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## Don DeLillo and 9/11: A Question of Response

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DON DELILLO AND 9/11: A QUESTION OF RESPONSE

by

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A THESIS

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## DON DELILLO AND 9/11: A QUESTION OF RESPONSE

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University of Nebraska, 2010

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In the wake of the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, many artists struggled with how to respond to the horror. In literature, Don DeLillo was one of the first authors to pose a significant, fictionalized investigation of the day. In this thesis, Michael Jamieson argues that DeLillo's post-9/11 work constitutes a new form of response to the tragedy. Drawing on the work of Marco Abel and his conception of maso-criticism, Jamieson argues that DeLillo works intensively into the attacks themselves as a way to avoid grand narratives that place them within a conventional story (the War on Terror, Islamic fundamentalism). His essay "In the Ruins of the Future" for *Harper's Magazine* and his novels *Cosmopolis* and *Falling Man* work as a cohesive theorization of this response. Without relying on judgment or historical narratives, DeLillo attempts to work back into the moments of instability when we did not quite understand what was happening, when there was only smoke and flames and ruins. How can our response to 9/11 be different? How and can we make the dizzying process of watching the attacks productive?

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## ***1. Introduction***

As I prepared to teach my Freshman-level composition class on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2009, I picked up our University newspaper, the *Daily Nebraskan*, in hopes that I would be able to frame my planned lecture on the 9/11 attacks around the local coverage. How were the student-journalists of my school dealing with what I considered to be the most important event of my lifetime? My ongoing research into the attacks had certainly quelled my expectations. Eight years had passed, each year seeing the memorials and media coverage surrounding the anniversary dissipate until only those who had directly lost loved ones in the Towers, the Pentagon, and the fields of Pennsylvania seemed to take notice. Even that morning's *New York Times* focused exclusively on the heated debate surrounding the World Trade Center Memorial site. But as I opened *my* paper, I was shocked to find nothing, not a single mention of the attacks of 2001. Aside from the date on the front page, which I had wrongly assumed would carry its own journalistic impetus, the most important day of my lifetime was missing. In the eight years that had passed, I can say that not a week went by that I did not recall that morning, the primal fear and terror I felt. And as the weeks and months and years passed, I could sense a world that had radically changed. But eight years on, somehow, that moment did not even merit a single word in the newspaper. How could I account for this disconnect?

In the end, I suppose, what was most surprising was that I found 9/11's absence surprising. In fact, the guiding principle of my 9/11 project, this very project, was that 9/11 was an event that we attempted to move beyond too quickly. While the event itself was unprecedented in method, scope, and especially media coverage, we quickly

assimilated it within a conventional narrative and framed it as merely one more moment in a larger, global struggle. In his address to the country nine days after the attacks, President Bush explained, “Americans are asking, ‘Why do they hate us?’ They hate what they see right here in this chamber: a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other” (“Transcript of President Bush’s Address”). This traditional story, good vs. evil, us vs. them, made the incomprehensible moments of that morning make sense. And more importantly, it firmly imbued the attacks with meaning. They were the starting point for a War on Terror that would make the world a safer, freer, better place.

Eight years into Operation Enduring Freedom and seven into Operation Iraqi Freedom, it is perhaps understandable how September 11<sup>th</sup> could disappear from the public conversation. If, as President Bush promised it would be, justice had been served to those who plotted against America, September 11<sup>th</sup> would no doubt be a rallying point for the power of American democracy and military might. But as it stands, September 11 is only the starting point for a seemingly endless and increasingly unpopular set of international conflicts. To my mind, this idea of September 11<sup>th</sup> as starting point is one that needs to be reigned in. Regardless of the persuasiveness of historical narratives that place the attacks within the context of the rise to power of American liberalism, the ruins of the Cold War, or a more fundamental battle between Christianity and Islam, the actual moments when the world watched the planes’ impact, the burning towers, and their stunning collapse seem to hold a stronger power that lies outside of such narratives.

In my search for something that would approach 9/11 in a way that accounted for the pure fear of watching the attacks, it was perhaps natural to turn to literature. The world of writing, more than most art forms, seems to have the tools to fashion a vision of the attacks that can give us something new. Film and photography, in the end, feel redundant. All we have are images of 9/11. How could a filmmaker hope to provide something new and relevant?<sup>1</sup> Literature, on the other hand, is not necessarily burdened with the viscosity of 9/11, at least in the conventional sense (Abel 193-197). Yet, in the wake of the attacks, writers struggled with the prospect of interpreting the event. The senselessness of the crimes, so it seemed, brought into question traditional areas of literary response. David Holloway writes, “the early 9/11 novel generally understood history to be governed by random factors – contingency, opportunism and unintended consequences – rather than motivated decision-making, policy initiatives or the working through of vested interests” (107). Narrative, in the wake of such “contingency” seemed ineffective, and perhaps even unethical.

Just as Theodor Adorno interrogated the prospect of writing poetry after Auschwitz, American writers approached the attacks of 9/11 with reservation and concern. One writer in particular seemed destined to engage the horror of that day. Don DeLillo had long been seen as the prescient writer of post-modernity. As Michiko Kakutani wrote in her review of *Falling Man*, “[DeLillo’s] novels, from ‘Players’ and ‘White Noise’ through ‘Libra’ and ‘Mao II’ and the remarkable ‘Underworld,’ not only limned the surreal weirdness of the waning years of the 20th century, but somehow also managed to anticipate the shock and horror of 9/11 and its darkly unspooling aftermath”

(“A Man, A Woman and a Day of Terror”). Or as Tom Junod wrote for *Esquire*, “Now, with *Falling Man*, Don DeLillo takes his crack at the post-9/11 novel, and God knows, there’s no one in our literature who has done more to earn the right. After all, the man has been writing the post-9/11 novel for the better part of four decades, and his *pre-9/11* novel, the magnum-opus *Underworld*, was prescient enough to put the looming towers on its cover, standing high and ready to fall.”

What makes DeLillo the most important American writer on 9/11, aside from his seeming prescience on the topic, is his sustained engagement with the attacks. While other American literary figureheads such as John Updike and Phillip Roth<sup>2</sup>, and more minor figures such as Jay McInerney (*The Good Life*, 2006) and Claire Messud (*The Emperor’s Children*, 2006), have had their go at writing on September 11<sup>th</sup>, DeLillo has produced a series of significant works that concern the event. And most importantly for this project, DeLillo preemptively theorizes the role of the writer in depicting 9/11, considering a way we can respond to the attacks of 9/11 that accounts for their specificity and does not reduce them to mere plot points in a larger, more general global struggle. How can the writer find a way to “give memory, tenderness, and meaning to all that howling space” (“In the Ruins of the Future” 39)?

This question of response is the fundamental question of this project. How does an event like 9/11 challenge our traditional notions of response? How has literature responded, and could it have responded differently? How, if at all, can this literary response help us understand or rethink our national response, the one seemingly assured as President Bush addressed the world from the ruins of the World Trade Center? To deal



with these questions I will begin by presenting one understanding of response put forth by theorist Marco Abel. Next, I will examine how Don DeLillo's post-9/11 writing has attempted to put this response into literary praxis. Part of the goal of this section will be to think of his essay for *Harper's Magazine* "In the Ruins of the Future," and his novels *Cosmopolis* and *Falling Man* as one extended project dealing with the 9/11 event.

Finally, I would like to set DeLillo's work into play with Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, which, in addition to DeLillo's *Falling Man*, is perhaps American literature's most extended engagement with 9/11 and its aftermath. By contrasting these two intriguing works, I hope to show how an author's conception of response plays a critical role in how 9/11 is approached, and how that approach interacts with the more general public response.

## ***2. A Time For Response***

In his book *Violent Affect*, Marco Abel argues for a kind of criticism that tries not to judge. Working specifically through film and literature, Abel explores the concept of judgment through violence. Violence, he argues, is unavoidable. It permeates the world we live in, from invasive airline screenings to news coverage of bombings in Iraq. The destabilizing nature of violence brings with it the inevitability of judgment. Within film and literature criticism, violence is generally judged on whether it is good or bad, representational or real. This debate usually takes a predictable course that straddles these binaries. Taking a look at the reception of Bret Easton Ellis' controversial novel

*American Psycho* can illuminate the terrain of this debate, and the stakes of Abel's own argument.

Upon its release in 1991, *American Psycho* was quickly deemed one of the most immoral, violent, and disgusting novels to ever be published in the United States. Its lurid descriptions of violent torture, dismemberment, and necrophilia already make it a difficult read. Ellis compounds that difficulty by writing in a flat, boring style that makes the moments of violence that much more disturbing. The violence, it seems, is just violence, nothing more. For critics, this was indulgent and disgusting and Ellis was quickly written off as an immoral sadist.

For Abel, the reception of *American Psycho* is rooted in two fundamental premises: first, that we actually know what violence is, and second, that violence in film and literature is primarily representational. In the case of Ellis' novel, it certainly seems that the violence is obvious. Chopping someone up with a designer axe is a sure fire instance of violence. But in Abel's discussion, the text is violent in much more interesting ways. Primarily, he focuses on the rhythm of the writing. Integral to the novel is the notion of boredom. Filled with pages and pages of vacuous discussions of designer clothes, skin moisturizers, fancy restaurants, and business cards, *American Psycho* becomes tedious to read. We begin to yearn for something, anything to happen. But when the moment of action finally occurs, it is much more than we bargained for. Patrick Bateman engages in increasingly bloody and bizarre acts of violence. Ironically, "most readers sooner or later begin to long precisely for that from which they have wanted to escape: the boring itineration of consumer goods, shallow observations, and senseless

activities” (46). This paradoxical response to the text is, for Abel, a moment of violence. It co-opts our traditional notions of readership and forces us into subject positions that we are not necessarily comfortable with. For Abel, this is the violence of the novel that is interesting and remarkable and precisely the instantiation of violence that most critics completely ignore in their engagement with the text.

This neglect on the part of critics is related to their fundamental assumption that violence is representational, that violence *means* something. In the case of the filmic adaptation of *American Psycho* by Mary Harron (2000), Bateman’s random violence becomes a metaphor for the 1980’s brand of corrupt capitalism. Bateman murdering a prostitute is really about how Reagan’s version of trickle-down economics depleted the lower classes and further divided the country between rich and poor.<sup>3</sup> In the film, the violence is funny. In the book, the violence is not. Ellis’s flat delivery makes it nearly impossible to transfer the book’s violence onto the plane of metaphor or allegory. It is incomprehensible and oppressive. Ellis describes Bateman murdering and dismembering a prostitute in the same style that he explains the clothes that the characters are wearing. In the film, the violence is often accompanied by moments of slapstick humor. When Bateman is murdering Paul Allen with an axe, he is also giving a running monologue on Huey Lewis and the News. The juxtaposition, and Christian Bale’s over-the-top performance, makes the scene funny, if uncomfortable. In the book, this type of juxtaposition does not happen. The monologues on Huey Lewis and Genesis receive their own chapters distinct from the instances of violence.

By presenting the violence as violence, most readers had no recourse to traditional modes of interpretation: that the violence was ironic, sarcastic, or satirical (which the film specifically highlighted). Instead, it just seemed to be. Because criticism primarily wants these moments of gratuitous violence to *mean* something, the fact that they do not leads to a quick moment of judgment. The *de facto* moment of judgment on the novel was that it ultimately meant nothing, an opinion that led *New York Times* book critic Roger Rosenblatt to exclaim, “At some point, someone in authority somewhere has to look at Mr. Ellis's rat and call the exterminator” (“Snuff This Book! Will Bret Easton Ellis Get Away With Murder?”).

In Abel’s thinking, the problem with this method of response to violence is that the response itself becomes violent. He writes,

What is finally problematic with the critical violence – including that [Mary Harron’s] film – done to Bret Easton Ellis’s novel is *not* the critical violence exerted (as if it could be otherwise) but what this specific violence *does*, namely, that this violence is ultimately reassuring and comforting in that it makes *American Psycho*’s violence recognizable in a familiar critical and ethical register. (57)

Even as a book of senseless violence, it was recognized as the result of poor skill, talent, and ennui. The only surprise was the fact that there was someone willing to publish it. But for Abel, violence is important for what it does, not what it means. Any attempt to work on violence in the “familiar critical and ethical register” is bound to come out with stale, predictable results. In the case of *American Psycho*, this familiarization of violence negates the power of the novel to make violence sensible on an affective register in ways that few novels have been able to do. By quickly denouncing the novel as immoral, we lose sight of what Abel describes as “the physical experience of reading the novel” (xvii),

which seems to have something interesting to say about violence as we normally understand it.

The problem, in the end, is one of response. If responding on the level of judgment produces “clichés” (57) that do little to actually deal with the text and what it does, what form should response take? What if we do not start from the assumption that violent texts or images primarily *mean* something?

The answer, for Abel, is what he terms maso-criticism. Influenced by Gilles Deleuze’s analysis of masochism, maso-criticism works to slow down the speed of judgment and representation. It is precisely a positive mode of engagement that attempts to see what we can do with violence, how we can engage violent texts in ways that will be productive and positive, rather than reductive and negative. It begins with the premise that violence is not fundamentally representational. Instead, Abel argues, the questions we need to “ask of violent images are not what they mean and whether they are justified but *how* they configure our ability to respond to, and do things with, them” (xiii).

Deferring our desire to judge is difficult. As literary scholars, we have been trained to operate on the level of meaning, representation, and judgment (“What does green symbolize in *The Great Gatsby*?” and the dreaded, “Did you like the novel?”).<sup>4</sup> As a method of response, maso-criticism attempts to extend the encounter with the object so as to delay the moment of meaning and judgment. Abel writes, “The attraction of representation, of judgment, is precisely the intensity of this speed, the rush felt by quickly arriving at the meaning, the significance, of violent images, which is affirmed all the more precisely because it allows us to escape the speed inhering the violence of

sensation” (23).<sup>5</sup> In the end, we gain a certain pleasure from this game of interpretation. In the case of *American Psycho*, it wrests control away from the text, which is experienced as difficult and violent (the violence of sensation) and places it in the hands of the critic as moral arbiter.

But for Abel, it is the “violence of sensation” that is important. For Abel, sensation, or affect, “is presubjective: it is what constitutes the subject rather than being a synonym for an already constituted subject’s emotions or feelings” (6). This moment is significant in Abel’s theorization of response for two reasons. First, if sensations are presubjective and constitutive of the subject, then we are always “already responsible” (10) to the object. We cannot choose not to respond to *American Psycho* because it affects us before we can even register those affects on the level of meaning, significance, or reason. Any decision we make in regards to the text (to put it down, to hate it, to write long, passionate defenses of its artistic merit) is already influenced by the sensation of our encounter with the text itself. Second, if we are always already responsible to a text, what becomes interesting is how our interaction with the violence of sensation influences our responsibility. If any decision we make about an object is presubjectively influenced by this encounter, it seems incredibly important to investigate this encounter and see what it does and what effects it produces (10). Thus, “ A critical encounter with violent images would therefore have to attend to these images’ *affective* intensities – their *effects* rather than their representational ‘meanings’” (10-11).

Because “Judgment [...] is always a practice that *proceeds with too much speed*” (112), the goal is to extend the encounter with the object for as long as possible. To

accomplish this, the critic must give herself over to the object, to work intensively “*through* the object itself.” In this mode of criticism, “The task, therefore, is not to subject the object to judgment but to confront it with the question of what it does” (85). In the case of *American Psycho*, the most interesting questions do not come out of the debate surrounding the novel’s morality, but out of the way the affective intensity of the novel caused readers to almost instinctively engage in these trivial debates. In the case of Ellis’s text, reading itself was made difficult in a way that radically influenced the more general critical response. By working with and through the text and how it works, we can begin to ask different questions. What effects does the object produce? How can those effects be productively used to increase knowledge, to produce lines of flight, to offer possibilities for resistance?<sup>6</sup>

This theorization of response is critical in the wake of 9/11, an event so large, so traumatic that it seems to have stood outside our normal interaction with the world. In a fundamental way, our expected response was embedded within the terroristic strategy. Gilles Kepel explains the attacks as a way for radical Islam to rejuvenate the waning power and structural weaknesses that emerged in the years following the defeat of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. He writes, “Its purpose [September 11<sup>th</sup>’s] was to provoke a similarly gigantic repression of the Afghan civilian population and to build universal solidarity among Muslims in reaction to the victimization and suffering of their Afghan brothers” (4). As seems retroactively clear, the attacks and the resulting War on Terror generated a sense of urgency and solidarity around international terror rings like al-Qaeda

and have led to sustained resistance in Afghanistan and Iraq and tragic bombings in places like Spain, England, and Indonesia.

For many theorists, this almost natural response on the part of the United States was one to be worked against. Jean Baudrillard, in his essay “The Spirit of Terrorism” writes,

The whole play of history and power is disrupted by this event, but so, too, are the conditions of analysis. You have to take your time. While events were stagnating, you had to anticipate and move more quickly than they did. But when they speed up this much, you have to move more slowly – though without allowing yourself to be buried beneath a welter of words, or the gathering clouds of war, and preserving intact the unforgettable incandescence of the images. (4)

For Baudrillard, the event itself disrupted our conventional notions of response. The event and the “gathering clouds of war” advanced with such speed that we had to work to slow them down. The event itself, what he calls “the ‘mother’ of all events,” (4) demanded our prolonged attention, but in a way that would elide our traditional representational modes of interpretation and judgment. He writes, “We try retrospectively to impose some kind of meaning on it, to find some kind of interpretation. But there is none” (30).

Baudrillard, using a type of response that attempts to “preserve intact the unforgettable incandescence of the images” (4), theorizes the symbolic power of the attack itself and its visualization. In the end, for Baudrillard, our traditional national response is problematic because it misconstrues the enemy. If we respond (which we did) with traditional displays of power and force, then we are bound to lose because the enemy fights on a symbolic level that uses death itself as a weapon. He writes, “At odds



with itself, it [America] can only plunge further into its own logic of relations of force, but it cannot operate on the terrain of the symbolic challenge and death – a thing of which it no longer has any idea, since it has erased it from its own culture” (15). Eight years into a war without end, Baudrillard’s analysis seems especially prescient. Each soldier we lose adds to the more general opposition to the war, while each suicide attack strengthens the righteousness of their cause. In the end, our initial response, the one assured as President Bush stood on the ruins and promised that “the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon” was bound to fail (“George W. Bush: Bullhorn Address to Ground Zero Rescue Workers”).<sup>7</sup>

The world of literature, and Don DeLillo in particular, built on Baudrillard’s call to caution, to preserve the event itself. In his sustained engagement with 9/11, DeLillo makes the problem of response central to any attempt to work through and understand 9/11.

### ***3. In the Ruins***

In December 2001, just three months after September 11<sup>th</sup>, Don DeLillo published an essay on the attacks in *Harper’s Magazine*. “In the Ruins of the Future” stands as one of the first literary responses to the tragic attacks, and remains, to my mind, one of the most powerful. It is a complicated piece that is part essay, part narrative, and part impressionistic prose poem. Foundationally, the piece is perhaps most remarkable for the way it interrogates literature’s own role in responding to 9/11. For DeLillo, the attacks on

the World Trade Center have challenged us to think anew how literature interacts with the world. After a passage that contemplates the people who will someday believe they lost a loved one in the tower, even though they did not, or the lost phones, shoes, and credit cards that seemingly evaporated in the dust, DeLillo writes, “These are among the smaller objects and more marginal stories in the sifted ruins of the day. We need them, even the common tools of the terrorists, to set against the massive spectacle that continues to seem unmanageable, *too powerful a thing to set into our frame of practiced response*” (35, my emphasis).

What follows in this essay, and worked through in his subsequent books, is an attempt to create a new kind of response, one that works intensively with the event and accounts for the elements that cannot be assimilated in grand narratives and historical contextualizations. For DeLillo, the goal of the writer is to create a counter-narrative, one that “take[s] the shock and horror as it is” (39). This direct engagement with the event seems to place the writer in a strange position, for DeLillo also argues that, “The event has no purchase on the mercies of analogy or simile” (39). Put another way, the event has no purchase on our frame of practiced response. As Abel explains in his discussion of DeLillo’s essay, “Crucially, however, DeLillo – unlike countless commentators who argued that 9/11 was ‘like’ a Hollywood disaster flick – does not have recourse to the language of images as simile or metaphor... DeLillo’s language performs the meandering look of the neorealist camera eye, following no narrative in particular, yet many at once, thus intensifying the very experience and concept of narrative as a mode of *seeing*” (194). Crucially, for DeLillo, the writer cannot help but write about the events, regardless of the

waning effectiveness of the “mercies of analogy or simile.” But that moment of engagement must shift registers, because “language is inseparable from the world that provokes it.” As a result, DeLillo’s strategy begins *in* the event: “The writer begins in the towers, trying to imagine the moment, desperately” (39).<sup>8</sup>

Working into the moment seems to be the most central and powerful element of DeLillo’s direct engagements with 9/11. It should be no surprise, given his open declaration in “In the Ruins of the Future” that his novel *Falling Man* begins just there. It opens, “It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night. He was walking north through the rubble and mud and there were people running past holding towels to their faces or jackets over their heads” (3). This is a moment of beautiful destabilization on DeLillo’s part. We have no real reference to where we are. It isn’t Church St. or Broadway or any other geographical marker that will hint at the location. It isn’t even a street anymore. It has been transformed into a world, a world of ash and darkness and rubble. Only as the man, the anonymous “he,” navigates through the ruins and manages to finally get a grasp on what is happening do we begin to understand for ourselves. Two pages later, DeLillo writes, “In time he heard the sound of the second fall. He crossed Canal Street and began to see things, somehow, differently” (5).

Seeing things “differently” is part of the counter-narrative DeLillo establishes, and opposed to most literary figurations of 9/11, DeLillo works actively to see into the moments of terror surrounding the event itself. While *Falling Man* begins with Keith Neudecker (although, in this opening section, his name is avoided) walking through the

ruins, it ends with the remarkable moment of impact. In three individual chapters within the novel, DeLillo follows one of the hijackers of American Airlines Flight 11, Hammad, as he progresses towards the attacks. After seeing Hammad at preparation in Hamburg and Florida, the final section begins as he is in the plane flying across the Hudson Corridor. As Hammad sits in his seat, DeLillo writes the impact.<sup>9</sup> It is an exceptional moment of writing, and one that deserves full duplication here:

A bottle fell of the counter in the galley, on the other side of the aisle, and he watched it roll this way and that, a water bottle, empty, making an arc one way and rolling back the other, and he watched it spin more quickly and then skitter across the floor an instant before the aircraft struck the tower, heat, then fuel, then fire, and a blast wave passed through the structure that sent Keith Neudecker out of his chair and into a wall. He found himself walking into a wall. He didn't drop the telephone until he hit the wall. The floor began to slide beneath him and he lost his balance and eased along the wall to the floor. (239)

It is DeLillo's attempt to render the moment of impact in words. We begin with movement, the roll and arc and spin of a bottle on the floor of the aircraft, becoming more agitated as the plane accelerates towards the tower. That movement is transferred to the movement of the explosion as the plane rips into the building. The "blast wave" explodes through the building sending Keith flying into a wall.<sup>10</sup> All of this occurs in one sentence and the transference of subject from Hammad to Keith in the sentence is forceful and violent. We are made, in as clear a way as literature can allow, to sense the impact of the plane. The text itself, after the impact, becomes destabilized and dizzy, with the repetition and mutation of Keith hitting the wall becoming confusing and out-of-time.

Abel explains the power of DeLillo's depiction of the event in terms of seeing, a particularly strange connection considered the medium we are dealing with. He writes,

Thus, the essay attempts rhetorically to position the readers so that they become capable of *seeing* that which cannot be perceived in the event's endless televised images – images that through their proliferations first intensified the public's affective responses to a point of utter confusion (“What happened?” “Why?” “What am I supposed to think?”) before this affect found itself territorialized onto the plane of judgment, of “correct” perception (George W. Bush's “the evil ones”). (195)

Although the world witnessed the impact repeatedly, we never saw the event in the manner DeLillo presents. The “endless televised images” are those of the collision of two objects: plane and tower. What DeLillo shows us is the moment of terror from the inside, violently marking the impact of plane and building through the sudden switch in subjects: Hammad to Keith. The only context we have (“What happened?”) is Keith's journey from his office to the street.

Examining the critical response to the novel is perhaps useful at this point because I believe it hints at just how challenging DeLillo's depiction of 9/11 really is. In her scathing review for the *New York Times*, Michiko Kakutani begins by granting DeLillo a bit of leeway: “not enough time has passed for any novelist to put the events of that day and its shuddering consequences into historical perspective...And yet even within these parameters of reduced expectations, ‘Falling Man’ feels small and unsatisfying and inadequate.” From this point, it should be obvious that, in terms of how literature should respond to 9/11, DeLillo and Kakutani are operating on two different planes. While in his essay for *Harper's Magazine* DeLillo wrote that “plots reduce the world,” (34) Kakutani believes that plot (i.e. historical perspective) is fundamental to shape any narrative about the day.

In fact, in *Falling Man*, DeLillo actively works to keep the greater historical context out of play. The only characters that reference this larger political context are the children, Keith and Lianne's son Justin and his playmates "the Siblings." The three take to staring out of windows with binoculars, waiting for Bill Lawton to fly another plane into a tower. Keith eventually realizes Bill Lawton is an appropriation of bin Laden, as the youngest sibling must have heard it on television. Lianne is shaken by the children's historical awareness: "That scares the hell out of me. God, there's something so awful about that. Damn kids with their goddam twisted powers of imagination" (72). Later, she confronts the oldest sibling about the matter in an attempt to stop them from talking about it anymore.

Within the novel, this refusal to acknowledge or work through the historical context of September 11<sup>th</sup> is challenging, precisely because in Abel's view we do not have recourse to the rush felt by the moment of judgment. The text is difficult to read and forces you back into the event, "to the violent vertigo experienced by an encounter with one's self as not always already being in control" (Abel 184). Within the novel, the characters operate with this lack of control. Lianne compulsively wants to edit a sprawling book that seems to have anticipated 9/11, in spite of her better judgment, and Keith instinctively attacks a man in a department store for looking at his friend Florence condescendingly. Likewise, as readers, we witness the event (9/11) and its effects, without a sense that they hold a larger purpose or meaning. They just happen, a fact that tends to frustrate conventional models of criticism that ask for such things.

DeLillo, in many ways, further provokes this kind of response by filling his novel

with generally unlikeable characters. Keith, the central figure of the novel, is distant, adulterous, and self-absorbed. Although he reunites with his wife after a lengthy separation in the wake of the attacks, when we rejoin the couple in 2004, he has taken to spending weeks at a time in Las Vegas playing poker. By the novel's conclusion, it seems, his wife Lianne has finally decided to leave him for good. Kakutani fumes,

Keith emerges from such passages as a pathetic, adolescent-minded creature. Yes, of course, he suffered trauma and shock. Yes, of course, his life was irrevocably altered by 9/11, but so, too, were the lives of thousands of other people (almost none of whose voices are heard in this novel) — people more grievously injured than Keith, people who didn't react by leaving home and work to pursue a mindless round of anodyne games in Vegas.

Kakutani all but makes explicit that she wishes DeLillo's response to the attacks could have been titled *Underworld 9/11*, which explains her disdain for the thousands of voices not heard in the novel and DeLillo's refusal to contextualize the attacks within the more general Age of Terror, like he did with the Cold War. But more fundamentally, she believes, the 9/11 novel owes a debt to the people who faced the attacks and made something better out of their lives, instead of those who pursued "stupid card games in the Nevada desert." In the end, we need to gain meaning out of 9/11, something that can allow us to turn the most devastating terror attack on American soil into a positive.

Quite obviously, DeLillo is not the author for those looking for a heart-warming tale of human survival.<sup>11</sup> But more fundamentally, DeLillo is interested in keeping his characters distant. At her core, Kakutani is frustrated because Keith does not resemble the people she envisions as having been victims of the attack.<sup>12</sup> Any sense of patriotism or human connectedness that seems to have emerged that day is almost completely absent in

*Falling Man*.<sup>13</sup> The only person Keith can connect with after the attacks is Florence, the owner of the briefcase he inadvertently carried out of the towers. Together, they are able to relive the event, and Keith sees himself in the towers as she narrates her own journey down the stairwell. But even this moment of connection is thwarted for the reader because Keith is sleeping with Florence, a fact that makes him an adulterer. Even if Keith does resemble the survivors of the attacks, we don't want him to. For DeLillo, these unsympathetic characters serve as one more way to frustrate our conditioned practice of response. As Abel writes, "The problem with the logic of representation as resemblance is that it always positions the responding subject outside the event and so reduces the event to what subjects believe to be their point of view" (208). In *Falling Man*, our point of view is altered, toyed with, and challenged in hopes that we will be able to enter the event in a new way.

While Keith Neudecker's story is certainly the most direct way DeLillo attempts to address the event itself in *Falling Man*, there is yet another, more inconspicuous character that serves as the most overt challenge to our traditional method of response, the titular character, Falling Man.

#### **4. David Janiak**

One of the most curious facets of the critical response to *Falling Man* is that there is little discussion of the character that gives the novel its name. Within the novel, David Janiak, a performance artist, reinterprets Richard Drew's infamous photograph of a man



jumping for the World Trade Center around New York City. Twice, Lianne witnesses Janiak, attached to a harness, drop from elevated structures and simply hang, “one leg bent up, arms at his sides” (33).<sup>14</sup> The spectacle generates huge gathering crowds and usually provokes anger and fear. Upon seeing Janiak for the second time, Lianne becomes so unnerved that she has to flee the scene, running haphazardly through the streets. Lianne’s response echoes the more general public response to Drew’s photography, which, upon publication on September 12<sup>th</sup>, sparked outrage that led to news outlets self-censoring any republication of the image.<sup>15</sup> Why did DeLillo choose this image as the centerpoint for his novel?

Kakutani quickly dismisses the figure: “Lianne also broods over the appearance of a performance artist known as Falling Man, a not so subtle symbol of the hubris of trying to make art out of horror.” The symbolic value Kakutani attaches to Falling Man certainly comes from her, not DeLillo. It is important to note that the image of the jumpers is already present in DeLillo’s *Harper’s* essay. He writes, “People falling from the towers hand in hand. This is part of the counter-narrative, hands and spirits joining, human beauty in the crush of meshed steel” (39). Presumably, Kakutani reads the Falling Man as a symbol of hubris because he ends up dying alone, after suffering disfigurement and pain following one of his falls. But for DeLillo, there is beauty in the image of the jumpers. The original power of Drew’s photograph lies in this inherent beauty. It is a perfectly composed image, the man flying in the visual conjunction of the two towers, one dark and one light. As an image out of context (we do not see flames or wreckage or even the sky or ground that would contextualize the image), we simply see a man soaring

in the air. And yet, the image was condemned and hated. It was seen as an unjust look at one man's very personal decision.

But for DeLillo's *Falling Man*, this seems to be precisely the power and necessity of the image. The *Falling Man*, quite simply, brings us back to the event. DeLillo writes, "He brought it back, of course, those stark moments in the burning towers when people feel or were forced to jump" (33). The *Falling Man* forces us to relive the moment of uncertainty, when the towers were still burning and we hadn't yet moved forward. It is a traumatic reliving, of course. Lianne can barely watch: "This was too near and deep, too personal" (163). His performance is too unsettling. DeLillo writes, "But why was she standing here watching? Because she saw her husband somewhere near. She saw his friend, the one she'd met, or the other, maybe, or made him up and saw him, in a high window with smoke flowing out" (167). The affective power of the *Falling Man* in the novel is that he rips the attacks out of the grand narratives they were placed in after the event. The event becomes singular. It carries its own weight and dimension that stands outside of space and time. For Lianne, 9/11 no longer signals the day her husband returned to her and their new life began. Rather, she can only see her husband in the towers and the pure horror of his experience there.

The *Falling Man*'s connection to Abel's conception of maso-criticism seems clear. Janiak is the visual embodiment of a type of response that hopes to defer judgment by slowing down time, by increasing the length of engagement with the event itself. Historically, the temporal space in which the *Falling Man* recreates Drew's photography across New York was one of increased speed. DeLillo writes, "We seem pressed for time,

all of us. Time is scarcer now. There is a sense of compression, *plans made hurriedly*, time forced and distorted” (“In the Ruins” 39, *my emphasis*). This was the time of the build-up to the war in Afghanistan that would bring justice to those who lost their lives on September 11<sup>th</sup>. In this space we were living in the future, as DeLillo writes, “guided by dread” (39). This future necessitated preventative action, and for the time being, the individual experience of the attacks themselves needed to be put away. The Falling Man makes that process difficult, recreating the terror and the event itself.

The particular power of the Falling Man is his immediacy. From the newspaper articles Lianne reads about the performer, we gather that Janiak maintained his position for some time, usually until police took him away. The power grows out of this duration. In Lianne’s second witnessing of the Falling Man, she occupies the space closest to him as he jumps in view of a moving train. DeLillo writes, “But the worst of it was the stillness itself and her nearness to the man, her position here, with no one closer to him than she was” (168). Unlike Drew’s infamous photograph, the performance depends on the observer: “He remained motionless, with the train still running in a blur in her mind and the echoing deluge of sound falling about him, blood rushing to his head, away from hers” (168). DeLillo synthetically moves between Janiak and Lianne, the “blur in her mind” mixing with the “sound falling around him” until blood rushes from her head to his. Her subject position becomes destabilized, with images of the towers and bodies and her husband flashing in her mind until she finds herself running haphazardly through the street.

In recent novels, DeLillo has become increasingly interested in performance art and the question of duration, both of which are central in Janiak's character. The performance artists of these novels particularly employ the physical act of suspense and immobility. This suspense makes duration affectively sensible and opens up the possibility to become more receptive to the effects of actions, and in the case of maso-criticism, violence. This theme is central to DeLillo's 2001 novel *The Body Artist*. Lauren Hartke, the body artist, works through the suicide of her husband by constructing a series of performances that attempt to recreate her last memories of the man. Torturously slow recreations of mundane actions (checking the time, drinking coffee) and ordinary conversations, Hartke can never make the performance slow enough, boring enough, nothing enough to fully work through the suicide. But the process comes close. A critic and friend of Hartke's writes of the performance, "You may find yourself looking and listening in hypnotic fascination, *feeling physically and mentally suspended*, or you may cast a glance at your own watch and go slouching down the aisle and into the night" (108, *my emphasis*).

Likewise, DeLillo's newest novel *Point Omega* includes bookending sections from the perspective of an anonymous man as he watches Douglas Gordon's videowork *24 Hour Psycho* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. The piece slows Hitchcock's film *Psycho* so that it takes a full day to watch it in its entirety. The power of the film, for the man, is that it complicates our traditional expectations and modes of response to film. He thinks, "They had to think in words. This was their problem. The action moved too slowly to accommodate their vocabulary of film" (10). Later, as

Richard Elster is watching the installation, Jim Finley notes, “Something was being subverted here, *his traditional language of response*. Stillborn images, collapsing time, an idea so open to theory and argument that it left him no clear context to dominate, just crisp rejection” (*my emphasis*, 47). In its slowness, the film resists any imposition of meaning or context. It is so troubling that Elster has to reject it and he leaves after only a few minutes. Later, he notes that the experience “was like watching the universe die over a period of about seven billion years” (47).

For those willing to give themselves over to the piece, its impact was more dramatic. For the anonymous observer the slowness of the film radically separated any notion of cause and effect (14) and “he wanted the film to move even more slowly, requiring deeper involvement of eye and mind, always that, the thing he sees tunneling into the blood, into dense sensation, sharing consciousness with him” (115). Just as Lianne’s witnessing of the Falling Man involved a transfusion of blood, so too does this film work its way “into the blood” until it shared “consciousness with him,” (15) the event and its reception immanently intertwined into one cohesive event.

The performances that occur in *The Body Artist* and *Falling Man* and the film *24 Hour Psycho* in *Point Omega* are visual embodiments of the theoretical task of maso-criticism. All present themselves as immanent responses to incomprehensible tragedy as they attempt to slow down time and extend engagement with their potential effects and possibilities. In particular, it seems clear how Lauren Hartke’s recreation of fragments of conversations and actions between her and her husband work to compose her own counter-narrative to his death. While the man had a history of depression and alcohol

abuse, the event itself belied those contexts. Lauren went to town for groceries and returned home to find her husband gone. Likewise, DeLillo's own approach to 9/11 works through a similar process. He engages with the small moments, the stories that can help compose a counter-narrative to that narrative that ended in the rubble ("In the Ruins" 34). The Falling Man embodies this and his effect on those who witness him is unmistakable.

In DeLillo's larger 9/11 project, these characters that attempt to slow things down serve a larger purpose. For DeLillo, the moments after 9/11 were critical. As I hope I have coherently elaborated here, we were all, collectively, already responsible to the event, or as Abel terms it, highlighting our lack of choice in the matter, response-able. Upon witnessing the attacks we could not help but respond. The form that response took, however, was not assured. DeLillo echoes Baudrillard's earlier pronouncement ("But when [events] speed up this much...") when he writes, "We seemed pressed for time, all of us. Time is scarcer now. There is a sense of compression, plans made hurriedly, time forced and distorted" ("In the Ruins" 39).<sup>16</sup> Lauren Hartke and the Falling Man beg us to attempt to slow that time down, to question the plans made hurriedly. When DeLillo follows with, "But language is inseparable from the world that provokes it," he is making an argument about response itself, not just literature. Response, in the end, is inseparable from the world that provokes it. And in the case of 9/11, that world is unlike anything we have ever seen. Before action must come examination, a return to the event and its immanent forces.

### ***5. The Utopian Glow of Cyber Capital***

Upon its publication in 2003, *Cosmopolis* was seen as a critical flop and hardly the 9/11 novel many expected out of DeLillo. While many failed to note a connection between the terror attacks on the World Trade Center and the novel,<sup>17</sup> others like Kakutani argued that it was a “hopelessly clichéd” attempt at exploring the post-9/11 milieu (“Headed Toward a Crash”). The failure to connect the novel to DeLillo’s initial response to 9/11 in *Harper’s Magazine* is perhaps understandable, given the text’s setting of April 2000. However, *Cosmopolis* serves to investigate and challenge the more general response to 9/11. While Baudrillard had questioned that response in terms of war and politics, DeLillo turns to economics.

DeLillo does not overtly connect *Cosmopolis* to the terror attacks. There are no musings on the World Trade Center or Islamic fundamentalism. Resistance in the novel is embodied in the seemingly out-of-date guise of Marxism and anarchism. DeLillo’s connections take subtler forms, particularly in the ways that *Cosmopolis* interacts and engages with “In the Ruins of the Future.”

DeLillo begins “In the Ruins” with a discussion of “the surge of capital markets” that “summoned us all to live permanently in the future, in the utopian glow of cyber-capital, because there is no memory there and this is where markets are uncontrollable and investment potential has no limit” (33). In his mind, “the protesters in Genoa, Prague, Seattle, and other cities want to decelerate the global momentum that seemed to be driving unmindfully toward a landscape of consumer robots and social instability” (33).

In contrast, the terrorists wanted to bring back the past. Time, in the end, plays a central role in the battle between America and globalization on the one hand and Islamic fundamentalism on the other.

The elemental nature of cyber markets is their inability to exist in the present. Enabled through technology, cyber capitalism lives in the future. And the World Trade Center was the emblem of this futurity. He writes, “The World Trade towers were not only an emblem of advanced technology but a justification, in a sense, for technology’s irresistible will to realize in solid form whatever becomes theoretically allowable. Once defined, every limit must be reached” (38). Here, the title of the essay gains resonance. The essay does not investigate the ruins of the World Trade Center, but the ruins of the future: “We have fallen back in time and space” (38) because “Our world, parts of our world, have crumbled into theirs” (33). The towers were the embodiment of capitalism’s determined progress forward. The attacks attempted to reverse that process.

For DeLillo, we almost instinctively understand the symbolic nature of the attacks, and we cannot help but reaffirm our “natural” order, the future. He writes, “This time we are trying to name the future, not in our normally hopeful way but guided by dread” (39). As Abel’s discussion of judgment and maso-criticism makes clear, this dread, this instability, begs for meaning and judgment (“name the future”), and subsequently action. DeLillo cautions us against such quick action.

In the end, DeLillo warns against returning to the past, to the time when we lived in the future of capital markets. But as the attacks drastically affected the stock market, itself only beginning to recover from the decline of the Dot Com bust (which began in



April 2000), the government encouraged the nation to keep spending money, with President Bush advising the country to “go to Disneyworld” (Bacevich). *Cosmopolis* details the folly of this choice.

*Cosmopolis*'s Eric Packer is the emblematic representation of the late 90's stock market savant. He has amassed a multi-billion dollar fortune speculating in the stock market and on currencies. He lives in a world in which money makes more money, without the hindrance of products or labor.<sup>18</sup> The novel follows Packer as he travels across New York City in search of a haircut. As he travels, he wagers more and more money against the rising price of the yen, insistently repeating his mantra, “The yen has to drop.” By the time he arrives at his destination, he has lost his multi-billion dollar fortune and the \$700 million inheritance of his new wife and destabilized the world economy in the process.<sup>19</sup>

The symptoms of our current economic predicament are all evidenced in the daylong journey of Packer. In the world of Bernie Madoff and Robert Stanford, the thought of a single individual losing billions of dollars out of greed and ego seems part and parcel of the system. Packer's reckless foray into the yen is backed by a generous credit market that allows him to borrow staggering amounts of money, a situation echoed in the implosion of our own housing and credit markets. He cannot pay back the credit, and as a result, financial and political leaders around the globe are forced to address the global population as one man has risked the system's collapse. Even smaller moments have eerie reverberations in our current situation. Markets fluctuate wildly as a Finance Minister addresses the world:

“...He made a comment about the economy that may have been misconstrued. The whole country is analyzing the grammar and syntax of this comment. Or it wasn't even what he said. It was when he paused. They are trying to construe the meaning of the pause. It could be deeper, even, than grammar. It could be breathing.”

[...]

“So the whole economy convulses,” she said, “because the man took a breath.” (47-48)

The danger of cyber markets and their instantaneous interaction with technology is that they can be affected by matters that are not entirely economic in nature. They begin to modulate and react to perceptions themselves. A comment, a mistimed pause, has real, monetary effects.

Brian Massumi, in his study of affect, writes, “The ability of affect to produce an economic effect more swiftly and surely than economics itself means that affect is a real condition, an intrinsic variable of the late capitalist system, as infrastructural as a factory” (45). Eric Packer understands this intuitively. He amassed his fortune on this affective power. He would hype a stock in his blog or a newspaper and the stock would magically skyrocket in price. Whether the company was actually viable was beside the point. His entire battle with the yen is based on similar principles. He has a natural instinct that the yen will fall. It is not based on anything but intuition. While every economic indicator and all of his advisors are telling him to cut his losses, he has to follow his instinct to its conclusion, even if it is bankruptcy or death. But this is not unique to Packer. While, in his review of the novel for the *New Yorker*, John Updike wrote that in *Cosmopolis* “implausibility reigns unchecked” and that “DeLillo’s sympathies are so much with the poor that his rich man seems a madman,” Massumi argues that this type of wild speculation is a transversal reality of the market itself. It does not simply affect

production and consumption patterns or stock speculation. “It is,” he argues, “everywhere” within the system. Affect, and the forces it carries with it, permeates the entire system.

Packer’s fundamental error, one of which it seems he should be intuitively aware, lies in his belief that the market is related to and dependent on predictable forces. Joseph Conte argues, “Instead of examining for harmonic balance, Packer should have recognized that patterns in currency values would be ‘lopsided,’ misshapen, irregular, or – as in the contest between globalism and terrorism – asymmetrical” (190). The nature of global finance is its instability, even if this instability holds real ties to determinate factors. Subjects still trade stocks and bonds and as a result affect cannot help but play a part as well. And affect is unpredictable and incalculable.

Vija Kinski, Packer’s on-staff theorist, understands this disharmony. For her, there are only screens. Making the connection to “In the Ruins of the Future” explicit, she says, “The glow of the screens. I love the screens. The glow of cyber-capital. So radiant and seductive” (78). But like most seductive things, the pleasure of cyber-capital cannot stay constant. She explains,

“Because time is a corporate asset now. It belongs to the free market system. The present is harder to find. It is being sucked out of the world to make way for the future of uncontrolled markets and huge investment potential. The future becomes insistent. This is why something will happen soon, maybe today,” she said, looking slyly into her hands. “To correct the acceleration of time. Bring nature back to normal, more or less.” (79)

Cyber-capital is abnormal and uncontrollable. The only answer is for an event that will “bring nature back to normal, more or less.” Baudrillard echoes this sentiment when he argues that 9/11 was the Earth’s resistance to globalization itself.

The echoing of “In the Ruins of the Future”’s conception of time is crucial and points to the major connective link between the essay and the novel. Fundamentally, *Cosmopolis* re-vision the world living in the future, the world left in ruins after the attacks (if only briefly). As the novel progresses, Packer quite literally begins to live in the future. He sees himself react to an explosion on a screen in his limo before it actually happens. In the novel’s conclusion, he sees his dead body laying in the stripped building in which his assassin lives. He then sees it in an ambulance and then in the morgue. He is seeing his future and thinks, “O shit I’m dead” (206). He is not afraid because he has become one with technology. DeLillo writes, “It would be the master thrust of cyber-capital, to extend the human experience toward infinity as a medium for corporate growth and investment, for the accumulation of profits and vigorous reinvestment” (207). This is the world of permanent futurity, in which the confines of being physically human no longer matter.

Kinski clarifies how this futurity affects decision making, especially in regards to Packer’s financial speculation. She argues, “Computer power eliminates doubt. All doubt rises from past experience. But the past is disappearing. We used to know the past but not the future. This is changing... We need a new theory of time” (86). In the case of the novel, the past has no purchase on his speculation on the yen. Doubt does not exist. He *knows* that the yen will fall.

This elimination of the past and movement towards a synthesis of humanity and technology is, for many people, threatening. Thus, Kinski is correct in stating that something will happen to correct this “new theory of time.” Within the novel, we see one potential method of correction. DeLillo’s *Harper’s* essay had theorized the protesters of Prague, Seattle, and Genoa as those who wanted to slow the acceleration of time. In *Cosmopolis* we get to see them in action. As Packer enters the financial district, his limo is forced to stop as thousands of protesters clog the street. The protesters release rats into the streets, attempt to destroy his limo, and take over a bank. Their political affiliation remains unclear. They exclaim, “A specter is haunting the world – the specter of capitalism,” an inversion of Marx’s famous declaration. Whether Marxist or otherwise, they seem to have an impact on Packer, especially when one protester sets himself on fire. Kinski dismisses the protesters as “a fantasy generated by the market” that “invigorate and perpetuate the system” (90). Even the man who commits suicide is “not original” (100). Packer disagrees, thinking that the market “could not claim this man or assimilate his act” (100).

If the market cannot assimilate the man’s actions, it simply forgets them. As cyber-capital’s embodiment within the text, Packer was perfectly positioned to become impacted by the man’s suicide. Instead of serving as a moment of pause and reflection for Packer, though, it happens too fast. The flames burn too hot and quickly the man is gone. Packer soon forgets the incident and continues his reckless attack on the yen. For DeLillo, resistance is increasingly difficult under capitalism and the types of attacks

presented in the text are too fleeting to have dramatic effects, especially when those to whom they are directed are living in the future.

For DeLillo, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 were a new form of resistance that provided a unique challenge to the dominant system. Instead of simply attempting to slow down time, the terrorists attempted to bring back the past. DeLillo argues that the terrorists have provided a unique challenge to our conception of time and technology by using them against us. He writes, “We have fallen back in time and space. It is their technology that marks our moments, the small lethal devices, the remote-control detonators they fashion out of radios, or the larger technology they borrow from us, passenger jets that become manned missiles” (“In the Ruins” 38). Instead of simply destroying the technology of the system, technology they believe is threatening their way of life, they have turned that technology against us. Baudrillard describes this as globalization fighting against itself. It is a form of resistance that takes seriously the Foucaultian notion that power cannot be dialectically opposed, but rather utilized for new ends.

In the end, DeLillo is not defending the terrorists. His portrayal of Hammad in *Falling Man*, for example, is hardly sympathetic. He plays on his own response to the attacks, or at least complicates it, when he writes in his essay: “When the second tower fell, my heart fell with it” (37). Instead, DeLillo sees 9/11 as an event that could allow us to reformulate our conception of the world, particularly in relation to time. *Cosmopolis* works to show us the effects that living in the future produce. If we want to continue in

that fashion, we have to be prepared for events that will attempt to “bring nature back to normal.”

Kinski, in retrospect, seems to be DeLillo’s ideological representative within the text and the most vocal opposition to living in the future. Crucially, it is important not to misread her declaration for a new theory of time. She is not arguing for living in the future. She actually stands in opposition to this theory, and indeed to Packer and his market speculation. She argues, “The future is always a wholeness, a sameness. We’re all tall and happy there... This is why the future fails. It always fails. It can never be the cruel happy place we want to make it” (91). We always envision the future as better than the present (“The yen will fall”), but it is always destined to fall short of this vision. We cannot predict the future, and systems built on the future (cyber-capital) are bound to fail, or at least radical instabilities, as I believe we are witnessing.

Chronologically, DeLillo’s 9/11 project presents a narrative of response. In his essay “In the Ruins of the Future” he establishes the stakes. He positions literature as specifically compelled to respond to the attacks, but to do so in a way that works into the event itself. It also charts the more general landscape of the attacks by working its way into the world of the terrorists. DeLillo understands that simply dismissing them as fanatics will do nothing to actually understand the event. By charting the attacks as an effect of globalized market forces embodied in the United States, he puts our more general national response at stake. In *Cosmopolis*, he charts the effects of that response and finds it lacking. With *Falling Man*, he presents a different option of response, one specifically hinted at in his essay. Here, he works his way back into the towers in an

attempt to see them anew. Additionally, his use of the Falling Man visualizes our possibility for response and the dramatic effects it produces, particularly through Lianne.

In the end, I believe, DeLillo has found what he would consider to be an ethical form of response, one that attempts to deal with the event on the event's terms. Peter Boxall, writing on DeLillo and 9/11, argues that

This difficulty [understanding the attacks] has emerged partly from an uncertainty about the nature of cause and effect in contemporary political culture. It is very difficult to frame an ethical response to the horror either of the attack, or of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that are to some extent a consequence of them, partly because it is hard to trace a clear narrative line from the former to the latter." (230)

This analysis is surprising given the fact that Boxall is working on DeLillo. If any author seems to complicate the idea of a "clear narrative line" between "cause and effect," it is DeLillo. In *White Noise* he warned that "We edge nearer death every time we plot" (26), in *Libra* that "Plots carry their own logic. There is a tendency of plots to move toward death" (221), and in "In the Ruins" that "Plots reduce the world" (34). Ethics, for DeLillo, is a question of seeing the world outside of such normative operations, of working into what Boxall calls the "fibrous material of the moment itself" (217).

To conclude this thesis, and in hopes of clarifying the uniqueness of DeLillo's position in the discourse surrounding 9/11, I would like to present a brief portrait of Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. By setting these two works into play with each other, I aim to produce what Gilles Deleuze has termed a symptomatology. Abel explains the goals of this type of project: "symptomatology diagnoses the differences between objects in order to emphasize the differences without eradicating them...it describes these differences as being produced on the same plane of



immanence – that is, objects’ differences result from the same field of surface forces at work in the same cultural-historical matrix” (37). Both writers have attempted to address the same event but have arrived at completely different projects, a fact that highlights the importance of response in regards to an event like 9/11.

### **6. Oskar Schell’s *Falling Man***

*Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* is the story of 9 year-old Oskar Schell as he copes with the death of his father in the attacks on the World Trade Center. Two years after the attacks, Oscar finds a mysterious key in his father’s closet, and he spends the rest of the novel attempting to find the key’s corresponding lock. Foer presents his book in a radical array of styles. Each character is given narrative voice within the text and each has a unique style that corresponds to a unique typeset. Foer also inserts numerous pictures that interact with the story. He explains this choice in terms of visibility: “And also 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 buildings, 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” (Mudge). It is clear that, like DeLillo, Foer is concerned with the ways literature can and should respond to 9/11. Like DeLillo, Foer is a native New Yorker, and it is obvious that approaching the subject was nearly unavoidable.

I want to focus primarily on Foer's repetition of images, and in particular his repetition of an image that alludes to Richard Drew's image of the Falling Man. Within the story, Oskar is searching for a clue as to how his father died. He knows he was in the Windows of the World, but he has to know exactly how he died. After he meets someone who knew a woman who died inside Windows of the World, Oskar says, "The real question was *how* they died together, like whether they were on different ends of the restaurant, or next to each other, or something else" (196). The search for the lock is one way that Oskar attempts to answer this question.

Oskar has printed out pictures of falling bodies from foreign websites in an attempt to find the answer to his father's death. He believes one picture in particular could be his father. Four times throughout the text we are presented with the image. The first two appearances are placed within a series of photographs that Oskar has collected in his journal. The third occurs as Oskar eavesdrops on a conversation between his psychiatrist and mother over his potential hospitalization for psychiatric care. Oskar also repeatedly thinks about the falling body, especially in moments of heightened emotion. The final presentation of the falling body is the most interesting, and the one I want to focus on here. As the novel ends, Oskar lies in bed imagining his life unraveling in reverse as he looks through his journal. Foer writes, "When I flipped through them, it looked like the man was floating through the sky. And if I'd had more pictures, he would've flown through a window, back into a building, and the smoke would've poured into the hole that the plane was about to come out of" (325). As he continues his father walks out of the World Trade Center, back home, and finally back into his room, telling

him the story of the Sixth Borough like he did the night of September 10<sup>th</sup>. The text concludes, “We would have been safe” (326). What follows is a flipbook of images that reverses the flight of the falling man. As you flip, he appears in the bottom of the page until he flies through the top.

For Oskar, this reversal is an answer, one that aids him in moving beyond his father’s death. Throughout the text, Oskar is hesitant to address the day itself. He always refers to September 11<sup>th</sup> as “the worst day,” and his most direct engagement with it arrives circuitously: he invents a “birdseed shirt” that will allow you to survive a jump out of a high-rise building and elevators that work by moving the building down instead of the elevators, “because if you’re on the ninety-fifth floor, and a plane hits below you, the building could take you to the ground, and everyone could be safe, even if you left your birdseed shirt at home that day” (3).

In contrast to DeLillo, who sees the writer’s duty as working into the towers “to give memory, tenderness, and meaning to all that howling space,” Foer approaches the attacks at a distance. In a short video piece about the novel directed by his brother, Foer acknowledges that he had no desire to write about the attacks, and that his first drafts had been unconscious engagements with the day (*Jonathan Safran Foer*). Within the text, we are presented with graphic depictions of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and the fire bombings of Dresden, but not 9/11. In the end, his most direct address comes in the form of the images of the Falling Man.

While Foer believes that the images of his book work to highlight the reality of September 11<sup>th</sup>, a comparison to DeLillo’s *Falling Man* is quite telling. Whereas David

Janiak brought back the event to such a startling degree that Lianne's only response was to flee, Foer's *Falling Man* works within conventional narratives. It is a problem to be solved, one of identity. Thus, we are presented with a blown up version of the image that Oskar has created in hopes of telling whether it is his father. While it becomes clear that finding out the identity is impossible, it does not stop symbolizing the drive to answer the same types of questions: How did he die? With whom? Where?

While DeLillo's *Falling Man* encompasses the idea of suspension and deferral, Foer actually gives the *Falling Man* movement. Through the flipbook, the *Falling Man* becomes the *Flying Man* as he returns to the building. This movement makes the image a fleeting one. Instead of being a point of contemplation, it serves a plot function. Oskar seems to finally cope with the death of his father by pretending it never happened. For DeLillo, the jumpers had been a point of interest because they seemed to provide a new angle of entry *into* the event, "part of the counter-narrative" (39). For Foer, the jumper is purely symbolic, an image that represents Oskar's internal state.

The novel's conclusion becomes more troubling in this regard. While, as I have argued, DeLillo's project charts and problematizes a type of response that would attempt to encounter the world as we have always encountered the world, by naïvely returning to the world that had provoked the attacks, Foer embraces this option. Oskar, a wholly compelling and sympathetic character, is ultimately granted relief and closure by returning to a better time before 9/11. Instead of charting the uniqueness of 9/11 to our world, Foer universalizes within a common *bildungsroman*. 9/11 serves as merely a backdrop to one precocious child's strange journey through New York City.<sup>20</sup>

While an entertaining and emotional book, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* fails to provide any new or fruitful insight into 9/11. While DeLillo attempts to work himself into the event, Foer is constantly working around it. The difference is a matter of response. DeLillo understands that we cannot help but respond to an event like 9/11. But that inevitability also means that we need to explore the path that response takes. Pretending like 9/11 did not happen, or that it was but one event amongst many, is impossible and unethical. In the end, I would argue, Foer's response to 9/11 becomes intimately tied to judgment and representation because he is heavily invested in making Oskar a likeable, charming character. As a result, the attacks of 9/11 are made *more emotional* because they affected a character we love. It is an understandable and familiar response, one that finds its origin in the very enormity of the violence we witnessed on that day. But as DeLillo has shown us, it is not the only possible response and perhaps not the most fruitful.

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<sup>1</sup> This is perhaps best evidenced in Oliver Stone's 2006 film *World Trade Center*. Stone is certainly aware of the inherent redundancy of showing the attacks. Instead, he visualizes the planes as shadows against buildings, with New Yorkers gazing up in awe and confusion. It is a moment that feels forced and awkward. The power of Edward Munch's *The Scream* lies in his refusal to show us the cause of the scream. Deleuze, in his analysis of Francis Bacon, likewise argues that Bacon works "to paint the scream more than the horror" (*Francis Bacon* 34). In the case of *World Trade Center*, the New Yorkers' stunned gazes fail to have the same impact because we know the cause of the horror, and more importantly, Stone gives us the reverse-shot, if only the unmistakable image of a shadow on a building. He fails to sustain the affective intensity of the violent moment because he is reliant on the cause (the plane), not the effect (the stunned citizens) (Abel 5).

<sup>2</sup> The extent to which Updike's *Terrorist* or Roth's *The Plot Against America* really address September 11<sup>th</sup> is certainly up for debate, although both are generally considered 9/11 novels. See, for example, Holloway.

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<sup>3</sup> See Linda Kauffman's review of the film in *Film Comment* for a detailed attempt to recover the novel and film as sharp, satirical exposé on the excess of the 80's.

<sup>4</sup> Crucial to Abel's argument in this regards is that the very act of judgment in representational criticism constitutes a kind of violence. The act of judgment reterritorializes (in Deleuze and Guattari's language) the object being judged in a way that blocks our access to what it does. By simply saying that *American Psycho* is evil, we ignore the interesting forces and affects inhering the text, and what the novel might provide in helping us think differently about violence in literature and art.

<sup>5</sup> One only needs to watch the live broadcast footage from the morning of September 11<sup>th</sup> to see this practice at work. When the second plane hits the South Tower, many broadcasters, instead of expressing shock or fear, quickly move to the level of "meaning" and "significance" by asserting that we now know that this is an attack, not an accident. See *September 11, 2001 - As It Happened - The South Tower Attack* for nearly 9 minutes of live news footage of the South Tower attack.

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey Nealon's book *Foucault Beyond Foucault* raises the possibility for resistance to power in the examination of effects. He writes, "Hence, as I've argued throughout prior chapters, the primary Foucaultian theoretical apparatus and toolkit is one of 'intensification': which is to say that critique becomes a matter of attempting to extend, broaden, or saturate certain effects within a given field, while trying to constrict, limit, or downplay other effects. It is, in any case, within an affirmative negotiation of a field's intense play of forces (rather than through a negation coming from outside that field) that one might begin to locate Foucaultian 'resistance'" (95).

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, never Baudrillard's friend or theoretical ally, echoes this sentiment in the collection *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*. He argues, "It consists in *that, that* I do not comprehend: *that which* I do not comprehend and first of all *that* I do not comprehend, the fact that I do not comprehend: my incomprehension. That is the limit, at once internal and external, on which I would like to insist here: although the experience of an event, the mode according to which it affects us, calls for a movement of appropriation (comprehension, recognition, identification, description, determination, interpretation on the basis of a horizon of anticipation, knowledge, naming, and so on), although this movement of appropriation is irreducible and ineluctable, there is no event worth of its name except insofar as this appropriation *falters* at some border or frontier" (Borradori 90). Again, the nature of 9/11 eschews any hope for traditional, comfortable "movement[s] of appropriation" like judgment and representation.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Boxall argues that DeLillo's attempt to enter the moment in a more real, visceral way is a feature of his recent output. He writes, "It is one of the working contradictions of DeLillo's most recent prose, however, that this evacuation of the moment, this entry into the suspended non-time of posthistorical mourning, is also a delivery into the very fibrous

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material of the moment itself. The evacuation of the moment does not only eject one from time, but also abandons one to it, to a time whose sinewy dimensions lie naked and exposed” (217).

<sup>9</sup> Oskar, in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, also imagines the impact of a plane into a tower. Importantly, as I will detail later in my longer discussion of the novel, Oskar is imagining a plane flying into the Empire State building, not the actual moment Flight 11 crashed into the North Tower. Additionally, the moment is surreal and imaginative. Oskar does not tend to imagine in terms of realism. Foer writes,

Even though I knew the view was incredibly beautiful, my brain started misbehaving, and the whole time I was imagining a plane coming at the building, just below us. I didn’t want to, but I couldn’t stop. I imagined the last second, when I would see the pilot’s face, who would be a terrorist. I imagined us looking each other in the eyes when the nose of the plane was one millimeter from the building.  
I hate you, my eyes would tell him.  
I hate you, his eyes would tell me. (244)

<sup>10</sup> While DeLillo never tells us what floor Keith works on, we know that the blast wave from the impact was felt across the building. The documentary *9/11* by the Naudet brothers shows that the lobby on the first floor had all of its windows blown out and people standing in front of the elevator shafts were on fire.

<sup>11</sup> Again, Oliver Stone’s *World Trade Center* is perhaps the perfect example of why these types of human-interest stories fail to capture the event as such. While the story of John McLoughlin and Will Jimeno as two of the 20 survivors of the tower collapse is quite compelling, one cannot help questioning a narrative that champions the exception of the attacks, rather than the rule.

<sup>12</sup> This is ironic in the wake of our contemporary economic situation. Many of the very people that occupied and died in the World Trade Center that day are presently seen as the perpetrators of systematic greed and corruption that led to the financial crisis. Is not the public perception of Wall Street investors the spitting image of Keith?

<sup>13</sup> In his comedy album that followed in the wake of 9/11, David Cross notes that the only happy people on September 12<sup>th</sup> were those who owned flag companies.

<sup>14</sup> The Falling Man’s connections to more general theories of masochism would certainly be worth further pursuit. In regards to Deleuze’s work on the subject, there are interesting, if problematic, connections. In *Masochism* he writes,

We should note here that the art of suspense always places us on the side of the victim and forces us to indentify with him, whereas the gathering momentum of repetition tends to force us onto the side of the torturer and

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make us identify with the sadistic hero. Repetition does occur in masochism, but it is totally different from sadistic repetition: in Sade it is a function of acceleration and condensation and in Masoch it is characterized by the ‘frozen’ quality and the suspense. (34)

Certainly, Janiak’s performance seems to attempt an immanent mode of response to the victims. Lianne, in watching the performance, almost deliriously enters the burning towers, imagining her husband and his friends. Additionally, the Falling Man performance seems to rely on duration, giving itself a “frozen quality.” However, Deleuze and Sacher-Masoch’s masochism is an act of suspense and pain that works in anticipation of pleasure, even if that pleasure is continuously deferred. Janiak’s performance’s are completely devoid of any sense of pleasure. In fact, we later learn through an interview with his brother, who helped him in his jumps, that there were future plans for a final jump without a harness.

<sup>15</sup> A more thorough investigation of Drew’s photography can be seen in Harry Singer’s UK documentary *9/11: The Falling Man*.

<sup>16</sup> The deeper connections between DeLillo and Baudrillard’s essays on 9/11 would certainly be worth more investigation. “The Spirit of Terrorism” was published on November 2, 2001 by *Le Monde*, which predates DeLillo’s by a month. There are unmistakable connections between the two pieces that speak to the theoretical affinity between the two authors. Whether DeLillo has read Baudrillard’s piece is unclear. Critics like Leonard Wilcox would perhaps argue that DeLillo’s echoing of Baudrillard was inevitable given the American’s obvious indebtedness to the other’s philosophy. See “Baudrillard, DeLillo’s *White Noise*, and the End of Heroic Narrative.”

<sup>17</sup> John Updike’s scathing review for the *New Yorker* is perhaps emblematic in this regard.

<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey Nealon writes, “One might say in a kind of short-hand that M-M’ comprises the formula for all forms of gambling, where money is directly *intensified* – made greater or smaller – rather than being transformed into a different state through the mediating work of commodity production. So, what we might call ‘fourth-wave’ finance capital is the latest instantiation of capitalism’s de-territorializing intensity (and the point at which capitalism, at its cutting edge, ‘is’ nothing other than intensification itself)” (63).

<sup>19</sup> Scholars have responded to the novel in radically divergent ways. Jerry Varsava argues that the novel depicts a particularly virulent form of rogue capitalism that stands in opposition to “real” capitalism. Joseph Dewey, taking a completely different, and to my mind inexplicable approach, sees Packer’s death as a moment of spiritual fulfillment, “of the remarkable resiliency of the human soul” (140).



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<sup>20</sup> In an interview with *Guernica Magazine*, DeLillo described his approach to writing about 9/11: “I didn’t want to write a novel in which the attacks occur over the character’s right shoulder and affect a few lives in a distant sort of way. I wanted to be in the towers and in the planes.” With *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, the narrative is not unique to 9/11. Oskar’s father could have died in any fashion, and the text would have unfolded in a similar fashion.

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