EDICIONES
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The Discourse of Fear in American TV Fiction: A Furedian Reading of *Person of Interest*[1]

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Abstract. Inserted in the ongoing discussion about the post-9/11 cultural archive, this paper analyzes the TV series *Person of Interest* (CBS, 2011–2016), created by Jonathan Nolan, through Frank Furedi's theories about the discursive formation of fear as presented in his texts *Politics of Fear. Beyond Left and Right* (2005), *Invitation to Terror. The Expanding Empire of the Unknown* (2007), The Only Thing We Have to Fear Is the 'Culture of Fear' Itself (2007), and Precautionary Culture and the Rise of Possibilistic Risk Assessment (2009). We make these works converse with several American and European sociological views, offering a transnational perspective over the issues at hand. With an interdisciplinary approach and with a critical-cultural methodology supported by selected instances from the first four seasons of the show, we argue that, despite timid hints at a critique of the flawed American democracy, the show feeds into an ever-growing array of media proposals of a citizenship based on precaution, contributing to the reinforcement of the post-9/11 atmosphere of fear through a logic predicated on inevitability and a deflated sense of agency on the part of common people that discourages practices of resistance.
Keywords: Post-9/11 TV, fear, precautionary culture, inevitability, agency

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How to cite this article: Fernández Morales, M. & María Isabel Menéndez Menéndez (2016) The Discourse of Fear in American TV Fiction: A Furedian Reading of *Person of Interest*, in *Complutense Journal of English Studies* 24, 7-23.

1. Introduction: Fear Redivivus After 9/11

For fifteen years, in almost every public or private conversation about them, we have been hearing, and maybe saying ourselves, that the events which took place in

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New York City, the Pentagon, and Shanksville, Pennsylvania, on September 11, 2001 changed the world forever. The idea that nothing would be same again for the United States or for the rest of the planet has prevailed as the received interpretation of the first terrorist attacks broadcast in real time, which took the lives of over 3,000 people on that date and many others in the related conflicts that ensued: two wars, several antiterrorist operations, and other attacks in different countries. As Arthur Neal has affirmed, "[t]his day provided a reference point for Americans to organize their memories into 'before' and 'after'" (2005: xi).

Millions of words have been written about 9/11 and its historical, economic, military, and political consequences, and this article does not provide a different take in any of these respects. What it does, as an original contribution to the corpus of scholarly works articulated around the 2001 events and the ensuing War on Terror, is examine part of its archive, specifically from the field of television, to delve into the inextricable link between cultural products and their contexts of creation and reception, and to expand the ongoing discussion of TV series as complex, worthy-of-attention forms of social knowledge within the framework of the Third Golden Age of fiction.[4] A successful show developed throughout five seasons,[5] *Person of Interest* (CBS, 2011–2016) has not yet been approached from an academic point of view in publications of impact, as have other contemporary shows we will be mentioning below, such as *24* or *Homeland*.[6] In this respect, our paper inaugurates a path that is left open for ample further research, considering the growing complexity of the series' scripts and the large number of episodes available for analysis. To this we can add the product's dialogic potential with other fictions that deal with the post-9/11 world and with the tensions between the American national plight and the process of globalization after those events.

With an interdisciplinary approach that activates concepts from the fields of television studies, cultural studies, and sociology, we perform an analysis of *Person of Interest* through the lenses of Frank Furedi's theorization of fear and terror in the West as presented in his texts *Politics of Fear. Beyond Left and Right* (2005), *Invitation to Terror. The Expanding Empire of the Unknown* (2007), The Only Thing We Have to Fear Is the 'Culture of Fear' Itself (2007), and Precautionary Culture and the Rise of Possibilistic Risk Assessment (2009).We make these works converse with several American and European sociological views, offering a transnational perspective over the issues at hand. With a critical-cultural methodology supported by selected instances from seasons 1 through 4, we

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[4]   About the Golden Ages of American television, see Sara Gwenllian-Jones and Roberta Pearson (2004). *Cult Television.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; James L. Longworth (2000 and 2002). *TV Creators: Conversations with America's Top Producers of Television Drama* (volumes I and II). Syracuse: Syracuse University Press; or Robert Thompson (1996). *Television's Second Golden Age: From 'Hill Street Blues' to 'ER'.* New York: Continuum. Shows that would fall into the Third Golden Age category are, among others, *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999–2007; probably the title that inaugurated this phase), *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–2008), *Lost* (ABC, 2004–2010), *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007–2015), *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008–2013), *The Good Wife* (CBS, 2009–2016), *Orange Is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013–present), or *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013–present).

[5]   The last one was airing as of the writing of this paper.

[6]   Members of our research unit have presented papers on *Person of Interest* in conferences in Spain (6th SELICUP conference, October 2014, one paper), Poland (2nd *His Master's Voice* conference, March 2015, two papers), and the UK (*Spying on the Spies* conference, September 2015, one paper), but a search in scholarly databases proves that nothing has been published about it yet, besides reviews and comments on popular forums and social networks.

argue that, despite timid hints at a critique of the flawed American democracy, the show feeds into an ever-growing array of media proposals of a citizenship based on precaution, contributing to the reinforcement of the post-9/11 atmosphere of fear through a logic predicated on inevitability and a deflated sense of agency on the part of common people. Following Sven Cvek's arguments in *Towering Figures* (2011), we situate our corpus as one of the items that form the dominant reading of 9/11 as a moment that changed everything;[7] one that contributes, alongside other series, but also fiction films, songs, novels, documentaries,[8] etc., to what this author calls "the event's in-culturation," that is, "the ways through which the event becomes part of US culture" (2011: 11).

The in-culturation of the murderous aggressions that took place on 9/11 immediately brought upon the country a sense of vulnerability, urgency, and need for action that has lingered and has been fed by recent attacks self-attributed to the Islamic State/DAESH. In fact, only two days after the 2001 events, Arvind Rajagopal already perceived that the United States was drifting "into a state of emergency without any public examination or debate," with an increasingly authoritarian state gaining "carte blanche to guard against all real and imagined enemies" (2002:173).[9] The now well-known measures approved by the Bush administration to enhance national security,[10] together with a language of radicalization rescued from previous critical moments that has done nothing but gain presence in the media since then,[11] became integral to an official discourse that insisted on what Barry Glassner has described as "the eerie incantation: *9/11 can happen again*" (2009: 233). In an oxymoronic situation that we seem to have accepted, emergency has become a permanent state,[12] and we have entered an era of renewed fear whose development the Obama administration and its allies have not hindered. Already into this president's first tenure, Mitchell Dean wrote about the new context as a regime configured "around what might be called the idiom of exception" that has given way to "a new security complex which activates a precautionary approach to risk" (2010: 463). Insecurity and the alleged struggle against it, as Tony Judt explained (2011: 203), have been recovered as active principles in politics within Western democracies. Fear of terrorism, but also fear of change, fear of unemployment, or fear of losing resources or control, is

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[7] In his book (2011: 20), Cvek proposes a second possible interpretation of the 2001 events, a counter-hegemonic one that would underlie continuity rather than rupture, reading 9/11 as a result of the ongoing American policies in the Near and Middle East. In our view, *Person of Interest* is clearly placed within the dominant analytic position, presenting the terrorist attacks as a turning point since the pilot episode.

[8] During the period of revision of this paper, news were published in Spain about the premiere of a documentary about 9/11 and the technology that, according to some experts, could have prevented it. *A Good American*, directed by Friedrich Moser, was shown during the DocumentaMadrid Festival (April 2016), reviving the discussion about surveillance, power, and control (see http://cultura.elpais.com/cultura/2016/04/27/actualidad/1461774073_008156.html or http://agoodamerican.org/ for more information).

[9] We quote from the 2002 printed version of the article, where the author explains that the text was written on 13 September 2001 and an early version posted at www.opendemocracy.net.

[10] The USA Patriot Act, the Homeland Security Act, the relaxation of privacy rights for the sake of prevention, etc.

[11] Jonathan Edwards expands on the dominant post-9/11 language in politics and the media in his article Figuring Radicalization (2015).

[12] In this regard, then Vice-president Cheney delivered a very revealing speech to the Republican Governors' Association in October 2001, in which he affirmed that "[m]any of the steps we have now been forced to take *will become permanent* … I think of it as *the new normalcy*" (in Dean 2010: 464; emphasis added).

ubiquitous. These fears have been further exacerbated since 2008, due to the traumatic economic recession and to several indiscriminate terrorist acts that have hit tourist resorts, restaurants, clubs, or stadiums, which are not considered war zones in the traditional sense. Anxiety about national and individual safety is now the normal state of things, and mainstream cultural productions do not contemplate many alternatives to this *status quo*.

Despite the intensity with which this hegemonic narrative has been discussed by experts since the collapse of the Twin Towers, the truth is that the Bush administration did not invent the wheel with its intentional politics of fear, which fertilized the ground for cultural productions in the same vein. As Marta Fernández Morales has stated in her introduction to *La década del miedo. Dramaturgias audiovisuales post-11 de septiembre* (2013: 20), the simplistic "you are with us or you are with the terrorists" statement articulated by George W. Bush in a November 2001 speech and later recycled in many public interventions by his government was not new. Neither was the dichotomy "us *versus* them," where "us" was still the United States and "them" were no longer communists but Islamic terrorists.[13] Both conceptualizations were based on mental and geopolitical structures that rekindled the discourses of the Cold War, and they constituted a dialectic wall that counter-discursive proposals have taken over ten years to trespass, if they ever have. As Noam Chomsky recalls (2011: 56), by the last decade of the long political struggle between the American and the Soviet blocks, Ronald Reagan came to power announcing that his international policy would be based on fighting terrorism; an argument that has become common currency for Western politicians since 2001.

Further connections between the Cold War mission against the red enemy and the global struggle initiated by George W. Bush can be found, for example, in the figure of Donald Rumsfeld, who was US Permanent Representative to NATO and Secretary of Defense in the 1970s, Reagan's Special Envoy to the Middle East during the 1980s, and again Secretary of Defense between 2001 and 2006. As Chomsky also points out (2011: 65), one of the diplomatic brains behind Bush's post-9/11 project, John Negroponte, was the US Ambassador in Honduras with Reagan, a president that used this and several other countries in Latin America as the US's backyard during his terror-obsessed tenure. Also before 2001, in the Democrat-ruled period between the two Bushes that have occupied the White House, President Bill Clinton fell prey to the speculations circulating about catastrophic terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, and created the position of National Coordinator for Security, Infrastructure Protection and Counter-terrorism in 1998 (Furedi 2005: 126). Since then, the strategies may have been slightly modified,[14] yet the military involvement and the money allegedly dedicated to fighting terrorism have done nothing but grow. In this respect, the politics that have contributed to today's discourse of fear with its own associated narratives, such as *Person of Interest*, seem to represent a continuum in the recent history of the

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[13]   Or even entire Muslim communities in some versions of this dichotomy, as Edwards illustrates throughout the 2015 article cited in a previous footnote.

[14]   Chomsky (2011: 221) examines the difference between George W. Bush's government arresting thousands of suspects and sending them to detention centers and the Obama administration targeting specific individual leaders, for instance.

United States, with the beginning of the 21st century as one of its climactic moments. In this context, as a culturally charged, economically significant, and enduring popular format (Henderson 2007: 7), television fiction plays a relevant role. Part of a wider approach to modifying social attitudes (Henderson 2007: 19), contemporary series constitute an important public space in which serious questions may be raised (Henderson 2007: 180).

The echoes of 9/11 in television series have been analyzed by Fernando de Felipe and Iván Gómez, who argued in their volume *Ficciones colaterales* that the terrorist blows of that date revolutionized our concept of reality and made us consider whether the usual narrative models would be able to reflect, predict, and exorcize the present and the future (2011: 16). They proceeded to mention over one hundred shows of different genres and styles, recognizing the contents of most of them (*JAG*, *24*, and many others) as part of the prevailing culture of fear, but also identifying a few instances of rebellion against the official discourse (*e.g.: South Park* or *The Simpsons*) and the possibility of a pedagogical use of some of the fictional products (*The West Wing*, *Boston Public*). As an illustration of the items in the first group—the majority of the shows produced in the US until this very day, and the one in which *Person of Interest* belongs—Klaus Dodds has suggested that the long-running *24*, which premiered on Fox two months after the 9/11 attacks, can be examined as a constitutive part of the then (re)emerging "homeland security culture" (2010: 22). About the same production, Patricia Trapero Llobera has concluded that it contributed to the atmosphere of paranoia and the development of conspiracy theories that arose after 2001, in a tense "ticking bomb scenario" that is typical of the techno-thriller genre (2013: 119).

Other papers in the same volume as Trapero Llobera's, entitled *La década del miedo* (2013) and whose introduction we have quoted above, have recognized the dominant wave of fear as one of the pillars of the post-9/11 culture in the US, together with an impulse to commemorate the victims, a renewed necessity to (re)construct the memory of the events, and a spirit of celebration of the heroes of that day—particularly the firemen. The book offers a close reading of titles as different from one another as *Homeland*, *The Killing*,[15] *Sex and the City*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Falling Skies*, *The Walking Dead*, *The Simpsons*, or *South Park*. Moving beyond explicit 9/11-related content, which was the focus of *Ficciones colaterales*, it examines the larger effects of the events, even on series that do not deal directly with them. Through the analysis of elements that include mood, images, tone, ideological subtexts, morals, and generic constituents, its eleven contributors come to the general agreement that despite the formal novelties, the redefinition of classical genres, the experimentation with plots and structural devices, and the transmedia dialogues established by many of the products in their corpus, content transgression is far from the norm. The resilience of the dominant discourse of fear, re-awoken after each new attack on, or threat to, the US or its allies, seems to be infinite, and below the original formal surface there tends to lie a conservative message.

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[15]   *The Killing* (AMC, 2011–14) was the American remake of the Danish original show *Forbrydelsen* (DR1 2007–12). In *La década del miedo* Alejandro Casadesús and Eva Parra analyze AMC's version, discussing the American dream in the post-9/11 context.

2. From the State of Emergency to Precautionary Culture: *Person of Interest*

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 in Pakistan that symbolically closed a decade of mourning for the United States (2 May, 2011), the TV network CBS launched *Person of Interest.* An obvious product of the post-9/11-*cum*-War on Terror context, as we have suggested earlier and elaborate on in the following lines, it was originally created by Jonathan Nolan, co-writer with his brother Christopher of the popular movies *The Dark Knight* (2008) and *Interstellar* (2014), who has revealed the real-life source material of at least part of the scripts. As Susan Karlin recollects, Nolan has cited "conversations with special forces and federal intelligence officials" (2011), and has acknowledged direct inspiration in documents elaborated, for instance, by the now closed Information Awareness Office.[16]

Upon its premiere on 22 September, 2011, *Person of Interest* was CBS' highest-testing drama pilot in fifteen years (Karlin 2011). It introduced Harold Finch (played by Michael Emerson), the inventor of a surveillance system commanded by the government after 9/11, trying to find what he dubs a "back door" to his technological creation. Devised to prevent terrorism, his machine was programmed to distinguish between "relevant" threats, i.e., hazards to the nation; and "irrelevant" cases, that is, violent crimes affecting ordinary people. Finch feels that many potential victims are being left out, and 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 an aid who can execute the tasks that he is unable to perform and hires John Reese (Jim Caviezel). Reese is 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 a safer everyday life for all.

Nolan's production is set in an alternative present in which surveillance in the name of national security apparently finds no resistance, at least until the controversial Vigilance organization goes public in season 3. As David Wiegand has written (2011), the show "engages a post-9/11 sense of paranoia in its viewers," immersed in a widespread politics of fear that conceives the world as "an increasingly dangerous, out-of-control place" (Furedi 2005: 66). As stated above, in line with the dominant interpretation of the event described by Cvek in *Towering Figures*, *Person of Interest* presents 9/11 as a radical turning point; a before/after landmark for American history explicitly mentioned by Finch through the now all-too-common expression "when the Towers came down"[17] (Nolan 2011: 1.1).[18] In

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[16] The Information Awareness Office was established in January 2002 by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency with the aim of tracking and monitoring potential terrorists. Congress defunded it in 2003 after public concern about mass surveillance raised significantly, but apparently some of its missions continued under other names, as disclosed by Edward Snowden in 2013. It is fascinating to us how this real governmental agency seems to have similar functions and the same potential dangers as the Artificial Intelligence designed by Harold Finch in *Person of Interest*.

[17] In *The Second Plane*, Martin Amis analyzes the power of media language to re-signify and to create new meanings. Despite the existence of other historical nine-elevenths, he affirms, the systematic repetition during the coverage of the attacks and its consequences has made the expression "9/11" synonymous with "nine eleventh two thousand one, the day the Towers fell" (Amis 2009: 223). This becomes evident in the pilot

that particular moment, as Finch explains in different scenes, national security became an obsession, and the government decided that protecting the US citizenry was the priority: "No one life is above the safety of millions of Americans," he reflects in 2.16. The seemingly never-ending threats to that safety become more and more serious, further and further embedded in the notion of uncontrollable terror, as the series advances. In this respect, season 4 emphasizes the danger posed by Decima, a private company that has built a second machine which is about to destroy Finch's and take global control. Having detected the threat that Decima was creating already in 2.21 ("I don't know about you, but I don't want to see what happens when an evil multinational becomes omniscient"), in the final episode of season 4 female co-protagonist Samantha Groves, a.k.a. Root (Amy Acker), warns the members of her rescue team, and the audience by extension: "If the machine dies, the world we wake up in tomorrow is one none of us wants to see."

The character of Root is especially interesting to explore as a spokesperson of the precautionary culture discourse within *Person of Interest.* First featured in episode 1.13, significantly titled "Root Cause," she starts off as an antagonist for Finch, fascinated by his intelligence and his knowledge of technology. She herself is a brilliant hacker, but also a hitwoman whose services are for sale, and a violent sociopath that changes sides midway through the series' conflict. By the end of season 2 the audience has learned that she is endowed with the ability to communicate directly with Finch's machine, and in season 4 she is actually presented as its Analog Interface. Slipping into the posthuman, Root thus appears as a kind of futuristic woman-cyborg. Through her unique connection with the device, she also assumes the role of a *sui generis* postmodern soothsayer, repeatedly insisting on the idea that saving her[19] is the only way to prevent chaos. In episode 3.10, "The Devil's Share," Root foresees "a larger fight ahead" and offers Finch an alliance against the second, wrongdoing machine. After she makes good of her word by saving him and his team in 3.12, she takes the leap onto the side of the "good guys," becoming instrumental to the solution of their individual cases but, more importantly, for their struggle against Decima.

As echoed by Root and other characters, then, in the predicament that *Person of Interest* fictionalizes, hyperbolic but still highly resonant of the post-9/11 reality,[20] precautionary logic dominates the discourse around the management of national, transnational, or global risk (Furedi 2009: 198). As Enrique Gil Calvo explains, the main idea behind the sociology of risk is that, the more modern we get to be, the

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episode of *Person of Interest* when Finch only needs to say "when the Towers came down" to be understood by other protagonists and, most probably, by the viewers.

[18]   All in-text references to the show are made using the season-episode system, where for example "2.6" stands for season 2, episode 6. The source we are using is the original TV broadcast, recorded via the Digital+ satellite platform in Spain. In order to avoid excessive reiteration and seeing as the season number already hints at the year of release, we will skip the creator-date information in subsequent references.

[19]   Root conceives Finch's machine as female, as the creator himself notes in 3.6: "Your choice of pronoun," he says, "illuminating." She goes so far as to refer to it as "Mom," imagining herself as one of her faithful children (3.7).

[20]   As anecdotal evidence of the worryingly close-to-reality background of *Person of Interest*, we could recall that the investigative journalistic volume *No Place to Hide* describes, for instance, how two reporters in a sensitive meeting are aware that the government has the technology "to activate cell phones and laptops remotely as eavesdropping devices" (Greenwald 2014: 12). This is something that we see the protagonists of the show doing in almost every episode, perhaps thinking that it is just one of the fictional, fantastic elements in the script.

more perilous and uncertain that modernity becomes, increasing the likelihood of crises, catastrophes and disasters taking place (2003: 23). This provides a fertile ground for alarmism and terror, without the need for anything to actually occur: the perceived threat, expanded through our contemporary networks of interaction, is enough (Gil Calvo 2003: 42). Thus, post-9/11 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 2001 onwards, as mirrored by the basic premise of *Person of Interest*, has been not *whether* something bad can take place, but *when* it will (Furedi 2005: 135). This reflects Dean's definition of the first decade of the 21st century as a period in which the Western citizens' experience "is one of disruption by events which are or appear to be outside the ways in which we imagined our world and its futures" (2010: 461). The constant expectation of disaster brings on a mood of helplessness and inevitability, a collective resignation summarized by the phrase "it is only a matter of time" (Furedi 2007a: 8). In turn, this atmosphere enables a permanent anticipation of destructive consequences symbolically encoded in the colors of the Homeland Security Advisory System 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 started in Afghanistan in 2001, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the shoot-first-ask-later policy applied in some of the latest cases of jihadist terrorist attacks in Europe and Northern Africa, or the immediate bombing in Syria on the part of France after the 13 November Paris massacre in 2015. As Dean affirms,

> [i]n the language of exceptionalism, one series of events, real and imagined, those which start with 9/11, have been viewed as necessitating the denial of normal legal processes and basic individual rights, including being informed of charges, access to legal representation and civilian courts and of protection under the international law, including the Geneva convention […] In the idiom of exception, the event is thus linked to a response held to be necessary. (2010: 44)

Precautionary culture and its derived sense of inevitability also create a pressing need for protection at any cost, leaving the door open in the real world 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. Since 9/11, the priority lies in trying to identify and expose the terrorists before it is too late (De Felipe and Gómez 2011: 223), and the quickly-developing industry that has made available barely detectable cameras, sophisticated hacking techniques, drones, etc. contributes to the perception described by Furedi that "[t]he line that used to delineate reality from science fiction has become blurred" (2005: 130).

As a fictional narrative of fear that masterfully captures this environment and its traces in both the public and the private sphere, *Person of Interest* focuses, not on solving crimes as we were used to seeing in CBS' typical procedural series like the

CSI franchise (2000–2016)[21] or *Elementary* (2012–present), but on preventing them. This constitutes a novelty within the genre; an "appealing twist," according to Mary McNamara's review of the pilot episode (2011).[22] It depicts the protagonists' efforts to try and stop disaster from striking "irrelevant" individuals while the government is theoretically doing the same for the whole nation, taking care of the "relevant" threats identified by Finch's machine. Due to this narrative focus, the series is revealed as one element within a larger cultural script that is consolidating the ever-present fear, the need for constant precaution, and the mood of inevitability as integral to our current *status quo*.[23] The first four seasons confirm its alignment to this tendency, illustrating David Altheide's argument that "popular culture has been the key element in promoting the culture of fear" (2002: 177) and exemplifying the process that Furedi has called "the dramatization of security" (2007a: 37). Evidencing this, Nolan's characters insist, for example, that somebody is killed in New York City every 18 hours (1.2), that "no one is safe" (1.22), that we live "in times of universal deceit" (2.5), and that the stakes are moving higher and higher, beyond national security (2.22). They also affirm pessimistically that there is no point in fighting the technology (3.2), and even that they themselves are merely "delaying the inevitable" (3.12).

This fatalistic approach does nothing but gain strength as the consecutive seasons of *Person of Interest* progress. It is undeniable that in the first season a general sense of inevitability was already there (from episode 1, the numbers selected by the machine constitute evidence that something bad *will* happen), but the protagonists' victories over evil still provided some sense of positive closure. Thus, for example, Diane Hansen's (Natalie Zea) cover was broken in court in 1.1 and she paid for her crimes as the leader of a murderous network of corruption. Later on, John Reese untangled a boy's kidnapping and restored him safely to his anxious father (1.5), and he put his own life on the line to save a sick six-month, clearly innocent, baby (1.17). The fragmentary quality of the opening season, with its attention placed on one individual case introduced and solved in each episode, allowed for some hope of resolution in favor of the heroes. Midway through season 2, however, the audience was presented with a weekly instalment without the usual "person of interest" focus. In "Dead Reckoning" (2.13) there was no number in the forefront. The narrative tension was created around the team's plans to rescue Reese, who was in life-threatening trouble after being declared "a matter of national security" by the authorities (2.11). In that moment, Nolan began to construct a master plot that since then underlied the individual cases and that reached its peak in the war between the two machines (Finch's and Decima's) in the latest three seasons. Their confrontation had an impact that went beyond individual wellbeing to reach the level of risk of global annihilation. The corollary of this is that, entrapped in an increasingly complex cobweb of threat and panic, the

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[21] *CSI Las Vegas* finished in 2015. *CSI Miami* was on air between 2002 and 2012, while *CSI New York* was broadcast between 2004 and 2013. *CSI Cyber* (2015–2016) was the shortest-running branch.

[22] This idea was already present in literature with outstanding instances such as the short story "The Minority Report" (Philip K. Dick 1956), which was adapted to film as *Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg 2002) and as the homonymous TV series developed by Max Borenstein for Fox (2015).

[23] We borrow the term "cultural script" from our main theoretical reference, Frank Furedi, who links it to ideas and feelings and identifies it as vital to the process of construction of fear in the article The Only Thing We Have to Fear Is the 'Culture of Fear' Itself (2007b).

protagonists—and by their assumed identification with them, the audience—did nothing to resist the mainstream discourse of the need for constant precaution in the face of an ever-growing menace beyond anyone's control. In coherence with this line of thought, two aspects of the 21st-century precautionary logic represented in *Person of Interest* became particularly interesting for the development of its stories and the transmission of the discourse of fear: on the one hand, the idea that anybody can be the enemy. On the other hand, the widespread belief that common people are vulnerable beings with a poor or non-existent capacity to act.

2.1. Anyone Can Be(come) a Terrorist, Or the Policy of the "Universal Adversary"

The first issue mentioned above in relation to the show's precautionary logic contributes effectively to catching the audience's interest: the machine provides Finch with a Social Security number per episode, and he and the viewers do not know initially whether the person behind it will be a victim or a perpetrator. In *Person of Interest* anyone can be an aggressor or have one tracking them, which promotes an atmosphere or paranoia and maintains the drama alive. In this respect, Nolan's creation follows a tendency identified by De Felipe and Gómez in other post-9/11 series: in the new stories, potential antagonists can be hiding anywhere, moving naturally among innocent people and ready to make hell break loose on them (2011: 223). In this televised, but also not-far-from-reality context, continue these authors, the terror strategy can be said to have triumphed when everybody watches everybody, when mistrust becomes the only possible defense of a fearful population, or when, in your mind, your neighbor might as well be a terrorist (2011: 244). It is the policy of the "Universal Adversary" as coined by the Homeland Security Council and explained by Furedi in *Invitation to Terror*: "The enemy has acquired an increasingly diffuse and abstract character [...] Uncertainty about the identity of the enemy has led to scenarios where little is left to chance and virtually anyone can be represented as a potential foe" (2007a: xiv).

In Nolan's series, Finch makes it transparent that, in a world where something terrible will inevitably occur, "only the paranoid survive" (1.14). Throughout its seasons, the show unravels a collection of situations in which apparently naive women turn out to have criminal brains (*e.g.* the aforementioned Diane Hansen in 1.1), and former Stasi agents such as Ulrich Kohl (Alan Dale) in 1.8 come back from the dead to apply torture techniques on their former coworkers. Similarly, apparently loving husbands and wives pay for each other's murder as in 2.8, and beauties presented as fragile and exotic come out as ex-spies and aggressive robbers, like the antiquities thief Kelli Lin (Elaine Tan) does, shocking everybody around her, in 3.14. In other cases—the majority, in fact—people from all walks of life are found to be threatened by violence and become potential victims that need the protection of the main characters. Men and women, teenagers and little girls, mob leaders, IT geniuses, diplomats' daughters and foster children, policewomen and Navy officers are rescued by Finch, Reese and the helpers they recruit on the way. The lead team, initially limited to Finch as the brain and Reese as the body, is completed by the previously corrupt NYPD officer Lionel Fusco (Kevin Chapman), the honest and reluctant NYPD detective Jocelyn "Joss" Carter (Taraji

P. Henson), the retired Special Agent Sameen Shaw (Shara Shahi), and the first antagonist and later collaborator Samantha Groves/Root, discussed above.

In a twist to the Universal Adversary philosophy, the limits between public and private crimes, relevant and irrelevant threats, global terror and everyday fears, and macro and micro levels of risk become ultimately imperceptible in *Person of Interest*. For instance, in 1.13 the number of the week, Scott Powell (Myk Watford), is presented as a family man caught within the Washington machinery; an "irrelevant" victim of a cascade of political decisions. Made redundant by budget cuts that audiences were surely more than familiar with during the recession period, Powell falls in a trap that makes him look like a potential murderer. With an FBI investigation under way, even his own wife suspects that he can be a terrorist… anyone can since 9/11. Moreover, when someone challenges this Universal Adversary construction, their life is threatened "for asking questions" about the system. Such is the case of Henry Peck (Jacob Pitts), a spy passing as a financial analyst that appears as the next victim-to-be in the penultimate episode of the first season. Pointing at the complicated workings of today's surveillance structures, when he finds out who Peck really is, Reese wonders: "How do we spy on a spy?" After the former reveals that heknows that Finch's machine exists and is about to die for it, the latter concludes: "There's no one to tell. Noone is safe" (1.22).

In season 2, a Homeland Security leak endangers a naturalized Cuban-American citizen (2.9). Fermín Ordóñez's (Michael Irby) case is representative of the private-public, personal-political, micro-macro confusion we are commenting on. A cab driver in New York, initially Finch's team recognizes that he is exposed to ordinary street crime and that"the threat could come from anyone of eight million people in [the] city." Nevertheless, his potential relevance for the government's data network becomes obvious when he is revealed as a defected Cuban sportsman whose American dream was destroyed by an unexpected injury. Desperate to take his family out of the island, Ordóñez throws himself into the arms of the Estonian mob, which is trafficking with information about international terrorism. As the other side of the coin, Finch's machine identifies Shaw as "irrelevant" despite her previous work as a government agent, and Reese must save her from imminent death when she suddenly becomes a foe for the CIA after discovering a corrupt plot (2.16). Later, during seasons 3 and 4, the frontier between what matters to national security and what does not is further shattered through the Decima storyline, with the protagonists moving between individual cases of honest men and women and institutional crime, or between keeping track of the chosen numbers and pondering the consequences of mass surveillance. Their struggle against what Furedi has called "the quiet fears of everyday life" (2007b) crosses paths with global terror, confirming within fiction what the sociologist has observed in real life, i.e., that "the line that divides ordinary threats from terrorist ones can often become blurred" (Furedi 2007a: 115).

2.2. Vulnerability and Lack of Agency, Or There's Nothing You Can Do

The second aspect of precautionary culture mentioned above that is reinforced in *Person of Interest*—the feeling of vulnerability and deflated sense of agency of the common individual—is also integral to Furedi's theorization of fear. He actually

goes so far as to affirm that "the defining feature of the current Western twenty-first-century version of personhood is vulnerability" (2005: 5), which "is now seen as the natural state for most people" (Furedi 2007b). For this scholar, popular culture plays a key role in the transmission of this idea within a wider discourse of fear, encouraging "the view that communities and people are weak and in need of support" (2005: 76). This environment of uncertainty and assumed helplessness, in turn, allows for the birth of an "intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy, the conviction that one's actions are being controlled by someone else" (Furedi 2005: 84). The result of this is a sense of individual insecurity and, still in Furedi's words, a "diminished role of human agency" (2005: 22). Thus, the perception of one's ability to act is inversely proportional to the perceived dangers surrounding us. In this respect, Furedi affirms in *Invitation to Terror* that "[t]he deflation of the status of human agency coincides with the inflation of threats" (2007a: 122), and that the condition of being at risk (or thinking that one is) "assigns to the person a passive and dependent role" (2007a: 123).

As an instance of its tight text-context relationship, the four seasons of *Person of Interest* analyzed here were developed under the assumption that there are higher powers controlling the citizens' lives: the government and its agencies, Finch's machine, or Decima's alternative Artificial Intelligence, paradoxically called Samaritan. Inserting the show into a narrative tradition that has tried to warn the Western world about totalitarian urges, Nolan's characters refer to post-9/11 America as an "Orwellian nightmare" (1.2), compare the machine(s) to Big Brother (4.3), and use other dystopian intertextual citations to insist on this idea, such as describing the surveillance society they (and we) live in as "a brave new world" (3.8). Furthermore, the common human beings' lack of agency under forces beyond their control is emphasized by the dubbing of the original machine as "God" from 1.23 onwards, particularly in seasons 3 and 4, and most often by Root. In the first episode of the third season, interrogated by a psychiatrist, she summarizes the sensitive information that she has had access to: "God is eleven years old," Root states. "She was born on New Year's Day 2002, in Manhattan." Later on, once more in the role of peculiar soothsayer that we have described, she envisions a world with two gods at war, i.e. Finch's machine and Samaritan, and clearly sides with the first one, becoming, as we have said, "one of the good guys" (3.17). About a year after that, in 4.19, Decima's deceitful John Greer (John Nolan), imagining his coming victory, sardonically concludes that Root has been "unfortunately honoring the wrong god."

The logical result of this dystopian proposal is that normal people are at risk on a daily basis, and that most of them can—and without the help of the protagonists, most probably will—be subject to some kind of aggression or abuse. The scale of cases falls onto the side of individuals who turn out to be potential victims, not culprits: 16 victims and 7 aggressors in the first season, and 20 victims and 1 perpetrator in season 3, for instance. Most of those victims are presented as very scared and desperately thankful to Finch, Reese and their assistants for being rescued from the forces of evil. Some notable exceptions are the more than able Zoe Morgan (Paige Turco) or the *capo*-turned-victim Carl Elias (Enrico Colantoni), both of them recurrent secondary figures that on various occasions shift positions: from objects of protection, to antagonists, and even to useful cooperators of the lead team. The main characters, then, appear most often as the only ones

who are able to overcome the prevailing fear and who possess some agency in a context of collective helplessness. Their agency is based on access to information and money (Finch's machine and his complex data network, together with his apparently unlimited budget during the first three seasons), as well as on physical and technological assets (Reese's, and later Shaw's and Root's, mastery of martial arts, weaponry, IT, and espionage techniques).

In a world populated by vulnerable men and women, the leading roles of *Person of Interest* make a contribution of their own to the superhero tradition, standing out as effective 21st-century vigilantes that would do whatever is necessary to achieve their objectives.[24]"The end justifies the means" philosophy underlies the whole show. Despite their critical position before illegal, illicit, or morally doubtful methods of surveillance and data gathering used by the US government and its agencies, Finch's associates very frequently break or simply choose to ignore the law, and they push the limits to do all it takes for their "persons of interest," protecting them if they are victims, stopping them if they are perpetrators. Reese himself describes this plight after being hired by Finch: "I'm alone in the world looking for bad guys" (1.1). Later, when one of his cases interrogates him about his job, he laconically responds "I help people" (1.6), something that he will repeatedly state throughout the rest of the seasons. With his Special Forces skills and a reserved personality whose nuances are only leaked to the audience in little doses, he always succeeds in his mission, which becomes more and more complex as not one, but two godly machines intervene in the citizens' existence.

3. Conclusion

In real life today, and ever since 9/11, the mainstream discourse encourages the sacrifice of civil liberties for the greater good, and is gradually consolidating a *status quo* in which surveillance in public spaces, control of private activities such as internet searches, and mutual vigilance have been normalized. Political authorities insist that they will protect their citizens: Denmark's PM surely did when she declared that her government would take care of the Jews in February 2015 after an attack on a synagogue. The Hollande administration did too when they announced the extension of the state of emergency in France until the end of the summer of 2016, allegedly to protect the fans attending the UEFA Euro soccer competition. In such cases no reflection or action were encouraged; silent and obedient compliance were expected. In this respect, Furedi argues that the 21st-century terror challenge is interpreted as a consequence of external forces instead of as a possible rejection of the Western ways (2007a: 167). Thus, populations are not usually invited to think critically about inequity, poverty, unfair globalization, or other circumstances that may be related to fanaticism and radicalization. These phenomena are oversimplified and presented as senseless and nihilist, not worthy of analysis or serious consideration, as Edwards concludes (2015: 116).

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[24] The analysis of Reese, Shaw, Root, and the process of construction of their identity within the superhero tradition in *Person of Interest* is under way within a national Research & Development project currently being developed by our research unit (see information about funding in this article).

In this regard, *Person of Interest* does offer, as we suggested in our introduction, some very timid hints at a critique of the US system, especially the government and its information agencies. In general terms, it does so by presenting the institutional power structure as deeply corrupted, all the way from the New York Police Department through the top positions in Washington (CIA, Homeland Security employees, senators, etc.). This becomes particularly relevant in the "HR" plot of the first three seasons that Detective Carter, an Afghanistan and Iraq veteran with an immaculate record, dismantles with the help of Finch's team. The storyline reveals an institution that has been profoundly damaged by personal greed, individual ambition, and lack of scruples. Several police officers are connected with mafia businesses in New York, and Carter's life is repeatedly threatened because of her insistence in exposing, denouncing, and prosecuting their dirty dealings. Eventually, she succumbs to the policemen-turned-criminals when HR's second-in-command Patrick Simmons (Robert John Burke) shoots her in 3.9.

On several occasions, the cynical John Reese is the one to echo the position of disappointment at the authorities and institutions, as someone who has been inside the machinery and wanted out. In the aforementioned eighth episode of the first season, for example, former Stasi agent Kohl recalls patriotism as the rationale behind his recruitment. He was told "your country needs you," he says, to which Reese bitterly answers: "They always say that" (1.8). Later, the hero advises Jack Salazar (Rey Valentin), a US Navy man that he protects as a potential victim: "When the guys from Langley come knocking, say no" (3.1). Close to the ending of the first season, we also hear his firm declaration "I want to expose the CIA for what it has become" (1.18). Building on this, in 2.2 audiences witness the government's arrogance, calling Finch, the genius behind the machine they have commanded themselves, "the little IT guy." In 3.13, they see how the government uses drug money to fund Homeland Security policies, and several times throughout its history the show has included scenes of illegal detention and/or torture, reminiscent of the infamous Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo situations (*e.g.* 1.5, 1.8, 2.2, 4.11, or 4.21). Furthermore, season 3 introduces Vigilance, an organization of privacy militants that takes action against Finch's original machine and Decima's duplicate, Samaritan.[25]

Nevertheless, despite the negative aspects of the US system uncovered by *Person of Interest*, the strong post-9/11 precautionary logic behind its main premise, based on the idea of inevitability and the American people's deflated agency, makes its critical potential too weak to invite a reading of the series as a discourse of resistance. Firstly, this is because the main characters, as bitter as they seem to be about their own experience with the White House and its acolytes, never consider social activism, political action or migration to a more transparent democratic country. On the contrary, they actually intervene to avoid radical ruptures in the lives of ordinary citizens, perpetuating the idea of America as a protective homeland where all types of individuals are allowed to pursue their dreams. The featured cases include traumatized war veterans trying to readjust (1.3), integrated immigrants living a quiet life (1.11), dedicated doctors at risk due to their strong ethics (2.7), and refugees trying to overcome their hurtful past in the country of opportunities (2.15).

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[25]   More on Vigilance below.

A second point against a resistant reading of *Person of Interest* is that, as the plot advances, the blurring of the limits between irrelevant and relevant threats, and between everyday life and global terror, reinforces the discourse of fear both intra and extra-diagetically. The featured storylines include honest workers persecuted by Washington (1.13) or trapped in international mafia networks (2.9), federal employees blown up in the middle of the street and still dubbed "irrelevant" (3.19), unimportant cases turned "relevant" by virtue of a technological menace (4.7), machine-controlled attacks on Wall Street (4.11), and imminent threats on the capital (4.22).[26] Additionally, with the amoral and powerful Decima gaining space and capacity for action within the narrative structure, Nolan's product does nothing but make Glassner's idea about the post-9/11 culture of fear reverberate infinitely, as quoted in our introduction: "[it] *can happen again*" (2009: 233).

One final reason to dismiss a counter-discursive value in *Person of Interest* with regards to post-9/11 fear is the construction of the subplot around Vigilance, whose introduction in season 3 we recalled some lines above. Presented as an organization formed by American citizens who stand up against the homeland security and surveillance culture imposed since 2001, for a few episodes it looks like a real threat for both Finch's team and the government-Decima alliance. Due to this, on more than one occasion members of Vigilance are implicitly characterized, and even explicitly labeled as, "terrorists" (3.19). Rejecting the term, its participants uphold that they are trying to recover the privacy stolen by the machine(s), and they use information—described by Greer as the "new global currency" (3.18)—to uncover the illicit workings of the system. By the end of the season, with Finch and other key members of the surveillance network in their hands, they stage "the trial of the US government" (3.22). This constitutes a climactic moment in which the Big Brotherly structure seems to be about to collapse. However, a final narrative twist reveals that the birth of the group had actually been orchestrated by Decima in order to create an antagonist and remind the government of the dangers of domestic attacks. Their insurgency, then, is nothing but a cog in an immense machinery of terror, created and instrumentalized by a villainous corporation that makes business out of the people's and the nation's sense of vulnerability and lack of agency. Once more, Furedi's idea (2005: 66) of the world being presented as an increasingly dangerous place is illustrated by Nolan's fiction.

All in all, as a successful product that forms part of a wider approach including other cultural manifestations and media proposals, *Person of Interest*, as suggested by Lesley Henderson of TV fiction in general (2007: 19), works toward shaping social attitudes. In this case not in the direction of eliciting progressive change, like some of the few irreverent shows mentioned by De Felipe and Gómez in *Ficciones colaterales*, but in order to reinforce the *status quo* (re)born after 9/11. The suggestion appears to be that, despite some slight signs of resistance, silence and precaution are the ways to go in a growingly risky environment. As part of the ideological consensus built on the ruins of the World Trade Center (De Felipe and Gómez 2011: 70), and again illustrating Henderson's ideas about the role of TV series as seen above, Nolan's creation raises significant questions about privacy, agency, and power, at the same time providing its own responses, based on the idea

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[26]   The last subplot is obviously reminiscent of 9/11 itself and even of more recent situations like the lock-up of Brussels after the Paris attacks in November 2015.

of the inevitable. Finally, as a relevant item in the archive generated after the 2001 attacks, *Person of Interest* confirms Jeffrey Melnick's argument that "9/11 has become the most important question and answer shaping American cultural discussions" (2009: 3), even fifteen years later.

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