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IRONY ABOUT TRAGEDY: THE ONION'S TREATMENT OF 9/11

Arseniy Khitrov¹

Abstract

In this paper the author analyses the materials that were published in the American satirical magazine *The Onion* in the period from 2006 till 2011 and mentioned September 11 terrorist attacks. The focus of the research is the persistence of 9/11 jokes five years after the tragedy occurred and later on. The jokes are classified basing on their subject-matter and rhetorical patterns. The author concludes that most of these jokes promote respect towards collective memory about the attacks and their victims.

Keywords: cultural trauma, collective memory, irony, 9/11.

Introduction

After 9/11 some social commentators² declared that irony would not be acceptable anymore. They declared the end of the age of irony. They declared the end of irony, the comeback to reality, and the recovery of the blanket of satire.

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² The social critic Roger Rosenblatt wrote about the end of irony in *Time Magazine* (see Rosenblatt R. The Age of Irony Comes To an End // *Time Magazine*. 2001. Sept. 24. P. 79. Retrieved Dec. 16, 2012, from: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1000893,00.html>, and comedians Jay Leno, David Letterman, Conan O'Brien, and Jon Stewart replaced their usual comic performances with emotional speeches (cf. September 11 issue of *The Daily Show with John Stewart*: <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/thu-september-20-2001/september-11-2001>). Moreover, on October 16, 2001, comedians and authors who worked for *The New York Observer*, *The Time Magazine*, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, *Modern Humorist*, and *The Onion* participated in a public round table entitled *No Laughing Matter? Comedy Writing in Unfunny Times* (the advertisement of this event can be still found here: http://www.ersvp.com/rsvp/reply.htm?event=ifda&cacheid=1073627238.8021&cobrandid=ersvp&user_session=e7c9873ee420806c7e423a5b12989e78). Rosenblatt's article provoked a series of responses by social critics who disagreed with him; see: Beers D. Irony is dead! Long Live Irony! // *Salon*. 2001. Sept. 25. Retrieved Dec. 16, 2012, from: http://www.salon.com/2001/09/25/irony_lives/; Kurtzman D. The Return of Irony // *AlterNet*. 2002. Sept. 10. Retrieved Dec. 16, 2012, from: http://www.alternet.org/story/14068/the_return_of_irony; Newman A. Irony Is Dead. Again. Yeah, Right // *The New York Times*. 2008. Nov. 21. Retrieved Dec. 16, 2012, from: http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/23/fashion/23irony.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

In particular, a few late-night comedy shows went off the air, infrequent political jokes were met with public disapproval, *The New Yorker* appeared with a black cover and lacking its famous cartoons, finally, a satirical magazine *The Onion* did not appear till the week after the event.

The Center for Media and Public Affairs reported that the number of political jokes dropped by 54% on late night television in the month following the attack and that uncomic guests were featured twice as frequently in the fifteen weeks after 9/11 as they had been in the previous fifteen weeks.³

On September 18 the comedian Gilbert Gottfried made a joke mentioning the attack: «I have to leave for L.A. tonight. I couldn't get a direct flight. They have to make a stop at the Empire State Building». As he himself recalls, after these words were said, there was a long gasp in the hall and then somebody said: «Too soon». The joke was cut off entirely from the cable version.⁴

On October 10 New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani gave New Yorkers permission to laugh again. It was a charity event featuring many New York comedians where Giuliani said: «I am here to give you permission to laugh. If you don't, I'll have you arrested»⁵.

Indeed, after 9/11 people were mourning victims looking for ways to commemorate them. Any significant historical event would have the same consequences. What is surprising is that it was the irony issue that resonated with the posttraumatic discourse.

The first post-9/11 issue of *The Onion* appeared on September 26. Some researchers have pointed out this particular issue was the first piece of humour that made them smile after the attack,⁶ therefore, *The Onion* actually started laughing before the official permission had been given.

Looking at the examples above, one might wonder: would it be morally acceptable to laugh about the tragedy? Is it morally acceptable, appropriate, and correct to make these kinds of jokes? Instead of developing a moral argument, in this paper I concentrate on the issue how the society and media function, therefore I have to find more appropriate questions. I ask myself: How and why can irony become acceptable or unacceptable? Are there norms that regulate irony? Is there a kind of irony that is specific to the trauma's aftermath?

³ O'Rourke III, D.J. The Death and Re-Birth of Irony: The Onion's Call for Rhetorical Healing in the Wake of 9/11 // R.E. Denton (ed.) *Language, Symbols, and the Media. Communication in the Aftermath of the World Trade Center Attack*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2006. P. 102.

⁴ Achter P. Comedy in Unfunny Times: News Parody and Carnival after 9/11 // *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. 2008. Vol. 25/3. P. 275.

⁵ Kuipers G. 'Where Was King Kong When We Needed Him?' Public Discourse, Digital Disaster Jokes, and the Functions of Laughter after 9/11 // *The Journal of American Culture*. 2005. Vol. 28/1. P. 73.

⁶ See Kuipers, op. cit., p. 73; Achter, op. cit., p. 286.

To answer these questions I analyze the contents, delivery, and exact timing of *The Onion's* jokes to determine the functions of irony in regard to the attack.

I will examine publications mentioning 9/11 from 2006 till 2011. It is the period from the fifth anniversary of the attack till the day when Osama bin Laden was killed. My sample allows me to uncover delayed effects of the trauma on humour. Throughout all eleven years that have passed since 2001 *The Onion's* stories included materials on 9/11. I find that the persistence is rather rhetoric-motivated than event-based. In other words, many stories were independent from then recent historical events. They were using the attack as a reference point within several stable rhetorical patterns. Theories that help to find out a possible explanation are those of cultural trauma by Jeffrey Alexander and of irony by Linda Hutcheon. I will detail their major points below and then I will proceed to the analysis of jokes.

The Social Process of Cultural Trauma

Jeffrey Alexander's theory of collective trauma is a constructivist one. He proceeds from the idea that trauma «is not the result of an event but the effect of a sociocultural process»⁷.

«Collective actors “decide” to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go».⁸

Analysing trauma as a process carried out by social agents, Alexander proposes the following schematic sequence of events: speaker(s) claim(s) trauma, labels an event as traumatic; carrier groups spread this idea out and make sense of an event; and the audience receives this message. Alexander labels this process «cultural construction of trauma».

A trauma claim proposed by the speaker should satisfy several criteria. First, the nature of the pain must be explained. Second, it must be clear who the victim is. Third, a relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience should be explained. Finally, responsibility should be attributed, i.e. it must be clear who the perpetrator is.

Given these conditions, it is assumed that the majority of people accept the idea of a traumatic nature of an event, and trauma becomes a new master narrative.

The sociologist Neil Smelser proposes his analysis of the traumatic aspect of 9/11 in terms developed by Alexander.⁹ In his article, written four months after the attack, Smelser describes how the nation was mobilized and solidarity was strengthened. Moreover, as the author points

⁷ Alexander J. Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma // J. Alexander (ed.) *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkley: University of California Press, 2004. P. 10.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Smelser N. *Epilogue: September 11, 2001, as Cultural Trauma* // Alexander (ed.), op. cit., p. 264–282.

out, 9/11 caused «the emergence of primordial cultural themes»¹⁰ which included, in particular:

«... a reassertion of the virtues of nation and community: unashamed flag-waving patriotism; a feeling that we, as Americans, under attack, were one again; and a feeling of pride in the American way of life, its values, its culture, and its democracy»¹¹.

This tells us that humor and irony were likely to be considered inappropriate in the aftermath of the attack. However, as I demonstrated on the examples above, it did not take long for irony to resume. How did it become possible? The contradiction between the seriousness of a re-activated primordialism and irony seems impossible if the irony is seen solely as a deconstructive, destabilizing, and relativizing practice. It can be also mobilizing, if, for example, it is regarded as one of the American values,¹² or as helping to cope with the trauma, as the aforementioned Rudolf Giuliani's permission to laugh again may suggest.¹³

The fact is that the same joke can be regarded both as deconstructive and mobilizing. There is nothing intrinsically ideological in the irony itself. What matters is its intended use and its perception. The contradiction between humour and trauma narrative is elusive.

In order to understand this point better I will discuss the differences between conservative and deconstructive discourses, then I will proceed to Linda Hutcheon's theory of irony, and ultimately, I will analyse certain jokes about 9/11 from *The Onion*.

Official Discourse versus Irony?

When thinking about trauma discourse and its relation to different kinds of parody, it is very probable to assume that the trauma discourse is equivalent to the official discourse, ushered by serious news media and political agents. It can be characterized as hegemonic, conservative, protective, healing, re-establishing collective identity, and serious. The ironical discourse would automatically become the counter-discourse and would embrace very different characteristics: being resisting to dominant systems of meanings, irritating, challenging existing social institutions, and undermining values.

Note that the entire sequence of events, however consistent it seems at first, is based entirely on a single assumption that pure types and binary oppositions exist, and that their function is inscribed in them naturally and cannot be changed through time or through agency and use.

This assumption is very strong. It is very likely to observe ironical discourse bearing the official discourse characteristics. For example, it can be trauma healing, protecting people from the pain of the loss, re-

¹⁰ Smelser, op. cit., p. 269.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 270.

¹² Kuipers, op. cit., p. 73.

¹³ For criticism of the coping interpretation of disaster humour cf. Kuipers, op. cit., p. 71–72.

uniting people, creating a new sense of community. Relaxing this assumption I discovered that ironical discourse tries to delude readers and to hide an attempt to re-establish hegemony. Theoretically, it is not a contradiction. It is not necessarily true that ironical discourse just mocks, destroys, and deconstructs, and that it does not propose anything positive or conventional. In this instance, it can help the official discourse to establish some values. It is not necessary that it is as revolutionary as it seemed in the beginning.

But did it really seem revolutionary? Or is it just the reader being trapped into the binary mode of thinking? What about hybridity of discourses? And what if different people who hear a joke can interpret it in different ways, that is to say that the result of the ironical discourse depends not only on intentions of the ironist, but also on the audience's choice? And does the overall outcome always depend on the audience anyway?

The theoretical approach is limited in its ability to answer the question. I will perform an empirical analysis based on Linda Hutcheon's theory of irony.

Theory of Irony

In her book *The Edge of Irony*, Linda Hutcheon argues that the situation when the ironist produces a joke and the interpreter gets it is an unreal one because this vision ignores the syntactic (contextual) and pragmatic (responsive) aspects of communication. In the entirety of a communicative situation, the interpreter is not exogenous. She or he has freedom to interpret a message and participate in the creation of the ironical effect of it.

Another element of the process is discursive communities. That is why Linda Hutcheon insists on the fact that irony «happens» in discourse. There is no guarantee that the joke would be interpreted in an intended way if it is. Hutcheon calls the situation of the ambiguity 'politics of irony'.

Linda Hutcheon points out that the meaning of irony is not just the reverse of what is said.¹⁴ Therefore, it would be too simplistic if not totally wrong to regard *The Onion* as a mirror that reflects serious discourses but just turning them upside down. One will see that in reality the spectrum of humourist approaches to 9/11 by *The Onion* is quite broad. Nevertheless, the occurrence of jokes about 9/11 might indicate the on-going activity in re-framing and re-interpreting the event of the official discourses. I concentrate on the rhetoric of jokes without establishing any causal relationships with events.

It is important to keep in mind that the meaning of a sign be it a serious concept or a matter of a joke, is arbitrary, time-dependent, and varies by an interpreter. In regard to *The Onion's* irony it means the following: it is unlikely that throughout the 2000s 9/11 as a concept meant

¹⁴ Hutcheon L. *Irony's Edge. The Theory and Politics of Irony*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995. P. 23.

the same thing. Then, since different audiences perceive, interpret, and use media materials in various ways, 9/11's meaning cannot be the same for everybody. There are two important implications of these two points for this research. Firstly, it is essential to trace the change in *The Onion's* irony about 9/11 through time rather than assuming that 9/11 stands for the same thing in 2001 as in 2008. Secondly, my interpretation and understanding of *The Onion's* 9/11 jokes represents just one of many possible ones.

The Onion is a weekly newspaper that comes out every Wednesday. In September 2001 it did not appear when it was supposed to, namely on September 19. It resumed on September 26 and was nearly entirely dedicated to the event. About a half of materials of the following, October 10, issue mentioned 9/11 as well. Moreover, there were jokes about 9/11 appearing steadily throughout the whole decade after the attack. Despite the fact of the stability of 9/11 as a rhetorical frame, media scholars who studied media coverage of 9/11 by *The Onion's* 9/11 have dealt mostly with the September 26 issue.¹⁵ In this paper, I will go further to analyse 9/11 humourist representations from a long-term perspective. More specifically, I will focus on publications made between the fifth 9/11 anniversary and May 2011 when Osama bin Laden was killed. I look at the persistence of 9/11 jokes in the period well beyond the event has been settled. How was 9/11 remembered on its fifth anniversary and during the years that followed, till the moment when Osama bin Laden was killed? In what contexts does 9/11 appear years after the tragedy? How do these jokes frame and re-frame the event of 9/11? How is the nature of pain/victim/perpetrator and the relation with a wider audience established? Which discursive communities is the irony related to? What is the politics of irony (inclusion/exclusion, subordination)? What do *The Onion's* authors try to communicate through these jokes about post-9/11 collective consciousness of the U.S.?

Objects of Jokes

During the first five years after the event *The Onion* recalled 9/11 in the materials that ridiculed such political and social issues as the war in Iraq, the Patriot Act, and the Detainee Treatment Act of 2005. In the period from 2006 to 2011 *The Onion* mentioned 9/11 in relation to the fifth anniversary of the tragedy; the 'War on Terror' campaign, which included the Iraq war as well, counter-terrorism measures; the release of two 9/11 films in 2006, Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* and *United 93* by Paul Greengrass; debates about constructing the New York Islamic Center around Ground Zero; the President Election campaign of 2007–2008; and, finally, the killing of Osama bin Laden. Political fig-

¹⁵ Achter, op. cit. (2008); Kuipers, op. cit. (2005); O'Rourke III, op. cit. (2006); Warner, J. Humor, Terror, and Dissent: The Onion after 9/11 // V.G. Ted Gournelos (ed.) *A Decade of Dark Humor. How Comedy, Irony, and Satire Shaped Post-9/11 America*. University Press of Mississippi/Jackson, 2011. P. 57–77.

ures that were ridiculed the most between 2006 and 2011 in relation to 9/11 were George W. Bush, Bush's Vice President Dick Cheney, and the former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. In particular, such events as Bush's retirement, Dick Cheney's alleged sternness and heart problems, Giuliani's participation in the presidential election campaign became triggers for *The Onion's* humourists.

Among these publications, I find not only event-triggered reports, but most interestingly, rhetoric-motivated ones. They did not address any particular events but were informed by specific rhetorical frames and had to do with long-lasting social phenomena. Such social conditions were fear of terrorists, islamophobia, the state's security measures, pragmatic exploitation of and profiting from the tragedy by politicians, conspiracy theories, and, finally, collective memory about 9/11 itself.

In addition, a number of commentaries had 9/11 events on their background.

I will focus on rhetorically motivated materials only. They deserve a particular attention because they have to do with stable interpretative patterns that circulate in the society, and therefore, their analysis will permit a better understanding of the reasons and ways of 9/11 becoming a part of American collective identity and initiated persistent collective discourses about the post 9/11 American society.

I show that these discourses, which initially intended to contrast themselves to official memory discourses by allowing for ambiguity in its steadiness, had become hegemonic, steady, and unilateral in the end.

The following rhetorical patterns were the most frequent on *The Onion's* pages during the period in question: a 'memory hole', anxiety about security measures, 9/11 capitalizers, terrorists and their interrogations, and American islamophobia. I will analyze three of these patterns in detail leaving the rest for the future research.

Memory Hole

When Ernest Renan in his lecture *What is a Nation?* stated that forgetting «is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation»¹⁶ he meant that in order to become a political formation its members should first forget that they had been different once and that the way towards the current state of nation lied through brutality, violence, and compulsion. His idea was provoking since it is commonly assumed that a sense of belonging or, in other terms, a collective identity very much depends on memory. On the other hand, it is often said that precisely collective identity is based on memory of violence and trauma. Moreover, trauma can be the very trigger of the identity creation, as it was in the case of trauma of slavery, which led to the emergence of the African-American cultural identity.¹⁷

¹⁶ Bhabha H. *Nation and Narration*. Bristol: Routledge, 2000. P. 11.

¹⁷ Eyerman R. *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* // Alexander (ed.), op. cit., p. 60–111.

Interpreting the idea of cultural identity in the light of Ernest Renan's theory, one can argue that in order to be a nation or, to put it differently, in order to obtain a collective identity, members of a community should forget some things and retain others. The issue about what should be remembered and what should be forgotten is a battlefield where politicians, critics, experts, moralists fight among each other. Another name of this battlefield is politics of memory. In regard to the United States, one of the parties, that takes part in this battle, promotes the idea that the United States of America can be seen as, metaphorically speaking, the United States of Amnesia. This idea implies that the entire nation systematically tries to force out painful and shameful memories such as the war in Vietnam or Abu Ghraib issue, or alternatively, to reframe them in a way so that actual deaths and sufferings of the country's citizens or victims of the country's politics are put aside and the country itself is remembered as possessing no responsibility for that.¹⁸ Whether 9/11 has passed or it is still going through a similar purification is an interesting question. Whatever the answer would be, it is clear that any practice of evocation of 9/11 is a part of the memory process. *The Onion* takes part in this process and it proposes its own vision of the nation's and its authorities' ability to remember the attacks. It can be assumed from *The Onion's* jokes that the ones who suffer from amnesia are ordinary Americans: «On the fifth anniversary this month, CNN.com will be streaming footage all day of the network's televised coverage from Sept. 11th, 2001, enabling viewers to relive it as events unfolded. What do *you* think?»¹⁹, asks the September 8, 2006 issue²⁰.

«September what?» answers Becca Townes, Systems Analyst. Later on, on May 14, 2009 *The Onion* asks its 'readers':

«Beginning July 4, the crown of the Statue of Liberty will be open to the public for the first time since Sept. 11, 2001. What do *you* think?» (Italics in the original.)²¹

Claudia Bunning's answer is:

«They closed the Statue of Liberty on Sept. 11? Did *anything* good happen on that day?» (Italics in the original.)²²

¹⁸ Cf. the analysis of the cinematic memory about the War in Vietnam is carried out in: Fluck W. The 'Imperfect Past': Vietnam According to the Movies // H.-J. Grabbe, S. Schindler (eds.) *The Merits of Memory. Concepts, Contexts, Debates*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 2008. P. 353–387.

¹⁹ All the articles of *The Onion* are cited from the newspaper's web-site <http://www.theonion.com/>. In order to group the articles chronologically, I used the advanced search options on *Google* search engine using «'Sept. 11' OR 9/11» as a keyword.

²⁰ CNN's Chilling 9/11 Tribute // *The Onion. America's Finest News Source*. 2006. Sept. 8. Retrieved July 16, 2012, from <http://www.theonion.com/articles/cnns-chilling-911-tribute,15064/>

²¹ Statue of Liberty's Crown Reopening // *The Onion. America's Finest News Source*. 2009. May 14. Retrieved July 16, 2012, from <http://www.theonion.com/articles/statue-of-libertys-crown-reopening,15704/>

²² Ibid.

Once more *The Onion* represents the Americans as having no memory in the article by a thought-out columnist Michael Jenkes *Hey, Wasn't There Some Sort Of National Tragedy A Few Months Back?* in the June 6, 2007 issue.²³ (22. Jenkes)

As a matter of fact, 2007 was a pretty quit year for the United States. The last significant tragic events before 2007 took place in 2005 when the Hurricane Katrina destroyed New Orleans. Thus, the author does not refer to any particular national tragedy but he rather addresses the absence of the sense of responsibility, seriousness, and long-term memory about what had happened to the US previously. The indicator of this intention is in the following line:

«Because if something like that had actually happened just a few months ago, I'm sure we'd all still be hearing about it and talking about it every day»²⁴.

In other words the author is framing the USA as the United States of Amnesia and talks about what is known in popular culture as «the Great American Memory Hole», meaning a lack of collective long-term memory.

He compares his personal memories with a movie:

«I must be thinking of some movie I saw. But if so, man, it was a pretty fucked-up movie»²⁵.

This comparison reminds of another one, from the September 26, 2001 issue, from the article entitled *American Life Turns Into Bad Jerry Bruckheimer Movie*²⁶ where the major point is that despite the fact that 9/11 looks like a movie in the media it is nevertheless real.

The Onion's criticism of the 9/11 media coverage can be a separate research issue and it is not my focus here. What is still important to notice in regard to the memory issue is that Michael Jenkes's article is a good example of the ambivalence of irony. On the one hand, it might be seen as a parody of a moralist discourse and of those who criticise Americans for their collective amnesia. On the other hand, it might be interpreted as a serious statement, *The Onion's* critical opinion about people's short memory and disrespect directly expressed through the first-person narrative.

²³ Jenkes M. *Hey, Wasn't There Some Sort Of National Tragedy A Few Months Back?* // *The Onion. America's Finest News Source*, June 6, 2007. Retrieved July 16, 2012, from: <http://www.theonion.com/articles/hey-wasnt-there-some-sort-of-national-tragedy-a-fe,11314/>

²⁴ Jenkes, op. cit.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ *American Life Turns Into Bad Jerry Bruckheimer Movie* // *The Onion. America's Finest News Source*. 2001. Sept. 26. Retrieved July 16, 2012, from: <http://www.theonion.com/articles/american-life-turns-into-bad-jerry-bruckheimer-mov,220/>

In 2009 *The Onion* thrust Americans once again in the video entitled *Americans Observing 9/11 By Trying Not To Masturbate*²⁷. This material ridicules ordinary people's practices of commemoration of the national tragedy. Their inability to respond to 9/11 has already become a matter of parody in the September 26, 2001 issue.²⁸ But while the 2001 issue described memory practices as a result of an interiorised ideology of commemoration that became automatic, the 2009 issue emphasises a restrictive and repressive aspect of memory practices that people reluctantly subjected themselves to, and the fact that the agreement to do so is actually challenged. The challenge to this agreement is expressed through the last person who speaks in this video:

«I know that I shouldn't masturbate on this day, but, I don't know... Should I not masturbate on Pear Harbour Day too?.. There is literally nothing in this world that'll keep me from masturbating»²⁹.

Thus, *The Onion* equates those memory practices that are reproduced mechanically or out of conformism to the absence of memory. What is also absent in both cases is sincerity, and *The Onion* seems to be protecting this value rather than undermining it.

Interestingly, while ordinary Americans are the objects of *The Onion's* irony for their amnesia, the authorities are represented as remembering 9/11 very well, but the newspaper shows their memory as not being sincere. It mocks the ways the state authorities express their grief. In the articles dealing with this aspect of the 9/11 aftermath *The Onion* represents state authorities as being cynic, highly pragmatic, profit-driven, non-efficient, and neglecting the task to remember.

For example, the September 11, 2006 issue published an article entitled *NYC Unveils 9/11 Memorial Hole*³⁰ which talks about the opening of the 70-foot hole on the site where the Twin Towers once stood. *The Hole, as the articles says,*

«contains over 16 acres of empty space, and is visible as far away as Hoboken, NJ. Over USD 175 million has been spent on the Hole's development, and thousands of pages of proposals and designs concerning the site in which the Hole was excavated were reviewed in over 2,800 hours of meetings. Work crews comprising more than 7,500 welders, equipment operators, ex-

²⁷ Americans Observing 9/11 by Trying Not to Masturbate // *The Onion. America's Finest News Source*, 2009. Retrieved July 16, 2012, from: <http://www.theonion.com/video/americans-observing-911-by-trying-not-to-masturbat,14366/>

²⁸ Not Knowing What Else To Do, Woman Bakes American-Flag Cake // *The Onion. America's Finest News Source*. 2001. Sept. 26. Retrieved July 16, 2012, from: <http://www.theonion.com/articles/not-knowing-what-else-to-do-woman-bakes-americanfl,221/>

²⁹ *Americans Observing 9/11*, op. cit.

³⁰ NYC Unveils 9/11 Memorial Hole // *The Onion. America's Finest News Source*. 2006. Sept. 11. Retrieved July 16, 2012, from: <http://www.theonion.com/articles/nyc-unveils-911-memorial-hole,2038/>

cavators, and other construction specialists spent long, often unpaid shifts in its depths»³¹.

The Hole is supposed to bring profit to the state and to promote the clash of civilizations idea. The article hints not only at the fact that by the fifth anniversary of 9/11 no memorial had been accomplished allegedly due to the bad management, corruption, and illegal status of workers involved, but also at the more broad symbolic meaning of the hole: «... that this deep, empty hole has come to stand not only for the New York City of today, but also for the transformation of the entire United States since Sept. 11, 2001»³².

The September 22, 2008 issue suggests yet another variant of a 9/11 memorial which would also be a profit-oriented, blindly patriotic place revealing the state's impotence in front of real terrorism.³³

Alongside these 9/11 memorials *The Onion* reports about another one, opened by the conspiracy theory advocates.³⁴ Thus, those who oppose themselves to the official version of the event become objects of jokes. A similar attitude towards the conspiracy theory supporters can be found in the video *9/11 Conspiracy Theories 'Ridiculous', Al Qaeda Says*³⁵ in which a supposed conspiracy theory advocate meets an Al Qaeda representative. Despite the fact that the latter is scoffed at, the former one is mocked in not a lesser degree.

Thus, *The Onion* points its sting at those who forget the tragedy, who capitalise on it, and who oppose the official version of 9/11. Therefore, *The Onion's* irony is far from being subversive towards traditional values of respect, esteem, and memory. It can be said that *The Onion* ridicules unauthentic ways of mourning and remembering and, as a consequence, it probably has an idea of an authentic way. But since the principle of irony is to say things indirectly, this authentic way can be only reconstructed through hints left by the newspaper's humourists.

Anxiety and Security Measures

What does *The Onion* say about 9/11 implications for the society's psyche? Its vision can be summarized as follows: the U.S. government propagated the sense of terror, fear, and anxiety in order to take control over the population.

³¹ NYC Unveils 9/11 Memorial Hole.

³² Ibid.

³³ Plans For 9/11 Museum Revealed // *The Onion. America's Finest News Source*. 2008. Sept. 22. Retrieved July 16, 2012, from: <http://www.theonion.com/articles/plans-for-911-museum-revealed,8466/>

³⁴ Construction Complete On 9/11 Truther Memorial // *The Onion. America's Finest News Source*. 2010. Sept. 7. Retrieved July 16, 2012, from: <http://www.theonion.com/articles/construction-complete-on-911-truther-memorial,18034/>

³⁵ 9/11 Conspiracy Theories 'Ridiculous', Al Qaeda Says // *The Onion. America's Finest News Source*, 2010. Retrieved July 16, 2012 from: <http://www.theonion.com/video/911-conspiracy-theories-ridiculous-al-qaeda-says,14222/>

«No, Cheney continued. No, 9/11 is about the warm feeling you get when you help an elderly woman cross the street and then whisper to her that the terrorists can strike at any moment. 9/11 is about the satisfaction of telling people to do things and then them doing it – not because they want to, but because they are afraid to do otherwise. 9/11 is about removing Saddam Hussein from power. But most of all, 9/11 is about love».³⁶

A fake George W. Bush takes a similar position:

«Everywhere I look brings back memories. The Blue Room is where Laura and I put up our first White House Christmas tree. Down the hall, in the East Room, is where I concocted my favorite signing statement to circumvent the anti-torture guidelines of the Detainee Treatment Act of 2005, and – ooh! – right across the way is where Cheney and I decided to use the death of 3,000 Americans on 9/11 and the nation's subsequent fear of another attack as an excuse to carry out our long-standing plan to invade Iraq. I should really get a picture before I leave»³⁷. (36. Bush)

Moreover, *The Onion* ridicules the security measures, which were taken after the attack for their alleged inefficiency and their provoking terrorists' further aggression. In *The Onion's* imaginary world, U.S. Counter-Counterterrorism Unit exploits Washington Monument in order to show the Americans how fragile their security is,³⁸ then, the Department of Homeland Security releases several Guantanamo detainees providing them with necessary means for organization of terrorist acts in order to test the security system³⁹. These two latter examples are interesting because that they can be interpreted in a way that *The Onion* actually does not totally disapprove of the conspiracy theory. If the former implies that there might be the State behind terrorist attacks, the latter openly labels 9/11 «the botched Sept. 11, 2001 security preparedness exercise».

Sometimes *The Onion's* irony allows for a judgment, which is serious and straightforward. In respect to the anxiety issue this seriousness can be found in the following quote:

³⁶ Cheney Waits Until Last Minute Again To Buy Sept. 11 Gifts // *The Onion. America's Finest News Source*. 2008. Sept. 1. Retrieved July 16, 2012, from: <http://www.theonion.com/articles/cheny-waits-until-last-minute-again-to-buy-sept-1,2521/>

³⁷ Bush G. I'm Really Gonna Miss Systematically Destroying This Place // *The Onion. America's Finest News Source*. 2008. Dec. 1. Retrieved from <http://www.theonion.com/articles/im-really-gonna-miss-systematically-destroying-thi,11435/>

³⁸ U.S. Counter-Counterterrorism Unit Successfully Destroys Washington Monument // *The Onion. America's Finest News Source*. 2007. April 11. Retrieved July 16, 2012, from: <http://www.theonion.com/articles/us-counter-counterterrorism-unit-successfully-destr,2181/>

³⁹ DHS Releases 5 Terrorists Into U.S. To Test National Security // *The Onion. America's Finest News Source*. 2010. Aug. 4. Retrieved July 16, 2012, from: <http://www.theonion.com/articles/dhs-releases-5-terrorists-into-us-to-test-national,17838/>

«Considering I was in a coma at the time, this will certainly help me fully assimilate to the scarred, paranoid society into which I awoke»⁴⁰.

Thus, according to *The Onion*, one of the consequences of 9/11 is a state of an excessive anxiety. *The Onion* ascribes the responsibility for this condition to the state bureaucracy. Moreover, the newspaper accuses state bureaucracy for profiting from 9/11, but not only them.

9/11 Capitalizers

Articles dealing with the problem of the post-9/11 memory in the American society contained several hints on pragmatic and even cynic uses of the tragedy by political figures. In fact, *The Onion* dedicates some of its 9/11 materials to this very issue alone. *The Onion* seems to imply that George W. Bush, former Vice President of Cheney personally, the Bush's administration in general, and media structures used it to accomplish their own egoist plans.

In 2006, two feature films about 9/11 came out: Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* and *United 93* by Paul Greengrass. Both films were criticized for their conservatism, conventionalism, but also for their use of the 9/11 issue for self-promotion. *The Onion* follows this line of criticism «live in a post-*United 93* world now», declares the newspaper equating the damage caused by 9/11 to the damage produced by watching the film.⁴¹

«This film [*United 93*] will be a touching tribute to the media exploitation of Sept. 11», says one of the 'respondents' in the article *First 9/11 Film Coming*⁴². *This is another example of the irony which is not ironic, as it was in the article "Hey, Wasn't There Some Sort Of National Tragedy A Few Months Back?" in the June 6, 2007 issue.*⁴³

Media exploitation of 9/11 is further criticised in the article, which mocks at Olive Stone's «three-and-a-half-hour film»⁴⁴. Here again The Onion mocks at the conspiracy theory and media's pretention to be showing 'the reality'. It can be argued that The Onion's parodies promote a constructivist vision of the media production and stimulate a critical stance towards political and media initiatives. In other words, The Onion propagates the idea that the media reality is not the reality itself but representation:

⁴⁰ CNN's *Chilling 9/11 Tribute*, op. cit.

⁴¹ Springer M. Is Opening Week Too Soon To See A 9/11 Movie? // *The Onion. America's Finest News Source*. 2006. April 26. Retrieved July 16, 2012, from: <http://www.theonion.com/articles/is-opening-week-too-soon-to-see-a-911-movie,11221/>

⁴² *First 9/11 Film Coming* // *The Onion. America's Finest News Source*. 2006. April 10. Retrieved July 16, 2012, from: <http://www.theonion.com/articles/first-911-film-coming,14965/>

⁴³ Jenkes, op. cit.

⁴⁴ New Oliver Stone 9/11 Film Introduces 'Single Plane' Theory // *The Onion. America's Finest News Source*. 2006. Aug. 8. Retrieved July 16, 2012, from: <http://www.theonion.com/articles/new-oliver-stone-911-film-introduces-single-plane,2017/>

«After seeing that sequence, there's no way anyone can ever deny again that there was only one plane in the airspace over the eastern seaboard that morning», Stone said.⁴⁵

The concern that viewers will not be able to tell a media show from a real terrorist event had been already expressed in the 2001 article *American Life Turns Into Bad Jerry Bruckheimer Movie*⁴⁶. «An actual scene from real life» and «Another scene not from a movie» said the captions for real photos of 9/11 attack placed in the article. These captions suggested that despite the fact that the attack might seem unreal it is not a special effect.

The Onion emphasises that, once having appeared on the screen, 9/11 representations became embedded into the logic of media production. The September 26, 2001 issue contained a thought out TV programme grid where all programmes were about 9/11. The October 3, 2001 issue called 9/11 media coverage «Surreality TV»⁴⁷. The September 8, 2006 issue treated this phenomenon as follows: «I doubt many people will watch. During that time, FoxNews.com will be airing *Pirates of the Caribbean*», says Zac Polk, Interior Decorator, in the article *CNN's Chilling 9/11 Tribute*.⁴⁸

The Onion's vision of the 9/11 capitalisation includes not only media structures but also political figures. As various jokes suggest, Rudolph Giuliani used 9/11 as an investment into his symbolic capital for his presidential campaign,⁴⁹ George W. Bush used 9/11 as a pretext to invade Iraq⁵⁰, Dick Cheney used it to propagate the sense of terror amongst citizens to facilitate manipulation⁵¹. While ordinary Americans, according to *The Onion*, do not remember 9/11, Dick Cheney remembers it very well. In the end all the aforementioned persons are honoured with a prize for being the tragedy capitalizers.⁵²

⁴⁵ New Oliver Stone 9/11 Film Introduces 'Single Plane' Theory.

⁴⁶ American Life Turns Into Bad Jerry Bruckheimer Movie // *The Onion. America's Finest News Source*. 2001. Sept. 26. Retrieved July 16, 2012, from: <http://www.theonion.com/articles/american-life-turns-into-bad-jerry-bruckheimer-mov,220/>

⁴⁷ Network Programming Dominated by 'Surreality TV' // *The Onion. America's Finest News Source*. 2001. Oct. 3. Retrieved July 16, 2012, from: <http://www.theonion.com/articles/network-programming-dominated-by-surreality-tv,3293/>

⁴⁸ *CNN's Chilling 9/11 Tribute*, op. cit.

⁴⁹ Giuliani to Run for President of 9/11 // *The Onion. America's Finest News Source*. 2007. Feb. 21. Retrieved July 16, 2012, from: <http://www.theonion.com/articles/giuliani-to-run-for-president-of-911,2152/>

⁵⁰ Bush, op. cit.

⁵¹ Cheney Waits Until Last Minute Again To Buy Sept. 11 Gifts // *The Onion. America's Finest News Source*. 2008. Sept. 1. Retrieved July 16, 2012 from: <http://www.theonion.com/articles/cheney-waits-until-last-minute-again-to-buy-sept-1,2521/>

⁵² Congress Honors 9/11 First Capitalizers // *The Onion. America's Finest News Source*. 2011. Jan. 18. Retrieved July 16, 2012, from: <http://www.theonion.com/articles/congress-honors-911-first-capitalizers,18856/>

Thus, once more one can see that *The Onion's* role in respect to the memory about trauma is protective. One of the indicators of its protective intentions is its humourists' sudden seriousness, which has been already mentioned before. One more example of this seriousness can be found in the following quote from the article *Congress Honors 9/11 First Capitalizers*:

«Americans who eventually capitalized on the tragedy with their bullshit advertising, partisan rhetoric, forgettable novels, defence contracts, and all-around cheap, manipulative sentimentalism»⁵³.

Here *The Onion* steps back from its ironic tone and turns to straightforward accusations.

Conclusion

In the course of ten years since 9/11 *The Onion* has been developing ironic narratives about the attack. I have shown how the newspaper remembered this event during last five years. There are several discursive patterns into which 9/11 publications can be qualified. These include «Memory Hole», the spirit of anxiety and concern with security measures, and 9/11 capitalizers. I argue that in my reading of these jokes *The Onion* does not take a subversive position towards the tragedy itself. Instead it rather functions as a censor who ridicules the absence of memory, perverse forms of commemoration, profit-driven commemoration, and exaggeration of security measures. The newspaper accuses ordinary Americans of having no memory and state bureaucrats along with media structures for remembering 9/11 in a cynic way. Speaking about 9/11 itself, *The Onion* becomes extremely serious.

⁵³ Congress Honors 9/11 First Capitalizers.