

The Depiction of 9/11 in Literature

The Role of Images and Intermedial References

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The 9/11 terrorist attack on the United States can be considered a cultural trauma and an intermedial phenomenon. The attack has become one of the most represented disasters in history since it produced an unprecedented visual impact on those around the world who watched the second plane crash into the South Tower live on television. That 9/11 was a media event is inextricably linked to the way we remember the attacks and the way we coped with them when they took place. Many spectators watched the same loop of video footage and images over and over during the days following the attacks and used the TV screen as a protective shield against the reality they perceived. In an attempt to make sense of the unfolding trauma, and due to the ubiquity of similar disasters in U.S. cinema, many people compared the events with a Hollywood disaster movie;¹ the suicide attackers were likened to actors in a global superproduction.² Such views underlined the seemingly unreal nature of the events and the way they shattered our sense of reality.

Maybe because the attacks seemed unreal, media reports on them used some of the conventions of fiction. Andrew O'Hagan in the *New York Review of Books* even claimed that September 11 offered "a few hours when American novelists could only sit at home while journalism taught them fierce lessons in multivocality, point of view, the structure of plot, interior monologue, the pressure of history, the force of silence, and the uncanny. Actuality showed its own naked art that day."³ For O'Hagan it seems that what made journalism so powerful those days was the way it appropriated many of the conventions of fiction (plot, point of view, interior mono-

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logue, etc.). The *9/11 Commission Report*, the official report on the events leading up to the September 11 attacks, also drew on fictional resources.⁴ Ben Yagoda found the book exemplary because of its literary style and its allegiance to the truth. He liked some of its literary techniques, such as its starting in medias res, and its use of foreshadowing in some sentences. It tells two parallel stories: that of Islamic fundamentalists and that of the U.S. government's attempt to deal with the threat. For Yagoda it is like a "cinematic structure cutting back and forth between the two narratives."⁵ Other reviewers also praised the book for the way it reads like a novel and for being "an improbable literary triumph."⁶ A graphic adaptation of the report in 2006 made use of the agile and colourful style of superhero comics: it provides sound effects like "R-RUMBLE" when the South Tower collapses and "BLAMM!" when one of the hijacked planes crashes into the Pentagon.⁷ The graphic adaptation received much praise for being unexpectedly moving and for its capacity to build suspense.⁸ Also, "the captions pack a lot of punch."⁹ The use of techniques coming from fiction thus elicited praise rather than rejection.

Ironically enough, when literature tried to draw from real images of 9/11 and from the language of journalism, many reviewers considered the move disrespectful and inappropriate. Maybe because reality had resembled fiction too much, and because some films, TV series, video games, and books had imagined the attacks before they took place,¹⁰ the events of 9/11 did not seem to lend themselves to fictional adaptation at first. In fact, the representation of traumatic events in literature has proven a bone of contention for decades. Theodor Adorno's famous words come to mind: "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric."¹¹ In the aftermath of the events, several writers and journalists claimed that fiction had nothing to offer that journalism and the news could not provide. Four days after the tragedy, the writer Ian McEwan admitted that all he could do was "watch the television, read the papers, turn on the radio again," recognizing that "the derided profession of journalism can rise quite nobly, and with immense resource, to public tragedy."¹² Lynne Sharon Schwartz wrote two months after the catastrophe that it was too soon to go back to fictional stories: "We will do what is needed; we will write the next sentence. Only not yet, not here on the bleak brink of November."¹³ Jay McInerney met his fellow writer Bret Easton Ellis on September 11, 2001, and both agreed that they could not go back to the novels they were writing (set in New York) and were glad they did not have a book coming out that month, since nobody now showed any interest in fiction.¹⁴

Despite these initial misgivings, all these authors ended up writing their own 9/11 novels: McEwan wrote *Saturday* (2005), Schwartz *The Writing on the Wall* (2005), and McInerney *The Good Life* (2006). Ten years after the attacks, 9/11 fiction has become a genre in itself. Novels like Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows on the World* (2004), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), and Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) exemplify how literature has chosen to com-

bine real and fictional elements with a series of intermedial references in the depiction of 9/11. I here understand intermediality as the interplay between different media forms: photography, film, and the written word combine in novels that draw both from reality and from fiction.¹⁵ Beigbeder, Foer, and DeLillo do not ignore the mediated nature of 9/11 but display it through the incorporation of other media in their fiction, which renders the representation of the trauma more effectively.

Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows on the World* (2004)

In this book we find many examples of intermediality and the blurring of reality and fiction. A quick look at the acknowledgments section reveals how the author has drawn from different media: songs, photos, newspaper articles, eyewitness accounts, nonfiction, literature, film, and poetry. The book consists of short chapters that represent one minute each from 8:30 to 10:29 a.m., the time of the North Tower's collapse on September, 11. Two narratives interlock: one about Carthew Yorston, the other about Frédéric Beigbeder. Yorston is a Texan real estate agent who is having breakfast with his two young sons at the Windows on the World restaurant atop the North Tower. Carthew mostly narrates these chapters, but his sons, nine-year-old Jerry and seven-year-old David, also contribute as they struggle to survive and escape the tower. Yet the novel is not just a fictional account of what might have happened to the people trapped in the Windows on the World restaurant. It is also narrated by a French author called Beigbeder who is writing from the Ciel de Paris restaurant atop the Montparnasse tower in Paris and who inserts his own experiences and reflections into the novel. These chapters combine autobiographical elements, facts about September 11, and comments on what is happening to the fictional Texan family in the North Tower. They undermine the fictional chapters: as the narrator Beigbeder puts it in the opening sentence, "You know how it ends: everybody dies."¹⁶

This twofold narrative is also visually reflected in a media combination—the blend of two medial forms of articulation that are present in their own materiality—that we find in the final chapter of the novel.¹⁷ There are two columns made up of words that reproduce both the shape of the twin towers and of newspaper columns. Thus, the role of journalism on 9/11 is visually underlined. Besides, Beigbeder reconstructs the towers through words: through his fictional account of the events and through his attempt to speak the unspeakable. This chapter also mixes image (the shape of the towers), media (the journal columns), and literature (the author's written thoughts and personal reflections on the events). With his narration Beigbeder symbolically reconstructs the towers and integrates them in our mind.

Another instance of media combination is the insertion of real photographs into the narrative. Two of them were taken at Montparnasse cemetery in Paris. In one of them we see an effigy of Charles Baudelaire in a thoughtful position. In the other we see the photo of what he seems to be looking at: the Tour Montparnasse

and a big cross that, given the angle, looks like the doomed twin towers. These photos represent Beigbeder's way of approaching the subject: from his position as a writer in the Montparnasse tower in Paris he reflects on the effects of the collapse of the twin towers in New York. The other photograph is equally symbolic and works as an ironic comment on the use of good and evil as absolute terms. Beigbeder took it in the United Nations sculpture garden and it shows a statue of St. George slaying a dragon, which, in the distance, looks like the fuselage of an airplane. It is a monument against war entitled "Good defeats Evil" and was made with the remnants of a U.S. and a Soviet missile. The photograph works as an ironic comment on the use of good and evil as absolute terms, since at the time in the United Nations the members of the Security Council were voting on a resolution about the war in Iraq. These media combinations depend on the image but also on their written context to make full sense.

Apart from these media combinations, the work also includes many intermedial references, that is, references to other media by imitating their techniques.¹⁸ As happened on 9/11, characters use references to disaster movies to make sense of the attacks. Carthew tries to convince his sons that they are merely seeing a new attraction like the ones in theme parks, with special effects, holograms, and actors. Beigbeder, the narrator, comments on the similarities with Hollywood films; he even says that the victims' suffering lasted 102 minutes, the same as the average Hollywood film and the same as the number of chapters in the book. According to the narrator Beigbeder, the dust cloud produced after the collapse of the towers seemed taken from disaster movies like *The Blob*, *Godzilla*, *Independence Day*, *Armageddon*, *Die Hard 2*, or *Deep Impact*.¹⁹

A *New York Times* article and a collection of eyewitness accounts serve as the basis for Beigbeder's reconstruction of the events.²⁰ In fact, the narrator Beigbeder quotes real survivors and rescue workers and mentions the names and stories of actual people. However, it is through fiction that readers begin to understand what happened those final hours. Well into the novel the narrator Beigbeder claims that art is a window on the world and that it constitutes the most appropriate means to face traumatic events:²¹ "Nowadays, books must go where television does not. Show the invisible, speak the unspeakable."²² Beigbeder goes where the media could not go by combining images from that very media with the power of fiction and the imagination.

Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005)

Foer's novel tells the story of Oskar Schell, a nine-year-old boy traumatized by his father's death in the World Trade Center. When he finds an unknown key in his father's closet, he starts a quest to find the lock it opens, hoping to find out more about his father and about how he died. His story intermingles with that of his grandparents who survived the Allied firebombing of Dresden in 1945. Just as *Win-*

dows on the World has two narrative pillars (Carthew's and Beigbeder's stories) *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* combines two traumas: 9/11 and World War II. In literature, trauma narratives tend to depart from linear sequence and make use of experimental devices to reflect the unsettling experience. Stylistically there are visual images, textual gaps, repetitions, and shifting viewpoints as readers are made to feel the disorienting positions of characters.²³ Images prove especially important in the trauma process since to be traumatized is to be possessed by an image or an event not assimilated or understood at the time.²⁴ Precisely because the experience cannot be assimilated and put into words when it takes place, it is arranged on an iconic level and returns in the form of hallucinations, nightmares, and images that haunt the traumatized person.²⁵ Thus a traumatic experience is reenacted belatedly through a series of images that cannot be assimilated, preventing the linguistic retrieval.

Since *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* constitutes a narrative of trauma, images play a very important role: there are photographs inserted into the narrative, changes in typography, and blank pages. Some reviewers did not receive well the graphic aspect of the novel, considering these images senseless gimmicks or,²⁶ worse, an exploitation of trauma.²⁷ Even though the graphic adaptation of *The 9/11 Commission Report* did not stir up controversy, when fiction drew from images, the act was curiously considered exploitative and unnecessary. In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* images are necessary as insights into Oskar's traumatized mind. Different photos of locks and doorknobs that show Oskar's need to "unlock" his own trauma represent his quest.

In the aftermath of 9/11, images played a double role. They were used to "act out" the collective trauma, which according to the historian Dominick LaCapra is the tendency to relive or reenact the past through flashbacks, nightmares, and compulsively repeated words and images. Over time, these images also became a way to "work through" the trauma, a means to gain critical distance from the events.²⁸ Therefore, images can both act out trauma through repetition and also work through it by visually mediating the trauma. Oskar acts out his trauma through his scrapbook, which he calls "Stuff That Happened to Me" and which is made of random images that have impressed him and that he remembers. Among the fourteen images, we find a collection of keys, two turtles mating, and a man falling from the World Trade Center. This last image, with slight variations, returns throughout the book. It represents the "unspeakable" for Oskar, since, even though he does not comment on it, it keeps returning belatedly through the flashbacks in his mind. This image is counterbalanced with other more hopeful ones like a flock of birds flying or a cat jumping.

The novel ends with a flip book made of images of that same man falling, but in reverse sequence; he seems to be falling upward. These images are directly linked to the last paragraphs in the novel in which Oskar finally confronts the photo of the

falling man, working through his trauma and wondering if that man might have been his father. In the same way as we can flip those final pages in the novel and make the falling man return to the window, Oskar imagines time going backward:

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. Dad would've left his message backward, until the machine was empty, and the plane would've flown backward away from him, all the way to Boston. . . . We would have been safe.²⁹

Just as Beigbeder reconstructs the twin towers visually through the two newspaper-like columns in his "10:28" chapter, Foer returns to a safer time with the help of the flip book. By combining fiction and real images Foer creates an illusion that can help us work through trauma.

Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007)

Falling Man tells the story of Keith Neudecker, a lawyer who barely escapes from the twin towers on 9/11 and who returns in shock to the apartment he used to share with his son Justin and estranged wife Lianne. Although they are all traumatized, they try to resume their life together. Unlike *Windows on the World* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, this novel has no images actually inserted into it, but images do play an important role as an expressive means. After seeing many photographs and videos of the events of September 11, 2001, DeLillo constructed the initial pages from well-known images of 9/11:

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.³⁰

Smoke and ash, office paper flashing past, shoes discarded in the street, paper cups: the focus is on the visual, not on verbal narrative, much in the way of how traumatic memory works.

Keith's own description seems taken from an Associated Press photograph of a man covered in ash: "He wore a suit and carried a briefcase. There was glass in his hair and face, marbled bolts of blood and light."³¹ Even Hammad, one of the terrorists, watches TV in a bar near the flight school that he attends and likes "to imagine himself appearing on the screen, a videotaped figure walking through the gatelike detector on his way to the plane."³² This is another image we are all familiar with.



Abdulaziz Alomari and Mohamed Atta passing through security in the Portland, Maine, airport before 6 a.m. on September 11, 2001. Source: United States District Court Eastern District of Virginia

The falling man of the title seems to reference to another well-known Associated Press photograph of a man falling from one of the towers upside down, one knee bent.³³ Since the novel reenacts the workings of a traumatized mind, that image cannot be processed and cannot be integrated with other experiences. Thus the falling man in the fictional world of the novel actually refers to the safer, substitute image of a performance artist who, with the help of a harness, suspends himself upside down. This seems inspired by the staged jumps that the artist Kerry Skarbakka made from the roof of Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art on June 14, 2005. In the same way as people rejected Skarbakka's performance because it caused the return, belatedly, of the image of people jumping to their death on 9/11, in the fictional world of the novel Lianne feels it causes the return of her father's suicide.

Keith is also haunted by an image of a shirt coming down from the towers that he remembers seeing during his escape on 9/11. He cannot put into words what happened to him, but the image of the shirt keeps reappearing in his mind. As the photographs of cats and birds in Foer's book stood in for those of falling people, the white shirt in DeLillo's novel serves a similar function. Trauma is coped with

through disassociation. At the end of the novel we finally learn what Keith witnessed that day, and we realize what the white shirt stands for: “He could not stop seeing it, twenty feet away, an instant of something sideways, going past the window, white shirt, hand up, falling before he saw it.”³⁴ Thus the integration of the image of the falling man is a necessary step for Keith to overcome 9/11, as it is for Lianne to deal with her father’s suicide.

Some reviewers claimed that DeLillo offered nothing that we had not already seen in the media. For example, in the *Washington Post*, Jonathan Yardley complained that the only emotions in the novel derived from pictures on television.³⁵ Yet it is the use of images we recognize that makes the narration especially powerful. At the beginning they are only loose images that return to haunt Keith; at the end they are integrated into the narrative of events, of what happened not just outside but inside the towers, where the cameras could not be.

Conclusion

In these three novels we can see the ways in which literature has drawn from different media to deal with one of the most mediated events in history. The use of newspaper columns, photographs, radio transcripts, phone messages, e-mails, and interviews with eyewitnesses in *Windows on the World*, the use of moving images—a flip book—and other images inserted into *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, and the references to well-known photographs of 9/11 in *Falling Man* all exemplify the importance of intermediality as an expressive means to approach a traumatic subject, to face the unspeakable and show it. Even though in the aftermath of 9/11 fiction was rejected as a suitable means for understanding the traumatic events, some authors rose to the challenge by drawing from other media and even using taboo images that had been hidden from the public. For example, the image of the falling man soon disappeared from the U.S. media because some critics felt its publication disrespectful to the dead (see Jaclyn Kirouac-Fram’s article in this issue). According to Kalí Tal, once traumatic events are codified, they turn into a weapon in the struggle for political power. Thus the status quo may silence some voices or hide some images to enforce its ideological message.³⁶ Since the image of the falling man represented the destiny of many victims, the media favored other more hopeful images, such as a photograph taken by Thomas E. Franklin showing three firefighters raising the U.S. flag at ground zero: it came to represent loyalty and resilience. Traumatic events can be rewritten until they become codified in a set of safe symbols. They may undergo a process of mythologization as a strategy to cope with trauma, and Franklin’s image turned something uncontrollable and frightening into a standardized narrative of patriotism. Literature recovered those images that had been hidden, those narratives that could only be imagined (like what happened inside the Windows on the World restaurant), and used them to emphasize the need to overcome our fears rather than hide them. Literature has the capacity to make us

face the unspeakable, to act out cultural traumas to work through them, mediating between our urge to know and our need to deny.

Notes

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1. Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism and Requiem for the Twin Towers*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 2002), 29; Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (New York: Verso, 2002), 16.
2. Paul Virilio, *Ground Zero*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 2002), 68.
3. Andrew O'Hagan, "Racing against Reality," *New York Review of Books*, June 28, 2007, www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2007/jun/28/racing-against-reality/.
4. *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States* (New York: Norton, 2004).
5. Ben Yagoda, "The 9/11 Commission Report: How a Government Committee Made a Piece of Literature," *Slate*, November 8, 2004, www.slate.com/id/2109277.
6. Richard A. Posner, "The 9/11 Report: A Dissent," *New York Times*, August 29, 2004.
7. Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colón, *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006).
8. Julia Keller, "Call It What You Will: New Sept. 11 Book Is Riveting," *Chicago Tribune*, September 20, 2006.
9. "The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation," *Kirkus Reviews*, July 15, 2006, www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/non-fiction/sid-jacobson/the-911-report/.
10. Some relevant examples would be Tom Clancy's novels *Debt of Honor* (1994) and *Executive Orders* (1996); the pilot episode of the TV series *The Lone Gunmen*; the free downloadable game called "Trade Center Defender"; Microsoft's Flight Simulator software; and films like *Turbulence* (dir Robert Butler, 1997), *Executive Decision* (dir Stuart Baird, 1996), and *The Siege* (dir Edward Zwick, 1998).
11. Adorno does not mean here that art cannot reflect a traumatic experience but that it has to do so through a new language that reflects the experience without minimizing it. Theodor Adorno, *Prisms* (1967; reprint, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 34.
12. Ian McEwan, "Only Love and Then Oblivion: Love Was All They Had to Set against Their Murderers," *Guardian*, September 15, 2001.
13. Lynne Sharon Schwartz, "Near November," in *110 Stories: New York Writers after September 11*, ed. Ulrich Baer (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 262.
14. Jay McInerney, "Brightness Falls," *Guardian*, September 15, 2001.
15. For the origins of the term see Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964; New York: McGraw Hill, 1987); and Raymond Williams, *Television Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Fontana, 1974). For more recent research on the connections between different media, see Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000); and Maddalena Pennacchia Punzi, *Literary Intermediality: The Transit of Literature through the Media Circuit* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2007).
16. Frédéric Beigbeder, *Windows on the World*, trans. Frank Wynne (London: Harper Perennial, 2004), 1.

17. See Irina O. Rajewsky, "Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality," *Intermedialités*, no. 6 (2005): 51–52.
18. *Ibid.*, 52.
19. Beigbeder, *Windows on the World*, 1. References are to *The Blob* (dir. Irvin S. Yeaworth Jr., 1958), *Godzilla* (any of several versions), *Independence Day* (dir. Roland Emmerich, 1996), *Armageddon* (dir. Michael Bay, 1998), *Die Hard 2* (dir. Renny Harlin, 1990), and *Deep Impact* (dir. Mimi Leder, 1998).
20. Jim Dwyer et al., "102 Minutes: Last Words at the Trade Center; Fighting to Live as the Towers Die," *New York Times*, May 24, 2002; Dean Murphy, *September 11: An Oral History* (New York: Doubleday, 2002).
21. Beigbeder, *Windows on the World*, 240.
22. *Ibid.*, 301.
23. See Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 6–7; Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 28.
24. See Cathy Caruth, introduction to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 4–5.
25. See Bessel A. Van der Kolk and Onno Van der Hart, "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma," in Caruth, *Trauma*, 172.
26. See Jennifer Reese, "Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close," *Entertainment Weekly*, March 23, 2005, www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,1039032,00.html; and Tim Adams, "A Nine-Year-Old and 9/11," *Observer* (London), May 29, 2005.
27. See Vivian Gornick, "About a Boy," *Nation*, April 25, 2005, 32.
28. Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).
29. Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2005), 325–26.
30. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man* (London: Picador, 2007), 3.
31. *Ibid.*, 3. An Associated Press photograph of a man covered in ash and the story surrounding it are available on the *USA Today* Web site, www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2006-09-07-sept11-then-now_x.htm. The image also appeared on the famous cover of *Fortune*, on October 1, 2001, online at foliolit.com/wp3/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/Fortune_OCT8_01.jpg (both Web pages accessed February 2, 2011).
32. DeLillo, *Falling Man*, 173.
33. The photo of the falling man is reproduced in this issue in the article by Jaclyn Kirouac-Fram.
34. DeLillo, *Falling Man*, 242.
35. Jonathan Yardley, "Survivors of 9/11 Struggle to Live in a Changed World," *Washington Post*, May 13, 2007.
36. Kalí Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 6–7.