What Would Jack Bauer Do? Negotiating Trauma, Vengeance and Justice in the Cultural Forum of Post-9/11 TV Drama, from *24* to *Battlestar Galactica* and *Person of Interest*

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What Would Jack Bauer Do?

Negotiating Trauma, Vengeance and Justice in the Cultural Forum of Post-9/11 TV Drama, from 24 to *Battlestar Galactica* and *Person of Interest*

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And Americans know we must act now. We must be strong, and we must be decisive. We must stop the evil ones, so our children and grandchildren can know peace and security and freedom in the greatest nation on the face of the Earth.

George W. Bush, October 17, 2001

The nightmare is still on.

John Updike, September 24, 2001

You say that nuclear devices have gone off in the United States, more are planned, and we're wondering about whether waterboarding would be a bad thing to do? I'm looking for Jack Bauer at that time, let me tell you.

Republican presidential candidate Rep. Tom Tancredo, May 15, 2007 (Quoted in Mooney)

- 1 Seventeen years ago, a series of suicide attacks on unique symbols of U.S. economic and military power turned a beautiful September morning into a cataclysmic nightmare. What for many began as a regular workday quickly turned into a nightmare of crumbling buildings, falling debris, and 2,977 dead (CNN 2018). Almost instantaneously, live television reports brought the disaster now known as "9/11" into the living rooms of a global collective of TV audiences.
- 2 During the months and years following the event, an emerging narrative of revenge and national trauma celebrated American exceptionalism and fueled a process of othering of "foreign"—particularly Muslim—ethnicities. This process arguably aided the government's call for a "War on Terror," and the establishment of a perceived

constant state of alert and national anxiety in U.S. culture. While initially supporting this grand narrative, television, and—as this paper argues—TV Drama in particular, helped to establish a cultural forum, in which negotiation and questioning of the long-predominant master narrative of “defeating the enemy there so we don’t have to face them here” (Pres. Bush 606) could take place.

1. 9/11 and the Media

- 3 Jürgen Habermas has argued that the total directness facilitated by television made 9/11 “the first global media event” (28) that did not only affect those people on Ground Zero but also those billions of TV viewers from in- and outside the United States. Ever since, scholars have sought to draw similarities between those mediated pictures and millennial Hollywood blockbusters such as the *Die Hard* or *Mission: Impossible* franchises, and questions arose about how cultural artifacts, ranging from TV and cinema to literature and comics, had premediated the event (see, e.g., Grusin).
- 4 During the following weeks, months, and years of this Day Zero, and in spite of early and continuing warnings from prominent intellectuals such Noam Chomsky, Susan Sontag, and Slavoj Žižek, a unifying cultural narrative was honed by political figures and media outlets alike—a narrative that superseded the smoldering variety of sociocultural conflicts of a U.S. society that was “divided by culture wars and extreme political partisanship” (Spigel 241) and promoted what many saw as a Manichean worldview of Us against Them. This dualistic narrative, strengthened by a corresponding rhetoric surrounding 9/11 which was fueled by superlatives such as “unforeseen,” “unimaginable,” and even “holocaustal” (White 20) helped to frame U.S. society’s psychological status as collectively wounded and created a self-image of the nation as a victim that must make use of all means to fight back in order to reestablish its sense of justice. Anchormen, journalists, and political campaigners were quick to establish a rhetorical link between 9/11 and the sixty-year-old national U.S. trauma of Pearl Harbor (see, e.g., Connor) in order to make sense of the event itself and to further strengthen the Us against Them-narrative.
- 5 Sociologist Neil Smelser sees the nation-wide reactions to 9/11 as manifestations of a more general self-perception of exceptionalism deeply rooted in a U.S. culture that uses the nation’s perceived victimization as justification for outward aggression. For Smelser, this tendency towards self-victimization through almost mythical narratives derived from recent U.S. history has often been used to unite the nation under one larger agenda (272). In the case of 9/11, such a narrative of revenge and national trauma celebrated American exceptionalism and fueled a process of othering of the enemy, all of which culminated in the War on Terror and led to a constant state of alert and collective anxiety (see, e.g., Duvall et al. 381). For Thomas Elsaesser, the predominant application of a terror paradigm following the attacks helped to limit the spectrum of public discourse, because the inherent polarization tended to repress the formation of early critical analysis (see *Terror und Trauma* 9-10). And Hayden White’s earlier analysis of TV broadcasts’ endless recap loops as producing an effect that led to “wide-spread cognitive disorientation and a despair at ever being able to identify the elements of the events in order to render possible an ‘objective’ analysis of their causes and consequences” (White 22) might prove equally applicable to the emerging national trauma parable following 9/11.

- 6 Scrutinizing academia's role in the discourse surrounding 9/11, David Slocum has highlighted academic scholarship's strong focus on images, semantics, and narratives of representations of terror and the corresponding cultural production (181). Still, and up to today, academic discourse on trauma in the context of 9/11 largely takes to remediations in the areas of film and literature as the main point of investigation. Over the last seventeen years, scholars of American literature amassed a plethora of analyses focusing on the Postmodern Big Three: the works of Don DeLillo (*Falling Man*), Jonathan Safran Foer (*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*), and graphic novelist Art Spiegelman (*In the Shadow of No Towers*). Similarly, film and media scholarship saw a surge in analyses of *United 93* (Paul Greengrass 2006) and *World Trade Center* (Oliver Stone 2006). This perceived over-use of recurring examples, particularly in literary fiction, has led critics to the consideration that "certain texts have already become hyper-canonical in the discussion of 9/11 fiction, and ... it is time to look at other fiction of 9/11 in the future" (Duvall et al. 394).
- 7 Similarly summarizing predominant trends in visual media scholarship of the last decade, Janet McCabe describes the existing academic work on 9/11 as "focused on blockbuster Hollywood films and the cinema of terrorism, or else how television, and in particular the news media, has handled the topics of war, terror and terrorism" ("In Debate" 80). Moreover, with a special focus on the U.S. television industry and TV scholarship, Lynn Spigel finds that "academic approaches have put too strong a focus on the news sector, thus largely neglecting almost every other TV genre, including drama among other entertainment genres" (238).
- 8 Taking up these critiques, this paper aims at opening a new perspective that does not primarily focus on terror as a main source of investigation (see, e.g., Takacs; Froula) but turns to questions of justice and trauma in the medium of television. Here, the premise is that the trauma paradigm had been evoked by reporters only minutes after the images of 9/11 first made their way around the globe, and many commentators, critics, politicians, and scholars employed the notion of a "traumatic event" to describe the impact of 9/11 on U.S. society, but only few scholars have set out to analyze the deeper implications that an application of the paradigms of trauma and justice bring with it in the context of television.

2. Mediatization of Cultural Trauma and the Role of Television Drama

- 9 Following the event of 9/11, public discourse almost instantly declared the beginning of a new age, the so-called post-9/11 era (cf. Rich). Many scholars, however, have pointed out that 9/11 did not really manifest a watershed moment that divides history in before and after September 11, 2001 (cf., e.g., Chomsky; Der Derian). Rather, 9/11 ought to be considered as part of larger techno-socio-cultural changes that do not warrant a distinct temporal division: the soar of neoliberalism, media digitization and corresponding processes of convergence and globalization that had already begun to transform U.S. society in manifold ways during the 1980s and 90s. It is important to highlight these pre-existing meta-processes so as to understand the basis of the rapid global dissemination of images and reports that made 9/11 the first truly global media event as described by Habermas. Similarly beginning in the mid-1990s, scientific discourse around the concept of trauma re-emerged and was then magnified and re-

popularized by the instant and wide-spread conceptualization of 9/11 as traumatic event and the underlying and omnipresent influence of modern media on Western societies.

2.1 Early and Post-9/11 Trauma Theory

- 10 The postmodernist notion of trauma as employed in this paper is mainly rooted in psychoanalysis and thus largely motivated by the early 20th-century research of Sigmund Freud. Freud extensively worked with war veterans showing symptoms of shellshock or “war neurosis” (205-211), and his experiences formed a therapeutic understanding of trauma that particularly highlights the feeling of loss associated with deep wounds to the psyche (see Turim 206). This Freudian trauma concept, which became re-activated during the late 1940s to diagnose cases of Holocaust survivors haunted by their dreadful experiences, saw its popular reestablishment during the late 1960s, when the American Psychiatric Association decided to accept post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)—a form of anxiety disorder—as valid diagnosis for Vietnam veterans (see Scott). It was thus used to diagnose individuals who had experienced violent assaults on their body or psyche, including

physical attack, robbery, mugging, sexual assault, being kidnapped, being taken hostage, terrorist attack, torture, incarceration as prisoner of war or in a concentration camp, natural or man-made disasters, severe automobile accidents, or being diagnosed with a life-threatening illness. (American Psychiatric Association 424)
- 11 Trauma symptoms were typically recognizable in recurrent, fragmented recollections via nightmares and daydreams which uncontrollably intrude into the individual’s day-to-day reality. Furthermore, the affected person’s silence, which was often even analyzed as complete muteness, was thought to represent a fundamental difficulty to communicate anything about the traumatizing event. Through PTSD, trauma soon became an established clinical diagnosis which was suddenly applicable to a considerable percentage of U.S. citizens, including war veterans and sexual abuse victims (see Scott 295).
- 12 Subsequently, Freud’s research on trauma became revitalized through Lacanian and Derridean interpretations during the 1980s (see, e.g., LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust*) that integrated the psychoanalytic approach into the area of Social and Cultural Studies. In the mid-1990s, these interpretations, together with the clinical, diagnostic tool of PTSD, converged in the works of a first wave of trauma theorists (see, e.g., Caruth; Felman; Laub). Since trauma has always been connected to concepts of remembering and mourning, it also became entangled with the larger, postmodern discussion around the fields of memory studies and corresponding research on melancholia and nostalgia. Doing so, trauma played a major part in the formation of Cultural Studies’ collective turn (see, e.g., Meek 178-9) as well as corresponding debates about collective identity formation through unifying narratives relying on cultural history.
- 13 For Elizabeth Ann Kaplan, the emerging postmodern trauma trope inscribes individual experiences into a larger collective narrative, thus crossing the bridge between individual and group experience of history. Kaplan understands the current U.S. society as representative of a “trauma culture,” which she sees as the formation of a new collective identity that is framed by the United States’ post-9/11 politics of terror

and traumatic loss which draws its legitimacy from the shocks and disruptions that subjectively-traumatized individuals are experiencing and living through (Kaplan 20). In this context, collectives identify with trauma narratives as to define and strengthen the group's social cohesion and identity. Instances of such collective identifications include, e.g., the "Americanization" of the Holocaust debate during the 1990s, which turned the historical atrocity into an "affirmative national parable" (Bond 733), and more recent debates about the formation of a similarly unifying parable through an implicit victimization of U.S. society through terrorism (e.g., Sielke 388).

- 14 Summarizing the impact of trauma on U.S. culture, Jeffrey Alexander attributes to the collective dimension of trauma the role of "new master narrative" for the United States in this new age (1-31). An important notion of such an approach to cultural trauma as established by Alexander is the assumption that events in general are not traumatic *per se*. Rather, traumatic dimensions are provided by the context, which defines how individuals or collectives interpret and narrate their relation to this event. This actualization of early trauma theory allows for a more nuanced analysis of what Susannah Radstone has criticized as retreating "from psychoanalysis's rejection of a black-and-white vision of psychical life to produce a theory which establishes clear, not to say Manichean binaries of 'inside' and 'outside,' 'trauma' and 'normality,' and 'victims' and 'perpetrators'" (19). Smelser similarly addresses such lack of early trauma theory of the 1990s as problematic, adding that this retreat of early trauma theory subsequently aided the silencing of the pre-9/11 socio-cultural cacophony of the 1990s, during which a variety of conflicts around a neoliberal identity politics were surging (269). In contrast, the post-9/11 narrative of national trauma helped to reassert unifying communal and national virtues through the celebration of American exceptionalism, also bringing with it a process of othering of the "enemy" and those who supported them (see Smelser 270).

2.2 From Collapsing Time Frames, Grief, and Wounds to the Collective Psyche ...

- 15 On the level of individual trauma, Thomas Elsaesser highlights the importance of narrative as *the* integral part of trauma assimilation and integration into a person's self-image. Updating Cathy Caruth's research, Elsaesser argues that "narrative and the ability to tell a (one's) story, where the narrator is fully present to him- or herself in the act of telling" ("Postmodernism" 196), allows the traumatized individual to cross the gap between her or his day-to-day reality and the traumatic memories by which he or she is haunted. In the context of cultural trauma, Ron Eyerman similarly underlines the importance of narrative: "Cultural traumas are ... processes of meaning-making and attribution, a contentious contest in which various individuals and groups struggle to define a situation and to manage and control it" (570).
- 16 Questions about the channels through which trauma can be transmitted today have led to the formation of central research topics around the mediation of memory, history, and trauma (see, e.g. Sturken; Landsberg; Roth; LaCapra, "Trauma"). Elsaesser notes that prior to modern traumatic events such as the Holocaust, "trauma" usually described a catastrophic event that had happened in a more distant past that was followed by a latency period in which interpretations and cultural meanings of that event could be negotiated. In contrast, Elsaesser points out that, with modern

catastrophes such as 9/11, the terrorist bombings of Madrid (2004), London (2005), and Paris (2015), and natural disasters such as hurricanes Katrina, Harvey, and Irma (2005, 2017) as well as the Japanese earthquake/tsunami (2011), this latency period has collapsed into itself ("Postmodernism" 195). Marita Sturken adds to that a particularization for television as a visual medium, which is "about the instant present, in which information is more valuable the more quickly we get it, the more immediate it is. Television allows for an immediate participation in the making of history; it produces "instant history" (125).

- 17 A further layer to this perceived absolute immediacy of history is added by practices of historians and archaeologists alike, who usually uncover and collect evidence of the past long after the fact. With 9/11, a felt need to collect and preserve as much as possible of everything that was deemed—if even remotely—significant had amateurs and professionals amass a tremendous wealth of information from that day:

Within hours of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Library of Congress staff began to call for and collect a vast array of original materials concerning the attacks on the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon, and the fate of United Airlines Flight 93, which crashed into the earth at Shanksville, Pennsylvania. (*Today in History—Sep. 11*)

- 18 This need to collect as much information as possible might be read as an almost-obsessive impulse to add substance to the overall discursive presentation of the United States as a traumatized victim.

- 19 2.3 ... to outward Aggression: Narratives of Injustice and Revenge

- 20 On the level of affect, such impulsive self-positioning reveals strong feelings of injustice on a personal level which was then collectively channeled into a strong sense of renewed nationalism. Much has been written about the immediate call for revenge of President Bush and others right after the attacks on 9/11, who were quick to assure that they knew about the whereabouts of the terrorists and their supporters who supposedly were aided by foreign governments, so as to establish an outward focus with the aim the re-establish justice for the nation. Voices such as Japanese fiction writer Miyazaki's compare the emergent, one-dimensional nationalism of the United States of that time to an "infantilized adult [who] did not doubt his omnipotence or his own sense of justice; he became violent if his desires could not be satisfied. [It] was unfortunate that this infantilized adult had been invested with the strongest power of any country in the world" (qtd. in Sugita 108). And as Arundhati Roy has aptly and timely put it in her "Algebra of Infinite Justice" two weeks after the 9/11 attacks:

What we're witnessing here is the spectacle of the world's most powerful country reaching reflexively, angrily, for an old instinct to fight a new kind of war [It] is vital for the U.S. government to persuade its public that their commitment to freedom and democracy and the American Way of Life is under attack. In the current atmosphere of grief, outrage and anger, it's an easy notion to peddle. (n.p.)

- 21 These observations are echoed in Ron Eyerman's reading of cultural trauma, which he sees as providing a strategy of discursive legitimization, a strategy that is publicly enacted by a variety of agents (citizens, public institutions, the media, etc.—what he terms "carrier groups") and that recursively asserts the trauma narrative's status as authentic and true (see Eyerman 571). And indeed, such affective elements had quickly been addressed by a variety of carrier groups including government agencies, politicians and other public figures in order to appeal to an out-of-balance sense of national justice.

- 22 All in all, the immediacy and quantity of news-reports, premature official interpretations of the situation at hand, and a repeated assertion that the pre-existing equilibrium of national justice as perceived by those carrier groups had been massively disturbed by the attacks point to an exemplary case of national trauma formation as a means to establish a political agenda. Doing so, the initial traumatic experience became conflated with a narrative of injustice that turned the early impulse of mourning and grief into outward aggression. The national call to arms and corresponding proposed restoration of justice thus promised to soothe the induced impulse of many to assert the event's status as a truly devastating, nationally traumatizing disaster.

3. Television Drama as a Post-9/11 Cultural Forum on Trauma, Vengeance, and Justice

- 23 Television has responded to the events of 9/11 in manifold ways. As will be shown, the collection of shows analyzed here motivate their audiences to reflect on and react to the current moral, social, and cultural state of affairs during this first decade after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Since the 1980s, TV has played an immensely important role in providing a platform for U.S. society to engage in rituals of confession, mourning, and witnessing, particularly through the format of the talk-show, which are seen as manifestations of earlier rituals rooted in religion and the welfare system (Elsaesser, "Postmodernism" 196). In that respect, television has taken over important social functions that other institutions and, on a more general level, U.S. society's disintegrating communal bonds have ceased to fulfill.
- 24 In the following, it will be argued that serial fiction drama has similarly been involved in commenting on and implicitly criticizing the social and moral dilemmas created by U.S. politics after 9/11. Linking this particular form with the cultural trauma discourse, the subsequent paragraphs will dissect the ways in which television drama series of the last decade have made use of 9/11 scenarios in their narratives in order to establish a public space of discussion regarding questions of terror, trauma, revenge, and justice. Along the lines of the cultural forum, a concept first introduced by Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch in 1983, television drama is understood as providing a discursive space in which a society's problems, wishes, and cultural values are laid open and negotiated. I argue that for the post-9/11 period, this cultural forum approach can help us trace a variety of emerging strands of public discourse around themes of personal and cultural trauma, which provides ways of coping with 9/11 and its aftermath that became manifest in the War on Terror.
- 25 Newcomb and Hirsch underline the necessity to consider television's impact beyond single episodes or series, as a "whole system that presents a mass audience with the range and variety of ideas and ideologies inherent in American culture" (49). It ought to be noted that, from a diachronic point of view, Newcomb and Hirsch's reference to mass audiences reflects a rather different media system than the one known today: During their time of writing, the U.S. faced a rather uniform three-network system with corresponding mass audiences. This of course significantly differs from our post-millennial landscape of networks, channels, and web streaming services that cater to a myriad of niche audiences. Thus, the singular cultural impact of television has been eroded by the diversification of TV content available on a multitude of platforms and a corresponding variety of niche audiences who negotiate meanings on local, national

and global levels (Lotz 429). Accordingly, the updated cultural forum approach I want to employ here understands a single television installment—in this context each individual show—as of diminished significance and instead focuses on emerging trends that can be observed across multiple shows, networks and channels, as well as periods of time (see also Lotz).

- 26 In the context of 9/11 and its traumatic impact, I consider television as capable of providing a shared social space in which a transfer of the witnessed, traumatic chaos of the event into a narrativized, more structured and explainable form might be achieved in order to reestablish meaning, and thus stability, for its audiences. Since the early 2000s, complex drama series such as *24*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Homeland*, *Designated Survivor*, or *Person of Interest* have provided a highly-nuanced and diverse spectrum of shows dealing with a variety of social, cultural, economic, and moral issues that emerged along with, and became amplified by, 9/11 and the events' surrounding cultural discourses. Many of these TV dramas involve narratives that motivate their audiences to reflect upon the moral, social, and cultural state of affairs. This is what Lotz calls "the negotiation of ideas, fears and values" (431), which take place in different, but also mutually overlapping clusters of this discursive spectrum that comprise the cultural forum of post-9/11 television drama. My key argument here is that the development of these clusters is representative of different stages of a larger cultural shift in dealing with 9/11: away from the prescribed Manichean terrorist hunt that called for imminent restoration of justice through revenge and persecution of the enemy during the early years, towards a more critical questioning of official U.S. foreign policy, its underlying dichotomies, and the effects this has on the individual in U.S. society.

3.1 Cluster One: Terrorist Hunt

- 27 In the wealth of TV series topically surrounding 9/11, at least three major clusters of shows dealing with questions of trauma and justice can be identified. What could be witnessed right after the attacks was the rise of a collection of "Hunt-the-Terrorist"-shows that put the Bush administration's Us against Them-narrative in fictionalized form. Most notable examples comprise shows such as *24* (FOX 2001-10, 2014, 2017), *The Agency* (CBS 2001-3), *NCIS* (CBS 2003-), *Prison Break* (FOX 2005-9, 2017) and *The Unit* (CBS 2006-9). Further to that, a collection of police procedurals including the long-running *Law & Order* (NBC 1990-2010), *NYPD Blue* (ABC 1993-2005), the *CSI* franchise (CBS 2000-15) and *The Shield* (FX 2002-2008) predated 9/11 but reacted to and incorporated the event into their narratives in quite similar ways.
- 28 The premiere of *24*, which was created by showrunners Joel Surnow and Robert Cochran in the Summer of 2001 for the FOX network, was originally planned to air on October 30, 2001. Due to the 9/11 attacks, FOX decided to postpone the show's launch by a week (Johnson 149). The series circles around the life of fictional Counter Terrorist Unit agent Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland), who is tasked with hunting terrorists, with specimens ranging from Serbian war criminals and Colombian drug cartel bosses to an Islamic sleeper cell financed by evil U.S.-Americans, in a "hands-on, take-no-prisoners" fashion.

Fig. 1: 24 – promotional poster

- 29 Every season is divided into 24 episodes, each of which focuses on one hour of Jack Bauer's life. Doing so, 24 has set new standards in creating suspense through a groundbreaking form of visual representation (see Allen) and a consistent realization of real-time storytelling with almost no flashbacks or other temporal modifications of the narrative. Furthermore, it has also been one of the first shows to explicitly make use of an open display of torture as an acceptable means to acquire "important" information as part of its prime-time suspense-driven drama narrative. The multitude of cases of waterboarding, electroshocks, sleep deprivation, etc. featured in the show have "been claimed to tap into a consensus of fear, and a shared desire for decisive action, encouraging a popular acceptance of torture" (Johnson 149), which was further promoted by the Bush/Cheney administration at that time. Critical reception of the show thus widely read it as the conservative camp's dream of a lone gunman/agent taking justice into his hands and finding "the bad guys" wherever they dare show their faces (see, e.g., Rubio).
- 30 With 24 serving as a prime example, the first cluster of shows can be seen as mirroring the reality of the immediate aftermath of 9/11 as perceived by conservative U.S. citizens. These shows replaced an occupation with the problems at hand—for example, with the actual trauma induced via the attacks and their images and corresponding problems arising from the attacks' effects—with an induced fear of future terrorist attacks planned by the world's evil-doers. Usually, this was followed by a direct acting upon the prevention of that threat: a behavior of "lashing out" and a search for an eye-for-an-eye re-establishment of justice that was prominent in U.S. society right after the attacks. The display of resolute action, perceived power, and a proclaimed will to hunt the perpetrators arguably was one of the main reasons why both the Bush/Cheney administration's approval rates (Gallup) and approval of the U.S. army sky-rocketed in

the period immediately following the attacks. 24's Jack Bauer School of Therapy (Cavelos 6) thus can be read as providing a form of exposure therapy that is supposed to help its audience to work through their trauma by engaging in narratives depicting heroic police officers/agents who actively fight America's aggressors and make sure the United States will be safe for at least one more episode.

- 31 Regarding aspects of production, it ought to be noted that the majority of these shows were or are ventures by FOX and CBS, two broadcasters that, in the political spectrum of the United States, are understood to tend toward a conservative worldview (see, e.g., Morris; Alterman). Furthermore, the case of 24 and its production company's ties with and support from right-wing institutions, conservative public figureheads, and the U.S. military have been regularly pointed out by media scholars (e.g. Johnson; Greene). Hence, the politics behind this first cluster of shows might well have been motivated by a conservative understanding (Greene 171) of a new U.S.-American narrative based on what has been retrospectively labeled "an extraordinarily myopic, self-righteous, even puerile view of the nature of our world" (Duvall 394) that celebrated the nation as a victim who has all the right to reinstate its supreme understanding of justice.

3.2 Cluster Two: Allegories on 9/11

- 32 A second cluster of television dramas that this essay wants to highlight includes shows that present allegories on 9/11 and its aftermath, thus commenting on the sociopolitical changes resulting from this event. Most of these series are part of the Science Fiction/Conspiracy/Mystery genre and comprise shows such as *Firefly* (FOX 2002-3), *The 4400* (CBS 2004-7), *Battlestar Galactica* (Syfy 2003-9), *Lost* (ABC 2004-10), *Jericho* (CBS 2006-8), *Heroes* (NBC 2006-10, 2015), *Fringe* (Warner/FOX 2008-13), *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* (FOX 2008-9), *FlashForward* (HBO/ABC 2009-10), and *The Leftovers* (HBO 2014-17).

3.2.1 Battlestar Galactica

- 33 Compared to 24, the plot of *Battlestar Galactica* (BSG) differs fundamentally in terms of genre conventions, since it is framed as a science fiction narrative. BSG, a re-imagining of the popular 1970s Sci-Fi TV show, is set in a distant future. Its premise is the almost total annihilation of humankind at the hand of the Cylons, a human-made robotic race that evolved to a collective consciousness. Having developed a monotheistic religion that runs counter to humanity's polytheistic beliefs, the Cylons strive to find their god, a task that can only be fulfilled by removing their intermediate creator, man.
- 34 The show follows the lives of some 50,000 survivors on board the Galactica and other spaceships, who are space nomads in search of a mythical Promised Land, their former home planet Earth. This complex story is further complicated when the human survivors learn that their Cylon enemies have gained the ability to adapt their physical appearance to the human image, becoming almost indistinguishable from real humans.

Fig. 2: *Battlestar Galactica*—"Last Supper" promotional poster

- 35 Starting with the basic premise of the Cylons as the "Other," which can be read as an allegory of the United States' armament of the Middle East and the subsequent revolt against U.S. domination, the show covers questions of war, terror, trauma, and the ambiguities inherent in a social group's search for justice. Issues covered in the show range from the discussion of reproductive rights and abortion to depictions of sexual violence, torture, and large-scale terror (Randell 169). These often controversial issues and the underlying ambiguities that are laid bare within the narrative were also part of the public discourse during the years after 9/11 and the United States' declaration to fight "evil" with all means necessary. For example, when the surviving humans in *BSG* capture one of the new, human-like Cylons, the possibility of torturing the captive to gain important information on the whereabouts of the enemy's fleet is discussed at length, with contradicting points of view presented via the individual characters. In stark contrast to the clear-cut Jack Bauer ideology employed in *24*, the characters' struggles to find a way through these moral dilemmas are established in detail, thus inviting its audiences to contemplate the inherent complexities and ambiguities behind the seemingly easy task of differentiating between right and wrong along the lines of a basic moral compass in order to establish a sense of justice within a society. Simultaneously, viewers are drawn closer to these characters who are depicted as neither simply good nor bad, but ambivalent and human. During the series, the audience is often prompted to develop feelings of sympathy for the Cylon antagonists, who further evolve in the image of their human creators and also adopt humanity's characteristics and flaws during the unfolding narrative. All in all, the show's audience is enabled to ponder a variety of philosophical questions of morality that denies easy solutions and closure through affect-driven lashing-out (Randell 173).
- 36 *BSG* provides a fitting example of the "cultural forum" by using television as a platform to comment on predominant ideologies and present differing points of views as well as to negotiate cultural values, ideas, and fears (Lotz 431). By presenting a narrative of

groups in constant conflict about ideologies and world-views that denies its characters easy recovery of its internal system of justice, *BSG* weaves an allegory that motivates viewers to scrutinize their personal views on current issues surrounding the event of 9/11.

3.2.2 Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles

- 37 Another example for this second cluster of allegories on 9/11 in the cultural forum might be found in the Sci-Fi series *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* (*T:SCC*). The plot of *T:SCC* is based on the Terminator movie franchise (1984-2019) and tells the story of teenage John Connor (Thomas Dekker) and his mother Sarah (Lena Headey), who fight to prevent the evil Skynet network from taking over the world and to annihilate or enslave humankind in the process. *T:SCC* weaves an allegory on post-9/11 anxieties about the enemies the United States have created in the process of preparing for the War on Terror. Skynet, which initially was designed to guarantee safety for a future United States, turns against its creators in the same way that former Cold War allies such as Al-Qaeda have become geopolitical adversaries of the United States (Froula).
- 38 Eventually, this analogy becomes more complicated, because Sarah and John, who are constantly on the run from Terminator cyborgs, also revert to extreme guerilla tactics to fend for their lives in the underground. Further narrative complexity is added by a traumatic framework that is realized through complicated and fragmented time shifts and jumps (Froula 175). These shifting temporalities induce a sense of confusion in the audience about the narrative coherence, as both past and future memories are realized through flashbacks and flashforwards in the narrative universe of the *Terminator* franchise. These complications originate from a fracturing of temporal relations, as John and Sarah, who in the pilot episode jump from 1999 to the year 2007, are visited by a group of future rebel soldiers. Among those visitors is the future version of John's father Kyle Reese, who, in the narrated present, is haunted by memories of his own future. Real-world parallels of such traumatic experiences of fractured time can be found both in U.S. army veterans coming home from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and those traumatized by 9/11 itself, who live in constant fear of new attacks on the United States. In *T:SCC*, though, the trauma trope becomes even more complicated, because the characters are not able to settle into a post-traumatic setting that would allow them to at least try and cope with their past experiences. Rather, they have to continue their war and fight a future that has already hurt them in the world of the *Terminator* universe. Ultimately, they find themselves trapped inside their trauma.

Fig. : *T:SCC* – fan poster contest winner

- 39 The traumata depicted here “mirror a United States that is haunted by memories of 9/11 in the anxious present of the war on terror and its government-stoked fear of another attack” (Froula, “9/11” 177). Doing so, the show exemplifies a narrativization of the complex relations between trauma, terror, and time. Thomas Elsaesser sees such overlapping relations as forming a trauma-terror dilemma: a disaggregation of the apparent causal relation between terror and trauma, which has become further complicated by modern terror. Based on a Derridaean understanding that extends trauma’s temporal linearity from past to future to a two-way spectrum of trauma that relates to both past and future events, for Elsaesser, the goal of “modern terror” seems to be to not only physically kill people, but also to generate traumatized survivors that are left to suffer from their traumata (Terror und Trauma 15). In *T:SCC*, this trauma-terror dilemma is put into narrativized form.
- 40 What unites this second cluster of shows is the narrative realization of a negotiation of U.S.-American fears in the allegorical context of fictional drama. This second cluster in the cultural forum surrounding 9/11 presents a collection of narratives that depict alternate world scenarios with characters who suffer from and deal with issues similar to these presented by the contemporary reality of the United States. Doing so, these shows aim to criticize modern moral dilemmas resulting from a deeply rooted understanding of U.S. exceptionalism (Smelser 264-82), which had been re-actualized on a collective level through the black-and-white master narrative promoted by the U.S. government. The negotiation of alternative options, values, and fears within this cluster and in each of the narratives form an interpretative spectrum that mirrors the pre-existing but temporarily suppressed diversity of public opinions on the topic. *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* foregrounds action and the familiar plot of the Terminator franchise and arguably provides only subtle instances that allow for a more

critical reading of the show such as the manifestation of the traumatized veteran who is reliving his haunting memories both in the past and the future. *Battlestar Galactica* also employs the allegorical framework of science fiction but provides a deeper level of critique that problematizes a variety of economical, ethical, and social issues, such as the (non-)necessity of war, thus motivating the public to reconsider and deliberate upon more fundamental U.S. positions and beliefs.

3.3 Cluster Three: Traumatized Individuals and a Dissection of the Homeland

- 41 The shows representative of this third cluster epitomize a turn away from allegorical approaches that had been so prominent in the years before and mark a shift toward a reconsideration of the causes, costs, and consequences of the United States' military engagement for its population, including a recognition of those left scarred by this engagement. Temporally, this cluster emerges as the newest of the three and includes drama series such as *Rubicon* (AMC 2010), *Homeland* (Showtime 2011-), *Person of Interest* (CBS 2011-16) and *Designated Survivor* (ABC 2016-19).

3.3.1 Rubicon

- 42 AMC's *Rubicon* features a 9/11 conspiracy "slow-burn narrative" (Smith) in the style of spy classics such as the John Le Carré novel-based UK miniseries *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (1979) and tells the story of Will Travers (James Badge Dale), who works as an analyst for the fictional intelligence agency American Policy Institute (API). When Travers finds himself entangled in a conspiracy that led to the killing of his supervisor and mentor David Hadas (Peter Gerety), he becomes determined to unravel a nationwide conspiracy, whose instigators have been plotting major global disasters in order to profit from insider trade betting on the disaster's outcomes.
- 43 What makes this show special is its narrative development that evolves at a snail's pace—a key element that is arguably found in most current AMC shows (see Smith) such as *The Killing* (2011-12, Netflix 2014), *Breaking Bad* (2008-13), or *Mad Men* (2007-15). In *Rubicon*, this is established via extraordinarily long scene takes and a corresponding lower cut rate and allows for a detailed character development. *Rubicon*'s characters are depicted as genial but wounded personae, and all of them are heavily involved in trying to solve the increasingly complex puzzles presented to them in order to find justice for their mentor's death. Travers' co-workers are either addicted, on the edge of paranoia, or otherwise depicted as having problems with social connections.

Fig. . Rubicon—opening title screenshots—web of conspiracy

- 44 Similar to plots such as in CSI:NY (see, e.g., McCabe, “In Debate”), *Rubicon*’s protagonist Travers appears particularly traumatized, since he has lost his wife during the September 11 attacks and has turned into an introvert stigmatized by this loss. His profession seems to further amplify his personal problems, with both him and his colleagues almost exclusively living in their offices. The series’ style of presentation imitates a taunting narrative style that provides the characters and the viewer with clues to mysteries in the one scene and withdraws or relativizes those hints in the next one. Thus, the audience is always kept on the protagonist’s level of information. What is more, the narrative tactics of keeping the viewer always one step short of deciphering “what it all means” creates a gravitational force that has the show’s audience always wanting to know more.
- 45 The choice of James Badge Dale as main actor seems to be remarkable on two levels. He creates a believable character driven by his extraordinary pattern-recognition skills, who is also haunted by a tragic past that alienates him from society at large. Moreover, the fact that actor Dale also played the partner of Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland) in *24*’s Season 3 makes Dale a fitting impersonation of the changes that U.S. television drama has undergone during the last one and a half decades: his transformation from the 2003 hands-on, ask-no-questions character Chase Edmunds (*24*) to traumatized intelligence analyst Will Travers (*Rubicon*), who struggles to make ends meet against the backdrop of a global conspiracy at his heels. Doing so, Dale’s character mirrors the questions asked by the third cluster of fictional TV drama. While the early stages of *24* represent a reenactment of U.S. society’s desire for retribution and an easy, eye-for-an-eye justice, *Rubicon* can be seen as a metaphor for a society in the state of slowly recognizing the damages that its traumatization has caused.

3.3.2 Person of Interest

- 46 *Person of Interest* presents yet a different angle on the 9/11 conspiracy plot. Produced by Jonathan Nolan, the show’s premise is the U.S. intelligence sector having mandated the construction of a supercomputer that is able to filter all surveillance data collected in

the city of New York so as to automatically recognize threats to the city's society via real-time pattern analysis. The narrative follows the creator of that machine, wealthy Harold Finch (Michael Emerson), and his partner John Reese (Jim Caviezel), a former Green Beret and ex-CIA field agent assumed dead by the authorities. As part of its unsupervised social pattern analysis of New York's citizens, the machine also produces a list of social security numbers of persons who, according to the automated forecast, will soon be part of an imminent crime (whether as victim or perpetrator cannot be known in advance). Reese has the task to interfere in each of those incidents, which form the basis of the show's episodic case structure.

Fig. : Person of Interest – Season 5 DVD cover

- 47 The show's characterization of Reese, who is depicted as a broken, introverted being, is an apt representation of the veteran soldier who appears to have lost all meaning in life that—echoing the successful *Bourne* franchise (Gaine)—has dramatically changed since he left his country. During the first few seasons, Reese has recurring traumatic flashbacks of his missions and of his wife's death. These seemingly uncoordinated recollections, as well as many of the over-arching plotlines, are narrated in fractured segments that—similar to traumatic memories – are confusing both for the protagonist and for the viewer. Structure and order are brought to this quasi-traumatic narrative setup via a visualization of the machine's inner workings that is used in almost every episode: a CGI representation of temporal fragments on an animated time bar that indicate each episode's narrative time frame spun from the past of the late 1980s up to its most current events in the year 2016.

Fig. 6: Person of Interest—*The Machine*-timeline interface

- 48 Similar to shows such as *Burn Notice* (USA 2007-12) or *The Blacklist* (NBC, 2013-present), *Person of Interest* features installments of one case per episode that are combined with overarching plot lines that slowly develop the two main characters' backstory as well as evolving supporting threads featuring two "side kick" police detectives helping Reese and Finch. Further plot lines include a corrupt CIA branch that tries to cut loose ends and tales of corruption and conspiracy which the duo finds itself in the middle of. Compared to *Rubicon*, the visual style is entirely different: considerably higher cut rates enable a faster development of the narrative and a focus on action. Adding to that, a recurring application of surveillance camera aesthetics that combine actual surveillance tape material with made-for-the-show CCTV video and extra CGI elements provide the show's seemingly paranoid surveillance framework.

Figure : Person of Interest—*The Machine* scans daily life in New York

- 49 In a rare convergence of fictional television storytelling and real-life events, the show saw a sudden boost in topicality that hit a cultural nerve at the time: With the

emergence of Edward Snowden's and other whistleblowers' leaks of state intelligence documents in the Summer of 2013—the show's second season had just ended and season three was in the making—the narrative quickly gained uncanny relevance in the context of the emerging NSA national surveillance scheme.

- 50 Similar to *Rubicon*, then, is the choice of topics and issues at the basis of *Person of Interest*: the projected consequences of a nation's call for increased security after 9/11 that leads to a deterministic dependency on the judgment of an all-seeing but also uncontrollable technology. For many, the shows' overall choice of topics and issues mirrors the United States' current state of affairs: a society that awakens to a bleak reality that it has created through its collective lashing out via the War on Terror. Adding to that, the shows of this third cluster in the cultural forum epitomize a newly-emerging character archetype: the traumatized war veteran who struggles to settle into the new homeland environment, which has considerably changed since he left to fight the War on Terror.

4. Shifting tendencies in the cultural forum

- 51 As Kaplan notes, 9/11 and the United States' "politics of terror and loss" have led to the emergence of a national trauma parable as well as a variety of corresponding trauma cultures. These trauma cultures share a new set of identities that are formed "through the shocks, disruptions and confusions that accompany them" (20)—identities that may allow for "a kind of emphatic 'sharing' that moves us forward, if only by inches" (37). As this essay has argued, U.S. television drama of the last seventeen years—and particularly the clusters exemplified here—have played an important role in the cultural forum that enables the discursive negotiation and sharing of a variety of tropes, issues, and questions surrounding justice, revenge, and personal and cultural traumata.
- 52 The cultural forum approach has been employed to make visible emerging trends and recurring themes persistent in the proliferating landscape that is the universe of television drama. The three clusters described here are understood to delineate particular points of reference in a larger spectrum in the negotiation of trauma, terror and loss, grief and vengeance, and corresponding conceptions of justice on personal and collective levels. It is not to say that the shows listed solely and exclusively represent the issues raised here, or that they are narrowly defined to only fit this analytic category; television is far too complex for that. Rather, negotiations of issues continue and evolve over time, and within a single show's life span, a new season may well incorporate quite different themes and issues or add a self-reflexive stance to the overall narrative; this has been the case, e.g., with later seasons of *24*. Hence, I see the clusters delineated here as forming interpretative fields that are also able to interact, overlap, or converge over time.
- 53 Right after 9/11, U.S. Americans hoped for justice in the form of those who were deemed responsible being caught—an impulse rooted in a system of just punishment that seems essential to many Western legal systems and societies. The variety of television shows that comprise the first cluster thus provided a daily substitute for what many were longing for. Through the construction of narratives that presented their characters' constant fight against omnipresent threats and the strengthening of a correspondingly induced culture of fear, the first cluster can be seen as supporting the

then-dominant conservative, nationalist construction of a national trauma parable. By appealing to the audiences' wish for easy redemption via a narrative that personifies a sense of "by-all-means-necessary" concept of justice, the Jack Bauer school of therapy presented a way to act out, rather than work through, the trauma in revenge plots that proposed vengeance as an easy healing mechanism. The second cluster comprises shows that confront the viewer with the ambivalence inherent in the topics of counter-terrorism and the consequences that an "Us against them" world-view might bring about. Nine years after 9/11, on May 2, 2011, the White House announced that U.S. soldiers had successfully killed Osama bin Laden, the man deemed responsible for the attacks, and President Obama acknowledged that this act was supposed to bring solace and closure for those suffering from the effects of 9/11. Nonetheless, the War on Terror continues up to this day, and television shows of the second and third cluster have picked up on the problems that this continuing involvement brings with it. As has been shown, those clusters present narratives that implicitly criticize the established culture of fear, steadily growing securitization, and technological determinism. Doing so, these stories began to tap into a budding public feeling of ambivalence and dissent towards this national parable. The third cluster arguably further magnifies this ambivalence via conspiracy narratives which are understood as outlets of public dissent with a long tradition in U.S. culture. Moreover, they reflect a massive uncertainty currently governing U.S. cultural discourse regarding questions of national security, steadily-increasing rise of securitization expenditure, and what this means for the long-sought-after restoration of justice in this country. It remains to be seen how future clusters will comment on, and thus foster discourse on, the most recent developments – both large and small – that President Trump's current U.S. administration brings about in a steadily increasing climate of distrust in the restoration of accountability and justice.

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ABSTRACTS

Discussing the concept of cultural trauma and its role in popular television dramas such as *24* (FOX 2001-10, 2014-), *Battlestar Galactica* (Syfy 2004-9), *Rubicon* (AMC 2010) and *Person of Interest* (CBS 2011-16), this paper sets out to identify three distinct clusters that are part of what Newcomb and Hirsch once termed a "cultural forum"—a discursive space in which questions of justice, revenge, terror, and trauma continue to be negotiated in significantly changing ways. Doing so, it finds that those clusters occur within a processual shift of cultural focus away from the early one-dimensional call for easy justice through retaliation motivated by the national narrative of heroes vs. perpetrators, towards a multifaceted occupation with the problems that U.S. society has been facing over the last seventeen years.

INDEX

Keywords: cultural forum, trauma, discursive space, vengeance, television studies, post-9/11, United States of America

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