screaming and sirens; and its shocked, injured victims—into the mise-en-scène of battling superheroes.

As these contributors note, fifteen years of media production after 9/11 have neither allayed fears about international terrorism nor brought viewers much closer to understanding the preconditions and prognoses for it. It is precisely that paralysis that keeps me up at night. Maybe the War on Terror offers but a postmodern symptom of the same disease that humanity's powerful perpetually inflict on its helpless. But because there is no foreseeable end to it, its many casualties—of body, mind, and soul—become infinite by definition. Perhaps, then, what post-9/11 media illustrate is that we can envision a terminus to terror's endlessness only by way of a singular apocalyptic event: as if we were only one drone strike, one surveillance protocol, one invincible virus, one End Times toxin, one wrong turn, or even just a single ocean-temperature degree away from the self-annihilation that seems predestined to play and replay throughout our post-9/11 lives and on our postmodern screens. ✱

When Terrorism Met the Plague: How 9/11 Affected the Outbreak Narrative

by Dahlia Schweitzer

In many ways, for Americans, the traumas of AIDS and 9/11 would define the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. Once war began in Afghanistan, the unknown Arab became the deadly contagious "other" threatening to infiltrate America's borders, kept at bay by relentless patriotism. Initial American desire for vengeance translated into the popularity of narratives featuring "heroic saviors and violent redemption," as well as "fantasies of national and subjective coherence."[1] These thrillers, very much fueled by Bush's War on Terror, shifted focus to include "the covert, small-scale, 'low-intensity' combat" that became increasingly

1 Stacy Takacs, *Terrorism TV: Popular Entertainment in Post-9/11 America* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012), 61, 65.

common after 9/11.[2] This kind of small-scale combat appears in all of the texts I discuss, where conflict is between single individuals, involving hand-to-hand fighting and computer screens rather than battlefields. This structural shift echoes a similar shift that has taken place within al-Qaeda since 2001. This shift, into a "network with diffuse structure, indirect connections, and nontraditional modes of communication," echoes many of today's terrorist organizations, which are also "highly decentralized and dispersed."[3] In many ways, the 9/11 attacks were a blow by cellular, networked, modular, nimble terrorists against a centralized tower, an icon, a pillar, reflecting how the new global crisis is one "between centralized hierarchical powers, and distributed, horizontal networks."[4]

While the years immediately following 9/11 might have initially focused on portraying pro-American patriotic messages, the shift quickly began to emphasize that the voice of freedom inevitably stems from the rogue hero fighting *against* the military machine or the corporate establishment. Examples of these rogue heroes abound. In *24* (Fox, 2001–2010), it is Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland) who leads the Counter Terrorist Unit as a one-man army. In *Toxic Skies* (Andrew C. Erin, 2008), it is Tess (Anne Heche) who stands up to the military and pharmaceutical establishments. In *Covert One: The Hades Factor* (CBS, 2006), it is Jon Smith (Stephen Dorff) who defies government orders and flees a secured military base. In *The Crazies* (Breck Eisner, 2010), it is David (Timothy Olyphant), Ogden Marsh's sheriff, who discovers the initial conspiracy, shuts off the town's water against a direct order from the mayor, escapes quarantine, and shoots military personnel—all in an attempt first to save the town and, after that fails, to keep himself and his wife alive. Torin Monahan writes that these rogue heroes "are the only ones that can act sufficiently," and that even though they might prefer to think things through and follow the rules, the circumstances of modern risk societies do not allow for it.[5]

Just one week after 9/11, letters containing anthrax spores were mailed to news media offices and two Democratic senators. Five people died and seventeen were infected. The FBI eventually identified the culprit in 2008 as Bruce Ivins, a scientist in the US Army's biodefense lab at Fort Detrick, in Maryland, although many still feel the investigation was inconclusive.[6] In fact, a congressional inquiry identified major gaps in the case.[7] The length of the investigation and inconclusive results, combined

2   Matthew B. Hill, "Tom Clancy, *24*, and the Language of Autocracy," in *The War on Terror and American Popular Culture*, ed. Andrew Schopp and Matthew B. Hill (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009), 127.

3   Boaz Ganor, "Terrorism Networks: It Takes a Network to Beat a Network," in *The Network Challenge: Strategy, Profit, and Risk in an Interlinked World*, ed. Paul R. Kleindorfer, Yoram (Jerry) Wind, and Robert E. Gunther (Philadelphia: Wharton School, 2009), 454.

4   Alexander Galloway, *Protocol* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 201, 204.

5   Torin Monahan, "Just-in-Time Security," in *Reading 24: TV against the Clock*, ed. Steven Peacock (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 114.

6   Yudhijit Bhattacharjee, "FBI to Request Scientific Review of Its Anthrax Investigation," *Science*, September 16, 2008, http://news.sciencemag.org/scientific-community/2008/09/fbi-request-scientific-review-its-anthrax-investigation.

7   William J. Broad, "Inquiry in Anthrax Mailings Had Gaps, Report Says," *New York Times*, December 19, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/20/science/inquiry-in-anthrax-mailings-had-gaps-report-says.html?ref=topics&_r=0.

with the death of Bruce Ivins, the victim of an apparent suicide, further compounded fears of future incidents of biowarfare. If the American government was so unable to prevent anthrax and 9/11, much less apprehend those responsible, why should it be any less unable to prevent future attacks? At the time, the fact that the anthrax used in the attacks was traced back to Fort Detrick also intensified questions of whether the greatest danger was already within our borders, possibly in the hands of our own government. A repeated plot point in many of these narratives is that a virus the American government has created is then used against the very Americans it is supposed to protect. This is exactly what happens in *The Hades Factor* and *The Crazies*, for instance.

The fact that 9/11 and the subsequent anthrax attacks were both masterminded and carried out intentionally not only exacerbated a sense of vulnerability and horror but also intensified fears of a potential bioterrorist attack. If pandemics reshape trauma by being open, messy, and timeless, then terrorism, too, disrupts traditional understandings of trauma. Terrorism, much like contagion, does not respect finite time frames or finite locations. Kevin J. Wetmore describes the color-coded terrorism threat scale unveiled by the Department of Homeland Security in March 2002. Green represented low risk; blue, general risk; yellow, elevated or significant risk; orange, high risk; and red, severe risk. Wetmore emphasizes that, significantly, "there was no color for none."[8] Art Spiegelman's three-panel strip in his 9/11 graphic novel *In the Shadow of No Towers* captures the relentlessness of such anxiety.[9] First we see people drowsing in front of the TV; then suddenly people with hair standing straight up; and in the final graphic, people drowsing in front of the TV with their hair still standing up. There is no reprieve, because nowhere feels immune. Intensifications in connectivity have brought this terror to our very doorsteps.

Although anthrax is not a contagious disease, the anthrax attacks did demonstrate the seemingly effortless ways in which terrorists could spread disease and the current power of ordinary social networks to harm us. Contemporary life makes us all interconnected, leaving us especially vulnerable to viral attack. Who thinks twice before opening mail addressed to them? Before drinking water? Walking down a city street? All of these actions, based on this crop of outbreak narratives, as well as some recent headlines, can now kill us. We do not even need to board a plane. The virus comes to us.

Both natural viral outbreaks and terrorist-orchestrated outbreaks call attention to the significance and power of networks in contemporary life. Whereas bombs and gunfire are location specific, a viral outbreak can (and often does) travel the world via networks (both visible and invisible) and becomes nearly impossible to contain. A viral outbreak is literally contagious information spreading throughout globalized vectors of disease. In particular, it is the standardization of networks in the twenty-first century that facilitates the effective spread of contagion and that allows terrorists to work as effectively as they do. It is no longer simply that globalization spreads disease, but that globalization exacerbates scenarios where terrorists can create and spread disease.

8   Kevin J. Wetmore Jr., *Post 9/11 Horror* (London: Continuum Books, 2012), 173.

9   Art Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers* (New York: Pantheon, 2004).

For example, *The Blacklist* episode "The Front" aired on October 20, 2014, on NBC. With Ebola getting ample news coverage at the time, this episode was perfectly synchronized with real-life events. In the episode, Maddox Beck (Michael Laurence) is an eco-terrorist who resurrects a dormant pneumonic plague virus and weaponizes it so that it operates at an accelerated rate. His goal is a worldwide epidemic that will kill off the entire human race, thereby supposedly saving the planet. "To preserve life on earth, we need to become extinct," Beck tells his cultlike followers, who infect themselves with the virus so that they can then spread it around the world. Sharon (Freya Adams) is his first follower to infect herself before heading to Washington, DC, to spread the virus intentionally. An average-looking young woman with dark hair pulled back in a ponytail, dressed inconspicuously in torn jeans and a striped sweater clutched around her, Sharon walks the streets, the pustules around her nose and mouth ignored by the passersby, spreading the virus merely by breathing. The virus is airborne and therefore requires no physical contact to spread. By the time she is identified as Patient Zero, roughly 2,300 people have been quarantined and given less than a day to live. Similarly, in *Global Effect* (Terry Cunningham, 2002), Sasha (Rolanda Marais), the terrorist ringleader's girlfriend, infects herself with the virus so that she can walk the streets of Cape Town, South Africa, infecting as many people as possible. The same basic premise also appears in *The Hades Factor*, where Hassan (Conrad Dunn), the terrorist leader, infects his men with the virus so that they can spread it within the United States via aerosol devices. In this case, contagion literally replaces explosives.

The national security apparatus is also portrayed as both ineffectual and corrupt in the TV miniseries *Covert One: The Hades Factor*. As in the book of the same name by Robert Ludlum and Gayle Lynds (originally published in 2000), an unknown Ebola-like virus begins to spread rapidly across the United States. Disease expert and former government agent Jon Smith must save the world from terrorists, untrustworthy double agents, and a deadly virus engineered to destroy. The film features several significant changes to the original story, most obviously the addition of al-Qaeda as the terrorist organization behind the outbreak. The miniseries opens at Camp Pendleton in California, where an army sergeant collapses, blood dripping from his mouth and nose. Meanwhile, in Seattle a waitress collapses midshift, blood dripping out of her mouth and nose. Finally, the scene shifts to Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, where a Muslim prisoner is found passed out, blood dripping from his mouth and nose. A terrible chain of reactions has begun.

This is the Hades virus, an airborne Ebola variant with a kill rate higher than 90 percent. Later tests also confirm that the virus is weapons grade and had been developed by the American government as a bioweapon. The dead Muslim prisoner from Guantánamo is linked to a known terrorist by the name of Hassan, and he is suspected to have been an intentionally infected "weapon," a suicide bomber with a virus in his detonation device. Other terrorists already in the United States plant aerosol dispersal devices full of infected blood in Dulles Airport and at the Department of Health. Panic and contagion ensue. The movie ends with the government's involvement kept secret. There is no easy and comforting resolution. Elwood Reid, writer of the screenplay, credits the involvement of the military-industrial complex in various illicit activities as inspiration for the film. Reid elaborates: "There are countless

examples, and what they all have in common is the military 'defense of country' excuse and the profit of corporations anxious to put potentially deadly things into the market place but doing so under the guise and guidance of military defense. It's a symbiotic relationship that the American public is, by and large, indifferent to. So that was the idea. The hypocrisy of the US military complex/business."[10]

The covert and untrustworthy nature of the American government was already evident ten years earlier, with the *X-Files* episode "F. Emasculata," which tackled notions of bioterrorism, viral outbreak, pharmaceutical conspiracy, and government cover-ups long before 9/11.[11] This variation on the terrorist narrative features corporations, and specifically pharmaceutical corporations, as villains who spread viruses intentionally for their own greedy motives. The episode follows a typical outbreak narrative arc in which we discover a deadly and unknown virus, watch it be introduced into the general public, and then follow our heroes as they try to contain it. Of significance is the way the virus is spread (via mail, foreshadowing the later anthrax attacks) and the culpability of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), working hand in glove with the corrupt pharmaceutical company to bypass Food and Drug Administration regulations by testing new drugs on unknowing prison inmates. Mulder (David Duchovny) demands that the government reveal to the public what is happening, but government agents refuse, arguing that this kind of knowledge would only cause panic. And so the episode ends, leaving us with the same feelings of unease, lack of resolution, and government conspiracy as *The Hades Factor*. As Monahan writes about *24*, "Just when the characters and viewers long for—and expect—resolution and safety[,] the best that can be hoped for is temporary management, containment, or postponement of the indiscriminate annihilation of civilian populations."[12] We can already see, even before 9/11, that distrust of the government was circulating alongside doubts, arguably a result of the AIDS epidemic, that the CDC could protect the American people.

The hypocrisy and untrustworthy nature of the US government also plays a central role in *Toxic Skies*. Tess is a World Health Organization doctor who discovers that the real cause of an epidemic is reduced immunity caused by pharmaceutical companies. In this case, contaminated chemtrails spread by planes cause diminished immune resistance, leading to an increased dependency on the very same drugs the companies are producing. Hospitals fill up with victims of an unknown viral strain that appears to be spread through touch and is referred to as "the plague." The similarities to HIV are numerous: the virus creates red spots that resemble Kaposi's sarcoma, actual death comes as a result of a compromised immune system, the infected first manifest acute flulike symptoms, the course of the disease can be documented with a rapidly decreasing antibody count, and it will not respond to any existing medications. As the virus spreads to other cities, it soon becomes clear that the military is affiliated with the pharmaceutical cover-up. People keep dying until Tess exposes the scheme.

10   Elwood Reid, e-mail message to author, November 3, 2015.

11   "F. Emasculata," *X-Files*, season 2, episode 22, Fox, aired April 28, 1995.

12   Monahan, "Just-in-Time Security," 111.

These various narratives all reflect the different ways that America, both pre- and post-9/11, felt itself to be under threat of attack, while they also depict how the forms of that attack had changed. While 9/11 may have brought fears of terrorism to the fore, temporarily alleviating our distrust in our own government with an onslaught of patriotic fervor, those feelings were soon replaced by a sense that the very establishments constructed to protect us were actually only looking out for their own interests. Threats—both of viral outbreak and terrorist attack—can no longer be naively projected upon distant countries. Viruses (much like terrorism) now lurk next door, internal threats are just as realistic as external ones, and our own government is as likely to kill us as the unknown Arab. The opening moments of the first episode of the television show *Quantico* (ABC, 2015–present) echo these sentiments. Miranda Shaw (Aunjanue Ellis), the assistant director of the FBI Training Division, tells the new students: "The state of this country is the most precarious it's ever been. Not only are there more threats than ever before, but the majority of those threats don't come from known organizations or extremist groups but our own backyard—a neighbor you grew up next to, a one-night stand you had, perhaps even a family member."

Without traditional signifiers, like meaningful geographic boundaries or race, gender, language, or cultural differences, it becomes increasingly difficult to determine who deserves suspicion. Instead, terrorism is more of a "contagion that circulates throughout society and may, theoretically, adhere to anybody (though certain bodies— brown, Arab, Muslim—remain more susceptible)."[13] This fear that the threat may come from the inside—not only that the evil is within our borders but also that we cannot even identify it—is what informs our contemporary narratives of terror.   ✻

13 Takacs, *Terrorism TV*, 75.