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Forging New Strategies of Representation in Times of Terror: Visuality and Intermediality in Post-9/11 novels of DeLilo and Foer

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Abstract:

In the classical Trauma Theory propounded by Cathy Caruth, trauma by definition eludes conscious psychic registration and recall. Using this precept as a springboard, the present paper seeks a critical engagement with the means by which the formal structures of artistic representations get impacted and metamorphosed by the "unsayability" and "unpossessibility" of trauma. The immediate impact of 9/11 on literary discourse was a perceived "lack" in the powers of the written word when juxtaposed against the visual imprint of the scorching celluloid images that were etched on the national imaginary. The attempt to "possess" 9/11 led to the rise of a new enterprise of "form" in the post 9/11 representations marked by visuality, intermediality and genric hybridity. This is recorded in the rise of such hybrid forms like the 'novel-album', the 'graphic novel' and the 'essay-memoir.' The paper explores how Don DeLilo in *Falling Man* and Jonathan Safran Foer in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* endeavour to transcend the perceived inadequacy of language by harnessing other para-textual resources to augment the polyphonic resonances of the text and in effect transmuting them into layered palimpsests.

Keywords:

Trauma, "lack", visuality, generic hybridity, intermediality, para-textual resources, DeLillo, Foer. Palimpsest

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1. Is the "word" haunted by a lack?

Perhaps what is central to the event we call 9/11, the global witnessing, the shared vicarious experience and the ultimate worldwide consumption of 9/11 is the visual spectacle of the plane hitting the North Tower, the bellowing smoke and the eventual collapse of the twin towers all watched in real time. Indeed it has been termed as a "global super-production" (Virilio 68) unfolding in front of a global "benumbed witness" (Borradori 28) in which "terrorists, with comparatively meagre resources, were able to create an astonishingly potent visual symbol that would go on to be endlessly repeated" (Randall 5). Terrorism has often invited analogies with literature for both have a definitional feature of penetrating into the private sphere. In this context, 9/11 has been successful in possessing and re-orienting the lives, imagination and emotional responses of an entire generation. Interestingly in some ways literature too aims to achieve something akin to this, namely penetrate the private sphere of human beings and attempt to possess something that may be initially written off as "unpossessable." Herein lies the connection between 9/11 and literature. However the difference lies in the fact that if 9/11 has invaded the private sphere in ways inimical, literature must aim for a palliative entry. For Kristiaan Versluys 9/11 "is ultimately a semiotic event, involving the total breakdown of all meaning-making systems" (2). In his essay, "There's No Backhand to This" James Berger declares: "Nothing adequate,

nothing corresponding in language could stand for it" (54). For Jenny Edkins, 9/11 is a traumatic event that is "outside the bounds of language, outside the worlds we have made for ourselves" ("The Absence of Meaning"). In "The Spirit of Terrorism" Jean Baudrillard writes "The whole play of history and power is disrupted by this event, but so too, are the conditions of analysis" (4). Noting the semantic slipperiness of 9/11 or September 11 Derrida goes on to say "we do not know what it is and so do not know how to describe, identify, and even name it" (qtd. in Borradori, 93-94).

What comes forth in unambiguous terms is that 9/11 poses a kind of crisis for language. As Richard Gray puts it "If there was one thing writers agreed about in response to 9/11. It was the failure of language; the terrorist attacks made the tools of their trade seem absurd" (1). Martin Amis claimed that "after a couple of hours at their desks, on September 12 2001, all the writers on the earth were reluctantly considering a change of occupation" (qtd. in Mishra) while Ian McEwan claimed in a later interview to have found it "wearisome to confront invented characters" (qtd. in Mishra). Indeed a lack haunts the written word in the post 9/11 era as indicated by a useful litany of questions posed by Martin Randall in his book *9/11 and the Literature of Terror*: "How can a writer put into words what had already been watched by millions? What could language add to those images that they already don't articulate? Indeed why write at all given the staggering enormity of the visual symbolism?" (5) In an interview given in *New York Times* in the summer of 2005 V.S. Naipaul postulated that the novel was essentially dead and suggested that non-fiction was much better equipped to "capture the complexities of today's world" (Donadio). Naipaul expresses his doubt as to whether "a fictional representation of 9/11 can be of any social value in the post -9/11 era" (Schultermandl, " Art Imitating Life?" 39). Even before Naipaul, Frederic Beigbeder in his novel *Windows on the World* had taken up this issue. In a metafictional novel whose chapters are titled against the minutes spent in a restaurant in the North Tower we are told, "Since September 11, 2001, reality has not only outstripped fiction, it's destroying it. It's impossible to write about this subject, and yet impossible to write about anything else. Nothing else touches us"(8). Hence 9/11 needs to be possessed, converted into narrative memory, its discursive potential demystified. This is where the lack that apparently haunts the word is made good. As David Simpson suggests, "[W]e who are elite, specialized readers are supposed to confirm our own patience and caution by discovering in the novel something we cannot find in politics or television, something we can think of as a truth" ("Telling It Like It Isn't" 213). The saturation of media images need to be contextualised, its iconic status needs to be demythologised, its ahistoricity contested. There is a "globalised need to comprehend, to explain, and to restore" (Versluys 4). This is where literature and by extension other mediums of representation like cinema play their role.

However if not "possessing" 9/11 is not an option as Beigbeder says and if fiction alone may not rise to the demands of the "complex realities of today's world" as Naipaul says, what new strategies of representation need to be forged? In other words does a limit event like 9/11 that "shatters the symbolic resources of culture" (Versluys 1) reshape and reconfigure the modes of representation in an effort to do justice to the task of "possessing" it and making meaning out of it? In the Introduction to *Portraying 9/11: Essays on Representations in Comics, Literature, Film and Theatre* Veronique Bragard *et al* raise the pertinent question of form: "How is form transformed by trauma?...Can we critically examine the 9/11 events beyond the boundaries of genres?" (6) Indeed how do representations in general and fiction in particular reconfigure their structural generic and other formal features to "possess" an event of such a magnitude? Voicing his scepticism of fictional realism as the most effective mode of accommodating the

"rupture" of 9/11 Martin Randall suggests that "more hybrid forms—the graphic novel, the essay/memoir, the film-poem, conceptual art—are better suited to represent the attacks" (63). The sections that follow engage with two major strategies that evolved to circumvent the failure of language and by extension representational media following the attacks of September 11. These include the use of intermediality and paratexuality in novels along with an overt investment in what is popularly called the "visual turn" in novels,

2 Intermedial References and the Visual Turn

The highly visual mass media narrative that constructed 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror, bespeaks of the mediated nature of 9/11. Consequently, a study of the literature that crystallised around 9/11 must take cognizance of the relationship between fictionality and visuality and by extension intermediality. Intermediality is understood as "the interplay between different media forms: photography, film and the written word" (Baelo-Allué, "Depiction" 186). Indeed many 9/11 novels incorporate handwritten pages, pictures, photographs and have a general tendency to include ekphrastic descriptions of the media disseminated images of the 9/11. The visual images that are so minutely described have become a part of the American visual literacy, "so much so they serve as emblems of what 9/11 has come to signify in the popular imaginary" (Schultermandl, "Art Imitating Life?" 41). This visual literacy is something that fiction cannot dismiss and hence fiction forges a strategy of intermediality along with a distinct visual turn.

3. *Falling Man*

Don DeLillo's 9/11 novel *Falling Man* attests to the proximity of the visual as opposed to the purely narrative in the very opening paragraph:

It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night. He was walking north through rubble and mud and there were people running past holding towels to their faces or jackets over their heads. They had handkerchiefs pressed to their mouths. They had shoes in their hands, a woman with a shoe in each hand, running past him. They ran and fell, some of them, confused and ungainly, with debris coming down around them, and there were people taking shelter under cars (1).

Smoke and ash, office paper flashing past, shoes discarded in the street, paper cups: the focus is on the visual aspects that surface and recede from view within seconds in a phantasmagorical disarray. The lack of visual continuity is an extension of a traumatic memory that cannot hold on to anything but remains unfixed, restless and repetitive. However, the most significant visual trope that the novel employs is in the title of the novel itself. The title *Falling Man* alludes to an acutely disturbing photograph of one of the 9/11 "jumpers" taken by Richard Drew, an Associated Press photographer. His arms are at his side and his left leg is seen bent at the knee and his white shirt is fluttering free of his black pants. The man in the photograph by Drew is perfectly vertical in consonance with the striped vertical towers that form his backdrop. There is a deathly geometric balance achieved in the picture as the figure of the man in free fall splits his backdrop: his left being the North Tower, while his right is the South Tower. The aesthetic symmetrical balance achieved only reinforces the horror and despair of a world gone awry and asymmetric, a world where desperation drives people to jump out of skyscrapers with certain death staring them in the face.

However, the photograph that Richard Drew took was published only once in the American newspapers. Every effort was made to banish it from the cultural memory of

9/11 manifestly because it was disrespectful to the dead. In an article published in the *Esquire*, the journalist Tom Junod resuscitates this picture from the amnesia of national self censorship and gives it the name that later DeLillo uses as the title for his novel, *Falling Man*. Junod goes on to reason that "the spectacle of doomed people jumping from the uppers floors of the World Trade Center resisted redemption" ("The Falling Man") and therefore the picture struck a discordant note in the discourses of the triumphant national spirit that was politically manufactured and disseminated by the media. In the words of Susan Faludi: "By September 12, our culture was already reworking a national tragedy into a national fantasy of virtuous might and triumph" (289). Indeed the media pre-empted mourning, introspection and soul searching on a national level by focusing on anger, injury and the ultimate triumph of the nation's spirit. Traumatic events when codified become fertile grounds for ideological insemination. Hence, the media was partial to other more hopeful images, such as the picture taken by Thomas E. Franklin, which shows three fire fighters at ground zero raising the U.S. flag: it came to represent the triumphant resilience of the unvanquished American spirit and in this narrative the picture of the falling man simply did not fit in.

Hence the title of DeLillo's novel resonates with the myriad discourses that have crystallised around this visual trope of the falling man: Drew's photograph, the outrage it created, its withdrawal from circulation in mainstream journalism and the ideological framings that caused this to happen. The absence of the Drew photograph and the politics of its erasure links up to other photographs which were fore grounded and the attendant politics of such hyper-visibility. In fine DeLillo chooses an image of irredeemable death as the iconic visual moment that gets reiterated in his novel and in choosing to do so "his novel provides a counter discourse to the prevailing nationalist interpretations" (Versluys 23). In the *Falling Man* the performance artist, David Janiak re-enacts the image of the "Falling Man" and shocks New Yorkers with his reckless jumps from bridges and buildings. In so far as Janiak takes a similar body posture to the man in Drew's photo he in essence creates a sense of déjà vu. Lianne, one of the protagonist in the *Falling Man* describes his performance thus:

She'd heard of him, a performance artist known as Falling Man. He'd appeared several times in the last week, unannounced, in various parts of the city, suspended from one or the other structure, always upside down, wearing a suit, a tie and dress shoes. He brought it back of course, those stark moments in the burning towers when people fell or were forced to jump. (33)

DeLillo cuts through the resources of language and harnesses the metaphoric potential of the visual that lies in the national imaginary. No wonder then that the audience is "outraged at the spectacle, the puppetry of human desperation" for the "single falling figure (that) trails a collective dread" (33). On a symbolic level therefore DeLillo uses the visual to serve as a commentary on 9/11. Like Lianne, Keith too is haunted by a visual image, that of a "shirt come down out of the sky. He walked and saw it fall, arms waving like nothing in his life" (246). Three years after Lianne first witnesses the performative Falling Man, she recognises the link between David Janiac and the Drew photograph mediated through her consciousness:

She tried to connect this man to the moment when she'd stood beneath the elevated tracks, nearly three years ago, watching someone prepare to fall from the maintenance platform as the train went past. There were no photographs of that fall. She was the photograph, the photosensitive surface. That nameless body coming down, this was hers to record and absorb (223).

What Lianne realises now is that "through her role as audience, she participates in the discursive impact of his performance as a social commentary on 9/11" (Schultermandl, " Art Imitating Life?" 50). It is her role as spectator/observer that enriches the performance and makes it explode with multiple significations. The point to be noted however is that the visual turn that underscores the trope of the "falling man" opens up layers of significations . The polyphonic possibilities of the novel are unleashed through a carefully orchestrated investment in the domain of the visual.

4. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*

While DeLillo attempted a textual palimpsest by harnessing the visual through the narrative, Jonathan Safran Foer was more overtly revolutionary in his use of the visual and intermedial resources in his novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. He debunks the notion that photographs, pictures, drawings, doodles, unconventional spacings between words and other such typographical unorthodoxy belong to the realm of children's fiction. Through the life of the protagonist who is a nine year old, precocious child named Oskar Schell the novel attempts to record both the "acting out" and "working through" of the trauma of 9/11. Oskar is traumatized by the death of his father on September 11 at the World Trade Center. In an effort to make sense of this loss he starts a quest for the lock of a key he finds inadvertently at the bottom of a vase convincing himself that this was his father's way of sending him clues about what really transpired. Oskar's narrative is interwoven with that of his grandparents who lost their entire family to the Allied bombing of Dresden in the Second World War in 1945. The two traumas of 9/11 and the Second World War converge and bleed into one another over the three generations. Trauma is defined as a confrontation with an event that constitutes a breach in understanding and experience. In other words a traumatic event achieves at best a fractured assimilation into the psyche: never fully registered at the moment of occurrence. Hence it fractures and disrupts the temporal flow leading to flashbacks, numbness, nightmares and hallucinations. Foer's meta-textual representations indicates this inability to "speak the unspeakable," given the psychic/temporal disruption occasioned by trauma. Given this inability to speak, coupled with the compulsion to record results in the innovative narrative/visual/typographic experience that *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* turns out to be.

The novel opens with three pictures that set an ominous mood for the reader. These three pictures are a) birds in flight but the perspective is blurred, b) the keyhole of a door lock with a beautiful doorknob made of crystal, and c) the front of an apartment showing numerous windows and a fire escape along with a shadowy figure looking out from behind the middle left window. Except for the picture of the birds whose blurred motion is analogous to what may have been the motion of the "jumpers" from the Twin Towers the immediate implication of the pictures remain a mystery. However these pictures recur later in the novel again (pages 166-67, 115 and 103 respectively) bringing back the full significance of the visual embedded into the narrative. For instance the door knob is associated with the burning doorknob that singes Grandpa's hands after the Dresden firebombing and is imprinted forever in his memory. A second set of photographs are found in pages 53 through 67 forming the visual content of Oskar's scrapbook, "Stuff that Happened to Me." Among others these photographs include an image of the physicist Stephen Hawking, another one of Hamlet enacting what is popularly known as the "Grave digging scene," a photograph of a rack of hundreds of keys, pictures of Oskar's fingerprints and of course the famous Richard Drew photograph of the "Falling Man." The intensely personal nature of a scrapbook

need not be over emphasised for "a scrapbook is meta-textual collection of fragmentary mementos used or the preservation of personal artifacts to reinforce memories…where each element conveys a unique connection to a specific experience" (Atchison 107). The final set of photographs is found at the end of the novel constituting a kind of a flipbook wherein the descent of the falling man is reversed. In the last 14 pages of the novel an illusion of motion is activated wherein the falling man escapes imminent death by moving upwards as it were till he is once again secure, once again revisits life and safety.

Apart from the numerous pictures and doodles, the novel also makes innovative use of spacings and blank spaces on the page foregrounding the materiality of the representation. For nine consecutive pages (pages 19 to 27), there is only one statement on each page spoken by Grandpa, a victim of aphasia. The reverse effect is introduced later in the novel (pages 281 to 284) where the words and spaces drift together resulting in a steady overlap. The gradual illegibility of the text thus obtained results in a black page staring the reader on page 284 defiantly resisting any attempt to wrest meaning out of it. Nor is Foer shy of using a totally blank page when the characters are too overwhelmed for words (pages 121-23). Business card and file cards are inserted as photographs within the text (pages 4, 99, 158-59, 286) when the characters look at them.

Foer's use of multimediality and meta-textual representative strategies have come to be looked upon as colourful distractions used by an adolescent, a sort of a novelistic gimmickry. Even John Updike while reviewing the book in *The New Yorker* wrote, "[T]he book's hyperactive visual surface covers up a certain hollow monotony in [the novel's] verbal drama" ("Mixed Messages"). Perhaps the most trenchant criticism came from Michel Faber. He calls the novel

a triumph of evasion, enhanced with dozens of otiose photographs, rainbow colours and typographical devices, whose net effect is to distract the reader (and Foer) from harsh truths. It promises to take you to Ground Zero, but helplessly detours towards the Land of Oz, spending most of its time journeying through the Neverlands in between ("A Tower of Babble").

Such a scathing criticism only serves to discover that the critic has missed the author's intention in using multimediality to cut through the knot of traumatic rupture and achieve immediacy on one hand and what Barthes calls *l'effet de reel* or "The Reality Effect" on the other. Marianne Hirsch argues that photography "best captures the trauma and loss associated with September 2001— the sense of monumental, irrevocable change that we, as a culture, feel we have experienced" ("The Day Time Stopped"). In an interview with Alden Mudge, Foer stoutly defended his use of meta-texts within the body of his narrative calling it a conscious decision with a purpose:

I […] think using images makes sense for this particular book […] because September 11 was the most visually documented event in human history. When we think of those events we remember certain images—planes going into the building, people falling, the towers collapsing. That's how we experience it; that's how we remember it. And I want to be true to that experience. ("Up Close and Personal")

In essence the novel is an engagement with the traumatised psyche of a nine year old and his grandparents who relive the old trauma when faced with the new one. Hence the visual diary of Oskar, "Stuff that happened to Me" is a means of trying to possess a traumatic event that defies the meaning making resources of logical grammatical language. Foer offers the reader a peek into the mind of the boy thereby achieving an

amazing immediacy and empathetic bonding between the reader and the character. All that he cannot express in words is collected in the form of images and we as readers look over Oskar's shoulders as it were seeing what he sees, bonding with him at the deepest level for we are an empathetic party to all his fears, anxieties, guilt and insecurities.

Quite often, there is a temporal disjunction between the pictures and its related verbal narrative. This is a formalist way of fleshing out the disruptive capacity of trauma. As Elisabeth Siegel observes, "The separation of verbal and visual representations of the same experience disrupts the narrative unity and requires greater attention from the readers in order to re-establish their connections and deduce the meaning of the images…They show that the meaning of the past experiences is not stable but created anew with each additional piece of information in an interplay of various media" (3). Indeed, these self-reflexive ruptures draw attention to the materiality of the representation whereby the reader is invited to take part in the meaning making process. The meta-text attempts to cut through the inadequacy/limitation of the written word while at the same time drawing attention to the status of the text as an artefact "causing us to rethink our perceptions of fiction and reality" (Atchison 108). To that extent *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* becomes a "readerly" text *a la* Barthes. Both absences and excesses in the text invite readers to make meaning by filling in the gaps. Todd Atchison goes on to observe, "The author shows the paradox of witnessing via discourse by revealing the artifice while simultaneously co-creating the experience (through witness and audience, writer and reader) in order to make meaning" (105). This is significant for 9/11 is an ever expanding field of signifiers and hence defies monolithic appropriations and unproblematic closure. Hence the use of visual narratives by Foer provides structural complexity as well as semiotic expansion leaving the text open for multi-faceted engagements. A totalizing grand narrative of 9/11 is pre-empted by foregrounding a multiplicity of viewpoints. For instance, between page 208 and 216, we are given one of Grandpa's letters accompanied by a large number of corrections marks. We are told that this kind of correction was something of a habit with Oskar's father and he often marked newspapers with red circles (10). Interestingly, the corrections initially follow the rules of punctuation and spellings but soon become unpredictable and erratic. In pages 214-15, large sections of the letter are marked out without any obvious fault.

Reading this as a substitute for the interaction that never transpired between the son and the deserter father, the unpredictable objections of the son to larger passages from the father's letter translates into grief, anger and even a sense of betrayal. The son's upset feelings about the father bleeds into the materiality of the text to be retrieved by the reader. Hence, the visual and self-reflexive materiality of the text "interactively invites the reader's response into their multiple epistemological layers and thus interfere with any linear or hierarchical construction of meaning" (Däwes 534).

The last series of photographs in the novel consists of 14 pictures which together form a flipbook. Originally, it must have depicted the descent of one of the "jumpers" to his death but Oskar reverses the arrangement of the pictures. Hence in effect the man seems to be flying upwards. This is Oskar's fantasy: that the man evaded death and floated up to life and safety. Significantly, the novel ends with the sentence: "We would have been safe."

When I flipped through them, it looked like the man was floating up through the sky. And if I'd had more pictures, he would've flown through a window back into the building, and the smoke would've poured into a hole that the plane was about to come

out of… the plane would've flown backward away from him, all the way to Boston… We would have been safe. (325-26)

Hence the flipbook mirrors the verbal narrative of Oskar who returns to safe time through the reverse motion that it affords. This is indeed an indication of unresolved trauma, a trauma that is not "worked through." However true to the polyphonic possibilities afforded by the intermedial and meta-textual content, the

flipbook looks back to the controversy and withholding of the photograph of the "falling man" taken by Drew. It may be read as an aslant commentary on the way the centres of power determine how public memory needs to be shaped to fulfil the agenda of the State. Indeed such a reading is supported by the fact that Oskar has to go to a Portuguese website to view pictures related to 9/11:

I found a bunch of videos on the Internet of bodies falling. They were on a Portuguese site, where there was all sorts of stuff they weren't showing here, even though it happened here. Whenever I want to try to learn about how Dad died, I have to go to a translator program and find out how to say things in different languages, like 'September' which is 'Wrzesien,' … Then I Google those words. It makes me incredibly angry that people all over the world can know things that I can't, because it happened here and happened to me, so shouldn't it be mine? (256)

Hence, the use of visual content in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* enhances the depth of the verbal narrative by creating a sense of immediacy and by acting as evidences to intensify the "reality effect". Further it invites the participation of the reader in deciphering the meaning of the text by foregrounding the materiality of the text while also subverting the operation of power in the lives of ordinary people by bringing back to circulation ideas and images that were occluded and erased from public memory.

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