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# Under the Radar: Jess Walter's *The Zero* and the State of Irony and Satire after 9/11

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This article explores a typically overlooked novel within the corpus of post-9/11 fiction, Jess Walter's *The Zero* (2006), and puts forward some hypotheses for this under-examination. The article suggests that the various debates that arose in the aftermath of 9/11—the status of fiction after tragedy, the theses on the demise of irony and satire, the high expectations put on canonical authors to give meaning to the event, and standardized explorations of the figure of the terrorist Other—all served to construct readings for *The Zero* that fell within prescriptive approaches to post-9/11 fiction and thus missed its highly subversive potential. While recent academic output is starting to explore *The Zero* in innovative ways, early reception failed to examine it conceptually and formally, favoring as it did a trauma studies approach that resulted in a bland analysis of the novel's focus on terrorist figures. This article offers a reading of *The Zero* through Mikhail Bakhtin's theorization of satirical carnivalization, a practice that is especially suited to construct a dialogic, polyphonic and inquisitive narrative to not only question but dialogue with the post-9/11 United States.

Keywords: post-9/11 fiction; irony; satire; counter-discourse; carnivalization; perpetrator fiction

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## Por debajo del radar: *The Zero* de Jess Walter y el estatus de la ironía y la sátira tras el 11 de septiembre

Este artículo explora una de las novelas menos estudiadas del corpus de ficción post-11-S, la novela de Jess Walter *The Zero* (2006), y propone algunas hipótesis que puedan explicar esta falta de atención. El artículo sugiere que los debates que surgieron en los Estados Unidos tras el 11-S—respecto al estatus de la ficción frente a la tragedia, las tesis sobre el declive de la ironía y la sátira, las grandes expectativas depositadas en los autores canónicos para que dieran sentido al hecho, y las ficcionalizaciones normativas de la figura del terrorista como

Otro—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 su potencial subversivo. 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 las acciones terroristas que son objeto de la novela. El artículo ofrece una lectura desde la noción del carnaval satírico desarrollada por Mikhail Bakhtin y muestra como la sátira 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.

Palabras clave: ficción 11-S; ironía; sátira; contra-discurso; carnivalización; ficción sobre la figura del perpetrador

## 1. Introduction

Over a decade and a half after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the corpus of post-9/11 fiction has diversified into previously unexplored areas and so criticism has also followed these new tendencies.[1] 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" (2015, ii) that dominated the discursive landscape after 9/11, and which signified the attacks as a traumatic moment of rupture that meant a loss, yet again, of innocence for the United States. The first wave of post-9/11 fiction tended to be dominated by certain readerly and critical expectations that, in the 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" (2005, n.p.), and while writers would oblige in due course, DeLillo's harrowing essay "In the Ruins of the Future" of December 2001 warned that response became a question of "response-ability," and that these first attempts at "understanding" 9/11 would be tentative at best. The challenge for writers was, as DeLillo wrote, "to set into our frame of practiced response" the "massive spectacle that continues to seem unmanageable, too powerful" (2001, 35), and to give it meaning while at the same time resisting "the demand to speak with moral clarity and [to] declare what the event means" (Abel 2003, 1236).

It is upon 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 attack's effects without falling into voyeurism, aesthetic escapism, domesticity or the attendant danger of depoliticization, when, at the same time, there was a recognition of the inexpressible nature of traumatic events.[2] 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" (2016, 169) and criticism often demanded, as well as decried, such limitations. 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 were clearly voicing these alleged failings, declaring that "Truth Is Stronger than Fiction" and that "no novels ha[d] yet engaged with the post-September

[1] The research carried out for the writing of this article was funded by an FPU grant from the Spanish Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports (MECD), and was conducted as part of the Consolidated Research Group Women's Creation and Thought (2014 SGR 44, GRC Creació i Pensament de les Dones) and the research project VANACEM (FEM 2014-55057-P).

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

11 era in any meaningful way" (Donadio 2005, n.p.), a verdict that was confirmed in 2011 in Laura Miller's piece for *Salon*, "Why We Haven't Seen a Great 9/11 Novel."

It was while still waiting for "the great 9/11 novel" to come out of the more or less 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" (quoted in Walter [2006] 2007)—and was a finalist for the National Book Award, it remained largely under the radar of critics and scholars alike, even as it shed some light on what 9/11 *had meant* and what 9/11 *has done to us*—the usual demands of critics of post-9/11 fiction. This is somewhat perplexing, as by 2006 roughly sixty-nine post-9/11 novels had been published and, of those, less than half were by American novelists. Thus 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 meant it passed 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 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" (Bush 2001b, n.p.), and to the effective inauguration of a state of exception at home and abroad. As John Duvall argues, the publication of Walter's text in 2006 was indeed a risky move (2013, 280), when the cultural climate was prone to self-censorship and to political correctness, and when dissenters were quickly accused of being un-American. No other American novel had so straightforwardly engaged with the consequences of 9/11 at the cultural and political levels as *The Zero* did, or sought so fervently to open up a space for an alternative public discussion of what 9/11 had meant. But as Baelo-Allué argues, the trauma discourse was so pervasive that it permeated not only post-9/11 fiction but also political discourse as the perfect means to accommodate the discourses of patriotism, innocence and exceptionalism, as well as to justify the ideology of pre-emptive action (2016, 167). This, together with academics in the field of trauma studies seizing upon the opportunity "to put into practice their own theories" (167), may explain the popularity of the trauma studies approach in critiquing early post-9/11 fiction, and it is in this light that Walter's choice to write a satirical novel stands out as a frontrunner in the exploration of the concerns that Petrovic attributes to the second wave; namely, the exploration of the wider and geopolitical implications of the US exceptionalist response (2015).

The analysis by Duvall is the first among a small number of recent scholarly articles that have begun to turn their attention to *The Zero*, albeit that some generic studies on post-9/11 fiction briefly mentioned the novel—sometimes just as a footnote—from 2009 onwards (Melnick 2009; Crownshaw 2011; Däwes 2011; Gibbs 2014). After

Duvall's article in 2013, Derosa (2013), Dodge (2014), Flinn (2014), K. Miller (2014) and Worthington (2015) have all followed up with important studies on the novel.[3] While it is true that some of 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 have also begun to investigate *The Zero*'s resort to satirical humor (Duvall 2013; Dodge 2014; Flinn 2014). Following in the same vein, this article reflects on the significance of Walter's satire as a counter-discourse that negates both the prescriptions of early post-9/11 fiction and the announcements of the satire's demise as a valid outlook for the post-9/11 world. In contrast to early media reception that seemed to miss the novel's high potential for ethical engagement, the brief examination carried out in this work of some of the textual and semiotic strategies employed seeks to demonstrate the vitality of an allegedly defunct and politically incorrect form of satire in the post-9/11 world.

## 2. The Recurrent Deaths of Irony and Satire[4]

Under the much-repeated mantra that "everything changed" on 9/11, trauma became the overarching and inescapable paradigm of interpretation, and the melancholic atmosphere of the nation became its context. As both Butler ([2004] 2006) and Sturken (2007) have argued, this melancholic state constrained the critical examination of the causes of the attack and hampered the task of seeking alternatives to the government's aggressive policies. In this context, then, the trope of the end of irony and satire soon gained traction as their attendant "lack of seriousness" was deemed an inadequate means through which to address the aftermath. Pundits and cultural prognosticators, like the editor of *Vanity Fair* Graydon Carter, declared that "the end of the age of irony" had arrived (Hirschorn 2011, n.p.) and reflected that this was probably the "[o]ne good thing [that] could come from this horror" (Rosenblatt 2001, n.p.). As Webber argues, the most relevant effect of this type of reaction was to demonstrate "a kind of political and cultural truism" that tends to associate American culture with perennial youth, whereby young people are simply "playing around" until events force them to get serious (2013, 3). The perceived loss of innocence on 9/11 thus demanded the United States to, finally, "grow up." The general mood seemed to subscribe to the thesis that foreshadowed the demise of black comedy, cynicism and satire in a post-

[3] Earlier studies include a conference presentation by Derosa (2011) and an MA thesis by Santin (2011). However, I take 2013 as the start date, which is when peer-reviewed journal articles or book chapters that focus specifically on *The Zero* begin to be published.

[4] 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). Many of the media texts I refer to here use them interchangeably. For a brief overview of the debates over the end of irony in the media, see Hirschorn (2011) and Duvall (2013).

9/11 climate "where a new form of PC (Patriotic Correctness) shaped most discussions of the US response to terrorism domestically and globally" (Duvall 2013, 280).

The end-of-irony thesis was, however, soon contested in both the televised and written media—Kakutani (2001), Williams (2003), Newman (2008)—as well as in the academic sphere, and 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 of the end of irony has even been turned on its head in post-9/11 cultural studies; as Ted Gournelos and Viveca S. 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" (2011, xii; emphasis in the original). However, this should not obscure the fact that humor in the form of irony and satire continues in some quarters 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" (2013, 279) and some continue to argue that "irony never really did make a comeback after 9/11" (Hirschorn 2011, n.p.).

Indeed, and as Duvall argues, "to claim that irony died on 9/11 is to selectively read fiction published since 2002" (2013, 280), highlighting that 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), Ken Kalfus's *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* (2006), and later examples such as Christopher Grimes's *The Pornographers* (2012). So what explains the resilience of the belief that satire is not appropriate to deal with 9/11?

Much has to do, in my estimation, with the currency of outdated modes of reading and understanding satire derived from an influential—yet now stagnant—corpus of satire criticism that bloomed, especially in the United States, between 1960 and 1980.[5] Unlike the notions of irony and parody, which were revisited by and became pivotal to postmodernism—see, for instance, Hutcheon (1985; 1994) or Jameson (1984)—satire has not had the benefit of such critical reevaluation until very recently. And this is despite the fact that Mikhail Bakhtin's groundbreaking work on the subject (1963; 1965) was readily available in the West in the 1970s, and that many theorists have been working on a renewal of the notion of the satiric since the 1990s: Griffin (1994), Weisenburger (1995), Bogel (2001), Mookerjee (2013) and Bowles (2015), among others. But as Bowles himself contends, satire tends to elicit an intuitive response in the reader whereby an exclusively referential or mimetic meaning is attributed to the

[5] The trope of the death of satire is a recurrent debate in aesthetic theory, especially from the nineteenth century onwards. In the United States, the debate bloomed between academics at Yale and Chicago universities during the period 1950-1980. See, for instance, Worcester (1940), Elliot (1960), Highet (1962), Feinberg (1963), Kernan (1965), Paulson (1967) and Hodgart (1969).

characters or situations described, and the text is usually perceived as aggressive, with a very clear, targeted intentionality that relies on an unambiguous moral positioning. For instance, and in order to understand what the consensual, mainstream perceptions are, *Merriam-Webster 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." ([2003] 2014, s.v.). In this conventional—and still current—view, satire is, then, a corrective tale that rests on the alignment of the reader and the author against the satirized object (Bogel 2001), an alignment which is perceived as unacceptable in certain historical circumstances—as one would satirically condemn certain situations at one's own peril. For instance, Roger Rosenblatt's argument that certain events "like 9/11, and perhaps Obama [...] are so big that they almost imply an obligation not to diminish [them] by clever comparisons" reveals how in this view ironic humor is "a diminishing act" where we smile "at the distance" (quoted in Newman 2008, n.p.). Yet newer trends in satiric theory question this perception of the distance between satirist/reader and the object, as they understand satire as, if anything, an act that problematizes the creation of difference precisely because the object of satire is "*not alien enough*" to the satirist and reader (Bogel 2001, 41; emphasis in the original).

The persistence of outdated understandings of satire is especially perplexing in a culture like the United States, which has such a long tradition of satirical writing and has produced such pivotal figures as Nathanael West, Joseph Heller, Thomas Pynchon and Kurt Vonnegut, to name but a few, to speak nothing of the pervasiveness of satire in every other artistic medium.[6] It is into this lineage that Walter's *The Zero* inscribes itself, and it is through dialogue and intertextual play with this tradition—as well as with the works of Céline, Kafka and Camus—that the novel finds its fullest ethical expression. As Walter fiercely states, "THIS BOOK IS NOT ABOUT THEM [the government]. It's about us" (Flinn 2014, 229; capitals in the original), about the way that Americans have deluded themselves into a post-9/11 collective insanity. Thus, the author himself states that the satire of *The Zero* goes beyond mere 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* does not merely "point the finger at" the government's management of the aftermath of 9/11, but attempts to lead readers into self-examination and a recognition of their own complicity, and it achieves this by building empathic bridges with the reader through what Bowles terms the satiric effect (Bowles 2015, 7).

As Daniel Bowles seeks to demonstrate in *The Ends of Satire* (2015), 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 satiric practices such as inversion, dialogism,

[6] For a comprehensive analysis of American satirical writing in the twentieth century, see Weisenburger (1995).

intertextuality, parody, citation and mythification in everyday theoretical and fictional writing, but can also help to better understand how the satiric effect works. Bakhtin's notions of carnivalization and dialogism are, in my view, among the most fruitful ways to re-examine satiric theory, along with Kristeva's reworking of Bakhtin's dialogism and ambivalence towards the notion of intertextuality. While it is beyond the scope of this article 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 (Bakhtin [1965] 1968) and the "carnival sense of the world" (Bakhtin [1963] 1999, 107) as the basis for the literary practice of carnivalization helps to understand the satiric as a literary gesture permitting the temporary suspension of monologic, authoritative discourses, thus opening up a small breach where other discourses may be considered.

Both in *Problems of Dostevsky's Poetics* (1963) and in *Rabelais and His World* (1965), Bakhtin traces the ancient festivities of carnival in Roman and medieval times as feasts that "celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order," marking "the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. [...] [T]he true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal [...] hostile to all that was immortalized and completed" (Bakhtin [1965] 1968, 10). From this idea of licensed transgression Bakhtin derives the notion of carnivalization (or epistemological inversion) as a literary practice that can be traced back to Antiquity, from the serio-comical genres of Classical times—especially the Menippean satire and the early Socratic dialogues—into the Middle Ages, where he identifies Rabelais's grotesque realism as one of the main examples of carnivalesque energies in fiction (Bakhtin [1965] 1968). These energies in turn encroach upon the emerging genre of the European novel in the eighteenth century (Bakhtin [1981] 2011) and can still be found in Dostoevsky's "polyphonic novel" of the following century, and in the "carnivalized genres" of today (Bakhtin [1963] 1999, 107-113). What Bakhtin's notion of carnivalesque writing underscores is a type of discourse that, in contrast to epic, distanced, closed off monologic discourses, opens up the text for an "atmosphere of joyful relativity" that reverts to "a weakening of its one-sided rhetorical seriousness, its rationality, its singular meaning, its dogmatism" (107). The carnivalized text is especially dialogic as it becomes "writing [that] reads another writing, reads itself and constructs itself through a process of destructive genesis" (Kristeva [1969] 1986, 47). This destructive force is not, as traditional criticism of satire is apt to contend, aggressive and sometimes gratuitous; rather, as Bakhtin maintains, the temporary and "festive" laughter of carnival is a rejuvenating and restorative force (Bakhtin [1963] 1999; [1965] 1968), and this is precisely the type of 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). As Bakhtin writes in *The Dialogic Imagination*, the power of 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 [1981] 2011, 23)

In this light, the satiric is revealed not just as a mode of writing but also as a mode of reading, a way of engaging with a text that is ambivalent, open-ended, polyphonic, that speaks in more than one voice, that is dialogized, "opposed to all that [is] ready-made and completed, to all pretense of immutability, [...] ever changing, playful, undefined" (Bakhtin [1965] 1968, 11). From this perspective, the mimetic act in *The Zero* can be explored as signifying "something beyond the mere practice of imitation" and denunciation (Bowles 2015, 12), and as probing the limits of contemporary authoritative discourses through their temporary suspension. The carnival laughter of *The Zero* is, as Bakhtin would suggest, inquisitive, regenerative, ambivalent and inclusive, as opposed to the type of negative mockery where Walter the satirist would be at a safe distance from the world that he mocks. In the narrative universe of *The Zero* the post-9/11 world is turned inside out through carnivalesque inversion: cowards become heroes, heroes become crooks, victims turn 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 bodily materiality that is so present in the satirical grotesque as a way of bringing all that is abstract and ideal down to earth and making it flesh and material (Bakhtin [1965] 1968, 18-19) is evident in *The Zero*'s constant percolation of "jigsawed bits of people" (Walter [2006] 2007, 44): a chin, a scalp and a head are found in the debris; a body explodes like a water balloon on the sidewalk; rescue workers at "The Place That Stunk" (17) play a game of "*name that piece*" (48; italics in the original), while politicians and bosses give inspirational speeches to the masses, and reporters go "grief fishing" (12). The text abounds with elements germane to carnivalesque subversion, with parodying doubles, unusual psychic states, inappropriate speeches and performances and a general sense of unacknowledged absurdity. Also, and as Kristeva demonstrates, the figures of language used "including repetition, 'inconsequent' statements (which are nonetheless 'connected' within an infinite context) and non-exclusive opposition, which function as empty sets or disjunctive additions, produce a more flagrant dialogism than any other discourse" ([1969] 1986, 49). Temporality is shattered as the narrative jumps from one scene to the next in *media res* and, in a final loop that takes the reader back to the beginning, *The Zero* most effectively embodies the temporary breach, the small gap of opportunity and transgression where the world has been turned on its head.

### 3. Jess Walter's *The Zero*: Satirizing the Aftermath

Walter's satirical novel is narrated through the impaired perspective of a police officer, Brian Remy, an allegedly traumatized and apparently schizophrenic individual whose paranoid experience serves to dissect post-9/11 culture and politics, the lethal logic of violence and forgetting and the manufacture of consent through aggressive state and media propaganda, "the most insidious, greatest propaganda ever devised" (Walter [2006] 2007, 222), according to one of the novel's characters. The novel constructs a devastating portrayal of a society's reaction to a terrorist attack and its acquiescence to the machinations of official discourse, since the felt need for "the comfort of conceptual closure" (Flinn 2014, 232) leads the society portrayed in *The Zero* to fall victim to discourses of heroism, of vengeance, of victimhood, of nostalgia, of security, of consumerism, and so on. As Walter reflects in his "Journals,"[7] he wanted to write an allegorical satire about the aftermath of 9/11 because such a reaction from people was not inauthentic and "in some ways the fact that they believed this shit was even more chilling" (Walter interviewed in Flinn 2014, 232). Thus, the novel's epigraph—which is the first of many references to the anti-hero Ferdinand from Louis-Ferdinand Céline's first autobiographical novel *Journey to the End of the Night* (1932)—brings to mind the self-destructive nature of the US military response and the oftentimes absurd logic that official discourses have employed to justify state violence—e.g., "they hate our freedoms" (Bush 2001a, n.p.). Like Céline's Ferdinand Bardamu in the epigraph to Walter's novel, the main character of *The Zero* has the feeling of being surrounded by collective insanity:

> 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 …
> CELINE,
> *Journey to the End of the Night* (Walter [2006] 2007, n.p.)

Even before the analogy with the post-9/11 United States is established, a concise "Author's Note" at the beginning warns that "This happened," (Walter [2006] 2007, n.p.), an assertive statement that becomes ironic in light of the utter unreliability of the narrative voice, since it will remain unclear what happened and what did not happen in the narrative universe of the novel.[8] Perhaps all that can be known for certain is that

[7] The 2007 edition of the novel includes a selection of entries from the journals that Walter kept while writing *The Zero*, hereafter referred to as the "Journals" (Walter [2006] 2007, 8-21).

[8] The text unequivocally sets the action in post-9/11 New York, and although the city is never named, many of its landmarks are. The analogy is further suggested by the invocation of rumors that were widespread in the post-9/11 days. See Walter ([2006] 2007, 8-9).

"This" (i.e., the writing of *The Zero*) "happened" (i.e., took place) for the Author.[9] The note acquires a deeper layer of meaning if read in dialogue with Vonnegut's opening lines to *Slaughterhouse Five*—"All this happened, more or less" ([1969] 2000, 1)—thus foreshadowing *The Zero*'s intertextual and polysemic intention. By establishing a connection to Vonnegut's text—a novel that also confronts the experience of severe trauma, death and loss during the US-British firebombing of Dresden in the Second World War, but crucially published at the height of the American War in Vietnam (1969)—Walter places signification in a dialogic relationship with prior texts and prior contexts—contexts of war, violence, madness and absurdity—which opens up the text for multiple and new significations. In a hospital scene at the beginning of the novel the victims of Vietnam are spectrally brought in through a phantasmatic Vietnamese girl with a burned hand who snaps her big eyes open and stares at Remy "as if she were waiting for the answer to some question" (Walter [2006] 2007, 8). But while Remy is distressed about the girl, the hospital employee ignores him and continues to read from Kafka's *The Castle*: "*nothing more hopeless, than this freedom, this waiting, this inviolability*" (Walter [2006] 2007, 8; italics in the original). Intertextuality, then, is one of the main strategies by which *The Zero* signifies, as the text will establish and build upon, become filtered and mediated by its dialogue with other texts, not only fiction but political discourse too, in particular, the many public statements by the Bush administration and then mayor of New York, Rudy Giuliani.

After the attacks, which have left chaos, destruction, thousands of victims and an enormous disaster scene called "The Zero," Remy is retired from the police force due to a spine injury, although his main concern is his deteriorating vision. His retirement enables his recruitment as an undercover agent in a government counterterrorism unit, the Documents Department of the Office of Liberty and Recovery, where he is assigned the mission of finding a woman, March Selios, who they believe was tipped off to flee the towers. The unit has come to this conclusion after a piece of paper with a recipe for pecan-encrusted fish, which hung on March Selios's office cubicle, has appeared on a bus in Canada. The agency's utter reliance on this small piece of paper for launching a full-scale counterterrorist operation 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 (Flinn 2014). The terrible consequences that derive from this allegiance to documents and knowledge put down on paper is yet another way in which *The Zero* subverts the reliability of fossilized monologic discourses and official narratives.

The allegedly benign mission of the Documents Department is to recover and interpret the infinite number of scraps of paper that blanket the city after the attacks, in order to reclaim "[the United State's] place in the world, our heritage, [. . .] gathering

[9] I am deeply grateful to Cristina Alsina at the Universitat de Barcelona for this idea, which needs to be further explored.

everything that was lost, recapturing the record of our people, and our commerce" (Walter [2006] 2007, 54). That is, to reconstruct a pre-lapsarian narrative, the mythical and foundational narrative that was in place before *everything changed*. Paper—and especially falling paper, whether real or in the shape of the flecks in Remy's failing vision—becomes the dominant image of the novel, and this is significant given that the image of falling paper is one of the most visited tropes in early post-9/11 fiction. Not only did the image become iconic but in post-9/11 fiction it is usually interpreted as a way of *not* talking about falling bodies. *The Zero*—just as DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007)—opens with the image of a flock of birds that in fact turns out to be "frantic" sheets of paper (Walter [2006] 2007, 3) but, contrary to expectation, abounds with falling bodies, body parts and an obsessive effort to recover every single body fragment and meaningless scrap of paper. Thus, the opening image of falling paper that suggests a trauma narrative is, as Duvall aptly points out, simply "a red herring" (2013, 283).

The misleading nature of this scene is indeed suggested by the second paragraph of the novel, which zooms in on a crime scene inside an apartment: a victim, Remy, is lying on the ground with a gunshot wound to his head. While readers may interpret that Remy has attempted suicide as a consequence of the trauma of the attacks—there is a suicide note on the table that reads "Etc." (Walter [2006] 2007, 5)—this pivotal scene begins to debunk the trauma narrative and announces instead the onset of some sort of parody. On the one hand, and given that the victim seems to be coming to after the impact of the gunshot, the question arises whether the image of falling paper that the novel opened with might not be an image of traumatic repetition but, rather, the consequence of a heavy concussion, what is often described as seeing stars. On the other, the way the crime scene is described parodies and subverts the generic conventions of the crime/detective novel and, especially, of the TV cop show *par excellence*, *Law and Order*.[10] These shows typically open with the crime scene, where the victim lies inert, and then the police arrive to inspect the scene. In *The Zero*, as Remy lies getting his bearings, his neighbor insists through the locked door that if Remy does not open the door, or at least tell her that he is OK, she will call the police. To which Remy replies, "I am the police" (Walter [2006] 2007, 4). This is the first epistemological inversion—in which the victim becomes the police, and vice versa—that anticipates the doubling of the main character that will follow.

The parody of the cop show genre continues as Remy (first victim, now police officer) inspects the crime scene (his own home) to try to figure out what has happened. He arrives at no conclusions (especially because the suicide note—paper—provides no clues), and the scene ends elliptically with Remy losing consciousness once again. These breaks in consciousness (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 in the mystery of his own life (trying to

[10] I am 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.

figure out—in a Pynchonesque sort of paranoid quest—what he does as an undercover agent) but also because his genuine requests for clarification on this point are taken by everyone else as proof of his laconic sense of irony, thus reinforcing the parody of the classic "hardboiled detective" in American crime fiction (Duvall 2013, 284).

The doubling of Remy as "good" Remy (the victim, the cop, the caring but incompetent father) and "evil" Remy (the victimizer, the ruthless undercover agent) paves the way for a world of inversions in which, as noted, law enforcers become terrorists and presumed terrorists are shown as innocent victims framed by a government plot. These inversions can also be analyzed, as Flinn suggests, as resulting in grotesque figures, "grotesque" understood here as the result of the joining of dissimilar fragments, the fusing of categories that usually preclude each other, which then coexist as a unit, with the end result being an evident misfit (Flinn 2014, 222).[11] Furthermore, Remy's efforts to reassemble a coherent narrative that is able to reveal the "meaning" of his actions epitomizes all the other characters' desire to defragment both themselves and the pre-lapsarian narrative of wholeness that has been shattered by the attack (Flinn 2014, 224). As a result, and as Finn contends, the characters in *The Zero* end up creating "counterfeit synecdoches"—parts that stand for a whole—that aim to compensate for their loss and to recreate "what is knowable, acceptable, containable," a course of action which, ultimately, shields them from any responsibility or sense of truth (224). Examples of "counterfeit synecdoche" are Remy's colleague Guterak capitalizing on the tragedy through his participation in commercials and movies as a "hero-cop," Remy's son Edgar pretending that his father is dead and performing his grief in a one-man show at school, and Remy's girlfriend April staging her grief for a TV show, all of which actions reveal the inability of the character involved to truly acknowledge loss (Butler [2004] 2006, 19-49).[12] Fragmentation pervades the novel at the metaphorical, the figurative and the narrative levels, and allows Walter to construct a particular form of satire, a "new grotesque" (Flinn 2014, 221), a literary style that depends for its effect on the coexistence of the ordinary with something terrible or uncanny in order to create a feeling of estrangement in the reader. As Kayser ([1957] 1963) notes, the feeling of estrangement implies feeling alien *within* the world but not so far removed from it that the narrative can be taken as either fantasy or tragedy. Hence 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

[11] The term "grotesque," which has a very solid theoretical base due to centuries of use in aesthetic theory, was originally coined in the Renaissance to designate a Roman type of ornamental painting that combined elements of different orders in a playful way, with no heed to symmetry or proportion, which also suggested something ominous and sinister (Kayser [1957] 1963, 21). In literature the term refers to a particular form of satire. Both Wolfgang Kayser's *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* ([1957] 1963) and Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* ([1965] 1968) emphasize the notion of play, of "a game with the absurd" (McElroy 1989, 2; see also Harpham 1982. For an analysis of *The Zero* as a new grotesque, see Flinn 2014).

[12] For an analysis of Edgar's grieving for his un-dead father as an appropriation and contestation of public grief, see Dodge (2014).

live in this changed world" (Kayser [1957] 1963, 185). Thus, in the narrative universe of *The Zero*, Remy is a mis-assemblage of odd parts who is also "estranged" by witnessing a world that remains oddly familiar, yet unknown.

The framing of Remy as a grotesque figure, his being both a victim/hero and a perpetrator/anti-hero, is an innovative approach to one of the main concerns of early post-9/11 fiction—the exploration of the figure of the terrorist Other. As Richard Crownshaw (2011) and Alan Gibbs (2014) contend, the trend in cultural memory studies—which have traditionally relied on the figure of the victim for identification—to turn to the figure of the perpetrator is verified in post-9/11 fiction in an attempt "to understand the terrorists, via their fictional renditions" (Crownshaw 2011, 76).[13] While these approximations have usually been vehiculated through Muslim or Middle Eastern characters, *The Zero* is perhaps the first post-9/11 novel to approach the terrorist Other through a white, non-Muslim American character, effectively bridging the gap that had otherwise existed in the exploration of post-9/11 perpetrators (76).[14] While the Middle Eastern characters in the novel do turn out to commit terrorist acts (although they are mostly framed), their actions pale in comparison to those carried out by the government agents who, rather than combating terror, seem to be "cloning terror" (Mitchell 2011) and producing more terrorists than existed in the first place. This suggestively leads to other real-life subversions, such as the dehumanizing treatment of detainees at the hands of the US military in Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib, and invites a reflection on the role of American perpetrators in the context of the post-9/11 world. However, most early reviews bypassed the implications of Remy's paralegal use of violence, as well as the novel's narrative choice to obscure these acts through its repeated leaps in chronology and ellipses: Remy's most violent acts are never directly narrated or fully shown, they are simply inferred. For Gibbs, this narrative strategy can be read as a wider political claim "regarding the invisibility of American 'counter-terrorism' operations post-9/11, and the way in which the American mainstream failed to discuss the ethics of such measures" (2014, 97). Thus, as Duvall contends (2013), the effect of Remy not knowing the full implications of his violence points at a vast majority of American citizens turning a blind eye to their government's establishment of a virtual state of exception both at home and abroad, verifying 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.). Cheney's words confirm the vitality of a type of political narrative that "in the name of national security, justifies [citizens'] exclusion from information and decision making" (Rogin 1990, 116), which relies on citizens' "intentional ignorance" (Chomsky 2003, 42) to make it possible.

[13] For a detailed analysis of the representation of terrorists in American post-9/11 fiction, see Bermúdez de Castro (2012).

[14] John Updike's would-be-terrorist Ahmad in his 2006 novel *Terrorist* is also American, but Updike's insistence on his mixed origins—Egyptian father, Irish mother—draws attention away from his American citizenship and seems to locate his alienation in his multicultural upbringing and surroundings. The presumed ex-terrorist Martin in DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) is German.

Although in his early "Journals" about 9/11 Walter did acknowledge that he was looking for "a narrative shape for an allegorical satire about the aftermath of 9/11" (Walter [2006] 2007, 8), the trauma studies approach taken by most early reviews reads the main character as a metaphor for the United States' prostrated self and its inability to make sense of the 9/11 events, thus missing much of the subversive potential of the novel. These readings tended to see Remy as a traumatized "Everyman"—especially because of his troubled psychological state—a universal figure standing not simply for the United States, but for American citizens as a whole, the shell-shocked collectivity post 9/11. This is, paradoxically, at odds with the story *The Zero* sets out to tell: Remy is in fact dumbfounded precisely by the collective narrative of heroism and loss that is superimposed on him, by how the insistent retelling of the collective experience of pain fuses and obliterates private trauma and individual suffering and turns it into commercial gain, which seems a direct allusion to the ease with which the diagnosis of "collective trauma" (Jameson 2003, 55-58) and the label of "hero" were applied to the general population as a whole after 9/11, and of how these ritualized and standardized formulations continue to feed the massive industry of public commemoration (Sturken 2007). Against this generalizing discourse, *The Zero* suggests that individual experience might actually leave room for unheroic acts, for unassuaged grief, for desperate and even cowardly acts, for ethical dilemmas and for psychological collapse. Therefore, I contend that the allegory refers not to Remy as a signifier of American society's experience of trauma, but to Remy as the embodiment of the need to go beyond traumatic paralysis and motivated forgetting and to delve into society's complicity with the discourses of power.

Furthermore, by applying a trauma studies approach, most early reviews found 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, i.e., as evidence of Remy's Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Contrary to these readings, the novel raises doubts about the significance of any of the symptoms by featuring a set of *literary* doctors with extremely suspicious names, Rieux, Huld and Destouches, who are each adamant about their own (conflicting) medical diagnoses—because they are written on paper and official reports.[15] While the psychiatrist Rieux is certain that Remy's condition "is textbook PTSD" (Walter [2006] 2007, 194) and that Remy is "not working for some top-secret department, investigating whether or not [his] girlfriend's sister faked her death" (194-195), the unnamed general practitioner insists on reporting a "chronic back pain" that Remy denies having; Remy's real medical concerns are his faltering eyes and his memory gaps, which are repeatedly dismissed. We do not know if Remy's impaired vision is real, imagined or metaphorical—as the eye surgeon, Destouches, tells him, he has "never seen such thin, tattered tissue on a human being that wasn't a cadaver"

[15] Rieux is the heroic doctor in Albert Camus's *The Plague* (1947), Huld is K.'s lawyer in Franz Kafka's *The Trial* (1925) and Destouches is Céline's real surname: Louis-Ferdinand Destouches.

(266)—but the problems can be interpreted, ultimately, as a metaphor for "the blind eye we turned to torture" (Walter interviewed in Flinn 2014, 229) and the paralegal measures put into effect by the *Patriot Act* (October 2001). The reader may be tempted to confirm—having witnessed the questionable procedures of the covert-ops—that these conflicting medical diagnoses are just another ruse, "a cover story" (Walter [2006] 2007, 196), but the fact that Remy's doctors are depicted as utterly unreliable—are they even real?—and the text's intertextual cues divert the attention away from PTSD and suggest, rather, a general state of delusion. What these diagnoses point at is the desire to find logical explanations, and hence closure for the 9/11 events, explanatory discourses that fill in the blanks of what cannot be known or comprehended.

In short, early reviews of *The Zero* tended to overemphasize the allegory of a traumatized collective identity, of the dislocation experienced by the nation as a whole due to 9/11, and they have been more reluctant to explore the 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 then-president Bush's phrasing. Contrary to these readings, *The Zero*'s satirical framing of Remy's dual nature as victim and perpetrator problematizes the limitations and the faultlines in the victim-oriented rendition of the aftermath and its coexistence with an aggressive and hero-oriented response. And this, to a large extent, is what 9/11 *has done to us* and what 9/11 *meant*, and Remy comes to realize that he cannot be defined in black-and-white terms and that it is in this guise that he must learn to live. By means of its elliptical and gapped narrative structure "Walter's novel actually stages the reader's complicity with the US state of exception" (Duvall 2013, 297) as the reader identifies with the clueless and "unknowing" Remy, who is ignorant of his role or purpose, but whose innocence is seriously compromised. Walter wants the reader to feel that "odd helplessness of being complicit in this delusional policy and world view" and the seeming inability to act against it (Walter [2006] 2007, 20), and this is further achieved by the satirical framing of the novel. The tragicomic laughter of satire builds empathic bridges between text and reader where laughter is revealed, as Kristeva contends, as "not simply parodic; [...] no more comic than it is tragic; it is both at once, one might say that it is *serious*" ([1969] 1986, 50; emphasis in the original). In stark contrast to traditional understandings that may conceive of ironic and satirical humor as exercises in frivolity or acts of diminishing and distanced aggression that presuppose an insulated subject position, a reading of *The Zero*'s satire as carnivalization brings to the foreground its potential for serious inquiry. It is in this vein that Walter conceived his novel, as an entry from 2005 in his "Journals" reveals: "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 [2006] 2007, 16), alluding to a place of indeterminacy that is doubtful of the government's self-assured rhetoric. It is in this vein that the "Zero" can be, as one of the novel's characters reflects, "[t]he point of departure in a reckoning" (Walter [2006] 2007, 309).

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