

Plotting Against America: 9/11 and the Spectacle of Terror in Contemporary American Fiction

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This article examines the literary preoccupation with the visual image and the seeming impossibility of realism in the wake of the September 11th terrorist attacks. Tracing a series of long and short pieces from a selection of authors, this piece examines how writers were quick to register a series of written responses to the events. Beginning with immediate subjective pieces from writers such as Paul Auster, Martin Amis, and Erica Jong, this essay analyses these writers' emphasis on the visual nature of the attacks, from the omnipresence of the television reports to the eyewitness testimony offered by many. It then moves on to concentrate on some of the short stories from Ulrich Baer's edited volume *110 Stories: New York Writes after 9/11* (2002). Focusing on pieces such as Avital Ronell's "This Was a Test" and A.M. Homes's "We All Saw It, or The View From Home," the author identifies a brooding melancholy over the limits of language as a communicative or affective tool. This is then taken up in a longer concentration on Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), both of which emphasise the visual—the latter to the extent of melding the visual with the written in his account of traumatic loss. Using the theoretical apparatuses of Slavoj Žižek and Jean Baudrillard, the author makes the case that all of these writers, to varying degrees, are self-consciously operating in a textual landscape in which the boundaries of literary realism have been altered. According to DeLillo, the real is now "unreal" or "too real" to be portrayed by straightforward realist narratives. Thus, these writers integrate an emphasis on the visual image within their fictions (performance art in the case of DeLillo and actual photographs interspliced with the text in Foer's novel), thereby offering a heightened version of realism in order to accurately portray the realities of post 9/11 socio-cultural and personal landscapes.

In the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Camp David on September 11th, 2001 writers from across the globe were solicited for their reactions to the monstrous spectacle of the day. As early as September 12th, the British writer Ian McEwan wrote of his confused state as he faced the compelling horror of the events as they appeared on the television screen in front of him (2). But by comparison to some of his American contemporaries, McEwan was a little late off the mark. Paul Auster, for instance, recorded his impressions on the day itself. By September 20th, 2001 Dinitia Smith, writing in *The New York Times*, called upon a host of writers, including Joan Didion, Bobbie Ann Mason, Tim O'Brien, Joyce Carol Oates and John Updike, to elucidate their thoughts on the future of writing in the wake of 9/11 ("Novelists Reassess Their Subject Matter"). This process of consultation with writers continued on both sides of the Atlantic, so that by September 30th John Dugdale observed that: "Among the writers who have written about the World Trade Center bombing so far are Martin Amis, Peter Carey, Amitav Ghosh, David Grossman, Ian McEwan, Jay McInerney, Susan Sontag, John Updike and Jeanette Winterson" (37).

This immediate deluge of literary responses has been mirrored in the protracted prose responses in the few short years since 2001. Despite Norman Mailer's edict to Jay McInerney to "wait 10 years ... It will take that long for you to make sense of it," a swarm of novels have appeared ("The Uses of Invention"). McInerney himself ignored the advice of the older writer, publishing *The Good Life* in 2006, a year which also saw the publication of Ken Kalfus's *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* and Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children*. Such novels, it seems, ignore the presence of the Muslim other, preferring instead to focus on the interior, domestic worlds of their American protagonists and the acrimonious state of their affairs. There have, of course, been exceptions to this. John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006) takes the reader into the mind and the world of a would-be home-grown jihadist, Ahmad Mullaway Mulloy. The British-born, Princeton-educated Mohsin Hamid, albeit ironically and through parodic inversion, takes on the terrorist in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2006) in which the Pakistani "fundamentalist" resists the fundamentals of the corporate New York lifestyle. Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) merges the domestic with the public, bringing his domestic protagonist into direct contact with his Muslim enemy through the novel's protracted metaphor of "organic shrapnel." And, needless to say, writers outside the borders of the U.S. have taken on the Muslim subject more willingly, and

according to Pankaj Mishra much more successfully, than their American counterparts (4-6).¹

What was immediately striking about a great number of these writers' responses was the emphasis on the visual or on the actual spectacle of the attacks. Many writers describe their impotence in terms of their being frozen in front of the television screen or, in the case of the New York writers, from some city vantage point. Indeed, for many writers in the weeks and months after the attacks, the heightened and widespread visibility of the attacks seemed to render them "too real" (DeLillo, "In the Ruins of the Future"). Thus the problem for the writer was how to write about events which seemed to defy the logic of traditional narrative realism and which presented a story that the whole world was already familiar with through an unending televisual loop. Using the theoretical apparatuses of Slavoj Žižek and Jean Baudrillard, and building on the ideas of Alex Houen, this essay will examine the thesis that the September 11 terrorist attacks engendered a new form of narrative realism, a form of realism born of a frustration with the limits of language as an affective and representative tool. This new realism, analysed here in a number of texts but especially in DeLillo's *Falling Man* and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), merges the written and the visual in order to realise the new realities of post-9/11 socio-political and personal landscapes of trauma, grief and loss.

As others have observed, the widespread public soul-searching of writers in the days and weeks after the attacks is an important gauge of the public position of the writer in the contemporary world. Why was it that writers were called upon to explain or offer insights into the events? In what way would they be able to offer accounts any more illuminating than one's own experience of 9/11? And how could the writer offer any more than what was offered by the endless reportage and documentaries of the day?

1. According to Pankaj Mishra, Loraine Adams's *Harbor* (2004), Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004) and Laila Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005) adequately describe the divided selves of Muslims: "There are no simple oppositions in these books between 'Muslims' and the 'west.' They simply assume that for many Muslims the west is inseparable from their deepest sense of themselves, and that most people from societies that western imperialism cracked open long ago cannot afford to see the west as an alien and dangerous 'other'; it is implicated in their private as well as public conflicts" (5). Also, Mishra contends that writers of non-fiction such as George Packer, Thomas Ricks and Rajiv Chandrasekaran offer more insightful glimpses into the realities of post-9/11 America.

For Daniel Lea, the literary writer is both “explicator and arbitrator of human psychology and emotional dumbfoundedness” (5). This builds on Karen Alkalay-Gut’s thinking on the position of the writer in mediating trauma. Writing on the poetry of 9/11, she sees the writer as being involved in an “aesthetics of rawness,” which entails instituting “a stable ground from which to view the events that is both fully engaged in the raw emotionality of the moment and distanced from it sufficiently to enable aesthetic contemplation” (259). Thus, according to Lea and Alkalay-Gut what is required of writers, mostly American in this instance, is an aesthetic apparatus that might lend shape to the confounding images and events of the day. The reading public seeks a narrative that will weave the multitudinous stories of 9/11, the stories of victims, survivors, witnesses and perpetrators, into some kind of coherence that speaks to a subjective sense and experience of the moment. In this way, writers can bring together the documentary and the emotional. Indeed, such was the case in the slew of early responses which were largely accounts of subjective experiences. Unfettered by the constraints of objective reportage, writers can create fictional spaces upon which the reader can graft his/her own story and emotional responses to the tragic events of the day. What readers seemed to look to writers for, in the aftermath of 9/11, was a unifying narrative (a plot, if you will) to make sense of the chaotic and polyphonic responses to the events.

In contrast with the later fictional and poetic responses to 9/11, the majority of the immediate responses to 9/11 were often non-fictional and subjective, describing various writers’ proximity to events. Many recorded with almost documentary exactness where they were when the planes struck. Erica Jong was at her “27th storey window on East 69th Street” (217), while Updike recalls watching events from “a tenth-floor apartment in Brooklyn Heights” (“September 11, 2001” 117). Others, such as Siri Hustvedt, Auster and Art Spiegelman, describe themselves in relation to their loved ones: the frantic phone calls, the retrieval of children from school, the desperate manoeuvres across the restricted city to check in with friends.² McNerney, for example, describes the urge to be on the streets, to be connected to the hysterical social mass, and to observe the testimonials, poems and photograph memorials that sprang up across the city. Indeed, McNerney observes the stories involved in such memorials and laments the stopped narratives of individual lives lost in the carnage (“Names and

2. See all three responses in Baer’s edited collection *110 Stories: New York Writes after September 11*.

Faces that Keep the Missing on our Minds: Remembering New York's Disappeared" 12). On the other hand, Amis, whose consideration of the attacks has attracted considerable controversy, presents his initial response vicariously: "My wife's sister had just taken her children to school and was standing on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Eleventh Street at 8.58am" ("Fear and Loathing"). What each of these accounts of the experience of 9/11 reveals is the collapse of the boundary between public and private memory, the elision of personal stories with wider cultural narratives, and our reliance upon literary writers to provide plots for the seemingly unimaginable.

In the previously mentioned Amis piece on the attacks the writer describes September 11 as the "apotheosis of the postmodern era—the era of images and perception" ("Fear and Loathing"). This is an astute reading of the events and their aftermath, for the attacks have meddled somewhat with our perception, both in terms of the reality of the events of 9/11 itself and our understanding of ourselves in relation to them. One of the most rehearsed observations of the image of the planes hitting the towers was the unreality of these events that were deliberately plotted so that they would be played out on the real-time television networks across the globe. This overwhelming sense of the fictional nature of these factual images delivered through a medium of instant replay displaces and ruptures, at least momentarily, our comprehension of the real. Indeed, theorists of postmodernism, such as Žižek and Baudrillard, have argued that the attacks can be seen only as a kind of fiction, suggesting that one of the greatest losses of the terrorist attacks was our sense of reality. Baudrillard remarks that "reality is a principle, and it is this principle that is lost" (28). Similarly, for Žižek the reality that settles into cultural consciousness in the aftermath of terrible trauma is of a different nature to that which preceded it and which formulated our sense of identity and understanding of the world. He observes that "the Real which returns has the status of a(nother) semblance: precisely because it is real, that is, on account of its excessive / traumatic character, we are unable to integrate into it our reality, and are therefore compelled to experience it as a nightmarish apparition" (19).

In their immediate responses to the attacks, writers turned away from the art of fiction by foregrounding the factual and the subjective. Many foresaw a crisis for the fiction writer in the face of this enormous trauma: McEwan, Hustvedt, Mailer, Zadie Smith, and Oates, for instance, were all quick to make this point. But Ulrich Baer's collection *110 Stories: New York Writes after 9/11* (2002), which draws together 110 very short

textual responses from New York writers, reveals the abiding nature of the issue. Countless contributors describe the futility of their efforts to approximate the events or the trauma incurred by the blasts. For Lynne Sharon Schwartz, the failure to write is itself that which best encapsulates the grief of the attacks. What is more, she questions the ethics of fiction-writing and observes an inability to write: “we are very tired of our stories, but we don’t know what the next story should be” (261). As Houen has pointed out, “it would appear that post September 11 the next step for the politically engaged novelist should be a revision of realism” (420). This revision of realism seems to be entangled with the prominence of the visual image in the spectacle that was the attack. The world was suddenly presented with a series of awful images: the plane taking its course through the skyscraper, the burning tower, the falling man, the female executive covered in ashes, the red-faced fire-fighters, and, of course, the memorial-placard images of the dead. And with this sudden proliferation of compelling visual images, the ability of writing to approximate the real was, of course, called into question by practitioners and cultural commentators alike.

The idea of the visual image as a threat, as a genre capable of superseding the written word, has long been rehearsed by writers, artists and cultural critics taking their lead from Walter Benjamin’s 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” With the advent of the visual image and visual technologies throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the debate about the ability of art to approximate the real world belongs as much to the cultures of modernism as it does to the postmodern paradigms of technological simulation expounded by the likes of Jean-François Lyotard, Baudrillard and others throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In this respect, 9/11 did not really represent some kind of rupture or a turning point of the kind described by former British Prime Minister Tony Blair at the Labour Party conference a month after the attacks, when he spoke of the shaken kaleidoscope of the new world order.³ What was especially interesting about Blair’s address was his deployment of a visual image to describe the new world stage. The image of the political kaleidoscope seems particularly apposite when one considers that at the time the ashes of the World Trade Center were still descending on New York City. Blair’s shaken kaleidoscope merges the visual with political

3. For Tony Blair’s Labour Party Conference Speech delivered on October 1st, 2001 see (<http://politics.guardian.co.uk/speeches/story/0,,590775,00.html>).

rhetoric. The highly metaphorical visual image has its literal counterpart in the falling ashes but it also, in its very nature, touches upon one of the issues that arose out of those very ashes—how to reconcile this newly transfigured relationship between images and word?

Just as political commentators have argued that 9/11 had been a long time coming, rooted in a history of antagonism between the United States and the Muslim world, and with intelligence about potential attacks available during the Clinton presidency, it is fair to say that the debate regarding the potency of words in the face of the visual has a long history. In the American context, such questions have largely concerned photography and the rise of photojournalism throughout “the American Century,” largely in the aftermath of World War I and II and the highly photographed Vietnam War.⁴ Again, the question arises in the wake of a large-scale trauma, the difference in 2001 being that the images that were instantly sent by satellite across the globe came from within American borders.

In light of this attack on American soil, the first foreign attack since the World War II, it is unsurprising that American writers became more subjective and less dispassionate in their immediate responses, presenting raw personal grief and their perceived sense of the futility of their literary endeavours. There was a general feeling amongst writers, articulated most succinctly by Oates, that words would inevitably fail in the face of the extremely visual nature of the attacks (“Words Fail, Memory Blurs, Life Wins” 11).⁵ Michiko Kakutani, in her review of Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004), makes a similar point regarding the inadequacy of words as testimony, noting how “in the immediate days after the attacks people struggled to articulate what they had witnessed” (“Portraying 9/11 as a Katzenjammer Catastrophe”). Baer’s edited collection of responses to

4. See Kennedy 259-74.

5. See also Joyce Carol Oates’s review of Jay McInerney’s *The Good Life* (2006), in which she observes: “Though a glut of material has appeared on the subject of September 11, much of it recorded testimony of survivors and eyewitnesses, very few writers of fiction have taken up the challenge and still fewer have dared to venture close to the actual event; September 11 has become a kind of Holocaust subject, hallowed ground to be approached with awe, trepidation and utmost caution. The reader’s natural instinct is to recoil from a purely fictitious treatment of so profound and communal a subject, for the task of fiction is to create a self-defined, self-absorbed, and highly charged text out of language, and the appropriation of a communal trauma for such purposes would seem to be exploitative” (“Dimming the Lights”).

9/11, *110 Stories: New York Writes after September 11*, is self-consciously pitched as a “model for New York’s perpetual self-reconstitution through metaphor and language that will prove as significant as the construction in concrete and steel around us” (1). Yet, the book presents stories that address the inability of language to “fit” the new world order. Avitall Ronell in “This Was a Test” scrutinizes the language of George W. Bush in his statement that the attacks “were a test,” asking “How does his language usage work here?” She questions the new “rhetoric of justification” invented for military action and cites Nietzsche in exploring the meaning of the word test as “a crisis in the relationship of experience to interpretation” (251-53). Jane Tillman’s story “Save Me from the Pious and the Vengeful” begins with the assertion that “Out of nothing comes language and out of language comes nothing and everything” (294) and goes on to explore the manifold ways in which the author attempts to create a story which might in some way offer meaning to the events. Ending with recourse to Margaret Fuller, Tillman claims to leave the imagining of the newly configured America, the stories, to others (294-97).

Lydia Davis’s story “Grammar Questions” deals obliquely with 9/11 through the precise attention to the laws of grammar and language in a monologue about a dying man (the father of the narrator). Scrutinizing every verb tense and grammatical configuration, the narrator is preoccupied with life, death, existence and “the body.” In the face of death the narrator also considers the accuracy of pronouns in describing the dying man: “he,” “it,” “my father,” “the body” (72-75). Davis’s story confronts the inadequacy of language in the face of trauma, linking the unspeakability of her impending loss with incomprehension; without the language to articulate crisis it is impossible to understand that crisis. As Davis’s narrator gropes for the grammatical terminology to describe her dying father, she evades the reality of the situation—the fact of his imminent death. The direct thematic parallel to this, her failure to directly address the events of 9/11, represents a real and subjective trauma in her retreat from the gravity of the situation.

Jenefer Shute’s story “Instructions for Surviving the Unprecedented (Break Glass in Case of Emergency, If Glass Not Already Broken)” is a nineteen-paragraph, fictional protocol supposedly directed at those who live alone. Ostensibly, the various paragraphs list the actions of a traumatised New Yorker gripped by panic. But each ultimately is interested in the salvage of language as a means of communication and as a way to make sense of the situation. Each paragraph of the story charts the failure of language and the failure of communication, with the dead phone lines, the

television stories delivering news of what is occurring just a few blocks away, the radio reporter “stumbling incredulously over his words,” and the need of the trauma victim to “be part of a narrative” (271-75). Listing the subject’s responses, Shute’s “instructions” emphasise incomprehension and disbelief, a cognitive insufficiency which, in turn, is linked with the linguistic insufficiency experienced by the subject as she is faced with composition. As the story progresses, each attempt at communication or representation fails: the elderly neighbour in shock is unresponsive, the phones remain dead throughout, as does email, and the immigrant superintendent’s hanging of an American flag on the front of the speaker’s apartment building seems like a misrepresentation of her feelings. These various attempts at linguistic communication culminate in the moment when the speaker is presented with the marker pen and enjoined to write a poem or a message to commemorate the victims. She writes “Words Fail Me.” Finally part of a narrative, she is overwhelmed by the failure of words to articulate her trauma. The story, however, is not bleak in its final outlook. The speaker concludes in the final paragraph that words, in the coming months, will regain their redemptive, communicative power. Indeed, the text itself is testament to the survival of words.

As well as the reconfiguration of language, of course, many of the initial authorial responses to the events emphasize the purely visual nature of the attacks. In his immediate piece for “The Talk of the Town” in *The New Yorker*, Updike, for instance, describes himself as “summoned to witness,” less an active agent than an individual at the beckoning call of another. The short article is littered with references to his Brooklyn Heights “viewpoint,” “television,” “seeing” and “television” again and again (“September 11, 2001” 117-18). Indeed, A. M. Homes’s short piece, “We All Saw It, or The View From Home,” directly addresses the overwhelming capacity of the visual image. Documenting her activities on the day of the attacks, she describes how the events of September 11 ripped her from the creative writing space of her early morning routine. From this moment she describes her writerly self in the language of filmography as “stilled.” Her sense of being an immediate witness is one of severe traumatic breakdown:

I see imagery that until now did not exist in reality, only in the fiction of film. Seeing it with your own eye, in real time, not on a screen, not protected by the frame of the television set, not set up and narrated by an anchor man, not in the continual darkness of a movie theatre, seeing it like this is irreconcilable, like a hallucination, a psychotic break. (151)

Yet, despite this direct experience, Homes describes a kind of distance imposed by the intermediary of technology. She uses her own camera to photograph the burning towers but finds that she has no film. And so she moves to the television, eventually finding that her images of the towers and the destruction are slowly eroded and replaced at first by the fresh footage on the television screen and then by its “unrelenting loop” (152). Finally, Homes concludes that her powers of writing have been diminished by the hole in the landscape. Describing the towers as her “navigational points” which enabled her imagination to roam free when writing, she now feels the shock of their absence. Indeed, the view from her window has altered her being. No longer a writer, she describes herself as a “war correspondent,” documenting events and emotional responses, with no remit for imaginative invention (153).

The silencing of the writer in the face of the image has long been the domain of Don DeLillo, who in his 1991 novel *Mao II* warned that the future belonged to the terrorist. A curiously prescient novel in its anticipation of the subjugation of a writer’s creative powers by the forces of terrorism, *Mao II* also impresses its theme of the tension between the visual and the written and the unique power of the visual image to erode reality itself as well as one’s subjective experience of the real. For instance, Bill Gray, the novel’s elusive writer, loses his identity and subjectivity when he allows himself to be photographed:

I’ve become someone’s material. Yours, Brita. There’s life and there’s the consumer event. Everything around us tends to channel our lives toward some final reality in print or film. ... Everything seeks its own heightened version. Or put it this way. Nothing happens until it’s consumed. Or put it this way. Nature has given way to aura. All the material in every life is channelled into the glow. Here I am in your lens. Already I see myself differently. Twice over or once removed. (43-44)

Here, either consciously or otherwise, DeLillo engages with Benjamin and Baudrillard’s theories of simulation and the evanescence of spectacle. To illustrate the reifying tendencies of the apparatuses of the visual, he invents the scenario whereby a commissioned series of photographs allow a terrorist to recognise and murder Gray. Effectively, therefore, the visual destroys the written and the verbal. Thus, the visual image does not just reflect reality. It changes its course.

Given DeLillo’s ongoing engagement with the figure of the terrorist and the cultural apparatus of contemporaneity throughout his writing, his

response to the attacks was keenly awaited. Unlike those of his compatriots, however, it was not immediate. In his piece “In the Ruins of the Future,” published in December 2001, DeLillo sidestepped some of the more hysterical responses to the September events and set the attacks within the recent historical framework of global capital, cybernetics and the proliferation of markets across the globe. Continuing with the themes and ideas raised in *Mao II* and his epic *Underworld* (1998), DeLillo sets the writer and the terrorist as like figures in the struggle to win over hearts and minds. Just as the writer weaves his plot to reduce the world and fit it into the confines of his story, so too does the terrorist: “Plots reduce the world. He [the terrorist] builds a plot around his anger and our indifference. He lives a certain kind of apartness, hard and tight” (“In the Ruins of the Future”). For DeLillo, the struggle between the writer and the terrorist, one who controls words and the other whose plot orchestrates the visual stuff of nightmares, is a power struggle of sorts for control of reality. In conducting the attacks, the terrorist has inserted his story into the Western narrative of technological optimism and progress, of wealth and success, thereby (as Žižek points out) altering the real which preceded the spectacular airborne events.

According to DeLillo, the only means of retaliation is the pursuit of counternarrative. Counternarrative consists of the stories criss-crossing New York City on the day of and days after the attack, the internet tales and blogs that infinitely proliferate throughout cyberspace. In short, counternarrative is the stories of the people—all the people—those locked and lost within the towers, those who watched from abroad, those on the streets and those who hung the placards documenting the narratives of lost lovers and friends. It is only through the pursuit of counternarrative, according to DeLillo, that we can wrestle the narrative back from the terrorist (“In the Ruins of the Future”). Indeed, in his longer fictional 9/11 novel, *Falling Man*, this is DeLillo’s strategy. Placing the story of Keith and Lianne Neudecker at the foreground of his narrative, he sets the terrorist figure, Hammad, at the periphery. The story of an ordinary marriage and its dissolution is given centre stage and the plot of the terrorist relegated to the sidelines of the narrative. DeLillo, of course, used this same strategy, albeit to different effect, in *Underworld*. In that book, the narrative at the sidelines was that of Manx and Cotter Martin, an African-American father and son who had effectively been written out of history. Their stifled narrative dangling precariously at the edge of the wider, predominantly white story was used as an indictment of the loss of minority histories and stories.

In *Falling Man*, however, one might argue that DeLillo inverts the

strategy. When discussing *Underworld* and the lost stories of Cotter and Manx in an article preceding the publication of the novel, “The Power of History” (1997), DeLillo referred to the lost narratives in need of salvage as “counterhistory” (60-63). In *Falling Man*, however, the seemingly larger story (insofar as it dominates the narrative of the novel) is the counternarrative. It is given precedence over the much wider cultural narrative of fundamentalist terror. So the story that dominates, that of Keith and Lianne, is the counternarrative, which is designed to stand against the story of Hammad and his murderous intentions. Thus, *Falling Man*, in its formal composition, demonstrates the power struggle between the writer and the terrorist. But DeLillo is not alone, of course, in this confrontation between the writer and the terrorist. Joseph Conrad first warned of the possibility of attack on literary art in *The Secret Agent* (1907) and, in the current context, Updike enacts the struggle between writer and terrorist by pitching an easily recognisable alter-ego against a perverse illogical home-grown terrorist in *Terrorist*.

The tension between word and visual image recurs in *Falling Man*, throughout which DeLillo presents language and words as the means to wresting the control of the visual from the terrorist. This is especially apparent in Lianne’s writing classes for her Alzheimer’s group, which produces a glut of counternarratives in the stories and reactions of her pupils:

They wrote about the planes. They wrote about where they were when it happened. They wrote about the people they knew who were in the towers, or nearby, and they wrote about God. ... No one wrote a word about the terrorists. (61-63)⁶

Language and writing here are the means of regaining control of reality, which Žižek and Baudrillard view as irretrievably altered by the visual images orchestrated by the terrorists on September 11. DeLillo touches upon this idea but refuses it credence in his article, “In the Ruins of the Future”:

6. The novel, of course, throws up countless instances of the redemptive power of language. Nina and Martin, for instance, discuss the merits of reading poetry as a means of overcoming trauma. Justin, Keith and Lianne’s young son, also plays with language. He attempts to strip language down to basics, to monosyllables, in an attempt to clarify and frame his thoughts. In trying to make sense of the attacks and the figure behind it, Justin replaces “Bin Laden” with “Bill Lawton.” And, of course, Lianne constantly ponders the significance and the power of words to bring people together, moreover their potential to heal her failing marriage.

The events of September 11 are covered unstintingly. There was no confusion of roles on TV. The raw event was one thing, the coverage another. The event dominated the medium. It was bright and totalizing and some of us said it was unreal. When we say a thing is unreal we mean it is too real, a phenomenon so unaccountable and yet so bound to the power of objective fact that we can't tilt it to the slant of our perceptions. ("In the Ruins of the Future")

This runs contrary to DeLillo's usual sense of the medium as eradicating the potency of the event, a recurring theme in *Mao II*, *Underworld* and *Cosmopolis* (2003). In the case of 9/11 and its media coverage, the event is perceived by DeLillo as dominating and uniting cultural consciousness. It is unaltered and brutal in its reality and it is this raw brutality, this "realness" which withstands alteration, that must be the subject of art. For DeLillo the visual must meld with the literary in the production of redemptive counternarratives.

DeLillo returns to this theme of the importance of the visual throughout his novel: we encounter it in the drawings in Nina and Martin's apartment, in the pictures the central characters visit in the Met, in the selection of Morandi *Natura Morta* paintings at the novel's close. Even the very title of the novel refers to a "still life" of sorts, evoking one of the most horrific sights which was replayed throughout the day. At various points throughout the novel New Yorkers are confronted with a performance artist who re-enacts the scenes of victims descending from the windows of the World Trade Centre. Here, the Falling Man is usually seen dangling from one of the city's skyscrapers while dressed in a business suit and suspending his limbs in the manner of one of the photographed jumpers, Jonathan Briley.⁷ By giving us a fictional performance artist (like Keith and Hammad, one of the book's many falling men) who bases his act on an image of a real victim, DeLillo deliberately confronts the issues facing the writer who attempts to

7. Indeed, Don DeLillo does this quite deliberately in *Falling Man*, where the eponymous performance artist, in his act, mimics the fall of a man agreed to be Jonathan Briley, who in his descent from the North Tower appeared to plummet straight, upside down with one leg bent and his shirt whipping in the breeze. DeLillo's performance artist, Janiak, is himself perhaps based on the performance artist Kerry Skarbakka who jumped more than thirty times from the Museum of Contemporary Art, dressed in a business suit, to recreate scenes from the World Trade Center attacks. One might also make the case that DeLillo builds his performance artist on the work of Sharon Paz and Eric Fischl's *Tumbling Woman* (2002).

aestheticize mass trauma. But DeLillo's falling man is more often scorned by the New Yorkers for whom he performs. Causing outrage and pain, he is a reminder of "those stark moments in the burning towers when people fell or were forced to jump ... the single falling figure that trails a collective dread, body come down among us all" (*Falling Man* 33). And so the problem faced by the writer attempting to create a fiction from the ashes of the World Trade Center is the great difficulty in encapsulating this "collective dread" with sensitivity to the dead and to the sensibilities of those left behind. Indeed, in an interview on National Public Radio after the publication of the novel, DeLillo described it as both a "responsibility" and as the toughest book he has written in an "emotional sense" ("*Falling Man* Maps Emotional Aftermath of September 11"). In this regard, the problem with the *Falling Man* is that he is not mediated by television, he is "too real," too bound to the objective facts of 9/11.

This sense of an artwork being too close to the objective facts of 9/11 was one of the many criticisms levelled at Foer's novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. After the enthusiastic critical reception of Foer's first novel, *Everything is Illuminated* (2002), expectations of his 9/11 book were very high indeed. However, the book was met by largely disapproving reviews which saw the writer's treatment of 9/11 as misguided and insensitive. Foer was even accused of deliberately playing on the reader's emotions by presenting the traumatised grief of a precocious nine-year-old who searches for clues into his dead father's life and imaginatively constructs a flick-picture book of the falling man in reverse. Rather than falling, therefore, he makes his way upward, back in time, back through the window of the World Trade Center.⁸ Indeed, that which seemed to perplex

8. See, for instance, Tim Adams's review in *The Observer* (London) which concludes that: "By the time you get to the end, and flip backwards through the pictures of the falling figure to restore the victim to the top of the skyscraper, as Oskar wishes, you may feel a good deal of the emotion has been borrowed and not quite deserved" ("A Nine-Year-Old and 9/11"). Tom Barbash, writing in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, laments the novel's closing images: "It lends to the story a horrific and unearned gravity, and at the same time it cheapens a gorgeous and beautifully sad moment at the end of the final chapter" ("Mysterious Key Sends Boy Sifting Through His Life's Wreckage After 9/11"). Walter Kirn in *The New York Times* describes the book as "an overstuffed fortune cookie," a novel composed with an "avant-garde tool kit developed way back when to disassemble established attitudes and cut through rusty sentiments, has now become the best means, it seems, for restoring them and propping them up. No traditional story could put forward the tritenesses that Foer reshuffles, folds, cuts into strips, seals in seven separate envelopes and then,

most of the critics in their reactions to Oskar Schell and his narrative of loss in New York City is the seeming unreality of the situation. He is described “more like a mouthpiece than an actual child,” a “plastic bag filled with oddities” and “an unreasonable invention.”⁹ For the critic Laura Miller, for example, Oskar is no more than “a device serving the author’s purposes rather than a fully imagined human being” (“Terror Comes to Tiny Town”). No less troubling was the apparently unrealistic urban landscape which Oskar appeared to inhabit. Updike confessed to being “boggled ... by a nine year old boy being allowed to roam ... all over the five boroughs” (“Mixed Messages”), while Roger Gatham observed how odd it seemed that the city traversed by the young narrator is inhabited by “quirky, gentle and sympathetic folk and not a single mugger” (“Novelist Trapped in Post-9/11 Tale”).

This, of course, brings us back to Houen’s idea of a necessary revision of realism in the wake of the attacks. If, as Baudrillard suggested, “reality is a principle which has been lost,” then the calls for fictional realism in the portrayal of deep individual and collective emotional trauma are surely redundant (28). Foer has admitted as much himself: “I am not really writing a nine-year-old-kid ... not in a realistic way ... sometimes you have to tell certain lies of reality in order to tell certain truths of emotion” (“Interview with Jonathan Birnbaum”). But then Foer does stick very close to the facts of reality in his depiction of the 9/11 attacks as well as other large-scale tragedies such as the bombing of Dresden and Hiroshima, not to mention the insertion of a host of real life characters such as Stephen Hawking. What the novel therefore presents is a contrived juxtaposition of the real with the fantastically unreal, setting the simultaneous experience of reality and unreality before the reader in this narrative of post-9/11 trauma.

In the light of these calls for realism and realistic depiction, David Brauner observes that in spite of the academic interest in the postmodern, the dominant fictional mode in contemporary American writing seems to be realism. In his discussion of realism and magic realism in Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* (2004) and Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Brauner points out that the deliberate swerve from probability in both novels is born of very different agendas. “Whereas Foer sought to legitimise

astonishingly, makes whole, causing the audience to ooh and aah over notions that used to make it groan” (“Everything is Included”).

9. See McInerney, “The Uses of Invention”; Barbash, “Mysterious Key Sends Boy Sifting Through His Life’s Wreckage After 9/11.”

his references to the terrorist attacks on the twin towers in terms of the moral obligations of the writer to engage with the pressing issues of contemporary life," he explains, "Roth wanted to reinforce his own credentials as a writer whose imaginative faculties operate independently of, and transcend, any particular event or zeitgeist" (191-92). And so while Foer sought to counter attacks on his novel by outlining the moral imperative he felt in writing the novel so soon after the event, Roth deliberately and consistently denied any connection between the events of 11 September 2001 and his novel.

What Brauner refers to as the "flights of fancy" in both novels (and fantasies of flight in Foer's book specifically) is a deliberate and sustained admixture of reality and fantasy, a clear depiction of the dual sense of the heightened reality and unreality evinced by the terrorist attacks and repeatedly recounted in writings about the events. From the very outset *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* presents a world in which reality has been irredeemably altered. The unusual child Oskar Schell, who is undoubtedly a reworking of Günter Grass's magic realist hero Oskar Matzerath, describes himself as an "inventor," an "amateur entomologist," a "computer consultant," a "Francophile," an "amateur astronomer," as well as a "natural historian," a "Great Explorer," a "jeweller," an "origamist," and as a "detective." The description of himself as an "inventor" is particularly apposite in this case, for the narrative that unfolds presents a series of invented scenarios in which Oskar reverses the actions of September 11 so that his father is reinstated into his life:

"So I can't stop inventing how he died. I'm always inventing."
 ... "I want to stop inventing. If I could know how he died, exactly how he died, I wouldn't have to invent him dying inside an elevator that was stuck between floors, which happened to some people, and I wouldn't have to imagine him trying to crawl down the outside of the building, which I saw a video of one person doing on a Polish site, or trying to use a tablecloth as a parachute, like some of the people who were in the Windows of the World actually did. There are so many different ways to die, and I just need to know which was his." (257)

Oskar's inventions culminate in the flick-picture book, an entry in Oskar's "Stuff That Has Happened to Me" diary, where the falling victim ascends back into the building, reversing the downward plunge into death.

As Oskar works through his trauma, searching for an elusive individual named "Black" and a locked room, both of which might be located anywhere

in the city, Foer demonstrates his struggle to integrate and understand the reality of the attacks.¹⁰ Oskar's narrative is deliberately non-realistic because the self-described politically-engaged Foer is experimenting in the necessary revision of narrative realism demanded by the attacks. Furthermore, Foer confronts the thorny issue of the difficulty and the failure of language and words in the face of the visual, the loss of words in the event of great trauma. In the letters of Thomas Schell Sr., (who has witnessed the bombing of Dresden) to his dead son, Thomas, the father of Oskar, words are never adequate: "There won't be enough pages in this book for me to tell you what I need to tell you, I could write smaller, I could slice the pages down their edges to make two pages, I could write over my own writing, but then what?" (*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* 276). Thomas, we learn, is himself the victim of a terrible trauma. A survivor of the bombing of Dresden, he has lost his first love, Anna, and stopped speaking. Unable or unwilling to communicate through spoken words, Thomas immerses himself in his art and communicates only with his notebook and through the tattooed words "YES" and "NO" on his palms. All his attempts to communicate with words are inadequate: they offer no solace, no joy and ultimately no comfort. He destroys his letters and indeed writes over them, thus making them impossible to read. It is only through his visual and tactile art (sculpture), that Thomas can express himself and intimate his grief, and he even uses the "YES" and "NO" on his hands to sculpt an image of his lost lover.

This combination of the visual with the written, for Foer, is a deliberate and positive method for articulating grief and trauma. He integrates it into the novel itself, presenting images of keys, a series of locked doors, photographs of New York City, pictures of people and places that Oskar meets along his journey. Each picture, a page from Oskar's book of "Stuff That Has Happened to Me," punctuates the narrative at a moment of emotional crisis in the young protagonist, a moment of fear, of loneliness or at the point of a painful memory. By combining the visual and the written, Foer succeeds in offering an altered form of realism for the post-9/11 cultural landscape.¹¹

10. The search for Black and the locked room in the city of New York is clearly homage to Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* (1987).

11. Indeed, Jonathan Safran Foer's method of combining the visual and the written here moves away from the tension DeLillo had seen between them in *Mao II*. Where DeLillo presented the two mediums as locked in a kind of power struggle, Foer (not unlike Art Spiegelman in his 2004 book *In the Shadow of No Towers*) presents their entanglement as potentially redemptive and a new aesthetic way in which to venture close to so profound and so communal a subject.

He, along with DeLillo and the other writers discussed herein, recognises the need to adapt literary realism to describe and represent a new world order in which, thanks to the omnipresence of the media, the boundaries between what is real and what is unreal are no longer clear.

For the likes of Schwartz, Shute, Davis, Homes and Ronell, whose stories harness the raw emotion incurred by the attacks, language seems redundant in the face of terror and the televisual spectacle. Words alone cannot unfurl the knot of grief nor can they adequately compete with images of mass devastation. Their stories, therefore, in their groping sense of confusion offer an aesthetic of rawness, as outlined by Alkalay-Gut and Lea. However, as Žižek reminds us, the events of September 11 engendered a new reality, a reality which was so close and so familiar it was “unreal.” When reality becomes a nightmare, realism itself falls apart. And in this context, it is the textual combination of the literary and the visual that might just come closest to capturing the terrible trauma of September 11th, 2001.

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