DECONSTRUCTING AND RECONSTRUCTING THE TOWERS: ALLEGORICAL FIGURES OF 9/11

By Brian J. Phelps

In the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, Americans grasped for ways to understand and represent the incomprehensible trauma, in part because, as many philosophers and cultural critics acknowledged, it was not just physical destruction or a political challenge, but also a semiotic rupture that challenged the efficacy of language itself. Consequently, common modes of working through the trauma, such as narrativization and temporal contextualization, have failed to provide closure. At the confluence of photographic theory, trauma theory, and deconstruction, the images of 9/11—particularly Richard Drew’s “Falling Man” and images of Philippe Petit’s 1974 WTC tightrope walk—have become allegories for the failures of these old methods and the need for new modes of working through the trauma.

A close look at the Falling Man of Don DeLillo’s eponymously titled novel reveals the myth of shared (collective) trauma in the event of 9/11 and the inherent re-experiencing caused by its mediation. Jonathan Safran Foer’s Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close places the blame for these on the failure of language. In response, the resurgence of popularity in the figure of Philippe Petit is in direct relation to his symbolic role. In Colum McCann’s Let the Great World Spin, his performance provides healing for characters who suffer from different traumas by championing the healing effects of shared witness (rather than shared experience) and artistic representation (rather than chronological narrativization). In the film Man on Wire, James Marsh uses the heist genre to, likewise, show the power of artistic representation—this time, in its ability to re-establish working binaries and provide meaning to the absence of the towers.
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by

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To my wife, Sarah, for being a constant inspiration and companion, for supporting our family through this thesis’s completion, and for being an emotional bulwark.
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Chapter 1

An Introduction

When graphic novelist Art Spiegelman, who already mined the depths of his second-generation Holocaust trauma in *Maus*, sat down to capture his direct traumatic experience of the terrorists’ attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, he knew that its effects would transcend his own experience. Unlike the incredibly personal and relatively coherent narrative structure of *Maus*, Spiegelman’s 9/11 graphic novel became an eclectic, disjointed mix of personal experience, political criticism, and chronological juxtaposition. Ultimately, its structure mirrors the loss of meaning and structure felt by Americans in the wake of the attacks and Americans’ frantic attempts at finding a way to restore them. The doubled feeling of loss—the physical absence of the towers and the psychological trauma embodied in their absence—is perfectly captured in his final title: *In the Shadow of No Towers*.

The original cover of the graphic novel, featuring the shadowy specter of the towers, black on black, reveals Spiegelman’s foresight that this absence would be the dominant image to emerge in regard to the discussion of 9/11 trauma. A diptych of Richard Drew’s AP photographs of 9/11 and its aftermath composed for Yahoo News (Fig. 1.1) is the perfect microcosm for the transformation of space at the core of the discussion. In fact, when Michael Arad and Peter Walker described their selected memorial for the WTC, this iconic absence was the most important psychological experience to capture. Fittingly named “Reflecting Absence,” their proposal takes the shape of two cascading pools that occupy the former footprint of the World Trade Center towers; Arad and Walker describe them as “large voids, open and visible reminders of the absence.” Their entire endeavor was to create a “space that resonates with the feelings of
loss and absence that were generated by the destruction” (World Trade Center Site Memorial Competition).

Arad and Walker understand that this loss is more than just a physical absence, however. A visitor to the memorial will also be confronted with the sublimity of the attack, as “The enormity of this space and the multitude of names that form this endless ribbon underscore the vast scope of the destruction.” And, true to the nature of the sublime, traditional modes of meaning-making will fail, as the list of victims thwarts any attempt at organization: “The names of the deceased will be arranged in no particular order around the pools.” Ultimately, meaning is just out of reach of the mind’s ability to comprehend, as it “can sense that what is beyond this curtain of water and ribbon of names is inaccessible.”
The difficulty in making sense of September 11 is due to its exceptionality as a traumatic event, not only because of its historical rarity for Americans (an attack on national soil), but also because of the rampant mediation of the attacks via television news reporting, and because of symbolic significance of the targets. The key words and image of Spiegelman’s book, Drew’s photograph, and Arad and Walker’s proposal, the same words seen throughout other responses—shadows, gaps, voids, and lacks—reveal the framework within which most initial theoretical responses to 9/11 operate. Discussions of 9/11 exist at the confluence of three distinct flows of philosophical thought: trauma psychology, photography (due to its uniquely visual representation), and semiotics and deconstruction (due to the symbolic nature of the attacks).

Three figures of trauma psychology dominate discussions of 9/11: Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, and E. Ann Kaplan. In their interplay, Caruth provides the best working definition of non-specific Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder that underpins all subsequent conversation:

…a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event. This simple definition belies a very peculiar fact: the pathology cannot be defined either by the event itself—which may or may not be catastrophic, and may not traumatize everyone equally—nor can it be defined in terms of a distortion of the event, achieving its haunting power as a result of distorting personal significances attached to it. (Caruth, *Trauma* 4)

The traumatic re-experiencing in Caruth’s definition is the primary symptomatic reference point for depictions of trauma in literature (whether it be stories about victims of war, abuse, or other trauma) and for the psychological treatment.
Freud’s original understanding of trauma classifies victims by their relationship with this re-experiencing, separating the symptoms and results into two possible camps: melancholia and mourning. However, Dominick LaCapra’s theories about recovery through narrativization use two new, yet related, words from the context of Freud’s study, to form a “nonbinary” classification that better understand the spectral nature of trauma: “acting out and working through, which are interrelated modes of responding to loss or historical trauma” (LaCapra 65). In LaCapra’s classification, Freud’s terms occupy the end points of process: melancholia is “an arrested process [of acting out] in which the depressed, self-berating, and traumatized self, locked in compulsive repetition, is possessed by the past, faces a future of impasses, and remains narcissistically identified with the lost object” (65). On the other hand, mourning is the “possibility of engaging trauma and achieving a reinvestment in, or recathexis of, life which allows one to begin again,” gained “through memory work, especially the socially engaged memory work involved in working through, [in which] one is able to distinguish between past and present and to recognize something as having happened to one (or one’s people) back then which is related to, but not identical with, here and now” (65-66). Since I am concerned with the relative success of different modes of coping with trauma, I will use LaCapra’s distinctions to qualify the actions of the characters and the authors under discussion. On occasion, however, Freud’s terms are still applicable, especially when describing situation of complete compulsive re-experiencing or, more rare, complete healing accomplished by working through the trauma.

The process of working through the trauma of 9/11 is especially fraught with hardship, however, due primarily to the overwhelming sublimity of the towers’ absence. Much like the Holocaust, studies of which form the core of Caruth, LaCapra, and Kaplan’s (early) work, 9/11 is defined by identification with an absence. LaCapra distinguishes between absence (the physical departure) and loss (the psychological emptiness), but warns that “When absence, approximated
to loss, becomes the object of mourning, the mourning may (perhaps must) become impossible
and turn continually back into endless melancholy” (68). E. Ann Kaplan, the only one of the three
to explicitly contend with 9/11, experienced the tragedy personally, and in capturing her initial
responses in *Trauma Culture*, explains that “the gap where the Twin Towers had stood in the
weeks that followed became a space full of horror… Their visual absence was traumatic: That is,
it was impossible to comprehend that they were gone” (Kaplan 12). Clearly, the absence and loss
have conflated in the context of 9/11.

This gap, then, becomes the working figure of 9/11 trauma studies, which fits into a
continuation of Caruth’s initial definition for PTSD. She elaborates on it by identified three loci
of “gaps” left in the wake of trauma:

1) The gap of “latency” that determines the temporal divide between the initial
unregistered event and the traumatic re-experiencing.

2) The gap in community caused by rupturing bonds between those who have suffered
the trauma and those who have not (as well as within traumatic communities,
themsevles).

3) The gap in appropriate language by which to talk about the trauma, which in turn
prevents the narrativization or communication of the experience.

It is the latter of these three that gains special privilege in the studies of 9/11 trauma. Generally, to
Caruth, the impossibility of reintegration of the trauma into narrative history or memory does not
end the discussion of understanding, it just “demands a different model or a different way of
thinking that may not guarantee communication or acceptance but may also allow for an
encounter that retains, or does not fully erase, difference [between experience and perception]”
(Caruth, *Unclaimed* 124). However, the special circumstances surrounding the trauma of 9/11 exacerbate the difficulties of this communication

The first is “the media’s constant repetition of the Towers being struck” (Kaplan 8). This would, at first, seem to be normal. Many have stated, as Charles A. Hill and Marguerite Helmers have, that “points of crisis in American culture since the Vietnam War have been visually recorded and widely disseminated to the public” (Hill & Helmers 3-4), and that this visualization and dissemination have become the model of national understanding. Individual photographs have offered a stable psychological understanding as well in the past; in the introduction to her collection *Trauma at Home: After 9/11*, editor Judith Greenberg, says that “the relationship between photography and trauma points out features of the photograph that make it particularly suited for communicating the wound of trauma, such as its elegiac stopping of time, its ability to hold on, its deferral of understanding, and its conveyance of an absent presence” (Greenberg xx). Hirsch, however, complicates this assumption in her chapter by realizing that “As [she] took photos at the ground zero site, [she] began to realize that, after all, it is the absence of the towers that [she has] been trying to show, and that absence, by nature, is not easily visualized” (Hirsch 82-3). The truth is that, aside from a few successful endeavors (“Here is New York: A Democracy of Photographs” is one such example), photographs failed to impart the means of working through or were rejected outright by society. Despite, or perhaps because of, the media bombardment of images of the attacks, photographs fail to capture its truth.

The second complication to traditional modes of working through is in the symbolic nature of the attacks. Jean Baudrillard and Slavoj Žižek both responded in print shortly after the attacks (in *The Spirit of Terrorism* and *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, respectively), each identifying and addressing the symbolic realm in which the event transpired. To Baudrillard, for instance, the attacks are new in the way that they “shift[ed] the struggle to the symbolic sphere”
because “The architectural object was destroyed, but it was the symbolic object which was targeted and which it was intended to demolish” (44).\(^1\) As other linguistic theorists joined the field, including Jacques Derrida and Jürgen Habermas, it became clear in their works that the attacks were more than a traditional gap in communicative language; they were a rupture in the very fabric of communication itself. While 9/11 is not the first moment in the intimately intertwined history of psychoanalysis and deconstruction (“it is significant that it was Paul De Man’s students at Yale [Caruth, Felman] who first turned to trauma,” says Kaplan [34]), it is nevertheless a watershed moment. This specific trauma seems to have caused an irreparable tear in the deteriorating faith in the possibility of successful signification.

It is this two-fold trauma: psychological trauma and semiological trauma that paints the backdrop for discussions of 9/11 and the works that attempt to deal with it. These two realms constantly impress on each other in a spiral of deconstruction that forces new modes of understanding and traumatic coping. As Jeanne Follansbee Quinn puts it in the introduction to \textit{Literature after 9/11}, “9/11 literature impels us to see these spaces even as it forces them together; it consistently uses the literal to deconstruct the symbolic and the reverse” (2).

Novels offer a unique literary environment for negotiating this difficult interplay of trauma. I agree with Paolo Simonetti’s broad claim that “In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, journalism and documentary reports seemed able to cope with reality better than fiction… [but] on the ‘Ground Zero’ of narrative, in the empty space left by the fall of the towers, postmodernist writers creatively cope with destruction and grief…by providing the mind with a new heterogeneous space for reflection” (555-6).\(^2\) Moreso, it is the “new heterogeneous space” of postmodern aesthetic, and not just the classic novel, that is the necessary response to the complications of this trauma; a format is needed that, as Cathy Caruth calls for, “simultaneously defies and demands our witness” (Caruth, \textit{Trauma} 5).
This is the contention of author Zadie Smith in her essay/review “Two Paths for the Novel” in the *New York Times Review of Books.* Even though the targets of her review are British, and not even explicitly about 9/11, she notes a significant paradigm shift in the “post-September 11 novel” towards what she considers the postmodern aesthetic. The novels that emerge from 9/11 are noticeably experimental in form, even to the disgust of some critics. The texts’ narrative amorphousness and mixed media—what Randall calls “hybrid forms” (3) and what Daniel Davis Wood calls a revival of the avant-garde *nouveau Roman* post WWII European postmodernism—clearly represent the unsure approach to new ways to make sense of the trauma. The canon of such experimental 9/11 fiction is continually being set by cultural and literary critics. Common works, some of which are addressed in this study, include Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man,* Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close,* Art Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow of No Towers* (a graphic novel), Ken Kalfus’s *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country,* Frederic Beigbeder’s *Windows on the World* (despite nearly unanimous disdain for its artistic squalor), and, occasionally, John Updike’s *Terrorist* and Ian McEwan’s *Saturday.*

Accompanying this boom, there has also been a growing body of critical work about this emerging literature to accompany Žižek’s and Baudrillard’s canonical philosophical ones. Four major book-length works on 9/11 literature have been published, including Sven Cvek’s *Towering Figures: Reading the 9/11 Archive,* Richard Gray’s *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11,* Kristiaan Versluys’s *Out of the Blue,* and Martin Randall’s *9/11 and the Literature of Terror.* However, while each of the four critics has American ties, some stronger than others, none currently teach or live in America, a fact betrayed the heavy influenced of a particular discursive boundary that seems tied to the European view of 9/11 and its aftermath. Influenced by the philosophical work of Žižek and Baudrillard, these writers stay rather centralized in the theoretical realm, perhaps because of a less direct experience with the trauma. More distressingly,
their critical analyses blend all too often with (not necessarily untrue) European disgust with the American political response, resurgence of capitalist ideals, and consequent lack of global vision. In many of these works, anti-Bush sentiments abound as frequently as direct quotes, and what close analysis exists, unravels quickly into sweeping claims about theory or politics.

While I draw from these canonical, and admittedly insightful studies, I ultimately agree with the emerging sentiment of critics, both American and European, such as Lucy Bond and Laura Tanner (and, perhaps, Martin Randall who seems to be the most sentimental of the four above), that the larger philosophical and, especially political, discourse has overwhelmed a concentrated study how the literature is actually going about carving out a new space for working through the trauma. In the following chapters, I identify a specific methodology of symbolism and structure by 9/11 authors that represents the relative failure or success of modes of working through the trauma.

In this study, I argue that the key method of representing these modes of working through is in the author’s creation of allegorical figures. The first to emerge, particularly in explicit 9/11 literature, is the figure of “The Falling Man,” based on the (in)famous photograph by Richard Drew (Fig. 1.2). The photograph, which captures one of the many (estimates come in at around 200) who jumped to their death rather than burn, inherited its name from the eponymous article in *Esquire* by Tom Junod. Junod’s article, and a subsequent documentary by Henry Singer also named *Falling Man*, chronicle the unsuccessful search for the identity of the anonymous figure. In these, “The Falling Man” is rendered as a failed Messiah of sorts; Junod identifies “the length and narrowness of his face—like that of a medieval Christ” and critic Noah Hamdy argues that, in the series of 12 shots from which the photo is drawn, “the vertical posture of Christ on the cross evokes a parallel to the steel bars of the towers...a visual association which anchors the Falling Man within the topos of religious mythology and ritualizes its replaying as a means to
transcendence and spiritual recovery” (255). However, this promise of salvation from trauma is ultimately ironic; in his anonymity and his inexorable fall, as one critic observes, he “dissolve[s] into an infinite semiosis, a negativité” (Hamdy 250).

In the next two chapters, I approach the Falling Man as an allegorical figure for the failure of traditional modes of working through the trauma of 9/11. Chapter 2 addresses the feelings of emptiness in Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, arguing that the absence of catharsis in the novel is a purposeful endeavor (and not a failed one) by DeLillo. In it, the Falling Man encodes
the means of failure for shared trauma and chronological narrativization of the traumatic events.

Chapter 3 expands upon the failure to work through trauma by identifying the breakdown of communication in *Falling Man* and reading Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* as its explanation. Foer uses the Falling Man as an allegory for the seemingly inexorable rupture in meaning that empties signifiers of meaning and frustrates the palimpsestic use of symbols.

However, the re-emergence of the 1970’s funambulist Philippe Petit, who illegally strung and walked a tight-rope across the WTC in 1974, as a viable literary/artistic subject provides a response to these traumatic failures. In reversing the visual and narrative persona of the Falling Man, he provides an allegorical subject for modes of working through the trauma embodied in the fall. While many images of Petit, both filmic and photographic, exist, one in particular demonstrates his reversal of the Falling Man by mirroring the posture – body straight, knee bent—but reversing the axis, suspending what seems to be the same figure mid-air (Fig. 1.3).

The second half of this study explores the way in which the images and figure of Philippe Petit provide the perfect working counternarrative to the trauma of 9/11. Chapter 4 approaches Colum McCann’s *Let the Great World Spin* with an analysis of McCann’s use of Petit as an allegorical figure for the productive process of shared witness (rather than shared experience) and of temporal reconstruction through impressionist art, in which a victim can be aware of the past but move into the present. Finally, Chapter 5 analyzes the use of the heist and documentary genres in James Marsh’s film *Man on Wire* to show how impressionist art can offer a closure to the rupture in the sign by breaking down the hegemony of trauma’s law and redrawing new boundary (binary) lines.

With these two allegorical figure and four texts, I hope to not only defend the work of DeLillo and Foer by showing that their perceived failures in writing are, in fact, insightful representation of the failure of working through the unique trauma of 9/11, but also to look at their exact definitions for the reasons behind that failure. Likewise, I hope that the study of recent work about Philippe Petit can clarify his role in 9/11 and provide a new understanding of ways to approach the ongoing process of recovering, individually and nationally, from the events of September 11.
Chapter 2

“There’s an empty space where American used to be”: Failures of Communality and Temporality in Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*

Marianne Hirsch’s explanation of her own experience with 9/11, documented with photographs, avers that it was “The most photographed disaster in history” (69). In literary circles, the syntax of this sentence is eerily familiar, recalling Don DeLillo’s famous “Most photographed barn in America” from *White Noise*. Whether or not Hirsch is actively alluding to this icon of modern American simulacra, it should come as no surprise to see DeLillo’s language creeping into discussions of 9/11. Not only is DeLillo part of the Baudrillardian critical camp that somewhat determines the relevant language of 9/11 theory, but he also published a widely-read early response to the attacks in *Harper’s*, “In the Ruins of the Future,” in which he claims that “The narrative ends in the rubble and it is left to us to create the counternarrative” (34).

It is no surprise, then, that so much effort has been put into scouring DeLillo’s novels, even those written before the attacks, for working examples of this counternarrative. After all, as both reviews and analysis of his books proclaim, Don DeLillo was made for 9/11 and vice versa. In his review of *Falling Man* for *Esquire*, aptly named “The Man who Invented 9/11,” Tom Junod, a man who seems equally as inseparable from the event, writes,

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.
However, when *Falling Man* was released in 2007, it was not the glorious, messianic novel many hoped for. It received mixed to negative reviews, and even the few positive reviews offered only lukewarm compliments, caveated with rhetoric that defended the novel against the larger scope expected of it. Most sound something like Frank Rich’s *New York Times* review: “Though the sensibility and prose are echt DeLillo, ‘Falling Man’ is not necessarily the 9/11 novel you’d expect from the author of panoramic novels that probe the atomic age (‘Underworld’) and the Kennedy assassination (‘Libra’) on the broadest imaginable canvas, intermingling historical characters with fictional creations.”

*Falling Man* is, indeed, a much more quiet, personal, and domestic novel than anyone expected from DeLillo. This, combined with its melancholic tone and circular narrative, led many critics to dub the novel somewhat of a failure. A catalogue of various responses reveals the breadth of criticism for DeLillo’s novel: Cheryl Miller chastises DeLillo for clinging to his “alienated and uncommunicative anti-hero” and “elliptical, mannered dialogue” (32); Adam Thrushwell, that the novel is “reabsorbed into the system of capital exchange that it seeks to contest” (282); Catherine Morley simply claims the novel is too “domestic” for the scope of 9/11; Rachael Greenwald Smith, that it “insists on the transformative force of the event even as it tends to ‘assimilate the unfamiliar into familiar structures’” (154).

The quote alluded to in Smith’s review refers to a now infamous section of Richard Gray’s *After the Fall*, in which he proclaims *Falling Man* the archetype of a failed 9/11 novel. Like Smith, who thought that the novel seemed “aware of its own aesthetic armor” (R. G. Smith 154), Gray believes that *Falling Man* is “beautifully structured…but the structure is too clearly foregrounded, the style excessively mannered; and the characters fall into postures of survival after 9/11 that are too familiar to invite much more than a gesture of recognition from the reader” (27). To Gray, the perceived affectation of the novel’s style and the emotional stasis of the
characters, however artfully wrought they may be, result in a novel that is “immured in the melancholic state, offering a verbal equivalent of immobility, that it is symptom rather than diagnosis” (28). Gray is not the only one to argue that the novel is stuck in the process of acting-out, perhaps even to the extreme of Freud’s melancholia. However, what his and others’ posturing belies is the fact that the novel is being judged as unsuccessful based on its efficacy as a psychological tool and not as a novel. In other words, the resounding sentiment is that *Falling Man* is not the 9/11 novel we were looking for not because it fails to adequately represent its themes, but because those themes are not the optimistic avenues of working-through that we so acutely desired.

While siding with Gray on issues of structural self-awareness, R. G. Smith, on the other hand, moves on from this judgment to laud *Falling Man* for its postmodern structure. It is the job of these 9/11 novels, she says, to do something new: “if September 11 novels do not appear to represent the ‘new world’ view aesthetically, it is tempting to conclude that there is something disturbing amiss in the field of the literary” (154). She does note, however, that the specific “historical conditions of the post-9/11 period in the United States “creates a “difficulty in channeling the traumatic force of 9/11 in a way that encourages new ways of thinking, feeling, and creating” (155). If this is true, then a novel truly about 9/11 may never represent these “new ways” of working through the trauma.

Critics who dismiss DeLillo’s novel as a failure of working through trauma ultimately miss the point. Instead, I argue, DeLillo’s novel chooses its own failure, the failure of existing modes of traumatic coping in these unique “historical conditions.” A close look at DeLillo’s allegorical employment of the Falling Man reveals that his novel encodes the failures of community and chronology as nodes for psychological restoration. Rather than providing a center point for recontextualizing the attacks or unifying experience, the novel calls for a different
method of coping, even if it cannot provide the answer or the methodology for reaching one. DeLillo is, after all, an author and not a psychologist, and his task is to chronicle the times, perhaps to critique them, but not to solve them in the way so many critics were, justifiably, hoping for.³

A Failure of Collectivizing Traumatic Experience

While it is the phenomenological latency that is the primary defining symptom of trauma, the rupture of community is the most visible and practical of the gaps caused by trauma and is consequently foregrounded in many discussions of trauma theory. Identifying and classifying the means by which trauma victims feel isolated from their surroundings and from each other is instrumental in determining the degree to which the traditional psychological responses (e.g. group therapy sessions) can heal psychological wounds.

An ongoing debate between E. Ann Kaplan and Cathy Caruth highlights the difficulty in determining the relative success of communal working-through of trauma. Both theorists ultimately agree that “Massive trauma ruptures social bonds, undermines community, destroys previous sources of support and may even traumatize those members of a community, society or social group who were absent when the catastrophe or persecution took place” (qtd. in Kaplan 66). The traditional solution to his problem is the sharing of stories in group therapy, providing a community of shared experience with whom to identify. Cathy Caruth, however, argues that attempts to share stories fail, as “the possibility that reference is indirect, and that consequently we may not have direct access to others’, or even our own, histories, seems to imply the impossibility of access to other cultures and hence of any means of making political or ethical judgments” (Caruth, Unclaimed 10). Kaplan, despite beginning with the same bleak definition, ultimately disagrees with “Caruth’s insistence on the ‘unspeakability’ and ‘unrepresentability’ of
trauma: I will argue that telling stories about trauma, even though the story can never actually repeat or represent what happened, may partly achieve a certain ‘working through’ for the victim. It may also (my main concern in this book) permit a kind of empathic ‘sharing’ that moves us forward, if only by inches” (Kaplan 37). Looking at photography, one of the primary media for creating a common text for large-scale communal trauma, can help to understand whether Caruth’s or Kaplan’s conclusions is correct about 9/11.

True iconic photographs have an ability to acknowledge (or create) collective experience and collective memories that “allow for the fabrication, rearrangement, elaboration, and omission of details about past, often pushing aside accuracy and authenticity so as to accommodate broader issues of identity formation, power and authority, and political affiliation” (qtd. in Hill & Helmers 77). By generalizing the specifics of the experience and, instead, providing avenues of collective ontological stability, these public photos attempt to provide the framework for the communal story. Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites analyze these public photos in No Caption Needed, dubbing them “icons.” To Hariman and Lucaites, an icon is a photograph that uses a balance of anonymity and personal identification to arrive at a central place of “public judgment… [that] always shifts the emphasis from individual experience to social types, characteristic responses, and collective obligations” (90). While Hariman and Lucaites are not wholly condoning of the process, they nevertheless define the way in which an icon can create a common morality and signification to interpret a crisis point.

The continuous media coverage of 9/11 presented America with a glut of images to fill this role for the absence of the towers. With most of America watching the same live footage, it would seem as though the communality of viewership would begin to hone in on a single image or two of the attacks and/or the aftermath. Yet, no one photograph emerged to fill the kind of role that Joe Rosenthal’s photograph of soldiers raising a flag on Iwo Jima or Nick Ut’s 1974
photograph of a Vietnamese girl running from napalm were able to do for similar cultural crisis points of earlier generations.

One candidate, proposed by Hill and Helmers, is Thomas Franklin’s “Ground Zero Spirit” (Fig. 2.1). This photograph draws much of its power, say Hill and Helmers, from its resemblance to Rosenthal’s unquestionably iconic photograph. Both photographs share a historical role in an attempt to reconstitute national pride in the wake of an attack on American soil (9/11 and Pearl Harbor, respectively) through the transcendent American flag. Both emphasize a sense of American togetherness in the collaboration of their endeavors. Likewise, the central figures in each became the hallmark figures of the event: young soldiers in WWII and NY Firefighters on 9/11. Franklin’s photograph did, in fact, become the front man for the nationalist media band in the years after the attack, even though it never had the same social impact as Rosenthal’s. But another photographic candidate – one that more resembled the painfully voyeuristic “Napalm Girl” than the nationally composed “Raising a Flag on Iwo Jima”—lurked in the shadows.

Figure 2.1. Franklin, Thomas. “Ground Zero Spirit.” 2001. The Record.
Richard Drew was certain that “The Falling Man” (See: Fig. 1.2, p. 10) would become a candidate for the iconic photograph of 9/11, as was chronicler Tom Junod. Even though Drew admits in Henry Singer’s documentary that, at first, “I didn’t recognize the objects I was seeing as people…that thought was too horrendous to me” (Singer), he later understands that the photographs must be iconic because they were “the only visible fatalities in a day that claimed thousands” (Singer). Junod agrees that the photograph offers a corporeal truth where it was otherwise lacking:

And it was, at last, the sight of the jumpers that provided the corrective to those who insisted on saying that what they were witnessing was "like a movie," for this was an ending as unimaginable as it was unbearable: Americans responding to the worst terrorist attack in the history of the world with acts of heroism, with acts of sacrifice, with acts of generosity, with acts of martyrdom, and, by terrible necessity, with one prolonged act of—if these words can be applied to mass murder—mass suicide.

When Henry Singer was also asked about his own opinions on the photograph, he reveals that he believed that there was also power in its aesthetic/psychological existence: “It captures the last moments of somebody’s life but it does so in a way that is peaceful and beautiful at the same time. That is one of the many reasons why it has burned itself into the consciousness of anybody who has looked at it” (Levy).

There is, as Singer alludes to, an aesthetic unity to the photograph that would seem to invite viewership. The most thoughtful analyses of its visual rhetoric are done by social critic Susan Lurie and art critic Andrea D. Fitzpatrick, both of whom agree with Singer that the image ultimately shows a gracefulness and even serenity in the man’s posture (a closer look at the other images in Drew’s series of the man show that his “missile-position” was merely a chance shot) that would seem to elicit a positive response. The serenity is reinforced by a “visual rhyme
between the man’s body and the building girders” (Lurie 44), in both the colors of his clothes (Lurie 44 and Fitzpatrick 84) and in their shared linearity (qtd. in Fitzpatrick 88). This is the impetus for Fitzpatrick’s claim that the photograph reinforces a psychological link already drawn by American viewers: “Tall buildings are metaphorically people standing erect. As each tower fell, it became a body falling” (88). As the “man’s world is shrunk to the context of the doomed towers” (Lurie 44), he becomes the perfect icon for the towers’ collapse. Ready, then, for his photograph to reach iconic status, Drew submitted his photo, and it was printed the following day, September 12, 2001, on page seven of The New York Times, and on many front pages nationwide.

DeLillo invokes the growing symbolic significance of “The Falling Man” for his title; like the photograph, in which Americans were supposed to see their own individual traumatic experiences ascribed, DeLillo’s title is meant to act as a source of collection for individual experiences of trauma regarding the towers. Linda S. Kaufman begins her study of Falling Man with just such a summary of the pronominal role of the titular character:

…while the title is singular, the novel portrays many falling men – and women. First is the man in a white chef’s coat and black shoes, plunging head first from the World Trade Center, immortalized in Richard Drew’s photograph—the shot seen round the world. The second falling man is Keith Neudecker, who survives the twin towers’ collapse, but is haunted by his colleagues’ deaths. Thirdly, Keith sees a white shirt float to earth. The novel begins and ends with this—literally disembodied—image of pity and terror. The fourth is a performance artist billed as “Falling Man,” who stages impromptu parachute jumps around New York City. (“Bodies in Rest” 135)

In the image of the Falling Man and in its emulation by the performer David Janiak, each of DeLillo’s characters is to share in similar ontological loss inherent in the experience of falling.
The novel would seem to support this reading, as it abounds with meetings, pairs, reunions, and relationships. Lianne works for a group therapy session for Alzheimer’s patients; her son finds camaraderie with a neighborhood friend, scouring the sky for planes; and Lianne’s reunion of sorts with her mother brings her some comfort. Keith’s affair with Florence appears as an especially promising example of the healing power of shared experience. After Keith returns her briefcase, which he absentmindedly brought with him from the rubble of the towers, they begin a cathartic sexual and (relatively) communicative relationship. Florence, at least, feels as though Keith “saved [her] life” through their “get[ting] to know each other” (108-9) by sharing their stories from the towers. When Keith finds Florence, someone with whom he can share this direct experience, he also discovers a sense of catharsis that he cannot find with those who experience it indirectly, such as Lianne or the members of his Poker group, despite his attempts and reconnection in those venues. Perhaps, this relationship is even meant to serve as a microcosm for a larger sense of national identity founded in shared experience. The novel is rife, after all, with references to a national whole, such as one character’s statement that “We’re still America” (192) after the attacks. Martin, Lianne’s father, says on a separate occasion that 9/11 “is not an attack on one country, one or two cities. All of us, we are targets now” (47).

The aspect of those final quotes that is so powerful is the all-encompassing nature of the pronouns. Suddenly, the diverse national identity of America is melted into a collective “we” and “us.” However, DeLillo must move backwards from the resultant collective “we,” and show how 9/11 did, in fact, create a universal experience through which the characters can unite. To do this, he structures his novel around open-ended pronouns that collect all possible antecedent characters under the umbrellas of the subsequent experience. In fact, the novel’s first actor is simply an unspecified “he” (1). The anonymity of this pronoun, much like the anonymity of the Falling Man
in the title of the novel and in Drew’s photograph, genericizes the experience and allows for easier vicarious experience.

Of course, the reader eventually reconstructs the diegetic identity of the pronoun from context (the antecedent-less “he” and “she” that begin the first few chapters refer to Keith and Lianne), but as more and more possible antecedents develop (such as the first time that “she” refers, instead, to Florence), the compounding effect is a blurring of the lines that distinguish who is committing or receiving any given specific action. Consequently, the pronouns not only operate metonymically, through their representation of a closest syntactical nominalization, but metaphorically as well, implying that the experience could be any one or more of the possible characters. For instance, Chapter Ten begins with an innocuous action that could be the story of many possible characters:

They walked the entire route, north for twenty blocks and then across town and finally down toward Union Square, a couple of miles in steam heat, with police in riot helmets and flak jackets, small children riding their parents’ shoulders. They walked with five hundred thousand others, a bright swarm of people ranging sidewalk to sidewalk, banners and posters, printed shirts, coffins draped in black, a march against the war, the president, the policies. (181)

In this instance, the acting pronoun refuses the reader even number and gender by which to apply a “proper” antecedent, and it could, therefore, refer to nearly any pair in the book. Keith has walked a similar route to see Florence; Lianne has previously walked with her mother, Nina, and her father, Martin, both separately and together, and also with her son; we have previous descriptions of an unidentified “they” in the people running from the towers in first chapter. Of course, another assumption would be that one of the “they” is the new character of “David Janiak,” who is the namesake of Part Three, which begins on the preceding page.
This specific example may be rather inconsequential in the scheme of the novel and 9/11 trauma, but when “she lived in the spirit of what is ever impending” (212) or when “he was walking north through rubble and mud and there were people running past holding towels to their faces or jackets over their heads” (3), the reader is transported, along with each of the possible precursor characters into the feeling of loss or even into the experience of the attacks themselves. These shared pronouns would seem to provide an avenue of shared experience which should be the catalyst for the process of working through the trauma.

Of course, as all of the theorists and reviewers note, the characters do not succeed in working through the trauma; they remain stuck in the inescapable acting-out of melancholy. The shared experience implied by DeLillo’s unfettered use of pronouns fails to provide the necessary unifying experience, much as the “The Falling Man” photograph failed to do in the media, for despite Drew, Junod, and Singer’s belief in the photograph’s unique quality, it did not become the icon it seemed destined to be. Neither the photograph nor the experiences of the universal pronouns truly captures the individually diverse traumas experienced by victims and witness of 9/11, a day that featured so many different forms of terror.

Instead of acceptance as a beautiful, elegiac representation of the attacks, Drew’s photograph was met with near universal dismay and disgust. Junod catalogs various negative responses to the photograph, most notably Mayor Giuliani’s and one viewer’s response to a rare photograph in “Here is New York” to feature jumpers: “This image is what made me glad for censuring [sic] in the endless pursuant media coverage” (qtd. In Junod). In the end, many newspapers stopped publishing it, some even rescinding issues and publishing apologies. There are many theories to account for the societal rejection and psychological failure of “The Falling Man” and other images of falling. Returning to the contrast between Franklin’s firemen and Drew’s falling man, Noha Hamdy bluntly sets the stage: “the images of rescue workers and
firefighters were among the most frequently disseminated, [while] those of people jumping from the towers were trapped in an iconic impenetrability” (Hamdy 253). Perhaps it is that simple, that in the wake of tragedy Americans superficially preferred the hopeful messages of less-challenging moral hero formation to those that challenge the symbolic moral order. Other attempts to define its societal failure include Levy’s and others’ argument that it simply calls up too many difficult and confusing emotions simultaneously and Jeffrey Alexander’s that it fails because it does not provide a counterpoint to the emerging myth of Osama bin Laden (Alexander 98). However, Hamdy finally returns the failure to the psychological realm in admitting that the photograph “was singled out as a moment embodying the ‘Destructive sublime’” (249). In Keniston and Quinn’s Literature after 9/11, Laura Frost summarizes that “Psychological studies after 9/11 singled out witnessing falling people—live or on TV—as a major predictor of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): this, of the many upsetting images from the day, had a lasting traumatic effect on some viewers” (180). Whether it is a simple emotional response or one rooted more deeply in psychoanalytic roots, the photograph nevertheless failed to produce a collective experience of or a communal avenue for working through trauma.

Of course, it is of note, that the initial fervor behind Franklin’s “Spirit” also waned and failed to step into the role of iconic 9/11 photograph. In fact, no photograph has become the necessary lasting image (at least no one image) of the crisis point, because, as DeLillo understood, there is something about 9/11 that thwarts attempts at communality and for which Falling Man serves as allegory: the inescapable modern condition of perspectivism. Susan Sontag argues that photographs may have the power to transform, and thereby ascribe meaning, but it “extends to everyone the possibility of making disinterested judgments about importance, interest, beauty” (Sontag, On Photography 176). The open interpretation of photographs, especially of the mysterious “Falling Man,” encourages a Saussurian response of arbitrary (or at
least personal) allocation of meaning. This internal process of ascribing meaning changes the image into something “as it is not in real life” (Sontag, Regarding 76), and it cannot, therefore, be related to another person. This lack of collective meaning-making challenges the communal role of photography in the traumatic sphere. In practice, Sontag would say, few photographs truly operate “iconically” in the Hariman and Lucaites sense because “Photographs of an atrocity may give rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry for revenge. Or simply the bemused awareness, continually restocked by photographic information, that terrible things happen” (Sontag, Regarding 13). DeLillo is acutely aware of the fact of perspectivism, as so many of his novels attest, and is, according to John D. Duvall, “aware that the destruction of the towers, broadcast live to the world as it was psychologically scarred millions of viewers, but he resists the notion of a new American identity based on collective trauma” (Duvall 152). Instead, DeLillo represents the complete failure of collectivizing the trauma of 9/11, as his metaphorical pronouns collapse under the pressure of attempting to unite such disparate entities as the traumatized American public.

The textual Falling Man (performance artist David Janiak, who recreates Drew’s photograph by suspending himself from buildings), like DeLillo’s title, is called upon to signify multiple people. In the novel, he represents “those stark moments in the burning towers when people fell or were forced to jump” (DeLillo 33). The plurality and ambiguity of the “people” in this sentence reinforces the comprehensive nature of this metaphor (which extends even to the embodiment of abstract ideas like “human desperation” [33]). He even literally seems to join people together in a shared experience, like a true iconic photograph; when Lianne stumbles across a performance, she notes the explicit diversity of its spectators: young students, a foreign woman in the window, commuters on the train, and a homeless man with whom she sought to “share a look…see what she herself was feeling” (DeLillo 163). Instead, however, Lianne realizes
that the Falling Man does not have the power to unify these radically diverse characters; each would only be able to “try to describe what they’ve seen or what others nearby have seen and are now trying to describe to them” (165, emphasis mine), without, one is to believe, much success.\(^9\)

In similar manner, the novel foils all of the attempts at unity pursued by its characters. Despite progress, however minimal, in their relationship, Keith and Lianne end apart, with Keith chasing his poker games and Lianne “ready to be alone, in reliable calm, she and the kid, the way they were before the planes appeared that day, silver crossing blue” (DeLillo 236). Likewise Lianne’s second family dynamic – she, Nina, and Martin – also remains unresolved. Even the promising connection between Florence and Keith is nearly absent from the final third of the book, as Keith ends their relationship.

The ultimate theme and aesthetic of the novel is, purposefully, a feeling of disconnection and disunity. In addition to the stilted dialogue that is characteristic of DeLillo, in which characters seem to be having contemporaneous monologues rather than discussion, the larger trifurcated structure disrupts what little unified narrative survives the discontinuous chronology. The specific namesakes of the three sections (“Bill Lawton,” “Ernst Hechinger,” and “David Janiak”) serve as much more fitting allegories for the novel’s failure at unification than the titular Falling Man does for its success. John N. Duvall, Joseph Conte (“Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* and the Age of Terror”), and Jen Webb have all identified the confused identities of these section titles as the major device for the text’s larger failure to properly provide ontological stability. All three section headers are names either falsely created or abandoned by the figures to which they refer. The first refers to two children’s mistaken hearing and consequent Anglicization of the name “Bin Laden;” the second to the real life art dealer for whom Martin is either an allusion or alias; the third, the real name of the performer who is known as Falling Man. Instead of the characters existing under the metaphorically open “Falling Man” who can allude to many of the
characters, DeLillo gives us sub-section epithets that refer to no one, and certainly not any of the protagonists. These multiple failures of connection—the failure of the pronominal collectivization, the actual character relationships, the complicated process of naming—lead Jen Webb to conclude that “Slippage of identity is one of the devices used in this novel, and its effect is to problematise relationships, causality, responsibility and presence” (58).

Interpretation is a complicated process to DeLillo. Embedded in its very nature is a process of perspectivism that limits any sense of collective identification. The individuality of perspective is only exacerbated by the extreme and variously unique trauma of 9/11, leaving its victims and witness ultimately unable to find a sense of community in any shared experience. One of the spectators of the Falling Man “saw something elaborately different from what he encountered step by step in the ordinary run of hours,” and was forced by the sublime unfamiliarity of the event to “find a crack in the world where it might fit” (DeLillo 168). As each individual finds the crack to fit their trauma, it becomes readily apparent that there is little room left for anyone else’s.

In Towering Figures: Reading the 9/11 Archive, Sven Cvek, concludes his section on DeLillo, and Falling Man in particular, with a similar observation. In the structural digressions, melancholic characters, and failed relationships that other critics have deemed ‘failures,’ Cvek sees a successful representation of “the fundamental emptiness of such a traumatic emergence of subjectivity: instead of a renewed national body and a reconstituted community, the novel offers a vision of arrested life in a state of emergency” (186). Cvek’s use of “arrested” in the final line signals the immobility of acting-out in which the novel’s characters are imprisoned, but it also recalls the other major failure of traumatic healing represented in the novel: the frozen time that prevents closing a golden “before” and a horrific “after.”
A Failure of Temporal Reconstruction

At the mid-point of the novel, DeLillo muses that “These are the days after. Everything now is measured by after” (138). This sentiment is the foundation for Cvek’s notion of the “arrested life” represented in the novel. While Cvek eventually detours to a discussion of irrevocably altered global politics, he nevertheless notices the centrality of this motif in both Falling Man and in other 9/11 literature. In an earlier chapter, he alludes to a line from Ken Kalfus’s A Disorder Peculiar to the Country: “Now you know what it’s like to live in history” (qtd. in Cvek 19). Much as it is the “now” of Kalfus’s line that interest Cvek in his analysis, as “It is a ‘now’ that implies transformation, a change from ‘before’ to ‘after’ that took place in an unnamed instance” (Cvek 19), so too does DeLillo’s line interest me. To Kalfus and DeLillo, it is the myth of “now” that dominates traumatic working-through in the context of 9/11, the myth that there is an identifiable “Unnamed instance” of causation that can rejoin the now-disparate timelines of ‘before’ and ‘after.’

Cvek sees the mediated reoccurrence of 9/11 images—“The Falling Man” especially—as the primary rupture in this bifurcation of time:

This is the point made by Susan Lurie in her extensive analysis of the falling man photograph. Lurie claims that the “sights of heretofore unimaginable dangers on US soil instigate what we might call a trauma of spectatorship” In her analysis, 9/11 signifies a break between a “before” in which the sense of US national safety was established exclusively through seeing the suffering of foreign others, and a “now” in which the safety depends on a “transformation of horrifying sights into reassuring ones.” (Cvek 54)

While Lurie’s eventual conclusion about an us/them dichotomy fits Cvek’s political aims in his analysis, she also calls upon the language of traumatic latency to frame her understanding of the relationship between the image and its viewers.
Perhaps the most well-known gap of trauma is this “latency” between initial event (the before) and its re-experiencing (in the time after), which was a central tenet to Freud’s original trauma studies. Cathy Caruth’s definition of PTSD included in the introduction literally centers on the “repeated, intrusive” re-experiencing of the event. In her earlier book, Caruth elucidates the Freudian roots of the term:

In his use of the term latency, the period during which the effects of the experience are not apparent, Freud seems to compare the accident to the successive movement in Jewish history from the event to its repression to its return. Yet what is truly striking about the accident victim’s experience of the event, and that in fact constitutes the central enigma revealed by Freud’s example, is not so much the period of forgetting that occurs after the accident, but rather the fact that the victim of the crash was never fully conscious during the accident itself: the person gets away, Freud says, “apparently unharmed.” (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 17)

The re-experiencing, Caruth continues, “remain[s] unavailable to consciousness but intrude[s] repeatedly on sight—thus suggest[ing] a larger relation to the event that extends beyond what can simply be seen or what can be known, and is inextricably tied up with the belatedness and incomprehensibility that remain at the heart of this repetitive seeing” (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 92). More recent neurological studies confirm that in “trauma the event has affect only, not meaning. It produces emotions—terror, fear, shock—but perhaps above all disruption of the normal feeling of comfort. Only the sensation sector of the brain—the amygdala—is active during the trauma. The meaning-making one (in the sense of rational thought, cognitive processing), namely, the cerebral cortex, remains shut down, because the affect is too much to be registered cognitively in the brain” (Kaplan 34). This missing meaning is the source of the power in that recurrent “now” in 9/11 literature; the characters of the novels, like the real-world victims they represent, are
trapped in a recurrent search for the meaning of the transformative event and for a way to recontextualize the event back into proper historical narrative.¹⁰

If Keith’s trauma in *Falling Man* is representative of the rupture in community, then Lianne’s (and to a lesser extent, Florence’s) trauma is representative of the rupture in chronology.¹¹ Lianne’s everyday life with Keith after the attacks is imbued with a “respect [for] the past, the deference to its fervors of the wrong kind, its passions of cut and burn” (DeLillo 35). She seems to be constantly trying to define the present in terms of the past – to rejoin some version of before and after, perhaps to reestablish a causality that will bring meaning to 9/11. However, her experience with the Alzheimer’s patients reveals two sad truths about the success of these struggles: firstly, she, like her student Carmen G, is temporally ‘cut’ into two: “two women simultaneously, the one sitting here, less combative over time, less clearly defined, speech beginning to drag, and the younger and slimmer and wildly attractive one…a spirited woman in her reckless prime, funny and blunt, spinning on a dance floor” (125).¹² Secondly, the missing traumatic events are “moments frozen in the run of routine hours” (127) that ‘burn’ up the “idea of later” and cause it to remain “elusive” (200) to her. In her analysis of this theme in DeLillo’s novel, Lucy Bond summarizes the predicament. Her argument that “DeLillo portrays the attacks as period of interruptive time; a suspended reality” (Bond 736) recalls the language of Caruth’s definition (and also the different “suspension” of the Falling Man performance artist). She also recalls Lianne’s language of cutting and burning when “This sudden fragmentation of both urbanity and history is represented as having destroyed the continuity of existence, severing the future from the past and, through this amputation, making the present appear only half-formed” (Bond 736).

As a microcosm for the attempt to narrativize the traumatic experience, Lianne makes frequent use of allusion as a rhetorical means of representing this search for connection between
'before’ and ‘after.’ Figuratively, allusions create meaning in a present context through a parallel to a historical occurrence. Ultimately, in *Falling Man*, the goal of an allusion is to relate an absence of meaning in a current situation to a past event whose signifier/signified relationship is established. DeLillo introduces Lianne with a scene of traumatic re-experiencing caused by a postcard featuring a picture of the cover of Shelley’s *Revolt of Islam* (8), a poem whose theme of revolutionary idealism and titular reference to Islam recall in Lianne’s mind the terrorism of 9/11. While the first occurrence of this rhetorical strategy is presented to Lianne, rather than deriving from her own search, it nevertheless transports a past occurrence into the present, albeit, in this case, a negative one. Lianne turns this strategy around, using her own allusions to work through moments of traumatic re-experiencing.

Lianne’s alludes to a Matsuo Bashō poem: “*Even in Kyoto—I long for Kyoto*” (DeLillo 32) as one such attempt. Bashō’s haikus embody (as many do) the ability to construct meaning through the concentration of sensory information. Consequently, it represents Lianne’s attempt to create meaning in two ways: firstly, by using a haiku to render understanding out of the sensory-only traumatic experience, and secondly, by using an allusion to establish meaning through comparison to the Bashō’s subject. This allusion, however, is the epitome of failure, however. In her attempt to recall the past occurrence, “the second line was missing but she didn’t think she needed it” (DeLillo 32). Of course, the completeness of the allusion is necessary, especially in this case, as the missing line is the central one, just like the missing event at the center of the ‘before’ and ‘after.’ She also fails to apply the allusion to the contemporary situation; her attempt to replace “Kyoto” with “New York,” makes her realize that “the [second] line was surely crucial to the poem” (34) and, without it, there can be no meaning. Even the completed allusion (*Even in Kyoto—/Hearing the cuckoo’s cry—/I long for Kyoto*) offers no respite; even with the central line identified, the speaker still ends with a feeling of loss and longing.
The failure of iconic photography in the media of 9/11 mirrors the failure of Lianne’s allusive search, in that neither fully negotiates the difficult relationship between traumatic past and present. Photography would seem to be a powerful entity for accomplishing this, as its format navigates the temporal deferral inherent to trauma. Hirsch elaborates upon her earlier description about the relationship between trauma and photography by arguing that “To photograph, we might say, is to look in different way—to look without understanding. Understanding is deferred until we see the developed image. This deferral is as inherent to photography as it is to trauma, enabling photography to help us understand the traumatic events of September 11” (Hirsch 72). Since photography emulates traumatic viewing in its deferral, its meaning-making process follows the same meaning-making process as the traumatic brain. But, unlike the brain that has failed to fully capture the initial event, a photograph properly captures and transports the past (you can’t forget a second line of a photograph, after all). Roland Barthes’s connection of photography and death in Camera Lucida is dependent upon the fact that “What the photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially” (Barthes 4). Barthes seems to be specifically referring to photographs like the “Falling Man,” which is impressively frozen in free fall, “immobiliz[ing] a rapid scene in its decisive instant” (Barthes 33). Its existence allows for the repetition of an event that is existentially, and practically, unrepeatable. A closer look at Drew’s series only increases the appreciation for this frozen moment, as it reveals the figure in unchoreographed falling, with this frozen moment the most picturesque (Fig. 2.2).
This perfectly captured moment, then, should provide the missing link in the gap between ‘before’ and ‘after’ by providing a composed, recognizable traumatic incident as reference point, an existent ‘now’ to fulcrum the traumatic effect.

However, as we now know, America patently rejected the photograph. Something about this specific photograph seems to exacerbate issues already surrounding photographs as representation of trauma. Andrea D. Fitzpatrick summarizes and paraphrases the relevant (and famous) passage form Barthes:

The photograph is both testament to and index of a past moment and the subject who inhabited it. The temporality associated with photography's noeme is thus complexly associated with death, pointing in its dual movements to the past and the future. Not only do photographs enact a type of metaphysical death (a petrification, a freezing) of the sitter, but they also, because they often depict people who have died since their likeness was taken, prefigure the sitter's death. Further, they are harbingers for the living, forcing on the viewer the poignant awareness that her or his own looks are taking place in stolen, fleeting time. (Fitzpatrick 89)
In other words, while photographs capture and transport the past, they do so with an intimation of death inherent in time’s passing. Like Barthes, Susan Sontag sees impending doom in inherent qualities of photography. In a great display of pessimism, Sontag proclaims that “The contingency of photographs confirms that everything is perishable; the arbitrariness of photographic evidence indicates that reality is fundamentally unclassifiable. Reality is summed up in an array of casual fragments—an endlessly alluring, poignantly reductive way of dealing with the world” (Sontag, *On Photography* 80). In true deconstructive fashion, Sontag argues that the ability of photography to “freeze time…testif[ies] to time’s relentless melt” (15).

If it is the frozen time that is primarily to blame for the incursion of feelings of death, then images of falling bodies are especially notorious, and not just for obvious reasons. Laura Frost’s analysis of these photographs—such as Drew’s and Lyle Owerko’s version in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*—brings her to an extension of Sontag’s theses:

Photography’s therapeutic function seems to fail in the case of the falling people in that it does not move its viewer out of the stunned present of traumatic time. Sontag concedes that photographs are powerful, “but they are not much help if the task is to understand. Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us” (*Regarding* 89). In the case of the falling people, the “still life” of photography represents disavowal or a repetition compulsion that cannot reach its goal. The stories of people falling from the building are impossible to reconstruct unless done through narrative.

(193)

Frost draws two clear points about the failure of the “Falling Man.” First, it cannot be properly narrativized. Since the photograph cannot be contextualized, it cannot continue the ‘before-during-after’ pattern sought by Lianne, and by extension, America. The second, related, point is
that the photograph’s resemblance to repetition haunts the viewer and causes the re-experiencing that thwarts attempts at working through.

To Kaplan, the rampant mediation of the attacks ensured this incursion of the past onto the present. Kaplan was far from the only one to notice that “the phenomenon of 9/11 was perhaps the supreme example of a catastrophe that was experienced globally via digital technologies (Internet, cell phone) as well as by television and radio” (Kaplan 2). Consequently, rather than a gap in memory to be completed psychologically, exterior images constantly bombarded the traumatized witness, which “seemed to feed trauma by being so highly visual in its happening” (13). She continues, in an echo of Sontag’s language, that “the images haunted one waking and dreaming. American culture was visually haunted” (13). This constant recurrence of images does not allow the traditional “working-through” of trauma therapy and ensures the re-experiencing by forcing images upon the victim. In this case, hallucinations are not even needed to re-experience the trauma; one need only turn on the television.

It is the photograph of the “Falling Man,” then, and DeLillo’s own textual version that encode the failure of narrativization. It is the omnipresent “falling” (whether it is in the performer’s name, the title of the novel, or the underlying collapse of the towers) that demonstrate why traumatic re-experiencing trumps narrative reconstruction. Jen Webb, who already pointed out the breakdown of community in DeLillo’s novel, sees in this word “falling” a grammatical representation of the failure:

*Falling* is a present participle, a continuous present, a derivative of a non-finite verb. The action of the verb is not completed; and indeed, the verb has departed from the scene, leaving behind only a descriptor. What this means is that the action evoked by the participle is ongoing….the falling man of Drew’s photograph, or of DeLillo’s novel, goes on falling, suspended as if by magic in that non-finite moment of time. (Webb 58)
Now, this is a rather limited view of the present participle, and only touches upon one possible interpretation of the word, the “ongoing.” Depending on the interpretation of the precise tenses of “falling,” the metaphor can be an immediate singular event, a persistently durational event, or a chronically repeated event, each with different symbolic possibilities.

If it is a singularity—a man who is currently falling but will eventually land—then the event and the person(s) it represents only the immediacy of the traumatic crash. But in this case, DeLillo seems more interested in the other two possibilities. If we interpret the fall as continuous, as Webb does, as the same man falling forever into the past and forever into the future, then he might symbolically provide an actual avenue of working through in his resemblance to the divinely eternal (“the is, was, and ever shall be”) that is the only possible solution to Lianne’s search. However, if the fall is, instead, interpreted as chronically repetitious (as in a man who chronically falls in many individualized instances) then it is an endless, precise repetition of a single antecedent event, like traumatic re-experiencing.

DeLillo takes great pain to dispel the productive possibility that the Falling Man is an unchanging continuation of the originally; his obituary makes a point of his impermanence, as it claims that his acts made him notorious only “for a time” (DeLillo 219). Furthermore, Lianne’s post-obituary search came up with a list that clearly recontextualizes the man in his repetitious jumps:

Dangling from the balcony of an apartment building on

Central Park West.

Suspended from the roof of a loft building in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn.

Dangling from the flies at Carnegie hall during a concert,

string section scattered…. (DeLillo 220)
The parallelism in these descriptions reinforce the repetitive (over continuous) nature of his actions. The implication is that each repeated jump is a new context for the repeated event; just like the visions, dreams, and hallucinations that haunt the PTSD victim, the trauma recurs in new, seemingly unrelated contexts. The Falling Man, then, represents the failure of temporal healing because the repetitive nature of the event, intensified by its mediation.

This allegorical model (established in Lianne’s own use of allusion) extrapolates back to her struggles with her personal history, including the terrorist attacks, but also her father’s struggle with early-onset Alzheimer’s and her own fear of the disease, as they shape her contemporary identity. Therefore, her desire to recover and reconcile with a clear antecedent past should not be surprising. Her primary plan for this is through her belief in the ontological power of activities like those of the “storyline sessions” (DeLillo 29) with the group of Alzheimer’s patients that she leads. In these sessions, the patients are asked to write about memories from their past, although they often request to “write about the planes” (DeLillo 31), specifically. Clearly it is their traumatic memory of 9/11 that is likewise haunting their attempts at memory. Lianne seeks to restore historical order not only for her own sake, but for the sake of these patients, who must connect back to a past before disease and before terrorism.

However, the patients, like allusions, the Falling Man, and Lianne herself, are not able to overcome the interstice between past and present in their writing; to one, Curtis B., “there was a spatial void, or a visual gap, a rift in his field of vision” (DeLillo 95). Writing moved them closer to understand the absent middle, but they only “approached what was impending, each of them, with a little space remaining, at this point, to stand and watch it happen” (94). The necessary last step through the remaining space is never taken, however, and it leaves two incongruent parts; Lianne, like one of her other patients, feels, once again, like “two women simultaneously, the one sitting here … and the younger” (DeLillo 125), far from the temporally unified, centered identity.
she hopes to attain. To Kristiaan Versluys, these Alzheimer’s patients “epitomize the tenor of the novel” (35), a tenor of “pure melancholia without the possibility of mourning” (20). Unlike those critics who argue that this novel fails because of that tenor, Versluys sees a successful representation of trauma in *Falling Man*. As the characters fumbling attempts at finding an absent center fail, DeLillo understands that existing modes of coping with the trauma of 9/11 are just “a series of ineffective holding actions against death and despair” (23). It is, ultimately, the working-through that fails, not the novel that represents it.
Chapter 3

“They believed in the dog”: Empty Signifiers and Shifting Signifieds in Jonathan Safran Foer’s Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close

There is an old joke that goes like this: “Did you hear about the dyslexic, agnostic insomniac? He stayed up all night wondering if there was a dog.” If we agree that, in response to their traumatic experiences with 9/11, DeLillo’s characters are certainly insomniac and, at best, agnostic, then the only remaining question is whose existence they ponder. While Lianne’s ontological search eventually takes her explicitly to God, Keith’s trauma in the World Trade Center leads him to “believ[e] in the dog” (58). This pun—although more sad than funny—reveals a very real issue that compounds the difficulty in healing the trauma of 9/11 for these characters: the attacks not only challenged larger structures of community and chronology, but also the very efficacy of language and the semiological system as the basic meaning-making tools.

As Don DeLillo demonstrates in Falling Man, the existing solutions to the temporal and communal ruptures of trauma fizzle in the face of the rampant mediation of the attacks and its individualized experiences. With this failure, consequently, attempts at healing have but one remaining path: the necessary task becomes “translating’ trauma—that is, of finding ways to make meaning out of, and to communicate catastrophes that happen to others as well as to oneself” (Kaplan 19). This seems like a normal extension of psychological treatment, but narrativizing the trauma relies on language working effectively to “translate” individualized experience into universal understanding. Unfortunately, the effectiveness of language fails Keith, Lianne, and DeLillo’s other characters just as acutely as the social means.
Martin Randall sees “the ambiguity of meaning inherent in signs and symbols” (124) as the dominant theme of *Falling Man*, as characters both fail to read the “precise definition” of “things that appear to signify particular meanings” (123-4) and fail to speak “a language to articulate this changed world” (125). After all, to these characters, “everything seemed to mean something,” their lives consumed with a “search for signs” (DeLillo 67). Despite the seemingly obsessive attempt to make the process of naming meaningful by constantly speaking and writing and musing over it, and despite attempts to ascribe meaning to the active symbolism of the attacks at every turn, ultimately, the characters’ attempts at language and communication fail, as we are introduced to translations, polyglottal scenes and characters, and modern art furiously open to interpretation. Even the book that Lianne is editing, which promises access to all the ancient alphabets ever used, provides “no language, it seemed, to tell them how he spent his nights and days” (197).

This process of meaning-making, much like the attempt to work through the psychological re-experiencing of the trauma, is challenged by the serious and ubiquitous mediation of the attacks. Seemingly without purposeful invocation of Jean Baudrillard’s language of Simulacra, Kaplan wonders aloud if “the ‘realness’ of 9/11 [is] being gelled into stock images, stock forms that would forever limit its meanings” (Kaplan 17). As the simulacra—the images of the attack—begin to replace the experience of the attack themselves for many of the victims and witnesses alike, the same semiological issues that interested Baudrillard threaten the possibility of productive post-traumatic understanding. In separate studies of the application of Baudrillard to Don DeLillo’s novels, Paolo Simonetti and Leonard Wilcox study the way in which DeLillo responds to the symbolic realm of terrorism. Simonetti argues that “terrorism is a self-conscious symbolic act that must be correctly interpreted and endowed with meaning to reach its goal, though one of its key aspects is its utter unpredictability” (557). Likewise, Wilcox notes that
“The terrorist attack does not, in and of itself, ‘speak’ in symbolic terms; rather it leaves a gaping hole in representation and our sense of the event’s meaning comes belatedly through the process of articulation” (100). In these two quotes, the vocabulary of language’s failure—“unpredictability” and “gaping hole in representation,” respectively—overwhelms the statements about the need for interpretation and articulation.

The third gap of trauma—that in the narrative/communicative realm—becomes a gap between signifier and signified that struggles for cohesion. DeLillo ultimately places the blame for failed communication deeper than social issues, at the very basis of signification itself: it is not just inability to narrativize this trauma that haunts the characters of Falling Man, but the paranoia about “what happened to the meaning of things, to tree, street, stone, wind, simple words lost in the falling ash” (103), about the slight difference in signifier between “God” and “dog.” It is for these reasons that, by the end of Kaplan’s book, we fully understand why translating trauma is so difficult: “the gap was phenomenological as well as symbolic” (Kaplan 12).

**The Towers and Signification**

Recent critical responses to 9/11 reveal the assumption that the attacks occupy the realm of semiology as much they do the realm of psychology, due, fundamentally, to the implied symbolic intent of the attacks. Exemplifying this cultural assumption in her 2005 introduction to a special 9/11 issue of The Journal of American Culture, Jane Caputi is able to claim, without the slightest need for justification, that the “terrorists deliberately chose symbolic targets—the Pentagon and the World Trade Center Towers—and with the attack on the WTC, staged a spectacle that would ensure great psychological impact” (Caputi 2). Especially noteworthy is the inclusion of the Pentagon in Caputi’s analysis. While there are plenty of justifiable military
reasons for the Pentagon to become a target, its inclusion on a list with the WTC automatically, it seems, move the attacks there to the symbolic realm, as well.

The confident assumptions of the attacks’ symbolic nature proliferate in the intellectual analysis of terrorism in Jean Baudrillard’s *The Spirit of Terrorism* and Slavoj Žižek’s *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*—the two major philosophical publications about 9/11. While the symbolism of the towers and of the attacks underpins Žižek’s notion that they represent an incursion of The Real, the discussion is even more explicit in Baudrillard’s theories. Amid his complex epistemological and political theories, there rings a refreshingly straightforward defense for reading the terrorist attacks symbolically: without taking into account the “symbolic dimension…it becomes a pure accident, a purely arbitrary act, the murderous phantasmagoria of a few fanatics, and all that would then remain would be to eliminate them. Now, we know very well that this is not how it is” (5). Our base instincts, Baudrillard tells us, are responsible for interpreting (or, rather, attempting to interpret) 9/11 in this fashion. For that reason, there must be a pre-existing psychological assumption about the tower’s function that causes their fall to wreak such horrible semiological destruction.

Well before the attacks, the WTC Towers subconsciously recalled the problem of shifting signification and the relative control of the sign offered (blindly) by American (over-)confidence. Their initial construction amid the anti-capitalist sentiment of the 1970s met with disapproval for their bold declaration of materialism and greed mirrored in their cold, concrete aesthetics. Through its early years, however—due, in part, to the artistic stunts of funambulist Philippe Petit, to whom I will return later—the towers came to signify a much more positive spin on American capitalism and its assumed political partner, democracy. Furthermore, their relative symbolism alternates between American and European critics, even in contemporary discussions of the attacks. Finally, there is the shifting symbolism of the attacks themselves. The assumed intention
was an attempt to undermine a sense of the invincibility of nationally assumed values for which
the towers stood—whichever signified you subscribe to—but nevertheless became a symbol of
nationalistic pride and community.4

All this is to say that, in their own shifting signification, the towers became a symbol of
American belief in the control of the realm of signification. Baudrillard founds his argument
about this function of the towers in their sublime “twinness.” Through iconic proof of the ability
to control mechanical reproduction—in the Walter Benjamin sense—the twinness of the towers
would seem to reinforce the ability to solidify signifier-signified relationship through its
reproduction. While Baudrillard suggests that their destruction is a suicidal result of this
reproduction (“The fact that there was two of them signifies the end of any original reference. If
there had been only one, monopoly would not have been perfectly embodied. Only the doubling
of the sign truly puts an end to what it designates” [39]), the control over its own manner of
embodiment and death is nevertheless the source of the towers’ power.

I would add to Baudrillard’s theory by arguing that by virtue of being two, they are
defined by the space between them and thereby represent closed-circuit control of any
semiological gap. As Baudrillard further argues, despite being the tallest buildings in their world
upon their construction, they put an end to the discussion of verticality—first replaced by the
rhetoric of the mirror, and later by a closed system of cloning (40). It is the space between that
makes them “two” and identifies their grandness. These towers then, much as they are symbols
of the presumed control of reproduction, are also symbols of presumed control over the gaps in
signification. The destruction of the towers, consequently, is not just destruction of the cultural
symbols, but of the very control of signification present in American confidence.

Ultimately, if the destruction of the towers is not only a psychological trauma, but also a
semiological trauma, one cannot help but turn to Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, the major
contemporary theorists on the role of language in society. In dialogues and interviews with Giovanna Borradori, both philosophers share their thoughts on the effects of the terrorist attacks on language. While Habermas is decidedly more pragmatic than his counterpart, he nevertheless sees the effects of terrorism on the linguistic-structural level, as well as the practical. In the introduction to her interview with Habermas, Borradori provides the context for the societal chaos:

New Yorkers like me were left in existential and sensory chaos: not only did a pervasive smell hang over Manhattan for weeks, but the acute scream of the sirens, usually lost in acoustic pollution, kept puncturing the silence left by the empty airspace—the great dome of contrails and roars crisscrossing above the City. (49)

Habermas reflects, however, that this social pattern of chaos has a linguistic toll. Borradori paraphrases Habermas’s belief that “if the mutual perspective-taking [that allows communication and community] for some reason cannot occur, speaker and listener become estranged from each other and indifferent to the redemption of their claims” (64). The key element of Habermas’s description is not the societal disconnection itself, but, rather, the mysterious “some reason” that prevents communication and causes the disconnection. As he eventually concludes, “The spiral of violence begins as a spiral of distorted communication that leads through the spiral of uncontrolled reciprocal mistrust to the breakdown of communication” (64).

Derrida, not directly replying to Habermas, nevertheless seems to have the perfect explanation for this breakdown of communication. To Derrida, the confused and arbitrary name/date epithet becomes the perfect embodiment of the fruitless need to re-ascribe lost meaning to the breakdown of signification:

But this very thing, the place and meaning of this "event," remains ineffable, like an intuition without concept, like a unicity with no generality on the horizon or with no
horizon at all, out of range for a language that admits its powerlessness and so is reduced to pronouncing mechanically a date, repeating it endlessly, as a kind of ritual incantation, a conjuring poem, a journalistic litany or rhetorical refrain that admits to not knowing what it's talking about. We do not in fact know what we are saying or naming in this way: September 11, le 11 septembre, September 11. The brevity of the appellation (September 11, 9/11) stems not only from an economic or rhetorical necessity. The telegram of this metonymy—a name, a number—points out the unqualifiable by recognizing that we do not recognize or even cognize that we do not yet know how to qualify, that we do not know what we are talking about. (86)

We struggle, says Derrida, to iterate the attacks, to understand through language, “to characterize, to think the thing in question, to get beyond the mere deictic of the date: something terrible took place on September 11, and in the end we don’t know what” (87).

Like DeLillo, these philosophers and literary theorists conclude that the failure to write and speak about 9/11 moves beyond the social/cultural struggles in community and chronology discussed in the previous chapter. They also recognize that the failure of communication runs more deeply than a difficulty in narrativization, contextualization, or even nominalization. The breakdown occurs within the fundamental building blocks; the destruction of the towers ultimately splits the very process of signification, calling into question the ability to make meaning of, well, anything at all.

A Failure of Communication

If the failure of communication is a prevalent motif in Falling Man, it is the central preoccupation of Jonathan Safran Foer’s other frequently cited 9/11 novel, Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close. Even more than DeLillo’s characters, Foer’s are handicapped by a near futility
of communication. As Foer’s imaginary Sixth Borough begins to float away in a fable that young narrator Oskar Schell’s father tells him, “Young friends, whose string-and-tin-can phone extended from island to island, had to pay out more and more string, as if letting kites go higher and higher” (219-20). Foer’s main characters find themselves in similar dilemmas, with communication progressively failing them, trying fruitlessly to grabble for its last remnants. This failure is embodied in a plethora of different communicative shortcomings.

Oskar’s narrative linearity is certainly questionable, as his stream of consciousness takes us through associative points that often happen well out of chronological order. Furthermore, his emotional candidness belies the barriers he creates in communication, such as actively keeping his father’s messages from 9/11 to himself. Other characters struggle with fully communicating their thoughts, as well. A. R. Black, Oskar’s partner and surrogate Grandpa, for instance, turns his hearing aid off to avoid verbal contact with the outside world and attempts to translate lives into single words, although most end up as “money,” “art,” or “war” and thereby lose their individual communicative power. But, one could use as many empty words as he or she would like because, as Black bemoans, “You could write a book…and that would leave things out, too!” (157).

The most explicit communicative misfit, Oskar’s real grandpa, Thomas Schell Sr., has physically lost the ability to speak after losing his beloved (and much more) in the American firebombing of Dresden. As if being a native German (and secondary speaker of Greek) does not present enough problems to an immigrant, Oskar’s Grandpa loses his spoken language word by word, beginning with “and” and ending with “I” (16). To compensate, he writes his dialogue on a notepad he carries with him—an act Foer captures with blank pages with a single sentence centered on them.; he also has “yes” and “no” tattooed on his hands. Unfortunately, the woman whom he is attempting to woo back—his wife, but replacement lover—has failing eyesight,
which itself, leads to a failure in communication embodied in the blank pages of her autobiography. They are left with a feeling of having “everything to say to each other, but no ways to say it” (81). S. Todd Atchison concludes that, “Grandma’s and Grandpa’s distortion of language’s representational potential symbolically defines the recursive struggle to express (and to comprehend) the chaos of personal trauma” (365).  

Foer represents this futile exercise in rendering trauma in language through his narrative structure (or astructurality, depending on your opinion). The grasping attempts at communication are perfectly embodied in the varied attempts of the characters to communicate. Many reviewers fault Foer for his use of post-modern “gimmicks” or “literary fun and games” and are quick to dismiss Foer’s novel, much as they were DeLillo’s. However, much as the reviewers were mistaken with DeLillo’s novel, so too have they missed the point with Foer’s, as a new batch of literary criticism reveals. In fact, just like the lack of closure in DeLillo’s novel, Extremely Loud uses its disassociating format purposefully, to “make evident the cracks and fissures of [Ground Zero representation’s] process of creation as memorial” (qtd. In Dawes 539).  

What many of the major reviewers seem to ignore is that the visual images and atypical presentation of text in the novel are conceived diegetically by its characters, not externally. The modes of communication they represent fail the characters as much, if not more so, than they fail the reader. Atchison, drawing from Cathy Caruth’s contention that traumatic language becomes a “collapse of [the traumatic experience’s] understanding,” argues that Foer’s experiments “with traditional narrative forms and … disrupts reader expectation by amplifying these sites of transference where the reader must take on the role of co-creator of the text by filling in the absent spaces usually found within the novel’s meta-textual representations of absence and presence” (Atchison 360). The characters are constantly reaffirming the “discursive” (349)—in its literal sense of needing two parties—nature of communication in the novel in their search for
partners. Thomas Sr.’s pursuit of his wife, Oskar’s mother’s new friendship with Ron, and even Oskar’s own need for a partner in A. R. Black (and, later, his Grandpa) attest to this communicative need. The novel, then, mirrors this diegetic need in “Foer’s use of meta-textual representation” which “amplifies this inability to communicate by causing self-referential narrative ruptures” (Atchison 359). 8

Much akin to the argumentative drift of generic linguistic trauma response to 9/11 above, these critics move from an assessment of the broader communicative failures to a more specific focus on the very process of signification at its core. To many, it all comes back to the power (or lack thereof) in the representational quality of signifiers – whether linguistic or pictorial.

**A Failure of Signification**

Oskar’s quasi-epic quest at the center of the novel’s plot holds the key (pun intended) to deciphering the target of blame for Foer’s conception of the failure of traumatic healing. At the beginning of the novel, Oskar finds a key in an envelope with the name “Black” written on it (the fact that “black” is written in red is proof it must be a name, a store clerk tells him.). The envelope has been left inside a vase precariously perched on the top shelf of his father’s closet. In his mourning for his father’s death in the World Trade Center, and searching for any last remnant of him, Oskar decides that the key must be one last clue in the ongoing puzzles and games they played. The natural progression is for Oskar to search out every “Black” in New York to find the lock that fits the key.

Critics from the camps of both opinions on the novel’s quality seem to regularly misinterpret this quest and, consequently, Foer’s thematic attempts with the novel and its structure. The tendency is to think of Oskar’s quest endearingly—perhaps because he is young, perhaps because of a more fundamental tendency to look for a positive story in times of trauma—
and to either see the quest as successful or to see its specific failure only in light of its peripheral successes. Most assessments read something like David Wyatt’s: “The end of Oscar's [sic] quest is not the uncovering of a secret but the finding of an audience—Mr. Black—with whom he can finally share what he already knows, and, beyond that, in quoting for the first time in the narrative his father's last words, to feel with someone their import and their force” (Wyatt 143). But the truth is that the quest fails, as Versluys contends, despite any accompanying “gestures towards a resolution of trauma rather than to its unresolvable suspension” (Versluys 115); instead of closure and the healing that he was looking for, “Oskar fears that he ‘will wear heavy boots for the rest of… [his] life’” (Versluys 113).

The best allegorical reading of Oskar’s search is to see it as a quest for meaning and, specifically, for closure of the semiological gap between signifier and signified. Oskar’s various plans betray the fact that re-establishing meaning extends beyond simply finding the man who knew his father. Foer clearly intends the key/lock as a symbol for the inextricable duality of the sign, and Oskar’s search takes the form of différence: only by finding the locks it does not fit can Oskar complete the meaning of the key. In addition, Oskar is constantly looking for clues in “all sorts of maps and secret codes and tools” (Foer 302), randomly, at times, trying to assign meaning to the objects and events he encounters. If anything, his quest recalls detective fiction more than epic quest, and Paul Auster’s existential detective fiction in The New York Trilogy at that.10 Detective novels—even Auster’s—have, at their core, a search for symbolic meaning, narrativization, and re-establishment of structure. To Oskar, if he can only find the matching lock to this key, to complete the relationships, he will somehow not only know the meaning of the key, but will arrive at a larger semiological unity that will also allow him to understand the significance of the 9/11 attacks and, microcosmically, his own father’s death.
After myriad attempts to find a signified for the signifier of the key, Oskar, in a moment when we must suspend our disbelief, actually finds the appropriate lock. However, the completion of this individual allegorical sign does little to open up a world of mystery for Oskar. Drawing on a comparison to Falling Man, Mitchum Huehls summarizes the failure of this symbol:

A quaint story, but the novel also suggests that this symbolic reunion with his father is impossible. Using DeLillo's language, we might say that the symbol is not strong enough to carry the weight of the event; symbolic language cannot find an adequate substitute for the event that will make its meaning and significance clear, even if that symbol is a present absence like a lock. For the key to unlock the lock would be for Oskar to inhabit the moment of his father's death, to understand the logic of that traumatic instant. Instead he can only come "incredibly close" to the event, as he is when he visualizes himself in a building hit by a plane: "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" (244). Indeed, when Oskar finally meets the man who owns the matching lock, Oskar declines to open it. (47)

While Oskar makes a new friend, has slight (but incomplete) closure with his mother and Ron, and learns other after-school-special lessons, we are reminded by the end of the novel that neither meaning nor healing is ultimately accomplished. The audience is tricked, perhaps, for an instant by his reversal of time and the semiological solidity of “dad,” which, unlike the unsteady signifier of dog/god, “backward… sounded the same as ‘dad’ forward” (Foer 326). But the conditional past perfect of the final sentence should be an unavoidable indicator of his quest’s failure. Only with the practical impossibility of the reversal of time, “would [he] have been safe” (326). The clarity of the “would have been” reminds us that he, in fact, is not.
It would seem that photography would provide a solution to this paranoia about the collapse of the semiological system. Indeed, photographs, at least in the early years of photography theory, did do this. Central to his argument in the canonical *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes argues that photographs inspire a sense of loss or an experience of death in the viewer, in that they capture a life that is no longer present (they are “inherently elegiac,” says Hirsch). While this theory is inherently full of the language of loss, it is also predicated on the unquestioned presence (at one time) of the subject of the photograph. Barthes presumes that, “Contrary to these imitations [painting, discourse], in Photography I can never deny that the thing has been there” (76). Moreover, in addition to simply *testifying* to the existence of the subject, “The Photograph’s essence is to ratify what it represents” (Barthes 85). A photograph actively argues for the existence of the signified in the photographic relationship. As photographs take on iconic status, particularly during traumatic events, it further reinforces this stability, replacing the relative failure of written language. This, in part, accounts for the popularity of so many crisis-time photographs, as they do “double duty because the iconic photograph also reverses the hierarchy of verbal and visual media. Instead of providing an illustration – the verbal report, the image is dominant, and any accompanying verbal text merely a caption or reduced to the function of captioning” (Hariman & Lucaites 90). In this way, photography would seem to overcome the need for linguistic modes of working through, at all.

Following in this argumentative train, Miles Orvell modernizes Barthes’s claims, taking into account the contemporary repercussions of Walter Benjamin’s theories on the “Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” which have not dampened the confidence with which photography theorists embrace the representational power of photography. Orvell begins his look at the photography of 9/11 by claiming that it “provid[es] a base of evidence regarding events that have defied our sense of reality.” The confidence of this assertion attests to his surety in the
ability of photography to impart the meaning of the attacks. Foer echoes his confidence in his explanation of his novel’s own visual focus: “To speak about what happened on September 11 requires a visual language” (Hudson). Despite the fact that many of the images in Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close are tangential to the actual towers or the attacks, they do seem to reinforce the stability of the narrative; the diegetic nature of the photographs lends verisimilitude to the otherwise magical-realist storyline.11

Orvell does, however, account for some of Benjamin’s theories that would seem to challenge the clear representative function of photography—this time from “The Author as Producer”—that photography cannot depict “a tenement house or a refuse heap without transfiguring it” into something with a sense of aestheticism (qtd. in Orvell). The act of transformation, of replacing the signified with a new (perhaps Simulacrum) version created by the image, is both testament to photography’s communicative power and also a first step in its breakdown of assumed signification. The internet, Photoshop, and other new technologies have seemed to exacerbate this issue. With this in mind, Orvell’s confidence falters, as “Photography within postmodern culture requires us to accept the messiness of blurred categories and ambiguities, of ambivalent responses, guilty pleasures, of wayward associations that push through our perceptions. It also, simultaneously, places us in the position of consumers of more distortion, more lies, ‘authorized’ by the very same inclusiveness and ‘democracy’ of the web” (Orvell)

The advent of Photoshop and other technology that allows for photo editing has certainly called into question the concrete signification of past photography. One needs look no farther than another photo to emerge in the online underground after 9/11, as reported by Leo Hickman in The Guardian article “Tracking down the tourist of death.” The figure in the photograph has come to be known as “Tourist Guy” (Fig. 3.1). This photo, rumored to have been discovered on a camera in the wreckage of the towers, became a quick internet sensation. A number of factual
errors, however, led to a short shelf life, as it was quickly proven fraudulent. A search for the subject or producer of the photograph turned up a few results—except for a couple of false accusations and admissions—until the original prankster was found, Peter Guzli, a 25-year-old from Budapest. As it turned out, the intent was quite innocent; the photo was simply a prank for his friends—in bad taste, but without malicious intent. However, the factual doubt that it fed to the internet community extended past the emerging conspiracy theorists. America was confronted with a challenge to the confidence with which photographs can speak to a believable signification.

This new insecurity is part of the reason that no single photograph—especially not “The Falling Man”—has emerged as the visual document of the attacks. Even Franklin’s “Ground Zero Spirit” failed to catch on as globally as its counterparts from earlier generations. In Franklin’s photograph, the firefighters are clearly identified—a statue was even suggested commemorating the three—but Hill and Helmers suggest, ultimately, that the photograph “illustrates [both] the possible modes of interpretation and the resistance to interpretation that a single image may have in our interpretive lives” (Hill & Helmers 5). Much as how the haunting
deconstructive words undermine hope for linguistic possibility in Simonetti’s and Wilcox’s study of Baudrillard and DeLillo above, so, too, does “resistance” haunt the symbolic power of the image in Hill and Helmers’s description. All of the photography theorists appear to hold on to doubts, with varied degrees of actual concern, about the symbolic power of photographs. Even one of Roland Barthes’s conclusions in the foundational Camera Lucida doubts that when a photograph “is painful, nothing in it can transform grief into mourning” (Barthes 90).

In an echo of Susan Sontag’s refutation of iconic photographs’ collectivizing power in the previous chapter, Tom Junod blames the radical polysemy for the failure “The Falling Man”: “Some people who look at the picture see stoicism, willpower, a portrait of resignation; others see something else—something discordant and therefore terrible: freedom” (Junod). In order to operate iconically, a photograph needs to “negotiat[e] the tension between individuality and collectivity” (Hariman & Lucaites 88), so that an iconic photograph’s power derives from its ability to mobilize through individual association with a photograph’s subject, which can be reached universally through the photograph’s rendering of “stock images and ideas of war and peace, poverty and the distribution of wealth, civic duty and personal desire, and other unavoidable concerns of collective life, and they stay within the realm of everyday experience and common sense” (Hariman and Lucaites 30). Through this application, the figures transcend simply being “strangers,” and become “social actors enacting categories of social performance” (44). The difficulty, as Junod points out and Sontag predicts, is that the photograph of “Falling Man” is dangerously universal (despite the limited experience it represents) but paradoxically absent of the individual.

Laura Frost’s analysis of the photograph relies on the assumption that “the photographs [of falling bodies] produce the awful intimacy of witnessing public death that is also anonymous” (191). It is clear to Junod that this radical polysemy is a result of an equally as radical anonymity
of the subject. At many of the newspapers that ran the photograph, searches for the subject’s identity unquestionably followed, as captured in Junod’s article and Singer’s documentary. The searches resulted in drastically varied responses by the families of possible victims—some embraced the fact that the falling man controlled his own destiny by choosing to jump instead of to suffocate or to burn; others, particularly the Catholic family of Noberto Hernandez, refused to believe their husband/father committed the sin of suicide. The failure of the search and the varied emotional responses of the families led to the photograph’s continued rejection and to the continually open identity of the subject. Consequently, the photograph “became an unmarked grave, and the man buried inside its frame—the Falling Man—became the Unknown Soldier in a war whose end we have not yet seen. Richard Drew’s photograph is all we know of him, and yet all we know of him becomes a measure of what we know of ourselves. The picture is his cenotaph, and like the monuments dedicated to the memory of unknown soldiers everywhere, it asks that we look at it, and make one simple acknowledgment” (Junod).

Foer picks up on this open-ended signification of the Falling Man and Drew’s photograph in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. Oskar’s interaction with the photograph elaborates on the cultural reactions to its anonymity, and it ultimately becomes the central allegory for the failure of working through in the novel. Just as the “Tourist Guy” photograph’s transformation into internet meme moves him into new contexts through copy-and-paste, and just as the Falling Man’s identity is full of potential figures, so is Oskar’s signifier key tried with a plethora of signified locks. Just as all of these attempts fail, so does the attempt to make meaning out of the attacks at the most fundamental level. With the preeminence of the Falling Man figure, in the prestige position at the conclusion of the novel, Foer reminds us that the problem with 9/11 is that trauma ruptures the very process of signification, the very attempts at working through and providing meaning.
Open Signifieds and Shifting Signifiers

In one of the many emotionally intense scenes of the novel, Oskar tries valiantly to discover the means of his father’s death. Like so many, Oskar connects to the anonymity of the Falling Man as a potential signifier for his father. He finds videos of falling men on a Portuguese site, where “there was all sorts of stuff they weren’t showing here, even though it happened here” (256). In these videos, Oskar sees “one body that could be him” (257). Foer’s choice of pronoun here is revealing: Oskar sees a body that could be him and not a body that could be his. The drive for Oskar is to restore identity to the empty signifier of the body itself. Rather than a picture being of his father’s body—an admission, still, of emptiness—Oskar instead hopes that the picture close the signification system and restore his father’s identity.

Like Junod and the other journalists who hunted for the Falling Man’s identity, Oskar “magnifies it until the pixels are so big that it stops looking like a person” (257), and he believes, “sometimes I can see glasses. Or I think I can. But I know I probably can’t. It’s just me wanting it to be him” (257). Oskar realizes that he is one of many repeating the exact same exercise, attempting to impart meaning into the open receptacle of the image. The fact that the photograph can be filled simply by “wanting it to be him” signifies that the process is completed individually by each possible viewer. It is significant, here, that Foer reminds us that the website is Portuguese, so that “whenever I want to try and learn about how Dad died, I have to go to a translator program and find out how to say things languages, like ‘September,’ which is ‘Wrzesień,’ or ‘people jumping from burning buildings,’ which is ‘Menschen, die aus brennenden Gebäuden springien’ (256). This should recall Ferdinand de Saussure’s major argument that signs are arbitrary—the differing signifiers in languages remind us that language is open to interpretation and interpersonal navigation. Consequently, whatever meaning Oskar thinks he is receiving from these websites is already filtered through one sign-based breakdown.
Foer centers his motifs of signification’s failure on Oskar’s interaction with the Falling Man. Repeating the larger cultural viewpoints that see the photograph as empty of meaning or radically open to interpretation, Oskar dwells on both the openness of the signifier and the palimpsestic nature of the signified. As he and various others try to fill the holes left behind by the trauma of 9/11, the resulting actions overwrite each other—just like Grandpa’s diary pages that have run out of space (Foer 281-4), until meaning remains undiscovered, and trauma remains unhealed.

Foer opens his novel in medias res—fitting the quest archetype of Oskar’s story—with Oskar in a limousine on the way to his father’s funeral. In the associative stream-of-consciousness of Oskar’s mind, he wonders: “Does a cave have no ceiling, or is a cave all ceiling?” (Foer 7). This introduces a whole funeral scene defined by absences. Oskar bemoans that “it’s not like we were actually burying him, anyway” (4) because of the empty casket; when Oskar asks his mother what she is squeezing in her purse, “She pulled out her hand and opened it, and it was empty” (7); Oskar’s flashbacks to games with his dad centers around the ideas that “no clues [is] a clue” (8) and that if no clues are provided ‘how could you ever be wrong?’ (9). There is certainly significance in absence here, especially if no clue is a clue to how to begin working through the trauma. Oskar’s initial question about the ontology of caves and consequent exploration of emptiness as a trope is one of many points in the novel where Oskar’s innocent questions and inventions open onto larger philosophical issues, in this case about the identification and classification of loss. A paraphrase of this question might ask this: is a loss defined by its empty space or by its surrounding confines?

The novel, ironically, is stuffed full of characters who are defined by emptiness, holes, and absences in their lives, and who specifically speak about their traumas (or are spoken about) in those terms. These characters are concerned with the inside/outside dichotomy so essential to
discussions of trauma and depression and/or with the identification of gaps and (often futile) attempts to fill them. Oskar’s Grandma thinks that her “life story was spaces” (176); Grandpa has lost his ability to speak and “can only hold on to things I want to lose” (113); even A.R. Black and some of the others, deal with their own losses by having their apartments “filled with different stuff. Tons of stuff. Stuff everywhere” (152).

Oskar’s Grandma and Grandpa’s attempt to rekindle their relationship is especially fraught with this concern. Both have been left with traumatic gaps from their experiences in the bombing of Dresden, Germany, in which Grandpa’s pregnant lover and Grandma’s sister lost her life. He carries with him an empty book, with each new phrase written on a blank page of the book—an early attempt to use language to put substance into an empty space. Grandma, having lost her sister, aware of the fact that she is a replacement for her to her husband, and having subsequently lost him when he ran away, can only make sense of presence in its relationship with these absences—she checks to see if young Oskar is safe in the bath, she asks him to tug on yarn she is knitting, “undoing what she’d just done—so that she could know [he] is OK” (100). Their coexistence is self-evident of the emptiness with which they are constantly dealing—Grandpa says that “she saw through the shell of me into the center of me” (113). His presence makes her “underst[and] the hole in the middle of me” (177) caused by her desire for a child. Their shared space is, ultimately, like the pages before Grandpa writes on his and after Grandma “writes” on hers, are “nothing places.” They literally live in the shared traumatic gaps of their history together. Grandpa tries to compensate for these gaps in her life by providing one of her needs: to learn English. Once again, Foer uses the language of filling and emptying to capture the process by which they try to heal: Grandpa “started bringing a knapsack, which I would stuff with as much [English reading material] as would fit” (108). Of course, as is so often the case in this novel, stuffing full an empty space—whether it be an apartment, a knapsack, or a coffin—is not
enough to compensate for loss, just as the would-be discovery of the identity of the Falling Man neither redeemed the photograph nor provided closure.

It is Oskar’s interaction with the empty coffin, of course, that is the central occurrence of this trope; it both begins and ends the novel. Oskar, even if he isn’t emotionally self-aware enough to comment upon it, is obsessed with traumatic empty spaces. In his show-and-tell report on the bombings of Hiroshima, one of his central visual aids is a replica of a “piece of paper, [found] about half a kilometer from the hypocenter, and the letters, which they call characters, were neatly burned out” (190) because the black absorbed the heat of the bomb more quickly. This passage about Dresden connects to the 9/11 framework in a couple different ways. First, it recalls Grandpa, who has had language “burned” out of him. More broadly, however, is a second interpretation that hinges on the double entendre of “characters.” Oskar’s explanation reminds us that the blast of 9/11 has burned out the insides of the novels’ characters, perhaps Oskar most traumatically.

Oskar’s trauma is particularly exacerbated by his experience with the answering machine, on which he hears his father’s messages, a secret he has maintained from everyone. He sees this secret as “a hole in the middle of me that every happy thing fell into” (71) and makes sense of it by way of the chronological gap that occupies his thoughts (“A lot of the time I think about those four and a half minutes between when I came home and when Dad called” [68]). It becomes clear in his session with his psychiatrist, Dr. Fein, that his “insides don’t match up with [his] outsides” (201). Perhaps, as Dr. Fein suggest, he has simply tried and failed to fill the space with “feel[ing] too much” (201). This is the method of the novel, however: to find empty spaces, empty signifiers, and attempt to cram them full of meaning. It is the secondary quest to exhume and fill the “empty box” (169) of his father’s coffin that drives the conclusion of the novel, after all.
Like the Falling Man, his father’s coffin is a radically anonymous entity – an empty signifier, like “the dictionary definition of emptiness” (321). As a way to provide closure, Oskar decides to “fill it, obviously” (321), but cannot develop any kind of containment that would bring actual healing or meaning. Filling it with “things from Dad’s, like…the Blacks who made museums of each other” (321), would fail just as the Black’s overfilled apartments failed to help them cope, by simply acting out the memory. Filling it with jewelry was arbitrary, and filling it with things “[he is] ashamed of” wouldn’t work because “you don’t really bury it” (322). Just like attempts to plug in various signifieds to the empty signifier of the Falling Man fail to make the sign concrete, so, too, do any attempts at filling the coffin. There is one idea, however, that seems to be promising—at least in regards to closure for Grandpa, if not Oskar: they will fill it with all of the unsent letters Grandpa has written to his son.

This is a powerfully-written, short scene by Foer, focused on a single paragraph of tense, choppy “dialogue” (Grandpa is, of course, writing), ending with this paradoxical exchange:

I asked him what [the papers] were. He wrote, “I lost a son.” “You did?” He showed me his left palm. “How did he die?” “I lost him before he died.” “How?” “I went away.”


Perhaps this gives some closure to the Grandpa, who is able, finally, to accept Oskar’s father as his son, and not just a replacement for the one he lost in Dresden. The use of this exercise for Oskar is less confident. If the filling of the empty coffin is a metaphor for the larger process of providing meaning to empty signifiers, than Oskar’s conclusion that “I don’t know what I understood then” (322) is rather sad.
There is a reason for this confusion, especially if we consider the specifically language-oriented attempts to fill spaces with meaning. The Falling Man’s character did not gain elucidation with the various attempts to identify the person signified in the photograph; instead, it complicated the process—was the coat a chef’s jacket? Was his shirt orange or red? Was it a beard or a shadow? Likewise the treatment of empty spaces as palimpsests in the novel in the attempts to ascribe meaning simply obscures any actual meaning produced. Oskar’s search for clues is one; connecting the dots on the map of Central Park “clues” produces an unwieldy proliferation of possibility: “it kind of looked like the word ‘fragile.’”…Then I thought of porte…I had the revelation that I could connect the dots to make ‘cyborg,’ and ‘platypus,’ and ‘boobs,’ and even ‘Oskar’” (10). Grandpa’s attempts to bring language as meaning-making tool involves writing his thoughts down on blank pages of paper, but his letters belie a sense of shifting signification that robs his writing of actual meaning. In his first letter, he jests,

It wasn’t unusual for me to run out of blank pages before the end of the day, so should I have to say something to someone on the street or in the bakery or at the bus stop, the best I could do was flip back through the daybook and find the most fitting page to recycle, if someone asked me, “how are you feeling?” it might be that my best response was to point at “The regular, please” or perhaps, “And I wouldn’t say no to something sweet”… (28)

Even this original writing can be recontextualized and consequently adopts new signifieds for its existing signifiers. This makes us wonder about the real efficacy of this written language to convey meaning (and, therefore, question the efficacy of the letters stuffed into the coffin).

This issue is compounded when writing is produced on top of writing in order to continue to search for meaning. Two typographical oddities in Foer’s novel underscore this. The first is Grandpa’s letter with red-marked corrections. Oskar’s father was, seemingly, able to read this
letter and correct it with his characteristic red pen. The marks obscure the initial meaning of the letter, however; along with the typical grammar and punctuation errors, his father has circled things like “my child” and “one hundred years of joy” that do not appear to contain grammatical or spelling errors. The implication, here, is that the errors come from the sentiments the letter contains – much in same way ironic quotation marks are used to ambiguately the actuality of a statement, the red circles deconstruct the meaning of the initial letter in an attempt to clarify meaning.

Grandpa’s final letter, this one written in the present day, typifies the eventual decay of palimpsestic signification. In an attempt to describe his feelings and situation, he rapidly works through his whole experience trying to return, but fails to return or to explain because of his futile attempt at find-and-replace signification. Early in this letter, he says his goal for returning is “To try to live” (268). Kristiaan Versluys picks up on these attempts to overwrite the past with the present in Grandpa’s story; earlier in his experience, it “becomes obvious that Grandpa is not so much sculpting Grandma as the image of her dead sister Anna, his true love for whom Grandma is but a poor substitute” (Versluys 84). But his whole world is full of the “multitude and uncontrollable polyinterpretability of things” (Versluys 108), and so these attempts are somewhat understandable. Hoping to come home, to a context in which he knows himself, he tries to go to “the old Columbian Bakery” but instead finds “a ninety-nine cent store where everything costs more than ninety-nine-cents.” He went by the “tailor shop where I used to get my pants taken in, but there was a bank” (278). Even his name is now open to interpretation; he first discovers his son’s name when he reads his obituary and, reading “Thomas Schell,” his “first thought was that [he] had died” (273). It is no wonder, then, that his attempt to convey his traumatic experience to another, to share in the trauma, and find closure fails because of his attempt to fill empty space with meaning.
In his final letter, Grandpa tells his son, “There won’t be enough pages in this book for me to tell you everything I need to tell you, I could write smaller, I could slice the pages down their edges to make two pages, I could write over my own writing, but then what?” (276). He chooses the latter and ends with a letter that, in an attempt to fill too little space with too much meaning, loses all intelligibility. Ultimately, his lasting message is that the quest to fill an empty signifier with meaning is moot; the polysemy of things caused by trauma—especially the trauma of 9/11—makes language and signification as meaning making tools ineffective.

Oskar has his own book that he fills in an attempt to bring his life meaning: *Stuff that Happened to Me*, from which many of the pictures in the novel are taken. Fittingly, he keeps it “in the space between the bed and the wall” (325). After the experiment with the empty coffin, he notes that “It was completely full,” and, had the novel ended there, we might be inclined to
think that the full book stands as a symbol of semiological closure for Oskar. The next sentence, however, reminds us that the process is far from complete: “I was going to have to start a new volume soon” (325).
Chapter 4

“Sometimes you’ve got to go up to a very high floor”: Shared Witness and Working Through in Let the Great World Spin

Unlike the early mixed, critical reviews of Don DeLillo’s and Jonathan Safran Foer’s 9/11 novels and other works of art featuring the Falling Man, well-known works featuring the more tangential figure of funambulist Philippe Petit, who tight-rope-walked the WTC in 1974, have been received with rave reviews.¹ In addition to eliciting glowing reviews in the same publications that expressed reservations about the former works—including the New York Times, Christian-Science Monitor and even another complimentary review by default 9/11 journalist, Esquire’s Tom Junod—these new pieces of literature impressed award committees, even when the more famous authors did not seem to live up to (perhaps because of) their lofty expectations. The first was Mordicai Gerstein’s 2003 Caldecott Medal-winning The Man who Walked Between the Towers. The second was the documentary film Man on Wire, for which director James Marsh won a 2009 Academy Award for “Best Documentary.” Most recently, Colum McCann’s novel Let the Great World Spin won the 2009 National Book Award for Fiction. All of this is to say that there is something about the literature of Philippe Petit that speaks to the modern sentiment more so than the Falling Man was able. McCann’s novel, especially, serves as a great counterpoint to the failures of DeLillo’s Falling Man, not only in its reversal of DeLillo’s relative critical failure, but also in the way in which it responds to the deconstructive pessimism of DeLillo’s attempts to work through 9/11.

The juxtaposition between the two reveals a difference in efficacy as tools of traumatic coping. While there were some early votes in confidence for the power of DeLillo’s writing (including the book jacket blurb from the 2007 Scribner Hardcover, which promises a “cathartic,
beautiful, heartbreaking” novel), as I have argued in Chapter 2, the novel deconstructs its own attempted modes of working through the trauma via shared experience and chronological reconstruction. I believe that the subconscious (and, perhaps, later conscious) understanding of this failure accounts for its dubious critical and commercial response, but no such ambiguity haunts the reception of *Let the Great World Spin*, whose healing power is praised with confidence (as is, ironically, its meandering structure, which closely resembles both DeLillo and Foer’s less praised versions).

Like DeLillo, McCann was a primary witness of the attack on the World Trade Centers. Growing up in Ireland—the subject of most of McCann’s preceding work—he moved to America in the 1980s, and New York in the 90’s. Tim Adams of *The Guardian* reports, “On the morning of 11 September, his father-in-law had been working on the 59th floor of the north tower, the first to be hit. He got out, staggered uptown to his daughter’s place, ash-covered. McCann has recalled elsewhere how his own daughter, then four, went to hug her grandfather, and then recoiled at the smell of burning—she thought he was on fire” (Adams). It is not surprising, then, with his immediate relationship to the attack, that McCann’s novel mirrors many of the same strategies both thematically and structurally as the other 9/11 novels.

Like *Falling Man* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, *Let the Great World Spin* features many narrators and points of view as it spirals outward from a central experience—the witness of Philippe Petit’s tightrope walk between the Twin Towers on 7 August, 1974. In addition, many of the characters share in a series of traumas that link their stories together in a complex web of interaction surrounding two major tragedies: the death of young soldiers in the Vietnam War and the more immediate car accident that kills Irish missionary Corrigan and prostitute Jazlyn and emotionally scars Lara, the driver of the other vehicle. This time period—1974—is a fitting setting for a discussion of the effects of trauma, as the Vietnam War served as a
second impetus (the first being the Holocaust) for the revival and revisitation of Freud’s theories of trauma from more than a half-decade earlier. As to be expected, the characters who deal with these various traumas parrot some of the language of trauma that is characteristic of Caruth, Kaplan, and LaCapra’s case studies and DeLillo’s and Foer’s novels. Ciaran, Corrigan’s brother, muses early in the novel about the moments of clarity before trauma haunts his world:

We seldom know what we’re hearing when we hear something for the first time, but one thing is certain: we hear it as we will never hear it again. We return to the moment to experience it, I suppose, but we can never really find it, only its memory, the faintest imprint of what it really was, what it meant. (McCann 47)

Ciaran’s description of his retrospective dismay of discovering his brother had finally fallen in love not long before his death could be lifted wholesale from one of the psychoanalysts above. It is a textbook description of the acting-out nature of melancholy, of trauma unhealed, returning again and again to the scene of the trauma in the brain’s attempt to process the sublime nature of the traumatic event.

This troublesome relationship with the past haunts many of the characters in the novel. Claire, getting ready for a meeting with other mothers who have lost sons in Vietnam, spends much of her section in retrospectives of her son from childhood until he leaves for war. Photographs clenched in her hands, she obsesses over these moments until “she feels a little murmur at her ribcage, a swell. Of air….She gets a little rush of blood to the throat. A clawing at her windpipe. As if someone is squeezing her, a momentary restriction” (75). This ghostly haunting is present in the post-traumatic guilt of Lara, as well, who envisions Jazlyn’s ghost, first, seeing “the bottoms of her feet” (122) and, later, “her face appearing over [Blaine’s ] shoulder…full and pretty. No eye shadow, no make-up, no pretense” (130). In both of these cases, the clipped clauses and departure from traditional grammatical structures might recall some
of the traumatic failures of language in DeLillo’s and Foer’s novels, as well. In any case, it is not surprising that, haunted by these ghosts of their traumatic pasts, characters like Lara “want to arrest the clocks, stop everything for a half a second, give yourself a chance to do it over again, rewind the life, uncrash the car, run it backward, have her lift miraculously back into the windshield, unshatter the glass, go about your day untouched, some old, lost sweet-tasting time” (128). These painful reflections of Ciaran, Claire, Lara, and McCann’s other characters place the novel squarely within the context of trauma literature, exploring the psychological workings of its characters’ reactions to their pasts. This is summarized cleverly in the double entendre of Corrigan’s medical death sentence: “The doctor came in, clipboard to his chest. He spoke quietly, of internal injuries. A whole new language of trauma” (72).

McCann’s characters don’t stop at this traumatic re-experiencing, however. Claire, Lara, and Ciaran all return to their discussion of the past and, along with the others, provide a very different final message about the relationship between the present and the traumatic past. Almost as if they had read DeLillo’s novel, the characters seem acutely aware that attempts to re-experience the past and engage in acing-out are ultimately futile. Corrigan, responding to his brother’s discussion about revisiting their childhood home—the scene of their father’s abandonment and their mother’s death—acknowledges that “sometime, maybe [I might go back]. I might bring some people with me” (45). Corrigan understands the dangers of facing the past alone—as Keith and Lianne try to do in Falling Man. Even Lara, embroiled with her guilt over the death of Jazlyn, recognizes that “Behind you will be a life that you never want to see again” (147). Of course, desiring blindness to the past and actually working through it are very different things—and the novel’s plot is the process of reaching a point of healing so that one can avoid seeing the past again.
Adelita, Corrigan’s lover, seems to have accomplished Lara’s wish in escaping her past in Guatemala. Aware that “time doesn’t cure everything,” she assures Ciaran that she “won’t go back” (68) to her past life and abandon her present one. Even when faced with a new tragedy in the death of Corrigan, her ability to work through tragedy leads her to a “still point where the present, the now, winds around itself, and nothing is tangled” (279). To McCann’s characters, the method for transferring trauma to healing seems somewhat simple in definition, if complex in accomplishment, as indicated by Claire’s husband Solomon Soderberg’s direction to “go on.” While somewhat emotionally distant, he nevertheless seems to have worked through the trauma of his son’s death. McCann describes Solomon’s reflection:

It didn’t bother him half as much as it used to. The fact was that he was part of a system. He knew that now. …Perhaps it just was a process of growing older. You leave the change to the generations that come behind you. But then the generation that comes behind you gets blown asunder in Vietnamese cafes, and you go on, you must go on, because even if they’re gone they still can be remembered. (253-4)

Like Lara, Solomon understands that “you must go on” is a part of the healing process. While healing does not involve forgetting or abandoning the past experiences—Adelita’s confidence is accompanied by a belief that “I will return to this day whenever I want to. I can bid it alive. Preserve it” (278-79)—it does involve the process of making something new out of the experience.

It is here that McCann’s novel responds to Falling Man and other literary works that lament the failure of traditional methods of working-through the trauma of 9/11. In replacing the figure of the Falling Man with the figure of Philippe Petit—whom McCann’s characters all witness walking between the towers in one way or another—he builds a new allegorical figure that explains successful processes of coping with trauma. If DeLillo’s characters’ failures in
collectivizing and chronologically contextualizing the trauma are embodied in the figure of the Falling Man, who arrests healing in traumatic re-experiencing through unsuccessful acting-out, then McCann’s characters’ successes are embodied in the figure of Philippe Petit, who, despite an “appearance of sitting heavy” (103), despite the mystery of being “[held] so high in the air” (324), and despite the immediacy of the impending fall (95) of “a jumper” (3), is ultimately defined by not falling from the towers. DeLillo’s characters are all “falling” men in one way or another, as I explored in the previous chapter, in the way they relate to the eponymous figure of his novel. So, too, are McCann’s characters all funambulists of sort—teetering precariously on a tight balance of their lives, but refusing, ultimately, to fall.

Even though Cathy Caruth is talking about psychological, rather than literary, works in *Unclaimed Experience*, it is explorations like McCann’s she is talking about when she claims the following:

> If traumatic experience, as Freud indicates suggestively, is an experience that is not fully assimilated as it occurs, then these texts, each is in its turn, ask what it means to transmit and to theorize around a crisis that is marked, not by a simple knowledge, but the ways it simultaneously defies and demands our witness. (*Unclaimed* 5)

The application of this quote commends authors like McCann for providing ways to work through the trauma of experience, but also acknowledging the difficulty of doing so. In my earlier explanation of traumatic language, I mentioned that I preferred LaCapra’s terms of “acting-out” and “working-through” because they represent a spectrum. And, just as *Falling Man* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* show characters unsuccessfully “acting-out” their trauma, resulting in traumatic re-experiencing and often Freud’s sense of melancholy, the characters in *Let The Great World Spin* act out successfully, moving into that realm of Freudian mourning that we call working-through trauma.
Philippe Petit

The closest parallel figure to Philippe Petit in the previous two novels is the performance artist David Janiak in *Falling Man*. They share the fact that they are both performance artists whose art connects them to the World Trade Center, although 30 years apart. Yet, despite the anachronisticity, it is possible to see Philippe Petit’s walk—or at least its contemporary literary/artistic revival—as a response to the symbolic performances of David Janiak. As mentioned above, the context of Petit’s renaissance is certainly telling, but McCann himself corroborates this conclusion; in an interview with Farah Miller, McCann confirms that “in the end, the novel is about 9/11: There are two human towers that fall in the first chapter and that’s Corrigan and Jasmine. They literally fall. And the whole rest of the book is about building them back up” (F. Miller).

The last part of McCann’s quote summarizes the way in which his novel is different than many of those that precede it and the main reason that Petit’s performance provides a counterpoint to the performance of the Falling Man: its effect is a reconstruction rather than a deconstruction. McCann continues in his interview:

The further away we got from 9/11, the more I wanted to find some way to recover. I wanted to talk about the more anonymous corners of the city, because I think it's very important that not all of that anger was turned to revenge. I don't want to get too yippee and "out there," but in the face of crime and torment, the good news is that we can heal. I was interested in the idea of redemption. (F. Miller)

And, in his novel, McCann establishes Petit as the Messiah figure that allegorizes this redemption. While Tom Junod and others see Christ-like composition in “The Falling Man,” it is really Petit who fills the role most fully to McCann, as he is, metaphorically, “about to enter warm gray water” (7) but, like Jesus, walks on top of it instead. Perhaps most telling is the belief
belied by the onlookers’ exclamations upon initial sight: “Jesus H. Christ” (4), “God, oh God” (7), “Oh, my God” (94), “My God” (106), and the list goes on.

In fact, one need only look at one of the iconic photographs to emerge from his walk to see a cross centralized in the image (Fig. 4.1), a shape McCann repeats in his chapter divisions (Fig 4.2). Unlike the radical verticality of Drew’s “Falling Man,” the perpendicular lines inherent in Petit’s walk—the towers vertical, the line horizontal; Petit vertical, usually; the balancing bar horizontal—arrest the seemingly inevitable downward movement of a fall and reassert a sense of horizontal mobility. Like God in McCann’s novel, Petit’s movement is like “God being ready to move sideways” (42). These characteristics of Petit’s performance: the horizontal movement intersecting the verticality of traumatic falling and the image of Petit resting peacefully in the air leads us to the first of the lessons learned by McCann’s characters about the process of working through: that rather than obsessing in the frozen moment of traumatic experience, there is a moving-on, an understanding of time passing that heals the latent re-experiencing of trauma. By repeating this image in the section breaks, McCann provides this message as the transition point into new contexts and new traumas.

Figure 4.1 – Dousseau, Jean-Pierre. “Untitled.” In Marsh, James, dir. Man on Wire. Magnolia Pictures, 2006. DVD.
Petit’s performance transports and transforms its witnesses, as seen in the accounts of both actual historical witness and McCann’s characters. Claire’s reaction to the performance reaffirms both its beauty and the reasons for its beauty; it is “amazing indeed…and an attempt at beauty” can be found in the horizontal/vertical “intersection of a man with the city.” While she notices that the city “is abruptly reformed, the newly appropriated public space, the city as art” (103), she fails, at this point, to see the transformative effect it is having on her own self, as well. Kurt Wurml, effusive with praise for Petit’s performances, elaborates on his artistic quality in a 1997 article:
What you actually see is a man walking in the sky. Television interviews with spectators who witnessed the show said that the performance had a tremendous impact on the audience. First, they didn't realize what they were witnessing, because it was something never before seen by them. Then they didn't believe what they saw because it seemed impossible. When the great fascination began to diminish, they became quiet, deeply impressed by the unique beauty of such a meaningful performance. Philippe Petit did for a short moment exactly the opposite of what most people do every day at the World Trade Center. He made the impossible possible. He created magic. I can imagine that since that day, the office employees in the two towers have a different view of their work space, and hopefully also a different attitude towards their work. (Wurmli)

The end of Wurmli’s statement is elegiac in context of 9/11, that the workers of the towers have had their lives transformed by the experience, but it is the rest of the quote that helps our contemporary audience see how Petit’s performance allegorizes the second method of working through (and one of the major advantages Claire has in her journey): the process of shared witnessing. As McCann illuminates, there is a distinct difference between witnessing and experiencing, and it is the shared witness of the novel – of the characters seeing Petit, of the mothers mourning their lost sons, of the varied experiences with the car accident— that brings the people together in empathy for individual trauma.

Shared Witness versus Collective Trauma

E. Ann Kaplan opens her post-9/11 book about trauma with an emotional account of her own experiences with the terrorist attacks in New York and recollections of her similar experience in war-torn England as a youth. Of course, as an academic in the world of psychology, even her own emotional response was not free from analysis, and her description is as
intellectually interesting as it is emotionally stirring. She captures her feelings at the time almost as if it were a diary:

…Nowhere was safe, just as nothing had been safe in wartime England. And we were in this together. …I felt the togetherness especially walking around Union Square, which instantly became a huge, makeshift memorial and also a site for posting images of people still lost. On those bright sunny September afternoons, the Square was crowded with mourners and with people like myself needing to share in the grief and loss we all experienced, even if one had not personally lost a loved one. (9-12)

While I argued in Chapter 2 that attempts at communalizing the trauma of 9/11 met with fairly explicit failure, Kaplan still finds a sense of content togetherness with others in the wake of the attacks. The difference lies in the final clause of Kaplan’s reminiscence: unlike shared experience, shared witness can come “even if one had not personally lost a loved one.”

DeLillo’s novel represents a mode of communalizing trauma that attempted to join people together under the umbrella of shared experience. The open antecedents of his pronouns seemed to imply an attempt to say that “this could be you,” and, by extension “this could be anyone.” However, Dominick LaCapra states that successful working-through of trauma must not fall into this “tendency… to conflate [community] with intuition or unproblematic identification implying the total fusion of self and other” (LaCapra 38). This is the mode attempted by the novel and its characters and is the method that DeLillo’s novel deconstructs by connecting it to the failure of the “Falling Man” photograph’s iconicity due to perspectivism. Rather, it is important to realize that “Historical trauma is specific, and not everyone is subject to it or entitled to the subject position associated with it. It is dubious to identify with the victim to the point of making oneself a surrogate victim who has a right to the victim’s voice or subject position” (LaCapra 78). A theory must be developed, in which the “role of empathy and
empathic unsettlement in the attentive secondary witness does not entail this identity; it involves a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other’s position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place” (78).

While Kaplan might not be the first to use the term, it is her use of “witnessing” and her definition thereof that has provided boundaries of definition for the process that LaCapra is describing. She notes that real community, like the one she finds in the square, does not come through sharing the same experience, or what she calls “vicarious traumatization.” This act “may be a component of witnessing” but only leads to “intensifying the desire to help an individual in front of one” (Kaplan 125). More powerfully, witnessing “leads to a broader understanding of the meaning of what had been done to victims, of the politics of trauma being possible” (122). Because witnessing is the more powerful mode of traumatic community, it is important to maintain a “deliberate refusal of identification with the specificity of the individual involved—a deliberate distancing form the subject to enable the interviewer to take in and respond to the traumatic situation” (125). McCann’s characters are able to find this more appropriate, second type of community with each other.

Certainly, McCann’s novel does not abandon the inherent sense of perspectivism, sharing with DeLillo’s and Foer’s the polyvocal narrative approach. The San Francisco Chronicle is quoted in the 2009 Random House trade paperback edition as claiming, “Philippe Petit’s tightrope walk between the twin towers unites the exquisitely realized characters.” The Oregonian adds an important word to its description of the cast of characters, calling them “a handful of seemingly disparate characters.” If the only method of community healing can come from shared experience, it would, by definition, seem to preclude these “disparate” characters, some of whom “had not personally lost a loved one.” They are joined, however, by that word that is vital to Wurmlí’s description of Petit’s performance and Kaplan’s trauma study:
witnessing. While the characters of *Let the Great World Spin* share very little in terms of day-to-day experience, and rarely share in similar traumatic experiences, they are united by their shared witness in Petit’s walk, and their shared witness of their own individual traumas.

McCann goes out of his way to remind us that these characters are, in fact, disparate, to put it mildly. They come from as different walks of life as seemingly possible. While it is Claire who is most self-conscious about inviting the other war mothers, especially the poorer Gloria who is also African-American, to her posh Upper East-Side penthouse, there are few pairs as shockingly different than celibate Irish missionary Corrigan and the 38-year-old black grandmother/prostitute Tillie. McCann makes us aware well before we meet any of these characters that the heterogeneous group is the real central protagonist of the novel; the opening sequence, witnessing the beginning of Petit’s tightrope walk streetside, is populated with a varied group of onlookers, nevertheless gathered together:

They found themselves in small groups together beside the traffic lights on the corner of Church and Dey; gathered under the awning of Sam’s barbershop; in the doorway of Charlie’s Audio; a tight little theater of men and women against the railings of St. Paul’s Chapel; elbowing for space at the windows of the Woolworth Building. Lawyers. Elevator operators. Doctors. Cleaners. Prep chefs. Diamond merchants. Fish sellers. Sad-jeaned whores. All of them reassured by the presence of one another. Stenographers. Traders. Deliveryboys. Sandwich board men. Cardsharks. Con ed. Ma Bell. Wall Street. A locksmith in his van on the corner of Dey and Broadway. A bike messenger lounging against a lamppost on West. A red-faced rummy out looking for an early-morning pour.

(4)

Separated as they are by life experience (and by the full stop of periods in McCann’s list), these witnesses are, in fact, comforted by each other’s presence. Unlike the equally disparate group
searching for unity in their attempt to interpret David Janiak’s performance in *Falling Man*, who subsequently disperse, this group is joined by the sight of Petit, who brings them closer until they are “perfect strangers touch[ing] one another on the elbows” (5).

This heterogeneity is instrumental to the proper process of working through. Writing about Ulrich Baer’s collection *110 Stories*, Kaplan notes that part of the reason for its relatively unqualified success is that the “volume fully recognizes that there can be no single story to contain the event” (Kaplan 137). This, too, would seem justification for the success of the photographic gallery “Here is New York: a Democracy of Photographs” which emerged shortly after the attacks. Like the initial wave of photographs that gave Kaplan a sense of belonging in her retrospective, the gallery celebrated an eclectic diversity of loss, “because the pictures in it,” explains its website, “have been contributed by anybody and everybody. The work of world-famous photographers hangs alongside pictures by police officers, firemen, businessmen, housewives, schoolteachers, construction workers, and children” (Shulan). The exhibition valued each experience equally—twenty-five dollars—thereby validating (at least by capitalist standards) each individual’s experience with tragedy.²

Since Claire is so specifically preoccupied with the heterogeneity of the group of mourning mothers, let’s return to their meetings as a microcosm for the process of shared witness. In Claire’s mind, the women are “all so different,” with “so little in common” (McCann 78). Even though they all lost sons in Vietnam, their experiences with trauma differ.³ Claire’s son was a computer operator who died in a bomb blast at a café; Gloria’s three sons died in combat; Marcia’s son died in a helicopter crash. Despite all of this, however, they find comfort in each other through an act of witnessing, since “death [is] the greatest democracy of them all…happens to us all. Rich and poor. Fat and thin. Fathers and daughters. Mothers and sons” (107). It is important to note that each member serve as both witness *for* and witness *to* the trauma – it is in
sharing their experiences with each other, in both speaking and listening that healing comes. Every time their differences reemerge and threaten the togetherness at the meeting in Claire’s apartment, they return to this experience of shared witness in sharing their boys’ stories, looking at their rooms, at photo albums. Gloria knows that, despite “everyone perched in their own little world with the deep need to talk, each person with their own tale” (293), it is important to “encourage [each other] to get it all out” (293), for instance by taking Claire’s tour of Joshua’s room and looking through each other’s photo albums.  

Claire and Gloria’s friendship emerges from this women’s group as one of the more heart-warming relationships in McCann’s novel. Claire and Gloria view each other as opposites, as the conflation of race and class issues makes both self-conscious of their burgeoning friendship; Matthew Mullins (though writing, rather myopically, about dubious relationships in Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close) argues that recent traumatic literature shows how trauma can especially join people between these previously disparate groups: “all individuals are members of numerous collective groups, such as class, gender, occupation, and religion, but goes one step further and posits an alternative identity that connects individuals in these various, and sometimes opposing, groups. What I propose is that traumatic solidarity is an additional collective that works across these group identities” (Mullins 300). Truly, their individual chapters reveal that they are drawn towards each other, and their relationship is cauterized in their shared witness of trauma. It is not long before Claire wishes to “tell [Gloria that] the wall between us are quite thin” (McCann 78) or before Gloria knew they shared a “kinship” (290). Their bond is much stronger, however, than just a hand of reassurance. When Jaslyn, who is Jazlyn’s daughter and Gloria’s foster-daughter, reminisces about the two women’s friendship, she pictures “Claire [sitting] with Gloria on wooden chairs in the back garden, by the plastic pool, near the red fence. They looked so different, Claire in her neat skirt, Gloria in her flowered dress, as if they
...running on different levels of pavement, but in the same body, the two of them combined” (330).

Unlike DeLillo’s characters in *Falling Man*, who end up isolated and split in two because of the inexorable failure to find someone with whom to share in their traumatic experience, Claire and Gloria, among others in McCann’s novel, are united in their shared witness with one another, until they figuratively become one. It is the witness of Philippe Petit in the novel that situates this coming together of disparate entities throughout the novel, just as it is in the historical event. In fact, this uniting might recall McCann’s description of Petit’s rope: “The cable was six strands thick with nineteen wires in each. Seven eights of an inch in diameter, braided to perfection. The strands had been wound around the core in a lay configuration, which gave his feet the most grip” (163). It is the unity of these disparate strands and wires that give the cord its strength and allow for the best grip, that keeps him from falling. Caruth could have been writing about the process of traumatic healing in *Let the Great World Spin* (she was actually writing about Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*) when she concludes her introduction to *Unclaimed Experience* with the following: “But we can also read the address of the voice here, not as the story of the individual in relation to the events of his own past, but as the story of the way in which one’s own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another’s wound” (*Unclaimed Experience* 8).

**Memory: Movement versus Still Life**

Whereas E. Ann Kaplan is primarily concerned with traumatic communities and the efficacy of shared witnessing in trauma, Dominick LaCapra concerns himself primarily with the temporal gap and the experience of latency that haunts trauma victims, which leads to his theories...
of “acting-out” and “working-through” defined in the introduction. While decidedly multi-faceted, his attempt to define the process of working-through trauma focuses on the healing of latent re-experiencing: “Working through is an articulatory practice to the extent one works through trauma (as well as transferential relations in general), one is able to distinguish between past and present and to recall in memory that something happened to one (or one’s people) back then while realizing that one is living her and now with openings to the future” (LaCapra 22). As an Irishman, dealing with a haunting, traumatic past is nothing new to McCann, and Andrzej Gabinski and John S. Slack both see in Songdogs, McCann’s second novel, some version of “an attempt at reconstructing and reconciling oneself with the past, a theme that a number of contemporary critics perceive as characteristic of the Irish literary experience” (Gabinski 44). Clearly, McCann’s experience with this theme has carried over into his understand of traumatic healing in regards to 9/11.

In the chapter on Falling Man, I argued that DeLillo was concerned with the failure of a specific mode of accomplishing reconciliation. His characters attempt to move from the present into the past, to reconstruct the specifics of the traumatic event through mimetic art (photography, reenactment), not heeding LaCapra’s warning that “Those traumatized by extreme events…may resist working through because what might almost be termed a fidelity to trauma, a feeling that one must somehow keep faith with it” (22). Because of this, those attempts lead only to an endless acting-out that result in a traumatic re-experiencing, symbolized in the photographic and literary character(s) of the Falling Man.” As I mentioned there, Laura Frost argues, “In the case of the falling people, the ‘still life’ of photography represents disavowal or a repetition compulsion that cannot reach its goal. The stories of people falling from the building are impossible to reconstruct unless done through narrative” (193). If it is the frozen image of falling that
emblemizes the failure of reconciliation in *Falling Man*, then McCann presents the problem, and its solution, relatively simply:

You know, when you’re young, God sweeps you up. He holds you there. The real snag is to stay there and to know how to fall. All those days when you can’t hold on any longer. When you tumble. The test is being able to climb up again. That’s what I’m looking for.

But I wasn’t getting up. I wasn’t able. (McCann 50)

It is tempting to see Corrigan’s intimation as a trite, verbose version of the old horse-riding parable, but in a context where falling is synonymous with PTSD, the re-saddling is a difficult endeavor, certainly, as one has to reverse the act of falling. In telling the story of her personal growth, Gloria remembers being left “eleven floors up in the Bronx with my three boys—and I suppose, in a way, with those two baby girls”—which makes her realize, as she never has before, that “sometimes you’ve got to go up to a very high floor to see what the past has done to the present” (McCann 306). How does someone reverse the process of falling? How do they, like Philippe Petit, appear to stand confidently in mid-air?

Again, McCann makes it seem simple: take the elevator. All of the major characters in the novel are forced to take elevators (or, in a few cases, archaic *stairs*) in their journeys to healing. Early in the novel, Corrigan’s doubts about his faith—challenged by the failure of his ministry, his forbidden love for Adelita, and his recent diagnosis of TTP—are assuaged by a miraculous ride in an elevator, wherein he “fell asleep in a lift [and] only woke up when it started moving” (52). Gloria’s journey towards kinship with Claire is bookended by specific references to her rides on the elevator (and Claire’s paranoia that they be directed to the “correct” elevator). Even the journey to Claire’s house in the Upper East Side is “*Up there. As if it were somewhere to climb. As if they would have to ascend to it. Ropes and helmets and carabiners*” (77). While only four floors, the elevator is Corrigan and Ciaran’s apartment building is part of the journey
for Lara to find closure and, eventually, reconnection through a relationship with Ciaran (140). These scenes open up possibilities of mobility for the characters through the metaphor of rising. In order to do this, one needs to take the static memories encapsulated in the photograph, and, like Conor in Songdogs, “assign signification and convert static, still imagines into vivid mini-narrations full of motion and life” (Gabinski 47). First and foremost, the vertical journey frees the traumatic victims from the static reoccurrence of the photograph allegorized in the Falling Man. But, in Let the Great World Spin this is accomplished not only by recontextualizing the photographs, but by moving to a more expressive type of art that inspires movement instead of stasis.

Of course, as with everything in Let the Great World Spin, Philippe Petit serves as impetus for and allegory of this necessary transformation. While most of the surviving images are, in fact, photographs taken by his accomplice in Le Coup, Jean-Louis Blondeau, the images differ significantly from those of the “Falling Man.” Laura E. Frost’s assessment of the photograph understands the arrested nature of the latter, arguing that it is incapable of providing the necessary mobilization from “dramatic time [frozen, acted out] to narrative time [mobile, worked through]” (193). The necessary linear movement of the figure (down) precludes the necessary narrative mobility to reconstruct a different future (the inevitable impact). Petit’s photograph presents a different image—its horizontality, and the fact that he crossed in each direction eight times—implies freedom of movement, which supports multiple narrative possibilities. Frost further recognizes in the familiar flip-book at the end of Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close a similar attempt to narrativize the image through reconstructed movement. However, the image is really just repeated, which results in a “fiction-making that not only ultimately steers around the trauma at its center but also reinstates the trauma in the novel’s conclusion. If Foer gives visual imagery the last word, the effect is to return, unresolved once
again, to the trauma of still life embodied by the photograph” (194). Perhaps, there would be some success in the contextualization of Drew’s “Falling Man” (unlike Lyle Owerko’s in Extremely Loud), in that the photograph exists as a series. There was some closure when images from elsewhere in the series were used to help identify the jumper; of course, that opened up a whole different can of challenges. Petit’s images exist in a much more narrative framework; the construction of various images from Le Coup can create a broad narrative of the action from planning to onset to completion. In fact, many of Blondeau’s (and other’s) photographs, as well as original footage from their self-made (but abandoned) documentary project, are used in the reconstructive narration of the documentary Man on Wire. It is much easier to think of these photographs as alive—especially when they are actual film—than it is to see those of the frozen Falling Man.

Through their experiences witnessing Petit, McCann’s characters are inspired, either directly or indirectly, to embark on quests of transforming the past into history/memory, which allows them to separate it from the present. Many of them begin much like DeLillo’s characters or Foer’s—obsessed with photographs and the traumatic recreation of the events. Claire, as I mentioned earlier, spends much of her section in traumatic retrospectives inspired by the photographs of her son, such as the ones on her nightstand, her husband’s desk at work, or her refrigerator. She even tries to linguistically imbue the photograph on her refrigerator with life, like Oskar attempts with his photographic flipbook, by giving it an illusion of passing time; she sees “clean[ing] the front of the fridge of everything but his photograph” like “giv[ing] it a haircut of sorts” (McCann 91). When she hears a “young intellectual on television, talking of photography,” she agrees that “Photographs keep the dead alive… [and] so much more than photographs” (29). Lara’s memory of the car accident manifests itself similarly: “Something happens to the mind in moments of terror. Perhaps we figure it’s the last we’ll ever have and we
record it for the rest of our long journey. We take perfect snapshots, an album to despair over. We trim the edges and place them in plastic. We tuck the scrapbook away to take out in our ruined times” (116). At another place in the novel, photographer Fernando Yunqué Marcano is haunted (in the Sontag sense) by the memory of his absent father, whose image he wants to load into a slide machine and “project the image all around the house…to make him ghostly and real in the darkness” (170).

It is no sin to keep photographs as memories, or to begin the process of working through with one. Often, it is a necessary fact of trauma, that the original event be remembered. LaCapra begins the process here as well:

In any event, working through is not a linear, teleological or straightforward developmental (or stereotypically dialectical) process either for the individual or for the collectivity. It requires going back to problems, working them over, and perhaps transforming the understanding of them. Even when they are worked through, this does not mean that they may not recur and require renewed and perhaps changed ways of working through them again. In this sense, working through is itself a process that may never entirely transcend acting out and that, even in the best of circumstances, is not achieved once and for all. (LaCapra 148-49)11

The three characters above all have their moments of “going back” and certainly “working them over,” but it is their process of “transforming the understanding of them” that I find particularly interesting in McCann’s novel. Like Conor in Songdogs, these characters are able to enter the worlds of the photograph and resuscitate their potentiality.

The first step in the process for these characters is to abandon their reliance on the stasis of these images and find something that properly accommodates the modality of time’s progression. Fernando’s chapter follows his attempts to photograph the graffiti around New
York, specifically on the path of his journey to work. Even while haunted by these static ghosts of images, he recognizes that there is more life in a photograph of action—his best being a picture of an actual tagger (171). He compares his endeavor to “a guy he saw once on television who made his money knocking bricks out of buildings. It was funny, but he understood it in a way. The way the building looked different afterward. The way the light came through. Making people see differently. Making them think twice. You have to look on the world with a shine like no one else has” (173). His pictures of graffiti, which would seem to be simply static images, actually provide him with a picture of transformation that implies movement through the image of a changed building. Interestingly enough, he reverses Claire’s failed attempt to personify the static image of her son; instead of futilely toiling to revive life through static art, he finds an art that is life itself, by agreeing with his boss that “there was art in a haircut” (173).

Gloria’s healing clearly begins when she is mugged and has many of her pictures of her boys stolen or ruined, and she is able to move on instead of obsess over the loss of the mimetic world of the photographs (308). This freedom allows McCann to provide a replacement to photographs as the basis for her continued traumatic healing. Later in the same scene, Claire responds to Gloria’s question about her drinking by “look[ing] away, over [Gloria’s] head to a painting in the corner of the room” and asking, “The truth?” Gloria responds with a confirmation: “The truth” (311). (“I don’t normally drink,” is Claire’s anticlimactic reply). The simplicity of this social exchange, however, belies a significant truth: McCann has syntactically and thematically drawn a connecting line between painted/created art and the passing of time (rendered, in part, in the visible construction of brushstrokes).

Both E. Ann Kaplan and Dominick LaCapra see artistic expression as a potential mode of working-through the traumatic re-experiencing illustrated, here, by photography. Drawing on the need for temporal progress, Kaplan proclaims, “Trauma can never be ‘healed’ in the sense of a
return to how things were before a catastrophe took place, or before one witnessed a catastrophe; but if the wound of trauma remains open, its pain may be worked through in the process of its being ‘translated’ via art” (Kaplan 19). This quote is one of Kaplan’s most cited because of its optimism and support for the power of artistic expression, and, truly, she follows this statement with a look at both film and artistic memorials that help both individual and collective working-through. She was not the first to see this, however, as LaCapra, more than a decade earlier, made a similar argument. LaCapra even more clearly differentiates the two modes or art (mimetic and impressionistic) in his version. He admits that “certain [mimetic] forms of literature or art, as well as the type of discourse or theory which emulates its object, may provide a more expansive space (in psychoanalytic terms, a relatively safe haven) for exploring modalities of responding to trauma, including the role of affect and the tendency to repeat traumatic events” (LaCapra 185), but clearly he sees this mode as limited in its ability. Rather, he supports “art [that] departs from ordinary reality to produce surrealist situations or radically playful openings that seem to be sublimely irrelevant to ordinary reality but may uncannily provide indirect commentary or insight into that reality” (186).

One would be tempted to see the painting in Claire and Gloria’s conversation as the mimetic portrait of her husband, Solomon, which is mentioned earlier in both Claire and Gloria’s chapters. Solomon’s portrait is mimetic, “like a photograph…where you’d hardly notice a brushstroke” (291), not the kind that would inspire rethinking of the past. However, Gloria has noticed the portrait earlier that day, and would surely have referred to it specifically rather than just to “a painting.” This implies that it is a different painting altogether, and the only other reference McCann gives us by which to identify it is Claire’s view of herself as “Modern. Like a fixture. A painting. A Miro” (78), whose art is a vast departure from the realism of photography. Whether or not Claire’s particular Miro(s) is one that directly responds to the rise of fascism in
Spain or Miro’s own mental breakdown, his art certainly expresses this sense of surrealist openness necessary for art to redefine the traumatic space in LaCapra’s definition (fig. 4.3).

Figure 4.3. Miro, Joan. Plate 6 from the Black and Red Series. 1938. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In addition to Miro, McCann offers a second artistic avenue of working through, this one in Lara’s story. She, too, is haunted by photographs, but has a realization about their limitations. Attempting to gain some handle on her spiraling trauma, she returns to Corrigan’s hospital and absconds with his belongings under guise of a relative. Attempting to reconstruct his life from these remnants, she notices something about Corrigan’s driver’s license photograph: “he looked younger than my freeze-frame memory had made him” (136-37). Lara’s two related photographs, his driver’s license and the “scrapbook snapshot” of memory that she formed at the scene of the accident, betray the static nature of time in the photograph. Neither is able to transition with her to her new attempts at healing. However, her husband, Blaine, despite his emotional coldness, seems to have a vision of art much more in line with the type of art that LaCapra is looking for, even if it was discovered by accident.
While not as radically open-ended as Miro’s artwork, Blaine does prefer the impressionistic styles of “Thomas Benton, or John Steuart Curry” over the more photographic styles of “the Smithsons, and the Turleys, and the Matta-Clarks” (126), but it is in his films where he begins to understand the necessary art for traumatic reconstruction. Blaine’s initial successful movies are clearly about the passing of time or its failure. His first film, Antioch “was a portrait of an old building being demolished on the waterfront…light filtering in through smashed warehouse walls, window frames lying over puddles, new architectural spaces created by fracture” (123). This film, which echoes the television show that awakens Fernando’s vision of art, captures the effects of time in an elegiac manner befitting the working-through of trauma. His second film, Calypso, “had Blaine eating breakfast on the roof of the Clock Tower Building as the clock behind him slowly ticked. On each of the clock hands he had pasted photographs of Vietnam” (123). Much like the first, this film captures the passing of time, but, fittingly, juxtaposes it with the static nature of traumatic memory from Vietnam symbolized in the photographs. Clearly, even though his myopic selfishness blinds him to its potential, Blaine has discovered certain modes for represented time in art.

This artistic expression moves from Blaine to Lara when her paintings become involved in the process of time’s passing. When the accident happens, Blaine and Lara are transporting their paintings to a potential seller and, returning home from the scene, have “forgotten the paintings. Left them out in the rain. … A whole year’s work. The water and paint had bled down into the grass. The frames would soon warp. Fabulous irony. All the wasted work” (127). Blaine, however, in his understanding of art, sees that the “paintings are about time!” (133). He proposes a radical idea: “We allow the present to work on the past. We could do something radical here. Do the formal paintings in the style of the past and have the present destroy them. You let the weather become the imaginative force. The real world works on your art. So you give it a new
ending. And then you reinterpret it. It’s perfect. Dig?” (134). In allowing the progression of time to reinterpret his preexisting artwork, Blaine allows the art to be a space for accomplishing LaCapra’s fundamental processes for working through trauma: “going back to problems, working them over, and perhaps transforming the understanding of them” (LaCapra 148). This is a quality that is absent from the earlier attempts at mimetic art, which do not attempt to transform any understanding of the traumatic experience in favor of capturing a fleeting truth about it.

When the reader meets Lara and Ciaran again through the eyes of Jaslyn, 32 years later, Lara has clearly been transformed by her ability to move past this trauma, and art remains her vehicle for doing so. Arriving at their house—the passing of time signified by the fact it cost them “a million plus” (342) to repurchase—Jaslyn notices that Lara had “splatters of color on her hands” and that she “smelled of paint” (343). Lara has not abandoned art, as the inside of her house reaffirms. The paintings are all “radical Dublin landscapes, translated as line, shadow, color” (343), which would imply a certain surrealism that opens up the possible traumatic space of the art. And, in a pronominal sleight of hand that would make DeLillo proud, McCann brings these paintings to life: “Inside, there was a lot of artwork on the walls. They wandered around, a glass of crisp white wine for each of them” (343). By the time we get to the crisp white wine, we realize the diegetic meaning of the sentence, but, for a second, we are given the vision of the artwork wandering about the room, alive.

Interestingly, the first thing Jaslyn notices about Lara is that she is “working in the garden, snipping roses with pruning shears” (342). A simple act that indirectly characterizes Lara’s sense of peace, now, so long after the traumatic event, but also symbolizes her continued practice breathing life into art. Perhaps trimming these roses is her version of haircut—a transformation of life into art that accommodates the passing of time.
Jaslyn gets the last words of the novel—an interesting touch of denouement that has met with mixed opinions. Yet, it seems fitting to flash forward since so much of this novel is about time, about how the past relates to the future. Like so many of the characters in this novel, Jaslyn carries with her a photograph, this one of Philippe Petit, “taken on the same day her mother died” (325). But to her, this photograph does not freeze time; it represents its passing:

A man high in the air while a plane disappears, it seems, into the edge of the building.

One small scrap of history meeting a larger one. As if the walking man were somehow anticipating what would come later. The intrusion of time and history. The collision point of stories. We wait for the explosion but it never occurs. The plane passes, the tightrope walker gets to the end of the wire. Things don’t fall apart. (325)

Jaslyn is on her way to visit the dying Claire, best friends with her surrogate mother, Gloria. This is a life Jaslyn never thought she would lead, born the daughter of a young prostitute, herself the daughter of a young prostitute. But Jaslyn was able to escape both that life and its traumatic interruption of the accident that took her mother’s life. She says, to conclude the novel, about both herself and others, “The person we know first…is not the one we know at last” (349). Somewhere, “A clock sounds” and we are privileged to McCann’s brilliant explanation of memory: “Just a clock, in a time not too distant from the present time, yet a time not too distant from the past, the unaccountable unfolding of consequence into tomorrow’s time” (349).
Chapter 5

“Exactly where the void, now defeated, used to vent its might”: Artistic Expression and the Closure of the Sign in *Man on Wire*

When Ciaran arrives in America from Ireland “carrying a torn copy of *Howl*” (24) in Colum McCann’s *Let the Great World Spin*, we might be tempted to think of Ginsberg or one of his compatriots (William S. Burroughs comes to mind) as the author of a fitting guidebook to the New York City that Ciaran is entering. Certainly, this New York is a city alive with an effusive language that spreads virally among and between its denizens. But, like Burroughs’s language (and, to a lesser extent, Ginsberg’s), New York’s is cacophonous, vulgar, and extremely loud; Ciaran recognizes that “it was not a series of words they would have used at home—motherfucking ambulance chasers weren’t big in the old country” (McCann 59). One need only read Tillie’s boldly crass chapters to understand the linguistic world that these characters occupy. However, despite all this noise, much as in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, language fails to provide any sort of meaning for these New Yorkers—it is sound and fury, signifying nothing.

The talking that identifies the New Yorkers—of Ciaran’s bar patrons, Tillie and the other prostitutes, and the witnesses of Philippe Petit, who can’t seem to stop announcing the obvious and talking right through each other’s responses—is a groping search for meaning, again. While chronologically removed from 9/11, in times of trauma, McCann’s characters watch their grabbling hands mist right through the language they reach for, just as Oskar, Grandpa, and Foer’s other characters do. Adelita, Corrigan’s widowed girlfriend, tries to “find a word to fit around this feeling” of nostalgic memory, but discovers that “words resist it.” Despite language’s attempt to “give [the feeling] a pattern it does not own… [to] put it in time… [and to] freeze what cannot be stopped,” language still cannot “describe the taste of a peach” (279). Because of this,
Ciaran finds words useless in the face of his loss when he bemoans, “There was nothing we could have done to save [Corrigan]. No words that would have brought him back” (70). Likewise, the group of war mothers finds little sympathy in the failed linguistic efficiency of the telegrams they received notifying them of their sons’ deaths. (109). True to attempts to qualify trauma, it is loss, especially, that evades definition to Ciaran, who knows that “words [are] good for saying what things are, but sometimes they don’t function for what things aren’t” (155).

It is against this cacophonous, yet failed, language that Philippe Petit commits his artistic crime. McCann frequently juxtaposes the grace and quietness of Petit against the noise of the city and its inhabitants: the only mention of Petit’s fear is at the chaos of his court trial, featuring, fittingly, the vulgar, loud-mouthed Tillie: “The walker stopped and looked from one side of the courtroom to the other. Momentarily frightened and bemused. As if there was way too much language in the space” (265). But Petit has a quieting effect on this world; McCann’s introduction of Petit, in the first sentences of the novel, tell us that “those who saw him hushed…It was a silence that heard itself, awful and beautiful” (3). Petit is the quietus of this search in both sense of the word—not only dos it hush the extremely loud search for language’s meaning, but it actually seems to pay the debt left by its failure.

Despite being represented by silence, Petit successfully brings new meaning and, as a byproduct, new language to the traumatized victims who witness him. Petit’s actions result in a city that is “abruptly reformed, the newly appropriated public space, the city as art….Making it a different space” (103). Claire, who is beginning to work through the trauma of her lost son in this scene, feels something special about Petit’s walk when she is told about them by Marcia, who witnessed it on her way to Claire’s apartment. Preoccupied with thoughts of “the man in the air,” Claire views the moments of silence as “An unfolding of seconds. A siren outside the window. The static broken and thoughts taking shape in their minds, like water in a pitcher” (106). To
Claire, the simple thought of what Petit is doing provides a container for the loose thoughts in her head that have heretofore escaped language, and is the impetus behind her decision to reach out to Gloria. But it is not just space and time that are reshaped by Petit’s actions; in fact, “everything was rewritten when he was up in the air. New things were possible with the human form” (164). Petit reopens the possibility of healing both the traumatized psyche and the linguistic gap it creates—exactly that which seems impossible. This is, ultimately, because, to Petit, “Everything had purpose, signal, meaning” (162), which can give the characters new “word[s] they seemed to know, though they had not heard [them] before” (7).

A Response to the Falling Man

It is really no surprise that Philippe Petit has become the allegorical figure for this quieting of traumatic language and reclamation of meaning. If the Falling Man is the allegorical figure for language’s traumatic failure, both generally (de Man) and specifically to 9/11 (DeLillo, Foer), then his antipode should serve that symbolic function, and it is clear from their relative iconic photographs (see: Introduction) that they offer opposing viewpoints on the mid-air body.

One of the key juxtapositions is the shift from the vertical to the horizontal plane that returns the visual focus to the body, the object on which trauma is often inscribed psychologically, as a way of identifying the traumatic event. Part of the anonymity of the Falling Man in Drew’s photograph is caused by the towers’ visual subsumation of the body (Fitzgerald 88; Lurie 45-46). As the viewer associates the body with the towers and vice versa, not only is the spirit of individuality lost in the architecture, but the body is lost to the destruction of the towers, much as they sadly were in real life. The perpendicularity of Petit’s line and body, however, sets the body in contrast to the towers, drawing attention back to the figure—a fact reinforced by the juxtaposition between the small figure of the body and buildings that are so, as Petit himself
states, “out of human scale.” Rather than losing the body—the ultimate trauma—it remains visually safe.

In a scene eerily similar between the two asynchronous figures, a shirt falls from the sky. This scene bookends *Falling Man*, in which Keith Neudecker, at the site of the attacks, sees “a shirt coming down out of the high smoke, a shirt lifting and drifting in the scant light and then falling again, down toward the river” (DeLillo, *Falling* 4). While some have argued that the shirt is euphemistic for the whole falling person, the actual body is absent, at least grammatically if not actually. The Falling Man’s body—the attempt at language in de Man’s taxonomy—has been lost with only an empty shirt (the empty signifier) floating down instead. The scene starts much the same in the stories of Philippe Petit: McCann’s characters “waited for the thump. The body twirled and caught and flipped, thrown around by the wind” (McCann 7). Likewise, Petit records in his memoir, *Man on Wire*, the experience of Annie, his lover who watches streetside, who sees “a black silhouette surging from [Petit’s] corner of the south towers and falling into the void. At first it’s a human shape, whirling and twirling” (Petit 175). The difference is that, this time, it is just a shirt. Looking past the falling shirt (the fear of traumatic language rupturing), one still sees the body (meaning) safely afloat and surprisingly stable.

The location of this surprisingly safe body is equally as important. While some photographs exist of Petit’s preparation or his first step onto the wire, most celebrate his mid-stunt acumen: lying down or kneeling and saluting in the middle of the wire, or simply walking gracefully so high up and so far from the edge. In these photos, Petit literally occupies what he calls the “void” and reconnects the semiological gap. One of the few critics to begin the discussion of Philippe Petit’s application to 9/11, Martin Randall argues that James Marsh’s documentary *Man on Wire* (based on Petit’s memoir) “celebrates as it were, the solidity (and architectural ambition, even beauty) of the WTC as does Petit’s walk. It also draws attention to
the space between them—Petit refers to it as the ‘void’—a space that, of course, no longer exists” (Randall 89). As Baudrillard, Žižek, and others (including myself) have argued, the gap between the towers is instrumental to its existence as a symbol for semiological control. As such, it is a precursor to or microcosm of the larger, edgeless gap left after the attacks, the gap that symbolized the linguistic rupture. Petit’s walk was inspired by the attempt to conquer this void, and while, to Petit, this void did not consciously represent any psychological version, his choice of nomenclature in this context is prescient. In his own description of the void, Petit describes it as such:

On one side, the mass of a mountain. A life I know.

On the other, the universe of the clouds, so full of unknown that it seems empty to us. Too much space.

Between the two, a thin line on which my being hesitates to distribute whatever strength it has left.

Around me, no thought. Too much space. (Petit 178)

Petit does seem to subconsciously recognize that the void is a space “full of unknown”: it is the space left in the meaninglessness of language. And so, he plans on imparting “whatever strength [his being] has left” into the space, imbuing it with meaning. And it works. Petit proclaims: “Victorious, I linger at the very middle of the crossing, exactly where the void, now defeated, used to vent its might” (194).

Most obviously, Petit inverts the impending impact of the Falling Man that is, to de Man, necessary to its symbolism for the failure of language in trauma. Cathy Caruth’s analysis of de Man’s reading of “The Fall of Hyperion” in “The Resistance to Theory” reveals a metaphor at work in de Man’s representation of language and philosophy, wherein “philosophy, or theory, incorporates its loss of reference to the falling empirical body” (80). Caruth sees de Man’s falling
body as a symbol for the fact that language always seems to fail (fall) when attempting to represent the initial experience of trauma, and thereby work through it. This is because falling is tied to latency—the body in the air signifies the inevitable movement towards an “impact of reference” that it has not yet reached. Without the forthcoming “impact of reference” (Caruth, Unclaimed 76), the image of Petit does not portend the psychological or semiological latency that underpins language’s failure. To put it another way, if Philippe Petit is a potential falling man—he might fall, after all—and therefore a possible traumatic figure, he solves this problem of reference in the photographic realm with his rebellion against gravity.

De Man does present an antipodal figure to the Falling Man in his essay: the marionette, drawing from his reading of On the Marionette Theater. Caruth extrapolates that the “means by which philosophy would achieve this conceptual and linguistic freedom is suggested… by de Man’s surprising association of the limbs of the philosophical body… with the puppet” (Caruth, Unclaimed 79). The solution of the puppet takes two forms. Firstly, it eliminates the falling that symbolizes the failures of reference, and replaces them with an “elimination of any referential weight” (81). While the marionette figure is static on its wires—much as Petit is—it gives the illusion of “rising” away from the traumatic impact. It is this static weightlessness that returns language to a pre-traumatic (pre-fall) state. The necessity of the suspension determines the reason it must be Philippe Petit, and not his contemporaries, base jumper Owen J. Quinn (22 July 1975) or Human Fly George Willig (26 May 1977), that must be the relative figure to the WTC that is revived as the counterpoint to the Falling Man in the contemporary age.

The second part of the solution is the replacement of falling with “the puppet dance [that] can be read as the representation of certain aesthetic model of self-knowledge” (80). Petit has the power, then, to replace the Falling Man with the figure of a marionette that does “not simply move upright, but dance” (80). Here, we must take into account the quality of the live
performance of Petit’s walk, rather than the stasis of either photograph or of the performance artist who recreates the Falling Man in DeLillo’s novel. Petit’s performance is not only mobile, but full of the beauty of dance. The Port Authority officer responsible for arresting Petit proclaims that he “observed the tightrope ‘dancer’—because you couldn't call him a ‘walker’” (Marsh). Petit thwarts the impending trauma of gravity and, like the marionette allegory, “transforms the laws of force and motion into superhuman grace” (Caruth, Unclaimed 80).

These pieces are all instrumental to the process of transforming the figure of reference from the traumatically failing (falling) body to the graceful figure of the marionette which accounts for a solution through self-reference. Petit’s performance draws attention back to the physicality of the body and not only suspends the body, but turns it into a dance, fulfilling de Man’s requirements that “the body of the system is both a human body and is at the same time the gracefully inhuman body of the marionette” (80)

**Semiological Redefinition, 1974**

The faith that McCann places in Petit’s transformative power has its basis not only in his symbolic power, but also in the practical results of his initial performance in 1974, when he transformed the signification of the Towers for the first time. At the time, the World Trade Center Towers were quickly becoming semiological entities as much as buildings, symbols of America’s capitalism and democracy or greed and dehumanization (depending on your perspective). Petit’s performance demonstrates the ability of expressive art to reshape meaning of a sign today, in part because it forever altered the signified maintained by the WTC’s signifier in 1974. In the New York Times review of Man on Wire (2008), A. O. Scott reminds his readers that “it is also worth recalling that the trade center inspired more love posthumously than while it stood. Mr. Petit was an exception. A zealous, daring wire walker—the French word funambule is a more lyrical, as
well as a somewhat more ridiculous-sounding term—he conceived a passion for the structures even before they were built” (Scott). But it isn’t that Petit simply loved the towers; his love was able to transfer to others. As the WTC’s own website’s timeline confesses, “Philippe Petit’s high-wire walk is credited with bringing much needed popular attention and fondness to the Twin Towers” (WTC Timeline).

Despite a sentimental, almost saccharine, adoration of the Twin Towers, Angus Kress Gillespie’s book Twin Towers: The Life of New York City’s World Trade Center contains the most thorough explanation of the towers’ transformation from capitalist eyesore to American treasure. While a bit light on critical depth, and overly celebratory in the towers’ success story, the book captures first-hand reactions of Americans in New York City and New Jersey (the initially planned site) during the conception and construction of the buildings—opinions which were thoroughly negative.

The list of enemies was long. Architects challenged the size, scope, and formalist style (a style catching on, but soon to die out, in Europe) of the project (Gillespie 10), as well as its ability to withstand New York City winds, which “underscore[d] everyone’s concern about skyscraper stability” (85). Financially, the project was ballooning and the city itself felt as though the Port Authority’s project was an “encroachment on its autonomy” (38), and “the New York Times began to question whether it was worthwhile” (87). Conservationists even found issues with the inability of workers to turn off lights, forcing them to leave them running indefinitely (138). The complaints of small business owners on Radio Row, displaced by the construction, and of the various workers whose conditions were under question created the greatest sympathy for their cause and antipathy towards the towers. Gillespsie records interviews with a few Radio Row shop owners, including the following:
“It’s just as though we were living in Russia or Cuba where a man doesn’t have anything to say about what happens to him,” said Oscar Nadel, a fifty-seven-year-old businessman with a tiny radio shop on Greenwich Street. “The Port Authority will tear down my business, and I have not yet been heard. If it were for the betterment of the city, that would be one thing. But this is simply big business running over us,” he added. (Gillespie 49)

Drawing on Cold War anti-communist sentiments, Nadel makes a strong accusation against the over-reaching Port-Authority. These concerns were exacerbated by three separate strikes, by the Sheet Metal workers, International Brotherhood of Teamsters, and the International Union of Elevator Constructors (Gillespie 116-17), in part over dismay about using Japanese steel, which “[was] causing deep anguish and concern with major domestic producers who [were] losing a fortune and [was] costing jobs for thousands of American workers” (Gillespie 110).

While these issues dominated the courtrooms and formal social outlets, the newspapers and magazines, another more paranoid fear about the towers festered: they were going to be symbols of America, certainly, but was it the kind of America that its citizens wished to live in? Jean Baudillard described their construction as a paradigm shift in the representative quality of NYC’s buildings:

That image [of healthy capitalist competition] changed after 1973, with the building of the World Trade Center. The effigy of the system was no longer the obelisk and the pyramid [of competitive verticality] but the punch card and the statistical graph. This architectural graphism is the embodiment of a system that is no longer competitive, but digital and countable, and from which competition has disappeared in favour of networks and monopoly…. monoliths no longer opening on to the outside world, but subject to artificial conditioning. (Baudrillard 38-9)
Baudrillard’s accompanying gloss—“Air conditioning, but mental conditioning too”—tells us everything we need to know about the societal fear that towers represented a move towards a rapid depersonalization of the capitalist environment. This lament over the lost individual in the corporate environment coincides with the contemporaneous opinions Gillespie collects, such as that of Ernst F. Shumacher who, in his book *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as If People Mattered* (1973), “challenged the prevailing Western assumption that bigger is always better. ‘Man is small and, therefore, small is beautiful,’ he argued. ‘To go for gigantism is to go for self-destruction’” (Gillespie 10).

These concerns are apparent, for example, in a 1975 *Newsweek* article, “Towering Infirmaries.” In this article the release of a “high-rise disaster movie,” *The Towering Inferno*, is impetus for a larger musing about the fears regarding the new wave of skyscrapers, headlined by the WTC. While addressing real world fears of fire and elevator safety that were integral to the terror of *The Towering Inferno*, the bulk of the article is devoted to a digression about the impersonal nature of the WTC. Drawing on exemplars of daily life in the towers, such as the inability to “open the windows or turn the lights off and on,” which are centrally controlled, and the “24 hours’ notice and pay for overtime use,” the article quotes George Bragman, president of Anchor Business Forms housed in the WTC, who says, “You’re a number here, not a person. You’re just not in control of your life” (Cowley, Malsch, and Sciolino). Judging from the degree of focus this topic earns in an article ostensibly about the danger of skyscraper fires, it is clearly the computerized capitalism, and not the practical dangers, that occupy the fearful minds of WTC viewers.

When he took his famous walk on 7 August 1974, Philippe Petit was able to reclaim the towers from this negative signification and return the focus to the human enterprise, thereby restoring an accepted signification. It is, in part, due to this act that the towers changed from
cold, concrete, capitalist blocks to American national symbols. Petit views himself as an artist, his wire “a theater stage, a canvas on which to paint poetry” (Petit 53). This ability to “paint” on the World Trade Center, like Fernando’s desire to do his own graffiti in Let The Great World Spin, “fills [Petit] with an arrogant sense of ownership” (17). Petit adds, “After all, the sky is my domain… [and] at that instant, the towers became ‘my towers’” (17). About the towers, Gillespie concludes that one of the primary reasons for the rejection of the towers’ architecture is that “To most Americans art and technology seemed to be irreconcilable” (Gillespie 35), and when Petit claims ownership over them with Le Coup, he paints overs the cold technology with human art, forever changing their signification.

When James Marsh set out to make a documentary based on Petit’s memoir, he chose to emphasize the power struggle between these two extremes. In an interview with Damon Smith for Filmmaker Magazine, Marsh says that the film is

…about someone refusing to acknowledge limits and boundaries, and seeing possibilities as well. It’s a positive thing: Philippe sees these buildings as a stage to perform on — that’s all they are to him. They’re not office buildings; there’s lots of money-grubbing capitalism going on inside, but he doesn’t care about that. So it’s like a satire on the buildings’ actual function, if you like. This is one reason I like the story so much: It has this subversive element to it. Imagine telling a policeman, “I’m not coming in — come and get me.” That’s what he was doing. It’s incredible. (D. Smith)

Marsh obviously sees the power of transformation in Petit’s actions—the ability to satirize and reverse an existing signifier of the towers. In making his documentary in 2008, Marsh draws on this power to again redefine the space of the World Trade Center using the symbolical and artistic capabilities of Petit’s walk. Petit, himself, in an elegiac epilogue included in his new edition of his memoir (retitled from To Reach the Clouds to Man on Wire to coincide with Marsh’s film),
calls for people to “Remember the World Trade Center tragedy. / Establish a memorial site./ Build again” (Petit 239), and that is what Marsh is attempting to do—consciously or not—with his revival of Petit’s magical walk 34 years earlier.

Conspicuously absent from the film, however, is any explicit mention of 9/11 at all, but Marsh is aware of the connection: “I think it was right not to burden the film with the ugly spectacle of 9/11, but of course I know everyone who sees the film is very aware of it. You kind of trust the audience to complete the film for themselves on that level” (D. Smith). After all, 9/11 clearly served as the impetus for Petit’s resurgence in popularity. This connection is not lost on most reviewers and critics approaching Man on Wire. Concurring with Bryan Appleyard’s rhetorically titled review “Is Man on Wire the most poignant 9/11 film?” Martin Randall says that the film “can be seen as a redemptive narrative that deliberately avoid s mention of 9/11 and instead seeks to, as it were, ‘rebuild’ the towers and encourage the audience to contemplate Petit’s remarkable feats rather than the terrorist attacks” (Randall 88). In redefining the signification of the towers and restoring a sense of humanity to the towers’ bleak enterprise in 1974, Petit has set the template for artistic redefinition of the traumatic space of the towers in this decade. Like McCann’s use of Petit to demonstrate the healing power of impressionistic art, so, too “Man on Wire may have succeeded in its engagement with 9/11 where others have failed” (Randall 88).

**Semiological Redefinition, 2008**

Looking at original documentation from circa 1974—such as the “Towering Infirmaries” Newsweek article, interviews in Twin Towers, or original footage from Marsh’s film—reveals an uncanny resemblance between the towers’ conception/reception and events and opinions surrounding 9/11. I have touched on many already, but there are a few other pieces that make Le
Coup stand out as a preemptive response to the attacks. As Marsh says above, the idea of the film was to “rebuild” the towers, a feat accomplished superficially by the original construction footage. However, rebuilding the towers implies what Martin Randall sees as “a reversal” (89) of the falling that defined 9/11—much as Oskar attempts to do in the end of Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close.

The brilliant thing about Petit’s story, and Marsh’s specific filmic emphases of it, is that it reads like a satirical form of the attacks themselves. In “September 11 as Heist,” Hamilton Carroll writes,

Situating Philippe Petit’s playful and mischievous act in implicit comparison to the events of September 11, Man on Wire simultaneously recalls the moment of the Twin Towers’ inauguration as American icons and rewrites the historical comparison between August 7, 1974 and September 11, 2001. Petit’s assault on the Twin Towers both substitutes for September 11 and is its uncanny double. It is the uncanny familiar that writes the later event. Viewed in light of Man on Wire, the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center becomes a doppelganger, a monstrous restaging of Petit’s earlier act, which is itself rendered uncanny by the comparison. (Carroll 843)

Carroll’s insight, here, is that Petit’s act becomes both the original template and the later mockery of the attacks on 9/11—devaluing the terrorist activity. In an interview with IndieLondon, Marsh states that he “was aware of some of the uncanny parallels… of a bunch of foreigners snooping around and taking photos, and having a plot against these buildings” (Carnevale), a fact which he clearly emphasized with some of his representative choices.

There are the shots of the van driving into the bowels of the underground garage beneath the North Tower, which recall not 9/11, but certainly the 1993 bombings. This is the first instance, however, where the reversal is seen: the dangerous and threatening, the potentially
traumatic, are replaced in the formula with the innocuous and artistic. Here, the van does not carry explosives; instead, its cargo is the wire-walking equipment necessary for Petit’s performance. Likewise, the scene in which Petit and Jean-Pierre hide from the guards beneath a tarp on the 104th floor (fig. 5.1) and Albert and Jean-Louis on the 82nd recasts a haunting death memory of the attack: these floors bookend the direct crash zone of the North Tower attack and the 82nd floor was the direct center of the South Tower attack, above which many were trapped by fires and destroyed escape routes. However, just as the contents of the van differ, so too does the content of these would-be body bags. Live bodies emerge, continuing their ascent.

The most notable reversal is presented in one of the iconic photographs to emerge from Le Coup. What was initially a photo that simply exemplified the sublimity of scale was transformed by 9/11 into a bone-chillingly prophetic image (fig. 5.2):
The image appears as if the plane is about to hit the towers. However, in 1974, the plane flies on, past the towers, again leaving them, and Petit, safely intact.

*Man on Wire*’s ironic reversal of the 9/11 attacks provides the film with the necessary context to provide an avenue to work through the traumatic language rupture it caused. Petit’s artistic prowess is now not only the answer to redefining the signification of the towers in 1974, but also the answer to providing meaning to an absent space that symbolizes the gap in language formation. Martin Randall’s analysis of the film, drawing heavily from Bryan Appleyard’s review, continues to be instrumental in understanding the film’s role in regards to 9/11.

Randall argues that the core issue of successfully narrativizing and artistically representing 9/11—the challenged faced by the characters of *Let the Great World Spin*—is this tension “between the ‘spectacle’ of the attacks and their subsequent aesthetic re-presentation – that defines all such efforts to dramatise the events” (Randall 88). Randall finishes this thought by
arguing that “perhaps surprisingly, Man on Wire offers a possible solution to this tension” (Randall 89) in the film’s reversal of 9/11 and in Petit’s artistic redefinition of the space.

Randall’s insightful analysis of Simon Armitage’s poem *Out of the Blue* (2006, 2008) in the chapter preceding his chapter on *Man on Wire* explains how Petit’s art is able to bring definition to space. Armitage’s poem has often been dismissed for sentimentalism and inability to move past cliché as an attempt to represent 9/11, and, while Randall does admit that “there are times when Armitage’s use of clichés comes perilously close to facetious humor” (79), he also sees something larger at work in them. Like most writers under discussion regarding 9/11, Armitage has “consistently wrestled with the hegemony of signifiers that have arisen surrounding the representation of 9/11” (80) and is interested in using clichés “as a way of examining how such idioms can be reinvigorated by the events of 9/11” (81). Particularly of note, in this context, is Randall’s discussion of Armitage’s revival of dead metaphors like “wing and a prayer” and “spinning a web”:

Armitage uses the familiar metaphor of ‘spinning a web’ to allude to the phone-lines stretching from the towers and connecting up family and friends. He refers to these lines as being like ‘tightropes’ (*OB*: p. 25), perhaps an allusion to Philippe Petit’s famous walk between the Twin Towers and also as a symbol for the imagined life-lines that phone contact suggests which is ultimately, movingly, illusory given the individuals’ inevitable demise. Again, the poem asks the reader to re-examine a phrase perhaps overly familiar from poetry and to reinvest it with a changed significance. (Randall 80)

Armitage invokes Petit’s tightropes here as a way of redefining the meaning of these metaphorical phones lines extending from the towers. While it is Armitage’s poetry, and not Petit’s action (this is his only appearance in his poems) that is responsible for the revival of this
dead metaphor, it bring to mind the ability to redefine or restore meaning to words that have lost meaning.

Likewise, through its satire of various doppelganger elements, *Man on Wire* calls attention to the new double meaning of events from 1974—actions that, at the time, were devoid of significance like a dead metaphor (the van; the tarp) or had considerably different intended signification (the plane). The power of Petit’s art (like Armitage’s invocation of his tightrope) is responsible for the revival and redefinition of these images from 9/11. Ultimately, Randall concludes that “the ‘spectacle’ of Petit’s walk between the towers is an ‘artwork’ that celebrates human ingenuity and imaginative/physical daring whilst also celebrating the solidity and structural aesthetics of the WTC Towers. His successful feat inspires awe and a sense of the unimaginable” (Randall 95).

**Heist Movies and Binaries**

*Man on Wire*’s ability to define empty space and answer the meaningless grabbling of language in the traumatic space after 9/11 through the image of Petit is tied up in the semiological necessity of binaries. Particularly, Marsh’s use of the heist or caper formula for *Man on Wire* represents art’s ability to break down and blur unproductive attempts at binary definition and offer new, productive ones.

In Stuart Kaminsky’s canonical, and still very relevant, *American Film Genres* (1984) and J. P. Telotte’s slightly more updated “Fatal Capers: Strategy and Enigma in Film Noir” (1996), binaries are instrumental to the narrative and thematic goals of the heist movie, as it inherently pits opposed forces against each other. According to Kaminsky, “the essential conflict in a big caper film is between man and technology, man and cold, social institutions” (76-77). Marsh actively courts the generic conventions in making *Man on Wire*, admitting that he “really
saw this as a heist story...so we employed some quite self-consciously ‘heist movie’ conceits” (Lodge). The genre certainly adds a narrative excitement to the otherwise formulaic documentary—“A great deal of fun to film,” Marsh adds—but it also is the perfect template for the historical context of Petit’s primal humanity versus the original perception of the towers’ inhumanity. While it is certainly possible to draft a piece-by-piece parallel between Kaminsky/Telotte’s genre definition and the plot and characters of *Man on Wire* (Marsh is correct that the structure is rigorously applied), the template reinforces what we already know: that through his criminal act, the “cold, social institution” is defeated by the ingenuity, adaptability, and human spirit of the culprit.

In the social and political discourse following 9/11, binaries became the primary mode of contemplating its repercussions in those respective arenas. Most writers and literary theorists, however, became disgusted with this over-simplified mode of discussing the new paradigm, especially in terms of the ethno-cultural “us/them” division between America and the Middle East. Literary-trauma theorist James Berger’s oft-cited essay response to 9/11, “There’s no Backhand to This,” drips with sarcasm as he summarizes the language of this “new world” after 9/11: “as in most apocalyptic scenarios, the world was now said to be clarified and simplified—a struggle of good versus evil, civilization versus barbarism, or, from the other side, faith versus godlessness, virtue versus decadence, good versus evil” (Berger, “There’s no Backhand” 56). Martin Randall leaves the sarcasm behind and simply declares them “false oppositions—literature (reason)/faith (un-reason); West (Christianity/democracy)/East (Islam/theocracy),” oppositions that he feels are “dangerously simplified” (Randall 7). And, of course, both Slavoj Žižek’s and Jean Baudrillard direct their anger towards the false binaries of democracy and Islam created by American political rhetoric.
In reading *Man on Wire* as commentary of 9/11, the temptation would be to look for a literal parallel to the heist opposition of freedom/oppressive law. Petit’s role remains unchanged—he is still a force of individualism, of artistic expression, and of transcendence, embodying the symbolism for the closure of the traumatic language rupture. However, what is the expression of law against which he and his “gang” organize? If we capitulate to the negative sense of binary opposition that plagued political discourse, it would be Islam; it is the narrow-minded, legalistic religion against which American freedom is pitted in the xenophobic rhetoric. In this case, the WTC’s security, those anonymous, ominous, roaming officers of law that hound Petit and his gang, stand in for this symbolic enemy. But those officers, ultimately, are a joke, comic relief. Of the three major security threats faced by Petit, the first is evaded in a childlike game of hide-and-seek; the guard, in shockingly close proxemics, does not notice the protagonists hiding conspicuously under the bulbous tarp in the middle of an empty room (Fig. 5.3). Likewise, the guard resting for coffee on the same floor as Jean-Louise and Albert manages not to notice them through a transparent sheet (Fig. 5.4). The second threat, of the guard who sets up below Petit and Jean-Pierre, is asleep with his eyes open. The final guard—who might actually confront Petit on the roof, is circumnavigated with a trick seemingly from a *Looney Toons* cartoon, complete with humorous use of classical music (“In the Hall of the Mountain King”), in which Petit circles the central spire while the officer circles around the other side.
Clearly it is not this law that is the serious opposition of Petit’s attack, nor is it the target of his artistic act. Islam is not the law in need of redefinition, thematically either. It is the “void”—the gap between the towers, which stands in for the larger absence of the towers post-9/11, that is the target. The basic plot elements of the heist or caper film establish the thematic realms of both the gang and the target by reinforcing their respective characteristics. For instance, rather than the common team of specialists that Kaminsky and Telotte define—saucracker, driver, hooligan, etc.—a tight rope walker (Petit) employs a couple photographers (Alan, Jean-François), a movie-maker (Jean-Louis), and a musician (David). This shift moves the scene of the rebellion from a “single crime of great monetary significance” (Kaminsky 77) into the artistic realm.

Furthermore, as these characters plan their artistic escapade, the “small crime[s] that precede the big caper…which will finance the bigger one [and] test the skill of the participants” (Kaminsky 77) are replaced by a “hop from gallery to gallery in SoHo, do[ing] MoMA until the closing bell rings” (Petit 95) and practice walks set up in a field. This latter detail is especially important; Marsh commits nearly the first half of Man on Wire to shots of Petit’s earlier performances and original footage from Petit’s practice sessions with the gang. The scenes that intercut the preparatory footage would normally establish the corruption or “flaw in the institution [evident in] its complexity and size that require a systemization which mechanizes human action” (Kaminsky 83), but Marsh instead provides sweeping long shots of the towers’ construction, emphasizing their proportionate size, especially their height. These last two details not only shift the realm of the rebellion to the artistic, but redefine the identity of the target, as well. In this formula, a much larger oppressive law opposes Petit’s action: “the law of gravity”—a force that he specifically names in his memoir (Petit 150). Even when, inevitably, “human weakness or frailty will prove too much for one of the gang members” (Kaminsky 84), it is the threat of the
overwhelming height that drives Jim to say he cannot assist with the rigging for fear of Petit’s fall and that drives Donald to become increasingly paranoid as they rise in the towers.

Consequently, it is Marsh’s use of the heist genre that constructs the binary opposition between art and gravity, art and trauma. As I alluded to earlier, in de Man’s allegory of the Falling Man, gravity is the prime natural law responsible for the failing (falling) of the body of language—gravity is trauma, and it is this that Petit conquers in pursuit of (re)defining the signification of the gap in his caper.

In defining the archetypal marionette puppet that can fill this role, de Man calls the figure “uncanny” (80), a word which Hamilton Carroll picks up on, in a different context, as the triumph of Petit’s walk. In addition to the figure of Petit, himself, becoming an uncanny figure, Carroll sees in Man on Wire that “the conventions of the heist film… help make sense of September 11 by producing a different set of relations to time and a space that draw on the uncanny, rather than the traumatic, nature of the events” (Carroll 835). By doing so, he argues, Man on Wire reclaims the past in making sense of the present. While I disagree that the temporal relationship is so easily summarized, I do agree with his classifications of Petit’s transformative power, which runs parallel to my own. As I pointed out in the historical editorials, the towers were, indeed, already an uncanny entity before their destruction, prime examples of “the technological sublime” (839). Likewise, the gap left by their destruction “merely confirms their already uncanny status: a monstrous double; endowed with the mythic force of an origin point at the moment of its destruction” (840). The heist genre, to Carroll, is structured around the navigation of the uncanny – the tension between “the familiar rendered unfamiliar, the unfamiliar discovered at the heart of the familiar (836), and can, consequently, provide a process of “rescaling[ing] them for human consumption” (840). He even sees in Petit’s walk, as I do, that in the act of “stringing a wire between the two towers, he made them one” (840).
However, Carroll stops at this psychoanalytical interpretation without extrapolating out to the foundational aspects of language to which *Man on Wire* also speaks. Failing to connect the “uncanny” of his article to the “uncanny” in de Man’s theory of the traumatic failure of language, Carroll’s argument only gets half way. His ultimate argument that *Man on Wire* returns the site of 9/11 to a space wherein the traumatic gaps of time and community can be worked through is correct, but it also provides the workable space for the third key traumatic rupture of language.

I would like to end this section by elaborating on Carroll’s concept of the uncanny in his article and my reading of impressionist art in McCann’s *Let the Great World Spin*. As it was in McCann’s novel, the art of Petit’s performance in *Man on Wire* must transcend the mimetic into the impressionist to accomplish its goal. Traumatic re-experiencing through unsuccessful acting out is tied to the mimetic repetition of traumatic event, so the impressionist twist (the experience re-presented through individual perception) is necessary to breakdown the hegemony of experience. In McCann’s novel, that was done with the juxtaposition between photography (as mimetic) and impressionistic painting. In Marsh’s work, it is done through the deconstruction of documentary’s factual hegemony with its combined use with the heist narrative. The film, consequently, becomes the exact impressionist piece implied by Petit’s performance, the one that is necessary for working through trauma’s incursion on language. In other words, in this taxonomy, photography is to documentary as impressionism is to *Man on Wire*.

Both film and anthropological critics have debated the definition of documentary, especially in regards to its mimetic qualities. Most conclude that generic documentary already begins to blur the lines between mimesis and perspectivism. Underscoring these criticisms is an assumption phrased best by Gerard Genette, Nitsa Ben-Ari, and Brian McHale, summarizing Barbara Herrnstein Smith:
“According to Smith…in the case of nonfictional works…it makes sense to speak of the narrative in question as having rearranged the sequence of some given set of events or the events of some given story’ [1980; 227]. In other words, in these cases alone do we or can we have access to at least two narratives, of which the first may be considered the source of the second, the fabula relative to which the possible distortion of the syuzhet may be gauged. (Genette, et. al. 759)

If it is only nonfiction that has a “true” fabula that precedes its syuzhet, documentary can be defined, as Dirk Eitzen does, as any film of which an audience may ask, “Might it be lying?” (89). In other words, the heist narrative, as Carroll suggests, is not enough to represent a rethinking of 9/11, as Marsh must begin with the mimetic documentary in order to reconstruct it as the uncanny.

In response to these diverse challenges and an evolution of style, Carl Plantinga has developed a definition of documentary that provides rather lenient bylaws for the mimetic documentary; a documentary must…

(1) take an attitude of belief toward relevant propositional content (the “saying” part), (2) take the images, sounds, and combinations thereof as reliable sources for the formation of beliefs about the film's subject and, in some cases, (3) take relevant shots, recorded sounds, and/or scenes as phenomenological approximations of the look, sound, and/or some other sense or feel of the pro-filmic event (the “showing” part). (114-5)

By stating that documentary merely must assert that it is attempting to represent an accepted truth, it circumvents many of the challenges that documentary has suffered, while still clearly separating it from its fictional counterpart. Marsh pushes the boundaries of documentary mimesis even further, refusing to capitulate easily to even these three basic requirements.
While critics continually debate the epistemological definition of documentary, there are some clear structural norms to which most audiences admit, most notably the use of three types of footage: original footage, documentary interviews, and re-enactment. Marsh’s uses of these three forms purport *Man on Wire* as a documentary and bearer of factual truth from an original event in the past to the contemporary viewer. However, Marsh complicates them at every turn, allowing Petit’s perspective to (at time, literally) break through these conventions and provide an impressionistic framework.

Marsh uses the original footage in *Man on Wire* rather conventionally to establish the dichotomy of opposed forces. It is composed of stock footage from the World Trade Center’s construction, home movies, and video taken by Petit’s hired crew for a film that never surfaced. While certainly the director’s bias is present in the selection and organization of detail, the generic assumption is that original footage is “quoted,” presented as un-doctored, un-modified original information. Even in this otherwise phenomenological truth, however, Marsh challenges its mimesis of the “pro-filmic event.” Marsh frames scenes from France in a fuzzy, black, dreamlike circle (fig. 5.5) and footage from Petit spying on the towers in binoculars (fig. 5.6), reminding us that this footage is translated through the mind or eyes of Petit.

Figure 5.5. Some of the original footage scenes are framed in a black circle characteristic of dream sequences. Figure 5.6. Original footage of the towers is presented in binocular vision, implying the personal viewpoint of Petit, even if he was not the source of the footage.
In regard to the second type of footage, the documentary interview, Marsh once again follows genre norms for most of the interview footage: medium close-up shots, stationary camera and speaker, closed shots, and tight framing of the subject against the top and either the right or left edge of the frame. By removing the narratorial incursion of a moving camera and diegetic world implied by a moving subject or open shot, these interview conventions have become synonymous with factual storytelling. It is in these interviews that Petit literally breaks through the conventions that construct the scene as truthful.

In Petit’s actual interviews sessions, the camera is slightly zoomed in, causing Petit to appear larger and break through the framing at the top and left boundaries that define the space. The wide-angle lens of the zoom also emphasizes Petit’s hand motions (which are allowed only to Petit) as they move toward the camera, implying that what we are seeing is magic, a sleight-of-hand deception meant to distract us from whatever truth lay behind the spectacle. Marsh also uses a unique type of interview with Petit, in which he is given free rein to move about the stage (they seem to be artificially constructed to provide Petit with relevant props). A handheld camera follows him and moves in from medium shots to extreme close-ups of his hands and face. The freedom of movement, diegetic world that extends beyond the borders of the camera, and the clearly artificial set deconstruct any attempt to see these as spontaneous assertions of truth by their subject.

The re-enactment scenes of documentaries are the part least beholden to assertions of truth, as they frequently adopt a Hollywood mode of cinematography and editing, especially in *Man on Wire*. In fact, the re-enactment segments are already “a contentious issue in some corners of the documentary profession” because of their similarity to fiction films (Lodge), and Marsh makes no apology for using them to inject the requisite action of the caper film into Petit’s story,
by adopting the short ASL, rapid cutting, and dominant music score of the Hollywood caper and the humor of the silent scenes by invoking a “comical, silent-movie aesthetic” (Lodge).

The effect of these choices further complicates the tension of mimesis and fictiveness in the scenes. As Platinga asserts, it is necessary to at least attempt a believable representation of the pro-filmic event it depicts. Marsh films these scenes in black and white, which would generally recall stock footage (more truthful) rather than recreation (less truthful), but depicts the scene comically and surreally. Marsh explains that the lighting and set “get less and less realistic the more they go into forbidden territory. By the end, it’s a very subjective environment” (D. Smith). In a separate interview, Marsh elaborates that the “studio made it more abstract and unreal. The idea was always to make a movie—to me the film is a heist movie—so the canvas had to be big, and expressionism seemed the right mode” (Thompson). The language that Marsh uses—“subjective,” “abstract,” “expressionism”—is telling. By this point, Marsh has completely abandoned the attempt at mimesis and accepted, instead, representation and perception.

This is compounded by the use of character voiceover (rather than the more traditional “voice of God” narration) during these scenes. We return to Genette, Ben-Ari, and McHale, who studied a similar phenomenon in literature, for a framework of this discussion. In their study, the “identification (A=N) [author = narrator], to the degree that this can be established, defines factual narrative, in which…the author assumes full responsibility for the assertions of his narrative and, consequently, does not grant autonomy to any narrator” (764). However, the “Voice of God” narrator, which is historically performed by the director, is replaced by various characters’ explanations of the events, just the “metadiegetic narrative” that is “a quite plausible indication of fictionality” (Genette, Ben-Ari, and McHale 764). John D. Dorst’s study of similar Errol Morris documentaries concludes that “the cumulative effect of alternating and overlapping the interviewee’s monologues with corresponding ‘fictive’ reenactments…is that the on-screen
speakers come to seem like generators of the cinematic text” (276). Bill Nichols notes that, like multiple narrators in the re-enactments, “a heterogeneous mix of authorized voices… destabilize the impression of a unified fictive space” (Nichols, “History, Myth” 15). The effect of all these shifts, much as it is above, is to disassociate any authoritative voice from the production of the documentary, moving the source of definition from the mimetic to the perspective.

*Man on Wire* uses the two genres, heist and documentary, to provide a space through which the traumatic gap of language can be closed and redefined. Just as Petit brought redefinition to the towers in 1974, Marsh’s film allows Petit’s art to act again, in the present by demonstrating the power of impressionistic art to restore the binary opposite traumatic language failure through moving the locus of definition internally through a shift from mimetic to perspectivist art.
Chapter 6

A Conclusion

I was a senior in high school in September of 2001, in a small Midwestern town of about 10,000 people. I remember that I was in a tech ed. class when the news broke: “someone flew their plane into the World Trade Center.” The initial reaction was a chuckle—what kind of idiot pilot could manage that feat of blindness? Certainly, we were sure, everyone was alright (except, probably, for the pilot); these buildings and symbols of America could not be endangered by such a little thing as this. Even when the real news started to pour in, there was a sense of stubborn pride in seeing the towers, initially, still standing despite the smoke and fire. I watched, live, as the first tower fell—by that point they were playing it in every classroom in the school—and I felt something change.

We were young and imbued with a traditional sense of teenage invincibility. We were geographically removed from New York City. As Midwesterners, sometimes we felt even more geographically removed than the west coast, who at least shared those “city-folk” values, or lack thereof. However, there was a palpable feeling that day that this would change things, even if we did not yet know how.

The next year, I would enter UW-Madison, that bastion of Midwestern radical liberalism, and the post-9/11 discourse centered on anti-Bush rhetoric and government infringement on privacy and “natural rights,” which none of us could truly define. I always felt, however, that something more than politics had changed. The impetus for this study was an attempt to discover what that change was that was so tangible in the days after, yet so undefined and, often, unnoticed.
Very few of us small town Midwestern teenagers experienced any kind of trauma on 9/11. No one I knew even had relatives in New York City, and, while the media sensationalism was haunting, we were emotionally reserved. However, we were not immune to the developing national trauma. The initial reactions of increased security and overseas action belied a rapidly deteriorating stability in our national definition. As a politically-conscious college student and, later, young professional, it was clear that America was constantly grabbling to find sure footing again, whether than be in the political or ontological realm.

Hopefully, with this study, some of the failures of those initial days have been highlighted through the works of Don DeLillo and Jonathan Safran Foer. Because of this new terror, committed in the realm of symbolism and aided by the media, traditional modes of working through the trauma—both for the specific individuals that seemed so far away and for the nation of which we were part—were doomed to failure. The media on which we relied for facts and figures became a mimetic nightmare, re-experiencing for us what we needed to move apart from.

Now, more than ten years after the attacks, we can begin to speak about 9/11 as the past, as an event that happened “in the 2000s.” The ten-year anniversary opened up new fruitful discussion about what exactly 9/11 was and how it shaped our nation. It also introduced us to writers like Colum McCann and filmmakers like James Marsh, who understood that 9/11 had become part of the fabric of contemporary America and must be accounted for. However, they knew that we still must work to move past it.
Chapter 1

1This assumption of the attacks’ deconstructive power is as prevalent in the literary critics’ discussion of 9/11 novels as is the assumption of the towers’ symbolic function. All four major book-length works about 9/11 literature—Richard Gray’s *After the Fall*, Sven Cvek’s *Towering Figures*, Martin Randall’s *9/11 and the Literature of Terror*, and Kristiaan Versluys’s *Out of the Blue*—contain early summaries of deconstructive theories about the inefficacy of language in working through the trauma of 9/11. See: Cvek (40), Versluys (2), Randall (5), Gray (1-2).

2While these novels fill the need for a contextualization of the attacks, they do not ignore their debt to the journalistic forms that preceded them, in the immediate aftermath. Specifically, the novels all seem to engage with the physical sight of the collapse, especially through their interaction with the photographic history discussed above.

Peter Brooker picks up on the visual language of Don DeLillo’s essay “In the Ruins of The Future,” in which he discusses the cultural reaction to the attacks and the consequent role of the novelist in its wake. Brooker argues that DeLillo’s desire to “capture the moment ... resembles the eye-witness accounts, the photographs and videos which documented the raw experience” (Brooker 14-5). DeLillo does acknowledge, however, that the influx of politics, history, and religion create a more complex environment better handled by the critical power literature than by the sensory/affective power of the photograph.

The interaction with photography is more than just implied to the writers of 9/11. In fact, many wondered aloud if “fiction, in some way, [had] been ‘superseded’ by the visual spectacle of the attacks” (Randall 32). This, along with the earlier-discussed deconstructive effects, leads
writers to muse about “this potential rupture in the assumed centrality of the written word adequately to describe reality” (32). Ultimately, though, most of the authors “also assert the importance of initially making tentative attempts to speak about the spectacular events” (32).

3 A similar argument can be found in Nelson, C. “You Can't Write a Social Novel After September 11.” *New Writing* 5.1 (2008): 50-64.

4 David Wyatt identifies some key structural aspects identifying this new genre: “Two formal devices recur with enough frequency to identify an emerging pattern: ‘likeness scenes,’ in which strangers or antagonists are aligned in an unlooked-for congruence; and strategic deferral, where something a character or a reader wants to know is withheld from the narrative until such time as it can serve his emotional education” (Wyatt 157).

5 Some critics see the texts as less thematically complicated than their structures imply. Pankaj Mishra accuses the body of literature of doubling down on traditional American sentiments and of avoiding the need to “[be] shaped by international forces.” Catherine Morley sees a body of work that actually reverts to an older, “domestic” thematic sentiment.

6 Lucy Bond argues that “9/11 remains subject to a crisis in criticism, resulting from the failure of certain strains within American studies to sufficiently separate their modes of critique from the ideological means of 9/11’s manipulation. An overreliance upon themes of trauma, and a failure to observe the means by which these discourses have been compromised by mobilization in political rhetoric, has led to the development of an interpretive void unable to produce much-needed counternarrative” (738).

Laura E. Tanner follows suit: “While existing critiques usefully interrogate the appropriation of the event through nationalist, capitalist, and media forces, they tend to dismiss rather than explore the general public’s embodied apprehension of 9/11. As a result, they bypass
the opportunity to define the phenomenological grounds on which lived experiences of this moment in history find their footing” (59).

7 In, “Allegories of Falling and the 9/11 Novel,” Elizabeth S. Anker draws from Walter Benjamin’s assertion that “allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things” in her own claims that “9/11 novels have widely employed allegory to confront the literal as well as figural debris of 9/11” (462). As I have done, Anker identifies two antipodal figures in the “‘falling men’ of the World Trade Center suicides, [who] underscore the slippages between art and terror” (463) and “alternate dramas of human prowess and agility conducted against the backdrop of a metropolitan skyline… feats of suspension, climbing, and acrobatics that equally mine the resonances of 9/11, while also querying the representational dilemmas posed by literature concerning terror” (471). While she does see, in the latter, “buoyant optimism” in “Petit’s achievement excavat[ing] competing associations tethered to the World Trade Center in a former historical moment, while at the same time celebrating human community and resilience” (471), her assessment of the former is fraught with the same anti-American sentiments as the European critics, content to dismiss the Falling Man as “the metaphor of the male mid-life crisis … American ineptitude, or the disavowed truth of late imperial impotence and failure” (464).

Chapter 2

1 DeLillo has been considered “the pre-eminent analyst of the age of the spectacle, the poet laureate of the simulacrum, of the depthless image floating above a social vacuum” (qtd. in Panzani 77).

2 *Cosmopolis* (2003, but written in late 2001), *Underworld* (1997), *Mao II* (1991), and *The Names* (1982) have been reread in the context of 9/11 studies, with even some of his lesser-
read novels—*Americana* (1971), *Players* (1977), and *Running Dog* (1978)—also receiving revisionist criticism. Most of these focus on DeLillo’s prescience regarding the emerging role of terrorism or on the shifting American identity embodied in the construction or destruction of the World Trade Center. See: Joseph Conte’s “Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* and the Age of Terror” (559, 562-3), Rossini (46-8), O’Hagan (29-30), Cowart (206), and Thurschwell (279), among others. Notably, see Baelo-Allué (67) for a fairly comprehensive look at his former novels.

3 According to Sonia Baelo-Allué, in *Falling Man*, DeLillo “chose to write a 9/11 psychic—rather than cultural—trauma novel” (Baelo-Allué 63). In doing so, “DeLillo rejects a more traditional mode of representation which seems inadequate when trying to show what psychic trauma feels like. In fact, *Falling Man* is a novel of ‘acting out’ rather than ‘working through’” (70).

Peter Brooker likewise says that this new mode “works in a different, more analogical, tangential and, I believe, more deeply analytical way. I want to explore DeLillo’s recent fiction, then, in the context of the shock to New York’s urban imaginary, and indeed to a national imaginary, as an example of how the nostalgia and defensive, sometimes belligerent, patriotism provoked by 9/11 might be rethought” (Brooker 10).

4 Ironically, Susan Sontag sees this composition as one of the major stumbling blocks to the photograph’s acceptance. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, she seems to be talking directly about “Falling Man”:

Transforming is what art does, but photography that bears witness to the calamitous and the reprehensible is much criticized if it seems “aesthetic”; this is, too much like art. The dual powers of photography—to generate documents and to create works of visual art—have produced some remarkable exaggerations about what photographers ought or ought
not to do. Lately, the most common exaggeration is one that regards these powers as opposites. Photographs that depict suffering shouldn’t be beautiful, as captions shouldn’t moralize. In this view, a beautiful photograph drains attention from the sobering subject and turns it toward the medium itself, thereby compromising the picture’s status as a document. (76-77)

5 In one extreme example, the pronoun refers to both Keith and Hammad, DeLillo’s invented terrorist, when the dually-personified “he watched [the bottle] rolls this way and that” (239) after the plane hits the towers.

6 The most notable example is Eric Fischl’s statue “Tumbling Woman,” which was meant to specifically commemorate those who fell to their death on 9/11. See Cvek (52-3), Lurie, and Fitzpatrick.

7 Ironically, Junod strongly “thought Falling Man was the defining image of 911” simply because it contrasted with the indoctrinating firemen platforms (Singer).

8 “Viewing the scene of destruction from a distance, as many photographs captured it, we are in the position of spectators at a scene of destruction whose scale reminds us of Thomas Cole’s painting in the Course of Empire series: In addition to our horror at this scene and our imagination of the excruciating suffering, there is in the spectacle of the buildings collapsing, the smoke and dust inundating the atmosphere, elements of the technological sublime, or perhaps its inversion—what we might call the destructive sublime” (Orvell).

9 Likewise, Lurie sees an implication of open interpretation in the original caption of the falling man: “A person falls head first after jumping from the north tower of the World Trade Center. It was a horrific sight that was repeated in the moments after the planes struck the towers.” The use of the interpretive article ‘a’ rather than the more definite ‘the’ makes the man
of the photo an “unidentifiable ‘person.’” Lurie predicts the failure of this open interpretation, however, as she see “anonymity segue[ing] into displacement” (Lurie 44). Lurie’s own caption is no better: “A man falling from the north tower” (45).

10 Brooker (“A second response was to ‘tell the story’—not only to repeat and repeat it again and so manage it in words, but to find the longer history which would contextualize events and emotions by conferring some fated sequence upon them” [13]) and others draw on LaCapra’s theory that repeating and revisiting is a first step towards working through the trauma. Žižek, however, notes an inherent paradox of forgetting and remembering caused by the media: “We should therefore accept the paradox that, in order really to forget an event, we must first summon up the strength to remember it properly. In order to account for this paradox, we should bear in mind that the opposite of existence is not nonexistence, but insistence: that which does not exist, continues to insist, striving towards existence” (22).

11 For Florence, like Lianne, the temporal gap seems to be the one most troubling (however, she actually finds some closure in her relationship with Keith). It is Florence who relives the experience in the towers with Keith (57-59) and who attempts to “[talk] back in time to some version of herself” (91).

Likewise, Lianne’s mother Nina seems to be obsessed with the past in her dealing with her troubled relationship with her husband, Martin. Her musings about art and relationships are tempered with sweeping statements about history and memory. For instance, her sadness about her own aging and her rapidly distancing past are captured in her poetic statement, “What old dead wars we fight. I think in these past days we’ve lost a thousand years” (44).
The similarity of imagery leads me to believe DeLillo may be drawing from Trauma: Explorations in Memory, wherein van der Kolk & van der Hart capture a real-life example of this temporally bifurcated identity:

This is most eloquently described by L. L. Langer (1991) in his study on oral testimonies by Holocaust survivors who never succeeded in bridging their existence in the death camps and their lives before and after. “It can … never be joined to the world he inhabits now. This suggests a permanent duality, not exactly a split or a doubling but a parallel existence. He switches from one to the other without synchronization because he is reporting not a sequence but a simultaneity” (95). This simultaneity is related to the fact that the traumatic experience/memory is, in a sense, timeless. It is not transformed into a story, placed in time, with a beginning, a middle and an end (which is characteristic for narrative memory). (van der Kolk & van der Hart 176-7)

One thread of thought regarding the retrograde vision of the characters in Falling Man, drawing on yet another connotation of ‘fall,’ ties the nostalgia to a post-lapsarian yearning for Garden of Eden “Innocence” (Randall 121). Some see a different Biblical Fall—this one of an actual tower—at the center of the loss: the tower of Babel. James Berger makes the most coherent argument about the application of this story, an argument especially relevant to the following section about semiological failure in the wake of the towers’ collapse. The elaborate comparison expands upon the danger of an attempt to regain the past in the wake of such fundamental trauma. An attempt to “re-establish what is imagined to be a perfect language without ambiguity, the language of Adam…absolute signifiers,” according to Berger, “is the logic of terror and terrorism” (Berger, “Falling Towers” 342).

Richard Gray comments on the various portrayals of temporal distortion: “The fall of the towers, as we shall see—and, for that matter, the fall of people from the towers—has become
a powerful and variable visual equivalent for other kinds of fall. In some texts, the towers, or the people, fall over and over again, as they did on instant replay on the television. ‘I’ve seen the same thing happen so many times now,’ one character complains in a play set on September 12, 2001, as he watches ‘those buildings fall down again’ on TV, ‘I don’t even know when “now” IS anymore! It’s like it’s always happening!’ (Wright, 32;). In others, the falling towers are caught at a frozen moment, as a distillation of terror, as again they were on television. And in some texts, the towers rise from their ashes, are returned into- the Manhattan skyline, or the falling man or woman is plucked out of the sky and restored to the building from which they jumped, in a gesture that is partly a longing for redemption and partly simple wish fulfillment.“ (Gray 7)

Another structural representation of this temporal breakdown can be seen in the large-form structure of the novel. Paolo Simonetti noted that “The narrative, like the lives of traumatized people, is irreparably fragmented; scenes from a post-9/11 existence appear and disappear without an evident order or continuity; chronology is shattered, and the characters’ thoughts and discourses return again and again to the day of the attacks” (559). Intelligent and fairly thorough exploration of the chronologically nonlinear, three-part, retrograde narrative already exist, in Cvek (181-7) and Conte’s “Don DeLillo’s Falling Man and the Age of Terror” (568), among others.

Linda S. Kauffman corroborates this view of DeLillo’s symbolic use of Alzheimer’s. In her insightful study, she combines this symbol, the lapsarian implications, and the atypical structure to ask some loaded philosophical questions:

Alzheimer’s is a metaphor for the post-9/11 condition. That condition is progressing exponentially: history is receding more and more rapidly from us—along with our will, imagination, and power to anchor it in anything approaching the familiar. Nor can we
fathom what the future holds, except to acknowledge that it will not resemble the past.

We are all, DeLillo suggests, like the patients in the early stages of the disease: “They approached what was impending, each of them, with a little space remaining, at this point, to stand and watch it happen” (Falling 94). How much time and space remain? That is the question that haunts Adam and Eve in Paradise Lost: “On the day we eat / Of this fair fruit, our doom is, we shall die” (Milton 901). Since time only has meaning after the Fall, the first two problems of interpretation arise in Eden: what is a day? What is death? Milton’s Genesis becomes retrogenesis in Falling Man—the tortuous going backward, a reversal of time. Retrogenesis also happens to be the clinical term for Alzheimer’s. Falling Man portrays the contradictions between present and past; life and death; time and eternity. It records, moreover, the precise moment when these contradictions collide with deadly impact. (“The Wake of Terror” 368)

Chapter 3

1 Laura E. Tanner sees in this scene a “collapse of structural categories that separate self from other, material from virtual, real from simulated. Having escaped from the World Trade Center, Keith enters a landscape defamiliarized by the shifting grounds of materiality…Instead of reinforcing and stabilizing human presence, objects in this apocalyptic landscape unrealize the embodied subject” (61). The language of Tanner’s analysis mirrors that of the question for signification in my own. One way to think about this is that the signified—the object, the “unrealized subject”—remains, now robbed of inner signification.

2 In a 2004 article that shares more similarities than the name of the parent journal, The European Journal of American Culture, David Ryan even more confidently states,
It was by no means an accident that the four planes that took off on the morning of September 11 had as their destination a set of symbolic termini. That one did not make it did not lessen the impact of the destruction of the World Trade Center, the symbol of US commercial power, and the Pentagon, its military might. Whatever the narratives of US capitalism, commerce and power had convinced the US populace, these targets were clearly chosen because they also represented the imperialism of US capitalism and military might in the Middle East. There was an immediate struggle over these symbols. (Ryan 7)

He goes on to say, “It was imperative that they be resituated into the more benign framework of nationhood and all the good things that the United States supposedly stood for. Thus the semiotic struggle of September 2001 saw Bush’s rhetoric and the use of the flag and photography privilege a certain interpretation over others” (7), which “reinforces the narrative that the terrorist attacks were on US freedom and values as opposed to the totemic symbols of its commercial power and military reach” (17). This difference in European and American understanding of the WTC’s signification underscores the unclear and shifting signification emphasized by the attacks.

3 That the site of the towers symbolizes freedom should be obvious in the colloquial nomenclature of its replacement, “Freedom Tower.” I would argue that the nationalist tendency for renaming (“freedom fries” instead of French fries) is only partially responsible for this, as the tower’s name has stuck long beyond the others.

4 “Strong national symbols such as the eagle and the flag are liberally in use in the popular and mass media as a means of gathering together the imagined national community, and to these patriotic and sentimental images the twin towers of the World Trade Center have been added in the way that the red poppy came to symbolize the First World War” (Hill & Helmers 4).
Richard Gray is among the many critics who see this as the fundamental trope of 9/11 literature. See: *After the Fall* (1).

Beverly Haviland sees this methodology as representative of a successful working through. Whereas she sees DeLillo’s novel wallowing in melancholy, she champions Foer’s as a measure of successful mourning. To Haviland, “Experimentation in form is the literary equivalent of traumatic empathy…fiction can engage the reader in experiences of uncertainty and ambiguity similar to those of the victim of a traumatic experience through its manipulation of such devices as the use of multiple voices and points of view, disrupted chronology, and distorted processes of symbolization” (431). Furthermore, to Haviland, the post-modern techniques of Foer’s writing “display[s], peacock-like, its variety of possible meanings, a point to which I will return later in this essay when I consider the materiality of the falling body” (434). She even excuses the breakdowns in communication between the characters by arguing that “this alternation of identification and differentiation is characteristic of the unfolding of the multi-dimensional plot, and it foregrounds the polysemy of signs by making the doubling of the name a mistake that nonetheless contributes to the success of Oskar’s quest” (436). However, Haviland, like other critics who see Foer’s novel as cathartic, seems to disregard the relative failure of his quest. While the appropriate lock is, surprisingly, discovered, it does not provide any new meaning for Oskar on his larger ontological search.

Elisabeth Siegel summarizes some of the negative responses to Foer’s atypical structure: “Describing the novel’s multimediality as ‘typographical gimmickry’ (Beck) or ‘pointless illustrations’ (Siegel), reviewers mostly considered the novel’s colorfulness a distraction. John Updike wrote in his review for *The New Yorker* that ‘the book’s hyperactive visual surface covers up a certain hollow monotony in [the novel’s] verbal drama.’”
For other critics who celebrate Foer’s uses of pictorial signifiers in the wake of language’s failure, see: Codde 242-7; Ingersoll 60; and Versluys 62-97.

Safer and Hornung both see the quest as successful in the way in which it brings people together—both the characters within the text and the reader into the text. Safer argues that in engaging the reader via the metatextual components, that the story moves from personal to macrocosmic. Likewise, Hornung sees a celebration of transnationality in both DeLillo’s and Foer’s work. Sven Cvek argues, contrapuntally, that is the quiet melodramatic tone that provides the necessary “Social glue” (71) to make the novel successful.

See also: Ingersoll 54-6

Huehls argues, “Using images to produce and elicit forms of temporal experience might initially seem counter-intuitive. After all, images, particularly the still photographs included in Foer’s text, represent stable and self-contained slivers of time. Functioning by analogy and simile, they tend to reduce, hypostatize, and impose meaning on a constantly moving reality better captured through cinema’s diachronic form. My readings will nevertheless suggest that Foer’s novel and Spiegelman’s comix successfully overcome this reductive aspect of images, enlisting them to portray specifically temporal forms of knowing” (45).

Likewise, Siegel argues that “the photographs embedded in Oskar’s narrative discourse seem to prove that it was really the woman in the picture he met, that he really saw Fifty-Ninth Street Bridge as in the photograph, that the cat in the picture really is Buckminster and so on. Just as the TV images of 9/11 convinced a global audience that what they were watching really happened, the photographs in Oskar’s narrative seem to be evidence that what happens in the novel really took place” (Siegel).
Both neglect, however, the larger system of signifier/signified deconstruction that permeates the text. While both admit to the failure of language because of the semiological rupture, they do not apply the same critical lens to the assumed semiological unity of the photograph.

12 In *Falling Man*, Florence finds similar experience with Keith as “she liked the spaces he made” (18), but she finds it healing for some reason.

13 Jonathan Safran Foer released *Tree of Codes* in 2010, a book published by die cast, created by cutting out words from Bruno Schultz’s *Streets of Crocodiles*.

14 This shifting signification works both ways; the signifier can shift in an attempt to encompass the same signified. James Berger asks,

> What happened? What is it called? September 11, 9/11, 911, the events of September 11, the trauma of 9/11, the catastrophe, the tragedy, the attack, the terrorist attack, attack on America, the horrors of September 11, the terrible events, the disaster, the terrorism of September 11, the cataclysmic events, the World Trade Center attack, recent events, the national tragedies, these horrible events, appalling events, massive crimes. (Berger, “There’s No Backhand” 54)

In some of my favorite examples of semiological arbitrariness in the novel, Foer shows us “Purple” written in Green ink (63), reminds us that I♥NY means “I love you” in Chinese (239), argues that a “rose is not a rose is not a rose!” (156), and sadly recalls Nietzsche’s statement, “that for which we find words is something already dead in our hearts” when Grandma laments “How can you say I love you to someone you love?” (314)
Chapter 4

1 See, especially, reviews by Mahler (New York Times), Scurr (The Telegraph), Kennedy (The Independent), Zipp (The Christian Science Monitor), Adams (The Guardian), and Junod (Esquire).

2 “Here is New York: A Democracy of Photos” is one of the few successful artistic endeavors in the initial timeframe after 9/11. Michael Shulan, one of the founders of the exhibition “thought it was absolutely essential to stare what happened directly in the face, in order both to absorb what seemed unabsorbable at the time and to prepare ourselves for whatever was (and is) going to happen next” (here is new york). Cultural critics and lay viewers alike initially saw success in the endeavor. Miles Orvell speaks high praise about it:

I am not sure how we can “make sense” of the totality of images given us, but maybe that’s not the point. Instead, what has emerged from Here Is New York is a new aesthetic that encourages us to accept, in a way not traditionally a part of aesthetic experience, the uncertainty of meaning implicit in the collection. It also embodies a set of principles that are indeed revolutionary, in corresponding to the unique conditions of production implicit in 9/11 and to the conditions of the postmodern moment more generally, by going against at least six major canons of traditional photographic practice and exhibition.

Likewise, Birgit Dawes sees in it “an important cathartic function: ‘It is the reenactment, the replaying, the fantasizing of the story that allow the mourning process to proceed and the event to acquire meaning’” (Dawes 520). It was popularly successful, too, with over 3000 submission and commentary that “everyone who sees them for the first time remarks on their beauty” (Shulan).

3 In Trauma: Explorations in Memory, Kai Erikson argues that simply the experience of trauma unifies people together:
For some survivors, at least, this sense of difference can become a kind of calling, a status, where people are drawn to others similarly marked. The wariness and numbness and slowness of feeling shared by traumatized people everywhere may mean that relating to others comes hard and at a heavy price, so I am not speaking here of the easy comradeship one often finds among those who live through telling experiences together. Still, trauma shared can serve as a source of communality in the same way that common languages and common backgrounds can. There is a spiritual kinship there, a sense of identity, even when feelings of affection are deadened and the ability to care numbed. (186).

However, just like the women in Claire’s group—except for Claire and Gloria—never quite become true friends, “calamity serves to strengthen the bonds linking people together—it does not, most of the time—but that the shared experience becomes almost like a common culture, a source of kinship” (190). In other words, “they are not drawn together by feelings of affection (in the usual meaning of term, anyway) but by a shared set of perspectives and rhythms and moods that derive from the sense of being apart” (194).

4 Unlike the trope of photography that McCann uses through most of the novel, this photography seems actually progressive. However, I would argue that it is actually the active process of shared witness that makes it productive for healing. Hirsch says, about her own photography, “Through photography I can become a witness in my own right, a witness not so much of the events as of its aftermath, a witness to the other act of witness all around me. I can invite others to become my co-witnesses. The proliferation of books, photographic displays, and exhibitions allows everyone to share in the act of witnessing and working through” (Hirsch 78).
The extent to which this is true is questioned by Jill Bennet, who wonders if the “imagined community” of shared trauma is limited to particular national, regional, or cultural groups (132).

In *Falling Man*, the melancholic characters find themselves frequently staring at paintings of still life. In its Italian name, *natura morta*, Lianne sees only death. These paintings, like the photographs, fail to move them forward. In fact, even in a still life of “kitchen objects but removed from the kitchen,” Martin “keep[s] seeing the towers in this still life” (49).

Gabinski and Slack each see in *Songdogs* this exact process of rejuvenating the past through photographs. To contrast the two brothers in the novel, Michael is concerned with possessing the photographs, and therefore allows them to remain static and dead. Conor is creative and travels through the narratives of the photographs, which allows for proper working through and mourning. This creates a template for LaCapra’s theories on acting-out and working-through, as it exemplifies that the past and future “constitute two extremes of a continuum and their successful reconciliation, the coming to terms with one’s past in order to embrace a better future, can only be achieved in present time, an elusive meeting point where tradition collides with prospect” (Gabinski 54).

Conor’s process is described as “walking into the photos” (Gabinski 47) and “ghost[ing] his way through the prints” (Slack 83). He is able, then, to transform his memory through “the conflation of memory, history, and imagination [that is] Conor’s method of reconstruction and regeneration of the past” (Slack 81). Drawing on the ubiquitous language of psychoanalytic trauma (and deconstruction), Slack finally argues, “Conor is able to read and then transpose a visual history into a written one and thus fill the gaps left in his parents’ badly recollected and/or spotty stories about their adventures and misadventures on two continents” (77).
See R.G. Smith (157-8) and Siegel for further development on the failure of Oskar’s reversal of time.

The fact that some of the images of Petit are stills from his documentary film and, later, that much of Blaine’s art are films, is noteworthy because Barthes draws a fundamental distinction between photograph and film. “The photograph’s noeme,” argues Barthes, “deteriorates when the Photograph is animated and becomes cinema: in the Photograph, something has posed in front of the tiny hold and has remained there forever (that is my feeling); but in cinema something has passed in front of this same tiny hole” (78). In this way, cinema does not impart the experience of death and loss in the same way as a photograph. This would seem, in part, to explain why so many of the texts analyzed by recent psychoanalysts, such as Caruth, LaCapra, and Kaplan, focus on film, both fictional and documentary.

There is an ongoing critical debate about DeLillo’s opinion about the efficacy of art in transforming time and dealing with trauma. For a concise argument, see consecutive chapters by Philip Nel and Peter Knight and the later chapter, “DeLillo’s Dedalian artists” by Mark Osteen, in The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo edited by John N. Duvall. Other critics cited in this paper have joined the argument, with Wilcox (90-91) and Panzani (83) arguing for DeLillo’s faith in the power of art. O’Hagan (39-41), Duvall (153), Versluys (30), and Osteen, in his own book on DeLillo, question his faith in the efficacy of art to transcend.

Cathy Caruth makes a similar claim, in saying that “we can understand that a rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not” (Caruth, Unclaimed 11).
One text about New York after 9/11 to meet with near unanimous praise is *The Colossus of New York*, which characteristically circumnavigates 9/11 in its non-fiction portrait of the city. Stephanie Li believes that the success of this book lies in its representation of New York’s “mutability” (86), its ability to adapt and change over time that provides a hopeful message in the post 9/11 city, by providing faith in the characteristic of the city that “predates the attacks” (86).

Chapter 5

1 James Berger (“Falling Towers and Postmodern Wild Children: Oliver Sacks, Don DeLillo, and Turns against Language”) sees the struggle for meaning after 9/11 as a tension between a failed attempt to restore a prelapsarian mode of communication that he dubs an “Adamic restoration of language” (352) and the desire for a new “transcendent” mode of language (353). It is interesting that Petit seems to exist as an image of both attempts—he is pre-fall language, but also transcendent in its traditional definition of “extending or lying beyond the limits of ordinary experience.”

2 In introducing his book on 9/11 literature, *Out of the Blue*, Versluys contrasts the impersonality of the towers with the profound humanity of the responses. Drawing on Marc Wigley’s architectural analysis of the towers in the wake of the attacks, in which he contrasts “a generic postwar corporate office tower…that conceals the body” against “the faces of the invisible occupants” whose photos graced the city (qtd. in Versluys 8), Versluys concludes that “Only in death did the World Trade Center workers acquire the individuality that, as cogs in a nameless mechanism, they had been denied during their lifetimes” (Versluys 8).
Many critics noted that 9/11 “seemed like a movie” and was foretold by American disaster movies; these disaster movies seem to subconsciously represent Americans fears of skyscraper destruction. This is only the first of many eerie parallels between the 1975 article and 9/11. The article notes that.

Fire, of course, is a constant fear of most high-rise workers, and a blaze last week at the World Trade Center only increased anxiety. Ironically, the fire was similar to the one in "The Towering Inferno" in that it spread to other floors through the electrical closets. No one was seriously injured, but firemen discovered that fireproofing material had not been installed on the floor where the fire broke out. The Trade Center has no sprinkler system, and it would take an estimated three hours to evacuate the building entirely. (Cowley, Malsch, and Sciolino)

Of course, 9/11 was also responsible for a shift in signification in the towers, as I have argued. It is also interesting that in the context of discussing Petit’s 1974 walk, the 1993 bombings of the towers also make frequent appearance as a transformative event for the towers’ image. In After the Fall, Richard Gray summarizes the anecdotal and poetic responses of David Lehman, whose opinion about the towers was changed with “the attack on the building in 1993, when a car bomb was detonated at the foot of the North Tower. ‘When the bomb went off and the building became/ A great symbol of America, like the Statue/ Of Liberty at the end of Hitchcock’s Saboteur’…It was there, for him, as a powerful image of national achievement and aspiration” (Gray 5). Gillespie quotes a very different source: Bruce Hoffman, “a terrorism specialist with the Rand Corporation” who claims, “A car bomb in a street in New York doubtless would have killed more people. But the World Trade Center is a symbol of Wall Street and the Manhattan skyline and the United States, itself, and I think that is very important” (qtd. in Gillespie 4).
It is no surprise that this form would appeal to Marsh, a self-labeled Hollywood reject for his failure on his first motion picture. Kaminsky points out that “The most energetic of the early films in the genre were Stanley Kubrick’s *The Killing* (1956) and *Rififi* (1954), both of which were big caper productions by directors acting as independent producers outside of—and in opposition to—the Hollywood establishment” (Kaminsky 76). Likewise, Marsh found himself “unemployable as a filmmaker in this country for one reason or another. The film [*The King*] wasn’t spectacularly successful, financially, and it riled certain people and critics. It was a kind of cruel film. So there was no way I could make another feature here” (D. Smith).

It is the inability to move past this harsh dichotomy that dooms the reviews of such books as John Updike’s *The Terrorist*.

Dirk Eitzen’s “When Is a Documentary?: Documentary as a Mode of Reception” has a fairly on-point summary of debates relative to this topic up to its publication date in 1995.

Attacks on Documentary’s sincerity have come from many philosophical angles. Documentary guru Bill Nichols argued, “Creative treatment turns fact into fiction in the root sense of *fingere*, to shape or fashion. The concept of making, or authorship, moves us away from indexical documents of preexisting fact to the semiotics on constructed meaning and the address of the authorial I” (“Documentaries” 592-3). In other studies, he has focused on biographical documentaries, dispelling the inability to avoid the inherent mythologization (“History, Myth”). Similarly, Jill Godlimov, in the critical lineage of Laura Mulvey, points to the artificial historical and structural closure of many documentaries as artificial meaning-making tools that are “inappropriate to [and mythologize] the topics” (Godlimov & Shapiro 84). Wendi Berman has challenged documentary based on new science that has “discovered that memory is actually a living re-imagination of an event; that memories are not snapshots” like the expected indexes of
documentary (Berman 129). Linda Williams had already argued one step further, that image
culture is already “a weakening in the historicity” of indexes (10) and acknowledges the
culturalists’ view that documentaries “cannot reveal the truth of events, but only the ideologies
and consciousness that construct competing truths—the fictional master narratives by which we
make sense of events” (13).

9 I’m working purposefully narrow here, as Man on Wire is a direct descendent of the
Errol Morris lineage. Marsh, himself, admits that much of his structure and style (including his
defense for the surrealism of much of the re-enactment footage) is because of groundwork laid by
The Thin Blue Line (Thompson). Furthermore, John Dorst’s work with the hybrid metaphor uses
Morris’s films for similar discussion of the way they blur genre and epistemological lines.

10 Interestingly, in most documentaries, the re-enactment appears in color while the
original footage is in black and white, which is, of course, reversed in Man of Wire. I would like
to say that this is another way in which the film challenges its own boundaries and questions its
own truth, but there hasn’t been much study as to whether this delineation of color=footage type
is common enough to form a genre norm. Jill Godlimov states that it is an audience expectation
that “when you put black-and-white stock footage into a color film, it is recognizable as stock
footage” (Godlimov & Shapiro 94), but she never argues for this universal convention.
Bibliography

Photographs


Primary Sources


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