Gender Violence and Gendered Agency within the Actantial Paradigm of *Person of Interest*[1]

Marta FERNÁNDEZ-MORALES
University of the Balearic Islands, Spain
María Isabel MENÉNDEZ-MENÉNDEZ
University of Burgos, Spain

Abstract: Ten years after the 9/11 attacks CBS premiered *Person of Interest*. It introduced the inventor of a surveillance system commanded by the government trying to find a "back door" to his creation: devised to prevent terrorism, it was programmed to distinguish "relevant" from "irrelevant" threats, and he feels that many potential victims are being neglected. Focusing on the topicalization of gender violence, we read the show through: 1) Furedi's analyses of the post-9/11 *culture of fear*; 2) McNay's neo-Foucauldian discussion of *gender and agency*. We argue that Nolan transplants ideas about the War on Terror onto everyday threats including gender terrorism. We also approach agency, which fluctuates between presenting the (super)hero as the savior of the damsel in distress and portraying women as agents who can protect themselves and others. Although the former dominates, the weight of gender violence within a Greimasian dramaturgical model makes *Person of Interest* different from other post-9/11 series; the clearest one in the vindication of this problem as "relevant" within a media discourse dominated by allegedly more important, macro-level fears of our time.

Keywords:
TV series, gender violence, agency, Actantial Model, culture of fear

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Introduction: 21st-century TV Dramaturgies

In our seemingly never-ending effort to label, classify and categorize cultural phenomena from our respective scholarly perspectives, it looks like Television Studies experts have been dissecting the small screen panorama and its line(s) of evolution for decades. Authors like Concepción Cascajosa-Virino, for instance, have labelled the phase between the late 1940s and the mid 1950s –its foundational period – "the first golden age of North American TV fiction" (2005: 7). Robert Thompson, in turn, had dubbed the 1980s and 90s "the second golden age" in his book *Television's Second Golden Age: From 'Hill Street Blues' to 'ER'* (1996), where he discussed the newly found complexity of characters that started to have a past and to be involved in growingly intricate storylines. More recently, journalist Brett Martin introduced his own view in *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution* (2014) and cited productions like *The Sopranos* (HBO 1999-2007), *The Wire* (HBO 2002-2008), *Breaking Bad* (AMC 2008-2013), or *Mad Men* (AMC 2007-2015) as illustrations of "the third golden age of U.S. TV fiction". His arguments focused mainly on the male (anti)heroes (Tony Soprano, Omar Little, and the like), difficult to situate within the traditional black-or-white dichotomy of "goodies" and "baddies" that we used to be able to identify easily in previous periods. The female characters of this new era (Patty Hewes, Carrie Mathison) are also more profound and hard to label, and the fragmentation of offer and demand –more networks and more specialized audience niches – call for a type of writing that had never been attempted before on television.[2]

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[2] For details about *complex TV* and its application to the panorama that we describe here, see Mittell 2015.

Whichever number we decide to assign to the current phase of TV creativity (the rhythm of technological progress and the increasingly wider range of platforms to access audiovisual products make it impossible to keep up with all the novelties), there seems to be an agreement among critics, scholars, and audiences that we are *definitely* living in *a* (first, second, third, fourth...) golden age of fiction. Creators and showrunners become the kings and queens of their business, prestigious performers (Kevin Spacey, Glenn Close, Al Pacino, Maggie Smith) migrate from the big to the ever smaller screen –a TV, a computer monitor, or any of the several portable devices at our disposal– and active fans elaborate their own expanded universes via websites, *fanfic*, *blogs*, forums, *wiki*-type tools*, vlogs*, YouTube renditions, and international conventions around their favourite shows. In the post-millennial context, and thanks especially to the availability of social networks, millions of viewers have become *prosumers*, i.e., consumers whose traditional role is re-conceived when they start to participate actively in the production of the items that they choose to consume. The prosumer, in Remedios Zafra's words, is not a passive individual that reads, listens, and assimilates information, but one that constructs, manipulates, appropriates and re-signifies it in the framework of new forms of reception and access to symbols (2015: 29).

In this context where – at least apparently – the power balance producer-receiver has been upset,[3] traditional networks like CBS or ABC must compete with transgressive cable channels like HBO and with streaming platforms like Netflix, which are modifying the population's consumption patterns. What used to be

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[3] Zafra elaborates on this question of power and the *appearance* of freedom to choose from what is really a limited number of options determined by an industry dominated by corporations and their economic and ideological interests.

a solitary weekly meeting with their beloved characters has now become individual or collective *binge-watching* or *marathon-viewing*,[4] with the extra pressure that this places upon creators and producers if they intend to maintain a faithful viewership from one season to the next. The way that this is done is via powerful cliff-hangers, continuous advertising of the coming episode(s) and surprises and, what is more important for the kind of analysis that we intend to carry out here: attention to narrative detail, good quality writing, interesting and resonant plots, rich character dynamics, and high-rate acting. When this is done well, it does not only keep the audience pools high enough to guarantee the renewal of a show; it also opens the path for the product to be incorporated into the corpus of relevant contemporary cultural manifestations. Because, as Cascajosa-Virino recalls, the academic interest for Television Studies is living a sweet moment, with texts being issued every month. The very rigorous British Film Institute inaugurated its own series of TV monographs in 2005, contributing to legitimating television as a form of art (Cascajosa-Virino 2005: 8). Several publishing houses have also placed into the market their series-focused sagas, as is the case if I.B. Tauris, with its *Reading...* collection (e.g. *Reading 'Desperate Housewives'*), the Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture line (e.g. *'The Big Bang Theory' and Philosophy*), or the Errata Naturae volumes about *Game of Thrones*, *The Wire*, and other recent productions.

Although some of the series that are receiving this kind of scholarly attention and have been awarded the label *quality television* during the first decade of the 21st century qualify as period dramas, such as *Boardwalk Empire* (HBO 2010-2014),

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[4] Theorists that have worked on the concepts of binge-watching and marathon-viewing are, among others, Rachel Silverman (Embry-Riddle University) and Emily Ryalls (Mississippi State University).

which revisits the 1920s; or *Masters of Sex* (Showtime 2013-present) and the aforementioned *Mad Men*, which go back to the 1950s and 60s,[5] several others are acting as mirrors that on the one hand reflect and on the other hand distort our current situation. Paradoxically, however, they do not always achieve this through completely original narrative formats or totally unheard of types of characters. In fact, the more we study 21st-century television, the more we are forced to look back toward classical narrative patterns in order to untangle the series' intradiegetic twists and their proposed viewers' rewards. For example, the highly disturbing *Dexter* (Showtime 2006-2013), which featured one of the "difficult men" described by Martin above, displayed, in the words of Patricia Trapero-Llobera, a solid conceptual apparatus and a complex dramaturgical world that comprised the tension between observing or disrupting the generic conventions (in this case of crime fiction and/or serial killer stories) alongside its placement within a cultural repertoire fed by previous traditions that turned it into a cluster of units with countless possibilities of combination (2010: 25). In a similar vein, the thoroughly successful *Lost* (ABC 2004-2010), despite its science-fiction drift, was set in the present but dense with canonical literary and philosophical references –beginning with the names of some of the protagonists: Austen, Locke, Hume, Rousseau–, and it constructed such a complicated dramaturgical network that it was impossible for its creators to close all the doors they had opened by the deeply disappointing finale. More recently, the very political *House of Cards* (Netflix 2013-present) has the lead role, Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey), recurrently breaking the

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[5] For a debate about nostalgia, the productive quality of memory and the current resonance of period dramas, see Domínguez-Garachana and García-Guerrero 2010, Dunn 2010, Menéndez-Menéndez and Fernández-Morales 2013, or Fernández-Morales and Menéndez-Menéndez 2014.

symbolic fourth wall (made present in this case by the TV screen) in a typically Brechtian manner to comment on his feats and misdeeds to a repulsed-yet-fascinated audience. And in a final example that brings us thematically closer to our corpus, the long-running *24* (Fox 2001-2014) used real time as a chronological framework for both its individual episodes and its whole seasons, in an interesting screen rewriting of one of the traditional Aristotelian unities.

As we could continue to illustrate with examples from an ever-expanding catalogue of contemporary TV series produced in North America, the old and the new are not as distant as it may seem, and the creators and showrunners of the now-queen-of-the-hill TV industry are not as much inventors of the unknown as brilliant postmodern recyclers of that which has worked for centuries on the handled page and/or the trodden stage. In the lines that follow, it is our aim to analyze one of the many successful post-9/11 shows that are currently being broadcasted in the U.S. and abroad (including our country, Spain), to explore the echoes of a classical dramaturgical pattern in its storyline and character development. We contend that the Actantial Model proposed by Algirdas Julius Greimas during the 1960s –in turn grown out of Vladimir Propp's analysis of narrative functions within classical fairy tales– is a valid tool to explain the construction of the male (super)hero in CBS' drama *Person of Interest* (2011-present) and the decisions that he makes in each episode, when considered in conjunction with the gender perspective.[6] John Reese (played by James Caviezel), as we will prove in the following lines with the supplementary help of Jens Eder's Clock of the Character Model, is a male *subject* within a relational framework that comprises several *senders* (the one(s)

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[6] As Anne Ubersfeld explains, Greimas' research does not necessarily apply to theater only, but to any form of story (1998: 47).

that instigate the action), *receivers* (the one(s) that benefit from it), *helpers* (collaborators in the mission) and *opponents* (trying to hinder it), with an overall *object* which, for him, is to amend a gender-based crime that becomes nothing if not his very reason for living.[7] Within a show that portrays the post-9/11 mood of inevitability, seemingly defending the idea that the common good should always comes first and that political terrorism against the U.S. must be the number one priority, the hyper-masculine maverick John Reese thinks otherwise. In a world where gender violence is dismissed as "irrelevant" by the government and its intelligence agencies, he becomes a vigilante that exposes their priorities as unfair for the regular citizen and vindicates abuse against women as yet another form of terror.

Focusing on the topicalization of gender violence as an integral element of a Greimasian structure from the pilot episode onwards,[8] our paper – inherently interdisciplinary – reads the first season of *Person of Interest* (2011-2012; when Reese's main traits are established) through the lenses of two theories: firstly, Frank Furedi's analyses of the post-9/11 *culture of fear* and its derived *precautionary culture* (2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2009). Secondly, Lois McNay's discussion of *gender* and *agency* (2014), elaborated within a feminist neo-Foucauldian framework that questions dominant discourse and explores possibilities of resistance. In a

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[7] If we chose to adapt, for instance, Constantin Stanislavsky's dramaturgical model here, instead of Greimas', what we now call *object* would become the main character's *super-objective*: his *raison d'être*, his defining essence or mission (for more on this theory, see Cárdenas 1999).

[8] In her presentation at the II International Conference *His Master's Voice* in Kraków (2015), Trapero-Llobera elaborated a taxonomy of topics featured in *Person of Interest*, in order of recurrence. Just considering Season One, gender violence was situated among the top ones ("God(s) and Ghost(s) in the Machine: Deterministic Chaos, (E)utopian Vigilantism and the State-sponsored Superpanopticon in *Person of Interest*" – unpublished).

gender-conscious Furedian interpretation, we argue that Nolan transplants ideas related to the War on Terror onto everyday threats including gender terrorism. Supported by McNay's work, we approach agency in the show, which fluctuates between the convention of presenting the male action (super)hero – Reese – as the savior of the damsel in distress, and portraying women as agents who can protect themselves and their peers. Although the former is more frequent, we conclude, the weight given to gender violence as a narrative and characterization device makes *Person of Interest* different from other post-9/11 shows; the clearest one so far in the vindication of this problem that affects millions of women as "relevant" within a media discourse dominated by the allegedly more important, macro-level fears of our time.

9/11, Media Priorities, and Popular Culture

Ten years after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and a few months after the death of Osama Bin Laden during a SEAL operation that symbolically closed a decade of mourning for the American public, the TV network CBS premiered a fictional show titled *Person of Interest.* Created by Jonathan Nolan, it introduced Harold Finch (played by Michael Emerson), the inventor of a surveillance system commanded by the U.S. government after 9/11, trying to find a "back door" to his selective creation: devised to prevent terrorism, his machine was programmed to distinguish between "relevant" threats –hazards to the nation– and "irrelevant" cases –violent crimes affecting ordinary people–, and Finch feels that many potential victims are being left out. His concern makes him look for an accomplice in the self-imposed mission of saving the citizens at risk that the government is choosing to ignore. Physically handicapped, he needs a companion who can execute the tasks that he is unable to

perform and hires John Reese, a Special Forces veteran and former CIA agent who, traumatized by personal loss, has decided to drown his sorrow in alcohol, and who is rescued by Finch's quest for prevention and justice. Bringing René Descartes' philosophy back to life in the 21st century, thus, Finch and Reese become two sides of the same coin: the mind and the body, which will complement each other beautifully throughout the show, very rarely swapping functions. In other words, together they very often will work as one Greimasian *actant*, since they are two characters with a shared mission. As Kurt Spang clarifies, "actant" does not equal "actor", or "character", or "figure": in Greimas' model, the actant is above all a *function* within the drama (1991: 111).

Set in an alternative present in which surveillance in the name of national security apparently finds no resistance (at least until the controversial activist group Vigilance goes public in Season Three)[9], *Person of Interest*, as David Wiegand (2011) has written, "engages a post-9/11 sense of paranoia in its viewers". As has been argued elsewhere (Fernández-Morales 2013a), the 9/11 attacks reactivated a culture of fear that already existed and that had as a very clear antecedent the Cold War period. The Bush Administration and the conservative media pundits renewed the "us *versus* them" dialectic of the past and justified the decisions that followed the 2001 aggression with what Barry Glassner has called "the eerie incantation: *9/11 can happen again*" (2009: 233). Contrary to the Cold War scenario, where the communist block was the obvious and only antagonist, in the new context the enemy was "terror", an abstraction which could be anywhere and everywhere, and which was therefore an extremely powerful

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[9] For a discussion of the show beyond Season One, and in particular of Vigilance in Seasons Three and Four, see our paper "The Discourse of Fear in American TV Fiction: A Furedian Reading of *Person of Interest*" (forthcoming).

weapon of mass control (Simpson 2006: 138). Since 9/11, as Furedi explains, "[t]he enemy has acquired an increasingly diffuse and abstract character. Not for nothing does the Homeland Security Council planning scenario refer to the enemy as the Universal Adversary" (2007a: xiv). Anybody anywhere can be or become a criminal (as the discursive emphasis on the radicalization of Muslim youth by the Islamic State/DAESH in the past few months suggests) and, as a logical corollary, uncertainty seems to be the new natural state of citizens and governments.

In our current predicament, as Furedi has analyzed, precautionary logic dominates the discourse around the management of national, transnational, or global risk (2009: 198). The dominant thought has shifted from the perception of probability to that of possibility, always contemplating the worst-case scenario as more than likely to happen. The question from 9/11 onwards has been not *whether* something bad can take place, but *when* it will, in a permanent anticipation of catastrophic consequences symbolically encoded, in the case of the U.S., in the different colors of the Homeland Security Advisory System, and that, again in Furedi's words, "continually demands that something be done" (2009: 208). Possibilistic thinking does not allow time for careful evidence-searching or lengthy trials; it calls for immediate action. Hence decisions like the war in Afghanistan, the invasion of Iraq, or the shoot-first-ask-later policy applied in the latest cases of jihadist terrorist attacks in Europe. The mood is one of inevitability which brings on a shared feeling of vulnerability and powerlessness, and a derived deflation of the individual and collective sense of agency (Furedi 2007a: 122). The War on Terror appears to be against something beyond anyone's control and a problem in which common citizens have no say or role, leaving decisions in the hands of their rulers.

The discourse of fear and its derived vulnerability promotes the idea of a pressing need for protection at any cost, leaving the door open to *ad hoc* legislation, a radical stretching of the governments' privileges to access information about their citizens, and a network of surveillance that surrounds us on an everyday basis. The paradox in this state of things is that the impossibility of knowing exactly what is going to happen (or where and when, for that matter) allows for a defensive use of the knowledge that authorities *do* have access to: "From this precautionary perspective", concludes Furedi, "knowledge is required to accommodate the prevailing climate of uncertainty and anxiety" (2009: 202). Playing with former Secretary of Defence's speech about the "known knowns" and the "unknown knowns" during the War on Terror –Donald Rumsfeld in a news briefing in February 2002, a confusing and now (in)famous quote that has even inspired a movie –,[10] we could say that governments and secret services need to know as much as possible in order to be aware of how much they *do not* know. In real life today, the official discourse encourages the sacrifice of civil liberties for the greater good, and is gradually imposing a status quo in which cameras in public spaces, control of private activities like internet searches, and everyday vigilance are normalized. Authorities insist that they will protect their citizens, and no reflection or action, but rather mutual surveillance and denunciation, are encouraged.[11] In this respect, Furedi argues that the 21st-century

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[10] *The Unknown Known*, directed by Errol Morris (2014): www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/03/rumsfelds-knowns-and-unknowns-the-intellectual-history-of-a-quip/359719/.

[11] In 2015 the U.S. Department of Homeland Security launched a national campaign, complete with a free *app* for *smartphones*, called "See something, say something", which allows for anonymous denunciations of suspicious people or acts. It is Jeremy Bentham's panopticon taken to its extreme thanks to technology.

terror challenge is interpreted as a consequence of external forces instead of as a possible rejection of the Western ways (2007a: 167). Populations are not invited to think critically about inequity, poverty, unfair globalization, or other circumstances that may be related to fanaticism, which is oversimplified and presented as senseless and nihilist, not worthy of analysis or serious consideration.

Building its fictional narrative universe upon these premises, *Person of Interest* is part of a corpus of popular culture products that, as suggested by Altheide (2002: 177), has been key in promoting the discourse of fear. Contemporary of other series based on the War on Terror like the aforementioned *24*, *Sleeper Cell* (Showtime 2005-2006), *Homeland* (Showtime 2011-present), or the recently premiered *Minority Report* (Fox 2015), it portrays the post-9/11 obsession with, not *solving* crimes of terror, but *preventing* them as part of our current precautionary culture. Finch's machine detects potential threats to the country and offers the security forces the chance of frustrating the terrorists' plans. In the process, however, it leaves out acts of violence whose public echo is not anticipated as big enough, neglecting victims of assault, rape, murder, or battering. For the machine, as for the general public, gender aggression is not a form of political terrorism, despite proof that much more than mere domestic quarrels is happening within American homes. As selected pieces of evidence, we can take the following self-explanatory data: 1) the number of casualties by terrorist attacks in the U.S. between 1970 and 2007 was 3,339 (Lafree 2010); 2) the number of American Army men and women killed in action in the wars of Afghanistan and Iraq between 2001 and 2012 was 6,488; whereas 3) the number of American women killed by their current or former partners in the same period was 11,766, according to domestic violence statistics elaborated by the FBI itself (Vagianos

2014). The question then would be: *How much and whose blood qualifies as "relevant"?*

Gender Violence and Male/Female Actants in *Person of Interest*

On International Women's Day 1999, the United Nations acknowledged, through Kofi Annan's official remarks in New York City, that violence against women is "the most shameful human rights violation, and it is perhaps the most pervasive. It knows no boundaries of geography, culture or wealth" (in Fernández-Morales *et al.* 2012: 16). In other words, at a global level, we live in what Emily Buchwald, Pamela Fletcher and Martha Roth have labelled a *rape culture*, defined as "a complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women [...] In a rape culture women perceive a *continuum of threatened violence* that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional *terrorism* against women as the norm" (1993: vii; emphasis added). In the United States of America, allegedly the most developed and free country in the world, according to the National Coalition against Domestic Violence, a woman is assaulted every nine seconds; one in five women has been the victim of violent aggressions on the part of a partner; half of the female victims of rape were made so at the hands of someone they previously knew; and up to sixty percent of regularly battered women can end up losing their job due to the consequences of the repeated assaults (NCADV 2015). Yet, when we turn on the TV, what we see on an everyday basis is ISIS/DAESH, Syria, Al-Qaeda, Islamic fundamentalism, weapons of mass destruction, arrests of supposed jihadists in our neighborhoods... sometimes the enemy within, but not at home. If we are to believe the news, terror is everywhere but between our walls.

As Fernández-Morales has argued elsewhere (2004), the means and the ends of gender terrorism and what is generally called "political terrorism" have much in common. Granted: the national, transnational, or global impact is not the same, among other reasons, due to the unbalanced media coverage, as the feminist movement has been denouncing for decades, most recently with campaigns like "Ni una menos" in Argentina or "November 7th" in Spain.[12] However, strategies like the tight control of time, movement, contacts, and resources; psychological violence through growingly serious threats that may or may not come true; physical aggression; or a brutal and extended violence that affects family members and communities, are common to the political/religious fundamentalist and to the patriarchal chauvinist. In this respect, psychiatrist Judith Herman made it very clear in the 1990s that "the most common post-traumatic disorders are not those of men at war but of women in civilian life" (1997: 28): In a now classical title, like Buchwald and her colleagues above, she conceptualized a continuum that is highly relevant for our analysis: her main volume of reference is titled *Trauma and Recovery. The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (emphasis added). And in the post-9/11 scenario, similar arguments have been developed by gender-aware authors Robin Morgan and Susan Faludi. The former, in the afterword to a 2001 re-edition of *The Demon Lover*, insisted that we should begin to visualize terrorism as part of a spectrum of patriarchal violence whose effects extend "from the battered child and raped woman who live in fear to an entire population living in fear" (Morgan 2001: 408). The latter, in *The Terror Dream*, also traced a continuum between the return of the John Wayne model of manhood, the celebration of the hyper-masculine hero as

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[12] See http://niunamenos.com.ar/ and http://marcha7nmadrid.org/.

embodied by the cowboy-like George W. Bush in the post-9/11 iconography, and the timely comeback of the hyper-feminine damsel in distress (e.g. the fireman's widow or the Twin Towers victim) hand in hand with the no-nonsense "security mom" who was ready to vote for any man tough enough to destroy the terrorists and defend America and her children (Faludi 2007: 204).[13] All these arguments suggest that the traditional dichotomies private/public and personal/political have become obsolete when it comes to studying violence and its consequences. And these binary oppositions are precisely at the basis of Jonathan Nolan's *Person of Interest*, which we now proceed to dissect from a gender perspective, focusing on the thematization of gender violence within a Greimasian structure updated for a post-9/11 context.

Let us do a brief recap here to remember that the super-advanced machine that is at the center of Jonathan Nolan's master plot has the job of differentiating "relevant" from "irrelevant" crimes. It feeds the "relevant" references to the government as potential threats to the nation within the framework of what Furedi (2009) calls "precautionary culture", and then supposedly destroys the "irrelevant" data. However, its creator Harold Finch manages to retrieve the discarded information on an everyday basis. The problem is that he only has access to a Social Security number –obviously pointing to a particular U.S. citizen– but he cannot know whether its holder will be the victim or the perpetrator of the felony to come. Whichever it is, he decides that he will do his best (with the help of the very able Mr Reese) to prevent it, since there will always be blameless victims involved, and he feels that he already saw enough innocence shattered on 9/11. For the heroes of our show, then, *everyone* is a "Person of Interest" (which is not the case for the powers that be, who only

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[13] About the "security mom" and its symbolic and political impact, see Fernández-Morales 2013b.

care about massive terrorist threats). By intentionally blurring the limits between relevant and irrelevant crimes, public and private issues, intimate and political matters, in *Person of Interest* Nolan challenges the prevailing binary thought and transplants ideas related to the War on Terror onto everyday threats including gender terrorism, which is re-conceptualized as "relevant" by virtue of the attention that the protagonist team decides to bestow on it.

In the season that occupies us here (2011-2012; 23 episodes), five different storylines revolve around the issue of violence against women: individuals living in fear in a nation that lives in terror as a whole. In four of them, it is John Reese that tries to solve the situation, with different degrees of success. In fact, his evolution from a mere active subject within a regular crime drama genre series into a superhero in the most popular sense (hyper-masculine, mysterious, attractive, with a costume that identifies him –he is known by the police as the Man in the Suit–, several identities, an obscure past, and almost supernatural abilities to fight his antagonists) is conditioned by his obsession with one particular victim of male terrorism, as we gradually discover. Actually, when in the pilot episode (22nd September 2011) Finch chooses Reese to "be his body" in the self-assigned mission of saving the "irrelevant" victims detected by his machine, the former CIA agent politely refuses, preferring instead to return to his then best friend: alcohol. Convinced that he will touch a sensitive cord, Finch sets a trap for Reese: he locks him into a hotel room and makes him overhear what he thinks is an attack against a woman on the other side of the wall. Reese's reaction is immediate: he does everything in his power to break into that room and stop the beating. This, within Jens Eder's model of character analysis, begins to define him as a *fictional being* (2010: 21): desperate and aimless as he may be, he jumps at the hint of gender violence happening near him. In Greimas'

terms, with Reese placed at the center of the structure as the dramaturgical *subject*, Finch's ruse works as the *sender* and the woman at risk is to become the *receiver*. Finally, Reese's *object* is undoubtedly to stop the aggression and make her safe. In other words: the pilot episode of *Person of Interest* displays a typical androcentric fairy-tale-like narrative in which the male hero initiates a quest (however brief) to rescue the lady. Classical romance all over again... but with a twist: the cries for help that Reese hears behind the wall come from an old recording. The woman is already dead. The killer husband is still free. Justice has not been done. Ten seconds later, Reese is on board and Nolan's show can officially start. The body (Reese) and the mind (Finch) have become one man on a mission.[14]

Episode 1.11, "Super", broadcasted on 12th January 2012, introduces the topic of stalking, one of the most elusive forms of gender violence. As Miriam López-Rodríguez explains, this type of abuse is usually more difficult to prove than physical violence, and it is complicated to recognize by non-experts (2012: 80). Victims tend to be blamed for tempting their aggressors in some way, and the phenomenon generally includes lengthy periods of psychological harassment before the man gets physical –by which point the woman is usually so scared and with such a low self-esteem that she most likely finds it impossible to defend herself. Marie-France Hirigoyen applies a very revealing label to this sort of criminal: she talks about *vampirism* to portray how the perverse individuals that embark in this kind of activity feed on the victim's psychic territory (1999: 159). And in Nolan's show, the IT expert Mr Finch does his homework of 21st-century *edutainment* and informs the public about the problem by reciting

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[14] It is to be understood that gender violence is not the only type of crime that Finch and Reese will try to prevent throughout the show, but it is our main thematic focus, as we have made clear. Hence the choice of corpus.

some numbers and statistics about stalking in the U.S.[15] To this, as is only expected by the audience at this stage, Reese reacts with all his assets and begins to control his main suspect: Trask, a building janitor who seems to take too much interest in one of the female lodgers, Lily, terrified because she receives unwanted messages, flowers without a sender's name, and other signs that someone is tracing her. When the situation becomes unbearable for Lily and, by extension, for Reese, who sympathizes with her to painful extremes, the protagonist decides to act and... gets the wrong man. A final narrative turn reveals to hero and audience alike that the stalker was –as is only typical in many real cases– Lily's ex-boyfriend, Rick, and that Trask was only doing his best to protect her. Reese's conception of justice for stalkers does not take long to be executed: he kills Rick on the spot, distrustful of the laws that may judge a man of means like him for such a slippery crime. Continuing to fulfill Eder's Clock of Character Model, this episode of *Person of Interest* opens the box of Reese's *symptoms*: "What causes the character to be as it is, and what effects does it produce? (Eder 2010: 22). Again a Greimasian *subject* moved in this case by female fear as an abstract *sender* but still with the same *object* of taking the woman to safety, Reese's dramaturgical function here gives us a hint of what is really happening inside him.

It takes one secondary plot in 1.13 and a few more weeks (until 1.21) for the audience to finally unveil Reese's trauma in relation to gender violence and, in Eder's terms, his potential value as a *symbol*: what he stands for, whether he may function as

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[15] The term *edutainment*, making reference to the combination of education and entertainment, was used for the first time in the 1970s by producer Robert Heyman. Since then, it has been applied to such different genres as documentaries, cartoon movies, children's programs or, more recently, fictional series like *Gilmore Girls* (WB 2000-2007).

a sign of something else (2010: 21). In "Root Cause", premiered on 2nd February 2012, the main case has to do with Scott Powell, a family man trapped in a network of corruption. However, as the episode opens, what we first see of Reese are his fists and the rest of his body hard at work against Mr Billick, whom Finch had discovered had a plan to murder his own wife. After some minutes of display of physical prowess –throughout *Person of Interest* Reese is involved in hundreds of fights and tends never to lose,[16] as the well-trained (by the government) (super)hero that he is– a solution is made obvious: Billick is carrying a gun, which implies a violation of his parole and will land him in jail. For once, Reese lets the justice system take care of the culprit, instead of executing him himself, vigilante-like,[17] as he had done with Rick in 1.11. Something similar happens in 1.21, a key episode for Reese's characterization, when it is suggested that he sends two potential women murderers to a Mexican prison, framed within a drug case that will keep them there for a long enough period of time to give him (and the victims that survived) some peace. In this respect, despite his easy shot and how brutal he can be against some of the criminals that he traps, we see Nolan's dramaturgical construction of Reese in relation to gender terrorism as highly symbolic. As Eder points out, the character may stand for something else beyond the explicit, and we read Reese as and Greimasian *opponent* of gender violence and a radical *helper* of victims of this scourge. No other type of aggression triggers the same intensity of

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[16] Reese's strength and abilities with weapons and martial arts, and the fact that he wins even the most unbalanced battles, could qualify *Person of Interest* as part of a tendency that *The New York Times* dubbed "Neanderthal TV" in 2005: a catalogue of shows where violence, torture, and "tough guys" were the rule (De Felipe and Gómez 2011: 132).

[17] For a detailed discussion of 21st-century TV vigilantes and their moral codes, see Beeler 2010 or De Felipe and Gómez 2011.

reaction in him, nothing infuriates him more, no other criminal seems more hateful in his eyes than the wife-batterer. Gender violence, then, is a vital element in what Eder calls the "mental models of the characters" (2010: 21); in this case Reese's.

The episode "Many Happy Returns" (1.21, 3rd May 2012) unties the knot of the Man in the Suit's trauma through a double-layered narrative that displays a technique used by other successful series like *Orange Is the New Black* (Netflix 2013-present). To the present-day narrative of Finch's and Reese's lives, the writers juxtapose flashbacks with some of the protagonists' backstories. In *Person of Interest* this had been happening since the first scene of the pilot, but 1.21 is a radical turning point in the audience's access to details about John Reese. This is when we understand why he is who he is in 2012, and it is also when the Clock of Character circle (Eder 2010) is closed: Reese as an *artifact* (how he is represented), *fictional being* (how he acts in his world), *symbol* (what he stands for), and *symptom* (what causes him to do what he does) merge harmoniously through his backstory with Jessica, the love of his life, whom he let go to fulfill his duty to his country after 9/11. This, together with his dramaturgical functions, as Eder concludes, contribute to the development of the plot, communicate relevant information, perspectivize the narration, convey super-ordinate meanings, and provide emotional value (2010: 31). In "Many Happy Returns", with the machine's leak about a woman named Sarah –self-renamed Karen for fear of her husband– working as the *sender*, and that very woman and Jessica functioning together as *receivers* of the *subject*'s (Reese's) actions, Greimas' *ideological axis* comes to life, bringing to the forefront the ethical considerations of the storyline (Spang 1991: 112).

What unleashes the beast in the episode at hand is the fact that Finch receives the same number again and again, hinting at

the fact that one person may be in the same scenario of danger day after day. To his question "how could anyone's life be repeatedly threatened?" there is a sad but clear answer that the show makes explicit, exposing the vulnerability of these women, considered "irrelevant" by their own authorities, too busy with "real terrorism": "They were living with the person who would eventually kill them" (Nolan 2012: 1.21). Ready to prevent this crime like all others, Reese turns a key that opens the door to his own past: in collaboration with Jocelyn Carter (played by Taraji P. Henson), a NYPD detective that begins as his *opponent* and ends up as something more than his *helper* as the show moves forward, he discovers that Jessica, the woman he was in love with when the Towers came down and he was sent to the battlefield, could have been one of those recurrent numbers. Like Sarah/Karen, Jessica married a powerful man who led a double life: Prince Charming outside, potential killer at home. For this kind of profile, very frequent in real life as experts have proved in different studies (Garrido 2001, Bosch and Ferrer 2002, Lorente 2004, Bosch *et al.* 2013), Reese proposes his own solution: "Show him what a real monster looks like" (Nolan 2012: 1.21). Unable to save Jessica, who has already been murdered when Reese manages to locate her husband, he does rescue Sarah/Karen, saying to her the words that he probably most wanted to have uttered in front his ex-girlfriend: "You are free" (Nolan 2012: 1.21). As mentioned above, by Finch's and Reese's influence both Sarah/Karen's and Jessica's executioners end up with a long sentence in a Mexican prison. The vigilante has accomplished his mission without falling into the trap of irrational revenge, providing a positive realization of Greimas' ideological axis mentioned above. And he has offered the audience his own version of Eder's Clock of Character, going all the way round for us and opening his heart for the one and only time in the whole season: "When you find that one person that

connects you to the world, you become someone different. When that person is taken from you… What do you become then?" (Nolan 2012: 1.21).

We hope to have made obvious so far that *Person of Interest* is a show about the post-9/11 culture of fear ("anyone can be a terrorist") and its subsequent precautionary culture ("something *will* happen and the machine will warn us") where the protagonist pair of the first season, Harold Finch and John Reese, provide a counter-narrative of their own by re-conceptualizing gender terrorism, among other crimes, as "relevant", contrary to the government's priorities. In the majority of episodes, through an effective synergy between Finch's privileged mind and Reese's extraordinary bodily abilities, they manage to prevent most of the problems that the machine foresees for ordinary citizens. They are, as we have said earlier, two sides of the same coin that end up configuring *a man* on a mission, an almost infallible (super)hero. They have resources (e.g. money), means (e.g. influence), skills (e.g. using weapons), and a very traditionally masculine form of agency: 1) identify the problem; 2) apply the necessary pressure (physical, psychological, economic) to overcome the tests it may bring on; 3) succeed. Unsurprisingly, the typical quest convention circulated within our androcentric culture for centuries, from Arthurian romance to fairy tales or Hollywood blockbusters.

Nevertheless, Jonathan Nolan's series also suggests the possibility of alternative subjects responding to gender violence, questioning the post-9/11 atmosphere of deflated agency described by Furedi (2005, 2007a, 2007b) that Faludi (2007), in turn, associates with the disempowerment of the civil population in general, but of women in particular. It is true that Nolan's dominant agents in the first season of the show are male types verging on the supermen. Yet, some of his female characters also

learn to construct their own networks of resistance inside a testosterone-filled, risk-dominated environment. Figures like the aforementioned Jocelyn Carter, for instance, are able to take the leap from victimhood to agency not only by facing her own violent husband,[18] but also becoming a heroine of sorts for her peers. In "Get Carter" (1.9, 8th December 2011) she identifies "a homicide waiting to happen" when she repeatedly spots the same battered woman in the NYPD headquarters. With her own life at risk because the machine has selected her Social Security number as one of the "irrelevant" cases, Carter prioritizes the potential victim and, assuming a courage that is not expected of female characters in traditional narratives, faces and threatens the abusive husband directly. To this present-day plot Nolan confronts Carter's backstory as an interrogator in Iraq, and in an exercise of compensation, places her on the same level of skills and bravery as John Reese. In fact, the regular hero acknowledges her agency without unsexing her in the process: he describes her as an "impressive lady", "honest" and the kind of person that "the world cannot afford to lose" (Nolan 2011: 1.9).

Further into the show –as we hope to explore further into our current project–[19] Nolan's dramaturgical structure becomes more gender balanced and his male and female characters all have their fair share of agency, both in relation to violence against women and to other types of threats. In this respect, *Person of Interest* stands out as an example of Lois McNay's neo-Foucauldian theory at work (as do other shows like the aforementioned *Orange Is the New Black*, for example), and proves that telelevision's postmodern construction of multiple subject positions may have the potential to reformulate our

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[18] This happens in episode 3.8, which falls outside the scope of our current corpus.

notions of identity and difference (Joyrich 1996: 17). Drawing on Foucault's idea that where there is power there can be resistance, McNay proposes a gender-conscious re-conceptualization of agency that includes the dimension of creativity in order for individuals or groups "to act in an unexpected fashion or institute new and unanticipated models of behaviour" (2014: loc. 784).[20] In this line, Detective Carter and other female accomplices of Finch and Reese in the ensuing seasons (e.g. former paramilitary agent Sameen Shaw) serve as examples of women who break the traditional gender barriers and find ways out of their own and other female characters' problems with patriarchy and its violence. Carter, acting as a *subject* of her own right, surprises an abuser with her threats in 1.9 and her own husband with her dialectic in 3.8 ("Endgame", 12th November 2013), as commented above. In "Most Likely To..." (3.19, 1st April 2014), Shaw displays unexpected performing and social abilities, and collaborates with Reese as one actant (two characters forming a unitary *subject*) to solve a young woman's murder that turns out to have been the result of a male-centered battle for her attention between her boyfriend and her best friend. In this case, Shaw does not hesitate to infiltrate a high school reunion with a fake identity or to use weapons and combat techniques in what could traditionally be considered a highly unfeminine manner in order to succeed, highlighting the creative quality of McNay's concept of gendered agency.

By Way of Conclusion

Conceived as part of the contemporary precautionary culture theorized by Frank Furedi (2009), *Person of Interest* falls

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[20] Originally published in 2000. We quote from the 2014 Kindle edition, where no page numbers but e-book "locations" are provided.

in line with other fictional products that reflect and reinforce the post-9/11 culture of fear, within a generalized ideological consensus built on the ruins of the World Trade Center (De Felipe and Gómez 2011: 70). It cannot be denied that it is in many ways representative of the conservative dominant discourse, with its obsession with risk and with the repetition of a massive terrorist attack. However, if we dare to try an exercise of what Stuart Hall would denominate a *negotiated position* within his "Encoding, Decoding" reception model of the 1990s, Nolan's creation may also be perceived as a potentially critical narrative in which the limits of legal and legitimate action are questioned, institutions like the U.S. government or intelligence agencies are put on the line for a close examination of their ends and methods, and events that have a tendency to be labelled "irrelevant" in a context that focuses on big threats and the common good are tackled by subjects who are less than ready to accept a position of powerlessness and lack of agency. From minute one of the show, for co-protagonist John Reese the battering and ultimate killing of his ex-girlfriend Jessica acquires as much importance as any terrorist plan to be dismantled by his former CIA employers. As the plot moves on and becomes more intricate and gender balanced, opening more space for theories like McNay's to be applied, for Jocelyn Carter and Sameen Shaw their position as autonomous agents is a number one priority, and they do whatever it takes to protect less able or not so independent women put at risk by executors of patriarchal practices. Within an updated Actantial Model that has the potential to make visible ideological vectors of much value to our gender-conscious Furedian approach, gender violence works as a powerful *sender* that conditions characterization and storylines alike. Further research is undoubtedly called for as the show continues on CBS for at least

one more year, and we will stay tuned for novelties about these and other "topics of interest".

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