otherworldly things in the morning pall. (DeLillo 2008, 3)

He watched it coming down. A shirt came down out of the high smoke, a shirt lifted and drifting in the scant light and then falling again, down toward the river. (Ibid., 4)

The world was this as well, figures in windows a thousand feet up,
dropping into free space... (Ibid.)

The ending of DeLillo's *Falling Man* brings the reader back to this opening scene, as the falling shirt of the beginning is turned into a figurative representation of a falling person: "Then he saw a shirt come down out of the sky. He walked and saw it fall, arms waving like nothing in this life" (DeLillo 2008, 246). The obvious observation here is that shirts do not wave, but people do. The same circular narrative can be observed in *The Zero*—if we choose to read the story as Remy's flashback dream—¹⁸⁸ and it is noteworthy that the novel opens with a similar figurative image: *The Zero* begins with an image of a flock of "angry and agitated" birds that turn out to be "frantic" sheets and pieces of paper (Walter 2007, 3). It is worth reproducing here the opening paragraph in full:

They burst into the sky, every bird in creation, angry and agitated, awakened by the same primary thought, erupting in a white feathered cloudburst, anxious and graceful, angling in ever-tightening circles toward the ground, drifting close enough to touch, and then close enough to see that it wasn't a flock of birds at all—it was paper. Burning scraps of paper. All the little birds were paper. Fluttering and circling and growing bigger, falling bits and frantic sheets, some smoking, corners scorched, flaring in the open air until there was nothing left but a fine black edge... and then gone, a hole and nothing but the faint memory of smoke. Behind the burning flock came a great wail and a

¹⁸⁸ The novel suggests this interpretation at the beginning of Part Three, as Remy wakes up in hospital after the eye surgery, and he wonders if life post-9/11 has not been in reality a dream. The description of that "dream" is an incisive and devastating portrayal of life in general, with some hints at specific events (for instance, the "Mission Accomplished" speech and the terror alert code implemented by the Bush administration come to mind): "A dream—that would explain the gaps, and the general incongruity of life now—the cyclic repetition of events on cable news, waves of natural disasters, scientists announcing the same discoveries over and over (Planet X, dinosaur birds, cloning, certain genetic codes), the random daily shift of national allegiances, wildly famous people who no one could recall becoming famous, the sudden emergence and disappearance of epidemics, the declaration and dissolution of governments, cycles of scandals, confession, and rehabilitation, heated elections in which losers claimed victory and races were rerun in the same sequence, events that catapulted wildly out of control, like plagues of illogic... as if some faulty math had been introduced to all the equations, corrupting computer programs and causing specious arguments to build upon themselves, and sequential skips—snippets of songs sampled before their original release, movies remade before they came out the first time, victories claimed before wars were fought, drastic fluctuations in the security markets (panic giving way to calm giving way to panic giving way to calm giving way to panic), all of it narrated by fragments of speeches over staged photo ops accompanied by color-coded warnings and yellow ribbons on trees" (Walter 2007, 263).

moan as seething black unfurled, the world inside out, birds beating against a roiling sky and in that moment everything that wasn't smoke was paper. And it was beautiful. (3)

Besides a wink to Camus' "puff of smoke in the imagination" by the mention of "the faint memory of smoke"¹⁸⁹ that is left after so much death, the description of these "frantic" sheets flaring and disintegrating can be read as a concealed reference to desperate people falling, further suggested by the "great wail and a moan" as the building collapses, thus leading on the usual interpretations of post-9/11 criticism of the image as screen memory. But as the novel progresses, this initial "conformity" to the conventions of early post-9/11 fiction will be challenged by numerous references to falling people and an incessant percolation of body parts as a result of the Office of Liberty and Recovery's obsessive effort to recover every single body fragment and every meaningless scrap of paper from the disaster scene. Body bags and refrigerated meat trucks remain useless as rescue workers keep finding only body parts but no bodies or people to rescue; Remy recalls how "he'd found a section of a woman's scalp—gray and stiff," and "a six-inch piece of a forehead and singed hairline" (Walter 2007, 12). Bodies have been pulverized to dust and Remy reflects how this smelly fine dust—that "pungent, flour of the dead" (14)—has gotten into his lungs, an idea also used by Foer in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and by Auster in *Brooklyn Follies*.¹⁹⁰ Remy knows that his colleague Durgan is "in pieces out there somewhere" (Walter 2007, 15). Thus, the opening image of falling paper in *The Zero* that seems to nod in recognition to post-9/11 trauma narratives and their aesthetic—some have argued escapist—conventions is, as Duvall aptly points out, just a "red herring" (Duvall 2013, 283). In fact, what this image announces is the fragmented narrative full of gaps and loops that will unfold, and that is probably best represented by the initial image of a flock of birds: an explosion of fragments that have to be put together again.

That the trauma story is a red herring becomes evident as soon as the third paragraph, when the opening scene—that had been reflecting on how "everything that

¹⁸⁹ Once again, I am thankful to Prof. Cristina Alsina for pointing out this parallelism that I had not noticed.

¹⁹⁰ Foer explores the anguish that families feel at not being able to bury the remains of their loved ones—which cannot be found—and having to bury empty coffins instead. The only certainty is that they have been pulverized to dust, and this is a disturbing thought. During a conversation with his mother after his father's funeral, Oskar snaps: "Dad isn't even there! [...] I don't understand why everyone pretends he's there. [...] He had cells, and now they're on rooftops, and in the river, and in the lungs of millions of people around New York, who breathe him every time they speak!" (Foer 2006, 169). In turn, Auster refers to how "the smoke of three thousand incinerated bodies would drift over toward Brooklyn and come pouring down on us in a white cloud of ashes and death" (Auster 2005, 304), in a novel that does not refer to the attacks of September 11 until the very last page.

wasn't smoke was paper. And it was beautiful" (Walter 2007, 3)—is brought to an abrupt halt by the mention of "Remy's eyes streak[ing] and flak[ing] and finally jimm[ying] open" (3). While this may suggest that the vision of falling paper can be either a dream or a scene of traumatic repetition, it could also be the result of Remy having previously closed his eyes, a biological reaction to changing light conditions that ends as soon as Remy opens his eyes again. Later, it will be revealed that Remy has vision problems which cause him to see little white streaks resembling paper in his eyes; of course, this condition can still be read as a reference to the trauma of 9/11, whereby the iconic image of falling paper repeatedly intrudes into a traumatized survivor's field of vision. However, the insistence on the factual reality of this condition—Remy even undergoes an operation where his orb is cut—somewhat detracts from a metaphorical reading. At this point, however, we know nothing about Remy's eyesight problems, and the narrative only states that Remy has sustained a gunshot wound to the head, hence the heavy impact is another probable cause for the flecks in Remy's vision (what is otherwise referred to as "seeing stars" after a heavy impact to the head). The suggestion that the wound is self-inflicted may again lead readers towards a trauma narrative approach, where Remy has attempted suicide as a consequence of the trauma of 9/11. Yet, this is also a red herring and the description of the scene (and the novel's development) will problematize any univocal identification of Remy as victim. While the suicide attempt is presumably real—there is a (suicide?) note on the table that reads "Etc." (5), and there is a later scene where Remy says "[m]aybe I should shoot myself" and Jaguar confirms that "you tried that" (310)—, this pivotal scene begins to debunk the trauma narrative and announces instead the onset of some sort of parody. Especially, I will argue, the scene will parody the generic conventions of the detective story and introduce the notion of Remy as a failed, incompetent detective that, as the novel unfolds, will gradually start to gain more insight—at least about himself—than is initially suggested or expected. Still, with regard to the post-attacks world around him, Remy will remain clueless.

The opening scene can be equated to a crime scene and the way that it is described mimics and subverts the generic conventions of TV cop shows, especially the cop show *par excellence*, *Law and Order*.¹⁹¹ Shows like *Law and Order* and *CSI* typically open with the crime scene, where the victim lies inert (*CSI* also includes the events that lead to the crime), and it is only after the crime scene has been presented to the audience that the cops arrive to inspect it. In *The Zero* a similar strategy is used, as the narrative zooms in on the crime scene where Remy lies inert; what is interesting is that the scene is inspected through the victim's eyes, Remy's:

¹⁹¹ I am indebted and deeply grateful to Matthew Armstrong for this observation, which he brought up at the "Reading Terror: Representations and Resistance" conference held at The Graduate Center (CUNY) in New York in November 2015.

Brian Remy's eyes streaked and flaked and finally jimmied open to the floor of his apartment. He was lying on his side, panning across a fuzzy tree line of carpet fiber. From this, the world focused into being one piece at a time: Boots caked in dried mud. Pizza boxes. Newspapers. A glass. And something just out of range... (3)

Remy even anticipates the "enter the police" scene that is so typical in cop shows: "If he waited long enough, a rubber-gloved hand would pick it up by the butt and drop it in a Ziploc, tagged and bagged—and him too, as long as he didn't move, a bigger bag, but the same" (4). As Remy continues to gather his bearings, a neighbor starts knocking on the door and insists that if Remy does not open up or at least answer if he is O.K., she will call the police. To which Remy replies "I am the police" (4). This is the first inversion—in which the victim becomes the police, and vice versa—that anticipates the doubling of the main character that will follow, as well as all the other subversions in the novel, where government agents become terrorists and the usual suspects are revealed as innocent.

The parody of the cop thriller genre continues as Remy (first victim, now police officer) inspects the crime scene (his own home) to try to figure out what happened. He arrives at no conclusions (especially because the suicide note is useless, citing "Etc." as a cause, which could mean it's pointless or too long to explain), and the scene ends elliptically with Remy losing conscience. These breaks in conscience—which are both gaps in the narration as well as in Remy's memory—are instrumental to the parody of the detective story, not only because throughout the novel Remy is forced to become the detective of his own life—reminiscent of the failed detective in Auster's *City of Glass* (1985)—, trying to figure out what he does as an undercover agent, but also because his genuine asking for clarification is taken by everyone else as proof of his "hardboiled" sense of irony, thus reinforcing the parody of the classic hardboiled detective in American crime fiction (Duvall 2013, 284). As Hoggart notes, the hardboiled detective—a genre type originated in the 1920s by Carroll John Daly's Terry Mack and Race Williams, and both epitomized and popularized by Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade and Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe—not only solves mysteries like other detectives but confronts violence on such a regular basis that he is usually the victim of burnout and displays a cynical, unsentimental, "tough" attitude towards his own emotions (Hoggart 1957, 58). The hardboiled detective also lives in a grey area of morality—not unlike the American hero myth explored in chapter 1—, and

might on occasion be seen as an antihero.¹⁹² In the case of Remy, although he does live in that grey area of morality, he comes off as the hardboiled type because, with absolutely no information about the case that he is supposed to be leading, nor any idea about what his role in the agency is, he usually remains silent—in order not to display his ignorance—or makes obvious questions that everybody else interprets as cynical off-comments.

From here onwards, several conventions of the detective genre and the television cop show are parodied; for instance, the relationship between Markham and Remy can be considered a typical “good cop-bad cop” dynamic, and in fact Markham is aware of the cliché and believes that Remy is performing it to their advantage. In a scene where they are extorting a Middle Eastern restaurant-owner, Markham exclaims, chuckling to himself: “‘Damn you’re good,’ [...] ‘When you turn on that silent thing... it’s really chilling. Mute cop, bad cop, huh?’” (115). Of course, Remy’s “act” as the bad cop is purely accidental, the result of his utter ignorance of what he is supposed to say or do.

The parody of the television cop show comes full circle when Remy’s own actions become the subject of a detective show on television that claims to be “*ripped from the headlines*” (283; emphasis in the original). Remy watches in horror as he realizes that the “secret” activities of his unit are apparently not so secret—presumably it is Guterak who has informed on them, as he has been “recording” Remy’s activities as per Remy’s request—and become the script of a show that features “a retired cop named Bruce Denny, who’d recently left the force because of back problems” (283). Here it is confirmed that the novel’s first scene—where Remy is lying on the floor as a victim—is univocally parodic, and that self-awareness is an essential quality of parody. As the narrator reflects, in Guterak’s cop show

two regular detectives were crouched over the body. Remy knew the ritual: the body always came first, and then the detectives’ job was to go to locations around the city and interview people quickly, asking one or two questions before moving on to the next interview, to make sure they caught the killer before the trial began in the second half of the show. (283)

Finally, the greatest parody of all is facilitated by Remy’s unit, that desires to play the covert-ops game—and resorts to all of its clichés—while being wholly unprepared for it. As it turns out, they can find no firm evidence to accuse the Middle Eastern suspects they had started following on pretty dim evidence, and so they proceed to

¹⁹² An example of the hardboiled detective tradition in recent TV fiction is, for instance, Jimmy McNulty in HBO’s *The Wire* (Chernin 2012, 43).

stage a “performance” aimed at increasing people’s perception of danger, because, as agent Dave says,

we think it’s counterproductive for the public to view our enemies as a bunch of harmless nuts, lunatics with shoe bombs, ineffectual zealots. In other words, we can’t afford to capture a band of unarmed cabdrivers and motel operators [...] an enemy without weapons is a dog without teeth. So we are not to move until the enemy has an incendiary device.
(274)

The framing of the terrorists in the last scene turns out to be just that, a performance—albeit with lethal collateral damage—aimed at reassuring the population that the intelligence agencies are doing their job—catching dangerous terrorists—and, at the same time, keeping them permanently on edge, even if that means they have to produce some corpses themselves first. The novel further suggests that this might have been the aim of The Boss from the start, playing the agencies against each other in order to obtain a heightened level of threat perception that may justify enacting aggressive and paralegal policies. Thus, the parody of the police/detective genre comes full circle, as there is surely nothing more parodic than creating victims in order to justify the need for launching a police operation.

As Rzepka and Horseley note, “to parody a form isn’t just to make its formal qualities highly visible; it is, generally speaking, to juxtapose conventional elements of style, structure and characterisation with the way in which the text creates meaning” (Rzepka & Horseley 2010, 572). Thus, what I suggest is that the parody that takes place in *The Zero* is yet another way of casting light on the constructedness of our responses when these are highly mediated by surrounding discourses, but in such a way that is, as Rose aptly points out, “ambivalently critical and sympathetic towards its target” (Rose 1979, 34). Parody is especially dialogic, creating a “a new bond between writer and reader as two who are ‘in the know’” (Paravisini & Yorio 1987,183) and are also part of that laughter.

3.8. Away from trauma and into paranoia

As I have argued previously, most early readings of the novel tended to interpret Remy’s condition both literally and metaphorically, as a representation of the post-9/11 United States writ large. Both these interpretations have usually explained Remy’s troubled psychological condition and odd behavior as the result of severe trauma, and argue that the narrative seeks to mimic Remy’s—and by extension, the nation’s

—“physical, political, and emotional condition in the aftermath of the attacks—which is to have been left in fragments” (Flinn 2014, 221). While I do concur with reading Remy at these two levels, and I believe Flinn’s argument about fragmentation is illustrative and relevant, I also believe that the novel’s satirical frame calls for an additional approach that exceeds that of trauma studies. Neglecting such a reading is, in my view, to miss the possibilities that the tragicomic laughter of satire can offer.

As Bakhtin writes in *Rabelais and His World*, “madness makes men look at the world with different eyes, not dimmed by ‘normal,’ that is by commonplace ideas and judgments. In folk grotesque, madness is a gay parody of official reason, of the narrow seriousness of official ‘truth.’ It is a ‘festive’ madness” (Bakhtin 1968, 39). As I will later argue, this type of “mad” character is less apt to put forward established “truths” but is, rather, repeatedly shown in the process of searching after truth in a way that understands that these truths are contingent, open-ended, and ambivalent. As noted by Bakhtin in his observations on menippean satire, the presence of unusual psychic states like double or split personality in satire has both a formal and a generic significance. On the one hand, these states make monologic discourse impossible, as the “epic” wholeness of the character in question is destroyed; on the other, the unfinalizability—to use Bakhtinian terminology—that these states make evident—the non-coincidence of the self with itself, the fact that a person/character is never fully revealed—bring to the foreground an internally dialogic relationship to one’s own self. It is also worth keeping in mind that the presence of unusual psychic states is a common feature of the Southern Grotesque—as noted by reference to Spiegel (1972) in chapter 2—as an instance of the “abnormality” that is characteristically featured in the satiric grotesque—in many cases portrayed as physical deformity—and that serves the function of breaking into the perceived “normality” of the society described in these works.

There are further implications to be derived from the novel’s featuring of an unusual psychic state, besides constructing the novel as a satiric grotesque. While from the perspective of trauma studies the novel offers an accurate portrayal of a traumatized individual, whose symptoms may include, as Schwarz argues, a dissociative identity disorder, Remy’s psychic condition can also be explored from the perspective of disorders like paranoia or schizophrenia. Just as trauma studies has proven to be an exciting tool for the exploration of issues related to language, narration, and memory, so have the notions of schizophrenia and paranoia provided interesting theoretical frameworks of analysis; for instance, those put forward by

Jameson, Lacan or Deleuze and Guattari.¹⁹³ Furthermore, these notions have provided exciting pieces of fiction, and I am referring—in particular and for obvious reasons—to the long tradition of paranoid fiction in the United States, most notably—but not exclusively—that produced in the post-sixties with works such as Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*, Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five*, and Thomas Pynchon’s almost entire oeuvre. Pynchon’s fiction, in particular, is a very good example of how paranoia can be understood as a structure of thought, as a powerful way of seeing through hegemonic discourse. The paranoid belief in the falsity of appearances, the “Puritan reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible” (Pynchon 1973, 188) doubles, so to speak, the narrative: there is a story on the surface, and then there is the story we believe to be true. In a way, we can understand this paranoid structure of thought, with its double narrative, as akin to the notion of “double-voicedness” that Bakhtin marks as an essential quality of carnivalized discourse and satire: discourse that is never monologic, hermetic, closed. Therefore, I will argue that it is in line and in dialogue with this tradition of American paranoid fiction—as well as with the works of Kafka, Céline, and Camus that I have noted above—, that *The Zero* puts forward a Pynchonesque sort of paranoid perception—the constant suspicion that something else is going on—as a valid and necessary way of seeing and thinking about the aftermath of 9/11 and the pervasive discourse of economic progress, war and retaliation.

It might be useful then, to elaborate briefly on the notion of cultural paranoia. As Bersani argues in “Pynchon, Paranoia, and Literature” (1989), the term “paranoia” has “an extraordinarily complex medical, psychiatric, and psychoanalytic history” (Bersani 1989, 99) that exceeds the apparent straightforwardness of its etymology, which refers to a distracted or deranged mind. While I will not delve into the clinical intricacies of the concept, it is interesting to note how some of these clinical observations serve to enlarge our understanding of what cultural paranoia can be. For instance, in his extensive writing on paranoia, Freud suggests that patients can overcome paranoia only through a “strenuous interpretative effort” (Bersani 1989, 99); that is, an effort of interpretation that can rewrite catastrophe as apotheosis (Ibid.), that can reformulate existing adverse conditions into a triumphant scenario. Note how the “cure” proposed by Freud—which lies in a successful reformulation or interpretation of pre-existing conditions—is, to a large extent, not too different from what the disorder is usually understood to be: a delusional and alternative interpretation of the way things are. This is one of the two understandings of paranoia that I will argue can be applied to *The*

¹⁹³ See also *Latent Destinies: Cultural Paranoia and Contemporary US Narrative* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000) for an introduction to the theme of cultural paranoia in American Studies. O’Donnell argues that in American culture there is a proliferation of works that underscore a sense of conspiracy and uncertainty, and undertakes the analysis of a number of films and novels in order to understand paranoia as “the symptomatic condition of postmodernity” (O’Donnell 2000, 5), rather than as an individual pathological disorder.

Zero's characters—especially if we think about The Boss, Markham, and Guterak—whose “strenuous interpretative effort” leads them to rewrite the catastrophe of 9/11 as a tale of heroic might.

For his consideration of paranoia as a cultural condition, Bersani turns to an early text from the 1960s by Richard Hofstadter (“The Paranoid Style in American Politics”), where paranoia is analyzed as a social phenomenon—rather than as a mental disorder—, as a cultural disorder that reflects the paranoid tendencies of ordinary people. Hofstadter argues that these tendencies are no longer restricted exclusively to clinical cases and finds many examples of this type of paranoia throughout the history of the United States. In a text published in 2000, O’Donnell also makes the case for paranoia as a social phenomenon and further argues that paranoia can be considered “the symptomatic condition of postmodernity” (O’Donnell 2000, 5). From this cultural rather than clinical view, Hofstadter characterizes social paranoia as a “belief in the existence of a vast, insidious, preternaturally effective international conspirational network designed to perpetrate acts of the most fiendish character” (Hofstadter 1964, 14).¹⁹⁴ This is what popular speech tends to identify as paranoia: a fear of persecution and a conspirational awareness, although the medical literature shows that this is only one aspect of paranoia, which also includes delusions of grandeur and schizophrenic dissociation, among other disorders.

As noted above, Pynchon is perhaps the most prolific writer of cultural paranoia. But, in Pynchon’s fiction, paranoia is cast in a positive light, and it refers essentially to the “reflex of seeing other orders behind the visible” (Pynchon 1973, 219), a structure of thought that can see the interconnectedness of things that are, at least visibly, not connected. As Bersani notes, in Pynchon’s texts all the paranoid thinking is probably justified, something that Pynchon achieves by featuring narrators that tend to validate

¹⁹⁴ Hofstadter’s claim was very pertinent at the time, but nowadays it seems like an almost obvious statement of fact, as conspiracy theories are no longer dismissed as wild and farfetched claims but are openly discussed in the mainstream media, and as this type of thinking has even become a style of doing politics. The most recent example of this is, for instance, the Trump administration’s claim about a conspirational accord between adverse news media (charged by Trump with publishing “fake news”), president Obama, and intelligence agencies to discredit him. For the ordinary citizen, it is not farfetched to believe in the existence of a wide net of conspirational accords between the Trump administration and Russian agents; in fact, these fears are legitimated by two separate investigations by Congress and the Senate, and a third by the FBI.

As regards 9/11, there is a vast body of conspiracy theories; some have been swiftly contested while others are still very popular, among them the idea that the government let the attacks happen, that it covered up the controlled demolition of the World Trade Center buildings, or that the Rothschild family is on a mission of Zionist world domination—fomenting wars around the world—and was responsible for 9/11. For explorations of conspirational paranoia in fiction and culture, see Samuel Chase Coale, *Paradigms of Paranoia: The Culture of Conspiracy in Contemporary American Fiction* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2005) and Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2000).

the characters' worst paranoid fears and, therefore, we could argue that paranoid thinking is not paranoid at all (Bersani 1989, 100). Furthermore, Pynchon tends to elaborate fictional plots that are of great verisimilitude,¹⁹⁵ and reading these fictional plots in light of contemporary events readers can easily relate to the characters' paranoia and come to think that not even the wildest paranoid imagination could come up with the incredible but possibly true stories that the novels allude to. This does not mean that Pynchon is interested in establishing a referential relation between facts and fiction and thus vindicate his characters' suspicions and plots; rather, as Bersani argues, Pynchon is more interested "in universalizing and, in a sense, depathologizing the paranoid structure of thought" (Ibid.). In establishing the verisimilitude of paranoid suspicions and plots, in making clear that these are not implausible, Pynchon puts forward paranoid thought as a valid way of seeing.

The same strategy, I argue, is used by Walter in *The Zero*: The dissociation between Remy and the society that surrounds him is further reinforced by Remy's own disjointedness, where he is both victim and perpetrator and where he struggles to discern fact from fiction from delusion and to keep track of all the apparently unconnected plots that, ultimately, either fit or have to be dismissed. On the one hand, this type of paranoid condition enables Remy to have a gradually increased perception, the suspicion that there is a "double," the acts of which need to be known and understood. On the other, the acts described in the novel, while strictly fictional, bear a close resemblance to events and news in the post-9/11 context, and the verisimilitude of Remy's worst fears elicits an uncanny laughter: if the events described are so absurd and terrifying and yet entirely possible, it begs the question of what is going on in the world. Just as in Pynchon's novels, *The Zero* is redolent with references to actual facts; for instance, there are veiled references to news articles about FBI operations on Muslims after the passing of the Patriot Act, and about the Weapons of Mass Destruction affair, among many others, all disguised under comic names and absurd plot descriptions. And, just as in Pynchon, this referentiality is not to be taken in the strict sense, as that would turn the text into mere denunciation or self-explication. On the contrary, if we analyze the mimetic gesture from a Pynchonesque perspective, what this conflation of fact and fiction achieves is the destabilization of readerly

¹⁹⁵ According to Neale (1990), verisimilitude operates along two lines: cultural and generic verisimilitude. Cultural verisimilitude has to do with the context, with the codes and conventions with which certain narratives construct fictional worlds that are, in general terms, in accord with culturally shared notions of what constitutes the real world. Generic verisimilitude refers to what is plausible or expected within the conventions of a given genre. In some genres generic verisimilitude may take precedence over cultural verisimilitude (for instance, in fantasy or science fiction), while in others they may coexist. In any case, as Lubomir Doležel argues in *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds* (1998), "[f]ictional worlds are not constrained by requirements of verisimilitude, truthfulness, or plausibility" (Doležel 1998, 19); that is to say, they are not limited by verisimilitude to the real world.

assumptions: if the plots of fiction are so paranoid yet so similar to reality, what does that say about reality and about us? There is no joy in Remy's rising awareness—in fact, Remy resists the process increasingly as the novel progresses—, but it is a quest from which there is no way back. And this, I have been arguing, is the function of reference in satire: it is not to lead the reader into the direction of a strict referentiality, but to awake in the reader a mode of thinking that questions the assumptions that are otherwise unproblematically held.

The paranoid reflex of seeking “other orders behind the visible” is also the discovery “that everything is connected” (Pynchon 1973, 820) and, as Bersani points out, what is important here is Pynchon's choice of the term “discovery” rather than “suspicion”: the paranoid knows, intuitively, that there is an invisible, conspiratorial interconnectedness. While this may be a scary thought, Pynchon's fiction suggests that the contrary—an “anti-paranoia,” a life “where nothing is connected to anything” (Pynchon 1973, 506)—is “a condition not many of us can bear for long” (Ibid., 103), to escape from paranoia is “to escape from the movement that is life” (Ibid., 103), to fall into an agnostic feeling of absurdity where chaos reigns and no sense can be made, the end universe as an open system, the possibility of an “Absolute Zero” (Ibid., 3) Thus, as Bersani suggests, paranoia is the impulse against an ontological anxiety, the knowledge that “[i]f they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don't have to worry about answers” (Ibid., 251).

3.9. Remy's grotesque, dual nature

Remy's paranoid condition is made more acute by his doubling between “good” Remy (the victim, the cop, the painfully incompetent father) and “evil” Remy (the victimizer, the ruthless undercover agent, the fake boyfriend), as this doubling—akin to a dissociative identity disorder—makes him increasingly suspicious that there must be “other orders behind the visible.” As a failed detective-narrator that seeks to reassemble a narrative both of the events and of himself, Remy's reservations about his involvement in questionable acts—and his inability to control his “double,” with whom he attempts to communicate through notes they leave for one another—eventually lead to a desire to obliterate himself from the action through heavy drinking (he is totally drunk and lying on the floor in the scene where the bomb plot is planned), through prescription drugs (Remy keeps popping pills while surveilling a woman

named Lisa Herote,¹⁹⁶ hoping that “this hallucination would dissolve” [Walter 2007, 197]) and, in the final scene, through the refusal to open his eyes, a reaction which has been anticipated in other points of the novel.

The conjoining of self and anti-self, which has a long tradition in the grotesque (Harpham 1976, 466), also enables Walter to represent the “conflation of hero and victim” (Walter 2007, “Conversation,” 6) that was experienced in the wake of 9/11: as Walter notes, “where some saw victims, other saw heroes” (Ibid., 3), because although we all witnessed the same thing, we didn’t all see the same thing. This conflation is, according to Walter, the result of a “perverse desire to create a triumphant myth out of pure tragedy” (Ibid., 6), a desire to quickly overwrite the display of US vulnerability with a show of might, resolve, and force, as has been argued in chapter 1. And, in a way, this is reminiscent of the interpretive¹⁹⁷ strategies that Freud mentions in his writings on paranoia, which refer to the paranoid’s effort to rewrite catastrophe as triumph: in this case, the effort results in a grotesque fusion of seemingly incompatible categories, where passive victimhood and assertive heroism overlap, and where “the hero” transmogrifies into the torturer, thus undermining the idea of heroism that post-9/11 discourse is redolent with, and further complicating critical approximations.

It is also interesting to note Walter’s willingness to acknowledge the individual citizen’s participation in this conflation that creates conditions that generate pain, especially as regards the response to the attacks at home and abroad: how the acquiescence to the nationalist discourse of aggression and retaliation—and the willingness to get back to the pre-attacks functioning the consumer economy—enables the government to engage in war. It is this acknowledgment of being both victim and agent—what, in another context, the editors of the anthology *Winning Hearts and Minds: War Poems by Vietnam Veterans* (1972) have called being “agent-victims of their

¹⁹⁶ Lisa Herote is a wealthy woman from Virginia with whom Bishir Maidan had an affair before starting his relationship with March Selios, and it is suggested that Lisa Herote was “used to paying for Bishir” (Walter 2007, 198). Remy obtains her name from Assan, after torturing him.

Madame Herote is also a character in Céline’s *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, a woman who owns a small lingerie shop in the rich end of Paris and who makes a fortune during the First World War (when every other shop is failing) by establishing a dubious “salon” in her back-shop, where her upscale customers can buy books and spend their time in the company of women. Madame Herote’s entrepreneurial vision, which consists of “intentions simples, rapaces, pieusement commerciales” (Céline 1975, 79), is what allows her to thrive and get rich in the midst of a war situation, as she levies a tax on every sentimental transaction (“parce qu’elle prélevait sa dîme sur les ventes en sentiments” [Ibid., 1980]). Thus, the choice of the name Herote in *The Zero* serves to underscore the “transactional” relationship between Bishir and Lisa, and how people can profit from otherwise unfavorable situations.

¹⁹⁷ I use the term “interpretive” here when I have previously used the term “interpretative.” The latter is used by Bersani, and I have used it when quoting his text; the former is used by Freud, and since this paragraph refers to Freud, I turn to “interpretive.”

own atrocities" (Rottman, Barry & Paquet 1972, v)¹⁹⁸—that enables a reflection on the causes and effects of the attacks. Rather than a simple attribution of blame to the other party, where one would simply be a victim, and which was the government's official stance, the novel suggests that what is lacking is a reflection on the possibility of one's own cooperation in furthering violence. In short, what the novel tackles is the failure "to debate the response honestly" (Walter 2007, "Conversation," 6).

The idea of being both agent and victim is what the novel articulates at a formal level through the doubling of Remy as both survivor police officer and undercover agent, effectively turning him into a grotesque figure, as Flinn contends. As I have explored in chapter 2, the grotesque can be understood as the result of sticking together dissimilar fragments, categories that usually preclude each other (agent-victim), and that are to coexist as a unit, with the end result of an evident misfit (Flinn 2014, 222). And this misfit inevitably causes a feeling of uncanniness, a feeling of estrangement within a recognizable reality—as argued by Ruskin, Kayser, and Bakhtin—which is also replicated in the grotesque's hesitation between the comic and the tragic. Even before these theorists, Friedrich Schlegel already referred to the "terrifying aspect of humor" and "the horrifying aspect of comedy" implicit in the grotesque (*Conversation on Poetry*, 1804). Thus, the grotesque is primarily concerned with the distortion and transgression of boundaries, both at the formal level and as a matter of content, where physical, psychological, ontological or any other sort of boundary is breached. The transgression, however, is not always clearly identified or denounced as what it really is, but coexists within the normal order of things, and it is the resulting discrepancy that gives rise to the feeling of uncanniness and the absurd. Grotesque characters tend to invoke both empathy and disgust and, regardless of their grotesque nature, usually have "an inner coherence, if not always a coherence to their social framework" (O'Connor 1960, n.p.). A very clear illustration of this is Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915), where Gregor Samsa, despite being transformed into a giant insect, continues to inhabit the family home; Samsa's transformation seems to be the least of his problems at first, as he seems more concerned about his burdensome parents and his dreary life as a traveling salesman. Kafka's novel is also a good example of one of the usual strategies of the grotesque: the resort to hyperbole (or exaggeration). As Bakhtin notes, the function of hyperbole is never to create a mere caricature or to elicit rejection; rather, exaggeration has a "positive, assertive character" (Bakhtin 1968, 19) which is to remove the subject under consideration from a

¹⁹⁸ It is worth reading the editors' argument in full: "Previous war poets have traditionally placed the blame on others. What distinguishes the voices in this volume is their progression toward an active identification of themselves as agents of pain and war—as 'agent-victims' of their own atrocities. This recognition came quickly to some and haltingly to others, but it always came with pain and the conviction that there is no return to innocence" (Rottman, Barry & Paquet 1972, v).

state of “untouchableness” and thus make it accessible. In other words, and as Ritter (2010) notes, hyperbole can serve different functions within a satiric, grotesque, or parodic text: “moving through impossibility towards possibility, asserting a lie on the side of truth(s), and re-orienting one’s perspective through disorientation” (Ritter 2010, n.p.). Thus, hyperbole, together with the other “four master tropes—metaphor, metonymy, irony, and synecdoche—” has the main function of extending and expanding meaning (Ibid., 4).

In *The Zero*’s grotesque several of these strategies are employed. Although the hyperbole is not used in the bodily sense that Bakhtin illustrates with Rabelais, the discursive world of *The Zero* is blown out of proportion into the absurd, and Remy’s subversion of the categories of law enforcer and terrorist anticipate a world upside down. Furthermore, the fact that he is disabled by a failing eyesight and a confused psychic state also falls in line with a usual trope of grotesque fiction, that of the disabled, mentally deranged, or crippled character.¹⁹⁹ Haar notes how in the fiction of the Southern Grotesque there are many such figures, especially the mentally impaired or deranged (Haar 1983, 142); examples of such disabled characters, whether physically or mentally, are Benjy Compson in Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and Donald Mahon in *Soldiers’ Pay* (1926); a wide range of characters in Flannery O’Connor’s stories like Rufus in “The Lame Shall Enter First” (1965), Hulga in “Good Country People” (1955), and Singleton in “The Partridge Festival” (1961); or John Singer in Carson McCullers’ *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), to name but a few. These disabled or deranged characters usually serve the purpose of insidiously breaking into a façade of normality or civility in order to inform their society of some underlying, disagreeable truth about itself, and how said society’s willful ignorance and complacency cannot be justified (Spiegel 1972, 431).

In *The Zero*, and as argued previously, the normal order has already been disrupted by the attacks, and it is with the backdrop of the official efforts to put it back together that Remy’s grotesque figure serves as a reminder of some disagreeable truth. Remy’s attempt to become whole again, to find a coherent, completed “meaning” for his actions, is supported by the other characters who are also trying to get their fragments back together and to recover the prelapsarian narrative of wholeness that was shattered to pieces by the attack (Flinn 2014, 224). As Flinn argues, in order to compensate for the loss sustained as a consequence of the attacks, characters in *The Zero* end up creating “counterfeit synecdoches”—parts that stand for a whole—that aim to recreate “what is knowable, acceptable, containable,” revealing their inability to truly acknowledge loss (Butler 2004)—the loss of loved ones, of security, of a mythic

¹⁹⁹ For a detailed analysis of how the figures of the grotesque are usually crippled, deformed, physically or mentally disabled—either in a literal or figurative sense—, see Peter Hayes, *The Limping Hero* (New York: New York UP, 1971).

idea of the nation—and which, ultimately, shields them away from any responsibility or sense of truth (Flinn 2014, 224).

3.10. Counterfeiting wholeness

An instance of “counterfeit synecdoche” is the commercialization of the traumatic experience by Remy’s colleague Guterak, which can be read as an attempt to bury (and wish away) his symptoms of traumatic shock. As he tells Remy, “[b]et your ass I’ll sell my experiences. I sure as hell don’t want ‘em anymore” (Walter 2007, 150). While at the beginning of the novel Guterak has incredible difficulty in narrating the event, by mid-novel his wife complains that he will just not shut up about it. But this does not mean that Guterak is overcoming the trauma and beginning a process of healing—as he admits, “I don’t want it to get better” (Walter 2007, 155)—; rather, Guterak has realized that there are commercial possibilities in narrating his experience. As he later tells Remy, his agent has warned him that “every time I open my fuggin’ mouth I give away what we could be getting paid for” (154) and so, in order not to compromise future profit, Guterak reverts to not talking publicly about his experience of the attacks. His optimistic turning to a commercial cycle of opportunity—where the narration of the experience goes from “inspirational stories, kids and animals,” to “backdrop stories,” “thrillers,” and then, finally, to “the big money” that can be made at anniversaries, which, as the agent says, deal on nostalgia (150)—in fact hides that Guterak’s process of grieving the losses and making sense of the experience is far from over. As Guterak reflects, “I still feel like I have no idea what even happened. No matter how many times I tell the story, it still makes no sense to me” (85). It becomes increasingly clear by Guterak’s sporadic outbursts that he shares Remy’s concerns about the speed of the reconstruction, and often wonders how unusual it is “that we don’t talk about this shit. Sometimes I think it’s crazy that we aren’t standing up and yelling about it” (154). What makes Guterak especially upset is the pace at which the cleanup of The Zero is taking place—i.e. the speed with which the process of grieving is finalized—, and would like to tell the authorities to “[I]eave the shit. Everything. The piles and mounds. What’s the fuggin’ rush? Let me and the smokers spend *the rest of our lives* going through it one piece at a time if we want” (154; emphasis added). In fact, Guterak has the feeling that people who “watched the whole thing on CNN” (85) have a more coherent understanding of the situation. Being too close to the center of tragedy—perhaps the same idea conveyed by Foer’s title *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*—makes the experience incredibly difficult to process and comprehend.

The notion of a televised narrative as a substitute for the difficult process of making meaning (and thus becoming “whole” again) is replicated in another counterfeit synecdoche, the “staging” of grief by Remy’s girlfriend, April, who reluctantly accepts

to participate in a reality show called *From the Ashes*. Her brother Gus—who, his father had admitted not without shame, was in “Entertainment” and lived in Los Angeles (124)—is presumably responsible for a television crew landing in April’s apartment, with blinding lights, audio equipment, and cameras. As they sit face to face, Gus tells April how sorry he is for not having been supportive of her after the attacks, or even in later months, because he “just... couldn’t face it” (206). April’s participation in Gus’ televised apology is a counterfeit synecdoche on several levels; first of all because it overlooks the fact that Gus would still be negligent of April if it were not for the show—and thus it does not have the healing power of a sincere apology—and, second and worst, the apology is repeatedly performed for several takes at the producer’s request, because “[t]he realer the better” (207). April cannot begin to fathom what she is supposed to say to Gus, and the producer suggests “say something like, ‘That’s okay, nothing you could’ve done would’ve brought March and Derek back, anyway’” (206). April upsets the producer by saying “I don’t think I can say that” (206), and as a result the producer suggests that the two of them say goodbye “and we’ll take care of it in editing” (207). “Just say goodbye, whatever you feel like saying... that you love him, whatever... that it’s just the two of you now, you know... talk about your grief... and pretend we aren’t here” (207). Thus, April and Gus’ awkward relationship will be turned into a recognizable story of two loving and grieving siblings who have lost a sister in the attacks, fulfilling the show’s aim of “[t]aking these stories of tragedy and letting people inside” (207) in a way that is comprehensible, knowable, expected. In other words, scripted—despite the show’s claim to reality. Furthermore, and as Flinn suggests, the attempt to stage April’s grief reveals that private feeling is perceived as inadequate and thus it is “flipped into a counterfeit synecdoche for a generalized, vicarious, and thus artificial sense of loss commercialized into a culturally narcissistic sentimentality to be broadcast and therefore commodified by television” (Flinn 2014, 225).²⁰⁰

Ultimately, these synecdochic performances seek to demonstrate “the grandeur of our sorrow at our loss” (Flinn 2014, 224) and they end up effectively hindering critical reflection—a movement that, already in September 2001, Arundhati Roy denounced in the United States’ initial response to the attacks.²⁰¹ What this reaction also exposes is

²⁰⁰ Other instances of “counterfeit synecdoche” include the performance of grief by Remy’s son, Edgar, and the government’s staging of a terrorist crackdown that may keep both the perception of threat and the sense of the need for control high. I analyze these two scenes in the section “Carnival scenes.”

²⁰¹ According to Roy, the US reaction sought to effectively “usurp the whole world’s sorrow” (Roy 2001, n.p.) by refusing to look at the probable causes and circumstances that may have led to the attacks, an argument similarly made by Susan Sontag (2001) and Judith Butler (2004). Trying to understand the causes was somehow ascribed, as Butler decried, to a sort of moral relativism, and the way in which this immense sorrow was processed turned the grief of September 11 into a national melancholia that delivered extremely violent results.

the existence of a collectively-sustained fictive narrative that Jaguar dissects, as usual, with laser-sharp precision:

You're always convincing yourselves that the world isn't what it is, that no one's reality matters except your own. That's why you make such poor victims. You can't truly know suffering if you know nothing about rage. And you can't feel genuine rage if you won't acknowledge loss.

That's what happens when a nation becomes a public relations firm. You forget the truth. Everything is the Alamo.²⁰² You claim victory in every loss, life in every death. Declare war when there is no war, and when you are at war, pretend you aren't. The rest of the world wails and vows revenge and buries its dead and you turn on the television. Go to the cinema.

[...] Entertainment is the singular thing you produce now. And it is just another propaganda, the most insidious, greatest propaganda ever devised, and this is your only export now—your coffee and tobacco, your gunpowder and your wheat. And while people elsewhere die questioning the propaganda of tyrants and royals, you crave yours. You demand the propaganda of distraction and triviality, and it has become your religion, your national faith. In this faith you are grave and backward fundamentalists, not so different from the grave and backward fundamentalists you presume to battle. If they are barbarians knocking at the gates with stories of beautiful virgins in the afterlife, then aren't you barbarians too, wrapping the world in cables full of happy-ever-after stories of fleshy blondes and animated fish and talking cars? (Walter 2007, 222-223)

This is the prelapsarian world that the characters are desperately seeking to reconstruct, and the mention of the Alamo is relevant as it exemplifies how defeat can be rewritten as a heroic story of sacrifice. The inability to acknowledge and grieve loss and defeat as what they are, replacing them instead with counterfeit synecdoches that

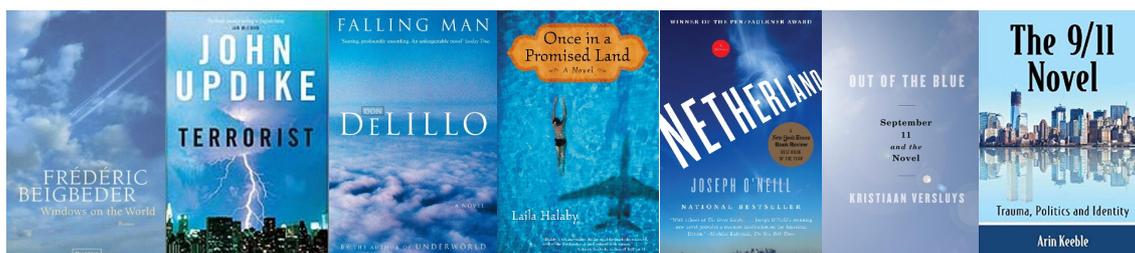
²⁰² The Battle of the Alamo was part of the Texas Revolution of 1835-1836, and it is usually hailed as a heroic effort on the part of the Texans involved because they were seriously outnumbered by the Mexican forces 9-1 and almost all the Texans defenders died in the siege. The defeat of the Texans has become mythologized in popular culture by several art works, books, and fictitious newspapers reports, and at least twenty-eight movies have been made about it from 1911 to 2005. Among the latter, I would highlight the 1960 production *The Alamo*, starring John Wayne as Davy Crockett, the TV production *The Alamo: Thirteen Days to Glory* (1987), with Alec Baldwin as Col. William Travis, and the 2004 blockbuster *The Alamo*, with a commended performance by Billy Bob Thornton as Davy Crockett.

may give a reassuring feeling of self-worth, is, if I may argue, the main theme of the novel. As Guterak's agent presciently suggests, the nation is invested in a nostalgic effort to recover what was (presumably) shattered by the attacks, a feeling of security and inviolability, an Arcadia where the United States is immune to the vulnerability and death that otherwise plagues the rest of the world. In Butler's words, it is the opposition to the notion of relational vulnerability as the basis of community—"our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure" (Butler 2006, 20)—and the refusal to undergo the "transformative effect of loss" (Ibid., 21), that gives way to "a fantasy of mastery (an institutional fantasy of mastery) [that] can fuel the instruments of war" (Ibid., 29). Indeed, president Bush clearly articulated this rapid transition in his address to Congress on 20 September 2001: "Our grief has turned to anger, and anger to resolution" (Bush 2001, "Address to a Joint Session," n.p.). Thus, I suggest that the novel's satirical portrayal of the artificial ways in which citizens and institutions attempt to reconstitute "a fantasy that the world formerly was orderly" (Butler 2006, 28)—how the government retaliates through profit and fantasies of control, how citizens rely on televised narratives to get everything back to the way it was—serves to bring to the foreground that war is a melancholic acting out—never more so than in this novel, where government agents are constantly "performing," if the pun is allowed. The novel seems to replicate, then, Butler's question of "what, politically, might be made of grief besides a cry for war" (Ibid., xii), and to state the importance of apprehending that dispossession is a fundamental part of who we are (Ibid., 24).

3.11. Undoing the Other through carnivalesque subversion

The portrayal of Remy as a grotesque figure—that cannot be defined in black-and-white terms—paves the way for a world of carnivalesque inversions in which law enforcers become terrorists and presumed terrorists are shown as innocent victims framed into a government plot. In doing so, the novel turns its attention to the figure of the terrorist Other and subverts the univocal depiction by the Bush administration's rhetoric, that had already defined him in univocal terms: evil, barbaric, irrational, uncivilized. While most post-9/11 fiction runs counter to the official characterization of the Other by exploring this figure in more nuanced terms, there is still, according to Derosa, a "problematic rhetoric" (Derosa 2013, 157) underlying these explorations. In "Alterity and the Radical Other in Post-9/11 Fiction," Derosa suggests that the notion of 9/11 as signifying a fall from innocence—illustrated by the pervasiveness of the trope of a blue and pristine sky featured in numerous covers of post-9/11 novels—seriously compromises the exploration of alterity. These blue skies seem to evoke a prelapsarian moment before the tragedy, seeking to convey the moment before innocence was lost. While some may doubt that there is such intention and argue that

the image only represents the blue skies of that Tuesday morning—novelist Julia Glass has remarked how “[a] passenger jet against a beautiful blue sky will always, always make me think of 9/11 and that’s a shame” (qtd. in Neary 2011, n.p.)—, it seems clear to me that even in that case the image seeks to evoke 9/11 as a moment of rupture, as a watershed that meant the end of the age of American innocence.²⁰³ The trope was also replicated in the then-emerging field of 9/11 fiction studies, whose practitioners tended to validate the notion of an unexpected attack on an innocent subject: for instance, Versluys’ *Out of the Blue* and Gray’s *After the Fall* (Gray’s volume, however, did not reproduce the image of the blue skies). While in the more general field of cultural studies there were many works that from the beginning fiercely contested this prelapsarian motif and raised questions regarding the United States’ history of violence in face of the trope of its “lost innocence”—for instance Dudziak’s *September 11 in History: A Watershed Moment?* and Hauerwas and Lentricchia’s *Dissent from the Homeland*, to name but two among many others²⁰⁴—it is difficult to find, during the first decade, the same dissenting tone regarding these tropes in academic criticism of post-9/11 fiction.



*The color blue was a common feature in the covers of many early post-9/11 novels, suggestive of the prelapsarian skies before “everything changed” on 9/11: Beigbeder’s *Windows on the World* (2004), Updike’s *Terrorist* (2006), DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007), Halaby’s *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) and O’Neill’s *Netherland* (2008). It also featured in non-fiction works such as Versluys’ *Out of the Blue* (2009) and Keeble’s *The 9/11 Novel* (2014).*

As Derosa points out, the evocation of a fall from innocence by 9/11 fiction studies is indeed problematic if one is to engage with the figure of the Other—one of the main interests of early post-9/11 fiction, as argued previously. Many of these novels try, in varying degrees, to engage with alterity, with the “terrorist” or “ultimate Other” who committed the attacks or who could commit similar attacks. But since the subject

²⁰³ A very interesting case in relation to the decisions that publishing houses make for book covers is Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland*, which features alternative (and radically different) covers in different editions: a skating rink in black and white in the first British edition (Fourth Estate, 2008), pristine blue skies in the 2009 Vintage edition, and an overcast sky in the 2009 Harper Perennial edition. The reasons why publishing houses decide to evoke or discontinue the trope is an interesting research question to take up.

²⁰⁴ See, for instance, Butler 2004 & 2006; Chomsky 2001, 2002 & 2003; Jameson 2003; Roy 2001; Sontag 2001; Didion 2001; Pease 2003; Žižek 2003; Baudrillard 2002.

position from which this engagement is established already presumes its own innocence, as inhabiting and then falling from a pristine blue sky, how can they “ethically evaluate the ideological beliefs of the other when the binary innocent victim and violent aggressor is so firmly established in one’s foundational imagery?” (Derosa 2013, 158). What Derosa suggests is that a more fruitful engagement cannot take place if the binary is not deconstructed first, which does not in any way mean finding justification for the attacks; rather, it calls for a reconsideration of the subject positions we as Westerners adopt in our rhetorical formulations about 9/11 (Ibid., 158). Such is the challenge, I argue, that *The Zero* takes on, in face of a discursive framework that quickly buried these considerations under the massive apparatus of media and government rhetoric that has consistently reified the binarism of The West versus the rest. And it does so by turning to a figure that is not traditionally explored in post-9/11 fiction: that of the American perpetrator, or the idea of “agent-victim” that I have mentioned above.

As Crownshaw argues, post-9/11 fiction’s engagement with the figure of the Other—in particular with the perpetrator Other—is symptomatic of current trends in cultural memory studies, which have traditionally relied on the figure of the victim but have witnessed in recent times a turn to the figure of the perpetrator (Crownshaw 2011; Gibbs 2014).²⁰⁵ Against claims that “depictions of the perpetrators [...] are dangerous because they create a sense of sympathy and silence the traumatized victims” and that “the imaginative act of adopting a historical terrorist’s point of view is not considered appropriate” (Däwes 2011, 242), post-9/11 fiction has increasingly turned to the figure of the perpetrator in an effort to respond to president Bush’s question of “Why do they hate us?” (Bush 2001, “Address to a Joint Session,” n.p.).

Several works within the corpus of post-9/11 fiction engage with the figure of the perpetrator, whether directly related to 9/11 or to other tragic events in history. Novels that engage with 9/11 perpetrators (or potential perpetrators) in an effort to “understand the terrorists, via their fictional renditions” (Crownshaw 2011, 76), still tend to depict them, for the most part, as radical or fundamentalist Others, usually blurring categories of race, religion, and politics and, thus, equating Arab to Muslim to terrorist.²⁰⁶ I have no doubt that such is the case of Updike’s *Terrorist*, although the

²⁰⁵ As Gibbs points out, war fiction and memoirs after the American wars in Vietnam and the Persian Gulf had already problematized the “gray area” where the traumatized American soldier is, on an individual and collective basis, also a perpetrator (Gibbs 2014, 161); after 9/11, this begins to be explored in journalistic/autobiographical texts such as Evan Wright’s *Generation Kill* (2004) and Nathaniel Fick’s *One Bullet Away* (2005). The significant difference, however, is that the latter are not fiction. Thus, I argue that *The Zero* is innovative in this approach within post-9/11 fiction.

²⁰⁶ For a detailed analysis of the representation of terrorists in American post-9/11 fiction, see Juanjo Bermúdez de Castro, *Rewriting Terror: The 9/11 Terrorists in American Fiction* (Alcalá de Henares: Biblioteca Benjamin Franklin, 2012).

same charge has been levied against DeLillo's *Falling Man*. Textual, cultural, or ideological motives can be argued for each of these depictions, and therefore I am not going to object to them or argue for them here. What I want to point out is that there are also other novels that are said to have achieved a more empathic focalization of the (potential) perpetrator, and in doing so have contributed to dispelling the epistemological confusion in the exploration of the Arab/Muslim Other. These are Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) and Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007). The first addresses these misidentifications through its main character, the Pakistani Changez, who delivers a novel-length monologue justifying his presumed "conversion" to fundamentalism. What is very interesting from a narrative point of view is that Changez's voice falls neatly within Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic, as it is easily inferred from his monologue that he is addressing and reasoning with an interlocutor. Although this interlocutor does not speak at all, we learn that he is an American, and that he keeps reaching in his jacket for what may be a gun. The American may or may not be an assassin sent to take Changez out, and Changez may or may not be a violent fundamentalist; we will never know: the novel offers no closure, and Changez's pleas for the American's understanding successfully creates empathy in the reader. Halaby's novel, in turn, explores how "everything changed" also for Arab Americans, and how racial prejudice can affect the lives of otherwise ordinary citizens whose own sense of helplessness turns out to be fatal.

There are also some novels that attempt to offer figures of Westerners as terrorists, such as Ernst Hechinger in DeLillo's *Falling Man* who, the novel suggests, might have been a member of a radical group in the Germany of the 1960s (a group like Kommune 1 usually comes to mind). Hechinger makes the frames of narrative regarding violence more complex by making evident how, sometimes, dissenting groups might consider resorting to violence.²⁰⁷ Other works that also seek to reflect on violence perpetrated by non-Arab or non-Muslim agents are Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*. In Foer's text, Oskar Schell Sr. can be considered a "perpetrator" only insofar as he is a German national

²⁰⁷ Critics usually read Hechinger as an "interpreter" or an "advocate" for terrorism, a European man whose articulate argumentation stands in contrast to the dark passages where DeLillo features the 9/11 terrorists, who come out as obscure, frustrated, and aggrieved persons. Some have argued that this characterization of the terrorists reifies the binarism of "us vs. them." However, I believe that DeLillo's characterization is appropriate and effective: the novel is a depiction of psychic and cultural trauma, and as such it is not to be expected that a trauma victim will empathize or fully understand his aggressor (Derosa 2013). The narrative value of these passages is not to offer a depiction or "representation" of terrorists, but to show how a trauma victim might try to delve into the terrorists' motives. That there is no such intention of portraying binarism is confirmed at the end of the novel, when terrorists and victims become "fused" at the moment the plane hits the tower, coming full circle with the novel's project of meditating on our own role in constructing precarious concepts such as "us" and "them," "inside" and "outside" (Kaspi 2012, n.p.).

during the Second World War, but the novel plays with duality by turning him also into a victim of the Allies' fire-bombing of Dresden. Both these works, by the inclusion of characters who are victims rather than agents of American violence—the firebombing of Dresden, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the United States' military retaliation after 9/11—, invite us to delve deeper into an imperialist history of violence, but they don't engage with the perpetrators and their motivations directly.²⁰⁸

Crownshaw further suggests that some post-9/11 works have attempted to reflect on the notion of an American perpetrator in an oblique manner, through the resort to screen memory. There are a number of novels written after September 2001 and not directly related to 9/11 that have at times been read as “screening” a reflection on the post-9/11 world through alternative storylines—fictionalizations that through other time frames and settings comment on the aftermath of 9/11. For instance, Philip Roth's counterfactual novel *The Plot Against America* (2004) is usually cited in the list of such texts—an intention that Roth has vehemently denied—²⁰⁹ and so is Michael Chabon's 2007 counterfactual *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (Gasztold 2014). Crownshaw also suggests that works that deal with slavery, such as Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008) and Valerie Martin's *Property* (2003), or with Native American destitution, such as Sherman Alexie's *Flight* (2007), are reflections on the aftermath of 9/11, especially as regards the

²⁰⁸ I have already noted in a previous footnote how Foer constructs the character of Oskar Schell Sr. as a possible perpetrator, and how this association is only related to his being a German who has lived through the Second World War. While the novel nudges towards the problematic temptation of associating his nationality with Nazi ideology, this is soon dispelled, because Oskar Schell Sr. features mostly as a victim of the British and American firebombing of Dresden in 1945. The novel also includes the testimony of a victim of Hiroshima, thus inviting us to consider that sometimes those who are victims in the present—in the case of 9/11, the Americans—have also been perpetrators in the past. By featuring some past events that show a history of US violence, the novel invites us to consider the possible implications of the military response to 9/11, which will only add to a long chain of victimization and perpetration. As Ilka Saal suggests in a 2011 article on Foer's novel, “[i]n the end, it is only in the specificity of violence and the concomitant experience of trauma that we can understand the complex causality of man-made events: Jews are destroyed by Germans, who are bombed by Americans, who are bombed by Muslims, who are bombed by Americans and Germans, and so forth” (Saal 2011, 469).

²⁰⁹ Which is not to say that that interpretation cannot be made, as it certainly has been; still, it definitely cannot be attributed to authorial intention. Roth has declared that the idea for this novel precedes 2001 and that he was genuinely interested in exploring an era of American history that is usually distorted by the enormity of the events in Europe during the 1930s and 1940s. The fact that anti-Semitism and fascism were common in the United States in those decades is usually forgotten, and Roth wanted to create a counterfactual history where Roosevelt is defeated by Lindbergh and anti-Semitism becomes a state policy. The premise is similar to other counterfactuals such as Sinclair Lewis' 1935 satirical novel *It Can't Happen Here*, in which a demagogue defeats Roosevelt in 1936 and establishes a totalitarian rule, and to Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), which is set in 1962 and depicts an occupied United States living under totalitarian rule, as a consequence of the victory of Nazi Germany and imperial Japan in the Second World War.

paralegal practices condoned by the United States and the dehumanization of detainees in the overseas detention centers of Guantanamo, Bagra, and Abu Ghraib. While this reading is possible, it is also true that these authors have been engaging with their themes long before 9/11, so I am unsure that these works can be read as screen memory. But even if these works are read as screen memory for 9/11 and as reflecting on the role of American perpetrators, they do not weaken Crownshaw's claim that, in the field of early post-9/11 fiction, the exploration of the American perpetrator is not common.

In short, and as Crownshaw argues, "[c]ultural theory after 9/11 has brought the figure of the perpetrator closer to home, but still in the guise of the terrorist" (Crownshaw 2011, 81). The terrorist depicted in post-9/11 fiction—and by this I mean not only in literature but in film, television, and graphic novels—is usually an alien and not American, thus perpetuating the pervasive subject position of the Westerner as innocent. It is for this reason that I argue that *The Zero* is, as previously suggested, a frontrunner in this respect, as it is the first post-9/11 novel, to my knowledge, that so clearly and unambiguously explores the figure of the American perpetrator while at the same time deconstructing topical representations of the post-9/11 Other. It is simply not possible to read the minor Middle Eastern characters of the novel (Bishir, Mahoud, Kamal) in terms of an effort to "understand" the fundamentalist other—since they are all framed—, at least not in the terms posed by early 9/11 fiction studies.

If such effort exists, it is articulated through the character of Jaguar who, granted, is Middle Eastern and does provide insight into possible grievances—it is suggested at some point that Jaguar's family has been killed by terrorists in the Middle East. But Jaguar's main narrative function is to facilitate a much deeper reflection on the American self, and on how it is necessary to acknowledge that nothing is "black and white," not even one's presumed innocence. In this way, the novel subverts one of the central tenets of post-9/11 fiction that usually attempts to explore terrorism through Arab or Muslim characters, and posits an important alternative vision of terrorism in the twenty-first century (Derosa 2013, 159), one that is not restricted to racial, religious or geopolitical circumstances and that can be dissected in ethical terms. Although the terrorist act that takes place at the end of the novel is committed by Jaguar, the novel has given the reader increasing clues of the American agents' involvement in the plotting, recruitment, instigation, and even of their extortion of individuals into committing a terrorist act. Jaguar's final action can be read in many different ways, but, in my view, he serves merely as a proxy for an American perpetrator. And none of the characters is a bigger perpetrator than Remy, especially because we are led to believe that he is the unit's "top gun," the specialist who can get the job done.

Through the interactions between Jaguar and Remy, the novel deconstructs standard depictions and, especially, the Bush administration's portrayal of the terrorist Other. Walter seems to be acutely aware that a binary understanding preempts any effort at getting insight into the "ultimate Other" and that a true engagement with the Other is impossible if the binary "us vs. them", constructed under false cultural premises, persists. These premises sustain, among many other things, that against "us" there is an Other that is the product of a backward and uncivilized culture, and one of the most effective ways of conveying this trope is by portraying the Other as animalistic. In a paragraph that closely mimics and parodies president Bush's "hunting metaphor" (described in chapter 1), The Boss explains to Remy why they sometimes need to cross the lines of legality in order to catch terrorists, and, significantly within the framework of a novel set in subverting expectations and blurring distinctions, ends up turning Remy into that which he is seeking to catch:

These *guys* hate our freedoms. You didn't *cause* the seditious letters these men wrote or the conversations they had. We owe it to the people who died in this city to find animals like this, animals capable of this kind of barbarism, and stop them before they even think of it. [...] Look, a hunter can't flush birds without sending a dog into the brush. My firm was hired to flush the birds. We provided a dog. A dog doesn't ask questions. He doesn't worry about causes. He runs where he's told. He barks. And then... [...] He waits for ducks to start falling. (Walter 2007, 298; emphasis in the original).

The Boss' speech resembles the circular structure of the novel's plot, where Remy's tracking of terrorists leads back to himself: the "terrorists" he needs to "hunt" are described in animalistic terms, but so does The Boss end up depicting Remy as an animal, as a "dog." The hunting metaphor is thus parodied and subverted, as the hunter turns out to be an animal himself.²¹⁰ Although the agency relies on this type of reasoning to be able to conduct its business, the novel consistently undermines the trope through the depiction of Jaguar as a PhD-educated Middle Eastern man who can reason his way out of an argument and may even have legitimate motives for his

²¹⁰ There are several other passages where the characterization of the Middle Eastern suspects as animals is turned on its head and applied to the government agents; for instance, the scene where Markham and Remy are surveilling Mahoud and Markham comments on the mating practices of deer. Markham believes that "deer are kind of sexy" (Walter 2007, 110) and says that if he were an animal, he would definitely have sex with a deer. Then he goes on to imagine himself as several animals and what his sexual instincts would be as each.

undercover activities. When Jaguar finds out that “Jaguar” is the codename by which Remy’s unit refers to him, he is deeply offended:

Jaguar? No. Really? [...] That’s awful. God, is the entire agency made up of morons? Look, I appreciate that you don’t want to endanger your work by telling those amateurs about me... But come on—*Jaguar*? How could you let them do that to me? [...] What about Iceman. Or something that reflects my education—Doc, for example? Tell them that I find Jaguar culturally and racially offensive. Tell them you’re worried that I’ll file a civil rights complaint. That ought to scare those officious assholes. (290; emphasis in the original)

Besides the evident irony of an undercover informant/potential terrorist openly filing a civil complaint for discrimination—which would evidently set his whole game off—, this scene is made funnier by its connection to a previous scene where the government agents discuss Jaguar’s codename, chosen “because of Tarzan. You know. It’s an animal” (271).²¹¹ When Markham suggests calling him Iceman instead, referring to Eugene O’Neill’s play *The Iceman Cometh* (1946), the other agent believes it is a reference to the film *Top Gun* (where Iceman is Maverick’s long-time rival). What is interesting about this double reference is that, on the one hand, *Top Gun* easily brings to mind president Bush’s performance of the “Top Gun stunt” (described in chapter 1); on the other, the reference to O’Neill’s *Iceman* brings with it the play’s main contention: that people need self-deception in order to be able to carry on with their lives, and that to abandon these deceptions or to see them for what they really are—lies—is to risk death, as one is no longer able to live with the truth.

²¹¹ The reference to the popular character Tarzan in relation to Jaguar is not self-evident. Although Tarzan obviously refers to the character created by Edgar Rice Burroughs in *Tarzan of the Apes* (1912)—the first in a series of novels that has served as the basis for several film and comic adaptations—its relation to the feline appellation “jaguar” may refer to a long-standing confusion regarding one particular feline character in Rice Burroughs’ story, Sabor. In the story’s original publication in 1912 in a pulp magazine, Sabor was a female tiger, but this was changed in the 1914 publication of the novel when Rice Burroughs learnt that there are no tigers in Africa. Thus, Sabor became a lioness. Many years later, in Disney’s adaptation *Tarzan* (1999), Sabor is a female leopard, although several viewers and critics have pointed out that Sabor’s big proportions indicate that she is a jaguar (a feline found only in South and Central America). Disney clearly intended (and missed) to portray a leopard, because the story takes place in Africa. While in Rice Burroughs’ novels Sabor is one of many characters, in Disney’s adaptation she is elevated to secondary antagonist. In Rice Burroughs’ novel Tarzan’s mother dies of natural causes and his father is killed by an ape, but in Disney’s adaptation it is Sabor who kills Tarzan’s parents, and felines in general are one of the main threats to Tarzan and the apes (besides humans). I am unsure if this is the motive behind the choice of the name Jaguar, but given the agents’ continuous reference to popular culture (e.g. *Top Gun*), and the fact that “the entire agency [is] made up of morons” (Walter 2007, 290), it might well be.

The subversion of the typical framing of the terrorist or fundamentalist Other is sustained throughout the novel not only by underscoring Jaguar's exquisite education—and Remy's perpetrator status—but by presenting the other Middle Eastern characters as framed into the terrorist plot by federal agencies. The Americans, on the other hand, are the ones exercising violence with a zealotry that can be compared to religious fundamentalism: in this case, the belief in the self-righteousness of the role their nation has to play in the world. The novel shows that the forcible recruitment of the Middle Eastern characters is the result of a divisive rhetoric—like the one that dominated post-9/11 national discourse—, which separated “the American from the un-American, the patriotic from the unpatriotic, with Arab and Muslim subjectivities being squarely cast in the latter category” (Fadda-Conrey 2011, 532). The actions by government agents described in *The Zero* are not unlike those reported in a number of media articles (Bartosiewicz 2011, Aaronson 2011) after the passing of the Patriot Act and the inauguration of the Department of Homeland Security. As argued earlier, I am not suggesting that the similarity between facts and fiction serves the sole purpose of denouncing these acts (which, it can be argued, it also does in a veiled way); rather, and more importantly, by destabilizing the reader as regards the verisimilitude of the actions described—whether cultural (contextual) or generic verisimilitude (Neale 1990)—the novel puts forward an enquiry into the reason (and madness) of the logic underlying these actions. The actions described and satirized in *The Zero* are not outside the realm of possibility in the post-9/11 heightened security state, and they also fit logically within the absurd world described by the novel, which in turn begs an examination of the post-9/11 world.

One such report denounces how the FBI resorted to “stereotypical othering” (Derosa 2013, 173) in order to build its informant network, asking “where US Muslims lived” in order to target them as informants (Aaronson 2011). In many cases, the way that this recruitment took place relied on an already existing fear of stigmatization and of being subjected to violent discrimination on the part of these citizens; in this regard, there is one scene in *The Zero* that comes to mind, when Remy vandalizes Mahoud's restaurant to obtain information. Mahoud is a “vaguely Middle Eastern” man (Walter 2007, 111) who owns a restaurant and who has reported an act of vandalism upon it: someone has thrown a rock through his shop window, with a note and a pig's ear duct-taped to it. The note says: “Go home, camel-fucker. We know where you live” (111). The scene makes it clear later on that this attack has been carried out by Remy, in order to have Mahoud call the police and thus have an excuse to approach him. Mahoud is indignant at the racism and ignorance that are evident in the note, first of all because he feels forced to put a sign in his shop that says “I am Pakistani not Arab,” and second,

because his own son “is in the American army” (111).²¹² As Mahoud laments with tears in his eyes, “I think in this country I should not have to explain that I am not a terrorist” (112). Markham pretends to be sympathetic to Mahoud’s plight but tells him that, unfortunately, there are so many cases like this that they have to focus first on those that include violence. Cynically, he tells him: “After they hurt someone, we’ll come back” (112). Mahoud is outraged, claiming that he is “a citizen of this country too” (112), to which Markham replies with a special offer: “Maybe I could go in and plead your case to my superiors. See if I can’t get some special attention on this [...] maybe if you were... helpful to us in some other area of our investigation, we could take an extra look at this harassment you’re getting” (112-113). Thus, Remy and Markham have created the conditions of Mahoud’s harassment in order to have leverage with him. Markham shows him “three sheets with six mug shots on each sheet, all of them Middle Eastern men” (113), and asks him if he recognizes any of them. Mahoud identifies Bishir, his brother-in-law, but tells Markham that he has not seen him in a year, and that he has already said so to the other agents that have questioned him at least four times about his whereabouts. This is the first indication in the novel that the agency is probably stepping on some other agency’s work; Markham dismisses it as a “mixup” and denies that “we’re trying to *harass people*” (114; emphasis in the original). Mahoud is suspicious at the way he has been approached, “in this alley, instead of coming in the front of my restaurant,” but Markham tells him not to “go all paranoid on us” (114) and issues a veiled threat: “help us find Bishir [...]. Then maybe we can protect your family” (114). At this point the charade is over and Mahoud is clearly aware that he is under threat, and starts begging “My God. I don’t... Please!” (114). Then he provides Miami as a possible location, where there are two brothers—Kamal and Assan—that Bishir knows. Markham thanks him and renews the threat: “I really appreciate your help. And you won’t mind if we contact you to help us out again, right Mahoud? I mean... if it means we can protect your family” (115). The scene ends with Markham congratulating Remy for doing “that silent thing” that he interprets as a performance, a “[m]ute cop, bad cop” stunt (115).

The tactics described in this scene are consistent with what Aaronson reports as the FBI’s post-9/11 tactics. According to Aaronson, the FBI has identified certain developments in the operational strategy of international terrorism—which has shifted from resorting to sleeper cells to depending on lone wolves—and thus has modified its

²¹² The latter is interesting as it provides a parallelism with Remy later on, when his son Edgar joins the army. However, the motives for each of them joining are different: Edgar joins to avenge his father’s “death,” and Remy feels impotent at not being able to dissuade him; Mahoud’s son’s motives are unknown, but the pride with which Mahoud says his son is in the American army suggests that it is pride in his son’s unquestionable status as an American citizen. Of course, there are many reasons why people, and especially immigrant or working class people, join the army (social mobility, economic need, etc.), but the passage does not point in any of these directions.

strategy and opted for a “preemption,” “prevention,” and “disruption” model, which consists in

identifying and neutralizing potential lone wolves before they move toward action. To that end, FBI agents and informants target not just active jihadists, but tens of thousands of law-abiding people, seeking to identify those disgruntled few who might participate in a plot given the means and the opportunity. And then, in case after case, the government provides the plot, the means, and the opportunity. (Aaronson 2011, n.p.)²¹³

The novel takes up this model and depicts federal agencies that are looking for “pre-terrorists”—a sort of *Minority Report* reality, where the government can anticipate crimes before they are committed—, individuals whose intentions, rather than actions, are suspicious (Bartosiewicz 2011, 30). The strategy also includes actively creating terrorists by goading the “potential” (and mostly framed) individuals into action. As one lawyer said in a real-life case, “the defendants would not have done anything if not kicked in the ass by government agents” (Aaronson 2011, n.p.), and such are the circumstances in which the novel’s Middle Eastern characters find themselves. A profoundly hilarious yet equally painful scene as the one featuring Mahoud is to be found towards the end of the novel and it shows some of these presumed (and extorted) “terrorists” taping a suicide video and incapable of delivering any credible lines. Their ignorance of fundamentalist motivation is so complete that they fall back on stereotype, as one advises the other: “Look, just say some crazy shit on the tape [...] Just cover your face, hold the machine gun, and say infidels and wolves and shit like that” (Walter 2007, 312).

The zealotry of the fictional government and its agents is so extreme that the counterterrorist operation results in competing, equally zealous, government agencies double-dealing and unknowingly messing up each other’s work. After realizing that the alleged mastermind that they are tailing, framing, and trying to catch—Jaguar—has been planted by another agency, Markham bursts out in frustration: “Is there anyone in this cell who happens not to be a government informant?” (294). There comes a point when Remy is so confused about where he stands that he asks Jaguar if he, Jaguar,

²¹³ In *The Terror Factory: Inside the FBI’s Manufactured War on Terrorism* (2013), Trevor Aaronson explores how the FBI built a vast network of informants to infiltrate Muslim communities and, in some cases, cultivate fake terrorist plots. For an informative preview of Aaronson’s documentary work, see “Inside the Terror Factory” published by *Mother Jones* on 11 January 2013 (<http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2013/01/terror-factory-fbi-trevor-aaronson-book>).

works for the Documents Department (“...you work for us?”). Jaguar’s response is revealing: “I’m sorry, but your idea of us tends to be a little bit fluid.... You switch sides indiscriminately... arm your enemies and wonder why you get shot with your own guns.... Are you with us?... May as well ask if I am aligned with the wind” (291). Jaguar’s reflection is reminiscent of how past actions can have undesirable consequences in the present; for instance, how the US training and arming of Afghan insurgents (the mujahideen) and Osama bin Laden in the early 1980s as a means to destabilize the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan led to the emergence of the Taliban that the US is now engaged with after 9/11.²¹⁴ Thus, Jaguar’s comment turns the recent history of the United States into a comedy of errors in which the United States, rather than being a superpower that has everything under control, plays the role of a superpower that is at the mercy of the powerful forces that it unleashes but has no way to control. Therefore, I would like to argue that Jaguar’s function in the novel is to insist on the possibility of different origins for the 9/11 story, or what Butler refers to as “start[ing] the story earlier” (Butler 2006, 5). What if the story of September 11 starts not on that day, but on a consideration of the conditions that have led to it, which includes considering “our role in instigating it” (Ibid., 8). And that is an important point that Walter seems to be making, forcing us to consider the extent to which Remy’s psychic condition can be, according to Derosa, “linked to the illness afflicting America writ large” in which the US engages in double standards and generates “the conditions of [its] own destruction” (Derosa 2013, 177).

Some readers have found it problematic that in the final scenes it is precisely Jaguar, the Middle Eastern informant, who detonates the bomb, which leads them to contend that Walter’s text is, after all, reinforcing the stereotype that it set out to deconstruct: that of reflecting about the terrorist Other through Muslim or Middle Eastern characters.²¹⁵ But there are several caveats to be made, as the character of Jaguar is made extremely complex by the novel’s plot and framing. On the one hand, it is indeed significant that Jaguar is the suicide bomber in the end, being, as he is, the most articulate and perhaps the only lucid character in the novel, one that the novel has cast in a positive light. This can be read as either a paradox—his education and dialogic stance fail to provide a non-violent solution—or a logical outcome—you create terrorists, you get terror. But Jaguar’s motivations remain unclear, and in my estimation this is consistent with the novel’s open-ended structure, as I will argue in what follows.

²¹⁴ As documented by the National Security Archive, “the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) played a significant role in asserting U.S. influence in Afghanistan by funding military operations designed to frustrate the Soviet invasion of that country. CIA covert action worked through Pakistani intelligence services to reach Afghani rebel groups” (Prados 2001, n.p.).

²¹⁵ I would like to thank a student at the Universitat de Barcelona, Asmaa Awinti-Haris, who made this point passionately and forced me to think about this apparent contradiction.

The only thing that is certain about Jaguar's bombing—that a bomb exploded, and that it was placed by a Middle Eastern person—is used to construct a triumphant media story about the federal agency's success in catching terrorists, with "only one" bomb detonated. But, in view of the government's questionable handling of the counterterrorist operation, the reader might question to what extent Jaguar voluntarily detonated the bomb out of conviction, and even presume that it was not really Jaguar who detonated it but the agency in an attempt to cover up for its own failure. After all, the reader gets the facts from Remy who, as the narrative has clearly shown, is not only an unreliable narrator but is so deeply immersed in the operation that he does not have all the facts. Another possible reading is that Jaguar's actions are the narrative device by which the novel conveys the end result of following the system to its ultimate logical consequences: you engage in terrorism, you create terrorists, you get terror. It illustrates Walter's expressed intention of addressing "our ability to delude ourselves, to torture, to claim victory in defeat, to claim justice in barbarism" (Walter qtd. in Flinn 2014, 233).

And yet a third reading of Jaguar's bombing is possible, one that, instead of seeing it as problematic in its racial politics, can read it as deeply ironic, as there is an evident incongruity between the actual and the expected results of the sequence of events described. The narrative has cast Jaguar in a sympathetic light, as a rational and educated man who the reader would not expect to resort to this type of violence. And yet, he does. I find that this is the type of post-9/11 irony that Beers fiercely argued for in "Irony Is Dead! Long Live Irony!" on 26 September 2001: "irony that pays attention to contradictions and embraces paradoxes, rather than wishing them away in an orgy of purpose and certainty" (Beers 2001, n.p.). Understanding Jaguar's bombing in this ironic way serves to reinforce the novel's satiric project: against traditional definitions of satire as a tale with a univocal moral message, Walter's satire subverts its own parody (where the presumed terrorist would be the "good guy") and by doing so arrives, crucially, at non-closure. What is important in the depiction of Jaguar as the bomber is that there can be no univocal interpretation of it. Thus, Walter's satiric depiction of the post-9/11 state of exception and of Jaguar's outcome puts forward a type of discourse that is "problematic, open-ended, essayistic, ambiguous in its relationship to history, uncertain in its political effect, resistant to formal closure, more inclined to ask questions than to provide answers, and ambivalent about the pleasures it offers" (Griffin 1994, 4-5), to borrow Griffin's phrasing. By leaving all possibilities open, and by refusing to "exonerate" Jaguar in a clear way, *The Zero* fully embodies a rhetoric of inquiry, of provocation, of dialogue, and of play.

All in all, one of the few conclusions that the novel allows us to draw is that the only factor that impedes the government agents from being categorized as terrorists is, incidentally, their ethnicity (Derosa 2013, 174) and their position of power (as

government agents), not their actions. As Schwarz notes, the novel “depicts the politics of fighting the foreign terrorism just to reveal the so defined outside threat of terrorists only as a force that originates from within: the official othering of the enemy conceals the fact that the threat comes from inside America” (Schwarz 2013, 389). In this way, the novel invites the reader to consider, according to Derosa, a “more deterritorialized notion of a self-generated terrorist within” (Derosa 2013, 176), as Walter seems to be contending, quite simply, that “terrorism is just a strategy and a terrorist is one who performs that operation” (Ibid., 6), shying away from “container” metaphors that serve to associate terrorism to “a group that one belongs to, with an identifiable region, religion, skin color, and uniform” (Ibid., 5). Thus, the novel challenges the reader to distinguish between acting and being, calling on some degree of ethical discernment and accountability. *The Zero* asks us to reconsider racial or religious misconceptions of the terrorist Other and to consider terrorism, instead, as a product of ideology and internal motivations, not as a cultural characteristic but as “an action that anyone can engage in should we lose focus on our similarities by engaging our differences too deeply” (Ibid., 179), in Derosa’s words. As Bhabha argued roughly a week after the attacks, “[o]nce we see terrorism as an organized political action, rather than the expression of cultural or civilizational ‘difference,’ we can both fight it and look towards the future” (Bhabha 2001, 4).

3.12. Carnival scenes

In part, the difficulty in placing Jaguar on the “good” or the “bad” side has much to do with the ambivalence that is intrinsic to a Bakhtinian understanding of the satiric text—in his terminology, the carnivalized text. As noted in chapter 2, Bakhtin argues that ambivalence is an essential component of the carnival sense of the world, and in order to illustrate it he offers an analogy with an emblematic medieval feast, the ritual of crowning the king of fools around Christmas time. On a symbolic level, crowning the king of fools amounts to uncrowning normative authority (especially Church

authority), and it is a most subversive act.²¹⁶ The central idea behind the ritual of the king of fools (“Lord of Misrule” in England and the “Prince des Sots” in France) seems to have been a brief, mock social revolution, in which power, dignity and impunity is briefly conferred on those in a subordinate position, i.e., subdeacons and other minor Church officials. It bears reminding that Bakhtin’s project is to determine how the carnivalesque festivities that wane after the Renaissance are translated into carnivalized literature and how the latter is shaped by the former in specific ways. Thus, according to Bakhtin, the crowning of the king of fools

determined a special *decrowning type* of structure for artistic images and whole works, one in which the decrowning was essentially ambivalent and two-leveled. If carnivalistic ambivalence should happen to be extinguished in these images of decrowning, they degenerated into a purely negative *exposé* of a moral or sociopolitical sort, they became single-leveled, lost their artistic character, and were transformed into naked journalism. (Bakhtin 1999, 126; emphasis in the original)

Ambivalence is essential, then, for the decrowning ritual to remain the vehicle of a dissenting stance, and so it is essential for the subversions of satire to remain tragicomic: the laughter of the grotesque always elicits an ambivalent response. While I have been arguing that *The Zero* is in itself one big subversion, there are two scenes in particular that I consider can be read as the “carnival scenes” of the novel, because they

²¹⁶ In *A History of Caricature and Grotesque* (1875) Thomas Wright describes the medieval Feast of Fools as follows: “Our forefathers in those times were accustomed to form themselves into associations or societies of a mirthful character, parodies of those of a more serious description, especially ecclesiastical, and elected as their officers mock popes, cardinals, archbishops and bishops, kings, &c. They held periodical festivals, riotous and licentious carnivals, which were admitted into the churches, and even taken under the especial patronage of the clergy, under such titles as ‘the feast of fools,’ ‘the feast of the ass,’ ‘the feast of the innocents,’ and the like. There was hardly a Continental town of any account which had not its ‘company of fools,’ with its mock ordinances and mock ceremonies. In our own island we had our abbots of misrule and of unreason. At their public festivals satirical songs were sung and satirical masks and dresses were worn; and in many of them, especially at a later date, brief satirical dramas were acted. These satires assumed much of the functions of modern caricature; the caricature of the pictorial representations, which were mostly permanent monuments and destined for future generations, was naturally general in its character, but in the representations of which I am speaking, which were temporary, and designed to excite the mirth of the moment, it became personal, and, often, even political, and it was constantly directed against the ecclesiastical order” (Wright 1875, 207-208).

The Feast of Fools was forbidden in continental Europe by the Council of Basel in 1431; in England, it was outlawed in the seventeenth century. However, it was not easy to suppress and instances of festivals of this kind survived in later years; for instance, in France they were celebrated as late as 1644. In his 1831 novel *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Victor Hugo recreates an account of a Feast of Fools, in which Quasimodo serves as the Pope of Fools.

most clearly illustrate the “world upside down” of the carnivalesque. One is the final bomb plot that I have been referring to recently—with the detonation of Jaguar’s bomb—and the other is Edgar’s performance at school which, in point of fact, can be read as a close analogy of the decrowning/crowning of the Feast of Fools.

The latter occurs early on in the novel and it anticipates *The Zero’s* upside-down world. Edgar’s sense of self-importance and the gravitas with which he follows through his absurd—because knowingly fake—tale about his father’s death is in itself a hyperbolic representation of grief. Because he is forced to grieve “generally,” like the large majority of the population who did not experience the attacks directly or suffer any personal losses, Edgar feels cheated into having to go through a “fleeting emotion” that is “weightless” (Walter 2007, 34). And this is why he decides to engage in a larger, augmented, deeper sort of grief (in other words, an exaggeration) and to grieve his undead father, because “[t]he only way to comprehend something like this is to go through it. Otherwise, it’s just a number. Three thousand? Four thousand? How do you grieve a number?” (34). As he notes, “[t]he death of a father... is the most profound thing I’ve ever experienced,” where “[r]eal grief weighs on you like you can’t imagine” (34).²¹⁷ In his hyperbolic rendition of fake-real grief, Edgar confesses how he cannot “get out of bed” and “there are times when [he] can barely breathe” (34); he cannot “get over it” and he does not want to. Later on, in a one-man show at school Edgar displays his fake-real grief for a school audience of students and parents as part of a festival titled “Gone But...: A night of one-act, student-written and student-performed plays and monologues” (106). The audience’s reception of Edgar as the curtain rises is thunderous, catching Remy off-guard (107), and Edgar proceeds to tell the story of how he learnt to beat his (dead) father at chess. Using a “mock deep voice” to impersonate Remy that causes laughter in the audience (107), Edgar narrates how he was taught to play chess by his father and how he, eventually, was able to beat him. At first, Remy would let his young son win from time to time—to boost his confidence—, but what is disturbing in Edgar’s story is that once that Edgar becomes aware—at nine years old—that he can beat his father, he lets Remy believe that he is still letting his son win (109).

Where the simple story of a son beating his father at chess could be read as a sort of symbolic initiation to adulthood, a rite of passage where the son gets up to the “level” of the father, Edgar’s twisted and distorted story is, in Flinn’s reading, a grotesque subversion of the paterno-filial line and of the natural, ontological order: It is one thing to beat your father at something, it is quite another to outsmart him and to condescendingly adopt a paternal role towards him. It is in this sense that I suggest

²¹⁷ Edgar even asks Remy: “what separates me from some kid whose father actually died that day?” To which Remy replies: “The fact that I’m alive?” (Walter 2007, 35). But this is not enough of a deterrent for Edgar and, later, he persists by explaining away the inconsistency thus: “And really... someday, you are going to die. Right?” (279).

that Edgar's performance can be read as the carnivalesque crowning of the king of fools, where the son becomes the father—at least for the short duration of the play. Furthermore, the supposed "reverence" with which the dead father was to be remembered is turned into a mocking denunciation that makes him look bad: Edgar tells how Remy "couldn't see the board" the way Edgar could and how Remy would "never be able to see like that" (Walter 2007, 107), how on that particular day Remy had been drinking heavily—thus somehow soiling the image of the heroic dead police officer—, and how Edgar could see "fear in his face, fear because he knew that I'd beaten him fair and square. That he'd lost to his nine-year-old son" (108). Edgar even tells the audience how he thought of his father as "a person who was halfway between things" (108), not ambitious enough, not driven enough, and how, after all, he (Edgar) did not really love him. At this point, "Remy had to fight the urge to stand up and defend his life" (108), but the audience, who at first had laughed timidly, unsure of the appropriateness of laughter in such a setting, is by now laughing openly and loudly at Remy's incompetence and enjoying Edgar's masterful and mocking rendition of it.

Thus, Edgar's show is a carnivalesque subversion in every sense, both of the roles father and son are supposed to play and of the function that such a play would seek to exercise as part of the school festival. In the context of public acts of mourning and commemoration, and as Neimeyer, Klass, and Dennis argue, a "central task of grieving is the reconstruction of [...] narratives" (Neimeyer, Klass & Dennis 2014, 325), both the individual self-narrative and the communal or cultural narratives that shape and sustain it. Acts of communal mourning such as the school festival are, thus, interpretive and communicative activities "charged with establishing the meaning of the deceased's life and death, as well as the post-death status of the bereaved within the broader community concerned with the loss" (Ibid., 326). The school festival is aimed to be a communal moment of mourning and remembrance, where students compose a narrative both of their lost loved ones and of the impact their loss has had in their own lives, and aims alternatively to pay homage to the victims, to provide comfort to the bereaved, and to promote healing by memorializing the meaning of the lives of the dead. As it turns out, Edgar's narrative of his (dead) father subverts both this communal function and the expectations and results one expects from such an activity and provides a grotesque parody of such acts; rather than restoring the meaning of his father in his own life—a meaning that has been supposedly shattered by the loss—Edgar's account actually diminishes that meaning, recounting not what he would say to his dead father if he had the chance—a common desire of people who mourn—but rather what he wouldn't say: that "[p]arents *choose* to have their kids" and that "[n]o kid ever chose to have his parents" (Walter 2007, 108-109; emphasis in the original); in other words, that he did not love him. Thus Edgar's act turns out to be a ritual decrowning of the (supposedly) revered dead father, with the collective participation

of the audience in the laughter it elicits. While this laughter is at first uncomfortable, by the show's end it turns out to be openly uncomplicated, with Edgar also acknowledging that, after all, "all the navel-gazing" (109) is somewhat laughable.

A similar argument can be made for the role that *The Zero* plays in the context of early post-9/11 fiction, where the media and criticism have often attempted to read the fiction produced within the narrow narrative premises of the event as a "watershed," and as an attempt to reflect on the traumatic shattering of the pre-9/11 world and on the dislocation and sense of loss that it brought about. While this assessment is to a large extent true, because these concerns were indeed shared by many early works, it does not disavow that a large number of these works have also sought to explore other concerns, mostly related to the circumstances that brought about the attacks and, in the case of *The Zero*, to the appropriateness or lack thereof of the American response. By incorporating the established frameworks of early post-9/11 fiction and criticism, that were by the year of publication widely understood by the general public and could thus establish a common ground, the novel interacts with and works from within the genre. By resorting to the trauma narrative and the post-9/11 heroic figure, and then subverting, parodying and reconfiguring it as satirically anti-heroic, the novel exposes the gap between the heroic ideal and its reality, and in doing so it calls for a pluralistic account of what the event meant and a reflection on the dangers of a unilateral and violent response.

The second carnival scene I focus my attention on is the "clusterfuck"—in Markham's words—: the fake counterterrorist operation at the end of the novel that turns into a failed and dramatic farce. With "competing agents busting in doors and swinging through windows, dropping through vents" (Walter 2007, 319) the final operation turns out to be a huge burlesque, as it bears reminding that the operation is a "performance" aimed at raising the level of fear in the population, and not a real operation with real targets. As such, and because of the mishandling by the government agents, it results in an unwilling parody of a police operation, with every character performing according to cliché and failing miserably at being credible. The way the scene is narrated, following all the conventions of a television detective/cop thriller plot, is constantly undermined by Remy's constant doubts about the role that he is supposed to play.

The scene begins with Remy observing a homeless man in a park who turns out to be an undercover agent, who then instructs a Middle Eastern man, Kamal, on where to wait to do a drop-off. Moments later, Bishir Maidan, "the agency's man inside the cell" (287) and March Selios's ex-boyfriend, appears and sits next to Kamal. It is worth noting that these two men have been tracked and found by Markham and Remy's questionable procedures; Bishir Maidan's name was provided by the restaurant owner Mahoud, who was tricked into believing that this would give him protection and stop

the racist attacks against him—carried out by Remy—, and whose whereabouts become known thanks to the surveillance of Lisa Herote, while Kamal’s name is extracted from Assan under torture, carried out by Remy and Markham. While this may sound confusing, this is exactly the point. The men exchange the package—now in Bishir’s hands—and walk away “trying so hard not to draw attention that they looked ridiculous” (287). Remy starts trailing them, but then he sees agent Dave (from a competing agency) sitting in a parked car, which makes him start to doubt whether he should take part in the operation at all: “Was the agency in control of all this? Did Remy need to follow Kamal anymore?” (287). Kamal and Bishir descend the stairs into a subway station, with Dave following, and Remy wondering “Was that it? Had Remy done his part?” (288). Then Kamal emerges and starts running down the block, and Remy starts chasing him “frantic with confused adrenaline. Was he supposed to stop Kamal? Was something happening? Would he recognize it if it did?” (288). Then Kamal, after completing a full circle around the block, enters an ornate building across a park, where Remy gets distracted by his desire to get breakfast and in contemplation of the building (this is the iconic building of the Indian and the Pilgrim that I have described in section 3.5). After some minutes, Remy’s phone buzzes, and, when he answers, it is Jaguar on the other end of the line, proposing a game of “Name That Sacred Text” (289). As Jaguar keeps quoting the Q’ran and the Bible alternatively, Remy keeps asking him where he is. In the conversation that ensues, while Jaguar makes a mishmash of religions and cultures, “[w]ith their stone pilgrims, and their marble soldiers, with their virgins in paradise and their demons in smoke” (291), Remy comes to realize that it is he who has paid Jaguar to plant a bomb, but he cannot recall why. The scene ends elliptically.

The next scene resumes with Remy sprinting after Kamal, until he suddenly stops when he sees “Markham dart around the same corner, waving a gun and sprinting twenty paces behind Kamal, but losing ground to him” (292). Remy feels it is his duty to stop Kamal, beats him to the ground, and puts handcuffs on him. Markham joins them and as Kamal protests that they “are making a mistake” Markham replies with the usual “macho” line of a TV cop which, additionally, resorts to an Orientalist feminization of the Arab man:²¹⁸ “I heard you throw like a girl” (292). Then a car stops in front of them, tires screeching (another convention of the genre), and two agents (one of them the homeless man) burst out and demand that Kamal be released. “Who are you?” Markham asks, dumbfounded, as one of the agents complains that “[w]e’re this close to penetrating this group of lunatics and you come along and nearly fuck it all up” (293).

²¹⁸ See “Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots” by Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai (*Social Text* 72.20.3, 2002: 117-148)

It is at this precise moment that Remy, “for once, felt ahead of events” and has a revelation about the inevitability of the path he has been treading: “You can’t beat this thing [...]. You can *want* to do the right thing, you can vow to pay attention, to focus, to connect the dots. But once you start down this path, it really doesn’t matter. Every path leads to the same place, events like water circling toward a drain” (293; emphasis in the original). And it is here that Markham realizes that everybody is a government agent or an informant.

The next seventeen pages—to which I will refer in the following section—are unrelated to the operation, which resumes on page 311. The scene opens in a narrow and animated wire room full of busy people coming in and out with printouts, translators perched forward speaking into recording equipment, technicians monitoring recording devices, and agents from both agencies listening to “three targets in a hotel room waiting for Jaguar” (312). As Markham tells Remy, they are “listening to Kamal make his suicide videotape. It’s... cool” (312). The scene clearly plays with the idea of a television studio, which is consistent with the fact that the government agents are using the Middle Eastern characters to “stage” a counterterrorist operation. This notion has been previously suggested throughout the novel by the manner in which agents keep explaining things through television metaphors; for instance, when discussing the terrorist cell and why it has eliminated one of its own members, agent Dave suggests that maybe “he was under surveillance, or it could be that he was having second thoughts, or maybe it’s a kind of reality show thing and they just voted off a member” (271). As Remy watches in confusion, the microphones pick up two voices whispering in English, which Remy recognizes as Mahoud, the restaurant owner, and Bishir. The way the scene is described does look like a reality show, where the competing agents at the studio control are watching the scripted outcome and commenting on the asset that each of their “actors” represent:

“This is crazy, [...]. I’m not going to do this.” Remy recognized the voice. It was Mahoud, the restaurant owner.

“Look, just say some crazy shit on the tape,” Bishir whispered back. “You don’t have to do anything after that. Just cover your face, hold the machine gun, and say infidels and wolves and shit like that.”

“No, I can’t do it.”

“Do you see that guy?” Bishir whispered. “Does he look like he’s fucking around? He’ll have us both killed if he thinks we’re backing out.”

In the wire room, Dave was chewing his thumbnail. “Come on, come on. Hold him.”

“But I never intended...” Mahoud began.

“Look, it doesn’t matter what you intended,” Bishir said. We’re here now. Just make your tape, and then you can run. But if you leave now we’re both dead.”

“That’s right,” said Dave. “Keep him hooked Bishir. Don’t let anyone out of that room.”

“He’s good,” Markham said in a low voice. “I wish we could’ve afforded someone like that.” (312-313)

The three Middle Eastern men—recruited by different agencies and unknowing of the others’ status—are being forced to tape suicide videos and to release a bomb threat, “[j]ust like on TV,” according to one of the agents (315). Therefore, this includes resorting to stereotype in the characterization of the terrorists, with mentions to “infidels and wolves and shit like that” (312), although both Mahoud and Bishir are clearly not sharing any such extremist motivation—dismissed as “shit like that.” The television metaphor can also be read, in my view, as a commentary on the constructedness of post-9/11 security operations, as the reports by Aaronson (2011) and Bartosiewicz (2011) indicate.

At this point, Remy becomes fully aware of the situation for the first time, and starts screaming and yelling that they have to stop it, that it is insane, until agent Dave has him removed from the room. Nobody is worried, because the Middle Eastern men have been given “a phony detonator” (Walter 2007, 315), although the agents cannot agree if it is the bomb or the detonator that is false. As Remy runs outside, he meets agent Buff, who tells Remy to not “sweat it. We got it under control. Soon as Ice Guy gets here, we move. Fuckers at the agency are gonna shit their pants when we raid their deal” (315). As he thanks Remy for his cooperation, Jaguar appears, then Markham and Dave, all of them running into the hotel, while Remy stays glued to the spot in utter desolation, and the scene ends with the expected action-thriller display of men “in the top-floor windows, wearing black Kevlar jackets, rifles strapped across their backs [...] rappelling down the face of the building” (316). Later on Markham will describe the scene to Remy, with no shadow of regret over how it was handled or his involvement in it:

“God, what a mess that was. The bureau and agency are gonna say it was some kind of joint operation, but it was a clusterfuck is what it was. Twenty competing agents busting in doors and swinging through windows, dropping through vents. The crossfire was nuts. Two bureau guys got hit. They were lucky they were wearing vests and the targets were the only ones... you know... neutralized—”

“You killed them?” Remy’s head fell to his chest.

“Well... yeah,” Markham said: another stupid question from Remy.

“They were making suicide videos. They were holding a machine gun, Brian.” (319)

Markham’s cynicism about the danger that these forced terrorists posed is evident, accusing them of the same things that the agency has forced them to do. Exasperated, Remy hangs up on Markham in what seems to be a significant—and much-awaited—liberation from his “double” and his undercover activities, and resolves instead to try to find April—who is leaving town and Remy—and to follow her “wherever she was going” (319). And it is then that Remy receives a phone call from Jaguar who, after realizing that he has been betrayed, asks him one simple question: “Does a man ever realize that he has been the villain of his own story?” (321). This question resonates with what Remy ends up asking his country: to what extent our actions will be revealed as detrimental to ourselves. What follows is the bomb explosion and Remy lying in a hospital bed.

As I have tried to show, this scene is the logical outcome of the way that the government agencies have been operating throughout the novel, as all their prejudice, abuse of power, deceit, incompetence, and cynicism comes into play in a climatic finale. As Schwarz points out, the ending of the scene illustrates “the Kafkaesque nihilism and absurdity of fighting terrorism by selling bombs to alleged terrorists” (Schwarz 2013, 389). Walter openly parodies the conventions and storyline of a cop thriller, including stereotypical characters (the homeless man, the agents in kevlar vests, etc.) and also characters who are aware that the scene is a performance and who metafictionally reflect on the role they play in it (like Bishir and Mahoud). What is significant about this scene—which is the last humorous scene in the novel—is that, after the failure is confirmed, it is still turned into a triumphant story, which is relayed by means of a “televised dream” that Remy has in hospital:

One day he dreamed two men debating whether the recent bounce in The President’s popularity was entirely due to the recent victory over a terrorist cell, in which four of the five members were killed and only one bomb was detonated... on a mostly empty train platform... killing only six... including the bomber... and severely wounding a retired police officer— (325)

What the televised dream exposes is the government’s reluctance to accept failure even in the face of defeat, and how it resorts to the construction of a counter narrative that

turns the failed operation into a success story, thus reinforcing the upside-down world that the novel depicts. Even if the government manages to deflect criticism for its failure, the scene can be read as a failed crowning: those in a position of power (the government agents) fail to resume their control of the situation once it is revealed that there is no “real” enemy and, furthermore, their performance fails to achieve even the slightest semblance of verisimilitude. As the agents sadly learn, what works in television does not work as smoothly in real life. Their unproblematic use of TV conventions only underscores the vacuity of the discourse that supports their actions, and, just as on TV, they can flip channels whenever the outcome is not the desired one.

Thus, I believe that the two carnival scenes that I have described above can be considered a continuum, where the decrowning brings about a vacuum of authority that is never reversed, where the temporary breach becomes a permanent condition. The inability to regain control leaves the narrative without a hero and the nation at the hands of people who are unable to lead. And this, I believe, is the reason why Remy refuses to open his eyes in the last scene, clinging to sleep and hoping that it has all been a fever dream (Walter 2007, 326), that somehow everything will go back to the way it used to be. In section 3.1 I have suggested that the sequence of events in the novel may be interpreted as constructing different narrative structures (a fever dream, PTSD hallucinations, a linear progression), and in this sense the ending of Remy closing his eyes might be read as favoring one of these structures. However, I believe the novel remains equally open to any of the above-mentioned interpretations as these are suggested or implied in several instances throughout the text. After all, the novel seeks to underscore how unwise—and untenable—it is to purport to offer a closed and final narrative, something that is further reinforced by the exploration of the very meaning of the novel’s title, as I will discuss in the following section.

3.13. The multiple meanings of “zero”

I have noted in the section above how ambiguity is a key element in the satiric grotesque, not only because the “subject” that laughs comes to realize that s/he is also part of the “target” of satire—as Bakhtin writes, carnival laughter “is also directed at those who laugh” (Bakhtin 1968, 12)—but because this laughter depends on a hesitation, or a tension, between the comic and the tragic, and this is what makes satire essentially uncanny, somewhat uncomfortable. Understanding satire as ambivalent is to give precedence also to a Bakhtinian notion of the carnivalized text as dialogic, open-ended, and essayistic, as opposed to a monologic, invective, and assertive understanding of satire. I will devote this last section to a scene in the novel that, I believe, illustrates this dialogic stance and also brings to fruition the novel’s function as inquiry in face of a homogenous discursive apparatus in the post-9/11 world. It is this

stance, I argue, that justifies the novel's resort to satire—although I am in no way arguing that satire is the only means through which this can be achieved. But through the resort to satiric humor—that includes all the textual strategies that I have explored above—the novel is able to put forward some disagreeable “truths” about the aftermath of 9/11, to do so in a way that creates empathy with the reader, and to thus facilitate a more serene reflection on “what 9/11 has meant.”

An enigmatic entry in Walter's “Journals” from 2005 reveals the author's intent to query the official narrative and to offer an alternative space for reflection: “What if the great 9/11 book comes not from there, but from here, one of those fuzzy places that doesn't exist to them” (Walter 2007, “Journals,” 16). Besides an awareness of the general expectation for a “great 9/11 book,” Walter shows how “there” and “them” have come to signify the official discourse of the mainstream media and the Bush administration, while “here” remains a private place, a place of indeterminacy, suspicious of an otherwise self-assured rhetoric. The place that many Americans—whether directly affected by the attacks or not—inhabit. This place is fuzzy—not seen or understood clearly, not expressed in precise terms, blurry, unfocused, lacking definition²¹⁹—because it is dialogic, yet in process, open to dialogue and transformation. Therefore, I will argue that the scene where Jaguar and Remy discuss the multiple meanings of the term “zero” (Walter 2007, 307-311) encapsulates the novel's scope and focus.

Many readers and commentators have hypothesized about the meaning of “The Zero” in the novel, both as a title and as a name-place for the site of devastation. The most obvious—and I argue misleadingly obvious—interpretation is the evocation of Ground Zero in New York City. What is interesting is that the name “Ground Zero” itself is open to multiple interpretations, as its genealogy reveals that it, in turn, refers to other scenes of devastation: the term was first used at the close of the Second World War to refer to the detonation sites of atomic bombs, it was familiar to “Cold War discussions of the material effects of nuclear explosions and [...] correctly used in relation to Hiroshima and Nagasaki” (Edkins 2003, 105). As the Merriam Webster dictionary states, the term entered English usage in 1946. It also notes that the term has become diluted over the twentieth-century, and besides its primary use as “the point directly above, below, or at which a nuclear explosion occurs,” it has become a synonym for “square one” (Merriam-Webster), for starting from scratch. Some have argued that it was this everyday usage of the term that made the site be spontaneously renamed Ground Zero—and I say “renamed” because it was originally and immediately after the attacks referred to as “the pile” (Langewiesche qtd. in Sturken 2004, 315). The use of Ground Zero to refer to the WTC site was allegedly first used live by a journalist at *ABC News*, and in print by an *AP* reporter, a few days after the

²¹⁹ According to varying definitions in the Merriam-Webster dictionary.

attacks. The choice of this designation may have also been influenced by the fact that during the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993, the site was also referred to as Ground Zero (Zimmer 2011, n.p.). In any case, most critics agree that the renaming clearly sought, above all, to evoke the devastation of a site of nuclear detonation, and disfavor its occurrence as a result of some common, everyday usage of the term.²²⁰

While critics like Ray (2005) argue that referring to the post-9/11 WTC site as Ground Zero “makes clear that the civilian victims and spectacular destruction of ‘9/11’ triggered an unconscious discursive reenactment of the problem of U.S. guilt for the 300,000, mostly noncombatant victims of the first use of nuclear weapons against the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945” (Ray 2005, n.p.), other critics like Edkins (2003), Kaplan (2003), and Sturken (2004) have forcefully argued that the name in fact appropriates the 1945 tragedy and somehow obscures American guilt. As Edkins states, the use of ground zero “in connection with 9/11 is a regrettable exaggeration of the destruction caused” (Edkins 2003, 105). It is important to note, then, how words “frame, interpret, and produce meanings—and preclude other meanings” (Kaplan 2003, 55), and as Kaplan suggests, the highly condensed and charged appellation of Ground Zero has come to signify both the attacks, the site itself, “the absence of the twin towers, the people, and the corpses to bury” (Ibid., 56), and also other meanings that can be derived from the idea of a clean slate:

This meaning resonates with the often-heard claim that the world was radically altered by 9/11, that the world will never be the same, that Americans have lost their former innocence about their safety and invulnerability at home. This way of thinking may be called a narrative of historical exceptionalism, almost an antinarrative that claims that the event was so unique and unprecedented as to transcend its time and defy comparison or historical analysis. (Ibid.)

But further political implications can be derived from the idea of Ground Zero as scratch, as a point of origin: “the illimitable response to terrorism must itself start from square one, from this original penetration of evil, and the response must match the full power of this traumatic rupture, for which no prior guidance, historical limits, or wider political context is appropriate” (Ibid.). In other words, the appellation Ground Zero as an unprecedented event—which equals historical exceptionalism—erases the many precedents of this type of event in history—including the one that lead to the coining of

²²⁰ See Ben Zimmer, “Ground Zero. Are These Words Tied to 9/11 Forever? (*Boston Globe* 11 September 2011). http://archive.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2011/09/11/ground_zero/

the term itself in relation to American nuclear bombing—and reifies the idea of 9/11 as an unprecedented fall from the United States’ “isolationist innocence” (Sturken 2004, 311).²²¹ As Kaplan contends, the destruction of New York did not prompt any overt comparisons with the nuclear detonations in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the memory of these events—and the American involvement in them—has been erased by the appropriation of the term into the 9/11 context. The veiled invocation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the use of the term “ground zero” served to elevate the destructive magnitude of the attacks of 9/11 by establishing a parallel between the events (Kaplan 2003, 57), while at the same time the American agency in causing nuclear devastation was obscured by the only overt historical comparison that was made—Pearl Harbor—that served to put the focus on American victimhood.²²² Because, as Kaplan notes, to acknowledge the reference to the nuclear bombings “would trouble the very binary oppositions and exceptionalist narratives erected on that ground, between before and after, between being with us or with the terrorists, between the American way of life and the ‘axis of evil’” (Kaplan 2003, 57), and would contest the idea of American exceptionalism by proving that the United States has also engaged in similarly destructive forms of terror. Thus, as Kaplan concludes, it is important to highlight “the importance of language in giving meaning to an event that seems to defy meaning” (Ibid., 57), when the choice of words can help to acknowledge or disavow recent history. As I have noted previously, the denomination Ground Zero can evoke not only the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki but also, as Coates suggests, the “ground zero” that African slaves encountered in southern Manhattan (Coates 2015, 86).

Such is the concern that prompts Jaguar’s discussion with Remy about the meaning of the term “zero” in the novel. Reflecting on The Zero as a site both of destruction and reconstruction, “a highly overdetermined space [...] inscribed by local, national, and global meanings, a neighborhood, a commercial district, and a site of memory and mourning” (Sturken 2004, 312), Remy sadly acknowledges that, in the site, converge economic interests, political agendas, and narratives of grief. It is a place where the past and the future overlap, with the past being ostensibly wiped away by the future,

²²¹ But, as Sturken contends, “virtually every traumatic event of 20th-century U.S. history, from Pearl Harbor to the Vietnam War, has been characterized as the moment when that innocence was lost” (Sturken 2004, 311).

²²² Critics have also argued that the comparison with Pearl Harbor has often been made for the sake of arguing that the American response to 9/11 should be as forceful and unwavering as the response to Pearl Harbor, which led to the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. On the evening of 11 September 2001, former secretary of State and national security advisor Henry Kissinger posted an online article in *The Washington Post* in which he said: “the government should be charged with a systematic response that, one hopes, will end the way that the attack on Pearl Harbor ended—with the destruction of the system that is responsible for it” (Kissinger 2001, n.p.).

with observation platforms being constructed to allow real estate speculators to envision ambitious plans for lucrative redevelopment. Not unlike some of the debaters who, after the cleanup operation at the WTC site, discussed the design for a memorial to the 9/11 victims (Sturken 2004), Remy distrusts the “plowed and scraped and rearranged” site because “[t]he ground is where history lay,” where memory lay, and “[i]f you take away the very ground, what could possibly be left?” (Walter 2007, 307). At The Zero “the soil was tamped with bone and gristle and bravery” (307), but those who have been working daily in the cleanup have no such idea of the quasi-sacredness of the place, and have colloquially transitioned from calling it “the pile” to “The Zero” and finally to “The Place that Stunk” (17). Now it no longer stinks with decomposing body parts, because it has been cleaned and sanitized, and it is while Remy is reflecting on the “yawning emptiness” (308) that Jaguar appears and, apparently reading Remy’s mind, comments: “Aptly named” (309). Looking at “the epic construction site before them” (309), Jaguar and Remy engage in a conversation over the possible meanings of “zero”:

Zero. The absence of all magnitude or quantity. A person or thing with no discernible qualities or even existence. The point of departure in a reckoning. Zero hour—that sort of thing. A state or condition of total absence. The point of neutrality between opposites. To zero in: to concentrate firepower on the exact range of something. That’s a good one, too, although it’s a bit literal. [...] But I tell you the best derivation, for my money: *zero sum*.²²³ That’s what we’ve got here, if you ask me. Gains and losses coming out equal. No possible outcome except more of the same. And yet...[...] No, say what you will. It is a fitting name. (309; emphasis in the original)

By opening the semantic field of “zero,” Jaguar invites Remy to reflect on the way that the aftermath has been processed and how it could have been processed alternatively. Where Remy sees absence, a void, Jaguar brings in meanings that seem to point to the reflections by Kaplan and Sturken that I have glossed over above, especially as regards past violence: the zero-sum game is suggestive of an imperialist foreign policy, where in order for me to win, you have to lose. And it is also reminiscent of how, for real estate speculation to succeed, the traces of destruction have to be erased.

²²³ The zero sum game, a concept derived from game theory and economic theory, is “a mathematical representation of a situation in which each participant’s gain or loss of utility is exactly balanced by the losses or gains of the utility of the other participants” (Source: Wikipedia). As a non-cooperative game, one side’s victory depends on the other side losing.

It is also interesting to note that the way that the scene is constructed makes it dialogical: although it is mostly Jaguar who speaks in direct speech, there are several markers that suggest dialogue—or even the Bakhtinian notion of an “internally dialogized voice”—such as Jaguar’s “say what you will,” even if Remy seems to be saying nothing. Just as Markham had anticipated Remy’s internal voice—in a previous scene where he not only replies to Remy’s thoughts but even to Remy’s wondering if he is thinking out loud (57)—, Jaguar anticipates Remy’s internal voice, and this idea is conveyed by placing Remy’s reflections as fitting each of Jaguar’s arguments. For instance, in response to the non-cooperative game of zero sum, where victory depends on the other’s defeat—an “us vs. them” scenario—Remy reflects on how our beliefs could also make us look uncivilized and primitive, with our insistence on “saying each night that the moon *came out*, like superstitious men scratching their fear onto cave walls” (309; emphasis in the original). This image is deeply suggestive of the “hunting metaphor” that the Bush administration used to portray the Taliban, in the wake of 9/11, as barbaric and primitive peoples who hide in caves, only that in the reflection about the meaning of “zero” Remy wonders if it could also be applied to us. Jaguar’s response to Remy’s thought is a reflection on the Arabic origins of the word “zero,” pointing at how the East brought culture—and new realities—to the West, and thus linking “us” and “them” causally and showing the interdependencies of the two cosmovisions:

It’s an Arab word [...]. Zero. From the word *sifr*. Means empty, like cypher. The world had no concept of zero, of nothingness, until we brought it west. Of course, we stole it from the Hindus. But it had never occurred in the West that there could be a number before one. [...] *Civilization*. They couldn’t even get their minds around the concept of emptiness, of infinity, the circle completing itself. If you can’t count nothing, you can’t conceive of everything. Without zero, you can’t comprehend negative numbers. So you can’t see infinity. There’s no sense to the universe. No negative to balance the positive, no axis on which to turn, no evil to balance the good. Without zero, every system eventually breaks down. [...] it’s the right name. (310; emphasis in the original)

Jaguar’s speech is conceptually packed, but the most obvious connection to be made here is the acceptance of vulnerability and loss as necessary steps for a more compassionate—and realistic—understanding of the human condition. It is, so to speak, understanding that we are “undone by each other” (Butler 2006, 23), and that, if

this is not understood, then the official “narrative falters, as it must” (Ibid.). When loss is not accepted in these relational terms, The Zero comes to mean the absence caused by the loss, a loss that in this scenario cannot be truly felt—because it cannot be truly acknowledged—and needs thus to be “forcefully” fed, counterfeited, performed, as in Edgar’s story about a dead father, as in the government’s triumphant rhetoric of heroic might and retaliation. As Flinn writes, “[a]ll voids must be filled. All emotional wounds, infected or not, must be plastered over” (Flinn, 2014, 225). The process of grieving is called to a premature end by the alleged needs of economic resurgence and hasty retaliation. As Walter notes in his “Journals,” The Zero symbolizes “[t]he speed with which the country moves on, digests even this” and how “we’re in Iraq” soon after the fact (Walter 2007, “Journals,” 18), “trading liberty for security, demanding our own propaganda. Party to our own deception. The propaganda of distraction, of triviality. Endless process of moment, overcoming, forgetting, nostalgia. A nostalgia factory” (Ibid., 14-15). In this sense, then, The Zero can be read as a metaphor for amnesia as a cultural condition that wipes clean the past to always get a fresh start, which also means that innocence is perpetually lost, that we always get back to the point of origin. Zero is the inability to integrate the “negative lessons of history” (Bercovitch 2002, 254) in the national narrative, which leads to a repetition of the same mistakes. Remy thinks also about the absence of zero in a clock, and how the absence of zero can be the absence of time to pause and reflect: “He thought of the watch face. No zero on a clock. Around and around. No rest. No balance. No starting place. Just on to the next number” (Walter 2007, 96).

And yet, zero can also mean a point of no progress, of paralysis, a “traumatic sense of time standing still” (Kaplan 2003, 56), as in the figure of the falling man suspended in the air that makes invisible the moment of impact on the ground, that cancels death in a moment of aesthetic sublimation. Zero can also come to represent that intermediate space between positive and negative, that middle ground that is neither this nor that, that space that carries with it the potential to become better or worse. As I have offered a parallel between Pynchon’s notion of paranoid perception and Remy’s psychic state, we could also look for a meaning of “zero” in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, where the hopelessness of the “Ideology of Zero” (Pynchon 1973, 149) pivots on the setting of binary contrasts between zero and one, the negation of the intermediate domain between those two figures, “a Pavlovian world of eithers and ors” (Fowler 1980, 55). The novel underscores how one can go “Beyond the Zero” (this is the title of the novel’s first section), and the epigraph announces how zero is never absolute, how “[n]ature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation” (Wernher von Braun qtd. in Pynchon 1973, 2). Transformation and renewal are, again, the key elements of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque, a festival that celebrates the two poles of death and regeneration. As Fowler notes, “Zero is here not a finality, but a portal. Behind the

visible world there is an invisible one" (Fowler 1980, 51). Additionally, Walter affirms that "Remy is the Zero" (Walter 2007, "Journals," 19), which Schwarz reads as a metaphor for Ground Zero, which "means nothing more than a blur concerning the definite knowledge of what constitutes the self" (Schwarz 2013, 376), the "erosion of the central 'I'" (Ibid., 385) "the nothingness of identity" (Ibid., 388).

There are no finite answers for the meaning of zero, and I do not attempt to offer all the possible answers here. But I want to conclude with Spanos' reflection on what zero can mean, as I believe it sets the tone for the type of reflection that Walter's novel opens up. In his memoir about the firebombing of Dresden by US-British forces, *In the Neighborhood of Zero*, Spanos—then a US soldier, and a survivor of Dresden like Vonnegut—, explains how he usually used the phrase "zero zone to characterize the 'place' that was Dresden after the apocalyptic firebombing" (Spanos 2010, xviii; emphasis in the original). And how, after delivering a lecture in Pittsburgh in 2007, fellow New Americanist Donald Pease suggested a different interpretation of the phrase for him:

that zero zone, which was the unspeakable consequence of the firebombing, was also, and because of that, a zone in which the social bond as I had been taught to feel it by "America," had been broken. It was this "revelation," he suggested, that enabled me to respond the way I did to the dead of Dresden, the "figures in the rubble who had been reduced to nonexistence," and turned that burned-out nonplace into "the neighborhood of zero." (Spanos 2010, xviii)

The neighborhood of zero is then, for Spanos, the place where the testimony of the horror can take place, and also a "redemptive" place where the "banalizing Word of the custodians of the American cultural memory" (Ibid.) can be contested. After all, what I have been trying to demonstrate throughout these pages is that reading *The Zero* from a Bakhtinian notion of satire emphasizes a similar redemptive function for "The Zero" as a place that can be, as Jaguar reflects, "[t]he point of departure in a reckoning" (Walter 2007, 309).

4. Conclusions

The objective behind this dissertation was to address a subject that, arguably, has received insufficient attention in post-9/11 fiction studies: the use of humor, and especially irony and satire, in the literary responses to the attacks. The use of irony and satire in relation to 9/11 remains a resistant terrain for post-9/11 fiction studies, even as humor has found its way into other cultural reflections on the attacks of September 11. From the immediacy of popular 9/11 disaster jokes, to *The Onion's* incisive pieces in late September 2001, the abundant coverage of the political management of the attacks in late-night shows, and episodes of *South Park* and *Family Guy* that pulled the event into their storylines,²²⁴ it is accurate to say that the last decade and a half has been teeming with ironic and satirical renditions of the aftermath of 9/11, despite the early calls by pundits and critics for the banishment of this type of humor. The view that that irony and satire were not adequate nor appropriate in the face of tragedy, out of varying degrees of cultural sensitivity or political correctness, has not only been contradicted by the abundant production of humorous works in post-9/11 popular culture, but also publicly and soundly contested in the cultural arena (Beers 2001; Kakutani 2001; Williams 2003; Newman 2008). In other words, popular culture was quick to respond to the “lifting” of the ban on humor after 9/11 which, as early as October 2001, then-mayor of New York Rudy Giuliani declared: “I am here to give you permission to laugh. If you don’t, I’ll have you arrested” (qtd. in Kuipers 2005, 73).

The outpouring of irony and satire in post-9/11 popular culture has been equally matched by the analyses carried out in the critical field, where a considerable number of scholarly works have given theoretical attention to the popular culture’s use of this

²²⁴ See footnote 108 for a description of the episodes dealing with 9/11.

type of humor in relation to 9/11.²²⁵ In contrast, the number of critical works that address the use of irony and satire in post-9/11 literary fiction is comparatively small, and while it is true that the number of post-9/11 fiction texts that engage in these humorous practices is scarce, its use is relevant enough to have warranted more critical attention.²²⁶ Especially, when considering that the post-9/11 novel was assigned a predominant role in the culture's need to define "what 9/11 has meant," echoed by the repeated expectations for "the great 9/11 novel." In other words, when the field of post-9/11 studies was attentively scrutinizing the novels produced, and when there seemed to be a critical consensus as to how to approach them, it seems odd that the use of satire in any post-9/11 novel should go unnoticed. A simple parallelism on the neglect of irony and satire in comparison to other considerations can be drawn by using Walter's *The Zero*: of the seven scholarly articles that analyze the novel, less than half deal specifically with the novel's use of humor—and two of those, only partially—, while the rest explores dominant questions of post-9/11 fiction studies such as the narration of trauma and the approximation to the figure of the Other. While *The Zero* does not negate these readings—in fact, it invites them—its use of satire in relation to 9/11 as early as 2006 is a feature salient enough, one would think, to have raised critics' attention. Especially, because it is not a marginal element in Walter's novel, but the element that articulates the narrative.

It is the imbalance and contradictions between the high profile debates about the alleged demise of irony and satire, their extended use in popular culture, the high

²²⁵ For instance, Daniel O'Rourke III and Pravin Rodrigues, "The Death and Re-birth of Irony: *The Onion's* Call for Rhetorical Healing in the Wake of 9/11" (*Language, Symbols, and the Media: Communication in the Aftermath of the World Trade Center Attack*, ed. Robert E. Denton Jr., New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2004); Giseline Kuipers, "'Where Was King Kong When We Needed Him?' Public Discourse, Digital Disaster Jokes, and the Functions of Laughter after 9/11" (*The Journal of American Culture*. 28.1 [2005]: 70–84); Paul Lewis, *Cracking Up: American Humor in a Time of Conflict* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006); Donna Hoffman and Alison D. Howard, "Representations of 9-11 in Editorial Cartoons" (*PS: Political Science & Politics* 40.2 [2007]: 271-274); Aloys Fleischmann, "The Rhetorical Function of Comedy in Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*" (*Mosaic: a Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 40.4 [2007]: 69-85); Paul Achter, "Comedy in Unfunny Times: News Parody and Carnival After 9/11" (*Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25.3 [2008]: 274-303); William R. Jones, "'People Have to Watch What They Say': What Horace, Juvenal, and 9/11 Can Tell Us about Satire and History" (*Helios* 36.1 [2009]: 27-53); Ted Gornelios and Viveca Greene, *A Decade of Dark Humor: How Comedy, Irony, and Satire Shaped Post-9/11 America* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011); Eliane Campbell, "The Cultural Politics of Justice: Bakhtin, Stand-up Comedy and Post-9/11 Securitization" (*Theoretical Criminology* 15.2 [2011]: 159-179); Sophia McClennen, "The Public at Risk: Dissent and Democracy after 9/11" (*Colbert's America: Satire and Democracy*, ed. Sophia McClennen, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Charlotte Heath-Kelly, "Can We Laugh Yet? Reading Post-9/11 Counterterrorism Policy as Magical Realism and Opening a Third-space of Resistance" (*European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 18.4 [2012]: 343-360); and Julie Webber, *The Cultural Set Up of Comedy: Affective Politics in the United States Post 9/11* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

²²⁶ Among the post-9/11 novels that resort to humor are Walter's *The Zero* (2006), Ken Kalfus' *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* (2006), Sherman Alexie's *Flight* (2007), Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2012), Christopher Grimes' *The Pornographers* (2012), and Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* (2013). Teddy Wayne's *Kapitoil* (2010), although set in 1999, is also meant to be read as post-9/11. As noted in chapter 2, Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children* (2006) and Jay McInerney's *The Good Life* (2006) can also be considered light social satires.

expectations set on fiction writers after 9/11, and—more importantly for the present project—, the lack of attention that these “banished” forms received when they were deployed in that most “venerated” product of post-9/11 cultural production (i.e. the novel), that triggered my interest and gave form to the main research questions that have animated this dissertation: what are the reasons that may explain the lack of attention that satire receives in post-9/11 fiction criticism, and what is the function satire serves in Walter’s novel?

The lack of attention to Walter’s novel has much to do, as I argue at the beginning of chapter 2, with a certain “fossilization” of post-9/11 fiction studies which, while certainly open to new developments in the corpus—as Petrovic shows—, seems to have established a standardized, prescriptive—and apparently unmatchable—way to analyze early post-9/11 texts. The questions that seem to dominate critical approaches to early post-9/11 fiction are how the texts in question attempt to understand and give meaning to the events of 9/11 and its aftermath, and how the traumatic shock of the attacks seems to complicate the task of understanding, narrating, and giving meaning to the events in fiction. Further complicating the matter is the fact that the reception of these novels is imbued with the culture’s high expectations: added to the need to define a “meaning” for the event, public debate turns increasingly into the wider role that fiction plays—or should play—in society. In this respect, Keeble argues that the critical importance assigned to these debates “actually reinforced George W. Bush’s assertion that ‘on September 11 night fell on a new world’” (Keeble 2016, n.p.), burdening fiction writers with the grueling task of explaining a world for which there was, allegedly, no precedent. This reading of the events of September 11 as a watershed moment, as a unique world event that changed history, has also meant that the complex prehistories and aftermaths of 9/11 have mostly been undercut in the dominant narratives about 9/11, further promoting recollections of a prelapsarian, mythical past before the loss of innocence. While I am not arguing that this is necessarily the stance that dominates the vast majority of post-9/11 fiction works, it does seem to be the stance that dominates critical approaches to it.

As a second possible factor, I have explored how the “seriousness” of trauma-centered approaches to both the aftermath and the literary responses to it, enters in conflict with public perceptions of what irony and satire are—irony as fundamentally unserious, distanced, and frivolous; satire as mocking, moralizing, and unambiguous. It is remarkable how this common understanding seems to dismiss the remarkable contributions of postmodern theory, which has revealed irony, satire, and parody to be playfully complex, double-voiced, deconstructive, and destabilizing. After all, I have also suggested that perhaps, although these notions seem to have been greatly simplified, there may remain some knowledge of satire’s inherently dialogical nature,

that renders it, consequently, “undesirable” at times when public discourse seeks to be hegemonic, hermetic, and self-contained.

In third place, I have also pointed to the breach that exists in literary theory between widespread understandings of the genre and actual satiric practice in narrative. Chapter 2 has sought to demonstrate how the corpus of twentieth-century satire criticism—a corpus that I have labelled “traditional” or “conventional”—still casts a large shadow over what critics, academics, and the general public understand as narrative satire. This understanding is further reinforced by the influence in the public consciousness of a popular and specific type of invective political satire in the United States (most clearly embodied in television late-night shows), that tends to have an unambiguous target that is ridiculed and lampooned. In general terms, then, narrative satire is usually understood as a closed, targeted, condemning, and unambiguous discourse that resorts to parody, irony, and several other textual strategies to expose and ridicule a set of ideas or people, always with a moralizing aim, and it becomes evident how this may be perceived as inadequate at times of national crisis. While this characterization of satire may partly be true—as it fits certain types of satire—, it does not account for the full range of possibilities that the satiric text opens up. Furthermore, and as I have suggested through chapters 2 and 3, it contradicts the long tradition of satirical writing in the United States, especially that produced during the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, a tradition that Walter pays homage to in his text through a rich intertextuality. While it may be argued that the characteristics found in many of these texts—with their disruption of linear plots and their use of intertextuality, parody, citation, and irony—can be adequately described as postmodern—a point that I concede—a full exploration of these strategies as part of a Bakhtinian understanding of satire—with its notions of dialogism and the grotesque at its core—helps to underscore the playful yet engaged nature of Walter’s text. In other words, I have deemed Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque as the most illustrative way to demonstrate—against the misconceptions that seem to drag postmodern understandings of irony and satire—how satirical post-9/11 fiction can be a useful and productive way to engage with the aftermath of 9/11, especially in relation to the discursive apparatus that was put in place.

Reading Walter’s satire through Bakhtin’s theorization of the carnivalesque gives preeminence to certain formal traits and rhetorical functions that help satire perform an inquisitive and dialogic work. The narrative’s gapped and non-linear structure, the featuring of unusual psychic states, of a narrative voice that is doubled or internally dialogized, the presence of multiple voices that results in a general sense of relativity, the presence of parody, of a deep intertextuality that understands writing as a re-reading or re-accentuation of another’s word, the identification of ambivalence as the structuring principle of the narrative, and the polysemic intention of the text, all render

The Zero capable of conveying multiple and diverse meanings. This is further reinforced by the novel's resort to the satiric grotesque, as this form of satire, with its inherently dual nature, makes more evident its ability to act as a counter-discourse to the monologic, epic, and official narrative described in chapter 1. The willful ambivalence and inconclusiveness of *The Zero* as carnivalesque satire are also underscored by the intense intertextuality that dominates it, which has the effect of bringing in other stories and other histories into the reflection about 9/11. By recontextualizing the event through the lens of Kafka, Camus, Céline, Pynchon, Vonnegut and others, the text challenges the singular importance and exceptionality attached to 9/11 and its aftermath, which, I argue, is akin to the work that many cultural critics have undertaken in the wake of 9/11 in their analyses of the causes and the consequences of the attacks, in hopes of illuminating the 9/11 conflict by means of an intertwined historical narrative that resists one-sided, imperialist, and dogmatic accounts.

To a great extent, this is the scenario that the novel problematizes: the possibility of, as well as the difficulty in, seeing through the constructed nature of widespread, common-sense and apparently self-evident "truths" which inform the narrative of 9/11 and the War on Terror that I have described in chapter 1. Said narrative was cast as a hegemonic, coherent, and protective discourse that, by resorting to the redeployment of foundational myths and cultural themes, arrogated to itself the functions of re-establishing collective identity, of protecting the citizenship, and of promoting healing. Resorting alternatively to the figure of the hero and the victim, the official discourse worked on two levels: on the one hand, by asserting American exceptionalism and the military power of the United States in the international arena; on the other, by underscoring the vulnerability that the attacks had exposed, insisting on the nation's collective trauma that justified the need for a strong military response and for a unified domestic front. Furthermore, the "culture of commemoration"—i.e. "Never Forget," "United We Stand"—flattened out post-9/11 discourse to the extent easy justifications could be found to exercise censorship, promote war, and establish reactionary domestic policies (Simpson 2006). Any alternative or dissident rationalization of the events—about the causes, about the consequences, about future policies—was met with notable unease and implicit or explicit efforts to silence it. In other words, the official narratives of 9/11 as trauma and loss, and of the War on Terror as the only justified response were, in every sense, discursive achievements, and through their insistent retelling by the government and the media they managed to combine public support and the advancement of a political agenda. It has been sufficiently documented, I believe, that there were overt and covert connections between the Bush administration's neoconservative and hawkish interests and the insistence on the trauma that 9/11 represented.

It was the realization of this intertwinement between the cultural, the emotional, and the political that further impulsed this research: while at first—looking at it from an outsider’s perspective—the official narrative of 9/11 and the War on Terror had seemed outlandish, with its overwhelming heroic overtones, its simplistic rhetoric of an “axis of Evil” and its use of frontier lingo (“Wanted! Dead or Alive”), George W. Bush performing as a cowboy president and a variety of heroic figures, and, at the same time, the almost hysterical insistence on loss, remembrance, and patriotic duty, I soon came to realize that there must be some strong binding factor that legitimated it for the population. Smelser notes how cultural trauma usually effects processes of mobilization of the citizenship around a shared feeling of solidarity that can also see the emergence of primordial cultural themes; indeed, these themes—the United States as a Virgin Land, the American Adam, the frontier thesis, the guiding principle of American Exceptionalism—soon came to the surface in my analysis of the Bush administration’s and the media’s rhetoric, and revealed how it is precisely the insertion of the narrative within a continuum of larger mythical structures shared by a culture that renders it powerful and apparently legitimate

These foundational myths and themes granted effectiveness and coherence to the official narrative to such an extent that it seemed antithetical to the very notion of trauma that it invoked, which resides precisely on the difficulty in narrating the traumatic experience. This is the justification for this dissertation’s approach to the aftermath of 9/11 not from a trauma theory perspective but from a discursive one, as I believed that we were still pending a sound discursive approach to the events, especially when discussing the growing corpus of post-9/11 fiction, which in many cases has tended to replicate the official narrative of lost innocence, trauma, and loss, overriding other insightful and necessary considerations.

By considering the 9/11 and War on Terror discursive apparatuses as narratives, this research has considered these discourses as the main intertexts that Walter’s *The Zero* interpellates, plays with and, ultimately, subverts. *The Zero* addresses precisely the culturally *mediated* quality of the aftermath, depicting a society whose reaction is deeply affected by media and government discourses: therefore, chapter 1 is an exploration of the myths and themes that support this post-9/11 rhetoric that allowed the government and the media to construct a narrative that would explain and give *meaning* to 9/11 and to promote the War on Terror. As several critics have shown, in order to engage humorously with something—especially if one is to ironize, satirize, and parody—one has to first grasp a full understanding of it. And in order to fully understand how these textual operations were carried out, I have deemed Bakhtin’s notions of carnivalization and dialogism, together with Kristeva’s notion of intertextuality—all of them central to the definition of satire that I have favored methodologically—, as the most adequate and incisive ways to demonstrate how, in

face of a monolithic discursive scenario, Walter's *The Zero* can function both to destabilize and to explore the questions brought up by post-9/11 cultural, media, and political discourse. More importantly, the novel is able to effectively respond to the questions of "what 9/11 has meant" and "what 9/11 has done to us," with the caveat that the answers provided may be multiple and not those that the hegemonic culture expects.

Walter recounts how, in the immediate days after the attacks he was reading Camus' essays in *Resistance, Rebellion and Death*, and this made him reflect on Camus' exhortation to "create dangerously": "one can always meet that state of things with a humanistic lamentation and become [...] a living reproach. One can also have [...] attacks of patriotic melancholy," but to create dangerously is "to find out how, among the police forces of so many ideologies (how many churches, what solitude!), the strange liberty of creation is possible" (Camus 1995, 250-251). This, in short, is the claim that I make for *The Zero*, and pose it as a novel that dares to provide a counter-discourse in face of a hegemonic discursive apparatus that decries critical analysis and dissent as un-American, that aims to present the use of irony and satire as frivolous exercises incompatible with the felt reality of a traumatized collectivity, and that demands a unified patriotic front. Reading *The Zero's* satire as carnivalized writing reveals it as a text that is more prone to asking questions than to providing closed and fixed answers, a text that seeks to convey multiple and diverse "meanings," unsure of any univocal claims to "truth." As Kristeva notes, the world represented in these carnivalized texts "has no fear of incriminating itself" (Kristeva 1986, 53), accepts that it is the target of its own satire, and in so doing it "becomes free from presupposed 'values'" (Ibid.) and received discourses. It is this type of text that can cast light on the faultlines in the victim-oriented rendition of the aftermath and the aggressive and hero-oriented official response to it, putting forward fundamental questions about the role of satire in the face of violence and terror. As Hutcheon observes, "[t]o parody is not to destroy the past; in fact to parody is both to enshrine the past and to question it" (Hutcheon 2004, 126). Therefore, this dissertation has sought to demonstrate how the aim of Walter's novel is not so much the denunciation of an allegedly false narrative, but the revelation of its constructed nature, and, hence, of the fact that it is open to challenge. Against the univocal, black-and-white rationale of the official narrative, the novel suggests the possibility of alternative and open-ended discourses.

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