Literature and Democratic Criticism:
The Post-9/11 Novel and the Public Sphere

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Introduction

> *And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?*
> *They were, those people, a kind of solution.*[1]
>
> *No democracy without literature; no literature without democracy*.[2]

This study is primarily concerned with the impact of and challenge posed by September 11 on the liberal imagination and on the capacity to produce "democratic criticism" of the liberal public sphere in the twenty-first century. September 11 has given impetus to the self-reflexive impulse in American culture and literature has joined the national process of self-searching and self-questioning. Seeing literary works as an expression of what Lionel Trilling has called "the liberal imagination," I will argue for the necessity of updating the term with the help of Edward Said's defense of humanism for the twenty-first century. The close readings of major literary works depicting September 11, as well as of several works which do not engage with the attacks directly, but have unmistakably been written in and about the decade marked by what Art Spiegelman has called "the shadow of no towers," offer a particularly poignant perspective on the role of literature within the public sphere and reveal the challenges that the liberal imagination faces at a time when liberalism itself is once again both highly contested and fiercely defended.

Before offering an overview of the dissertation's structure and chapters, certain preliminaries are in order. I will begin by briefly sketching the intellectual climate after September 11, focusing on the conflicting views within the liberal left regarding the nature of the threat posed to liberalism by fundamentalism. Next, I will outline my methodological approach highlighting the need to reconsider Lionel Trilling's notion of "the liberal imagination" in view of historical realities in the twenty-first century and suggesting that Edward Said's reevaluation of liberal humanism as the locus of democratic criticism can offer

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[1] C.P. Cavafy, "Waiting for the Barbarians," *Collected Poems*, trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, ed. George Savidis (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 18.
[2] Jacques Derrida, "Passions: 'An Oblique Offering,'" *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit, trans. David Wood et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 28.

a path to do so. I will proceed with outlining the main concerns of the chapters, after placing my contribution within the expanding discussions regarding post-9/11 American literature.

9/11 in Intellectual Debates

It has become a cliché by now to say that we live in a "post-9/11 world," with the event turning into an unavoidable reference point for the recent history and intellectual life of the United States and the rest of the world. A plethora of literary works have been published bearing the "post-9/11" designation, as part of a marketing strategy promising to offer an insight into the first part of the 21st century. The notion of "a post-9/11 world" alone carries the implication that it represents a moment of rupture. The question of whether the terrorist attacks of September the 11th 2001 represent a watershed moment remains open, but the event has since then been upstaged by a series of partly interconnected crises, from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the 2008 financial crisis, the Occupy Wall Street movement, the Arab Spring, the onset of the civil war in Syria in 2011 and the subsequent migration crisis, to the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States in 2016, the global rise of nationalistic right-wing movements and the ever more dramatic natural disasters connected to the climate crisis.

After the fall of the Berlin wall, Jean Baudrillard had prophesied the coming of an age of "weak events," a time of "frozen history," but on September 11, which he declared a "strong event," history seemed to be coming back with a vengeance.[3] The snowball of history has kept on rolling since then. Designating 9/11 "the mother of all events,"[4] In his view, the collapse of the two identical colossuses embodying Western capitalism and the unchallenged world domination of the US allegedly caused the spectators of the globally broadcasted event to experience an unconscious jouissance, resulting from the fulfillment of their collective wishful thinking. Others, like Jürgen Habermas, have used a moderate tone in weighing the potential historical implications of what appeared to be a watershed moment:

> If the September 11 terror attack is supposed to constitute a caesura in world history, as many think, then it must be able to stand comparison to other

[3] Douglas Kellner, "Globalization and Terrorism: Some Comments on Recent Adventures of the Image and Spectacle on the Occasion of Baudrillard's 75th Birthday," *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies*, Volume 2, Number 1 (January 2005), accessed June 20, 2013, http://www.ubishops.ca/baudrillardstudies/vol2_1/kellnerpf.htm#_edn1.
[4] Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism and Requiem for the Twin Towers* (New York: Verso, 2002).

> events of world historical impact. For that matter, the comparison is not to be drawn with Pearl Harbor but rather with the aftermath of August 1914. The outbreak of World War I signaled the end of a peaceful and, in retrospect, somewhat unsuspecting era, unleashing an age of warfare, totalitarian oppression, mechanistic barbarism and bureaucratic mass murder. At the time, there was something like a widespread foreboding. Only in retrospect will we be able to understand if the symbolically suffused collapse of the capitalistic citadels in lower Manhattan implies a break of that type or if this catastrophe merely confirms, in an inhuman and dramatic way, a long known vulnerability of our complex civilization. If an event is not as unambiguously important as the French Revolution once was—not long after that event Kant had spoken about a "historical sign" that pointed toward a "moral tendency of humankind"—only "effective history" can adjudicate its magnitude in retrospect.[5]

If Habermas was circumspect about assigning a particular meaning to the event in its immediate aftermath and emphasized that only the unfolding of history could safely do that, Jacques Derrida warned against the repetition of 9/11 like a litany in public discourse. In Derrida's view, treating the event as a moment of rupture was a self-inflicted continuation of the terrorist act and would lead to its endless perpetration. He added that the US should mourn and move on after the attacks, as was often done in the case of historical calamities in other parts of the world.[6] Persistent criticism against interpretations of September 11 as a moment of historical rupture came from Noam Chomsky who reminded the public of what he saw as America's numerous pre-9/11 terrorist-like global state interventions. What some called his "truculent tu quoque,"[7] his insistence on parallels between historical events in which America has played the role of perpetrator and 9/11, brought Chomsky criticism at the time, particularly from pro-war public intellectual figures like the late Christopher Hitchens,[8] or, on the more moderate side, Louis Menand.[9]

The representation of the attacks in the public sphere was promptly regulated by certain discursive strictures, some of which are still in place today. The sacralization of Ground Zero as "hallowed ground" and the canonization of the victims as "heroes" are two prominent examples of how mainstream discourse has contributed indirectly to making radical self-

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[5] Giovanna Borradori, Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 26-27.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Walter Russel Mead, "9-11; Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace: How We Got to Be So Hated," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2002 Issue, accessed November 2, 2015, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/2002-09-01/9-11-perpetual-war-perpetual-peace-how-we-got-be-so-hated.
[8] Noam Chomsky and Christopher Hitchens have been engaged in a polemic that started after 9/11 and continued after Osama Bin Laden's assassination, with Hitchens defending the course of state policies and Chomsky's continuing insistence that Bin Laden be brought to justice. See their respective articles in *The Nation* and *Slate*.
[9] For his criticism of Chomsky see Louis Menand, "Faith, Hope and Clarity: September 11 and the American Soul," *The New Yorker*, September 9, 2002.

criticism seem taboo when practiced in relation to the World Trade Center attacks.[10] Protecting the sensibilities of the public was a recurring excuse for censorship, which included "The Clear Channel Memorandum" banning certain songs from several national radio stations.[11] Painful images of people jumping from the World Trade Center towers were removed from the mainstream media and replaced by inspirational ones representing the rescue efforts of firefighters and the by then ubiquitous American flags. Some intellectuals, who were not sparing the public sensibilities supposedly catered to by the censors, found their work refused by US editors.[12]

The public sphere became a battlefield in the meaning-assigning process surrounding the terrorist acts. The aftermath of 9/11 saw not only the escalation of the usual culture wars between liberals and conservatives, but also a rift within the American left.[13] Paradoxically, Christopher Hitchens, Chomsky's outspoken opponent within the left, supported Bush's policies in Iraq and Afghanistan and thus politically aligned himself with the religious Right, while at the same time being a prominent advocate of New Atheism, which brought him in conflict with the same group. Many of the liberals supporting President Bush's post-9/11 foreign policy perceived this new crisis in patterns established by previous major conflicts like World War II or the Cold War, where liberalism pitted itself against totalitarian Fascist and Stalinist regimes. Paul Berman, among others, argued for the revival of a self-assertive brand of liberal discourse in the face of the new extremist threat:

> the long campaign against Arab radicalism and Islamicism that has now begun will have to resemble the Cold War in yet another respect. It will have to be a war of ideas - the liberal ideal against the ideal of a blocklike, unchanging society; the idea of freedom against the idea of absolute truth; the idea of diversity against the idea of purity; the idea of change and novelty

[10] See the case of Native American studies professor Ward Churchill, who has lost his tenured position as a result of publishing an article in which he treats the attacks as retaliation against aggressive US foreign policies and refers to victims working in the financial sector as "little Eichmanns." T.R. Reid, "Professor Under Fire for 9/11 Comments: Free Speech Furor Roils Over Remarks," *Washington Post*, Saturday, February 5, 2005, accessed June 4, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A76-2005Feb4.html.

[11] Neil Strauss, "After the Horror, Radio Stations Pull Some Songs," *New York Times*, September 19, 2001, accessed September 29, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/19/arts/the-pop-life-after-the-horror-radio-stations-pull-some-songs.html.

[12] Gore Vidal, had his post-9/11 articles on the subject rejected by publishers. See Gore Vidal, "September 11, 2001, (A Tuesday)," *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace: How We Got to Be So Hated* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press/Nation Books, 2002), 1-48.

[13] For an overview of the antagonistic positions within the American Left with regard to the war on terror see: Adam Shatz, "The Left and 9/11," *The Nation*, September 23, 2002, accessed May 1, 2013, http://www.thenation.com/article/left-and-911?page=0,4#axzz2cyesncB9. For the persistent criticism of what he views as gone-astray leftists like Chomsky and the Islamic scholar Tariq Ramadan, whom he considers an apologist for the Taliban, see Paul Berman's *The Flight of the Intellectuals* and *Terror and Liberalism* and on the British front see Nick Cohen's *What's Left?: How Liberals Lost Their Way*. French leftist intellectual Bernard-Henri Lévy's *Left in Dark Times: A Stand against the New Barbarism* is another meditation on the post-9/11 reaction of the left and an indictment of the Chomskyan wing.

> against the idea of total stability; the idea of rational lucidity against the instinct of superstitious hatred.[14]

In a similar fashion, Christopher Hitchens and other intellectuals (like British author Martin Amis) persistently equated Islamism to previous threats to liberalism like Fascism and totalitarian Communism, stressing the importance of a firm liberal response.[15]

The division of the world extant during the Cold War, a remnant of the "good war," allowed for a flattering national self-definition, but the new "enemy" brought about complex and hard to pin down dynamics, particularly due to the transnational character of Al Qaeda. What many perceive as America's imperialist interventions and entanglements in the Middle East, coupled with the colonial history of the area, complicate things further. Just as aware of the danger posed by fundamentalism as Paul Berman but adding Christian and Jewish brands of fundamentalism to the equation, Jürgen Habermas, too, stresses the importance of upholding Western liberalism with its roots in the Enlightenment. However, Habermas correspondingly insists on the role of self-criticism in the liberal-democratic tradition as a means of countering fundamentalist tendencies both at home and abroad. He refers to Islamist fundamentalism as resulting from a failure of communication between the privileged and the underprivileged nations of the world exacerbated by the "equation of democratic order and liberal society with unbridled capitalism:" "… fundamentalism is the child of a deracinating modernization, in which the derailments of our colonial history and the failures of decolonization have played a decisive role. As against fundamentalist self-quarantine, we can, in all events, show that the legitimate critique of the West borrows its standard from the West's own 200-year-old discourse of self-criticism."[16]

At play in the rift within the liberal left seem to be two different understandings of liberalism. Berman seems to adhere to a static view of liberalism, as already achieved, as a sum of established Western values, which need to be protected against the attacks of the illiberal Other. In this perspective, liberalism needs to firmly assert its superiority in order to effectively resist the outer fundamentalist threat. Habermas, on the other hand, points out that in order to resist fundamentalism, liberalism has to uphold its own self-critical nature, which has been muffled in the aftermath of the attacks when a belligerent climate subsumed under the dictum

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[14] Paul Berman, "Terror and Liberalism," *The New Prospect*, December 19, 2001, accessed February 12, 2013, http://prospect.org/article/terror-and-liberalism.

[15] Hitchens sees the clash between the liberal West and "Islamofascism" as his generation's moment to rise up to the example of previous militant intellectuals (he mentions George Orwell).

[16] Eduardo Mendieta, "America and the World: A Conversation with Jürgen Habermas," *Logos Journal Online*, 3.3, Summer 2004, accessed February 2, 2014 http://www.logosjournal.com/habermas_america.htm.

"you are either with us or you are with the terrorists" has made self-critical voices appear suspect. Habermas' take on the Enlightenment project as unfinished implies a view of liberalism as a perpetually self-correcting process. From this perspective, the proper response to the current Islamist threat is to ensure the preservation of liberalism's self-critical core in order to stave off fundamentalist tendencies originating from within or from the outside. It is precisely this self-critical stance that is essential to the liberal humanism championed by Trilling and Said, as will be discussed in more detail further on.

Liberal humanism(s)

With the works of Lionel Trilling and Matthew Arnold in mind, Edward Said suggests that liberal humanism goes through cyclical awakenings and (re)definitions brought about by periods of cultural and political turmoil.[17] First published in 1950, Trilling's *The Liberal Imagination* is an example of liberal self-reflection prompted by the strong ideological conflicts of the early Cold War period, namely the totalitarian developments in Stalinist USSR, as well as by the dark history of World War II and the rise and fall of the European fascist movements. In this sense, Trilling's best-selling work of literary criticism followed in the footsteps of Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*,[18] which, Said points out, had also been written at the time of the colonial crisis in India and Ireland and in the aftermath of the Hyde Park riots. Said's own take on humanism and democratic criticism preserves the spirit of his Columbia predecessor's work on the liberal imagination, particularly the emphasis on self-criticism as the *sine qua non* of the liberal humanistic tradition, expanding it to fit the realities of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Critics have drawn attention to Trilling's vague explanation of the notion of liberalism,[19] remarking that it is best understood in opposition to the totalitarian ideologies of the time, namely Fascism and Stalinism.[20] Most studies on liberalism begin by conceding that

[17] Edward Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2004), 36.
[18] Said is not alone in tracing the continuity in liberal self-interrogation and culture from Arnold to Trilling, Louis Menand supports the same idea in his introduction to a recent edition of Trilling's study: "… Trilling uses "literature" in the same way that Arnold used "culture" and "poetry": as a general term that actually refers to a select canon." Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: New York Review Books Classics, 2012), Kindle Edition, Kindle location 61.
[19] See Louis Menand's "Introduction" to Trilling's *The Liberal Imagination*.
[20] Ibid.

offering a definition of the term is a difficult if not impossible task. According to Edmund Fawcett, the word is often met with "incomprehension or abuse," having different, often contradictory meanings within Western culture and outside of it:

> Among European anti-globalists "liberal" means a blind apologist of market greed. To angry American conservatives, liberals are an amoral, bleeding-heart elite. To its zippier metropolitan fans, liberalism nowadays suggests little more than letting people in boardrooms and bedrooms do as they please. Across the wider world, liberalism blurs in many minds with a Western way of life, whether envied or scorned, to be imitated or left aside.
>
> People will tell you that liberals believe in free markets, low taxes, and limited government. Or no, that what really makes a liberal is mutual acceptance, equal respect, social concern, and standing up to bullies. You will hear that liberals are principle-spouting humbugs or dithering fence sitters, that they are leftists, rightists, or incorrigible centrists hawking for supporters in an ever-shifting middle ground. …
>
> Liberalism, you will be told, is an ethical creed, an economic picture of reality, a philosophy of politics, a capitalist rationale, a provincial Western outlook, a passing historical phase, or a timeless body of universal ideas.

On account of its varied and often contradictory usage, Judith Shklar has called liberalism an "all-purpose word,"[21] while Duncan Bell proclaims it "the metacategory of Western political discourse":

> Liberalism is a spectre that haunts Western political thought and practice. For some it is a site of the modern, an object of desire, even the telos of history. For others it represents an unfolding nightmare, signifying either the vicious logic of capitalism or a squalid descent into moral relativism. For others still, perhaps the majority, it is a mark of ambivalence, the ideological prerequisite for living a reasonably comfortable life in affluent democratic states—the least worst option.[22]

Most often, in the attempt at a definition, liberalism is characterized as the "political doctrine" whose guiding goal is that of creating the political and social conditions which foster "the exercise of personal freedom."[23] Fawcett, however, emphatically chooses to define liberalism in terms of a quest for "order" rather than as a doctrine placing individual liberty at its center. Treating liberalism as a political practice that has gradually gained terrain starting with the nineteenth century, Fawcett argues that it is a doctrine born out of the necessity to achieve a sense of order in an "ever-shifting" post-Enlightenment world. With religion losing prominence and traditional social structures being constantly challenged, liberalism came as a response to

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[21] Quoted in Duncan Bell, "What Is Liberalism?" *Political Theory*, 2014, Vol. 42(6) 682-715, 683, accessed September 1, 2015, https://www.academia.edu/6128088/_What_is_Liberalism_Political_Theory_Vol._42_no._6_2014_.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid., quoted from Judith N. Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear," *Political Thought and Political Thinkers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 3.

"a novel condition of society energized by capitalism and shaken by revolution in which for better or worse material and ethical change now appeared ceaseless."[24]

Liberalism has a significantly different history in the United States than in Europe and the "liberal" label carries different connotations on each side of the Atlantic. Historians have pointed out following Tocqueville, that the United States, not having a history of feudalism, have naturally embraced liberalism and gradualism.[25] Despite the fact that political poster figures for liberalism and conservatism in the US have historically embraced contradictory positions on issues such as human nature, or state intervention and civil liberties, there has never been a binary opposition between liberalism and conservatism. According to some historians, "[t]he American political tradition is essentially based on a liberal consensus,"[26] a notion Trilling echoes on a cultural level in his introduction to *The Liberal Imagination*, when he argues that liberalism is "not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition"[27] in the United States.

Unlike Louis Menand, John Carlos Rowe argues that Trilling's liberal imagination is sufficiently well defined and consists of four major interconnected "qualities." The first "quality" of "the liberal subject (author or citizen)" is the possession of what John Keats called "Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."[28] In Rowe's (slightly reductive) explanation of Trilling's appropriation of Keats, the notion of "negative capability" represents the capacity of the "liberal subject" to imagine and accept the ideas and values of an Other and to "keep an open mind" to new ideas and new experiences.[29] The second important feature of the liberal imagination is its "critical spirit" through which it keeps itself in check and constantly redefines itself in accordance to its guiding ideals. The other two ingredients of Trilling's brand of liberal humanism are the centrality of the complex individual who cannot or should not be "reduced to his political or class affiliations" and, lastly, an adherence to cosmopolitan values and human rights. For Rowe, Trilling's notion of the liberal imagination is still a timely critical tool: "Whether we understand it as a utopian ideal or as a practical political position, liberalism is a concept we ignore or trivialize at our own peril. It continues

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[24] Edmund Fawcett, *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), xviii.
[25] Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "Liberalism in America: A Note for Europeans," *The Politics of Hope and the Bitter Heritage: American Liberalism in the 1960s* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008), 81-83, 81.
[26] Schlesinger refers here to a notion put forth by "the consensus school of American history."
[27] Trilling.
[28] John R. Strachan, *A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on the Poems of John Keats* (Oxon: Routledge, 2003), 14. For Keats, the author most in possession of negative capability was William Shakespeare.
[29] John Carlos Rowe, *Afterlives of Modernism: Liberalism, Transnationalism and Political Critique* (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2011), 4.

to shape our values."[30] At the same time, the critic updates Trilling's approach with the addition of a missing emphasis on "the holy trinity" of race, gender and class, reconsidering its cosmopolitan dimension to suit the complexities of today's globalized world. While Trilling's cosmopolitanism is limited to the transatlantic, English-speaking world, having Henry James as its foremost figure, Rowe suggests that the liberal imagination extend its embrace to include a wider variety of "others," in the spirit of Kwame Anthony Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*.

Central to Trilling's liberal imagination is its self-critical function, which is not to be understood as a dogmatic, clearly defined task. Rather, this self-critical function is synonymous with the continuous endeavor of the liberal imagination to take "the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty."[31] Therefore, Trilling does not reduce the task of literature to its critical dimension, but rather identifies it as the locus of liberalism's commitment to openness and complexity, where unrestricted self-examination may be exercised. "Trilling's skepticism about the critical program for which he became celebrated, his ability to think the limits of his own thought," is what allows his work to endure the test of time, Menand suggests.

In his description of the bourgeois public sphere, Habermas includes literature, and the literary salon as an important component thereof; it is one of the locations where discourse going against constituted power can exist. For Habermas, the bourgeois public sphere has suffered increasing degradation through commercialization and subjection to the interests of self-serving individuals who have little concern for the public good. Literature remains in Jacques Derrida's view an outlet for disinterested thought because it is the form of discourse which allows complete freedom of expression as "a modern invention, inscribed in conventions and institutions which … secure in principle its right to say everything."[32] Even more, Derrida has repeatedly associated literature with what he calls *démocratie* à *venir* ("democracy to come"),[33] which, very briefly put, implies a conception of democracy as a project continually in the making. Asked in an interview if this connection between literature and democracy implies that the former has a "critical function" essential for the existence of the latter, Derrida deconstructs the very notion of such a "critical function" elaborating on the elements that link

[30] Rowe, 22.
[31] Trilling, Kindle location 207-208.
[32] Jacques Derrida, "Passions: 'An Oblique Offering,'"28.
[33] For a more in-depth overview of Derrida's complex notion of "democracy to come," which he used and reformulated on different occasions and in different contexts, see Simon Critchley, *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (London and New York: Verso, 1999), 279-280.

the field of fictional discourse with "democracy to come" and emphasizing the importance of their unfinished, open-ended status:

> I am not sure that "critical function" is the right word. First of all, it would limit literature by fixing a mission for it, a single mission. This would be to finalize literature, to assign it a meaning, a program and a regulating ideal, whereas it could also have other essential functions, or even have no function, no usefulness outside itself. … In the end, the critico-political function of literature, in the West, remains very ambiguous. The freedom to say everything is a very powerful political weapon, but one which might immediately let itself be neutralized as a fiction. This revolutionary power can become very conservative. The writer can just as well be held to be irresponsible. He can, I'd even say that he must sometimes demand a certain irresponsibility, at least as regards ideological powers, of a Zhdanovian type for example, which try to call him back to extremely determinate responsibilities before socio-political or ideological bodies. This duty of irresponsibility, of refusing to reply for one's thought or writing to constituted powers, is perhaps the highest form of responsibility. To whom, to what? That's the whole question of the future or the event promised by or to such an experience, what I was just calling the democracy to come. Not the democracy of tomorrow, not a future democracy which will be present tomorrow but one whose concept is linked to the to-come [a-venir, d. avenir, future], to the experience of a promise engaged, that is always an endless promise.[34]

The reference to Zhdanov's cultural policy for the arts is an example of the totalitarian potential inherent in assigning a particular role to literature and in giving it a determinate political mission. Through his deconstruction of the notion of the critical function of literature, Derrida does not reject this possibility, but rather moves the conversation on the political role of literature to a different plane, pointing out that the power of literature does not lie in its programmatically being a medium of social and political criticism, but rather in its very lack of any responsibility to define and limit itself in this way or otherwise. Another important feature of literature that connects it to "democracy to come" is its secrecy and refusal of total transparency, which goes hand in hand with its open-endedness. An insistence on clarity and uncovering any secret are manifestations of totalitarianism for Derrida, according to Jonathan Culler, who also argues that the post-9/11 pronouncement of an end to irony could signal an "onset of totalitarianism," which may mean "an end of democracy also."[35]

My own use of the notion of liberalism and the liberal imagination is partly informed by John Carlos Rowe's multicultural, post-globalization version of Lionel Trilling's brand of

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[34] Derek Attridge, "This Strange Institution Called Literature: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), 33-76, 38.
[35] Jonathan Culler, "The Most Interesting Thing in the World," *diacritics* 38.1-2 (2008): 7-16, 15, accessed May 3, 2013, <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.

literary criticism. However, in one of the following chapters I will argue that the post-9/11 novel *Open City* by Teju Cole rightly challenges the cosmopolitanism of Appiah, which Rowe perceives as the future of the liberal imagination. Appiah's cosmopolitanism adds a global dimension to Trilling's parochial Euro-American cosmopolitanism but shares its social detachment. I argue instead for a reconsideration of the liberal imagination in line with Edward Said's *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* and its version of liberal cosmopolitan ethics in a post-9/11 world.

Said's approach to criticism manages to walk the thin line between intellectual detachment and political commitment. Following Theodor Adorno, Said sees the intellectual as necessarily both inside and outside of society, particularly in a time when wars are fought in the name of "*our* values" and the resurgence of patriotism or Western-centrism has made suspect the self-critical tendencies of humanism. The humanist's position as both "inside and outside" can be achieved through a commitment to documentation, to historicizing current events, as well as through an excavation of "the silences, the world of memory, of itinerant, barely visible groups, the places of exclusion and invisibility."[36] In the spirit of Trilling, Said argues that humanistic discourse should produce "more rather than less complexity"[37] in order to enrich and enlarge debates in the public sphere and to counterbalance the prevalence of Manichean sound bites in the mainstream media.

At the core of Said's liberal humanism is "democratic criticism" conceptualized "as a form of democratic freedom and as a continuous practice of questioning and of accumulating knowledge that is open to, rather than in denial of, the constituent realities of the post-Cold War world, its early colonial formation, and the frighteningly global reach of the last remaining superpower today." Critique and "resistance" are "at the very heart of humanism" in Said's perspective, not in a reductive Zhdanovian way, but rather through an embrace of complexity, critical self-reflection and the intellectual effort of close reading and historicization. Humanism for Said is "a process of unending disclosure, discovery, self-criticism, and liberation,"[38] a "technique of trouble" always potentially subjected to fallibility.[39] To constantly keep itself in check, humanism must confront "its abuses by the experience of Eurocentrism and empire"

[36] Said, 81.
[37] Ibid., 64.
[38] Ibid., 21-22
[39] Ibid., 47. Derrida perceives democracy as a never fully achieved state, but as something to be constantly striven for, something that is always "to come." Similarly, Said rejects a static view of humanism and of the literary canon, as that argued for by Allan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind*, of which he is critical in his lectures. Said's humanist ethics reject radical anti-foundationalism, but are very much informed by Michel Foucault, and are Left-leaning without being Marxist. These often contradictory tendencies allow him to achieve a rare balance between intellectual detachment and political commitment.

and be open to being "critical of humanism in the name of humanism."[40] Thus, for Said, the liberal imagination has to be worldly, "cosmopolitan and text-and-language-bound in ways that absorb the great lessons of the past."[41]

The Post- 9/11 Novel

In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, many authors were called to voice what for the majority remained inexpressible, to fill the void left behind by the collapse of the towers and to contribute to creating a narrative of the event. From Don DeLillo to David Foster Wallace, Toni Morrison, Paul Auster or John Updike, many authors published their immediate reaction.[42] These early responses were often personal, candid and touching confessions or short-stories treating the event as a moment of rupture, or quite to the contrary, rejecting exceptionalist narratives, or grappling with the act of representing what seemed unrepresentable. In her poem *The Dead of September 11*, Toni Morrison expressed the challenge of addressing the attacks in their immediate aftermath and the dangers of writing out of a strong emotional response:

> … But I would not say
> a word until I could set aside all I know or believe about
> nations, wars, leaders, the governed and ungovernable;
> all I suspect about armor and entrails.
> … I would purge
> my language of hyperbole; of its eagerness to analyze
> the levels of wickedness; ranking them; calculating their
> higher or lower status among others of its kind.
> Speaking to the broken and the dead is too difficult for
> a mouth full of blood.
> … I must not claim
> false intimacy or summon an overheated heart glazed
> just in time for a camera. I must be steady and I must be clear,
> knowing all the time that I have nothing to say - no words
> stronger than the steel that pressed you into itself; no scripture
> older or more elegant than the ancient atoms you
> have become.[43]

[40] Ibid., 10.
[41] Ibid., 11.
[42] Many of these early reactions have been published in one of the first collections of literature dealing with 9/11: Ulrich Baer, *110 Stories: New York Writes after September 11* (New York: New York University Press, 2002).
[43] Toni Morrison, *The Dead of September 11*, 2001, accessed January 13, 2014 http://www.legacy-project.org/index.php?page=lit_detail&litID=83.

Morrison's indictment of the media's approach to reporting the event emphasizes the constructed nature of these representations and their staged emotionality.[44] Moreover, the poem dramatizes the way in which many representations of the attacks become politicized. By self-reflexively laying bare its own limitations, however, the poem manages to tackle the highly sensitive topic without falling into the traps it enumerates.

Several authors have used the occasion of the attacks to restate the attributes of the liberal imagination by setting the role of the writer in opposition to the actions of the fundamentalist other. Author Martin Amis's first reaction to the attacks was to feel overcome by a sense of futility about the act of writing fiction, only to then use the occasion to redefine his role as a writer in opposition to terrorism. He refers to the attacks in terms of "de-Enlightenment," the result of a dangerous reemergence of religion and irrational conformism. From this point of view, the author finds a new sense of mission as the heroic torchbearer of reason in a time of resurging fundamentalism: "A novel is a rational undertaking; it is reason at play, perhaps, but it is still reason."[45] Amis is not alone in his reconsideration of the role of the writer in opposition to the act of terror, in the wake of 9/11. In his early response to the attacks, Ian McEwan describes acts of terror as a "failure of the imagination" on the part of the terrorists, in that they lack the imagination necessary to empathize with their victims. This perspective indirectly confers a positive value to the practice of fiction writing, which may foster an empathic encounter with the inner lives of the other.[46] Don DeLillo suggests in his response to the attacks that the role of literature is to offer a "counter-narrative" to the terror inflicted by the attackers and to capture the moments of humanity, which continue to exist in the confrontation with such inhuman destruction.[47]

Other authors have constructed their early responses in relation to larger themes that have been central to their work. Religion has been a recurring theme throughout John Updike's career and his fictional take on the attacks describes a series of religious experiences undergone by several characters including a victim, a distant witness and one of the perpetrators.[48] David

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[44] For a discussion of how the media supported the Bush administration's narrative of 9/11 and the "war on terror" campaign see Douglas Kellner, *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy: Terrorism, War, and Election Battles* (London: Paradigm Publishing, 2005).

[45] Martin Amis, "The Voice of the Lonely Crowd," *The Second Plane* (London: Vintage, 2008), 11-20, 11.

[46] Ian McEwan, "Only Love and Then Oblivion: Love Was All They Set against Their Murderers," *The Guardian*, September 15, 2001, accessed May 7, 2010, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/15/september11.politicsphilosophyandsociety2.

[47] Don DeLillo, "In the Ruins of the Future," *The Guardian*, December 22, 2001, accessed June 4, 2010, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/dec/22/fiction.dondelillo.

[48] John Updike, "Varieties of Religious Experience," *The Atlantic Monthly*, November 2002, accessed June 29, 2011, http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/2002/11/updike.htm.

Foster Wallace's first response to 9/11 is a self-deprecating meditation on authenticity and ironic detachment (his signature preoccupations) in a time of mourning.[49] These early works of post-September 11 fiction or literary journalism strike a fragile balance in their attempt to perform the cultural work of representing the event and commemorating it, while also maintaining literature's intellectual position as "both outside and inside society" and as an outlet for "democratic criticism."

Mostly starting in 2008, studies concerned with the ever-expanding 9/11 literary "canon" have begun to map out and asses of the influence of this historical event on literature, in the US, but also across the globe. Ann Keniston's and Jeanne Follensbee's 2008 collection of articles *Literature After 9/11* (the title may be slightly misleading, as the collection includes essays on commemorative practices and popular culture as well) represents a first step in providing an overview of literature in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks. Many of the contributions to the collection tackle the challenges and limitations of representation and a significant part are indebted to Holocaust and trauma studies, drawing on Freudian approaches in their more recent reconfigurations by Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra or Shoshana Feldman. With the "spectacle" of the second plane hitting the South World Trade Center tower and the collapse of both transmitted live on TV, what Jürgen Habermas calls "a world public" was formed,[50] engendering a global experience of the traumatic sequence of events. The prominence of Holocaust and trauma studies in the late nineties has led to a surge of critical works assessing representation of the September 11 attacks from this particular lens and has provided a framework to interpret the first works of fiction on the subject as expressions of both national and personal trauma.

Published in 2009, *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* by Kristiaan Versluys is the first comprehensive study of the 9/11 novel up until and including DeLillo's *Falling Man*.[51] Versluys' theoretical framework is that of trauma studies, which has continued to inform more recent studies like Sven Cveck's 2011 *Towering Figures: Reading the 9/11 Archive*.[52] The necessity to move beyond a trauma-studies methodology is acknowledged by Cveck, who uses it mostly as a spring-board for a wider discussion of the works of fiction, including *Falling Man* as the most recent, from a more politically aware historicist perspective. Magali Cornier Michael's more recent book on 9/11 fiction specifically limits itself to works which directly

[49] David Foster Wallace, "The View from Mrs.Thomson's," *Rolling Stone*, October 25, 2001, 95.
[50] Medienta.
[51] Kristiaan Versluys, *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).
[52] Sven Cvek, *Towering Figures Reading the 9/11 Archive* (Amsterdam: Rodopi Press), 2011.

represent the attacks, focusing on the ethics of representation and continuing on the path established by Holocaust studies.[53] The dominance of trauma discourse in the cultural readings of September 11, according to Sabine Sielke, causes a resistance to closure, "suggesting that we will repeatedly have to return to the ruins of Ground Zero." The "rhetoric of the unrepresentable" in trauma culture remains "risky business" for Sielke, because "post-9/11 politics could easily have its way" in the empty space left behind by a failure of representation.[54]

Birgit Däwes' 2011 study *Ground Zero Fiction*[55] self-consciously moves beyond the trauma and Holocaust studies approach, having a historicist, transnational, almost encyclopedic breadth. Other studies on the subject published in the same year, namely Martin Randall's *9/11 and the Literature of Terror* and Richard Gray's *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11*, are limited to early primary works and include literary genres other than the novel.[56] Richard Gray's *After the Fall* uses Homi K. Bhabha's notion of "hybridity" and theories of "deterritorialization" as reference points for dismissing or validating works of literature dealing with 9/11. Däwes covers a wider spectrum, both in terms of theoretical approaches and of the primary sources included, suggesting the first comprehensive typology of what she calls "Ground Zero fiction," which includes six "approaches:" "metonymic," "salvational," "diagnostic," "appropriative," "symbolic" and "writerly." Cvek's subtitle *Reading the 9/11 Archive* is perhaps telling of the problematic aspects shaping these first studies concerned with the representation of 9/11 in literature; the most obvious one being the complex task of assessing and drawing conclusions on an ever expanding body of works, both primary and secondary. The historical ramifications of the attacks, including the subsequent global war on terror and its corollary, complicate the task further.

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[53] Magali Cornier Michael, *Narrative Innovation in 9/11 Fiction (*Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2014).
Michael reveals her corpus limited to works which directly represent the attacks (the novels she chooses to focus on are also part of the early 9/11 canon up to DeLillo's *Falling Man*) in "Narrative Innovation in 9/11 Fiction," paper presented at *9/11/2001 and the Politics of Aesthetics: Literature and Memorial Arts*, The McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts, September 11, 2013, accessed February 10, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8o_lrY8XC74&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

[54] Sabine Sielke, "Why 9/11 Is [Not] Unique," *Beyond 9/11: Transdisciplinary Perspectives on Twenty-First Century U.S. American Culture*, eds. Christian Kloeckner, Simone Knewitz and Sabine Sielke (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2013), 263-287, 284.

[55] Birgit Däwes, *Ground Zero Fiction: History, Memory, and Representation in the American 9/11 Novel* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2011).

[56] Martin Randall, *9/11 and the Literature of Terror* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011),
Richard Gray, *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2011). Both studies deal with the pre-2008 novels and a combination of literary genres, including drama, documentary and journalism.

Like Däwes, Georgiana Banita also acknowledges the limitations of dealing with the representation of 9/11 in fiction through a single theoretical lens, in her 2012 book *Plotting Justice: Narrative Ethics and Literary Culture after 9/11*.[57] However, unlike Däwes, who employs a variety of theoretical lenses (overall favoring a New Historicist transnational one) to somewhat inconclusive ends, Banita manages to subsume a variety of issues pertaining to the representation of September 11 under the umbrella of an ethical turn in fiction. While giving unity to the study, the ethics frame encompasses a variety of sub-issues ranging from questions of representation, but also cultural and political matters, the justification of war, as well as the morally questionable offshoots of the Bush doctrine, including illegal detention, torture and surveillance. The more limited body of works dealt with by Banita is made up mostly of novels in which 9/11 plays an apparently secondary role, it has a background function or is alluded to indirectly. In line with Banita, this study will also show that there is something to be gained by moving beyond direct approaches on the attacks. The centrality of the attacks in the economy of a novel is not necessarily telling with regard to the representativeness of that particular work for the post-September 11 period. Often, works centering on the attacks fall back on old paradigms and established modes of representation, while other works barely mentioning 9/11, or using it as a background, manage to capture its subtle, yet poignant, ripple effect. I argue that works benefitting from a larger historical distance from the attacks, either temporally or in terms of adopting a wider perspective, are often more apt at capturing its historical implications and ramifications. While including works engaging directly with the World Trade Center attacks, my dissertation also aligns with the notion put forth by the editors of the 2013 interdisciplinary collection of essays *Beyond 9/11* that an "effort to move beyond that ignominious day" may give way to "more complex and multi-faceted perspectives of twenty-first century U.S. politics and culture."[58]

September 11 as well as the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris are events that have fired up the public sphere in defense of "our values" which are described and seen by many as being under attack, causing a potentially problematic political, but also cultural, "rally 'round the flag" effect. The French-European solidarity with the US after the attacks on the World Trade Center, expressed at the time in the *Le Monde* title "Nous sommes tous américains," was echoed

[57] Georgiana Banita, *Plotting Justice: Narrative Ethics and Literary Culture after 9/1*1 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 2. As it is based on her dissertation submitted in 2008, Banita's study is also restricted to novels published before that time, including *Falling Man*.

[58] Christian Kloeckner, Simone Knewitz and Sabine Sielke, "Introduction," *Beyond 9/11: Transdisciplinary Perspectives on Twenty-First Century U.S. American Culture* (Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Bern, Bruxelles, New York, Oxford, Wien: Peter Lang), 25.

back in 2015 as a global response to the Paris attacks in the ubiquitous "Je suis Charlie" and "Pray for Paris." The solidarity inherent in these slogans is often accompanied by a monolithic view of "the West," whose liberal values are perceived and described as under threat.

As scholars of liberalism have pointed out, in the absence of a stable definition, liberalism tends to define itself in the negative, in opposition to competing illiberal ideologies. At the same time, this absence of a stable self-definition allows liberalism to pragmatically morph in order to pursue its ideals in ever-changing historical contexts. This process of historical adaptation and reconfiguration is possible through the practice of self-criticism. The tendency towards self-definition in opposition to the other and the self-critical imperative at the core of liberalism's historical endurance are often at odds with each other.[59] Democracy, according to Jacque Derrida, bears the seed of its own potential destruction through a tendency towards "auto-immunity," which entails, very briefly put, responding with undemocratic self-protective measures to perceived threats to the democratic order. A similar dynamic as that described by Derrida under the concept of "auto-immunity" can be identified in the previously discussed post-9/11 calls for a more self-assertive liberal response to fundamentalist threats.

The liberal imagination both mirrors and contributes to the continuous process of liberal (re)definition. The post-September 11 novel offers a variety of insights into and dramatizations of liberal self-understanding in the twenty-first century. Literature is ideally equipped to perform the cultural work of "democratic criticism," but, as will become evident in the individual discussions of literary works, it may also duplicate some of the potentially illiberal self-defensive tendencies within the public sphere. The following chapters display an interest in the interaction between the world of fiction and that of the mass media, having their main arguments anchored in wider debates taking place in the public sphere. The order of the chapters reflects my understanding of a certain temporal development in how the question "who are *we*?" has been approached in the decade after the attacks. In some cases, the novels engage with what is being purposefully or accidentally silenced within the public sphere, giving a voice to the voiceless and the marginal and focusing on the gray areas that are excluded from the often black and white sensationalist mass-media approach. The public sphere itself becomes an object of scrutiny in some of the novels I discuss. Each literary work is put through a process of individual close reading and historicization, but also treated in relation to the other works

[59] A recent phenomenon in European politics is the redefinition of far right parties, traditionally anti-liberal, as defenders of liberal values. See Ben Marguiles, "How the European Far Right Discovered the Dark Side of the Liberal Tradition," *Social Europe*, December 11, 2015, accessed December 11, 2015 http://www.socialeurope.eu/2015/12/how-the-european-far-right-uses-the-dark-side-of-liberalism/.

sharing similar concerns. Where relevant, I place the novels within the wider context of the oeuvre or background of their authors. Aside from the general frame of the dissertation based on my understanding of Trilling's "liberal imagination" updated via Said's discussion of humanism and democratic criticism in the twenty-first century, each chapter's thematic focus requires the introduction of new theme-appropriate theoretical tools. These critical approaches allow me to unpack the issues prominent in the public sphere that the chapters center upon. At the same time, they provide the basis for the analysis of the works in relation to each other.

The first chapter of this study focuses on "the death of irony" debates, which have grown out of the already extant culture wars between liberals and conservatives, exacerbating tendencies visible at least since the long nineteen-nineties.[60] The "the death of irony" argument used in the immediate aftermath of the attacks is one manifestation of the cultural "self-searching" they have occasioned. In a reactivation of the Protestant spiritual awakening pattern in American culture, conservatives have used jeremiad-like rhetoric to blame liberal "decadence" for indirectly bringing about the attacks of September 11. I rely on theories of irony and satire, as well as on Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis, to discuss how satire, a fundamentally liberal literary genre,[61] has fared in the new millennium. By looking at two what I would like to call "September 10 satires", Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children* (2006) and David Forster Wallace's satiric novella *The Suffering Channel* (2004), and at what author Jess Walter has called "a September 12 novel," *The Zero* (2006), the chapter investigates how the aforementioned works waver between two modes of satire, the militant one that is in line with a liberal belief in individual and societal betterment through self-criticism, and the nihilistic brand of modernist and particularly postmodernist satire.

A process of mourning, Judith Butler argues, is concomitantly a process of redefining the self in relation to the loss suffered. In the public sphere after the attacks, the narrative of victimhood merged with existing narratives of American innocence and exceptionalism,

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[60] In his study on what he calls "the long nineties," Phillip E. Wegner presents 9/11 as a repetition of the fall of the Berlin wall and refers to the end of the Cold War period as an era of renewed self-understanding for the US: Phillip E. Wegner, *Life between Two Deaths, 1989-2001: U.S. Culture in the Long Nineties* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

[61] Few recent studies deal with newer modes of literary satire and my chapter opens up discussions regarding the changes suffered by the genre. A striking missing link in the literary scholarship is the connection between satire and liberalism. Literary critics tend to still view satire through the lens of classical literary studies as a conservative genre, which does little justice to the mutations it has suffered in the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century. Interestingly, however, popular political satire in the US has gained more academic attention, being under fire particularly on account of its alleged "liberal bias" (popular satire shows like *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* are the usual culprit). See a recent study investigating the scarcity of conservative political satire, prompted by the case of a popular comedian who, after September 11, moved from being a liberal, to supporting President Bush, while losing his popularity in the process: Alison Dagnes, *A Conservative Walks into a Bar: The Politics of Political Humor* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

challenging the practice of democratic criticism. The second chapter explores the politics of victimhood in connection to the larger efforts of memorialization and commemoration. Authors Don DeLillo and Jonathan Safran Foer, whose novels *Falling Man* (2007) and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) I have selected as case studies for this chapter, have both expressed the necessity for literature to provide a "counter-narrative" to the terrorist act. Their works, however, have different means of achieving this desideratum and different approaches to representing victim figures. Foer's novel problematically idealizes his characters, sentimentalizing victimhood and reviving an exceptionalist narrative of American innocence within a trauma-centric transnational view of history. DeLillo's work, on the other hand, painstakingly avoids melodramatic emplotment, using a self-reflexive minimalist form of realism to represent victimhood in a multifaceted manner. Drawing on intellectual discussions regarding the challenges posed by mourning to the articulation of democratic criticism in the public sphere (from Judith Butler's post-9/11 Levinasian ethics of mourning, to David Simpson's critique of "the culture of mourning" and Andreas Huyssen's work on the politics of memory), the chapter analyzes literary depictions of victimhood in relation to the controversial obituary series *Portraits of Grief*.

The necessity to understand the reasons behind the attacks, and therefore to know the motives of the terrorist other, carries an element of self-scrutiny evident in the ubiquitous post 9/11 question "why do *they* hate *us*?" The third chapter is concerned with post-9/11 literary depictions of Islamist terrorists in Martin Amis' *The Second Plane* (2008), John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006) and *Falling Man* (2007) by Don DeLillo. In these works, the terrorist other becomes a vehicle for self-analysis, an occasion to redefine the liberal self in a binary opposition to the other, or to see oneself through the defamiliarizing gaze of the other. For Edward Said, the "the Other" is "the source and resource for a better, more critical understanding of 'the Self'",[62] but the violent encounter between the fundamentalist Other and the liberal Self complicates this dynamic, generating a potentially problematic brand of self-criticism, or, in other cases, functioning as a ploy to stifle democratic criticism.

The fourth chapter moves beyond representing the attacks, the victims and the terrorist other, taking the question "who are we?" to a global and cosmopolitan level inescapable in the century marked by the fall of the twin towers. While operations to protect the "homeland" against terrorism become global during "the war on terror," understanding citizenship in terms

[62] Akeel Bilgrami, "Forward" to Edward Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, xii.

of national and global affiliations requires a recalibration of the dichotomy between patriotism and cosmopolitanism. Amy Waldman's 2011 *The Submission* and Teju Cole's 2011 *Open City* engage with the limits and challenges of liberal cosmopolitanism in a post/11 world dominated by a politics of fear. The works discussed in this chapter no longer struggle with representing September 11, but rather take for granted that the attacks have shaped the complex world we inhabit, revealing the potentially destructive effects of mistrust within the American public sphere, as well as at a global level. To explore how the cosmopolitan dimension of liberalism and its twenty-first century manifestations are dramatized in the two works of fiction, I rely on competing theories by Martha Nussbaum, Kwame Anthony Appiah and Homi K. Bhabha, inclining towards the conclusions of former Saidian student Bruce Robbins and Jacques Derrida's indirect take on cosmopolitanism via his notion of "democracy to come."

The concluding chapter suggests that the influence of September 11 on American culture is perhaps best understood by challenging its historical centrality and presenting it in relation to other events, processes or phenomena competing for public attention. To illustrate this claim, I discuss three works of fiction which treat September 11 as a central historical marker, only in order to dramatize how it has overshadowed or helped speed up other crucial historical processes connected to the rise of neoliberalism. I introduce the notion of neoliberalism, mostly understood in terms laid out by Wendy Brown. Furthermore, I touch upon the influence of neoliberalism on the liberal self-understanding, the meeting point between neo-Marxist criticism and liberal self-criticism, and the current challenges faced by the liberal imagination. Liberalism has been under intense scrutiny following the 2008 economic crash or in view of the evermore urgent global environmental crisis, and the works of fiction briefly analyzed in my conclusion (Benjamin Kunkel's 2005 *Indecision*, Jonathan Franzen's 2010 *Freedom* and Thomas Pynchon's 2013 *Bleeding Edge*) provide an illuminating perspective shift for the necessary task of democratic criticism. I argue that "the clash of civilizations" narrative dominant after the attacks on the World Trade Center and reiterated after the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris often functions as a diversion from the practice of democratic criticism and the task of facing liberalism's own contradictions and their global repercussions.

Chapter 1:
Irony Is Dead, Long Live Irony: Satire after 9/11

Are you looking for something to take seriously? Begin with evil.[63]

Like the novel, which continues to live despite having been repeatedly pronounced dead,[64] irony too appears to have survived successive death pronouncements. The decade before September 11 was marked by "endism," which is considered by some a side effect of postmodernism, encompassing pronouncements of the "death of history," from that by Francis Fukuyama to those made by postmodernist thinkers like Jean Baudrillard or Jean Francois Lyotard.[65] At the same time, calls for an "end of the age of irony" had been made as early as the nineteen-nineties,[66] but became pronouncedly urgent in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. Calls of an end to irony were among the first manifestations of the larger self-reflexive processes beginning to take place in American culture after the attacks, as Roger Rosenblatt's often quoted post-9/11 *Time* magazine piece reveals:

> For some 30 years--roughly as long as the Twin Towers were upright - the good folks in charge of America's intellectual life have insisted that nothing was to be believed in or taken seriously. Nothing was real. With a giggle and a smirk, our chattering classes - our columnists and pop culture makers - declared that detachment and personal whimsy were the necessary tools for an oh-so-cool life. Who but a slobbering bumpkin would think, "I feel your

[63] Roger Rosenblatt. „The Age of Irony Comes to an End," *Time*, September 24, 2001, accessed February 23, 2013, http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1000893,00.html.

[64] For a critical overview of the death pronouncements concerning the novel, see the chapter "The Novel Is Dead. Long Live the Novel" in Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *The Anxiety of Obsolescence: The American Novel in the Age of Television* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006). For a more recent discussion of the death of the novel see Robert Clark Young's "The Death of the Death of the Novel" in *The Southern Review*, Winter 2008. Often, pronouncements regarding the death of the novel have materialized in a transformation and even revival of the medium, as was the case for instance with John Barth's essay *The Literature of Exhaustion*, which, despite apparently depicting the demise of the novel, has come to be seen as the manifesto of the postmodern novel. In a similarly paradoxical fashion, "the death of irony" pronouncements could also be seen as the manifestations of a renewed interest in a concept in need of reconsideration.

[65] For more on the subject of "endism" in the context of postmodernism, see Stuart Sim, *Derrida and the End of History* (New York: Totem Books, 1999), 8-9.

[66] A pre-9/11 critic of irony was twenty-five-year-old Jedediah Purdy, whose debut book touched a sensitive chord, starting a debate in the media on the subject of the necessity of irony's demise, and stirring both the opponents and the defenders of irony almost two years before the attacks. Purdy decried the disengagement of the nineteen-nineties. The emblematic popular-culture incarnation of this era of disengaged irony was the TV series persona of Jerry Seinfeld, with his famous shrug, in the eponymous show, self-reflexively described as "about nothing." See Jedediah Purdy, *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today* (New York: Vintage, Random House, 2000).

> pain"? The ironists, seeing through everything, made it difficult for anyone to see anything. The consequence of thinking that nothing is real - apart from prancing around in an air of vain stupidity--is that one will not know the difference between a joke and a menace.
> No more. The planes that plowed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were real. The flames, smoke, sirens - real. The chalky landscape, the silence of the streets--all real. I feel your pain - really.[67]

The call for a return of the "real," which complemented "the end of irony" pronouncements in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks, could also be seen as a twenty-first century manifestation of the American jeremiad rhetoric, as used by Sacvan Bercovitch. The jeremiad as a form of discourse becomes particularly visible during the cycles of cultural "awakening" meant to rejuvenate America's status as a chosen nation and its providential mission. Watershed historical events or periods of cultural turmoil in the United States are often followed by an increase in jeremiad-like public rhetoric.[68] These periodical awakenings allow for historical occurrences to be filtered through the nation's civil religion patterns and to be woven into and understood through the lens of already existing national narratives. Furthermore, the American jeremiad goes hand in hand with an exceptionalist national self-understanding, which makes its use as a tool of historical sense-making particularly problematic. Andrew R. Murphy points out that the 9/11 attacks have been incorporated into the American jeremiad pattern, becoming an occasion for self-examination, but also for the reinstatement of an exceptionalist self-understanding, while fueling the rhetoric of the already existing culture wars.[69]

More than a decade later, the state of irony continues to be rechecked almost regularly on the anniversaries of the attacks,[70] which stands only as proof that the death pronouncement has been premature. In reality, the wishful thinking involving the death of irony had already started at the end of the nineteen-nineties, and had more to do with a sense of exhaustion with regard to postmodernism having gone mainstream, than with irony per se. Several articles on the subject of irony's supposed demise point out that the term has often been misused as a

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[67] Rosenblatt.
[68] Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).
[69] For a post-9/11 discussion of the American jeremiad, which pursues its recurrence in American cultural discourse to the present day, particularly after the World Trade Center attacks, see: Andrew R Murphy, *Prodigal Nation: Moral Decline and Divine Punishment from New England to 9/11* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
[70] Eric Randall, "The «Death of Irony» and Its Many Reincarnations," *The Atlantic Wire*, September 9, 2011, accessed January 23, 2013, http://www.theatlanticwire.com/national/2011/09/death-irony-and-its-many-reincarnations/42298/. On the ten-year commemoration of September 11, the article gives an overview of the several death of irony pronouncements and reports its inevitable and necessary revival in the years following the attacks.

synecdoche for what many saw as the ills of the last decade of the twentieth century: its cynicism, its propensity for questioning claims of absolute truth and societal values, and playfully placing them within inverted commas.[71] The features of the Zeitgeist that were put under the umbrella of irony seemed to have permeated popular culture and everyday life, in an apparent contagion of superficiality, cynicism and lack of engagement with any of the "serious" issues:

> The irony of postmodernity denies a difference between what is real and what is appearance and even embraces incoherence and lack of meaning. It claims our interpretations of reality impose form and meaning on life: reality is constructed rather than perceived or understood, and it does not exist separately from its construction. Awareness of constructions has replaced awareness of meaning, and postmodern irony replaces unity with multiplicity, meaning with appearance of meaning, depth with surface. A postmodern audience is made conscious of the constructed nature of meaning and of its own participation in the appearance of things, which results in the self-referential irony that characterizes most of our cultural output today.[72]

In his study on what he calls "the long nineteen-nineties," Phillip E. Wegner argues that the period is bracketed by two moments of collapse, the fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of the Twin Towers, and marked by the supposed death of the great master-narratives. The long nineties represent a transitional period from the apparent end of the Cold War in 1989 to the actual ushering in a of "a new world order" achieved through the destruction of "the symbolic universe of the Cold War" on September 11, 2001, which Wegner refers to as the repetition of the previous collapse of the Berlin wall.[73] Seen as "a place between two deaths," the nineties both look back to the past and dream up the period to come, thus precipitating its "awakening," to paraphrase Walter Benjamin.[74]

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[71] Zoe Williams, "The Final Irony," *The Guardian*, June 28, 2003, accessed February 23, 2013, http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/2003/jun/28/weekend7.weekend2. Williams shows how the use of the term irony in the post 9/11 context tended to have little to do with its original meaning (that "of purporting a meaning of an utterance or a situation that is different, often opposite, to the literal one" and of "a state of affairs or an event that seems deliberately contrary to what one expects and is often amusing as a result"). Instead, it was used to incorporate several traits of postmodernism that were viewed by its critics as negative (from its self-referential tendencies, apparent cynicism, the deconstruction of the great metanarratives, or its whimsical, playful character). For a rebuttal of the death of irony thesis, see also: Michiko Kakutani, "The 9/11 Decade: Artists Respond to September 11," *The New York Times*, September 1, 2011, accessed February 11, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/01/us/sept-11-reckoning/culture.html or Andy Newman, "Irony Is Dead. Again. Yeah, Right," *The New York Times*, November 21, 2008, accessed February 11, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/23/fashion/23irony.html, to give just a few examples.

[72] Lisa Coletta, "Political Satire and Postmodern Irony in the Age of Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart," *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Volume 42, Issue 5, October 2009, 856, accessed June 5, 2014, http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1540-5931.2009.00711.x/abstract.. Colleta analyzes the satire of popular culture figures like Colbert and Steward, suggesting that the postmodern irony employed by the two, as well as the postmodern conceptions of reality of the viewers, prevent the satire from being effective in the traditional sense, that is from leading to action and, eventually, to social change.

[73] Wegner, Kindle edition.

[74] Wegner turns to Walter Benjamin's *Arcade Project* to justify his discussion of the nineties as a transitional period, but also for his perspective on history. Like Slavoj Zizek, among others, Wegner points out the uncanny preoccupation with disasters in the ten years preceding the fall of the twin towers. He offers the example of

While some recent commentators maintain that irony was at least wounded on 9/11, others continue to argue for the necessity of its demise, which only proves that it still has a pulse.[75] Many of the debates between critics and defenders of irony are marred by their adherence to different understandings of irony,[76] which prevents them from achieving a productive dialogue. Its critics generally have in mind postmodern irony, which they (often improperly) associate with cynicism and lack of societal involvement.[77] Its defenders build their arguments around the more traditional understanding of irony as a generative tool of social and political criticism in the tradition of classics like Jonathan Swift's gruesome, but socially involved satire *A Modest Proposal*, which sheds light on the situation of the Irish population in relation to the British, at a given historical moment and which is aimed at achieving social change.[78] These two facets of irony continue to exist side by side and to be used in the unceasing debates on the subject.

In the early nineties, novelist David Foster Wallace was already arguing for the need to move beyond postmodern irony. Aesthetically, postmodern irony had exhausted its historical purpose becoming an empty pose in its late, mainstream phase. Wallace's death of irony pronouncement is "anxiety of influence"-induced and his critique is an act of creative destruction; a way of finding his own path beyond that of his postmodern predecessors:

> Irony and cynicism were just what the U.S. hypocrisy of the fifties and sixties called for. That's what made the early postmodernists great artists. The great thing about irony is that it splits things apart, gets up above them so we can

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DeLillo's *Underworld* as a novel historicizing the Cold War, but with an indefinite conclusion and a cover representing the World Trade Center, which other critics have referred to as prophetic as well.

[75] The recent opinion pieces on the subject of irony's fate argue from contradictory standpoints. *The Encyclopedia of 9/11* entry about "the end of irony" suggests that the death pronouncements might actually have been accurate and looks into recent pop-culture for proof, see: Michael Hirschorn, "The Encyclopedia of 9/11: The End of Irony," *New York Magazine*, August 27, 2011, accessed September 13, 2011, http://nymag.com/news/9-11/10th-anniversary/irony/. For jeremiad-like recent approaches against the dangers of ironic non-involvement see: Christy Wampole, "Opinionator: How to Live Without Irony," *The New York Times*, November 17, 2012, accessed June 12, 2013, http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/17/how-to-live-without-irony/, and Matt Ashby and Brendan Carroll, "David Foster Wallace Was Right: Irony Is Ruining Our Culture," *Salon*, Sunday, March 13, 2014, accessed March 20, 2014, http://www.salon.com/2014/04/13/david_foster_wallace_was_right_irony_is_ruining_our_culture/. The last article was ranked as the online publication's most popular in the weeks after being posted, receiving over two hundred user comments. True to the spirit of the jeremiad, it points towards the possibility of redemption: "The art of irony has turned into ironic art. Irony for irony's sake. A smart aleck making bomb noises in front of a city in ruins. But irony without a purpose enables cynicism. It stops at disavowal and destruction, fearing strong conviction is a mark of simplicity and delusion. But we can remake the world."

[76] D.C. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony* (London: Methuen, 1969), 3: "Getting to grips with irony seems to have something in common with gathering the mist; there is plenty to take hold of if only one could."

[77] There is decidedly a violent, even destructive quality to irony, even the classical sort: "For both its devotees and for those who fear it, irony is usually seen as something that undermines clarities, opens up vistas of chaos, and either liberates by destroying all dogma or destroys by revealing the inescapable canker of negation at the heart of every affirmation. Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), ix.

[78] Swift's satires are often given as text-book examples of militant satire, but despite their engagement with the social and political realities of the time, they can also be seen as springing from a dark and cynical perspective on human nature.

> see the flaws and hypocrisies … Sarcasm, parody, absurdism and irony are great ways to strip off stuff's mask and show the unpleasant reality behind it. The problem is that once the rules of art are debunked, and once the unpleasant realities the irony diagnoses are revealed …, "then" what do we do? Irony's useful for debunking illusions, but most of the illusion-debunking in the U.S. has now been done and redone… Postmodern irony and cynicism's become an end in itself, a measure of hip sophistication and literary savvy. Few artists dare to try to talk about ways of working toward redeeming what's wrong, because they'll look sentimental and naive to all the weary ironists. Irony's gone from liberating to enslaving. There's some great essay somewhere that has a line about irony being the song of the prisoner who's come to love his cage.[79]

Like John Barth's trajectory in *The Literature of Exhaustion*, Wallace's diagnosis of aesthetic exhaustion is at the same time a call for a new approach to representation, more appropriate for the times.

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the critics of postmodernist irony spoke up against what they saw as the moral ambivalence of postmodernism and postcolonialism, which they considered guilty of propagating a mentality of blaming the victim in the case of the attacks and of espousing a rhetoric that denied a clear ethical stance in a time when, they thought, one was desperately needed. Theirs was not an aesthetically grounded anti-ironic jeremiad like that of Foster Wallace, but rather a politically motivated one. Replying to an article published only eleven days after the attacks, which was dedicated to bashing the postmodern and postcolonial methodology prevalent in the academia of the time,[80] Stanley Fish rhetorically asked "[w]ho would have thought, in those first few minutes, hours, days, that what we now call 9/11 was to become an event in the Culture Wars?"[81] In a time of patriotic resurgence in the public sphere, defenders of the postmodern approach risked sounding callous and unpatriotic, which led to its proponents being dubbed "excuseniks," in a return to Cold War-like binarism.[82] Fish likened the attacks on postmodernism and the indictments against its proponents[83] to the red scare rhetoric during the Cold War:

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[79] David Foster Wallace, "A Conversation with David Foster Wallace," interview by Larry McCaffery, *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Summer 1993, Vol. 13.2, accessed February 2, 2013, http://www.dalkeyarchive.com/book/?fa=customcontent&GCOI=15647100621780&extrasfile=A09F8296-B0D0-B086-B6A350F4F59FD1F7.html.

[80] Edward Rothstein, "Attacks on U.S. Challenge the Perspectives of Postmodern True Believers," *The New York Times*, September 22, 2001, accessed March 2, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/22/arts/connections-attacks-us-challenge-perspectives-postmodern-true-believers.html.

[81] Stanley Fish, "Postmodern Warfare: The Ignorance of Our Warrior Intellectuals," *Harper's Magazine*, July, 2002, accessed March 2, 2013, http://web.pdx.edu/~tothm/religion/postmodern%20warfare.htm.

[82] For more on the role of "theory in a time of terror," and a defense of the postmodern approach see David Simpson *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration*, 121-171, and Judith Butler's preface to *Precarious Life*.

[83] Edward Rothstein, "Moral Relativity Is a Hot Topic? True. Absolutely." *New York Times*, July 13, 2002, accessed March 2, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/13/arts/connections-moral-relativity-is-a-hot-topic-true-absolutely.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm. The article is a response to Stanley Fish's *Harper's Magazine*

> Are you now or have you ever been a postmodernist? No one is asking this question quite yet. But if what I've heard and read in the past months is any indication, it's only a matter of time before people who say things like "there are no universal standards of judgment" or "there is more than one way to see this crisis" will be asked to turn in their washroom keys, resign their positions, and go join their terrorist comrades in some cave in Afghanistan... These self-appointed Jeremiahs forsake nuanced analysis for the facile (and implausible) pleasure of blaming a form of academic discourse for events whose causes reach far back in history and into regions of the world where the vocabulary of postmodernism has never been heard. Saying "the post-modernists did it" or "the postmodernists created the climate that led to its being done" or "postmodernism has left us without the moral strength to fight back" might make these pundits, largely ignorant of their quarry, feel good and self-righteous for a moment. But it won't help us understand what our next steps might be or how to take them.[84]

Slavoj Zizek and Jean Baudrillard have depicted 9/11 as an essentially postmodern event, in the sense that it gave an impression of unreality, in which, seemingly, life was imitating art. They both referred to the sensation of déjà vu triggered by the spectacular collapse of the towers, which seemed to mirror previous disaster movies and the wishful thinking of a culture of affluence subconsciously fantasizing about its own potential demise.[85] For Zizek, the obsession with simulacra and the constructed nature of reality, exemplified by pre-9/11 popular culture hits like *The Matrix* and *The Truman Show*, went hand in hand with the anxiety of a society increasingly aware of the artificiality of its condition under the rule of "virtual capitalism" for which the Twin Towers functioned as a symbol. In a similar line of argumentation, Baudrillard referred to the attacks as the actualization of Western society's death-wish ("they *did it*, but we *wished for* it").[86]

The feeling of atrophy and exhaustion of a culture, which was going through a period of apparent peace and prosperity, but whose mundane existence revolved around "nothing" (with a logic similar to that of the script of *Seinfeld*, the iconic sitcom of the nineties), produced an underlying anxiety and a sense of purposelessness in many. Seen superficially, the nineteen-nineties should have marked a triumphant period between what Francis Fukuyama pronounced as "the end of history" at the fall of the Iron Curtain, and the end of America's "holiday from

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opinion piece and an installment of the post 9/11 polemic regarding postmodernism.

[84] Stanley Fish, "Can Postmodernists Blame Terrorists?: Don't Blame Relativism," *The Responsive Community*, Volume 12, Issue 3, Summer 2002. The same issue is addressed in a similar manner by Judith Butler in *Precarious Life*.

[85] Slavoj Zizek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London, New York: Verso, 2002), 17.

[86] Baudrillard, 5.

history"[87] on September 11. Still, Fukuyama himself was ambivalent about the repercussions of the supposed triumph of liberal capitalism, predicting that the end of history will be "a very sad time,"[88] as it would lead to diminished political involvement, if not to a total lack thereof, as a result of the same postmodern condition of distrust for all the "grand narratives." Additionally, he argued that the idealism that came with this lost ideological territory would be "replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands."[89]

This post-Cold War "crisis of meaning" is an offshoot of the "enemy deprivation syndrome,"[90] which has caused the West to lose "its cohesion because it has lost its enemy." With the fall of the Iron Curtain, "[t]he ideological cement which anti-communism provided as a negative justification of Western capitalism has crumbled away".[91]An effect of the disappearance of a visible enemy, of an essential element in the binary logic of the Cold War was what one could call a turn inwards in the capitalist world, a turn towards self-criticism. The potentially problematic implication of this self-reflexive turn, according to neo-conservative intellectual Irving Kristol in his response to Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis, was that the enemy became "us, not them."[92]

Despite the numerous pronouncements of the death of irony and the attacks on postmodern relativism, satire seemed to be alive and well in the wake of 9/11.[93] As an indispensable outlet for democratic criticism, satire tempered the patriotic excesses of the time and what Philip Roth has referred to as an "orgy of national narcissism and a gratuitous victim mentality which is repugnant."[94] The popular political satire TV show *The Daily Show* had a self-reflexive intervention in their first episode after the attacks, with a host visibly troubled by the

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[87] The catchphrase was coined by George Will in his September 12, 2001 article "The End of Our Holiday from History" in the *Washington Post*.
[88] Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?," Summer 1989, *The National Interest*, accessed May 22, 2012 http://www.wesjones.com/eoh.htm.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Philip Hammond, *Media, War and Postmodernity* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 13.
[91] Hammond, 14. For a similar line of argumentation see also David Held, *Models of Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 221-222.
[92] Irving Kristol, "Response to Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History?*" Summer 1989, *The National Interest*, quoted in Hammond, 7.
[93] The newspaper *The Onion* was already reporting on the Bush administration's response to the attack, with its signature satiric bite: "U.S. Vows to Defeat Whoever It Is We're at War with," *The Onion*, September 26, 2001, Issue 37, accessed February 20, 2013, http://www.theonion.com/articles/us-vows-to-defeat-whoever-it-is-were-at-war-with,219/.
[94] Sam Leith, "Philip Roth attacks «orgy of narcissism» post Sept 11," *Telegraph.co.uk*, October 5, 2002, accessed June 20, 2012, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/4792421/Philip-Roth-attacks-orgy-of-narcissism-post-Sept-11.html. Translated from an interview by Jean-Louis Turlin, "Le 11 Septembre a entraîné un insupportable narcissisme national," *Le Figaro*, October 3, 2002.

thought of having to continue with "business" as usual and concluding with a statement about the importance of keeping humor and satire alive as a sign of democracy's survival. Even more, satire proved its indispensability in the months and years following the attacks, as the show's main target became the Bush administration's war on terror rhetoric and controversial policies.

Perhaps in response to the patriotic excesses in the public sphere at the time, some of the earliest works of literature dealing with September 11 were biting satires. Neil LaBute's play *The Mercy Seat* was published as early as 2003 and went against the general emotional tone used by the media in approaching the topic of the attacks, which had become sentimentalized, with a cliché-laden emphasis on loving, grieving families and heroic gestures in a time of crisis. LaBute's approach to drama preserves its pre-9/11 cynical signature feature in dealing with the event from the perspective of a cheating husband and his mistress, whose affair save the man from death in one of the towers, and who consider using the opportunity to fake his death and elope together, letting his family believe he is dead. This is a far cry from the image of the victims as ideal family members propagated in *Portraits of Grief*, or film renditions of the attacks such as Oliver Stone's *WTC* or the drama *United 93*.

The image of the victims as selfless or ideal family members that has been so ubiquitous after the attacks is often based on the genuinely touching and disturbing last phone-calls to their loved ones made by the victims in the towers or the planes. Significantly, in *The Mercy Seat*, an important part of the plot involves the main character's turned off mobile phone and his reluctance to contact his worried family to let them know he has survived the collapsing towers. The telephone calls from the World Trade Center have since then become an almost iconic reference to the event. The plot of Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is also centered around the last phone calls made by a father about to die in one of the towers and the traumatic consequences of the son's inability to answer the disturbing messages left on the answering machine, which he hears in real time. The opening credits of the drama *Zero Dark Thirty* - based on the efforts of the secret serviedsxfr ces to capture Osama Bin Laden and on the final successful mission - include the authentic telephone calls made by victims of the attacks who were in the towers or on the planes. As audio material played on a dark screen, they manage to capture the emotional intensity of the attacks in a nutshell and, without requiring further visual aid or explanation, they function quite efficiently as an epitome for 9/11. The high emotional effect of the audio recordings provides preemptive justification for the many scenes of torture and borderline if not actual transgressions of the rule of law, leading to the capture of the terrorist mastermind depicted in the film.

An approach similar to that of LaBute can be found in the satire *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country*, in which a husband and a wife going through a divorce, both hope the other has died in the attacks. This satiric novel demystifies the popular culture cliché of the perfect family by focusing on a dysfunctional one, whose members almost literally wage war against one another, in a domestic conflict escalating along with the war in Iraq. In Jess Walter's *The Zero*, one of the characters who has lost her sister on 9/11 is troubled by the real life *Portraits of Grief* obituary project, in which family members remember touching mundane details or episodes from the lives of their lost ones. As she still tries to cope with the painful discovery that her sister was having an affair with her husband around the time of the attacks, she is unable to cast aside her negative emotions and find that touching "telling detail" representative of her sister, in line with what has become the signature of the real life obituaries. The cynical scenario of domestic betrayal and marital enmity in these September 11 satires may be seen as a rendition of the larger post-9/11 escalation of the culture wars in American society, and of the cracks behind the slogan "United we stand" so often chanted in the immediate aftermath of the attacks.

Another early literary take on the World Trade Center attacks that presents the victims from a cynical perspective with satiric elements is Frederic Beigbeder's 2003 novel *Windows on the World*. The metafictional work includes an account of experiencing the moment the planes have crashed into the buildings and their jarring collapse, as seen from the perspective of fictional victims. Beigbeder's characters are drawn in grotesque lines; particularly a real estate manager with a failed marriage having breakfast with his sons at the *Windows on the World* on the day of the tragedy, whose last thoughts are of missed sexual opportunities rather than directed towards his family. The French author's pre-9/11 popularity was based on works that were labeled as "autofiction," written from the perspective of a cynical "bourgeois-bohème"[95] narrator, the alter-ego of the author, and captured the frivolous pre-9/11 Zeitgeist.[96] *Windows on the World* continues on the well-traveled "autofiction" path, being written mainly in the first person with the author's alter ego meditating on the effects of the attacks, French-American relations, his personal life and, most prominently, on the novel about September 11 that he intends to write, excerpts from which make up another level of the novel itself.

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[95] David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 2000). Brooks coined the term "bobo," short for "bourgeois-bohème," which he applied to the generation that became prominent at the turn of the millennium and which combined middle class, high earning corporate jobs, with a bohemian lifestyle inspired by the counterculture. This phenomenon also reflects the complexities of the mainstreaming of postmodernism on a sociological level.

[96] Beigbeder's pre-9/11 topic of choice is consumer culture and his alter-ego hero shares similar preoccupations with the heroes of emblematic American works of fiction of the nineteen-nineties like those by authors Chuck Palahniuk or Brett Easton Ellis.

There is a tension between these two narrative levels of Beigbeder's work: the auto-fictional, metafictional level and the fictional account of the one-hundred-nineteen minutes between the impact of the planes and the collapse of the towers seen through the eyes of several fictional victims. The self-confessed frivolity of the narrator's life experience and his ambition of representing the tragic event from the perspective of the victims are the main focus of the metafictional level of the novel, which deals with the challenge to representation posed by the attacks. The transnational, stratified satire is aimed at his own post-9/11 status as an upper-middle class European and intermingles with a satire of American business culture as represented by the imaginary victims of the attacks. The narrator confesses to using the event as a "crutch" to lend gravitas to his otherwise mundane observations, which do not depart much from those of his pre-9/11 characters. Sitting in the restaurant of the Parisian Montparnasse tower, the French equivalent of the Twin Towers' Windows on the World, the narrator ponders the historical transatlantic relation between the US and France and the entanglements of the globalized late capitalist Western world. He feels his own exposed vulnerability in the wake of 9/11 and a sense of global solidarity in morning as that implied in oft quoted line "nous sommes tous Américains" from a *Le Monde* article published on September the 13th 2001. Tragically, the same line has been echoed back to the French people, by the global solidarity movement after the recent terrorist attacks in Paris, making Beigbeder's transnational post-9/11 sense of anxiety appear prescient.

Like irony, which is more often then not its appanage, satire has become an extremely slippery term escaping precise definition and being used to characterize different sets of works, often seeming to be "a 'mode' or a 'procedure' rather than a 'genre'."[97] The New Critical theories of satire, like Northrop Frye's take on the subject in *Anatomy of Criticism*, still dominate the critical approach to the genre, despite more recent attempts at a redefinition. For the New Critics, satire is "a rationalist discourse launched against the examples of folly and vice, rectifying them according to the norms of good behavior and right thinking," its purpose being to "construct consensus and to deploy irony in the work of stabilizing various cultural hierarchies."[98] This model applies to classical satire, but becomes less effective when dealing with contemporary or more recent examples of satire. Even the critics dealing exclusively with classical satire find the model limiting and in need of being updated and attuned to the more recent

[97] Dustin H. Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 4.
[98] Steven Weisenburger, *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel, 1930 – 1980* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 1.

developments in critical theory.[99] A sense of inadequacy has existed in the formalist understanding of satire from the very beginning and manifests itself in the inflexible focus on the strict morality of satire, which, according to Alan Wilde makes the genre "stale and moldy" and thus incapable of "speaking for the 20th century" because it is "a minor form" that cannot address the complexities of modern times.[100]

Because of this formalist association with moralistic purposes and conservatism, the term satire is sparingly used to describe novels produced in the 20th century, despite the fact that a large number of works, particularly those carrying the postmodern designation, do display obvious satiric features. The term "Black Humor"[101] became the catchphrase of choice when referring to late modernist or postmodernist works, from novels by Vladimir Nabokov, Joseph Heller or Kurt Vonnegut, to Thomas Pynchon or William Gaddis. Theorists and critics of postmodernism, like Frederic Jameson and Linda Hutcheon, place a lot of emphasis on the role of irony[102] in postmodern fiction, but avoid employing the term satire, which they nonetheless replace with terminology belonging to the realm of satire, like *pastiche* and *parody*.

For Hutcheon, parody is the quintessentially postmodern mode and it entails an inherent critique of the limitations of language, particularly in the representation of history. In addition, the use of parody is a means of questioning the modernist idea of the author, the cult of personality and originality that surrounds him, and debunking claims that one can place oneself outside an ideological position. On a more general level, parody, in Hutcheon's view, goes hand in hand with the postmodern skepticism with regard to the modernist insistence on the autonomy of art from the rules of the market and from mass production.[103] On the other hand, for Jameson, the postmodern use and reuse of past literary forms and modes is nothing more than a "blank parody," what he critically sums up under the term *pastiche*, a negative understanding of parody in comparison to Hutcheon's use of the term: "Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior

[99] See for instance Griffin, who argues for a New Historicist approach to satire and sees the New Critical model as obsolete and limiting.
[100] Alan Wilde, *Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1981), 28.
[101] Black Humor, according to Vonnegut, is "laughing in the middle of political helplessness" (Vonnegut, 1973 *Playboy* interview, in Weisenburger, 90) and has a lot in common with what Freud has referred to as "gallows humor," the type of humor practiced by people suffering under long term discrimination and under the rule of others, having little, if any, room for self-determination, typical for Eastern-European, Balkan populations under Austro-Hungarian rule, and particularly for Jewish populations in Europe.
[102] Linda Hutcheon has studied irony extensively as part of her research on postmodernism, but also independently in *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
[103] Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter."[104] What Hutcheon sees as political commentary and the unmasking of the ideological role played by language, Jameson presents as decadent word-play meant to mask the lack of political commitment and a general nihilistic emptying out of social commentary.

Steven Weisenburger perceives the designation "Black Humor" applied to complex postmodern novels as insufficient. Furthermore, the focus of both Jameson and Hutcheon on the postmodern (re)use of past literary forms does not suffice to conceptualize the satirical range these works of fiction display. Thus, Weisenburger sets out to reassess the characteristics and limits of satire, in order to be able to use it in categorizing postmodern political novels. Pointing out how the long unquestioned dominance of the formalist definition of satire has limited the application of the term to innovative works of fiction in the 20th century, he suggests a manner of reevaluating its function by moving beyond what he calls the "generative model" of satirical practice under which he places ancient texts and classical satirical works by Alexander Pope or Mark Twain. Taking a cue from Rene Girard's theory of "generative violence" to develop his terminology, Weisenburger argues that, limited by the formalist generative understanding of satire as a means of reinstating the moral order, recent critics have failed to see the genre develop into what he calls the "degenerative model" of satire. An offshoot of deconstructionist thought, degenerative satire subverts "hierarchies of value and reflects suspiciously on all ways of making meaning, including its own," suspecting that "any symbolic practice may entail incursions of power."[105] If generative satire is characterized by a type of violence meant to restore order, degenerative satire's rhetoric violence is directed at signification itself, "[i]t lacks a steady narrative, specific "targets" and fixed norms of corrective goals." These degenerative elements are allegedly not a new development; they can be encountered in classical satire, in the works of Jonathan Swift, for example.[106] Generative satire has been perceived as having the power to "punish vice and uphold liberal norms,"[107] while in its degenerative form it questions its own discursive method.

Postmodern writers rather indiscriminately placed under the banner of "Black Humor" display both generative and degenerative elements, but are considered by "old-school" liberals to lack a strong socially inclined satiric bite, "flogging nothing except perhaps a malevolent cosmos." The type of humor employed by Kurt Vonnegut falls most often under such critical

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[104] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 17.
[105] Weisenburger, 3.
[106] Ibid. 14.
[107] Ibid. 27.

dismissals; he and its other proponents have often been accused being the victims of their own brand of self-mocking humor, which denotes "self-loathing." [108] This accusation rings similar to those directed against postmodernist practitioners after 9/11. Consistent in his longstanding humanistic approach, Vonnegut's response to September 11 - in his touching obituary to the firefighters of his neighborhood in New York, which included a reference to firefighters in Afghanistan in a plea against vengeful retaliation, and his later compassionate take on the phenomenon of suicide bombers – was seen by some as unpatriotic and problematic.[109] The degenerative mode in postmodern satire, which Weisenburger identified as a tendency in the American novel from the 1930s to 1980s, existed alongside its generative form, which regained prominence in the late eighties and early nineties, with works such as Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*.

The post 9/11 satires to be discussed in this chapter seem to mark a return to generative satire, departing from the "cultural work" of "firebombing the cultural theater where meanings are made"[110] and moving from a discursive level, back to social and political critique. This does not, however, imply that they adhere solely to the classical traits of generative satire; that definition is no longer perceived as sufficient, not even by critics working within the field of classical literature. Furthermore, what I would like to call "September 10 satires," David Foster Wallace's *The Suffering Channel* and Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children*, take as their subject of scrutiny the excesses of life at the turn of the century, in a time of postmodern mainstreaming and of focus on simulacra and discursive play, which is set in contrast to the sudden invasion of "the Real" on September 11. Another work to be subsequently discussed, Jess Walter's self-entitled "9/12 novel," [111] *The Zero*, puts under a satiric lens the heroic 9/11 master-narrative and engages with the controversial governmental policies during the war on terror and the schizoid response of the American collective unconscious to its exposed vulnerability. These satires question the narrative of innocence prevalent in American culture, which has been reactivated and often abused in the process of culturally "working through" the national trauma caused by the terrorist attacks.

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[108] Ibid. 81-82.
[109] Jerome Klinkowitz, *Kurt Vonnegut's America* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009).
[110] Weisenburger, 261.
[111] Walter, addendum, 4.

The Unbearable Triviality of Being: David Foster Wallace's *The Suffering Channel* and Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children* as September 10 Satires

> *Perhaps this very prospect of centuries of boredom at the end of history will serve to get history started once again.*[112]

A look at the first pages of newspapers in the wake of tragic events like September 11, reveals the general triviality of ordinary news, the sort that are being consumed by readers on a daily basis, like celebrity gossip or petty political scandals, which appear almost obscene when paralleled with the invasion of the Real brought on by the shocking loss of human life on tragic events such as the above mentioned. Taking place in the months before September 11, 2001, David Foster Wallace's short story *The Suffering Channel*, from his 2004 short fiction collection *Oblivion*,[113] is a cynical look into the professional world of several *Style* magazine employees working at a media company's headquarters in one the World Trade Center towers. They are preparing the September 10 issue of their magazine, unaware of the disaster about to strike, and are completely immersed in the development of their materials for the new issue. The third-person narrative voice combines free indirect speech from the perspectives of several interns and one of the writers at the magazine, with omniscient narratorial interventions indicating which of the characters will lose their lives in the upcoming attacks. In a satirical tone with grotesque touches, the characters are presented individually as they perform their professional duties, with few, almost clinical interventions detailing psychological curiosities or significant anecdotes from their past. Skip Atwater, the writer in charge of the "human interest" stories department of the magazine, is pitching an article on an Indiana based artist whose feces come out in the shape of extraordinarily detailed works of art, as the opening lines of the novella make clear:

"'But they're shit.'

'And at the same time they're art. Exquisite pieces of art. They're literally incredible'

'No, they're literally shit is literally what they are.'"[114]

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[112] Fukuyama.

[113] David Foster Wallace, "The Suffering Channel," *Oblivion*, (New York: Little Brown and Company, 2004), 238-325.

[114] Wallace, *The Suffering Channel*, 238.

This subject could not be farther from the "human interest" stories which will become prominent in the media after the September 11 attacks, in articles detailing the deeds of heroes or in obituaries like *Portraits of Grief*.

At the same time, the media company is working on a new Reality TV channel called "The Suffering Channel," which is meant to broadcast images and videos of real life human suffering:

> At first it's just montages of well-known photos involving anguish and pain: a caved in Jackie next to LBJ as he's sworn in on the plane, that agonized Vietcong with the pistol to his head, the naked kids running from napalm. There's something about seeing them one after the other. A woman trying to bathe her thalidomide baby, faces through the wire at Belsen, Oswald crumpled around Ruby's fist, a noosed man as the mob begins to hoist, Brazilians on the ledge of a burning high-rise. A loop of 1,200 of these, four seconds per each, running 5:00 PM-1:00 Am EST; no sound; no evident ads.[115]

The excerpt describes the initial program of the suffering channel, which planned to expand its schedule to incorporate an uninterrupted flow of videos of "the most intense available moments of human anguish," like videos of people witnessing or experiencing painful deaths, animal euthanasia, waking up from anesthesia during abdominal surgery and so on. Again, the graphic representation of real life violent occurrences on TV is contrasted with the post-9/11 "sanitization" of materials published or broadcasted after the attacks, which included censoring precisely the type of images and footage that the fictional reality TV channel specializes on.

The scatological art of the shit artist brings to mind the abject art movement of the eighties and nineties, which broke taboos with regard to the representation and use of bodily functions and fluids, predominantly in the visual arts. For Julia Kristeva exposure to the abject brings about an eruption of the Lacanian Real. Body waste is taboo because it is a reminder of death and decay and all that we brush aside in order to live.[116] While actual abject art is often political, particularly in its feminist versions, Wallace's "shit artist" seems to have no agenda. His art is literally an involuntary excretion, caused, as some characters speculate, by a traumatic early life. Thus, Wallace's short story is less a parody of abject art, but rather a satirical take on the borderline obscene solipsistic tendencies of art at the end of the millennium; its decadent obsession with individual trauma, death and decay. The Suffering Channel's specialization on the abject, suggest a general millennial obsession with the Real permeating both high a low culture and contributing perhaps to the postmodern dissolution of the dichotomy between the two realms of cultural production.

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[115] Ibid. 288-289.

[116] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982)., 3.

In a world dominated by simulacra, as Slavoj Zizek points out, a new "passion for the Real" emerges as a means of achieving a counterpoint: "in an exact inversion, the 'postmodern' passion for semblance ends up in a violent return to the passion for the Real."[117] The so called "cutters"- persons who cut or hurt themselves, not necessarily in a self-destructive impulse, but rather as a means of escaping the sensation of mundane unreality and of experiencing their own corporeal reality - are given by Zizek as a telling example of this tendency. On a more general level, he adds, Third World people dream about escaping their miser condition and achieving the American dream, while "well-to-do Americans, immobilized in their well-being, dream about … a global catastrophe that would shatter their lives."[118]

While nothing in the lives of Wallace's characters could allow them to predict the event to come, their every-day existence, "glossy" as the magazine they work for, seems to necessitate a dose of or to include a certain fascination with suffering, the abject and the Real. The most admired intern at *Style* magazine, with a perfectly slim and sculpted-through-training-body and a personal sense of fashion, is revealed to have been a Sylvia Plath-reading "cutter" during her college years, hiding a troubled self under a mask of perfect coolness. In a manner reminiscent of Brett Easton Ellis' emphasis on the outer appearance of his yuppie characters in *American Psycho*, Wallace fastidiously describes the high fashion corporate attire of his characters, including the expensive brand names they wear. With their own highly trained bodies kept under control through diets, sports and high-end tailoring, the characters seem detached from the abject realities of their bodily functions and from human suffering in general. As they debate whether "the shit artist" is an appropriate subject for their glossy magazine, the interns, who actually seem to be running the magazine, find themselves morbidly attracted to the subject, despite their apparent reticence, and spend a complete informal brain-storming session, sharing personal anecdotes on the topic of the particular bodily function.

The narrator provides additional clinical-like information on the participants in the discussion, focusing mostly on their social positions and degree of integration within the group dynamics of their work place, or providing psychologically relevant information from their childhoods or early lives. As is common in the satiric mode, the characters are not well rounded individuals, but rather types (most of the interns bear the same names, Laurel and Tara), exponents of a well-oiled system about to be shaken by an encounter with the Real. In the same clinical tone, the narrator casually mentions whether some of the characters will survive or die

[117] Zizek, 10.
[118] Ibid. 17.

in the upcoming terrorist attacks. After briefly outlining Laurel Manderley's WASP family background, the narrator concludes with the remark that she "was destined to survive, through either coincidence or premonition, the tragedy by which *Style* would enter history two months hence."[119] The notion that the characters and the magazine they work for would "enter history" brings to mind Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis and places the narrative in the context of the nineties and the general sense of living during the "boring" times after the death of the grand master-narratives. Another member of the magazine staff, the admired executive intern and former "cutter," however, appears destined to become one of the victims of the attacks, as the narrator coldly states: "She had ten weeks to live."[120] None of the relations between characters involve emotions, but are rather regulated by lust, ambition, envy, power or weakness and, in this sense, Wallace's fictional depiction of 9/11 victims has very little in common with the obituaries of the real-life victims in *Portraits of Grief*, despite the fact that both use the telling detail, the minor episodes in a person's life in order to epitomize the individual. Instead of focusing on the touching, human segments of the individual's existence, Wallace's novella fringes on grotesque, pointing out the peculiar, the clinical, the isolated and the abject, all aspects which would later be sanitized in the real-life obituaries.

The author's immediate response to the events of September 11 in *The View from Mrs. Thomson's*, first published in the October 2001 edition of *Rolling Stone*, carries less of the cynicism of *The Suffering Channel*. The structure of *The View from Mrs. Thomson's* is based on the tension between the description of an authentic experience of mourning and the narrator's cynicism with regard to the patriotic reactions of his neighbors made visible through the sudden appearance of American flags on every lawn in his neighborhood. The self-deprecating cynic struggles with his own inability to authentically react to the tragic event without intellectualizing it and filtering it through his postmodern lens. As a guest in Mrs. Thomson's Mid-Western living-room, he watches the unfolding of the horrific news along with several acquaintances gathered around the host's large TV screen, in a situation exemplary for Bloomington Indiana, a community in which "they watch massive, staggering amounts of TV" and "reality—any felt sense of a larger world—is mainly televisual."[121]

The narrator contrasts what he sees as the authentic reactions of mourning and of a community strengthening itself in the face of disaster, with his own worldly, postmodern sus-

[119] Wallace, *The Suffering Channel*, 245.
[120] Ibid. 326.
[121] David Foster Wallace, "The View from Mrs.Thomson's," *Rolling Stone*, October 25, 2001, 95.

picions and associations, including observations about the staged appearance of the news anchors in such a moment of crisis, the sensation of deja-vu created by President Bush's speech that he describes as consisting of a series of block-buster action hero cliché-laden lines. The self-aware cynical thought process of the narrator inevitably veers in the direction of Slavoj Zizek's and Jean Baudrillard's post-9/11 reflections, including a mental note of the unreal effect of life imitating art, of 9/11 seen as a gruesome spectacle, and of the fact that America's recurrent apocalyptic nightmares were becoming true. These cool inner rationalizations appear callous in comparison to the authentic reactions of the old ladies gathered at Mrs. Thomson's, who genuinely worry about the potential loss of relatives in New York. The early satirical tone of the piece used in describing the artificial perfection of the suburban lawns of Bloomington with flags planted in the wake of 9/11 gradually turns from a sense of individual isolation faced with this collective patriotic display, to a sense of self-blame in relation to his own cynicism:

> The half-assed little geography lesson is the start of a feeling of alienation from these good people that builds in me all throughout the part of the Horror where people flee rubble and dust. These ladies are not stupid, or ignorant. . . . What these Bloomington ladies are, or start to seem to me, is innocent. There is what would strike many Americans as a marked, startling lack of cynicism in the room. . . . nobody's near hip enough to lodge the sick and obvious po-mo complaint: We've Seen This Before."[122]

Wallace echoes conservative jeremiads against postmodern irony in a self-flagellating manner and allows the possibility of a narrative of American innocence: "I'm trying to explain the way part of the horror of the Horror was knowing that whatever America the men in these planes hated so much was far more my own – mine and poor old loathsome Duane's – than these ladies'."[123] Significantly, however, in his later novella *The Suffering Channel*, the sense of community and authentic emotion described in *The View from Mrs. Thomson's* is missing completely, being replaced by a bleak satirical tone. If the reality filtered through the TV screen can bring about an authentic communitarian experience of mourning and consolation in *The View from Mrs. Thomson's*,[124] in *The Suffering Channel* the media becomes an outlet for exhibitionism, voyeurism and the provider of the most readily available simulacra of the Real.

According to Jacques Lacan, the Real can only be experienced through moments that represent traumatic caesurae in the otherwise established and monotonous symbolic order. Reassessing the individual relation to the Real in Lacanian terms, Zizek reconsiders his earlier

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[122] Ibid. 132-133.
[123] Ibid. 133.
[124] This positive perspective on television is a rather rare instance in Wallace's work. For the author's take on the impact of television on literature see David Foster, Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13:2 (1993: Summer), 151-194.

statement about the contemporary fascination, if not obsession, with the Real as being the result of the unreality of everyday life in late capitalist societies, and instead emphasizes the fact that: "The Real which returns has the status of a(nother) semblance: precisely because it is real, that is, on account of its traumatic / excessive character, we are unable to integrate it into what we experience as our reality, and are therefore compelled to experience it as a nightmarish apparition."[125] To oversimplify, the Real cannot be fully registered or reconciled with our fabricated notion of reality, and is instead perceived only as nightmarishly unreal. That is why many have commented on the "unreality" of experiencing September 11.

The millennial obsession with the Real and its relation to the attacks on the World Trade Center towers that Zizek expands upon seems to be at the core of Wallace's post 9/11 novella. *The Suffering Channel*'s "[r]egistered motto," namely "Consciousness is nature's nightmare,"[126] rings similar to Zizek's twist on the Lacanian Real and lends itself to interpretation. The reactions of the viewers to the station's televised incursions into the Real are not mentioned, but the images come into sharp contrast with a world so detached from the reality of human suffering and the apparently perfectly ordered corporate activity of the characters, their chiseled bodies and controlled projected self-image. At the same time, the collection of violent images prefigures the disaster to come, the outburst of the Real that is about to shatter their mundane existence. The image of people jumping from the ledges of a high-rise in Brazil included in the photography selection of *The Suffering Channel* - a reference to the 1974 skyscraper fire in Brazil that claimed many victims - is a grim foreshadowing of the aftermath of the terrorist attacks to come.

In Wallace's novella, television is presented as a vehicle for the individual's illusory quest to obtain a confirmation of his existence, of his Realness, through having himself recognized by others as a result of what Andy Warhol famously dubbed the "fifteen minutes of fame" that are available to everyone in the postmodern era. The only reason why the painfully shy "shit artist" agrees to participate in having a magazine piece written about him is because of his wife's ambition to vicariously achieve her fifteen minutes of fame and to have her existence "confirmed" by appearing on TV:

> Mrs. Moltke said how she's thought about it and realized that most people didn't even get such a chance, and that this here was hers, and Brint's. To

[125] Zizek, 19.

[126] The English version of the motto is identical to an often referred to quote translated from the work of Romanian thinker writing in French, Emil Cioran. Still, there is no proof that Wallace has gotten the quote from Cioran. Perhaps more telling in this respect is the repetition of the TV channel's motto in the closing of the novella, in a Portuguese version: "*A consciência é o pesadelo da natureza*" (328). Notably, in Portuguese *consciência has a double meaning, namely both conscience and consciousness.*

> somehow stand out. To distinguish themselves from the huge faceless mass of folks that watched the folks that did stand out. On TV and in venues like *Style*… To be known, to matter… to feel people's eyes, their gaze. That it made a difference someplace when they came in.[127]

Like Mrs. Thomson from Wallace's early take on 9/11, the Moltkes share the same connection to the world mediated through television. On the other hand, the role played by television in their lives has little to do with community building and more to do with a desire to achieve the individual recognition in the eyes of their community.

The "shit artist" himself remains voiceless throughout the novella with the exception of a desperate message sent to Skip Atwater. He himself is just a means for the other characters to achieve their selfish goals; for his wife to get her fifteen minutes of fame and for Skip to get his story. His wife suggests that his artistic "gift" is the result of a traumatic childhood in which he had to suffer terrible violations of his intimacy and she postulates that his art is an involuntary outlet for the suffering that left him with a crippling shyness. She does not however consider the fact that her desire for public exposure represents nothing less than a reiteration of his initial childhood trauma, by having him "produce" his artwork live on *The Suffering Channel*, with cameras following his every facial expression and confirming the "authenticity" of his work. With the preparation of this televised act of human cruelty the story concludes on the eve of the September 11 attacks, revealing the grotesque underbelly of a society obsessed with fame, as Skip Atwater ponders:

> The paradoxical intercourse of audience and celebrity. The suppressed awareness that the whole reason ordinary people found celebrity fascinating was that they were not, themselves, celebrities. That wasn't quite it… It was more the deeper, more tragic and universal conflict of which the celebrity paradox was a part. The conflict between the subjective centrality of our own lives versus our awareness of its objective insignificance. Atwater knew - as did everyone at *Style*, though by some strange unspoken consensus it was never said aloud - that this was the single great informing conflict of the American psyche. The management of insignificance. It was the great syncretic bond of US monoculture. It was everywhere, at the root of everything - of impatience in long lines, of cheating on taxes, of movements in fashion and music and art, of marketing.[128]

The characters of the short story are Nietzschean "last men" living at the end of history. Their desire for fifteen minutes of televised fame is a perverted, consumerist version of the struggle for individual recognition, or *thymos*, which Fukuyama, following Hegel and Nietzsche, identifies as the driving force of history.[129] For Fukuyama, the ability of the liberal democratic order

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[127] Wallace, *The Suffering Channel*, 283.
[128] Ibid.
[129] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), Kindle edition. Fukuyama describes *thymos* as the propensity of "human beings [to] seek recognition of their own worth, or of

to satisfy the human *thymotic* aspirations will determine the success or failure of this political system and the course of history. In Wallace's bleak satire, the semblance of *thymos* offered by late capitalist society is one devoid of heroism and courage and mostly to be obtained through shameless exhibitionism and over-exposure made possible through the availability of mass communication technology.

Tragedies like September 11 have the power to momentarily elevate the individual from his subjectivity and give him a sense of the "objective insignificance" of his life. Presenting his characters immersed in their self-centered trivial pursuits, while placing them on the eve of a life-changing event, has the effect of magnifying the triviality of their preoccupations to grotesque proportions. *The View from Mrs. Thomson's*, published with the author's "caveat" that it was "written very fast and under what probably qualifies as shock,"[130] uses a satirical tone to describe how the immediate aftermath of 9/11 was experienced in Bloomington, Illinois, but ends in a touching tone with an account of authentic communitarian mourning. The novella published three years later, however, is a satire, which leaves no sense of redemption for its central characters, some of whom are future 9/11 victims, contrasting in this sense with the mediatized post-9/11 insistence on individual heroism, family values, and the existence of a community of mourners. The memorials to the actual victims of September 11 emphasized the purposefulness of their lives and their unique individual contributions to the communities they belong to. Obituaries like *Portraits of Grief* thus indirectly projected an image of the liberal democratic order as the system in which nothing could deter its members from achieving their greatest potential, except such violent disruptions from the outside. In Wallace's vision, the future September 11 victims are unindividuated types whose fascination with the abject may be seen as the manifestation of a larger cultural death wish.

A similar September 10th approach is also adopted by Claire Messud in her novel of manners with satirical elements, *The Emperor's Children*. Focusing on a group of friends in their early thirties, the novel gives a rather pessimistic view of the generation belatedly maturing at the turn of the millennium, in the shadow of the previous radical generation of the sixties. The latter generation is represented by Murray Thwaite, a reputed liberal, left-leaning, politically involved journalist and book reviewer, who lives from the reputation he has built during

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the people, things, or principles that they invest with worth. The propensity to invest the self with a certain value, and to demand recognition for that value, is what in today's popular language we would call "self-esteem." The propensity to feel self-esteem arises out of the part of the soul called thymos. It is like an innate human sense of justice. People believe that they have a certain worth, and when other people treat them as though they are worth less than that, they experience the emotion of anger. Conversely, when people fail to live up to their own sense of worth, they feel shame, and when they are evaluated correctly in proportion to their worth, they feel pride." (187)

[130] Wallace, *The View from Mrs. Thomson's*, 91.

the sixties and consolidated later on. He is introduced first, both to the reader and, intradiegetically, to a group of students at Columbia University, as an exponent of the Vietnam War generation. As a guest speaker, he is trying to convey some of the revolutionary energies of the age of his youth to more or less apathetic members of the younger generation. The embodiment of the emperor hinted at in the title of the novel, Thwaite stands as the axis around which the other younger characters rotate in their relatively belated coming of age struggles. His daughter Marina is involved in a seemingly never-ending process of completing a book on the cultural significance of children's attire entitled *The Emperor's Children Have No Clothes*, about the manner in which children's clothing trends reflect the changing cultural mores. The content of this fictional work of cultural analysis throws an interesting light on the novel's own title, emphasizing the superficial tendencies of the generation subsequent to that of the sixties.

Like Wallace's novella, Messud's novel takes place in the months leading to September the 11th, starting in March. Unlike *The Suffering Channel*, it includes the attack itself and briefly chronicles its impact on the lives of the different characters. Furthermore, the novel uses the event to lend more gravitas to an otherwise almost Victorian novel of manners, shedding light on the more or less superficial concerns of upper middle class New York-based intellectuals and their personal and sentimental entanglements. At the same time, the novel dabbles in the pre-9/11 liberal identity crisis by exploring the generation gap between Murray Thwaite and the various exponents of the younger generation growing up in his shadow. The young characters of the novel find themselves ethically demotivated in the age following the so called death of all master-narratives. Another sources of their disengagement is the nurturing societal atmosphere they have grown up in fostered by Thwaite's generation, which leaves them little to rebel against and thus denies them another motor for action and self-definition. Thwaite himself is going through a parallel crisis caused by the mainstreaming of the revolutionary ideas of his youth and the contradictions between his former counter-cultural status and his present success. Coming of age in the sixties, Thwaite had a stifling small town life to escape from and silent generation parents to rebel against, joining in the spirit of the age that wholly embraced the possibility of change and of revolution. His daughter Marina and young nephew Bootie, as well as others in their entourage, grow up wanting to be like him and to measure up to his ethical ideals. In the changed social and cultural situation at the end of the millennium, and confronted with their own shortcomings and lack of ambition or drive, they find themselves paralyzed and incapable of finding their own way, or bitterly disappointed in their mentor, whom they start perceiving as a well concealed fraud.

In the late fifties, Norman Mailer predicted that a revolution can only happen if there is opposition and violence, but, if the discordant element is accepted by the liberal society, he "would end by being absorbed as a colorful figure in the tapestry."[131] Mailer's take on dissent in liberal societies is similar to Sacvan Bercovitch's theory about the interplay between dissent and assent in American culture, which illustrates how waves of dissent are gradually integrated in the wider American ideology, leading to the eventual reestablishment of the rule of assent.[132] The drama of Murray Thwaite's life involves keeping up with his revolutionary youthful ambitions and ideas in his old age, as he is honored and accepted by liberal society, while at the same time becoming just another "colorful figure in the tapestry." Ironically, although he has preserved the rhetoric of the sixties - talking about revolution and quoting the 1968 French student movement's catch phrase "Rêve plus evolution equals Révolution"[133] at an award ceremony for his lifetime achievement - he is now honored by the very "establishment" he has struggled to revolutionize. His once radical intellectual ideas support his now comfortable middle class way of life. The several speeches he gives throughout the novel inevitably make reference to "the importance of integrity" and "pursuing the truth even when it wasn't fashionable" and mention the times "when we believed in tearing it all down and beginning again. When any establishment, and certainly an organization like [the one he was getting his award from], was suspect."[134] Even through his looks, having longish white hair, and a perpetual cigarette in the corner of his mouth, Thwaite is doing his best to preserve his rebellious activist persona and his cultural capital in his old age.

Thwaite's individual crisis is representative of a wider crisis of the liberal Left in the United States pre-9/11. The multiple perspective structure of the novel allows for a variety of angles through which Thwaite's character is presented, appearing in turn as admirable and despicable, loved and hated, admired and reviled, but remaining a pivotal element in the self-making of all the other characters. Murray Thwaite's identity crisis surfaces with the arrival of his nephew Bootie, who admires him greatly and whom he hires as his secretary and protégé. An Emerson reading, sloppy and slightly over-weight idealist, Bootie is at first fascinated by his uncle's apparently uncompromising persona, only to later discover his inconsistencies and

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[131] Norman Mailer, "The White Negro," *Dissent Magazine*, June 20, 2007, accessed September 10, 2012, http://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/the-white-negro-fall-1957, originally published in *Dissent Magazine*, Fall, 1957.
[132] Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
[133] Claire Messud, *The Emperor's Children*, (London: Picador, 2006), 175.
[134] Ibid. 174-175.

hypocrisy. A Holden Caulfield-like college dropout, Bootie finds an understanding conversation partner in Murray. He is taken with his anti-establishment, anti-phoniness approach, but becomes gradually aware of his uncle's own phoniness as he rummages through and reads his papers, emails, and secret unfinished book manuscript. His uncle's hypocrisy becomes obvious at first through small things, like canceling a meeting with underprivileged youths with the excuse of an emergency, in order to be able to participate in a more culturally prestigious event alongside Palestinian dissidents. Coupled with the discovery of the older man's affair with his daughter's best friend, however, the biggest disappointment for Bootie is reading the manuscript of his mentor's supposedly life-crowning secret work, suggestively entitled *How to Live*. Murray suffers from writer's block, which prevents him from moving on with what is supposed to be a collection of his life's precepts, because in order to achieve the desired level of authenticity he has to confront the contradictions of his successful career.

Other facets of Murray's hypocrisy come to light particularly in his relation to his wife Annabel, a lawyer for underprivileged youths and the only character actively involved in attempting to produce some sort of social change. His lack of actual involvement is satirized through an episode in which he leaves the vomit of the old family cat that he accidentally steps into for his wife to clean, or, later, through the decision, taken together with his daughter, to pretend they know nothing about the same cat's dead body in the living-room so that his wife can eventually "deal" with it. In a chapter narrated from the perspective of the family's maid, Aurora, Murray's lack of social commitment is further unmasked. Aurora is an uninvolved observer of the Thwaite family and literally in charge of their dirty laundry. Generally disenchanted with Murray and surprised by the popularity of his persona, Aurora reveals the discrepancies between Murray's rhetoric and actual life style. A telling episode in this sense is Murray's comfortable refusal to accommodate one of his wife's troubled young clients despite the young African-American's visibly serious situation. Seen from the house-maid's point of view as she goes about her work around their house, Murray's idealism is uncovered as nothing more than rhetoric.

The contradictions embodied by Murray's character are representative for the conflicting legacy of the sixties and for the complexities of the post-Cold War, "end of history" era. His personal charisma coupled with his constant talk of truth and integrity, while being engaged in an extramarital affair, bring to mind the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal and the liberal crisis that has marked the end of the twentieth century. Ironically, just months before starting his own

extramarital affair, Murray expresses his disappointment with Clinton, emphasizing his hypocritical approach to his marriage, but also in relation to the American people with respect to his controversial foreign policy, declaring that the "liberals in this country deserve better."[135]

The notion of revolution appears recurrently in the novel, not only in Murray Thwaite's idealistic sixties brand of anti-establishment rhetoric, but also in its more recent and cynical postmodern avatar. The latter is a paradoxical mixture between the revolutionary avant-garde spirit and a sense of exhaustion. A young Australian journalist transplanted to New York, Ludovic Seeley, is Murray's postmodern counterpart who wants to revolutionize the cultural scene by launching *The Monitor*, a new magazine with a self-declared revolutionary approach to journalism. Seeley's understanding of revolution is, however, significantly different from Thwaite's, as he doesn't believe in tearing down the establishment to start things anew. As an exponent of "the end of history" generation he would rather take over the establishment himself by practicing a type of journalism that espouses and spreads what he thinks of as "the truth." In his view, Murray is "a sentimentalist," a remnant of a time when the people adhered to "the antiquated notion that a passionate reporter is more valuable than dispassionate one."[136] The "truth" that Seeley wants to bring to the light would be achieved through "debunking the lot of them," "unmasking… hacks" like Murray for "what they are," with the magazine being "the instrument to trumpet that the emperor has no clothes."[137] As part of a large cultural debunking campaign, Seeley envisions "[q]uestioning essays. Like, is PEN really a worthwhile institution, for example. Or a renegade appraisal of modern art, the New York art scene, is Matthew Barney a fraud, that kind of thing…"[138]

The parable of the emperor's new clothes hinted at in the title of the novel is once again brought up in connection to Murray and his function as a liberal role-model. Behind Seeley's revolution is a generational Oedipal complex, a desire for the cultural capital and drive that the previous generation has enjoyed, which seems impossible to achieve in the given historical context. At "the end of history," the only revolution that still seems possible is a counterrevolution, which unmasks those claiming to bring forth radical change as frauds. For Danielle, Murray's lover of the same age as his daughter, Seeley's is a "nihilists' revolution," a form of cultural rebellion voiced in a cynical, degenerative satirical mode that seems to be sweeping

[135] Ibid. 55.
[136] Ibid. 122.
[137] Ibid. 123.
[138] Ibid. 197.

over New York at the debut of the twenty-first century, with the appearance of real-life publications like *The New York Observer*, *The Onion* and *McSweeney's*. The irony prevalent in these publications, according to Danielle, is "about the blurring of left and right politics in pure contrarianism" and represents the appanage of ""[p]eople who aren't *for* anything, just against everything."" With his obsession for Napoleon, Seeley reminds Danielle of a Dostoyevskyan character on the eve of starting a revolution; a phenomenon which she would like to explore in the form of a documentary.[139] To her boss however, the very idea of a revolution "just seems so outdated… [s]o seventies"; he points out that "there isn't revolution in a little clever sarcasm."[140] Planned to be launched at the end of September, Seeley's revolutionary magazine project is canceled and its satirical bite made irrelevant by the attacks: "nobody wanted such a thing in this new world, a frivolous satirical thing. Ludo said Merton has made it sound like a fashion magazine he was dismissing, instead of an organ for radical cultural commentary. … The revolution belonged to other people now, far away from them, and it was real."[141] The last statement echoes a recurrent post-9/11 concern, to be found even earlier particularly in the work of Don DeLillo, whose novel *Mao II* tackles the supposed usurpation of the culturally revolutionary potential of literature by real life terrorism.

Unlike Seeley, whose ambitious project collapses along with the Twin Towers, Murray finds a new sense of mission and a new "market" for his brand of liberal ethics by "suddenly being called upon to provide moral or ethical guidance, to offer a path for confused and frightened liberals through the mad alarms and self-flagellations of those hideous, tumultuous weeks…"[142] Partly echoing the real life public contributions of intellectuals like Howard Zinn or Judith Butler, Murray finds a middle way argument. He does not side with the radicals solely blaming American imperialism for the attacks, but, at the same time, recognizes the delicate situations of Middle Eastern countries and the contribution of the US to the conflicts in the area, upholding the importance of human rights and action within the limits of international law. Furthermore, he finds himself reinvigorated and ready to start over with his personal book project, which his nephew had been so disappointed in. He even considers dedicating it to him, which might be a way of capitalizing on Bootie's presumed death in the events of September 11. In his personal life, the attacks, which he witnesses from the windows of his mistress'

[139] Ibid. 41.
[140] Ibid. 168.
[141] Ibid. 449.
[142] Ibid. 459.

apartment, give him a new sense of direction by helping him decide to return to his wife and to end the relation with his daughter's best friend.

Framing the attacks through this particular angle (the window in the apartment where Murray's affair takes place), the novel raises questions with regard to the authenticity of the post-9/11 ethical turn. It is Murray's nephew Bootie who goes through the most dramatic post-9/11 transformation, in another example of how the attacks are used by particular individuals to further their personal goals or interests. Disappointed by the phoniness of the New York intelligentsia, which he has previously hoped to become a part of, Bootie uses his own supposed death on September 11 to start life anew under a new name on the West coast, attempting a classical American self-making path, in his relentless quest for an authentic existence. The sudden post-9/11 irrelevancy of Seeley's nihilistic brand of postmodern irony suggests that the event has brought about a new seriousness and a return of ethics. Nonetheless, the revival of political commitment implicit in Murray Thwaite's sense of retrieved cultural relevancy is undermined by the character's previously revealed imposture. His repentance while witnessing the September 11 attacks and his subsequent ethical awakening are a means of satirizing the post-9/11 return of political gravitas in the public sphere and of dismantling the narrative of American innocence. At the same time, the character of Booty, who represents a departure from both Thwaite's hypocritical 60s political engement and Seeley's postmodern nihilism, seems to refuse becoming an agent in the public sphere. A representative of the millennial generation, Booty remains as yet undefined, characterized only through his disenchantment with both of the above mentioned role-models and through his unrelenting quest for authenticity.

Both of the September 10th satires discussed above engage with what David Foster Wallace identified as the quintessentially American inner conflict "between the subjective centrality of our own lives versus our awareness of its objective insignificance," which became much more visible in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Both satires by Messud and Wallace suggest a crisis of individual "recognition" in pre-9/11 American society. Their characters are frustrated or paralyzed by their failure to channel their *thymos*, or they try to appease their desire for recognition through its vulgar consumer culture ersatz offered by fifteen minutes of televised fame. Wallace's satire is "degenerative" in spirit, to go back to Weisenburger's terminology, particularly through its use of the abject and the grotesque in the description of a decadent affluent society haunted by its own potential demise. As a comedy of manners, *The Emperor's Children*, on the other hand, exhibits some of the traits of "generative satire," exposing the mores of American liberals, but allowing a glimmer of hope for the future

through the character of Booty and his rejection of the available, but tainted, cultural role-models, to pursue his own open-ended post-9/11 self-making scheme.

A *9/12* Satire: Jess Walter's *The Zero*:

> *The really difficult struggle happens when one does not even know who it is that's threatening him, grinding him down— and yet one does know that there is a tension, an antagonist, a conflict with no conceivable end to it.* [143]
>
> *Our interest's on the dangerous edge of things.*
> *The honest thief, the tender murderer,*
> *The superstitious atheist.*[144]

Post-9/11 and during the Bush presidency, popular culture representations of the homeland security defender were dominated by the rugged figure of agent Jack Bauer in the TV series *24*. Bauer's methods were often unorthodox and he had no qualms about the use of torture on the yet to be proven as guilty others, but ultimately justified his actions as doing what was necessary in the given situations, under the pressure of time and circumstance. The countdown structure of the episodes and the constant ticking bomb sound-effect in *24* function as a justification for the often ethically questionable methods used by the character. A similar conception that the rule of law becomes bendable when the purpose is to prevent events like 9/11 from taking place is also visible in *Homeland*, a more recent and complex take on the war on terror waged by the secret services under the Obama presidency. The female governmental agent and central character is consumed by the fear of not allowing the terrorist attacks to be repeated under her watch; a fear which causes her to adopt often legally questionable methods, such as unauthorized surveillance.[145] In the first season of *Homeland*, a returning Iraq war veteran is

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[143] Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), Kindle edition, 395.
[144] The verses from Robert Browning's *Bishop Blougram's Apology* are quoted by Jess Walter in his real life notes from Ground Zero included in the edition of the novel as an addendum (p.13). The same verses have also been used by Turkish author Orhan Pamuk as a motto for his novel *Snow* significantly dealing with religious radicalism in Turkey.
[145] The TV-series *24* has apparently influenced the legal advisers of the Guantanamo detention center and is often mentioned as an example in defense of the real life legal "ticking bomb" theory as a justification for "enhanced interrogation" techniques: Donald P. O'Mathuna, "What Would Jack Do? The Ethics of Torture in *24*," *Global Dialogue*, Volume 12, Number 1, Winter/Spring 2010, accessed May 23, 2014, http://worlddialogue.org/content.php?id=460. For a discussion of the ethical challenge posed by the use of torture in the series and as part of government policy in the war on terror, see Slavoj Zizek, "The Depraved Heroes of *24* Are the Himmlers of Hollywood," *The Guardian*, Tuesday, January 10, 2006, accessed June 2, 2013,

revealed to have been "turned" into an Islamist terrorist while taken captive by Al Qaeda. Thus, the ambivalent "villain" is not an incomprehensible Other as was mostly the case in *24*, but an unfathomable "one of us."

Jess Walter's novel *The Zero* includes elements of thriller plot structure in order to satirize a system of national defense, which, in the process of performing its duty, paradoxically creates its own enemies. The central figure, Brian Remy, is a policeman turned agent in the wake of 9/11, who suffers from a combination of short-term memory loss and double personality disorder. In a parody of the popular culture genre, the investigations of the partly unwilling secret agent lead him back to himself. After an attempted suicide, which leaves him with a serious head injury, Remy has short intervals of consciousness followed by intervals he preserves no recollection of. What at first appears as a short term memory loss issue turns out to be a sort of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde case of Dissociative Identity Disorder, which causes the individual to have a double personality or multiple ones, with one personality not recalling the previous actions of the other. The condition becomes gradually evident throughout the novel, having its implications revealed only towards the end. The episodic structure of the novel[146] includes only the perspective of one of Remy's personalities, the apparently harmless distraught and disoriented policeman, adrift in the world following an unnamed disaster that can clearly be identified as 9/11, as he helps out at the location of the terrorist attack called "the Zero."

As the plot progresses, he is left to pick up the pieces of his actions in the periods that are registered as blackouts in his mind and in which he is apparently very active. Using the character's double personality as an allegory, Jess Walter satirizes the manner in which the homeland security institutions of the US are manufacturing their enemy in order to justify their existence. On a larger scale, the character's affliction is suggestive of the complex psychological mechanisms at play in safeguarding of the American narrative of innocence and the paradoxical interplay between the role of the victim and that of the perpetrator within the context of the war on terror. For John N. Duvall, the relatable apparently innocent hero, who is gradually revealed both to himself and to the reader to be a violent thug, illustrates the post-9/11

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http://www.theguardian.com/media/2006/jan/10/usnews.comment.

[146] Kristine A. Miller interprets the episodic structure of the novel, with each episode ending abruptly in media res and with a hyphen, as a narrative strategy meant to illustrate the manner in which trauma, in its authentic form, elides narrative structures. She likens Walter's strategy to the scripts of real life oral testimonies about 9/11, which have also made use of the hyphen to illustrate the breaks and pauses used by witnesses attempting to convey their experiences in an authentic manner: "Reading and Writing the Post-9/11 Cop: Trauma, Personal Testimony, and Jess Walter's *The Zero*," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 70, no. 1 (2014): 29-52, accessed June 26, 2014, http://muse.jhu.edu/.

cultural process identified by Donald E. Pease[147] as a subtle transition from a rhetoric of exceptionalism and innocence, to a paradoxical one of exception:

> Rooted in traditional senses of American exceptionalism (the City on the Hill, Manifest Destiny), post-9/11 exceptionalism presents itself as a moment in which Americans must temporarily make an exception to the mythos of American exceptionalism. In other words, America, if it is to retain its long-term exceptional moral status, cannot afford to be exceptional in its championing and protection of civil liberties and individual rights until such time as the threat of terrorism has been eradicated.[148]

In the same line of argumentation, Remy is presented by Duvall as "the latest in a long line of American Adams, guilty precisely because of his innocence." His semblance of innocence is preserved unconsciously through his split personality torn between America's "state of exception"[149] and its exceptionalism. On the one hand, "he still wants to believe in (and is confused when he does not find) an exceptional America where the individual has inalienable rights that are assured by the state," while, on the other hand, his other personality "is an agent of the state of exception, who uses violence and intimidation to protect the homeland from perceived alien threats".[150]

Opening with a motto taken from Louis Ferdinand *Céline,* the novel partly shares the controversial French author's black humor and the antiheroic attitude of his characters. Moreover, Walter's satiric approach has a lot in common with the Black Humor novelists of the fifties and sixties, particularly with Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut, but at the same time showcases important differences that will later be discussed in more detail. The description of "the Zero" and of the characters and activities surrounding it are a good example of Walter's double edged satirical approach, which can paradoxically merge touching, humanist elements in a manner reminiscent of Vonnegut, with a biting cynical satirical mode and naturalist tendencies.

Going against the mainstream media created master-narrative of September 11 that has turned a story of victimhood into one of heroism and selflessness, the novel opens with a darkly

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[147] Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009). For an overview of post-9/11 American exceptionalism see also: William V. Spanos, "American Exceptionalism in the Post-9/11 Era: The Myth and the Reality," *symploke* 21, no. 1 (2013): 291-323, accessed June 27, 2014, http://muse.jhu.edu/.

[148] John N. Duvall, "Homeland Security and the State of (American) Exception(alism): Jess Walter's *The Zero* and the Ethical Possibilities of Postmodern Irony," *Studies in the Novel* 45, no. 2 (2013): 279-297, accessed June 26, 2014, http://muse.jhu.edu/.

[149] For a complex discussion and historicization (from the French Revolution to 9/11) of the notion of a "state of exception" see Giorgio Agamben, *The State of Exception - Der Ausnahmezustand,* lecture at European Graduate School, August 2003, transcription by Anton Pulvirenti, accessed June 3, 2014, http://www.egs.edu/faculty/giorgio-agamben/articles/the-state-of-exception/.

[150] Ibid.

satiric incursion into the ghastly experience of Ground Zero rescue workers. The author was actually present on the site and experienced the clearing process first hand while doing research for a writing assignment, taking notes which became the foundation for the novel. At the same time, as the ghost writer of a high-ranking police official's biography in the period prior to and immediately after September 11, Walter had insider access to the reaction of the police force to their post-9/11 hero status.[151] The descriptions of "the Zero" and the sheer magnitude of the destruction have a haunting effect, which borders on the uncanny, while at the same time including graphic details that have been censored in the mainstream media, such as the small fragments of human remains, human scalps and chins, which are being uncovered from under the ruins and collected in buckets, while mostly everything, organic or not, has been pulverized. During the day, the site becomes the venue for the constant media showcase, with workers posing, celebrities and politicians visiting in a ritual that looks like disaster tourism. The desolation and destruction of "the Zero" prompts self-interested or existentially troubled individuals to change or to try to make sense of their lives.

While embodying his "good cop" persona, Remy participates tirelessly and truly heroically at the huge effort of clearing the rubble of "the Zero." At the same time, many of the heroic and touching commonplaces of the media representation of first-responders are rewritten from a satirical perspective. Remy's partner Paul Guterak opportunistically casts himself as a hero rescuer (despite the fact that, unlike Remy, he has run away from the site) and revels in his post-9/11 role, which offers him the public recognition and heroic aura that he has never enjoyed as a regular policeman. He offers tours of the site for celebrities and politicians and has developed his own routine and narrative to accompany the "sight-seeing." The commercialization of the attacks is put under a satiric lens through Guterak's open attempts at cashing in on his new and undeserved hero status. He gets an agent, but instead of landing the reality TV show he hopes for, he stars in a "first responder" cereal commercial.

In an episode showcasing the absurdist interplay between public and private mourning practices, Remy's son, Edgar, acts as if his father has died on September 11, even with his father alive and present in the same room, and mockingly mentions what he perceives as the less than genuine "general grief" practiced by the public "as a competitive sport", in order to defend his own personalized approach to mourning.[152] This absurdist display of personalized grief is nonetheless taken seriously by Edgar, who, in what he calls the last stage of his grieving,

[151] See Kristine A. Miller.
[152] Walter, 34, 36.

goes so far as to enlist as a volunteer in the war in Iraq, which may be seen as an illustration of the public channeling of misdirected public grief into revanchard war-mongering, which Judith Butler has warned against.

The main targets of the satire, however, are America's institutions and their strategies in "the war on terror." High-ranking officials engage in jingoistic speeches, which directly echo those of George Bush, a parodic version of whom is often referred to as "The President," while slogans in a similar vein cover the walls of the institution Remy is co-opted by: ""Our enemy are haters who hate our way of life and our abilities of organization! We will confound them!""[153] In a speech given in the presence of the media, The Boss echoes Bush's call[154] for Americans to demonstrate their patriotism through consumption: "These bastards hate our freedoms. Our way of life. They hate our tapas bars and our sashimi restaurants, our all-night pita joints…. They hate our very… economic well-being. This is a war we fight with wallets and purses, by making dinner reservations and going to MOMA, by having drinks at the Plaza."[155] In the wake of 9/11, Jürgen Habermas has called for critical self-assessment on the side of the affluent West, particularly in view of consumption becoming the flag-bearer of democracy in the world, which he perceives as highly problematic and as a potential factor in the spread of terrorism.[156]

Reminiscent of Derrida's diagnosis that democracy is suffering from an auto-immunitary syndrome, Remy's agency seems to create terrorists in its effort to defend the homeland by framing its own collaborators as terrorists. Remy and his partner Markham terrorize innocent Muslim-Americans placing anonymous threats against them and destroying their property. Later, they get called on the scene as representatives of the authorities in order to file the report of their own previous aggression. The two kidnap potential witnesses against a possible terrorist, completely disregarding the rule of law and go so far as to torture what appear to be innocent civilians of Muslim descent. Remy finds himself called to the scene of a shopkeeper's devastated property and, analyzing the message left behind by the bullies accompanied by a pig's ear, discovers that the familiar hand-writing is his own.[157] Later in the novel, Remy regains his "good cop" consciousness while his partners are torturing a Muslim-American citizen on board

[153] Ibid. 101.
[154] See Duvall for a more detailed discussion about the problematic equation between freedom and consumption in Bush's post-9/11 discourses, which the novel satirizes.
[155] Ibid. 51.
[156] See Borradori.
[157] Walter, 111.

of a yacht, a location which brings to mind the extralegal status of Guantanamo, and is genuinely shocked. While rescuing the man from his colleagues and giving him hope for rescue, Remy's second "bad cop" personality takes over once again and he returns the terrified and humiliated captive, who has previously confided in him, back to his amused colleagues. It becomes clear on this occasion that Remy's condition, far from affecting his effectiveness as an agent, in fact enhances it. The struggle between his baffled and disoriented self the reader has access to and the ruthless agency thug he appears to be during his blackout periods creates a "good cop, bad cop" one man show that is quite effective in confounding "the enemy."

Furthermore, Walter's satirical bite is directed towards American consumerism and particularly towards the problematic conflation of freedom and democracy with consumption. Partly echoing Habermas' causal link between the spread of consumerism and that of terrorism, one of the characters in the novel, the mysterious secular Muslim agent under the code name Jaguar, with whom Remy collaborates, equates the recurrently mentioned "barbarity" of religious fundamentalists with that propagated through the consumption of American popular culture, in tones reminiscent of Theodor Adorno's critique of the same phenomenon:

> And while people elsewhere die questioning the propaganda of tyrants and royals, you crave yours. You demand the propaganda of distraction and triviality, and it has become your religion, your national faith. In this faith you are grave and backward fundamentalists, not so different from the grave and backward fundamentalist you presume to battle. If they are barbarians knocking at the gates with stories of beautiful virgins in the afterlife, then aren't you barbarians too, wrapping the world in cables full of happy-ever-after stories of fleshy blondes and animated fish and talking cars?[158]

Caught up in the agency's dubious self-justifying schemes, Jaguar is possibly framed as a terrorist and eventually ends up as one, committing a suicidal attack at the metro. The incident is the final stage in the gradual revelation of Remy's complicity in the framing of several agents of Muslim descent as terrorists in order to create a public image of success for the agency and, implicitly, in order to ensure the public success of figures of authority like the Boss and the President. Jaguar's allegiance remains partly ambiguous, but he is nonetheless constructed as an articulate and at the same time mysterious character,[159] voicing a complex critique of American culture and foreign policy. He references President Bush's often repeated ultimatum that one is either with *us* (the problematic levelling pronoun that Edward Said emphatically argued

[158] Walter, 222, 223.

[159] Aaron Derosa argues convincingly that the character of Jaguar is a representation of the Other, which manages to avoid binary simplifications and asks the reader to consider complex manner in which terrorism is generated, in "Alterity and the Radical Other in Post-9/11 Fiction: DeLillo's *Falling Man* and Walter's *The Zero*," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 69, no. 3 (2013): 157-183, accessed June 20, 2014, http://muse.jhu.edu/.

needs to be unpacked) or with the terrorists: "I'm sorry, but your idea of *us* tends to be a little bit fluid. . . . You switch sides indiscriminately. . . arm your enemies and wonder why you get shot with your own guns. . . *Are you with us?* . . . May as well ask if I am aligned with the wind…"[160] Through the articulate critical interventions of characters like Jaguar and particularly through the staging of Remy's complex and paradoxical culpability in innocence, *The Zero* manages to do the cultural work required by Judith Butler in *Precarious Life*, namely that of not only telling the 9/11 story as "a first person narrative," but of additionally considering the perspective of a third or of receiving "an account delivered in the second", which "can actually work to expand our understanding of the forms that global power has taken."[161]

The short term memory loss confers the novel the narrative structure of a thriller or of a detective novel, with Remy investigating and trying to make sense of the actions he has performed while his secret agent personality takes over. While popular culture thrillers like *24* take for granted and in a sense propagate the logic of "the state of exception," with Jack Bauer repeatedly bending the law and using torture for the higher cause of saving innocent lives, Remy's investigations, in a parodic version of the popular scenario, lead him back to himself, revealing the paradoxical implications of the state of exception. A degree of suspense is created by his gaining or losing his consciousness while engaged in more or less dangerous or peculiar situations. The agency he is working for leads absurd campaigns consisting of trying to retrieve all the papers scattered and lost in the collapse of the towers in order to collect and archive the remnants of the capitalist order the buildings themselves stood for, as one of the slogans posted on the walls, quoting The Boss, makes clear: ""Imagine the look on our enemies' faces when they realize that we have gathered up every piece of paper and put it back!""[162] With the constantly referenced enemies nowhere in sight, the gargantuan task of retrieving and archiving all papers scattered at "the Zero" becomes, like Remy's investigation, an end in itself.

Remy's double personality illustrates the complexities and contradictions of American policy surrounding the war on terror, showcasing the conflict between America's self-image as a positive interventionist force "spreading democracy" and, on the other hand, its disregard of the rule of law and its problematic use of torture. In his post-9/11 study on the role of amnesia with regard to immigration in the development of American nationalism, Ali Behdad postulates

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[160] Walter, 291.
[161] Butler, 8. It must be mentioned in this context that Butler perceives paranoid conspiracy-theory versions solely blaming the US for September 11 to be "just as dangerous" as those propagating a simplistic cultural clash explanation for the attacks because they both feed on American exceptionalism and prevent reaching "a broader explanatory picture." (9-10)
[162] Ibid. 100.

that amnesia "is of paramount importance in the founding of the United States as a nation."[163] Behdad chronicles the relation between amnesia and patriotism in the history of the United States, perceiving the post-9/11 xenophobia and disputed Homeland Security measures as the most recent development of this particular historical pattern:

> Historical amnesia in the US is a cultural form of repudiation that works through projection and denial. For example, an average citizen may have a general knowledge of the violent and abusive acts committed by American soldiers in Abu Ghraib prison recently, but most have turned a blind eye to the facts, perhaps in an effort to show support for the American troops and to not appear unpatriotic.[164]

According to Sigmund Freud, the essence of repression "lies simply in the function of rejecting and keeping something out of consciousness,"[165] which might be caused, in Remy's case, by his inability to mediate between irreconcilable inner tendencies, illustrated in the novel by his double personality. Similar to the auto-immunitary reaction linked by Jacques Derrida with democracy, in which apparently self-protective measures paradoxically lead to self-destructive effects, Remy's Dissociative Identity Disorder is symptomatic for a nation that hovers between ethically questionable self-protective manifestations of patriotism and a historical commitment to democracy and the rule of the law. In his notes taken during the process of writing the novel, the author himself mentions this national double identity: "We have chosen to forget. We have chosen to be a party to our propaganda. We are all living half our national lives, allowing some side of ourselves to do the dirty work."[166]

As an "allegorical satire," the novel dramatizes the national "*collective insanity, a post-traumatic break with reality*."[167] For John N. Duvall, *The Zero* is a work of fiction whose satirical approach confirms the survival of postmodern irony in a post-9/11 world. While casting it as an example of the effectiveness of the postmodern approach in capturing the ethos of the decade marked by the complications of the war on terror, Duvall nonetheless detects a slight departure of the novel's satiric strategy from Linda Hutcheon's observations about the complicity of postmodern irony with the subject of its bite. In this sense, Duval rightly argues that "Walter's novel actually stages the reader's complicity with the US state of exception,"[168] but does not further expand upon the subject.

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[163] Ali Behdad, *A Forgetful Nation: On Immigration and Cultural Identity in the United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).
[164] Ali Behdad, "Critical Historicism," *American Literary History*, Volume 20, Number 1-2, Spring/Summer, 2008, 286-299, 290.
[165] Sigmund Freud, *General Psychological Theory* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 105.
[166] Walter, addendum, 15.
[167] Ibid. 8. The author himself designates his novel with the term.
[168] Duvall, footnote 8.

The political implications of the satire as well as its approach distinguish it visibly from the previously discussed satirical works, particularly Messud's, although they have been published more or less at the same time. Walter achieves his self-declared quest to "[m]ove past cold war irony and sarcasm" but preserve "Vonnegut's humanism and humor,"[169] while returning to an even older dark humor model like that of Céline,[170] combined with the modernist allegorical vision of Franz Kafka. The element of novelty in Walter's approach to satire is that of not extricating the individual from the system's web of structural violence: "With Kafka, the government bears down on the individual. Now – it is us. We are culpable."[171]

For Cold War ironists like Vonnegut and Heller the individual is both part of the system and outside of it; he is an unwilling victim of an establishment whose rules he has no control over and from which he cannot extricate himself. It could be argued that heroes of novels like Heller's *Catch 22* are an off-shoot of the "virtuous citizen" engaged in a nihilistic version of civil-disobedience against a system he no longer perceives as just or justified, but rather sees as an absurd, impenetrable order epitomized under the designation "they":

> I move from situations in which the individual is against his own society, to those in which the society itself is the product of something impenetrable, something that either has no design or has a design which escapes the boundaries of reason… It is the anonymous "they," the enigmatic "they," who are in charge. Who is "they"? I don't know. Nobody knows. Not even "they" themselves."[172]

If the hero of Heller's satire manages to somehow preserve his innocence under the oppressive rule of an establishment in which Power is arbitrarily diffused in a Foucaultian manner, Walter's character Remy is himself half-consciously an organ of the establishment paradoxically harming itself in its efforts of self-preservation, by turning innocent civilians and loyal agents into terrorists while fighting terrorism. Remy's short-term memory loss is not an excuse, but rather an unconscious mechanism that allows him to pursue both paths, to commit illegal acts and to preserve a semblance of innocence. The selective amnesia he suffers from is symptomatic for American culture at the time and is illustrated once again in the novel through the metaphor of television zapping, which allows one to "skip away from anything unpleasant, go from death to music videos."[173]

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[169] Ibid.13, 19.
[170] Céline is a difficult to qualify author who has exercised an important influence on American authors, particularly the Beat Generation writers.
[171] Walter, 18.
[172] Joseph Heller, "Preface to the 1994 edition of 'Catch 22,'" *Catch 22* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), Kindle edition.
[173] Walter, 325.

Conclusion

The works discussed above offer a glimpse into a decadent end of the millennium and into the undersides of the liberal democratic society under the state of exception. The characters are far from heroic individuals struggling to navigate the complex world they inhabit and to solve or simply survive the effects of the contradictions inherent to their freedom.

In Wallace's novella, September 11 comes not as the tragedy interrupting harmonious lives in a democratic society, as one would have it in popular culture representations like Oliver Stone's *WTC*, but rather represents the actualization of an affluent society's anxieties, the encounter with the Real it had been fantasizing about in the form of simulacra. The Hieronymus Bosch-like picture of pre-9/11 New York cultural decadence in *The Suffering Channel* employs some of the tropes of the American jeremiad, leaving open to interpretation the scope of the narrative's temporal placement on the eve of the September 11 attacks. Seen in connection with Wallace's earlier first response to the attacks in *The View from Mrs. Thomson's*, in which the postmodern ironist echoes the conservative jeremiahs by flagellating himself for his knee-jerk ironic response to the terrorist attacks and his inability to react authentically, *The Suffering Channel* is a return to a non-self-conscious, non-apologetic form of satire with degenerative elements. While Mrs. Thomson and her church group stand for the possibility of authenticity and a potentially redemptive side of American culture, isolating the individual postmodern ironist narrator as the culprit, *The Suffering Channel* depicts a whole culture devoid of authentic emotion and obsessed with the simulacra of suffering, while ironically finding itself on the brink of a historical disaster.

Claire Messud's novel of manners creates an unflattering picture of the preoccupations of the New York intelligentsia and of the American cultural landscape at the turn of the century. In this context, 9/11 comes to shake the atmosphere of complacency dominating the life of the upper-middle-class characters at the center of the novel. Functioning like a *deus ex machina* gimmick, the attacks give the characters the opportunity or, in some cases, force them to reassess their lives and their perspectives. The changes they go through involuntarily or which they willingly undertake are mostly superficial individual ones. 9/11 represents, nonetheless, a significant event in the lives of the characters, some of whom use its consequences opportunistically. Thus, the novel illustrates the mechanics of the jeremiad in American culture by showing

how the individual characters go through a spiritual or ethical reevaluation in the aftermath of the attacks, which does not however fundamentally alter the cultural fiber of the liberal democratic society. In this sense, both works by Wallace and Messud debunk exceptionalist perspectives on September 11 by contextualizing it as the dénouement to an age marked by the ideological confusion left behind by the fall of the Iron Curtain and by depicting a liberal democratic society torn by its own contradictions, which is a far cry from the monolithic representations in official discourses or the mainstream media after the attacks. Furthermore, both works showcase how 9/11 has exacerbated some of the tendencies already extant or lying dormant in American culture and it has made even more visible the unbearable frivolity of life in an affluent society.

Wallace and Messud aim their satiric arrows at the frivolity of pre-9/11 life in order to point to the self-righteousness of the post-9/11 "orgy of national narcissism." *The Zero* uncovers the self-serving selective amnesia taking over the nation in order to preserve its innocent self-image, as a paradoxical guise in which it can commit human rights abuses and violate international law. A bleak political and existential self-titled "9/12" satire set in the aftermath of the attacks and delving into their surreal consequences, *The Zero* uses an individual case as a synecdoche for a national condition. Remy's apparently harmless Kafkaesque victim persona is gradually revealed to have an incompatible violent thug side, which illustrates the post-9/11 identity crisis of the US and the slippery slope from the role of victim to that of aggressor. At the same time, Walter's satire questions the traditional use of the rhetoric of innocence in American culture, which has been reactivated in exceptionalist responses to the attacks and has paradoxically led to the adoption of ethically questionable self-defense measures reminiscent of Jacques Derrida's auto-immunitary symptoms. The generative satire employed by the three works discussed - with degenerative elements in the works by Wallace and Walter - allows for an approach which is consistent with Jürgen Habermas' as well as Edward Said's calls for critical self-assessment on the side of the West in the wake of September 11. From this perspective, 9/11 and its military off-shoots seem to have had a regenerative effect on satire as a genre, returning it from the discursive turn it has taken during postmodernism back to the critique of social, cultural and political phenomena.

Chapter 2:
Playing the Victim: The Politics of Memorialization and Grief

> *In a certain way, and paradoxically, our responsibility is heightened once we have been subjected to the violence of others.*[174]

Victimhood does not appear prominently in the American cultural and national imaginary, which is a famously positivistic. In the aftermath of September 11, the United States were forced to negotiate their then new status of victim as part of the national self-image. Slavoj Zizek argued that "on September 11, the US was given a unique opportunity to realise what kind of world it was part of," the opportunity, as a victim, to develop a heightened sense of empathy with others partaking in loss and grief, but "[i]nstead it opted to reassert its traditional ideology: out with any feeling of responsibility or guilt towards the third world, *we* are the victims now."[175] Judith Butler develops a similar thesis in her essays, arguing for an acceptance of the "vulnerability" revealed through the attacks as a means of "successfully" undergoing a process of mourning. The channeling of that acceptance into a renewed self-understanding on the part of the US should inform their approach to global policy, infusing it with an ethical awareness of what Emanuel Levinas has called "the precariousness of life."[176] Critical of President Bush's problematic call for "'an end to grief after a mere ten days of flamboyant mourning," which has translated into a general call to arms in the incipient war on terror, Butler suggests embracing grief and victimhood as an act of self-knowledge and transformation:

> Suffering can yield an experience of humility, of vulnerability, of impressionability and dependence, and these can become resources, if we do not "resolve" them too quickly; they can move us beyond and against the vocation of paranoid victim who regenerates infinitely the justifications for war. It is as much a matter of wrestling ethically with one's murderous impulses,

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[174] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004) 16.
[175] Slavoj Zizek, "What If Nothing at All Has Changed," *Times Higher Education*, September 6, 2002, accessed May 3, 2014, http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/News-and-Analysis/What-if-nothing-at-all-has-changed?/171430.article.
[176] Butler, 151.

> impulses that seek to quell an overwhelming fear, as it is a matter of apprehending the suffering of others and taking stock of the suffering one has inflicted.[177]

The call for "an end of grief" made by President Bush and referred to by Butler is part of what Elisabeth Anker has called the "melodramatic plotline" adopted in the media and in official discourses after September 11. In the "melodramatic plotline" described by Anker, "the United States became signified as a morally powerful victim ensnared in a position that required it to transform victimization into heroic retributive action."[178] This melodramatic approach to victimhood is at the core of the political response to September 11, which involved glossing over the grieving, self-reflexive phase outlined by Butler and moving on to self-imposed heroic retaliatory action. The self-criticism and the Levinasian ethical dimension of the grieving process suggested by Butler, which she articulates also in response to the calls for an end to the relativism associated with postmodernism, are replaced in the melodrama scenario with a self-righteous "structuring framework for a specific contemporary American national identity that establishes its own moral virtue through victimization and heroic restitution."[179] In her ethical approach to victimhood and mourning, Butler emphasized the complex moral imperative of seeing oneself through the prism of the other, considering the suffering of others and one's role in its infliction, and not resorting to violence, not even as a means of self-preservation.[180] The melodramatic pattern in post-9/11 mainstream public discourse, on the other hand, favored a monolithic self-understanding which demanded and justified rash retaliatory action. Seen as the sine qua non of humanism, the acknowledgement and management of vulnerability are in Butler's perspective essential for effective and ethical mourning. Following the example of feminism, vulnerability is something to be accepted and learned from, while its denial can have dangerous consequences. Denying vulnerability, the melodramatic model uses the instance of victimhood in a non-reflexive manner as the justification for retaliation, adopting a heroic self-image:

> … America is fashioned as an imagined community unadulterated by immorality or evil. The country is designated as both unified and virtuous, and any state action taken at this time is predicated by the justification of moral right-

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[177] Ibid., 150. Dissatisfied with the Freudian tentative scenario of "successful mourning," Butler develops her own, which involves the acceptance of the fact that loss effects changes on the self, which are beyond its control. Thus, "successful mourning" can be achieved through the active acknowledgement of the transformation of the self through loss and the process of getting to know and understand this altered version of oneself.

[178] Elisabeth Anker, "Villains, Victims and Heroes: Melodrama, Media, and September 11," *Journal of Communication*, 55 (2005): 22–37, accessed June 3, 2014, http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2005.tb02656.x/pdf.

[179] Ibid., 25.

[180] Butler, 136.

> eousness. Clear demarcations and culturally identifiable patriotic significations denote America's resounding goodness. Through the melodramatic narrative, "the American people" become a united entity whose shared values and social solidarity create a homogeneous body. The American people's virtue extends naturally from their practice of democratic freedom; decency and righteousness are intertwined with the designation "freedom loving people." American ideals of freedom, free markets, and democracy serve to reinforce the ideal of an honorable and politically unified nation of virtuous common folk.[181]

The virtuous imagined community described by Anker has been persistently created by the media coverage of the attacks, as she demonstrates in her article, and it has also been replicated and perpetuated in a perhaps subtler manner by some of the earliest efforts of commemorating the victims. One of the first and most widely known instances of listing and remembering the individuals who died in the attacks was *The New York Times* series of unconventional obituaries *Portraits of Grief*. The collection of obituaries was inspired by the flyers posted by relatives of the missing and deceased throughout Manhattan consisting of a photograph of the victim and the concerned family's message. The journalists adopted the format of the flyers, preserving the actual snapshots of the victims provided by the families, in which most of them are smiling, and adding another textual snapshot from the individual's life, edited and written based on the recollections of their loved ones. The public response to the serialized portraits of over 1800 of the 2937 World Trade Center victims was massive and the project "evolved improbably in the weeks and months after Sept. 11 into a sort of national shrine," while religiously reading its daily installments "became a ritual for people nationwide."[182]

Hundreds of readers expressed their emotional response to the unconventional obituaries, among them author Paul Auster, who mentions two of the main reasons why so many readers were fascinated with and touched by the portraits of the deceased: "One felt, looking at those pages every day, that real lives were jumping out at you… We weren't mourning an anonymous mass of people, we were mourning thousands of individuals. And the more we knew about them, the more we could wrestle with our own grief."[183] The victims are remembered in a democratic manner, as the creators of the portraits point out: listed in alphabetical order each individual is given the same treatment and the same amount of importance, regardless of their social standing. But perhaps the paradoxical source of the emotional responses to

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[181] Anker, 25.
[182] Janny Scott, "A Nation Challenged: The Portraits, Closing a Scrapbook Full of Life and Sorrow," *The New York Times*, December 31, 2001, accessed January 14, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/31/nyregion/a-nation-challenged-the-portraits-closing-a-scrapbook-full-of-life-and-sorrow.html.
[183] Ibid.

the portraits is their focus on the quirky and often upbeat snapshots from the lives of each commemorated individual; instances from an ordinary life, cut short by an extraordinary event:

> There was Myrna Yaskulka, the Staten Island grandmother remembered for her pink rhinestone-studded sunglasses, metallic gold raincoat and leopard-skin pants; Kevin Dowdell, the oft-decorated firefighter who sanded floors on his days off to support his family; Diane Urban, who spoke her mind so often that one relative suggested at her memorial service that everyone get T-shirts saying "Diane Urban Told Me Off."[184]

Many have commented on the emotional outlet religiously reading the portraits occasioned, among them Howard Zinn and Susan Sontag, the latter confessing the process brought her to tears every morning.[185] The strong emotional response recounted by Sontag, the kind of emotional addictiveness that came hand in hand with the act of reading the daily installments of these portraits, and particularly the individuation created through the focus on an episode or personal detail from the lives of the victims pointed out by Paul Auster, have made them a problematic memorialization choice.

In retrospect, several critics have put under the lens the commemorative strategies used by the portraits and the manner in which they have been politically coopted in the wider post-9/11 debates in the public sphere. In David Simpson's view, the *Portraits of Grief* have "framed" the victims in a double sense, by literally capturing their lives in snapshots and participating in the wider processes of "framing 9/11" through an act of narration, but also in the more negative sense of the victims being "exploited for purposes over which they and their families have no control."[186] Going through a brief history of the rather recent historical phenomenon of commemorating the common man (monuments and obituaries being previously reserved to figures of high rank), Simpson points out how the focus on the commonplaceness of the lost lives in *Portraits of Grief* moves a step beyond this historical gradual democratization of commemorative practices, becoming politicized. "[T]he accumulation of meaningful lives" led by ordinary individuals, many of them recounted in particular stages of achieving their "American dream," amounts in Simpson's view to the message that "America works" [187] and becomes an act of nation building:

> …the stories were almost all versions of the same story – happy people, fulfilled in their jobs, fountains of love and charity, pillars of their family and community. The assembled miniature biographies told the story of a flourishing civil society indifferent to race, gender, and economic category. Everyone under the roofs of the Twin Towers was happy and getting happier.

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[184] Ibid.
[185] Ibid.
[186] David Simpson, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006), 87.
[187] Ibid., 22

> They had just become engaged, just found the job they wanted, just got their feet on the ground.

Despite the intentions of the editors of capturing the complex singular lives and the individuality of the deceased, Simpson remarks that the portraits end up having a levelling effect and eventually serving "an interest in the projection of an all-American wholeness of spirit and a national state of health and happiness, and, inevitably, of capitalist neoliberal health and happiness."[188] The focus on the individuals serves to make their existence meaningful and not a "bare life," in Giorgio Agamben's understanding of the term, a process which leaves other lives, which are not individuated in the public sphere, "bare." In this respect, Simpson mentions the terrorists and the later Iraqi victims and American soldiers in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as "bare lives" and collateral damage of the politicized focus on the 9/11 victims.[189]

Part of the vulnerability experienced after September 11 involved, according to Butler, a dislocation of First World safety, which brought more visibility to a "hierarchy of grief" in which some lives are more "grievable" than others.[190] The degrees of grievability with regard to victimhood pose a challenge to our understanding of the human, Butler further argues, and the visibility or absence of particular instances of human loss and suffering in the public sphere regulate the humanity assigned to some victims and denied to others. To support these claims Butler refers to the examples of Palestinian victims in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, who are tellingly absent from the commemorative practices in the public sphere. She further mentions the dehumanizing absence of the post-9/11 Iraq war victims who remain unmourned in the media.

Furthermore, the others may be dehumanized despite being represented in the public sphere, if the "precariousness" of their lives is obscured. Butler offers two instances of dehumanization operated notwithstanding the visibility of "the face" of the other.[191] The first such instance of dehumanization would be the representation of the terrorist other, or of Saddam Hussein as pure evil, which incites "disidentification … through the hyperbolic absorption of evil into the face itself."[192] The second type of dehumanization Butler mentions is exemplified through a cover of *The New Times* representing unveiled Afghan women, which has been hailed as "a celebration of the human." Butler debunks this as an image "mobilized" to serve a certain

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[188] Ibid., 46.
[189] Ibid., 51.
[190] Butler, 30.
[191] The complex notion of the "face" is the cornerstone of Emanuel Levinas' humanism, which Butler adopts.
[192] Butler, 143.

"narrative function," representing "American triumph" or providing an incitement "for American military triumph in the future." Despite its apparently positive depiction of the other, it masks actual suffering and "the precariousness of life," which is indispensable for an empathetic and ethical encounter.[193] Complete identification with the other, according to Butler, results paradoxically in "the death of identification"[194] by collapsing "into identity," a projection of the self on the other rather than a recognition of the humanity of the other. The presence of "the face," in Butler's reading of Levinas, functions as a humanizing force to the extent that it concurrently involves an acknowledgement of the ultimate unknowability of the other. In this context, a "triumphalist image" like that of the Afghan women obscures this difference between the self and the other, which makes identification possible. Conversely, an ethically conscious image, what Butler refers to as a "critical image," "works this difference [between the self and the other] in the same way as the Levinasian image; it must not only fail to capture its referent, but *show* this failing."[195] Both Butler and Simpson showcase how degrees of what and who is considered grievable in the public sphere determine the humanity assigned to or withheld from the other, or how dehumanizing the other through different representational tactics, conscious or unconscious, endangers the functioning of the democratic processes and creates an endless cycle of violence.

In an article about the *Portraits of Grief* seen as an element in the degeneration of the post-9/11 commemorative practices into a "pornography of grief," Simon Stow traces the undemocratic influences of the transfer of private mourning and emotion into the public sphere.[196] Going back to the practices of ancient Greece with regard to limiting and regulating the expressions of grief and mourning in the public sphere so as to prevent their interference in the healthy functioning of the polity, Stow demonstrates how the post-9/11 commemorative practices disregard such a cautious approach, to potentially (self)damaging effects. The insistent individuation of the victims in *Portraits of Grief* goes against the Greek practice of keeping the deceased anonymous in the process of commemorating them in the public sphere. According to Stow, the Greeks believed the that the emotional identification with the individual victims would lead to a type of "mourning that never ends" threatening to "infect the polity as a whole"

[193] Ibid.
[194] Ibid., 140.
[195] Ibid., 146.
[196] Simon Stow, "Portraits 9/11/01: The New York Times and the Pornography of Grief," in Quinn and Keniston, 224-242.

and "to undermine democratic deliberation and good judgment."[197] To the Greeks "the mourning that never ends" is a form of excess and by no means a patriotic duty, as implied by the repeatedly chanted post-9/11 slogan "we will never forget." Part of this hubristic approach to mourning is "the pleasure of tears" present according to Stow in declarations like Susan Sontag's confession that she reads "every last word" of the obituaries, "every single day" with tears in her eyes, an act which turns public mourning into what he calls "the pornography of grief."[198] Such unleashed emotionality in the public sphere opens up the possibility of political manipulation and is particularly dangerous to "critical patriotism." In the wake of September 11, the "critical patriotism" essential for a functioning democracy was "eclipsed by [an] empty nationalism" sustained among other things by "the fetish of our remembrance embodied in the 'Portraits of Grief.'"[199]

Stow is not alone in detecting a paradoxical degree of pleasure extracted from the focus on the experience of victimhood. Even before 9/11, in 1999, Ian Buruma meditated on "the joys and perils of victimhood" as reflected in contemporary cultural practices and in certain approaches to historiography, or as used in the maintenance and (re)creation of ethnic identity or of other types of imagined, often minoritarian, communities.[200] With the advent of multiculturalism and the focus on ethnicity in the last decades of the twentieth century, Buruma observes "many minorities have come to define themselves above all as historical victims,"[201] which has led to several knotty consequences. When the children of the "silent generations" (be they Holocaust or Armenian genocide survivors, former American-Japanese internment camps detainees, or Chinese survivors of World War Two) break their parents' silence, cultural identity becomes in Buruma's view "based entirely on victimhood." This centrality of victimhood in the representation of the past, he further argues, becomes a "pseudo-religion" and can lead to historical "myopia" and vengefulness. In an age marked by postmodern historical revisionism and relativization, Buruma sees this phenomenon as an attempt to hang on to a certain degree of authenticity through emotion and the sentimental affiliation to a community united through victimhood, which has permeated the approach to historiography in general:

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[197] Ibid., 226.
[198] Ibid., 231.
[199] Ibid., 238.
[200] Ian Buruma, "The Joys and Perils of Victimhood," *The New York Review of Books*, Volume 46, Number 6, April 8, 1999, accessed August 3, 2011, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1999/apr/08/the-joys-and-perils-of-victimhood/?page=1.
[201] Ibid., under the rubric "minorities" Buruma includes not only ethnic or racial ones, but mentions also feminist factions which embrace victimhood in their discourse, gay communities, particularly those afflicted by AIDS and so on.

> Historiography is less and less a matter of finding out how things really were, or trying to explain how things happened. For not only is historical truth irrelevant, but it has become a common assumption that there is no such thing. Everything is subjective, or a sociopolitical construct. And if the civic lessons we learn at school teach us anything, it is to respect the truths constructed by others, or, as it is more usually phrased, the Other. So we study memory, that is to say, history as it is felt, especially by its victims. By sharing the pain of others, we learn to understand their feelings, and get in touch with our own.[202]

This sentimentalization of historiography observed by Buruma is ultimately "ahistorical" and has the effect of levelling distinct historical experiences into "a kind of soup of pain," in an "Olympics of suffering" in which the Holocaust becomes the main paragon against which other violent and traumatic historical episodes and phenomena are being measured, diminishing the task of contextualizing and understanding them in their own right.[203] Furthermore, this ahistorical approach "injects" the public sphere with sentimentality, which may annihilate critical democratic deliberation under accusations of callousness, which cannot be disputed:

> I think the tendency to identify authenticity in communal suffering actually impedes understanding among people. For feelings can only be expressed, not discussed or argued about. This cannot result in mutual understanding, but only in mute acceptance of whatever people wish to say about themselves, or in violent confrontation. The same is true of political discourse. Ideology has caused a great deal of suffering, to be sure, particularly in political systems where ideologies were imposed by force. But without any ideology political debate becomes incoherent, and politicians appeal to sentiments instead of ideas. And this can easily result in authoritarianism, for, again, you cannot argue with feelings. Those who try are not denounced for being wrong, but for being unfeeling, uncaring, and thus bad people who don't deserve to be heard.[204]

After September 11, these cultural commonplaces with regard to the representation and the role victimhood have come in handy in the process of filtering a national experience of victimhood and integrating it into the nation building process.[205] Trauma studies, whose vocabulary had entered the mainstream through the popularization of Holocaust studies in the twentieth century, provided a frame for narrating the experience of September 11, thus inscribing it in the wider discourse of victimhood described by Ian Buruma.

Literature had already been attuned to this culture of victimhood prior to 9/11, with authors like Jonathan Safran Foer or Art Spiegelman self-consciously and self-referentially

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[202] Ibid.

[203] Buruma gives numerous examples of the questionable trend in late twentieth century historiography of using the Holocaust as the quintessential paragon for experiences of loss and suffering, from the Nanking massacre, to the more recent AIDS epidemic.

[204] Ibid.

[205] For a discussion of the use of trauma and victimhood in US nation building processes see Marcel Hartwig, *Die traumatisierte Nation?: „Pearl Harbor" und „9/11" als kulturelle Erinnerungen* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2011).

writing about coming to terms with their heritage as second or third generation Jewish-Americans and descendants of Jewish survivors of the Holocaust. Not surprisingly, both authors were among the first to include September 11 in their fictional universe and to tackle the task of representing the historical event and its consequences using the vocabulary of trauma. Mostly prevalent in the self-representation of minorities or oppressed groups, the discourse of victimhood became mainstream with the advent of multiculturalism and the paradoxical centrality given to the marginal in postmodern culture. After September 11, white middle-class male authors could tap into the cultural capital of the discourse of victimhood as well. In the nineteen-nineties, Don DeLillo famously referred to the role of the novel as that of providing a counterhistory, taking on the task, one could say, of putting imaginary flesh on the bones of history, by recreating historical events from the prism of historically insignificant individuals and providing the sensual and sensory details missing from official historiography. With sentimentality permeating historiography and public discourse through the narrative of victimhood and with mainstream commemorative practices like *Portraits of Grief* adopting the focus on the "telling detail" from an individual's life in its reinvention of the obituary, literature is put in the position of participating in these larger commemorative discourses, competing with them to a certain extent, and self-consciously meditating on their political entanglements.

Sentimental without a Cause? Memorialization, Secular Humanism and the Sentimental in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*

> *My unconditional compassion, addressed at the victims of the September 11, does not prevent me to say it loudly: with regard to this crime, I do not believe that anyone is politically guiltless.*[206]

Few of the 9/11 novels have received so much attention as Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, which has been both highly acclaimed and harshly put down by critics. The child's perspective and the combination of humor and melodramatic elements have perhaps contributed to the public success the novel has enjoyed as a *New York Times* bestseller.

[206] Jacques Derrida, Theodor Adorno Prize acceptance speech, quoted in Slavoj Zizek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, 10/7/01 – Reflections on WTC – Third Version, accessed June 7, 2014, http://www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-zizek/articles/welcome-to-the-desert-of-the-real/.

The first person narrative from a child's perspective has a long-standing tradition in American literature, from *Huckleberry Finn* to *The Catcher in the Rye*, or *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, and it is often coupled with the conventions of the coming-of-age novel and a vernacular écriture, as well as with a liberal democratic critique of societal structures and mores, but also with a problematic narrative of American innocence.[207] Cashing in on the idiosyncrasies, humor and subjectivity of the child's perspective, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is able to tackle the delicate themes of experiencing a traumatic event and losing a loved one using an often sentimental and emotional tone, or narrative and multimedial tools which produce such effects. In Foer's earlier novel *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), the encounter between personal history and world history is central to the narrative endeavor. His characters are often cast in a typology of the innocent bystander caught up in the machinery of history. The cycle of daily life is interrupted by atrocities and his characters have to live with the consequences of this historical loss, an acute awareness of death and psychological trauma that marks them irremediably.

Dealing with painful and politically controversial historical moments like the Holocaust or September 11, Foer's work focuses on the intimate and the psychological, rather than on the social or the political, in an ahistorical approach to history which creates the same pitfalls as the sentimentalization of historiography signaled by Ian Buruma. His pre-9/11 debut, *Everything Is Illuminated*, has been referred to as a third generation Holocaust novel,[208] using a mix of postmodern self-referential prose and magical realism to elaborate on the complexities of retrieving a traumatic history, and the generational burden it creates. With its self-referential commentary on the impossibility of retrieving the past, while at the same time building an empathetic bridge to the victims of history in an effort to reconstruct their lives through imaginary means, Foer's debut novel both denies the possibility of authentic historiography, and creates a sentimental account of historical victimhood, which prompts an emotional response from the reader.

Despite its experimental prose, his 9/11 novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* displays very little of the self-mocking irony of postmodern prose, but rather it uses typographical innovations or photographical inserts to increase the emotional impact of the book. This multimedial approach has been repeatedly referred to by critics as a means of coping with and making visible the unspeakable psychological effects of trauma and the limitations of literature

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[207] *Huckleberry Finn* and *To Kill a Mocking Bird* are complex critical outtakes on racial relations and tensions in the United States, while *The Catcher in the Rye* is not so much concerned with the social and the political, but is rather a more existentialist type of social critique. For a discussion of the political and liberal dimensions in *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, see John Carlos Rowe, *The Afterlives of Modernism*.

[208] Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

in representing traumatic experience.[209] A streak of humanism and humor combined with the tragic bring to mind Kurt Vonnegut, but Foer's representation of science and religion differs significantly from that of the postmodern author. Foer's work echoes the ideology propagated by the New Atheist movement, which tends to replace religious belief with something close to a deification of science and rationality.[210] The traditional sentimental novel was born out of a trend of thought that rejected the supremacy of knowledge achieved only through the rational and embraced a cult of sensibility and the emotional. Paradoxically, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* uses some of the emotional strategies of the sentimental novel and at the same time appears to glorify the human scientific pursuit, which is the result of Enlightenment rationality. In this sense, Foer's approach differs significantly from that of Kurt Vonnegut who was painfully aware of the downside of scientific development. The novel's use of innovative narrative and typographical techniques is coupled with a preoccupation with and glorification of scientific innovation and progress, which are at the core of liberal capitalism, at a time when America's "way of life" is supposedly under threat.

The plot is structured as a quest or a detective novel written mainly from the perspective of Oskar Schell, a nine-year-old self-declared vegan, pacifist, inventor, jewelry designer, amateur entomologist etc. and a sensitive child prodigy in the vein of J.D. Salinger's Glass family. After his father's death in the World Trade Center attacks, Oskar accidentally discovers in his father's closet an envelope marked with the word "Black" containing a key and embarks upon a quest to find the lock it belongs to and reveal the mystery behind it. This search for the lock and purpose of the key is a means of coping with trauma and mourning, with Oskar *acting out* and then gradually entering a problematic process of *working through* the trauma of losing his father and not being able to answer his last call before the collapse of the towers. Oscar's trials and tribulations mirror the larger scale societal healing processes taking place at the same time. The other two perspectives used in the novel belong to Oskar's grandfather and grandmother who are survivors of the Dresden firebombing, an experience that has altered the course of their lives, drastically marking them. Trauma and therapeutic self-expression go hand in hand not only for Oskar, who collects the photos and documents that make an impression on him in a

[209] See Verslyus.

[210] For an elaborate critical discussion of the *New Atheist* movement and its relation to science see Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2009). For a critique of literary proponents of New Atheism see Arthur Bradley and Andrew Tate, *The New Atheist Novel: Fiction, Philosophy and Polemic after 9/11*, (London: Continuum, 2010). Bradley and Tate refer to what they call "the New Atheist novel" as a symptom and a result of the political and mentality-related changes that have occurred particularly within the British intellectual milieu after September 11, naming Ian McEwan, Martin Amis and Salman Rushdie as the literary exponents of this trend.

sort of multimedia scrap-book, elements of which are included in the chapters written from his perspective, but also for his grandparents who are avid memoire and letter writers. Several chapters in the novel consist of Thomas Schell's (the grandfather) letters to the son he has abandoned before he was born, in which he accounts for his elusive behavior and isolation by relating them to his life-altering experience of the Dresden fire bombings. Some of the most experimental parts of the novel are made up of excerpts from his notebooks, which he uses on a daily basis in order to communicate with other people after losing his ability to speak due to the trauma suffered as a teenager. The grandmother too writes letters to Oskar recounting her side of the story of their family and how their destiny was altered by one of the most controversial interventions on the side of the Allies during the Second World War.

For a historically conscious author like Foer, whose earlier novel dealt with the heritage, or rather generational burden and trauma of the Holocaust, it cannot be incidental that his post 9/11 work is centered on a family of German origin deeply affected by a historical military intervention orchestrated in part by the American military forces. In addition, the novel also includes a real life testimony of a survivor of the Hiroshima atomic bombing; a harrowing and powerful account of a mother who loses her daughter, which Oskar uses in a school presentation. A thought provoking parallel is drawn between the mass extermination of civilians by the US military and Oskar's own loss in a historical terrorist attack against the United States. This parallel is a strategy that tones down and places an otherwise potentially self-indulgent sentimental victimization story within a larger, global frame. Critics have seen the novel's multilayered perspective on historical victimhood as exemplary for a transnational mode of commemoration[211] and as a means of complicating the "us vs. them" divide[212] predominant in the post-September 11 public debates. Other critics have interpreted Foer's focus on the family as a sign of isolationism, a retreat into the realm of the familiar, into the problematic homeland, while ignoring the intricate network of political and historical factors at play in an event with global implications and reverberations such as 9/11.[213]

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[211] Birgit Däwes, "On Contested Ground (Zero): Literature and the Transnational Challenge of Remembering 9/11," *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, 52.4 (2007): 517-43.

[212] Magali C. Michael, "Unravelling the *Us*/*Them* Divide: DeLillo's *Falling Man* and Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*," conference paper presented at *Conceptions of Collectivity in Contemporary American Literature*: International Conference at Johannes Gutenberg-University Mainz, 7-9 July, 2011.

[213] Richard Gray briefly discusses Foer's novel cataloging it as one of the "failed" attempts at representing the post-September 11 world because, according to him, it is a return to a one-dimensional perspective that finds comfort in the familiar and does not fit in with what he considers the "successful" works that deal with the event from a globalist perspective, emphasizing the "hybridization" of cultures (in Homi K. Bhabha's understanding of the term) that 9/11 revealed. This comes in contradiction to the approach of Däwes, who stresses the transnational mode of commemoration evident in the novel and Magali's, which also focuses on the multiplicity of victim perspectives that are paralleled in order to counteract exceptionalitst interpretations. Sven Cvek's take on the novel

The child's perspective is predominant in the structure of the novel and it provides the core storyline. The emotional subjectivity that is predominant in Oskar's point of view inadvertently duplicates some of the melodramatic features of the main-stream media's coverage of the event. Oskar is an all-white-clothes-wearing boy (he literally refuses to wear any other color because white is the least thermo-absorbent color, and would leave him least vulnerable in case of a bombing, one example of his many trauma-induced fears and phobias) searching for someone named Black. He is an innocent confronting the dark side of the world. Aside from the use of the vernacular as a humoristic strategy, Oskar's narrative voice has little in common with Mark Twain's use of the child narrator in order to unveil the phoniness, hypocrisy and, to a certain extent, absurdity of adult life and of social norms and constructs. Twain's child narration possesses a certain rawness and presents a gloomy perspective on the human condition, using a defamiliarizing angle for satirical purposes.[214] For Foer the child's perspective is a means and an excuse for the sentimental, for veiling reality in fantasy and idealization, rather than unveiling it as fake or misconstrued. In Twain's work, the adults seen through the eyes of a child are often risible or even grotesque figures. Oskar, on the other hand, sees the adults he encounters through a magical realist lens that only focuses on their most touching features, to which they are ultimately reduced. Most of the characters Oskar comes into contact with are marked by personal loss, an aspect which is their defining feature. Furthermore, his quest around New York, a city notorious for its multicultural, but also socio-economic diversity, becomes an exploration of different forms of personal grief, but avoids any confrontation with the social or political realities central to other child's perspective novels previously mentioned. If for Holden Caulfield the encounter with the adult world in which he is about to enter is a literally depressing confrontation with its phoniness and Twain's child narrators constantly uncover the hypocrisy of adults and of social conventions, Oskar gets into contact with nothing but benevolent individuals (with the exception of some bullies at school) who pave his way in the process of *working through* his trauma. In his meandering through New York City, Holden Caulfield is confronted with its human fauna, including a violent encounter with a prostitute and her pimp, and suffers from acute alienation. During his travels, Huckleberry Finn comes

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is closest to the present one, as it deals with the novel's use of established modes and genres like the melodrama, the family drama and the *Bildungsroman*. This genre-appropriating strategy reflects what the author sees as the return to the familiar, a tendency to take refuge into the past and into established patterns of meaning as a means of working through trauma. Sven Cvek, *Towering Figures: Reading the 9/11 Archive* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011).

[214] J. D. Stahl, "Satire and the Evolution of Perspective in Children's Literature: Mark Twain, E. B. White, and Louise Fitzhugh," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 15, nr. 3 (1990): 119-122. "Mark Twain, in any case, presents us with a sympathetic, largely reliable child narrator whose naive limitations themselves serve, by a kind of forceful indirection, to satirize social conditions and their unconscious internalization." (120)

face to face with a string of murderers and a variety of petty criminals (including his own father), as well as with several legal or socially acceptable forms of human folly and cruelty. Oskar is on the move in what appears to be a completely sanitized New York City, which therapeutically fosters his quest, and is populated solely by well-meaning individuals forming a community of grievers who embrace Oskar's own grief.

Suggestive of the novel's paradoxically political depoliticization is Oskar's precocious knowledge about anything from elephant memory to Stephen Hawking's *Brief History of Time* (which is his self-declared favorite book), but utter silence with regard to world politics, the same being valid for adult characters in the novel. His grandparents' meditations on the Dresden bombings carry no mention of the historical and political controversies behind them, aside from the reference to their having sheltered a Jewish man during the Nazi persecution, which establishes them as innocents and non-collaborators of the regime.

The fact that characters are defined by their loses and reduced to their role as a victim goes hand in hand with a propensity towards binary oppositions in the novel. This particular aspect becomes visible in the dramatic and extreme response of Oskar's grandfather to the trauma suffered in adolescence. He can no longer speak or have a meaningful life and he has "Yes" and "No" tattooed on his hands for purposes explained in a written dialogue with his grandson: "'It's made things easier. Instead of writing yes and no all the time, I can show my hands.' 'But why just YES and NO?' 'I only have two hands.' 'What about 'I'll think about it' and 'probably' and 'it's possible'?'"[215] Experiencing the Dresden bombings has left the grandfather afflicted with what he himself calls "the cancer of never letting go,"[216] a phenomenon that can have damaging effects on its subject, who is constantly reliving a traumatic past, which prevents him from having a meaningful experience of the present, or, in the jargon of trauma studies, he is caught in the treadmill of acting out his traumatic past experience without being capable of getting to the stage of working it through. For instance, his relationship with Oskar's grandmother is for him a (failed) means of reenacting his teenaged love story with her older sister who has died during the bombings. He leaves his family before the birth of his son and returns to Dresden to work at the Zoo, as he had done in his pre-war life, and in this way turns his back on the chance of starting life anew. The attraction towards the binary opposition of "yes" and "no" exhibited by Oskar's grandfather is a symptom of trauma, a manner of coping and gaining control over his surroundings. A similar tendency towards binary oppositions

[215] Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 257.
[216] Ibid., 17.

seems to compel the September 11 survivor Keith Neudecker in DeLillo's *Falling Man* to immerses himself in mind-numbing poker sessions:

> But the game had structure, guiding principles, sweet and easy interludes of dream logic when the player knows that the card he needs is the card that's sure to fall. Then, always, in the crucial instant ever repeated hand after hand, the choice of yes or no. Call or raise, call or fold, the little binary pulse located behind the eyes, the choice that reminds you who you are. It belonged to him, this yes and no, not to the horse running in the mud somewhere in Jersey.[217]

There are a number of other similarities between Keith's post-traumatic symptoms and those experienced by Oskar's grandfather aside from their propensity towards binary logic and repetitive almost robotic routines. They share an inability to communicate with others, to express or experience emotion, and a tendency towards isolation, which masks a desire for control and is illustrative of a nation-wide trauma induced reaction.

Although the novel dramatizes the dangerous potential of what Oskar's grandfather has referred to as "the cancer of never letting go," it simultaneously romanticizes extreme mourning, echoing the mainstream commemorative refrain "we will never forget." Several of the characters that populate the novel experience a prolonged state of mourning. Mr. Black, one of the Blacks that Oskar meets during his search (who incidentally lives in the same apartment building as the Schells) is a long time widower who has not left his apartment in years and is committed to spending the remainder of his days mourning and remembering his deceased wife. After they become acquainted, Mr. Black renounces his self-imposed seclusion and accompanies the boy on most of his expeditions around New York. Another one of the Blacks whom he encounters turns out to be living illegally in the Empire State Building due to another never-ending process of mourning for her long deceased husband. The mourned husband used to be a traveling salesman and amateur inventor who created a very powerful spotlight, which he attached to his car allowing his wife to follow his itinerary around the city from the top of the second tallest sky scraper in New York after the Twin Towers. Her symbolic act of never leaving the Empire State after his death is a means of constantly "keeping an eye on" her husband's memory, but it is also a means of suspension, both literally (as she never touches the ground again) and symbolically (as she suspends her connection to the living and chooses instead a never-ending state of mourning).

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[217] Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, (London: Picador, 2007), 212.

Compulsive archiving is a frequent preoccupation of characters in Foer's works, both in his Holocaust novel *Everything Is Illuminated*[218] and in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. According to Andreas Huyssen, the recent cultural "obsession with the past" and what he calls the "musealization" of culture may be seen as a consequence of the fact that modernization "is inevitably accompanied by the atrophy of valid traditions, the loss of rationality, and the entropy of stable and lasting life experiences." At the same time, the "ever increasing speed of technical, scientific, and cultural innovation produces ever larger quantities of obsolescence, while objectively shrinking the chronological expanse of what can be considered the (cutting-edge) present at any given time,"[219] which in turn creates an anxiety of forgetting that manifests itself in efforts of cultural preservation through musealization. The information age, with its constant ebb and flow of news has caused a desensitivisation of the public with regard to human suffering and the current efforts of commemoration are a means of lengthening the memorial attention span and a way of coping with the anxiety of media-oversaturation-induced amnesia. Oskar's quest and his determination not to stop searching for the key, his compulsive collecting habit (he has a scrapbook entitled "Stuff that Happened to Me"), as well his self-destructive habit of pinching himself and giving himself bruises, are all symptoms of a wider societal anxiety, a fear of mourning and then moving on, as Jacques Derrida has suggested would be the ethical approach to the events of September 11.

The symptoms of this general "musealization" of culture become visible in Oskar's encounter with another Black family, a married couple, who have turned their home into a museum dedicated to themselves, the wife collecting artifacts detailing her husband's life and vice versa. A former war correspondent, Mr. A. Black, Oskar's neighbor and side-kick in his quest, is also a compulsive collector and archivist. He has memo cards for every important person that he meets, or personality that he comes across, in which these particular individuals are defined in one word.[220] The obsession with musealization manifests itself both on a public level and on a personal, everyday life level and it seems to go hand in hand with a glorification of the "everyman," discussed also by David Simpson as a rather recent phenomenon, which has intensified since 9/11. The 9/11 memorial *Portraits of Grief* significantly capitalized on this tendency by presenting the victims of the attacks as defined by the "little things," the minor

[218] The main character in *Everything is Illuminated* is obsessed with archiving his family's past and in his trip to Ukraine in an attempt to excavate this past he has a quasi-magical encounter with Lista, another character whose life is centered around memory preservation and archiving and who has been guarding the remnants of the vanished village in which the main character's grandfather has grown up.
[219] Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimsest and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Presss, 2003), 32.
[220] Foer, 158.

but "telling detail" from their everyday lives, like that of a husband putting toothpaste on his wife's toothbrush before leaving for work,[221] which perhaps inadvertently became politicized and problematic:

> The toothpaste on the toothbrush is the quintessential prosaic detail, the ultimate fact of everyday life, the metonymy of the domestic fable… For it tells the story of what worked in the marriage, and to the extent that the portraits represent something larger than an individual—and they do—they are crafted to serve as the microcosm of family life, of community values, of a valiant and, though wounded, above all, happy America. The domestic detail of the toothbrush comes to stand for the intimacy of the home, and the home for the nation's public life: the home front against the incursions of terrorism. The detail as the index of poignant loss—the toothpaste on the toothbrush, the minute and the familiar—embodies that which we cherish against what is foreign and terrifying, that which protects against the war on terrorism. In measuring disaster, the smaller the marker, the bigger the loss seems to be the rule of incommensurability.[222]

In a similar strategy of using the apparently insignificant detail to hyperbolize the loss suffered, Oskar's grandmother repeatedly asks with regard to touching mundane scenes interrupted by disaster, like two sisters kissing in their bed on the eve of the Dresden fire bombings: "How could anything less deserve to be destroyed?"[223] The parallel between the experience of the Dresden bombings, the real life testimonial of a survivor of the Hiroshima atomic attack and September 11, however, universalizes the experience of victimhood. On the one hand, as critics have argued these parallels pave the way for a transnational mode of commemoration,[224] but on the other hand, as Ian Buruma suggests, they turn historiography into an indiscriminate "soup of pain" by triggering a universal empathic reaction, which dangerously obliterates the political and historical specificities of each historical occurrence. In similar lines as Buruma, David Simpson points out that drawing parallels between historical instances of victimhood often leads to questionable declarations of "moral equivalence."[225] Instead, Simpson adds, "the most urgent point to be made is that this is *not* Hiroshima, not *our* Hiroshima, not our price of

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[221] "Portraits of Grief," *The New York Times*, March 9, 2003: "With Tommy Knox it was often the little things. The way he put toothpaste on his wife's toothbrush when he got up before her, almost every day. He'd leave it on the vanity ready for her before he left his home in Hoboken for his job as a broker at Cantor Fitzgerald. Or perhaps it was how he made the oldest gag in the book funny again. At weddings, parties, any place, really, he slapped in a set of grotesque false teeth and worked the room in his gregarious, antic style, which never failed to make everyone laugh… Or maybe it was the way he listened — attentive, alert, compassionate. 'I guess it was all the little things,' said his wife, Nancy Knox. 'All these little, special things that made Tommy who he was and made us all love him.'"

[222] Nancy K. Miller, "'Portraits of Grief:' Telling Details and the Testimony of Trauma," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, Volume 14, Number 3, Fall 2003, 112-135, 122, accessed June 4, 2011, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/dif/summary/v014/14.3miller.html.

[223] Foer, 313.

[224] See Däwes.

[225] Simpson, 43.

full admission into the community of global suffering,"[226] as Foer's novel often seems to suggest.

Commemorating the common man and hyperbolizing loss by glorifying the mundane prevents the victims from being perceived as "bare lives," but it may also directly or indirectly contribute to obscuring the "precariousness of life" in the representation of the Other who is reduced to a personification of evil. Oskar reflects upon finding Mohammed Atta's card featuring the defining word "WAR" in Mr. Black's archive, but not finding his father's name in there at all:

> ""It's just that why would you have one for him and not one for my dad?" "What do you mean!" "It isn't fair!" "My dad was good. Mohammed Atta was evil." "So!" "So my dad deserves to be in there." "What makes you think it's good to be in here!" "Because it means you're biographically significant." "And why is that good!" "I want to be significant." "Nine out of ten significant people have to do with money or war!"
>
> But still it gave me heavy, heavy boots. Dad wasn't a Great Man, not like Winston Churchill, whoever he was. Dad was just someone who ran a family jewelry business. Just an ordinary dad. But I wished so much, then, that he *had* been Great. I wish he'd been famous, famous like a movie star, which is what he deserved. I wished Mr. Black had written about him, and risked his life to tell the world about him, and had reminders of him around his apartment.
>
> I started thinking: if Dad were boiled down to one word, what would that word be? Jeweler? Atheist? Is copyeditor one word?"[227]

The actual titles of the *Portraits of Grief* sketches are echoed here in Oskar's attempt to reduce his father to a short designation and they are also mentioned and enumerated in the novel, as the grandfather retells how he scanned the papers after the attacks to see if his family were among the victims. "The list of the dead" included several fathers and a more specific "new father who had a cold that morning and thought about calling in sick," many brothers, sisters, an "only child," a "wine aficionado," a "Scrabble player" and many other touching designations echoing the role played by the dead in their family circles or in civil society.[228] Oskar's desire for his dad to achieve historical recognition as an innocent victim despite, or rather because of his ordinariness, is illustrative of recent commemorative practices focused on individuating the previously anonymous ordinary victims of history. *Portraits of Grief* are representative for this new approach to commemoration, prompting a reader to declare that the obituaries of 9/11 victims made him aware of "how ordinary life is a matter of being heroic."[229] Oskar's attempt

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[226] Ibid., 44.
[227] Foer, 159-160.
[228] Ibid., 273.
[229] Thomas Mallon, "The Mourning Paper," *The American Scholar*, Vol. 71, No. 2 (Spring 2002), 5-8, 6, accessed June 20, 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41213282.

to boil down his father's personality and Mr. Black's adding Oskar to his file under the designation "son" and correcting his own designation from "war" to "husband" reflect the strategies of *Portraits of Grief*, which, according to Thomas Mallon, manage to "boil down" complex individuals, with qualities and shortcoming, into flat characters with exclusively positive features, thus repopulating "Ground Zero with the citizens of Pleasantville" and "substituting in most cases treacle for essence."[230] At the same time, Oskar's desire for his father to achieve fame in death shows how shifting the focus of historiography to the representation of victimhood is an act of emotional retribution and does not help illuminate the complex socio-political web of factors which have created that particular historical event. Quite the contrary, the emphatic individuation of Oskar's father goes hand in hand with the decontextualization of the act of terror, which Judith Butler has been warning against, and with the dehumanization and presentation of the terrorist as pure "evil," which reduces him to "a "bare life" to use the Agambian term David Simpson appropriates to make similar claims.

Historicizing the epitaph, David Simpson emphasizes the genre's tendency to "record the good in everyone, as if they lived in a world without cruelty or evil or mere human failings," and to express the "truth hallowed by love – the joint offspring of the worth of the dead and the affections of the living" in William Wordsworth's words.[231] The character of the father who dies during the World Trade Center attacks is depicted only through the subjective perspective hallowed by the love Oskar and his other relatives have for him, which makes him one-dimensional. The focus on the intimate snap-shots of the lives of the victims in *Portraits of Grief*, according to Simpson, serves the purpose of turning them into individuals we can relate to. They all have touching stories and a seemingly clear purpose in life, unlike other anonymous historical victims treated like "bare lives," disposable under the rhetoric of a higher purpose. Thus, common men who were the victims of a tragic terrorist attack, but were caught unaware and had barely any agency in the course of the events are turned into "heroes, sacrificial victims, icons of patriotic life, above all saturated with meaning…"[232] and "made to figure in grander narratives of national futures and civic virtues than any of them could probably have imagined or perhaps desired."[233] While all the victims, be they of the Hiroshima atomic bomb, the Dresden fire bombings, or 9/11, are presented as devoted and loving parents, sons and

[230] Ibid., 7.
[231] Simpson, 36.
[232] Ibid., 51.
[233] Ibid., 29.

daughters, lovers, husbands and wives,[234] in Oskar's imagination the terrorist features as a "bare life" unquestionably worthy of vengeful hate. This brief and reductive reference to the terrorists replicates the binary logic of the "war of terror" rhetoric:

> I was imagining a plane coming at the building, just below us. I didn't want to, but I couldn't stop. I imagined the last second, when I would see the pilot's face, who would be a terrorist. I imagined looking each other in the eyes when the nose of the plane was one millimeter from the building.
> I hate you, my eyes would tell him.
> I hate you, his eyes would tell me.[235]

Agreeing with Andreas Huyssen that the last decades have seen the rise of a culture of commemoration, Simpson makes the case that this wider phenomenon goes hand in hand with what he calls "memorial fiction", an assumption that he leaves relatively unexplored and undefined, limiting himself to naming a few titles that form a rather heterogeneous ensemble.[236] Assuming that there is such a category, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* would be an ideal contestant for the title on account of its idealization of the common man who is a casualty of historical events beyond his grasp and of the romanticized portrayal of mourning as a struggle to preserve the memory of the deceased.

Oskar's quest is an excuse to visit all the boroughs of New York and get in contact with all walks of live, as he visits every person with the name Black listed in the phonebook. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that the Anglo-Saxon origin of the name is rather restrictive considering the variety of the population of New York. An endearing ode to the city recovering from a tremendous loss, paralleled on a personal scale by the protagonist's own loss, Oskar's search for the Blacks of New York leads him to the final confrontation with death and his father's empty grave, which he digs up in order to fill it with his grandfather's letters to his now dead son. The empty grave set up in a graveyard by the family so that they can mourn Oskar's father, mirrors the loss the city itself is confronted with in the hollow Ground Zero; the result of a disembodied type of death that is hard to come to terms with for the ones left behind. For a city that defines itself through constant change and self-innovation this confrontation with death is just as life-changing as a nine-year-old's experience of losing his father; it represents a loss of innocence.

The recurrent figure of the falling man is the epitome of experiencing the loss of innocence, bringing to mind the fall from grace. The identity of the persons spotted while falling

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[234] Oskar's grandfather is a little more problematic at first sight, as he abandons his wife and son, but only does so because he cannot recover from the loss of his first lover.
[235] Foer, 144.
[236] Simpson, 32.

from the towers has remained unknown to this day due to the distance between the photographer/witness and his gruesome subject. Thus, the photographed images of falling men stand for the impossibility of retrieving the experience of the victims: "I started thinking about the pixels in the image of the falling body, and how the closer you looked, the less you could see."[237] The picture of the falling body, magnified to an indistinguishable silhouette is reproduced in the novel and it is a telling instance of the ambiguous role technology plays in the societal effort to preserve the past, by recording it imperfectly and without providing a redeeming narrative.

Oskar becomes obsessed with the pictures of the falling man in his effort to come to terms with the loss of his father by associating his disappearance with a body. Much has been made of the closing pages of the novel, in which Oskar imagines his father moving backwards in time from the moment of his potential fall from the tower to a time when he was safe at home. This description of a movement back in time is followed by a flipbook made from the actual iconic image of the falling man, who is made to float back upwards, in a frame by frame backwards movement until the falling body disappears from the frame completely, leaving it to the reader to imagine his return to the moment when he was "safe." The backwards fall, or return to innocence, is echoed earlier in the novel in a letter written by Oskar's grandmother, in which she imagines a backwards movement from the Biblical moment of the fall from grace, the source of all human suffering, to the creation of this world, the beginning of time:

> At the end of my dream, Eve put the apple back on the branch. The tree went back into the ground. It became a sapling which became a seed.
> God brought together the land and the water, the sky and the water, the water and the water, evening and morning, something and nothing.
> He said, Let there be light.
> And there was darkness.[238]

This striking recurrent image describes a utopian vision of rewinding life and undoing the inevitable process of decay. The backward movement in both the biblical dream sequence and in the falling man flipbook can be seen as a utopian refusal to accept the human condition and the inevitable loss of innocence. This denial echoes elements of the larger cultural and societal climate in the aftermath of September 11 and points to a return to a traditional American stance, a cult of innocence that Leslie A. Fiedler criticized in the nineteen-sixties:

> …a 'liberalism of responsibility' must replace a 'liberalism of innocence.' With more hope than conviction, Fiedler concluded that 'the age of innocence is dead,' naming innocence as the affliction stunting not only Ameri-

[237] Foer, 293.
[238] Ibid. 313.

> can political but literary culture as well. The final chapters of *An End to Innocence* explored his claim that 'even our best writers appear unable to mature. . . Their themes belong to a pre-adult world.' The regressive state of both realms, politics and literature, reflects the consequences of 'having substituted sentimentality for intelligence.'[239]

The flip book at the end of the novel is an artificial way of turning back time, of returning to an age of American innocence and safety. This innocence however can only exist concurrently with a lack of confrontation with the political and the treatment of characters as restricted to their private sphere, which is violently shaken by an encounter with history. In his catalogue, Mr. Black registers the personalities he has encountered under terms like "War" or "Money" or "Sex," which point to the individual's affiliation with a network of power relations within society. He lists Oskar as "Son" and corrects his own identifier from "War" to "Husband." This correction complements his decision to renounce his life-long work as a war journalist and dedicate himself to the memory of his late wife while living a secluded life. The reduction of human identity to familial connections is paralleled by a reduction of historical events to their impact on the idealized version of an individual's private sphere. This version of history disconnected from the public sphere of global politics is a paradoxically political act of depoliticization because it creates a vacuum of historical responsibility and reproduces the exceptionalist narratives of American innocence.

As a descendant of pogrom survivors, Foer comes from a tradition of dealing with and representing trauma and is very much aware of the importance of "bearing witness" in life-shattering historical events. Still, his approach in representing the events of September 11, depart significantly from the testimony, the genre that sprang from the efforts of Holocaust survivors to put down in writing their experience of the inexpressible. The most poignant features of what Elie Wiesel considered "a new genre of literature" were its rejection of the reader's "pleasure of identification" and its awareness of its own limits when it comes to the process of representing "reality." The testimony genre displays a heightened concern with regard to the ethics of representation.[240] By introducing his alter ego in the frame of both his graphic novel about the Holocaust, *Maus*, and in his later personal account of 9/11, Art Spiegelman's narrative strategies are very much indebted to the heritage of the testimony. This propensity comes to light particularly in the self-reflexivity of Spiegelman's works and the dramatization of his personal effort in retelling his parents' traumatic past experience. Moreover, his work reflects his doubts with regard to the possibility of representing September 11 and additional fears that

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[239] Ross Posnock, "Innocents at Home: Ross Posnock on the legacy of Leslie Fiedler," *Book Forum*, Summer 2003, accessed July 2, 2010, http://www.bookforum.com/archive/sum_03/posnock.html.
[240] Eaglestone, 38.

his own narrative could be co-opted by an ideological camp. As a third generation Jewish-American author, Foer does inherit some of the traits of the testimony, but more with regard to scope than form. His works are preoccupied with the idiosyncrasies of post-traumatic culture and appear motivated by the idea of a responsibility to bear witness to history and to remember the past (hence the recurrent reference to compulsive historical archiving and collecting in his novels). Yet, as the author himself declares in an interview, his narrative strategies depart significantly from the scrupulous representational ethics of the testimony as he seeks to increase, not to prevent the "pleasure of identification:"

> You need to have a reader's sympathy in order to accomplish anything. It's like at a reading, I find it's better to read something funny than to read something tragic… I wanted it to be very energetic. Funny isn't even what I was going for. It's more like energy. I wanted the reader to feel compelled to read further…
> Oskar is not like a realistic character. There isn't anybody in the world who's like him... I was only trying to make somebody who evoked a certain set of feelings. So I didn't really look to the real world. I looked to myself, you know - what makes me laugh, what makes me upset.[241]

Combining the sentimental with quirky humor, the novel's style shares another element with the obituaries of the victims in *The New York Times*. In his critique of *Portraits of Grief*, Thomas Mallon recognizes a similar reader reaction to the combination of the touching mundane and humorous elements as that described by Stow under "the pleasure of tears." He concluded that the grief experienced by the avid readers of the obituaries was more of an exercise in narcissism: "a feel-good aren't-I-sensitive grief, manageably poignant and no doubt useful in reaching 'closure'…"[242]

Sentimentalism in literature has a long history that has often been traced back to eighteenth century moral philosophy and its concern with "ideas about virtue and society, benevolence and taste" and their "progressive refinement" throughout the subsequent ages.[243] The sentimental novel developed "two modes" that enabled it to stir and mould the emotions and feelings of readers, while simultaneously inserting "matters of political controversy into the text of the novel itself"[244] and thus channeling the emotional energy created towards particular political or ideological goals. In her study of the sentimental power of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Jane Tompkins maintains that the sentimental novels written by women in the nineteenth century

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[241] Joel Whitney, "The Distance Between Us: Joel Whitney Interviews Jonathan Safran Foer," *Guernica Mag*, August 15, 2005, accessed June 23, 2011, http://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/73/the_distance_between_us/
[242] Mallon, 6.
[243] Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 9.
[244] Ellis, 9

perform "cultural work", offering a critique of American society far more politically effective than that delivered by canonical high-brow critical voices such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville."[245] If one is to keep this dual nature of sentimental literature in mind and to accept Tompkins' thesis, Foer's novel seems to make use of sentimental strategies and to find new ways of emotionally engaging the reader, but without using this emotional energy to achieve social critique or for any obvious subversive means. Critics have made a strong case that the parallel between the Dresden bombings, the Hiroshima atomic attack and September 11 in the novel echoes Slavoj Zizek's suggestion that innocent casualties on all sides of a conflict be identified with, treated and mourned equally.[246] Interestingly, in the reductive film adaptation of the novel, this problematizing association between traumatic historical events, which blurs the boundaries between victims and perpetrators, is left out completely. In a similar line of argumentation, critics have identified traces of Emmanuel Levinas' ethics in the novel.[247] Still, in my understanding of Levinas' ideas as filtered through the ethical post-9/11 stance proposed by Judith Butler, the novel's depoliticized focus on victimhood has the effect of obscuring "the precariousness of life" in the case of the terrorist Other in a manner dangerously similar to that of mainstream media reporting or war-mongering political punditry.

The novel contains moments of sentimentality for sentimentality's sake and a certain amount of almost narcissistic mourning. The child narrator's innocence offers an excuse for several sentimental elements and, in general, for an emotional narrative approach. Oskar is very vocal about his own emotions, be they anger or depression. He often refers to himself as having "heavy boots" and is tormented by post-traumatic self-flagellating guilt; he repeatedly admits to having given himself bruises. His portrayal of the adults in his life, particularly his father, is a reduced version of a human self. Thomas Schell is an ideal father, with no visible deficiencies and his representation resembles that of the 9/11 victims in *Portraits of Grief*, or of characters typical of sentimental fiction (one only has to think of the beatific uncle Tom and little Eva). Still, if flat idealized characters like uncle Tom and little Eva serve Beecher Stowe's general strategy of appealing to her audience's Christian humanism in order to persuade them to embrace the politically radical cause of abolitionism, the idealization of Oskar's father seems to

[245] Jane Tompkins, "Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History," in *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 122-146, accessed June 7, 2011, http://web.princeton.edu/sites/english/NEH/TOMPKINS.HTM
[246] Zizek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*.
[247] For a discussion of several 9/11 novels from the perspective of Levinas' ideas of the Other see Magali, but also Rodica Mihaila, "Falling Man Tropes and the New Cycle of Vision in the Recent American Novel," *Writing Technologies*, vol. 3 (2010), 86-99.

be less part of a political strategy, but instead appears to have the same logic as the recent forms of epitaph writing discussed by Simpson and is thus liable to create the same pitfalls.

In his polemical lectures in which he responds to the claims of New Atheist figures like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, Terry Eagleton makes the case that in their effort to discard religious belief, they paradoxically create their own surrogate version of it, replacing "irrational" religion with a "belief in family, scientific progress and, most importantly art."[248] Theoreticians and the writers associated with the New Atheist movement profess the superiority of Western rationalism and an Enlightenment-inspired belief in progress, and indict religion as a barbaric atavism. Without directly engaging in this type of value judgment, Oskar does however voice opinions which share with the New Atheist movement a similar brand of humanism, the emphasis on the family and human connections of love, a glorification of science and, most importantly, an emphatically self-declared atheism. Educated in the spirit of atheism, Oskar hangs on to his father's principles even when he is forced to confront questions and issues that seem to elide a rationalist new atheist explanation, like death or the significance of human life:

> When Dad was tucking me in that night and we were talking about the book, I asked if he could think of a solution to that problem. "Which problem?" "The problem of how relatively insignificant we are." He said, "Well, what would happen if a plane dropped you in the middle of the Sahara Desert and you picked up a single grain of sand with tweezers and moved it one millimeter?" I said, "I'd probably die of dehydration." He said, "I just mean right then, when you moved that single grain of sand. What would that mean?" I said, "I dunno, what?" He said, "think about it." I thought about it. "I guess I would have moved a grain of sand." "Which would mean?" "Which would mean I moved a grain of sand?" "Which would mean you changed the Sahara." "So?" "So? So the Sahara is a vast desert. And it has existed for millions of years. And you changed it!" "That's true!" I said, sitting up. "I changed the Sahara!" "Which means?" he said. "What? Tell me." "Well, I'm not talking about moving that one grain of sand one millimeter." "Yeah?" "If you hadn't done it, human history would have been one way…" "Uh-huh?" "but you did do it, so…?" I stood on the bed, pointed my fingers at the fake stars, and screamed: "I changed the course of human history!" "That's right." "I changed the universe!" "You did." "I'm God!' "You're an atheist." "I don't exist!" I fell back onto the bed, into his arms, and we cracked up together.[249]

The idea of the quest itself is an offshoot of his father's influence and their shared interest in exploration and scientific pursuits. At the same time, a quest may also have a spiritual dimension and it is often associated with a degree of soul-searching.[250] Even more, suffering due to

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[248] Bradley and Tate, 16.
[249] Foer, 86.
[250] On the quest in recent American fiction see Ihab Habib Hassan, *Selves at Risk: Patterns of Quest in*

the loss of his father, Oskar is on the lookout for Ersatz-father-figures and one of the many candidates for the role is none other than the real life scientist Stephen Hawking, to whom he writes asking whether he can become his protégée and from whom he eventually receives a touching letter in response. Oskar seems to be looking for a solution to his spiritual crisis by appealing to humanist science. As a reaction to trauma, his mind is reeling and he compulsively invents things that are meant to make the world safer and to help people express their fears and emotions. His "inventions" include microphones that broadcast every individual's heart-beat, pipes that connect people's pillows to a reservoir of tears allowing the assessment of human sadness in New York, or birdseed shirts that would allow one to take flight in dangerous situations and so on.

Bringing together two strange bedfellows, sentimentalism and scientific pursuit, Oskar's compulsive inventiveness reflects a culture in crisis, whose anxiety with regard to the potential loss of its comfort and safety is channeled towards technical advancement. Oskar's inventiveness is mirrored in the formal construction of the novel, which incorporates numerous innovative typographic or visual elements that critics have interpreted as a commentary on the limits of language in representing trauma.[251] An example of intermediality in literature, the novel has been hailed as a literary response to the storytelling techniques propagated by the new media, visible in blogs for instance; a medium which incorporates personal narratives as well as visual material, both photographic and video, being a collage of original material and "borrowed" elements.[252] In a similar vein as the work of Ian McEwan (who is described by Bradley and Tate as the quintessential New Atheist novelist) there is an admiration for human ingenuity that permeates Foer's novel, accompanied by a certain sentimental "tenderness" towards the achievements of the Western world. This admiration surfaces for instance in the following excerpt in which Oskar and Mr. Black look for Ruth Black on the observation deck of the Empire State Building and she acts as their guide:

> All in all, the feeling and spirit of New York is embodied in the Empire State Building. From the people who fell in love here, to the ones who have returned with their children and grandchildren, everyone recognizes the building not only as an awe-inspiring landmark which offers one of the most spectacular views on earth, but an unequaled symbol of American ingenuity.[253]

Contemporary American Letters (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

[251] See Versluys.

[252] For a take on the visual elements in Foer's novel see Elisabeth Siegel, "*Stuff That Happened to Me*: Visual Memory in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005)," *Current Objectives of Postgraduate American Studies*, Vol. 10 (2009), accessed May 6, 2013, http://www-copas.uni-regensburg.de/articles/issue_10/10_07_text_siegel.php.

[253] Foer, 249.

Jonathan Safran Foer is a self-declared believer in the dictum expressed by the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert: "Imagination is the instrument of compassion."[254] Still, his own writing has little in common with the work of the poet who has lived through two repressive political regimes and whose style has been described to function "as a sort of antidote to the dangers of sentimentality or inflation [; it is] restrained, ironic, stripped of punctuation, averse to 'tricks of the imagination' and passionate in its insistence on precision."[255] Herbert himself declared: "'I avoid any commentary I keep a tight hold on my emotions I write about the facts.'"[256] In contrast, the style of Foer's novel is similar in spirit to that of the sentimental novelists of the nineteenth century, when humanitarianism became a fashion and literature promoted a "sympathetic model of character."[257] Art as a vehicle for morality, spirituality and particularly empathy, has a long history in the English speaking literary world; one has only to think of Matthew Arnold's views on the subject, and, more recently, New Atheist authors like Ian McEwan have been returning to these ideas, looking at art as a medium creating empathy, which can provide much needed humanistic values and replace the hole left behind by religion. Significantly, in McEwan's novel *Saturday* the main character's life is literally saved by Matthew Arnold's poem *Dover Beach*, which concludes with an image of human love, as the only possible refuge in a modern world left barren by the retreat of religion in the face of scientific rationalism. Atheism and humanism are paralleled in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, coupled with a focus on family and communitarian relations as the loci of humanistic pursuit. An eloquent example of this replacement of the religious community with the family or a community united by humanistic principles would be the story told to Oskar by Mr. Black, the former journalist, quest side-kick and one of many Ersatz-father-figures in the novel. This story of artists surviving under a repressive regime prompts the two main characters in the novel to restate their atheism:

> "I once went to report on a village in Russia, a community of artists who were forced to flee the cities! I heard that paintings hung everywhere! I heard you couldn't see the walls through all of the paintings! They'd painted the ceilings, the plates, the windows, the lampshades! Was it an act of rebellion! An act of expression! Were the paintings good, or was that beside the point! I needed to see it for myself, and I needed to tell the world about it! I used to

[254] David Swatling, "Imagination is the Instrument of Compassion," *Radio Netherlands Worldwide*, February 4, 2010, accessed May 3, 2014, http://www.rnw.nl/english/radioshow/imagination-instrument-compassion.
[255] Eva Hoffman, "Remembering Poland," *The New York Times*, February 16, 1986, accessed May 22, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/1986/02/16/books/remembering-poland.html
For more on Herbert see: Harvey Shapiro, "Zbigniew Herbert, 73, a Poet Who Sought Moral Values," *The New York Times*, July 29, 1998, accessed June 20, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/1998/07/29/arts/zbigniew-herbert-73-a-poet-who-sought-moral-values.html.
[256] Ibid.
[257] Ellis.

> live for reporting like that! Stalin found out about the community and sent his thugs in, just a few days before I got there, to break all of their arms! That was worse than killing them! It was a horrible sight, Oskar: their arms in crude splints, straight in front of them like zombies! They couldn't feed themselves, because they couldn't get their hands to their mouths! So you know what they did? They fed each other! That's the difference between heaven and hell! In hell we starve! In heaven, we feed each other!" "I don't believe in afterlife." "Neither do I, but I believe in the story."[258]

The connection between a lack of belief in the afterlife and humanism becomes more poignant when seen in the context of the September 11 attacks led by Jihadists, whose image as believers in the afterlife for whom actual existence represents a mere passage to a better world has been broadly popularized. Torn between the atheistic credo instilled by his father, which he proudly takes on and repeatedly reaffirms, and his need to work through his father's death without recourse to the comforts of religious belief and rituals, Oskar's quest is of a spiritual kind and the contradictions embodied in him are those of a society trying to cope not only with loss but also with the revelation of its vulnerability, by reaffirming its liberal, Enlightenment-based values. A discussion between Oskar and his mother with regard to his father's burial ground containing an empty coffin occasions another reiteration of his atheism, in which rationalist humanism has replaced religion:

> "It's just an empty box." "It's more than an empty box." "Why would I want to spend eternity next to an empty box?" Mom said "his spirit is there," and that made me *really* angry. I told her "Dad didn't have a spirit! He had cells!" "His memory is there." "His memory is here," I said pointing to my head. "Dad had a spirit," she said… I told her, "He had cells, and now they're on rooftops, and in the river, and in the lungs of millions of people around New York, who breathe him every time they speak!" [259]

On the one hand, the humanism and sentimental strategies of the novel foster sympathy, which in Adam Smith's view is a means of alleviating "grief by a process of healing consolation, and in a significant echo of the sentimental, the very articulation of misfortune offers relief to the sufferer."[260] The three perspectives comprised in the novel, belonging to Oskar and his paternal grandparents, are records of their attempts to articulate the misfortunes that they have suffered, to mourn and then to try to live, as the grandfather puts it in one instance.[261] Yet, despite its therapeutic value, the novel's sentimentalism mirrors back at society its own liberal-humanist values in a narcissistic act of commemoration. Instead of fostering social criticism

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[258] Foer, 164.
[259] Ibid., 169.
[260] Ellis, 14.
[261] Foer, 268. Asked about the purpose of his visit to the US, while traveling from Germany to be near his family after learning about the death of his son on 9/11, Oskar's grandfather writes down that he returns "to mourn," which he crosses out and replaces with "to try to live."

and betterment, as earlier sentimental works have been known to do, or as is frequently the case with American works of fiction written from the perspective of a child narrator, the novel presents post-9/11 American society as an idealized community of mourners. The humanism at play in the representation of the innocent victim subjected to the machinery of history leaves out the context for the source of destruction that is also of human making. The cause of suffering is perpetually elsewhere, a faceless Other who remains unrepresented. The sentimental treatment of historical victims and a romanticized portrayal of mourning in the novel mirror similar tendencies in the public sphere and fall short in terms of the commemorative ethics suggested by Judith Butler and David Simpson.

"There Is Nothing More Abstract Than Reality:" History, Art and Representation in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*

> *… [T]he world narrative belongs to terrorists… The narrative ends in the rubble and it is left to us to create the counternarrative.*[262]

In the months following the attacks of September 11, Don DeLillo wrote the article *In the Ruins of the Future*, an eloquent meditation on the role of the artist and of art in light of the recent tragedy, whose cultural significance was only beginning to take shape. The symbolic implications of the attack and its overwhelming presence in the media and in the public consciousness caused many pundits, intellectuals and artists to perceive it as a historical moment of rupture, almost a *ground zero* for the arts and culture. While some authors were contemplating the blank page and the futility of art in the wake of such a human tragedy, Don DeLillo's article suggests that the role of the artist is of contributing to the creation of "the meaning" of the event. The novel that "tries to give memory, tenderness and meaning to all that howling space," a delicate task set in the flurry of an emotional general state of mind within the culture at large, was published six years later and testifies to the different stages of perceiving the event and its complex consequences. As is already visible in his early article, DeLillo's strategy of giving "meaning" is a self-aware one, which continuously defers meaning in the process of attempting to assign it. *Falling Man* records the evolution of the event's public perception, but it is mostly

[262] Don DeLillo, "In the Ruins of the Future."

concerned with how the act of terror has permeated and subtly altered the private lives of individuals and how it has "changed the grain of the most routine moment." Marco Abel parallels the author's style in the post-9/11 essay *In the Ruins of the Future* with the cinematic approach of Italian neo-realism and Andre Bazin's take on montage, arguing that the author adopts a self-aware visual manner of presenting the attacks, which manages to avoid becoming prescriptive:

> DeLillo's essay demonstrates the impossibility of saying anything definite about 9/11 – especially anything that captures the event's meaning. His writerly eye …. instead focuses on the affective quality of the event's singularity and on how a language can stylistically image [sic] and, in the process, reconfigure what it means for contemporary thought to respond ethically to whatever the event's content might be(come).[263]

As will later be discussed in more detail, DeLillos' novel *Falling Man* adopts a visually centered self-aware form of realism inspired by the work of the Italian painter Giorgio Morandi, whose work does not incidentally feature prominently in the novel, in a continued effort to ethically represent September 11 in its complex ramifications and implications.

The author had been taking the pulse of American culture long before September 11 and, consequently, it did not come as a surprise that he would be one of the first voices to respond to the event in writing. Themes like terrorism, or the part of history missing from the official main-stream account and the interplay between individual private life and public world-changing events have been at the core of his works from the very beginning. Comparing his article *The Power of History* from 1997 with *In the Ruins of the Future* from 2001, it becomes evident that there has been a slight shift in the manner in which he perceives the role of the writer with regard to the representation of history. Prior to 9/11, the responsibility of literature to history, as DeLillo presented it, was mostly an aesthetic one that involved the (re)creation of a language, described as a sensuous process of remembering past details that appeal to the reader's senses and that have been ignored in the "established history and biography": "There is pleasure to be found, the writer's, the reader's, in a version of the past that escapes the coils of established history and biography and that finds a language, scented, dripping, detailed, for such routine realities as sex, weather and food, for the ravel of a red thread on a woman's velvet sleeve."[264] Although, formally and aesthetically speaking, DeLillo's adhesion remains almost unchanged in his post September 11 article, there is a noticeable shift in his idea of the role of

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[263] Marco Abel, "Don DeLillo's 'In the Ruins of the Future:' Literature, Images, and the Rhetoric of Seeing 9/11," *PMLA*, Vol. 118, No. 5 (Oct., 2003), pp. 1236-1250, 1237, accessed May 2, 2014 http://www.jstor.org/stable/1261462.

[264] Don DeLillo, "The Power of History," *The New York Times Book Review*, September 7, 1997 http://www.nytimes.com/library/books/090797article3.html.

the writer, which seems to have changed to that of giving "memory, tenderness and meaning to all that howling space" left behind by the terrorist attack. His interest in "the impact of history on the smallest details of ordinary life" still makes itself noticed; yet the sensual experience that it implied in his earlier article seems to be missing from *In the Ruins of the Future*, being replaced by a heightened sense of responsibility towards representing the event. Furthermore, if the term "counterhistory," which he has used in relation to his Cold War novel *Underworld*, emphasized the role of literature as *counter* to "established history" and carried Foucaultian undertones, his later reinvention of the term in relation to 9/11 hinted at the idea that a novel should provide a "counternarrative" to the terrorist act and fill the gap created by destruction.[265] While his idea of "counterhistory" was an almost hedonistic project of rewriting history through a new language, a very sensory experience that literature could provide, his representation of "counternarrative," on the other hand, bears none of the aesthetic playfulness displayed in his article from 1997. This post-9/11 reconsideration of the purpose and strategy of rewriting history comes partly from an impulse of filling the "howling void" that had been created through the attack. Concurrently, this rewriting of history is most of all a means of replacing the "narrative" of the terrorist act, which permeated the minutia of mundane experience, occupying "our lives and minds" and changing "the way we think and act, moment to moment, week to week, for unknown weeks and months to come, and steely years," with alternative narratives.[266] Through this (re)appropriation of the storyline it becomes possible to turn the balance of power upside down again. The counternarratives are not the exclusive realm of the author. Quite the opposite, they exist outside the work of fiction; they are touching facts like that of falling men holding hands during their descent, the stories people invent inadvertently about where they were when the towers fell, the conspiracy theories circulating on the internet, everything that displays a glimpse of humanity faced with a tragedy of proportions.

By shifting the focus of what it is counter to, the act of rewriting history loses part of its subversive quality and, rather than offering a perspective in opposition to the official history created by the media, it joins the general cultural process of memorialization. Still, DeLillo's self-aware type of realism allows for an ethical representation of the event and its aftermath, managing to stay clear of the pitfalls of sentimentalization and the idealization of victimhood and mourning and, in this manner, opens the possibility for an ethical approach to grief and

[265] DeLillo, "In the Ruins of the Future."
[266] Ibid.

commemoration which integrates the critical self-examination essential to democratic criticism. The humanism of his approach to victimhood functions without the collateral dehumanization of the other, avoiding binary oppositions by introducing a democratic array of voices in which 9/11 becomes more than a "first person narrative." *Falling Man* answers Judith Butler's call "to narrate" the event from a third person or "to receive an account delivered in the second" in order to achieve the necessary credentials for ethical historical agency.[267]

When DeLillo published *Underworld*, the Cold War had officially ended, which allowed for a sprawling bird's eye view over post-World War II American history. On the other hand, September 11 brought into the foreground and contributed to the expansion of a conflict until then lurking in the margins and with a development and consequences that are yet to be experienced, comprehended and interpreted. That is why *Falling Man* begins and ends in media res, so to say, in the rubble and confusion of the falling towers, spaning over a period of three years after the attack. "Plots reduce the world" argues DeLillo in his post 9/11 essay and his explanation for terrorism moves beyond the cultural and political. Both his essay and his novel suggest that the terrorist is animated by the human attraction towards "the intensity of a plot,"[268] the brotherhood insinuating itself within a group united by a common goal. As a counternarrative to the terrorist act, his novel *Falling Man* avoids emplotment, focusing instead on several atomized individual perspectives (including that of a World Trade Center surviving victim and that of one of the terrorists) and episodes from their lives before and after the attacks. By not allowing any of the perspectives to have ascendancy over the other, the novel defies totalization on several levels, engaging dialectically with issues such as dealing with trauma, mourning and memorialization in both the public and the private sphere, the intersection of the two, as well as the role of art in the representation of history.

Compared to other historically minded works by DeLillo, *Falling Man* is only deceivingly modest in ambition and coverage of social or historical layers. It is an intimate account of how a broken up family is briefly brought together again after the tragedy of September 11. Their daily lives are disrupted and their most inner thoughts and perceptions affected and altered by the attacks. Ultimately, however, the novel illustrates how even an apparently life-shattering event gradually falls into oblivion. A survivor working in the World Trade Center, Keith Neudecker, emerges superficially wounded from the debris and chaos of Ground Zero and returns home to his ex-wife and child. The plotless story takes place in the days, months

[267] Butler, 8.
[268] Mark Binelli, "Intensity of a Plot," *Guernica*, July 17, 2007, accessed May 2, 2011, http://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/373/intensity_of_a_plot/.

and finally in the years after the event and it consists of a series of episodes from the daily lives of the main characters, including Keith's ex-wife Lianne, her mother Nina, and her mother's lover, Martin. Some of the main issues concerning 9/11 that have caused uproar in the public sphere are present in the novel as filtered through the personal perspectives of the characters. The narrative is mostly character driven and restricted to several perspectives, which brings to mind DeLillo's more recent small scale works like *The Body Artist*, or *Cosmopolis*, rather than his sweeping historical outlook on iconic real events from novels like *Underworld* or *Libra*. Aside from the episodes in the lives of this family of New Yorkers experiencing the attacks and their aftermath, two chapters introduce the perspective of Hammad, a character inspired by the real World Trade Center terrorists and possibly loosely based on Ziad Jarrah, who has been given a more humane portrayal than Mohammed Atta in the media. The two parallel storylines, that of the American family and that of the terrorists seem separate and only merge in the final description of the moment of impact when Hammad's plane crashes into the World Trade Center Tower. The family of New Yorkers briefly comes together only to drift apart again while going through a chaotic healing process after the attacks and individually looking for comfort and purpose. The terrorists are linked together by "the intensity of a plot." A disorderly quest for a purposeful life is paralleled by a minutely planned quest for death. The atomized structure of the narrative emphasizes each character's individualism, including that of the terrorist, in an ambiguous manner that reveals the democratic quality of literature, which allows each voice to be heard by giving each perspective equal footing. Characters share the frame of the novel and the historical context surrounding September 11 like objects framed in a painting, which allows them to both stand alone and to echo each other. Terrorism, on the other hand, is the definitive totalizing plot that involves the effacement of the individual personalities of those involved in it: "Shed everything but the men you are with. Become each other's running blood… His life had structure. Things were clearly defined. He was becoming one of them now, learning to look like them and think like them. This was inseparable from jihad. He prayed with them to be with them. They were becoming total brothers."[269] Similarly, the "intensity of a plot" obliterates the humanity of the victims, which become mere pawns in the larger scheme: "The others exist only to the degree that they fill the role we have designed for them. This is their function as others. Those who will die have no claim to their lives outside the useful fact of their dying."[270]

[269] DeLillo, *Falling Man*, 83.
[270] Ibid., 176.

Style in *Falling Man* is minimalist in the vein of American modernist prose like that of Ernest Hemingway or John Dos Passos, who have both explored the visual potential of language, preferring to show rather than to tell. The opening and closing passages which depict Keith's experience at Ground Zero are cinematic and more sensory-centered than reflective, being written in short sentences, in an accumulation of visual details. A recurrent, almost imagist, visual element is that of a ghostly white shirt coming down from the sky,[271] in the midst of all the rubble. The white shirt appears to be a synecdoche used in order to avoid confrontation with the actual falling bodies, while also emphasizing the anonymity of the falling victims.[272] At the same time, the image of the shirt is also significant with regard to the complications inescapable in the attempt to represent the experiences of the actual victims. The floating shirt is a stylized empty shell, as opposed to flesh and blood human beings, and it can moreover be considered an objective correlative for the state of mind of the characters who are experiencing a downfall without being able to grasp its meaning, its core remaining empty. At a certain point in the novel, Lianne is described as "feeling like a shirt and blouse without a body."[273] The imagist-like picture created with words is echoed in the novel by an equally frequent and symbolic presence, that of the Falling Man, a performance artist, who specializes in a disturbing type of happening: he jumps from tall New York buildings, dressed in a suit and tie, secured with a rope, in imitation of the falling victims of 9/11.

Trauma operates a disruption of "all sense of time" remaining ever present in psychological time and causing an endless repetition of the distressing moment[274] in a similar manner to the repetitious "artistic" act performed by the Falling Man. The title of the novel, through the use of the present continuous tense, implies an inability to reach closure and to heal; a process that is not yet complete. The symbolism of the image of a man falling and the immediate association with the fall of man is multifaceted[275] and suggests a loss of innocence and a sense of loss or decay. Concurrently, it prompts cynical associations with regard to the potential for progress of a culture which, according to DeLillo, has "invented the future," but is now

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[271] The image appears several times in the novel, in the opening pages dedicated to Keith's Ground Zero experience (4); later on as he retells this moment to Lianne in a state of shock (88) and, significantly, it is mentioned in the last sentence of the novel: "Then he saw a shirt come down out of the sky. He walked and saw it fall, arms waving like nothing in this life." (246)

[272] See Tom Junod, "The Falling Man," *Esquire*, September 8, 2009, accessed September 4, 2010, http://www.esquire.com/features/ESQ0903-SEP_FALLINGMAN.

[273] DeLillo, *Falling Man*, 23.

[274] Linda S. Kaufmann, "World Trauma Center," *American Literary History*, 21, no. 3 (2009): 647-659, 649, accessed August 13, 2013, http://muse.jhu.edu/.

[275] For a discussion of the trope of the falling body in several recent American novels, see Mihaila.

faced with "the ruins of the future."[276] DeLillo's essay of the same title emphasizes the paradox hidden in the fact that technology, the embodiment of the idea of progress, has been turned into a destructive weapon by the very "regressive" forces that supposedly try to stop progress and bring back the past.[277]

Despite its apparently conservative style and minimalist approach, the novel is intradiegetically self-reflexive through the use of ekphrasis. The representation of visual art in writing, ekphrasis, entails a discussion of the role and limits of art in general.[278] In the case of Don DeLillo's work,[279] ekphrasis functions as a metafictional approach that renounces postmodern self-reflexive auctorial intervention, the irony and parodic elements that came hand in hand with it. Ekphrasis achieves the self-awareness associated with postmodern fiction by being a reminder of the artificiality and constructed nature of every form of representation. In *Underworld*, Pieter Bruegel the Elder's painting *The Triumph of Death* is used as a visual reference and parallel for the novel's equally sweeping canvas depicting the Cold War era, an epoch marked by the shadow of atomic annihilation. Similarly, the intimate and rather minimalist setting and cast of *Falling Man* offer a telling parallel with the still-lifes of Giorgio Morandi, which are mentioned and described repeatedly throughout the course of the novel, echoing and illuminating some of its major concerns. Significantly, a section of the novel appeared in *The New Yorker* under the title *Still-Life*,[280] prior to the book's publication.

Modernist authors like Hemingway have also been inspired by still-life painting, characterized by "a sense of distance and objectivity"[281] that the authors themselves attempted to achieve in their work. The still-life genre, or *natura morta*, is in itself a reflection on death and the ephemeral quality of life: "… the still life is always a coded sign of anxiety, a *memento mori*, the objects in a still-life composition symbols of 'what we shall have taken from us.'"[282] In an American context, the still-life genre is close in scope to "American Precisionism, a movement in painting that emphasized the 'thingness of things,' the essential power inherent

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[276] DeLillo, *In the Ruins of the Future*.
[277] Ibid.
[278] For a brief presentation of the history and characteristics of ekphrasis see Ryan Welsh, *University of Chicago, Theories of Media, Keywords Glossary*, "ekphrasis," Winter 2007, accessed January 5, 2011, http://humanities.uchicago.edu/faculty/mitchell/glossary2004/ekphrasis.htm.
[279] For a study of ekphrasis in DeLillo's novels, see: Julia Apitzsch, '*Whoever Controls Your Eyeballs Runs the World':* Visualisierung von Kunst und Gewalt im Werk von Don DeLillo (Göttingen: V and R unipress, 2012).
[280] Don DeLillo, "Still-life," *The New Yorker*, April 9, 2007, accessed September 5, 2011, http://www.newyorker.com/fiction/features/2007/04/09/070409fi_fiction_delillo.
[281] Wilhelm S. Randall, "Objects on the Table: Anxiety and Still Life in Hemingway's 'A Farewell To Arms,'" *The Hemingway Review* 26.1 (2006) 63-80, accessed March, 21 2012, http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Objects on the table: anxiety and still life in Hemingway's A...-a0155918662
[282] Ibid.

in everyday objects, as in Williams's famed red wheelbarrow."[283] As Hemingway once pondered the degradation of meaning and the value of certain words and concepts in a time of war,[284] one of DeLillo's characters similarly "wonders what has happened to the meaning of things, to tree, street, stone, wind, simple words lost in the falling ash."[285]

The changing perception that the character Lianne has of the Morandi painting hanging on the wall of her mother's house subtly records how her consciousness has been altered by September 11. At the same time, the presence of Morandi's paintings in the novel is revelatory with regard to the interplay between public and private mourning and suggests an understanding of art as a mirror for the flow of human consciousness, rather than a means of altering consciousness. The cool impersonality of Morandi's work allows the characters to project their changing mental states and altered priorities, instead of imposing on them a view of the world. In the aftermath of the event, both Lianne sees the towers and the presence of death in the "groupings of bottles, jugs, biscuit tins" painted in "brushstrokes that held a mystery she could not name…, some reconnoiter inward, human and obscure, away from the very light and color of the paintings," while the Italian version of still-life, "natura morta," "seemed stronger than it had to be, somewhat ominous, even."[286] The manner in which the characters seem to project their own preoccupation with the attacks onto Morandi's painting is one instance illustrating how the act of terror has altered their perception of mundane objects:

> "I am looking at these objects, kitchen objects, but removed from the kitchen, free of the kitchen, the house, everything practical and functioning. And… I keep seeing the towers in this still life." … Two of the taller items were dark and somber, with smoky marks and smudges, and one of them was partly concealed by a long-necked bottle. The bottle was a bottle, white. The two dark objects, too obscure to name, were the things that Martin was referring to.
>
> "What do you see?" he said.
>
> She saw what he saw. She saw the towers."[287]

In the closing chapters of the novel, which take place three years after 9/11, Lianne visits an exhibition of Morandi's paintings, only to find new associations in them. The passage of time has worn out the image of the burning towers, which is replaced by the personal trauma of losing her mother who had loved the work of this painter. September 11 may have indirectly contributed to her mother's untimely passing by unveiling an ideological rift between her and

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[283] Ibid.
[284] "[a]bstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow [which] were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the numbers of regiments and the dates". Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (New York: Scribner's, 1995), 185.
[285] DeLillo, 103.
[286] Ibid., 12.
[287] Ibid., 49.

her lover of twenty years, Martin. The public trauma of the attacks become merged with the personal memory of her mother's last years in Lianne's consciousness: "Because even this, bottles and jars, a vase, a glass, simple shapes in oil on canvas, pencil on paper, brought her back into the midst of it, the thrust of arguments, perceptions, deadly politics, her mother and her mother's lover."[288] DeLillo uses Morandi's pieces to illustrate how the effects of a traumatic event wear off and life moves on. By paralleling the effects of the attacks on the character's psyche with a painful personal loss, the novel downplays the exceptionalist idea of 9/11 as a moment of rupture. In their apparent simplicity, Morandi's paintings outlive these temporary personal projections and stand to represent "something deeper than things or shapes of things," [289] and, as Lianne's mother, Nina, suggests, they are a reflection on mortality, on "[b]eing human, being mortal."[290]

Through the use of ekphrasis, DeLillo parallels two approaches to artistic expression, each having different aesthetic and political implications. The parallel produces awareness about the manner in which a traumatic event may be represented through artistic means and problematizes the ethics of representation and mourning. The minimalist and austere still-lifes by Morandi exude a complex simplicity, offering solace and peace to the viewer through their apolitical and accepting reflection of death and mutability. Another instance of ekphrasis in the novel, the performance of an artist revealingly self-entitled Falling Man, is unsettling to Lianne because it implies a reenactment of the traumatic experience of the persons falling from the World Trade Center towers, in an ethically questionable imitation of reality. The ethics of representing victimhood by reenacting the painful and shocking instances of individuals jumping from the burning towers is problematic as it pertains more to the Freudian stage of *acting-out* rather than that of *working through* a traumatic experience. Furthermore, the performance's means of "addressing" an audience are similar to those employed by the real life terrorists, who, as DeLillo argues in his essay *In the Ruins of the Future*, intend to alter the consciousness of witnesses to the event. The performance artist offers an empty imitation of the actual event by reenacting the fall of 9/11 victims, whereas Morandi's still-lifes capture an instant of time, holding life still, a privilege only available to art. Disenchanted with the media, sick, and estranged from her lover, Martin, Nina takes refuge in the stillness of these paintings: "I think these paintings are what I'll look at when I've stopped looking at everything else. I'll look at

[288] Ibid., 209.
[289] Ibid., 111.
[290] Ibid.

bottles and jars. I'll sit here looking."[291] This statement on the role of art as a provider of comfort is echoed earlier in the novel, when Lianne refers to art in opposition to the media, the former having a therapeutic effect through its aesthetic qualities, while the latter involves the ad nauseam repetition of the traumatic occurrence; the former is the tool of working through trauma, while the latter has maintaining a sensation of constant crisis as its *raison d'être*:"'People read poems. People I know, they read poetry to ease the shock and pain, give them a kind of space, something beautiful in language,' she said, 'to bring comfort or composure. I don't read poems. I read newspapers, I put my head in the pages and get angry and crazy.'"[292]

In her study on the intersection between art and violence in DeLillo's work, Julia Apitzsch sees the Falling Man's performance, particularly the frozen pose taken during the fall (a restaging of the iconic photo of the real life falling man whose history is told by Tom Junod in his well-known *Esquire* article)[293] as a parallel to Morandi's still-lifes. For Apitzsch, the Falling Man's performance is an act of cultural rebellion against the censorship of the image, which was first published in major publications, only to be later banned in order to supposedly protect public sensibilities, as well as the dignity of the dead. Seeing the work of the performance artist as another approach to representation along with Morandi's paintings, Apitzsch concludes that "DeLillo offers what the real photo and its censorship could not: a creative variation that might allow for a new approach to the traumatic images."[294]

Instead, by briefly comparing DeLillo's discussion of art in *Falling Man* with a similar use of ekphrasis in *Mao II*, I argue that the performance of the Falling Man and Morandi's paintings seem to contrast, rather than complement each other in the novel's wider discussion of representation. The parallel between avant-garde art, which has a lot in common with terrorism, and an apparently more modest form of realism also appears in DeLillo's *Mao II*. The spirit of the avant-garde, embodied in the figure of the dying novelist Bill Gray, appears to be in decline, tortured by its problematic relation to terrorism, a phenomenon gradually gaining ground globally. Realism, on the other hand, is embodied in the figure of Brita, the photographer whose modest task is to record reality rather than intervene in shaping it. The idea that the terrorists are gaining the territory that once belonged to the avant-garde artist in the struggle over the occupation of public consciousness is one of the core themes of *Mao II* and it is further

[291] Ibid.
[292] Ibid., 42.
[293] Junod.
[294] Julia Apitzsch, "The Art of Terror-The Terror of Art: DeLillo's Still Life of 9/11, Giorgio Morandi, Gerhard Richter, and Performance Art," in *Terrorism, Media, and the Ethics of Fiction: Transatlantic Perspectives on Don Delillo*, ed. Philipp Schweighauser and Peter Schneck, (New York: Continuum, 2010), 93-111.

pursued in *Falling Man*. The performance artist uses similar means to those of the terrorist, choosing the time and place of his happenings so that he can insure maximum coverage and a large audience:

> Then she began to understand. Performance art, yes, but he wasn't there to perform for those at street level or in the high windows. He was situated where he was… waiting for a train to come… this is what he wanted, an audience in motion, passing scant yards from his standing figure.
>
> She thought of the passengers. The train would burst out of the tunnel… It would pass and he would jump. There will be those aboard who see him standing and those who see him jump, all jarred out of their reveries or their newspapers or muttering stunned into their cell phones. These people had not seen him attach the safety harness. They would only see him fall out of sight… She wondered if this was his intention, to spread the word this way, by cell phone, intimately, as in the towers and in the hijacked planes.
>
> Or she was dreaming his intentions. She was making it up, stretched so tight across the moment that she could not think her own thoughts.[295]

The effect of the performances on Lianne, who chances upon them twice, is reliving the original shock of September 11 and seems to have no cathartic or comforting effect. She is instead unsettled and left baffled as to what the artistic significance of what she has witnessed may be. Furthermore, experiencing the performance of the fall puts her in a state of panic and anxiety, causing her to literally run away from the scene in a blank state of confusion similar to that experienced by Keith as he walked away from the tumbling World Trade Center towers. The endless repetition of the real life moment becomes significant in connection to the role played by the mass media at the time. Through repetition, the performance ends up having a gaze-arresting, hypnotic, but in time numbing effect, similar to that created by media overexposure. As she witnesses the performances, Lianne becomes repeatedly aware of her inability to look away, in a similar manner to the reaction she has to the news coverage of the attack: "Every time she saw a videotape of the planes she moved a finger toward the power button on the remote. Then she kept on watching."[296]

Still, aside from the momentary subversive act of exposing to the public an image censored by the media and the authorities, the performance does little to give "memory, tenderness and meaning to all that howling space." It is the type of art embodied by the still-lifes that performs this role by attempting to represent reality in a manner that provides a "counternarrative" to the media as well as to the act of terror. In this sense, the visual narrative strategy and the novel's avoidance of emplotment seem to share the apolitical representational approach of Morandi's work:

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[295] DeLillo, *Falling Man*, 164-165.
[296] Ibid., 134.

> …Morandi chose an art that could not frighten or persuade, as the mass-media imagery of Italy was intent on doing; his struggle was 'to purge representation of its manipulative potential so that painting . . . might be carried on without cynicism or apology.' Modestly, insistently, Morandi's images try to slow the eye, asking it to give up its inattention, its restless scanning, and to give full weight to something small.[297]

Both the art of Morandi's paintings and Falling Man's performances have a mimetic quality, but their relation to the real is quite different. While the latter capitalizes on the shock value of the real to comment upon it, Morandi's art, whose dictum argues that "nothing is more abstract than the reality,"[298] captures the momentary, but moves beyond it to dramatize how the essence of things is perpetually out of reach and allows for an endless subjective reinterpretation, as Lianne ponders while visiting the exhibition three years after 9/11: "Nothing detached in this work, nothing free of personal resonance. All paintings and drawings carried the same title. Natura Morta. Even this, the term for still life, yielded her mother's last days."[299] Moreover, the performance of the Falling Man still appears as a haunting, but hollow experience three years later: "The man eluded her. All she knew was what she'd seen and felt that day near the schoolyard, a boy bouncing a basketball and a teacher with a whistle on a string. She could believe she knew these people, and all the others she'd seen and heard that afternoon, but not the man who'd stood above her, detailed and looming."[300]

Both forms of artistic representation featured in the novel point to different types of memorialization in art. The form of art represented by Giorgio Morandi's work is non-intrusive, being a source of self-willed reflection, meditation and comfort. Falling Man's performance art, on the other hand, is acting out society's anxiety of forgetting as theorized by Andreas Huyssen. Furthermore, by paralleling these two approaches to artistic representation, the novel acquires an intradiegetic form of self-reflexivity, which brings awareness to the very act of representation and the ethics thereof. By constantly deferring emplotment, the novel manages *not* to circumscribe the events of September 11 into a narrative that may be politically co-opted, without, however, avoiding the political. The dissolution experienced by the family of the World Trade Center survivor Keith Neudecker contradicts the melodramatic mainstream narrative of American victimhood and retribution, and the emplotment of the lives of the September 11 dead in *Portraits of Grief* as an American success story cut short by the tragedy. At

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[297] Robert Hughes, "Art: Master of Unfussed Clarity," *Time*, December 21, 1981, accessed June 20, 2011, http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,925154,00.html#ixzz1Q0CFS8W0.
[298] Renato Miracco, Maria Cristina Bandera, eds., *Giorgio Morandi 1890-1964: Nothing Is More Abstract Than Reality* (New York: Skira, 2008).
[299] DeLillo, 210.
[300] Ibid., 224.

the same time, the novel's missing plotline is compensated for and replaced by the narrative of the event's initial primacy in the consciousness of the characters followed by its gradual withdrawal into the background as other personal experiences of loss take the lead. Through the use of ekphrasis, two approaches to the artistic representation of September 11 are contrasted. The Falling Man heroically reenacts the moment of extreme vulnerability embodied by the falling victims of September 11, putting his own life at risk in the process. Yet, his artistic reenactment fails to produce a cathartic effect and reopens the wound instead of allowing it to heal. As still-lifes, Morandi's paintings are essentially meditations on the precariousness of life, to go back to Judith Butler's Levinasian terminology, a representation of life haunted by the specter of death and thus also a reflection on vulnerability. In a still-life, vulnerability is represented as an inherent part of life and of the human condition and not an exceptional occurrence as is suggested in the representation of the falling bodies in Falling Man's performance. Modelling his prose after the austere example of Morandi's paintings, DeLillo achieves an approach to representing the attacks that is less liable to be politically coopted.

Conclusion

Don DeLillo's idea of counternarrative is the result of a commemorative impulse and it shares certain features with 9/11 memorialization efforts like *Portraits of Grief*, including their focus on the interruption of the mundane by the attack. At the same time, the counternarrative refers to the rejection of a plot and of "reducing the world," countering in this sense both the act of terror, which is the result of a plot, and the melodramatic emplotment in the media representation of the event discussed by Elisabeth Anker. A similar propensity of countering mainstream narratives of the event is at the heart of Jonathan Safran Foer's novel:

> Books have a very important function in the world – a function more important now than it was before September 11th – which is to tell stories of individuals, stories in which people in other cultures can recognize themselves… We share who we are by telling stories. …
> We need as many voices as possible because unfortunately our national storytellers about the event have been politicians and they've been telling a story so different than most people I know experienced the day.[301]

[301] Swatling.

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, however, replicates the mainstream melodramatic projection of victimhood, which contributes to deepening the fissure between "us" and "them," despite its laudable humanistic intentions. While DeLillo's 9/11 survivor Keith Neudecker's humanity is made all the more poignant by his flaws, Foer's several characters who are victims of historical catastrophes are idealized one-dimensional figures.

The paradox of memory culture, as Huyssen calls it, is that the more it tries to remember and memorialize, the more it forgets: "critics accuse this very contemporary memory culture of amnesia - anesthesia or numbing."[302] DeLillo's characters Keith and Lianne stand for two ways of dealing with trauma: Keith tries to immerse himself in repetitive, mind-numbing activities like poker tournaments in what looks like a classical case of acting-out trauma, while Lianne confronts her anguish and anger and tries to work it through in a huge personal effort of memorialization. This fear of forgetting that paradoxically causes forgetfulness sheds an interesting light on several passages in the novel that are dedicated to Lianne's work with Alzheimer's patients: a writing class in which the attendees record their fading memories, in a fight against forgetting that is lost from the start. Lianne also immerses herself conscientiously in the national effort to "musealize" and remember 9/11 and its victims. She is a dedicated reader of the *Portraits of Grief* (as a self-imposed obligation)[303] and of the newspapers; she becomes interested in the Middle Eastern world in an attempt to understand the source of the event and she does internet research on the artist self-entitled Falling Man.

The saturation brought forth by over-memorialization of the event has the paradoxical effect of self-willed forgetting for DeLillo's characters. As time passes, Lianne gives up on her avid search for memory and information: "She wanted, herself, to be away from it all. These three years past, since that day in September, all life had become public." Keeping away from the pitfall of idealizing his victim characters, DeLillo records not only the struggle to deal with trauma and the human reaction to a shocking occurrence, but also the evolution of the public perception of the event filtered through the private experience of one family. *Falling Man* traces the gradual change from shock and the widely spread perception that the event represents a moment of rupture, to the over-saturation caused by its repetition in the media, the disenchantment brought about by the excesses of the war on terror, and the self-willed or inevitable process of forgetting. By dramatizing the dialectics of thorny issues in the post 9/11 world, like

[302] Huyssen, 16.
[303] DeLillo, 106. "She read newspaper profiles of the dead, every one that was printed. Not to read them, every one, would have been an offense, a violation of responsibility and trust. But she also read them because she had to, out of some need that she did not try to interpret."

the role of art, the representation of terrorism (which will be discussed in more detail in a subsequent chapter), or memorialization, all the while avoiding resolution and totalization, DeLillo's prose manages to provide a counter-narrative to both the media and to the act of terror.

Foer's novel is animated by similar impulses as DeLillo's when it introduces narratives belonging to victims of American military attacks alongside the main plot focusing on the traumatic aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks. These parallels, however, fail to illuminate the specificities of September 11 as a historical event. Instead, by universalizing historical victimhood they add to the "soup of pain" of post-postmodern approaches to historiography criticized by Ian Buruma. Furthermore, the novel's sentimental strategies and recourse to the narrative of innocence make it less effective as a counter-narrative and open to similar critiques as those raised against *Portraits of Grief*. Furthermore, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* displays a self-congratulatory atheistic humanism, which critics of New Atheism such as Terry Eagleton, have associated with post-9/11 Western-centrism. Emplotting the attacks as a melodrama, the novel reproduces the mainstream narrative of victimization and retribution described by Anker, which can easily be politically coopted. The experimental typography, photographical inserts, multi-mediality and magical realism displayed in the novel only partially function as a self-reflexive approach to the complex question of ethically representing the attacks, and mostly serve the purpose of enhancing its sentimental narrative strategies, duplicating on a formal level the novel's glorification of scientific progress and innovation. On the other hand, *Falling Man* reveals the aftereffects of September 11 and of the memorialization effort surrounding it. Characters in the novel, particularly Lianne, experience a disjunction between their private process of internalizing the historical event and its uses and abuses in the public sphere. In a manner reminiscent of Giorgio Morandi's dictum that "nothing is more abstract than reality,"[304] DeLillo uses ekphrasis to self-reflexively portray individual reactions to a traumatic historical event, as well as the delicate connections between the different characters and the world around them. Nonetheless, both *Falling Man* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, as the titles themselves suggest, display a nearness to the event and trauma-focused approaches, which significantly reduce the range of their historical vision. Despite their intense focus on victimhood, the novels differ significantly with regard to the intensity of the emotion invested in their subject. Foer's novel deliberately uses the sentimental and a mel-

[304] Miracco et al.

odramatic plotline to entice an emotional response, while its characters remain one dimensional. The style of DeLillo's prose painstakingly avoids emplotment and emotionality, without sacrificing the humanity and complexity of his characters.

Chapter 3:
Put *Yourself* in *Their* Shoes: The Terrorist Other and the Liberal Self after 9/11

> *How much can we hope to understand those who have suffered deeper anguish, greater deprivation, and more crushing disappointments than we ourselves have known? Even if the world's rich and powerful were to put themselves in the shoes of the rest, how much would they really understand the wretched millions suffering around them? So it is when Orhan the novelist*

> *peers into the dark corners of his poet friend's difficult and painful life: How much can he really see?*[305]
>
> *Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion, and it is the beginning of morality… The hijackers used fanatical certainty, misplaced religious faith, and dehumanising hatred to purge themselves of the human instinct for empathy. Among their crimes was a failure of the imagination.*[306]

Published in 1981, in the aftermath of the Iranian Islamic Revolution and at the onset of the Russian-Afghan war, a time when certain Middle Eastern countries were the hotspot of public attention in the US, with news of bloodshed, religious fundamentalism, anti-Americanism and a dramatic hostage situation, Edward Said's study *Covering Islam*[307] reveals the reductive tendencies in the Western media coverage of the Middle East. After September 11, the global public eye has been once again, and perhaps more than ever before, bombarded with news about Islam and particularly Islamism, a mediatic focus which has continued throughout the operations of the war on terror, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, to the more recent Arab Spring, the advent and expansion of ISIS and their still ongoing conflict-ridden repercussions. The issue of Islam being covered by Western media, pundits and intellectuals remains as thorny as Said perceived it in 1981 and the play upon words in the title of his book implies a question that is still worth asking nowadays: how much is the West covering up, when it covers Islam in the media and in intellectual debates? At the same time, this chapter focuses particularly on what the West is uncovering about itself in the act of "covering Islam" through literary representations of the terrorist other.

The transformation of the Quran into an overnight bestseller in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 is one of the symptoms of a wider public interest in learning more about the hostile other and his motives.[308] Still, this sudden thirst for knowing the other did not necessarily create

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[305] Orhan Pamuk, *Snow*, trans. Maureen Freely (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), 266, quoted in John Updike, "Anatolian Arabesques: A Modernist Novel of Contemporary Turkey," *The New Yorker*, August 30, 2004, accessed June 5, 2011, http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/08/30/040830crbo_books?printable=true. Significantly, John Updike refers to this quote from in his review of Orhan Pamuk's *Snow*, which he criticizes for not being politically involved enough.

[306] Ian McEwan, "*Only Love and Then Oblivion*," *The Guardian*, September 15, 2001, accessed June 7, 2011, http://www.ianmcewan.com/bib/articles/love-oblivion.html.

[307] Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).

[308] An article from The New York Times traces post-9/11 reading trends by following the works topping the Best Seller List. The author concludes that the immediate aftermath of the attacks prompted a sudden interest in Islam, with the Quran becoming a number one bestseller, followed by non-fiction books about the rise of Al Qaeda and the biographies of the 9/11 terrorist and the leaders of the movement. A year after the attacks however, the desire to understand the origins of the act of terror seemed to have been replaced by a patriotic thirst for historical self-

the basis for ethical and balanced reporting on Islam, which remains a sensitive topic often reductively dealt with in the format of the news. At the same time, the public desire to know the other was conditioned by the information available in the marketplace of ideas. Said has also been a constant critic of Western experts of the Middle East and their often Orientalist theories about the Middle East.[309] Concurrently, the critic strove to debunk the underside of theories like Samuel Huntington's notion of a "clash of civilizations" arguing that: "'The Clash of Civilizations' thesis is a gimmick like 'The War of the Worlds,' better for reinforcing defensive self-pride than for critical understanding of the bewildering interdependence of our time."[310] The 2011 public scandal prompted by a plan to build an Islamic cultural center in the vicinity of Ground Zero is a reminder of the emotionality still connected to the events of September 11 and the tendency to view them as the result of "a clash of civilizations."

In the post-9/11 context, in which binary thinking was prevalent in public discourse, Edward Said (re)formulated his views on humanism presenting it as an antidote to the potentially dangerous divisive tendencies of the time. Humanism, in his view, is tightly connected with the encounter with the other and the survival of humanistic values is only possible through critical self-assessment in light of this encounter. The constraints imposed by the format of the mainstream media report result in a decontextualization of the subject, a dehistoricized manner of presenting "the facts" that leaves out more than it reveals. Righting this wrong is the major task Said sees as pertaining to the intellectual and the writer, whose work is to complicate the facts by putting them into a context, and to balance easy generalization with an emphasis on the complex particular.

The perception of the role of the intellectual has been subjected to several changes of paradigm during the 20th century. In his last book, Said maps out a path for the intellectuals of the 21st century. Part of Antonio Gramsci's idea of the intellectual as the necessary producer of a "counter hegemony" to the one created by the ruling class is preserved in Said's own view

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knowledge, as reflected in the number one bestseller *Let's Roll!* a memoir written by Lisa Beamer, the widow of one of the United 93 victims, and other bestsellers including Lynne Cheney's children's book *America: A Patriotic Primer*. In the next few years, the bestseller list was dominated by New Atheist books mirroring a wider post-9/11 reconfiguration of the role played by religion and a reassertion of rationalist humanism. Jennifer Schuessler, "Inside the List," *The New York Times*, September 2, 2011, accessed June 4, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/11/books/review/inside-the-list.html.

[309] His critique of Bernard Lewis' work in *Orientalism* is well-known and it has taken on a new dimension in the aftermath of 9/11 when Lewis became an advisor of the Bush administration and instrumental in the justification of the invasion of Iraq. See for instance Said's indictment of Lewis and the coverage of terrorism in the Western public sphere in "The Essential Terrorist," *The Nation*, August 14, 2006, accessed July 7, 2014, http://www.thenation.com/article/essential-terrorist.

[310] Edward Said, "The Clash of Ignorance," *The Nation*, October 22, 2001, accessed June 7, 2014, http://www.thenation.com/article/clash-ignorance?page=0,2.

on the subject. Still, unlike Gramsci, Said's vision of the intellectual is not based on class struggle and the intellectual's act of "organically" becoming the spokesperson for a certain class. Rather, he takes a more Foucaultian approach that focuses on revealing the power struggles behind public discourse. Although he possesses an acute postmodern awareness of the limits the autonomy of the intellectual is subjected to, Said still sees the struggle for independent expression as the defining feature of the humanist. In a self-consciously utopian endeavor, following Theodor Adorno, Said argues that the intellectual should be a self-declared societal exilé and at the same time a bona fide agent who, from his position as a symbolic outsider, struggles to untangle history from the web of power relations and "to construct fields of coexistence rather than fields of battle"[311] by giving a voice to the marginal. In a way, he pleads for the preservation of the ideal of the intellectual as a counter-cultural figure acting less as a romantic rebel, but rather as a self-aware ethical agent; the conscience of a culture struggling to preserve its humanistic values:

> The intellectual is perhaps a kind of countermemory, with its own counterdiscourse that will not allow conscience to look away or fall asleep… the intellectual's provisional home is the domain of an exigent, resistant, intransigent art into which, alas, one can neither retreat nor search for solutions. But only in that precarious exilic realm can one first truly grasp the difficulty of what cannot be grasped and then go forth to try anyway.[312]

In the emotional immediate aftermath of September 11, members of formerly dissident circles seem to have embraced the status quo, as Said mentions in his last interview. The public stances of intellectuals and writers associated with the post-9/11 New Atheist movement, like Christopher Hitchens and Martin Amis, reveal a complication in the role of the intellectual vis-à-vis "the establishment." Their opposition to religion and analogous glorification of Enlightenment-based rationality and modernist creative imaginative play went hand in hand with what many on the left criticized as a defense of the policies of the war on terror and a controversial depiction of Islam. The publicized polemics regarding the policies of the Bush administration between Christopher Hitchens[313] and Noam Chomsky in the American press, and, on the other

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[311] Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, 141.
[312] Ibid., 143-144.
[313] In an article on the role of the public intellectual Hitchens casually argues that "[a]n intellectual need not be one who, in a well-known but essentially meaningless phrase, 'speaks truth to power.' (Chomsky has dryly reminded us that power often knows the truth well enough.) However, the attitude towards authority should probably be skeptical, as should the attitude towards utopia, let alone to heaven or hell." It is worth remarking that his last sentence contains a telling gradation and, while the task of countering abuses of authority is downplayed by the use of two relativizing markers, namely "should probably," the critical attitude towards religion is given primacy through the use of "let alone." Christopher Hitchens, "How to Be a Public Intellectual," *Prospect Magazine*, May 24, 2008, accessed January 7, 2011, http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/what-is-a-public-intellectual.

side of the pond, the public critical exchanges between Martin Amis and Terry Eagleton with regard to Islam and Islamism, as well as Eagleton's wider criticism of the tenets of New Atheism, are representative for the different appropriations and understandings of the role of the liberal humanist in the aftermath of 9/11. Critics pointed out that September 11 and the subsequent London metro bombings occasioned a problematic revival of Victorian liberal humanism.[314] In a review of McEwan's novel *Saturday*, author John Banville denounces it as neoliberal Blairite propaganda.[315]

In another line of thought, the anxiety of writerly irrelevance in light of the attacks, mentioned by Amis in the previously discussed essay from 2002, echoes a wider concern with the decrease in cultural capital experienced by the novelist at the closing of the 20th century. In his study of a return to omniscience in the post-postmodern novel of the last two decades, Paul Dawson perceives a "relationship… between contemporary omniscience and cultural anxieties about the decline of literature and the diminished status of novelists."[316] "As a mode of narration vested with the highest narrative authority," omniscience has been the main target of the radical revisionism occasioned by modernism and postmodernism, being largely considered a stage in the historical development of the novel rather than a still viable and evolving narrative approach. Dawson's study of contemporary forms of omniscience in Anglo-American fiction argues that the narrative strategy has been reconfigured in the last two decades incorporating its own critique in light of postmodern discussions of the death of the author and the limits of auctorial authority. Connecting narratological concerns with "the nature of fiction as public discourse,"[317] Dawson argues that post-postmodern instances of omniscience in the novel differ significantly from those espoused by eighteenth and nineteenth century authors with respect to the source of the authority assumed by the narrator:

> Contemporary omniscient narrators can no longer claim the luxury of being spokespersons of authority, asserting accepted truths on behalf of a general

[314] Elaine Hadley, "On a Darkling Plain: Victorian Liberalism and the Fantasy of Agency," *Victorian Studies,* Vol. 48, No. 1 (Autumn, 2005), 92-102, accessed August 23, 2012, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3829882.
[315] Two critical essays are rather emotionally involved in their criticism of McEwan's post-9/11 Victorian liberalism and emphasize the curious complicity of most reviewers with the ideology espoused by the novel *Saturday*, which they perceive as a masterpiece: Lars Eckstein, *Saturday on Dover Beach: Ian McEwan, Matthew Arnold, and Post-9/11 Melancholia*, postprint published at the Institutional Repository of the Potsdam University, in Philosophische Reihe, 82 http://opus.kobv.de/ubp/volltexte/2012/5922/, accessed February 1, 2014. In a critical review of McEwan's novel, author John Banville declares that "*Saturday* has the feel of a neoliberal polemic gone badly wrong; if Tony Blair … were to appoint a committee to produce a 'novel for our time,' the result would surely be something like this." John Banville, "A Day in the Life," *New York Review of Books*, May 26, 2005, accessed February 5, 2014, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2005/may/26/a-day-in-the-life/?pagination=false&printpage=true.
[316] Paul Dawson, *The Return of the Omniscient Narrator: Authorship and Authority in Twenty-First Century Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013), 23.
[317] Ibid., 23.

> consciousness. The contemporary omniscient narrator can best be described as a form of public intellectual: a thinker and writer who is able to speak to a general audience on a range of public issues from a base of specific disciplinary expertise.[318]

Among the exponents of this new species of omniscience Dawson names Don DeLillo, Martin Amis and John Updike, who, perhaps not incidentally, are the three writers who have included representations of Islamist terrorists in their post-9/11 works, which make the subject of the present chapter. Martin Amis' collection *The Second Plane*, which combines mostly non-fiction works and two pieces of short-fiction, is given by Dawson as an example of what he calls "the discursive relationship between narrative voice and the extrafictional statements of authors in the public sphere."[319] And, indeed, as will later be discussed in more detail, the narrator in Amis' fictional account of a gap in what is known about Mohammed Atta's last days before the attacks, problematically bears a striking resemblance to the voice of the author himself in the opinion pieces published along with it.

The connections between the acts of a terrorist and the role of the novelist are multifaceted and certain authors seem to feel compelled to address and thus propagate this parallel. One example thereof would be the pre-9/11 discussions about whether the impact of the work of a novelist is usurped by acts of terror doing the same "cultural work" of altering human consciousness, which was prompted by Don DeLillo's novel *Mao II*. DeLillo's later post-9/11 claim that the novelist can provide a counternarrative to the act of terror would also fit the bill.[320] Amis and McEwan indirectly claim literature's share of cultural capital by pitting the liberal realm of free play and empathic humanist identification represented by the novel against "the failure of the imagination" and the lack of empathy that makes terrorism possible and the "massive agglutination of stock response, of cliches, of inherited and unexamined formulations"[321] represented by religion. Furthermore, the September 11 attacks seem to have also been an occasion for the novelists to claim part of their fading cultural capital back, as Amis unambiguously makes plain in his introduction to *The Second Plane*: "If September 11 had to happen, then I am not at all sorry that it happened in my lifetime. … Geopolitics may not be my natural subject, but masculinity is. And have we ever seen the male idea in such outrageous garb as the robes, combat fatigues, suits and ties, jeans, tracksuits, and medics' smocks of the Islamic radical?"[322] As Paul Dawson points out, Amis appeals to his expertise in masculinity

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[318] Paul Dawson, "The Return of Omniscience in Contemporary Fiction," *Narrative* 17, no. 2 (2009): 143-161, 150.
[319] Dawson, *The Return of the Omniscient Narrator*, 19.
[320] DeLillo, "In the Ruins of the Future."
[321] Amis, "The Voice of the Lonely Crowd," *The Second Plane*, 19.
[322] Ibid., "Introduction," x.

exercised in his fiction, in order to defend the legitimacy of his publicly expressed opinions on the subject of Islamism, which he argues is the misbegotten offspring of wounded masculinity.[323]

While the media could often deal only reductively and in a sensationalist manner with the perpetrators of the attacks, investigative journalistic efforts like that by Lawrence Wright's Pulitzer Prize winning *The Looming Tower: Al-Queda and the Road to 9/11* contextualize the actions of the terrorists allowing for a more complex perspective.[324] The tools of narrative journalism give Wright's perspective a historical breadth missing from the fictional works to be discussed in this chapter. A favorable review characterizes Lawrence's outline of "the road to 9/11" as "a narrative history that possesses all the immediacy and emotional power of a novel."[325] On the other hand, several critics have argued that the actual post-9/11 literary representations of terrorists are reductive and misbegotten or problematic in terms of representing the other.[326] Perhaps this discrepancy between the critical appraisal of journalistic portraits of the terrorist and the dismissal of literary approaches to the terrorist subject lies less in the quality of the acts of representation themselves, but rather in the expectations of the critics and the tools and critical frames used to analyze them. The journalistic piece by Wright offers a wide-ranging historical and sociological response to the questions that have troubled the general populace in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, questions about the identity of the terrorists and why *they* hate *us*. Conversely, literature is more suited to offer psychological explanations, like

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[323] *The Second Plane* has received numerous critical reviews and the author's widely publicized statements have been the subject of many polemical responses. Terry Eagleton has dismissed Amis' authority to emit opinions on the subject of Islam and Islamism saying: "I have no idea why we should listen to novelists on these matters any more than we should listen to window cleaners." (Tim Adams, "Amis's War on Terror by Other Means," *The Observer*, January 13, 2008, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/jan/13/politics.martinamis) At the same time Amis is considered to be one of the leading public intellectuals in Britain and in this role he has been invited to join then Prime-minister Tony Blair on several official trips including one to Baghdad during the war, an occasion generally only available to few highly regarded journalists, which sheds light on a changing dynamics between the work of the novelist and the task of "speaking truth to power."

[324] Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Queda and the Road to 9/11*, (London: Penguin Books, 2006).

[325] Michiko Kakutani, "The Evolution of Al Qaeda and the Intertwining Paths Leading to 9/11," *New York Times*, August 1, 2006, accessed February 3, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/01/books/01kaku.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

[326] See for instance the same Michiko Kakutani's critical review of John Updike's *Terrorist* for *The New York Times*, or Pankaj Mishra, "The End of Innocence," *The Guardian*, May 19, 2007, accessed June 23, 2011, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/may/19/fiction.martinamis. For a wider discussion of the critical response to the literary representation of terrorism in fiction, a defense of DeLillo's approach and the inclusion the Jess Walter's *The Zero* in the wider discussion of representing terrorism, see: Aaron Derosa, "Alterity and the Radical Other in Post-9/11 Fiction: DeLillo's *Falling Man* and Walter's *The Zero*." *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 69, no. 3 (2013): 157-183, accessed August 20, 2014, http://muse.jhu.edu/.

Amis' notion of wounded masculinity[327] as the motor of Jihadism, or Don DeLillo's "intensity of a plot" and the power of group regimentation as a way of explaining the lack of empathy through which the act of terror becomes possible. While narrative journalism may provide the public with the factual information they crave in order to piece together the puzzle of the terrorist other and his motives, like any form of discourse, it obscures and privileges historical information through the very nature of its "narrativity," to use Hayden White's terminology. If, like historiography, journalism cannot escape the fictionalizing quality of narrativity despite its factual focus, literature is a realm of free-play, where facts become mere starting points for the exploration of wider themes and narrativity is consciously enhanced through different techniques. In this manner, as will later be discussed in more detail, the literary representations of terrorism contribute to the ethical debate with regard to the possibilities and limits of discursively representing the other partly through the very narrative strategies they employ.

Whether in anthropological, journalistic or artistic terms, Linda Alcoff argues that "the practice of speaking for others is often born of a desire for mastery, to privilege oneself as the one who more correctly understands the truth about another's situation or as one who can champion a just cause and thus achieve glory and praise. And the effect of the practice of speaking for others is often, though not always, erasure and a reinscription of sexual, national, and other kinds of hierarchies."[328] In a potentially positive spin on the notion of "speaking for others," Mita Banerjee uses the term "ethnic ventriloquism" to describe "white civilizational critique in the voice of the native."[329] Used as a vehicle for self-knowledge and self-critique, the voice of the other is thus not appropriated in a display of power through the possession of expert insight into and knowledge about the other, but rather as a means of stepping outside oneself in order to achieve the distance necessary for democratic criticism. In her study *Ground Zero Fiction*, Birgit Däwes adopts Banerjee's concept of "ethnic ventriloquism" as a frame for her analyses of works of fiction representing the terrorist other[330] arguing that:

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[327] Wright's portraits of Al Qaeda's founders and its leaders is underlain by a similar notion to that of Amis' misguided masculinity, albeit implied within the historical and sociological landscape he weaves in order to contextualize the birth of Al Qaeda and the actions of its members.

[328] Linda Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," *Cultural Critique*, No. 20 (Winter, 1991-1992), 5-32, 32.

[329] Mita Banerjee, "Civilizational Critique in Hermann Melville's *Typee*, *Omoo*, and *Mardi*," *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 48.2 (2003): 207-25, 208. See also Mita Banerjee, *Ethnic Ventriloquism: Literary Minstrelsy in Nineteenth-century American Literature*, (Heidelberg: Winter Verlag, 2008).

[330] Däwes' book chapter dedicated to representations of the terrorist other in post-9/11 fiction is the edited version of an earlier published article, which did not mention the notion of "ethnic ventriloquism" and instead relied less effectively on Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject for a unified argument on the three works discussed. The edited book version adds John Updike's *Varieties of Religious Experience* to its list of works discussed and in this way expends the earlier discussion of Updike's novel *Terrorist*. However, the individual novel analyses in Däwes' later book chapter still rely mostly on the earlier frame pertaining to Kristeva's abject, rather than the more productive one of "ethnic ventriloquism" mentioned in the introduction and in the chapter's concluding remarks.

> In ventriloquist reconstructions of these narratives, the fictional texts discussed… track and expose less convenient subtexts, presenting the (white / Western / American) subject with uncanny mirror images, in which the Other – whose original referent is made invisible in the act of ventriloquism – blurs into the Self.[331]

While I partly embrace the parallel between Banerjee's discussion of how American democratic criticism in the nineteenth century was made possible in the act of "ethnic ventriloquism" and the contemporary acts of terrorist ventriloquism (if I may phrase it so) in Däwes' study, I believe more distinctions need to be drawn between the two historically and ideologically specific paths of appropriating the voice of the other in order to achieve self-critical distance.[332] At the same time, the appropriation of the voice of the terrorist other in the different works of fiction discussed by Däwes[333] need to be contextualized more thoroughly within the larger oeuvre of the respective authors, as well as within the historical specificities of the post-9/11 public sphere. Furthermore, the authors included in the present chapter are representative for the reconfiguration of narrative omniscience discussed by Paul Dawson. That is why more inquiry needs to be made into the formal choices of appropriating the voice of the terrorist other and particularly in the source and the specificities of the narrative authority exerted by the different narrators. Dawson's claim that in the newer forms of omniscience the narrators partly draw their authority from their public intellectual personae suggests that it is relevant to assess the work of these authors in the wider context of their participation in the public sphere.[334]

In a visual art context, Hal Foster has also grappled with the implications of artists from ethnically and racially privileged groups appropriating the voice of the ethnic other. If in Banerjee's ethnic ventriloquism based on the works of 19th century American authors, the other becomes a vehicle for self-criticism, Foster's "artist as ethnographer" is actively involved in ethnic and racial politics. To be able to address these more recent cases of "speaking for others"

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[331] Däwes, 284.

[332] Banerjee's concept of "ethnic ventriloquism" may be seen in the wider context of Romantic civilizational critique, Romantic primitivism and the Romantic reconfiguration of the Enlightenment-based "noble savage." On the other hand, the appropriation of voice of the terrorist in the aftermath of 9/11 should probably be seen in the context of wider public debates about Islam and Islamism, the role of religious belief, the notion of a clash of civilizations and the complexities of imperial power-relations. Also to be taken into account is the potentially distorting influence the immediacy of the traumatic historical event may have had over the appropriations of the voice of the "enemy" other by Anglo-American authors. For a more historicist approach, Linda Alcoff's notion of "speaking for others," on which Benerjee also draws, can perhaps be more productive in identifying the significant differences in the appropriation of the voice of the terrorist by Anglo-American authors.

[333] Däwes's approach to the representation of terrorism includes more works, some pertaining to popular fiction, and which are bound to the specificities of the genres they belong to, making them more prone to adopt and exacerbate mainstream ideas and emotions with regard to the subject and less likely to become the vehicles of democratic criticism.

[334] This is relevant in the case of Martin Amis' work and it is particularly in the analysis of his work that I take a different path from Däwes, whose analysis of *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta* functions outside the context of Amis' work as a public intellectual.

in the arts, Foster draws a parallel to earlier appropriations of the voice of the proletariat by engagé bourgeois authors, as discussed by Walter Benjamin in "The Artist as Producer:" "Today there is a related paradigm in advanced art on the left: the artist as ethnographer… But the subject of association has changed: it is now the cultural and/or ethnic other in whose name the artist often struggles."[335] A means of deterring the "ideological patronage"[336] potentially involved in assuming the voice of the underprivileged other is Walter Benjamin's idea of "the author as producer."[337] Walter argued that the politically engaged author need not only align himself ideologically with the proletariat, but must also reconsider his means of production, his technique that is; he must support revolutionary content with an appropriately innovative form.

Foster has adapted Walter's aesthetic program of "the artist as producer" for the equally problematic and politicized age of multiculturalism. The bourgeois author embracing the cause of the proletariat could not avoid the conscious confrontation with the inevitability of committing the fallacy of "othering in identification:" "identification with the worker confirms rather than closes the gap between the two, through a reductive, idealistic, or otherwise misbegotten representation."[338] "The artist as ethnographer" is confronted with the same impasse in the act of speaking on behalf of "the cultural and/or ethnic other." A way out of this representational and ethical quagmire is however suggested by Foster following Benjamin's notion of a formal alignment with the political claims of the engaged author. Thus, Foster argues, the solution for "the artist as ethnographer" would be the adoption of self-reflexive mode of "speaking for others," in the sense of producing artistic "work that attempts to frame the framer as he or she frames the other."[339] Foster's problematization of the role of the artist implies a bona fide identification with the cause of the other. Yet, Western artists representing "the terrorist other" in the aftermath of a traumatic real life event are animated by less clear political agendas than the socially or ethnically emancipatory ones of "the artist as ethnographer." At the same time, the "ethnic ventriloquism" of the terrorist perspectives discussed in this chapter only partially serves the purpose of critically turning the gaze back on the liberal Western self. Both Edward Said and Judith Butler suggest that the survival of liberal humanism is conditioned by an ethical encounter with the other and the perseverance of democratic (self)criticism. The subsequently

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[335] Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: Art and Theory at the End of the Century* (Boston: MIT Press, 1996), 303.
[336] Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," *New Left Review* I/62, July-August 1970, accessed June 21, 2011, http://newleftreview.org/?page=article&view=135.
[337] Ibid.
[338] Foster, 174.
[339] Ibid., 200.

discussed Western literary attempts at speaking for the terrorist are representative for the wider crisis of liberal self-understanding, which wavers between preserving its humanist self-critical stance and what Said has called a "defensive self-pride."

Terrorizing the Subject: *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta* by Martin Amis

> *'He believes in No-God, and he worships him.'*[340]

Published alongside Amis' articles, book reviews and essays concerned with terrorism and the post 9/11 world, his short-story *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta* is better perceived in the context of the author's activities as a public intellectual and it is a particularly revealing case-study for the implications of this merging of roles. Amis uses a quote from the *The 9/11 Commission Report* as a motto for his short story suggesting that the author's endeavor is that of filling the gaps in the narrative of the event that non-fiction cannot provide: "No physical, documentary, or analytical evidence provides a convincing explanation of why [Muhammad] Atta and [Abdulaziz al] Omari drove to Portland, Maine, from Boston on the morning of September 10, only to return to Logan on Flight 5930 on the morning of September 11."[341] Opening with a very minute, cinematic description of the physical preparation Atta goes through in the morning of the attack, the narration follows the terrorist's thoughts as he mechanically follows his plan and takes pleasure in two last acts of malice aimed at instilling sentiments of doubt with regard to their mission in his fellow plotters and another member of Al Qaeda, a hospitalized imam. With a "gangrenous" frown on his face that he himself cannot bear see reflected in the mirror, a chronic case of constipation for which he finds relief only during the final collision with the towers,[342] the fictional terrorist meditates upon the implications of his act. Many of his views are strikingly similar to those expressed by the author in the essays

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[340] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, accessed May 6 2014, http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/WJAMES/ch02.html.
[341] Amis, *The Second Plane*, 95.
[342] Ibid., 97-98. "… he had not moved his bowels since May… Every few minutes he was required to wait out an interlude of nausea, while disgusted gastric juices bubbled up in the sump of his throat. His breath smelled like a blighted river… Shaving was the worst because it necessarily involved him in a contemplation of his own face… The detestation, the detestation of everything, was sculpted on it from within… With that face growing more gangrenous by the day. And that name, the name he journeyed through life under, itself like a promise of vengeance: Muhammad Atta."

published alongside the short story. The narration often slides almost imperceptibly from the limited third person narration written from Atta's point of view to considerations that echo some of the main ideas in Amis' articles, without any demarcation, making it impossible to differentiate between the character's interior monologue and auctorial commentary. For instance, the description of Atta's passing through passport control at the airport and his routine conversation with an official continues with the following thoughts that seem to be taken directly out of Amis' article "Terror and Boredom:"

> Whatever else terrorism had achieved in the past few decades, it had certainly brought about a net increase in world boredom. It didn't take very long to ask and answer those three questions – about fifteen seconds. But those dead-time questions were repeated, without any variation whatever, hundreds of thousands of times a day. If the Planes Operation went ahead as planned, Muhammad Atta would bequeath more, perhaps much more, dead time, planet-wide. It was appropriate, perhaps, and not paradoxical, that terror should also sharply promote its most obvious opposite. Boredom.[343]

A reader and reviewer of studies dealing with what he perceives as the new arch enemy of the Western World, most of them written by authors whom Said has accused of Orientalism and propagating a "culture clash," Amis' perspective on Islamism goes hand in hand with his vituperating the politically correct responses to the attack coming from leftists. The far left intellectuals are, in Amis' view, blind to the dangers of what he, following Paul Berman, calls Islamofascism. The multicultural tolerant ideology of the far Left makes them err "on the side of indulgence"[344] and thereby guilty of what he calls the fallacy of "Westernism." Reactions that have sought to understand the context of the attacks and connect them to past failures of the US foreign policy in the Middle East are considered by Amis to be knee-jerk-like responses from people unable to see beyond their ideology, or too afraid to break the rules of political correctness. He imagines a dialogue between the real life American jihadist John Walker Lindh and Osama bin Laden, the former telling the latter that "now would be a good time to strike… because the West is enfeebled, not just by sex and alcohol, but by thirty years of multicultural relativism. They'll think suicide bombing is just another exotic foible, like shame-and-honour killings. Besides, it's religious, and they're always slow to question anything that calls itself that."[345]

[343] Ibid., 198.
[344] Ibid., 70.
[345] Ibid., 72.

Ideas such as the aforementioned, along with several controversial remarks made in interviews,[346] were labeled as racist and islamophobic. In response to Amis' controversial assertions, Marxist critic Terry Eagleton accused him of being the torch bearer of a new type of "Western supremacism" that "has gravitated from the Bible to atheism:"

> If the test of liberalism is how it confronts its illiberal adversaries, some of the liberal intelligentsia seem to have fallen at the first hurdle. Writers such as Martin Amis and Hitchens do not just want to lock terrorists away. They also tout a brand of western cultural supremacism. Dawkins strongly opposed the invasion of Iraq, but preaches a self-satisfied, old-fashioned Whiggish rationalism that can be wielded against a benighted Islam. … The novelist Ian McEwan is a freshly recruited champion of this militant rationalism. Both Hitchens and Salman Rushdie have defended Amis's slurs on Muslims. Whether they like it or not, Dawkins and his ilk have become weapons in the war on terror.[347]

Amis, on the other hand, brings into question the morality of the liberal intellectual's tendency to problematize and complicate the issue of terrorism rather than acknowledge it as a clear and present danger to be dealt with accordingly: "It is painful to stop believing in the purity, and the sanity, of the underdog. It is painful to start believing in a cult of death, and an enemy that wants its war to last forever."[348] Dismissing efforts at contextualizing the act of terror as part of a wider tapestry of global politics and accusing Leftists of sympathizing with the enemy, Amis partly echoes the mainstream censorship which Judith Butler saw as dangerous for the health of the public sphere:

> Intellectual positions that are considered "relativistic" or "post-" of any kind are considered either complicitous with terrorism or as constituting a "weak link" in the fight against it. … In a strong sense, the binarism that Bush proposes in which only two positions are possible – "Either you're with us or you're with the terrorists" – makes it untenable to hold a position in which one opposes both and queries the terms in which the opposition is framed.[349]

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[346] Rachel Donadio, "Amis and Islam," *The New York Times*, March 9, 2008, accessed May 20, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/09/books/review/Donadio-t.html. See also the interview with Ginny Dougary, "The Voice of Experience," *Times Online*, September 9, 2006, accessed June 3, 2014, http://www.ginnydougary.co.uk/2006/09/17/the-voice-of-experience/. The following quote has been at the core of the accusations of Islamophobia against Amis, particularly from Terry Eagleton's side: "What can we do to raise the price of them doing this? There's a definite urge — don't you have it? — to say, 'The Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order.' What sort of suffering? Not letting them travel. Deportation — further down the road. Curtailing of freedoms. Strip-searching people who look like they're from the Middle East or from Pakistan. ... Discriminatory stuff, until it hurts the whole community and they start getting tough with their children."

[347] Terry Eagleton, "Rebuking Obnoxious Views is Not Just a Personality Kink," *The Guardian*, October 15, 2007, accessed May 24, 2011, http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2007/oct/10/comment.religion.

[348] Amis, 71.

[349] Butler, 2.

The short-story *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta* operates a demystification of the image of the terrorist. In his 2005 article on the then only foreseeable transformations the terrorist novel would suffer post-9/11, Benjamin Kunkel argues that novelists would not be able to go back to the sympathetic, albeit often disapproving in tone, approach to representing the terrorist, which was prevalent in the nineteen-nineties in novels like Paul Auster's *Leviathan*, Jennifer Egan's *Look at Me*, or Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*: "Our terrorist novels have usually sympathized with the left-wing domestic terrorist's complaint, however irretrievably mixed up with family romance and social maladaption. You can feel the identification and even admiration coursing alongside the disdain."[350] Unlike the pre-9/11 depictions of fictional domestic terrorists, the fictional version of Atta is stripped of any traces of a martyr-like aura, as well as of political motivation or religious belief. The "core reason" behind his act, which is repeatedly alluded to throughout the story, but which is only revealed towards the end, is a self-destructive and generally destructive death-wish that remains unexplained and unaccounted for in Amis' development of the character: "The core reason was of course all the killing – all the putting to death… Killing was divine delight. And your suicide was just part of the contribution you made – the massive contribution to death."[351] What remains behind in the process of demystifying the terrorist subject is an empty shell of a character, as one reviewer points out:

> Amis's 'varnish on a vacuum' is a way of sealing an absence of explanation, wrapping it up. Once it has been so packaged – a handy, pocketsized, neatly labeled black hole – he can make it his subject, or make it his message. The trouble is that without taking cause and effect into account, a novelist can't write a novel… Atta can't see himself in his reflection, and Amis can't see him either: which makes him not a person but a narrative black hole.[352]

Stripping the terrorist of any motivation other than his murderous suicidal drive is a means of avoiding a confrontation with the political and historical context for his act. Devoid of any humanizing features, other than the universality of bodily functions on which the narrator emphatically focuses and of the experience of death, the fictional Mohammed Atta is an example of what Judith Butler has referred to as dehumanization through the representation of the other as the face of evil: "The face … whose meaning is portrayed as captured by evil is precisely

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[350] Benjamin Kunkel, "Dangerous Characters," *The New York Times*, September 11, 2005, accessed June 23, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/11/books/review/11kunkel.html?pagewanted=all.
[351] Amis, 122.
[352] Daniel Soar, "Bile, Blood, Bilge, Mulch," *London Review of Books*, Vol. 29, No.1, January 4, 2007, accessed June 27, 2011, http://www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n01/print/soar01_.html.

the one that is not human, not in the Levinasian sense. The "I" who sees that face is not identified with it: the face represents that for which no representation is possible, an accomplishment of dehumanization and a condition for violence."[353]

The interconnectedness between terror and boredom is a recurrent theme in the essays collected in *The Second Plane*. The author had apparently planned to publish *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta* in a volume under the title *Terror and Boredom*, along with *In the Palace of the End*, a short story based on the life of Saddam Hussein's psychologically disturbed son, Uday, and with *House of Meetings*, a novel including the confessions of a former Soviet gulag inmate. Boredom in his view is a vicious circle, both the cause of terror and the outcome of a terrorist act: Amis' Atta is pathologically bored and disgusted with life and through his act of terror, the Western world is to become more boring and bored through the enforcement of strict and time-consuming security measures.[354] At the same time, the terror inflicted by tyrannical regimes like that of Saddam Hussein or Stalinism in the Soviet Union is built and consolidated through a perverse combination of boredom and torture. Adopting a Hitchensian stance, Amis also associates boredom with religious fanaticism, which hinders the possibility of rational communication and argumentation between individuals.[355]

While the radical, but homegrown, politics of the domestic terrorists so prevalent in the American novel of the nineteen-nineties partly mirrored the radical criticism operated by literature and allowed for a certain degree of identification on the part of both the narrator and the reader, the religious motivation of the September 11 terrorists is at the core of their impenetrable otherness. And it is this opaque otherness of Islamism that the authors discussed in this

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[353] Butler, 145.

[354] According to Däwes, Atta's indifference and boredom make him a reflection "of precisely the capitalist society he battles." She further argues that "the story identifies terrorism as a logical and 'appropriate' counterpart to the 'net increase in world boredom' (157)," rather than its cause, and concludes that the terrorist figure "emerges as the internalized other of Baudrillard's 'suicidal' West (*Spirit* 6)." (256) While I partly agree with Däwes' idea that through the use of the abject in the portrayal of the terrorist other, the line between self and other becomes blurred, I would say her wider argument that Atta here stands for the "suicidal" West in the Baudrillardian sense or as a dramatization of Derrida's auto-immunitary syndrome inherent to Western democracy (although I think a distinction needs to be drawn between the two), would only function at the expense of ignoring Amis' stances as a public intellectual, or when seen as an act of auctorial self-subversion. This interpretation would ideologically place Amis in the same "weak-link," relativistic leftist camp, which he has criticized in his non-fiction.

[355] Alex Bilmes, "Martin Amis: 30 Things I've Learned about Terror," *The Independent,* October 8, 2006, accessed June 24, 2011, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/martin-amis-30-things-ive-learned-about-terror-418950.html.

"Terror brings with it boredom. This was very much the case in Stalin's Russia. It was the two pillars - you get them half dead with boredom and then you scare the life out of them every waking second. And then you really have a docile population. It's different in our culture. It's not just airport queues and this feeling of meaninglessness that comes over you when you're taking your shoes off and going through security. A homely analogy would be when you realise you're having dinner with a fanatical Christian. What you realise is that all the higher faculties in your mind have to go to sleep while you're in the presence of belief. Your reason is no good to you; it's not an actor in you at all. That's boredom. It's dead time. And faced with fanaticism that's what one feels."

chapter have grappled with, finally choosing to either side-step it, or to problematically confront it, whether directly or indirectly. Less evidently in *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta*, but quite openly addressed in the pieces of non-fiction accompanying it, Amis struggles head on with the reasons behind religious fundamentalism. His unfinished short-story *The Unknown Known*,[356] which, as the satirical title suggests, attempts to get to "the core reason" animating fundamentalists like real-life Sayyid Qutb and his followers, the contemporary fundamentalist terrorists. In *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta*, the constant deferral to reveal the recurrently referred to "core reason" of the terrorist act points to the empty center of Amis' endeavor. A crisis of representation is played out as meaninglessness.

Not contextualizing the evolution of his character in *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta* and just presenting him in media res downplays the role of history and politics. In this sense, Amis is embracing the idea of 9/11 as a moment of rupture in a manner that public intellectuals like Noam Chomsky or Judith Butler have been warning against in their emphasis on the importance of historical and political contextualization. Echoing the author's own theory suggesting that wounded masculinity is at the core of religious fundamentalism, Mohamed Atta the character shares a similar line of thought in a malevolent, intentionally doubt-inducing conversation with his imam, in which he spontaneously decides "to speak his mind." Giving up his prepared speech in which he would have provided the expected idealized picture of his meeting with Osama bin Laden and reiterated the ego-boasting story of how "it wasn't the West that won the cold war. It was the Sheikh," Atta reveals his nihilistic core. The references to the wounded ego and the hurt "masculinity" behind Islamist ideology in Atta's discourse in front of the hospitalized imam clearly echo the extradiegetic discourse of the author:[357]

> It comes from religious hurt, don't you think? For centuries God has forsaken the believers, and rewarded the infidels. How do *you* explain his indifference?" Or his enmity he thought, as he left the bedside and the ward. He considered too, that it could go like this, subconsciously, of course: if prayer and piety had failed, had so clearly failed, than it might seem time to change allegiance, and summon up the other powers.[358]

The last sentence of the quote is another example of the problematic brand of omniscience adopted by the narrator who has access to the several layers of the character's consciousness. The change of "allegiance" is ambiguously phrased (is it to the Devil or to the way of the

[356] Martin Amis, "The Unknown Known," *Granta 100*, Winter 2007, accessed June 14, 2012, http://www.martinamisweb.com/commentary_files/TheUnknownKnown.pdf.
[357] These ideas are recurrent in Amis' nonfiction work about 9/11 and in his interviews. See for instance the (in)famous interview with Dougary: "It's their own past they're pissed off about; their great decline. It's also masculinity, isn't it?"
[358] Amis, 112.

decadent West that Atta considers pledging, or is it to the conflation of the two?) and probably intended as humorous.[359] Both omniscience and the satirical mode are problematic strategies in representing the terrorist other, as will be discussed in more detail in what follows.

The article *Terror and Boredom* interweaves auto-biographical references to a failed attempt at completing the satirical short-story whose central character is Ayed, a grotesque "diminutive terrorist"[360] figure with four wives who refuse to obey him (partly because of his violent sexual practices that include a rodeo belt). His "stressful" job as a terrorist at the Prism, part of a Sector called "Unknown Unknowns"[361] includes the task of coming up with "paradigm-shifts," surprising new ways of attacking the West that are increasingly hard to devise after the "success" of "the planes operation" on September 11. Freeing all the rapists and sex offenders from prison and unleashing them over Greely Colorado (significantly, the town where Sayyid Qutb, the so-called "father of Islamism," lived during his exile in the US in the late 1940s) is Ayed's paradigm-shifting grand scheme, which, however, brings him a lot of ridicule from his terrorist peers. The planned ending of the unfinished story was supposed to be an escalation of the satire and the grotesque in which Ayed finally gets his "conceptual break-through, his unknown unknown: he is the first to bring martyrdom operations into the setting of his own home" in a plan left to the imagination of the reader, which involves his disobedient wives and the rodeo belt.[362] Moving the terrorist act into the very home of the "martyr," aside from echoing Amis' suggestion that Muslims should "bring their house in order,"[363] it also brings in another one of his pet arguments against Islamists, their treatment of women. In the essay discussing the reasons for failing to complete this satirical piece of fiction, short episodes, or planned elements of plot line from his unfinished story are the starting point for digressions about anything from Sayyid Qutb's life, to a famous case on domestic violence

[359] Where Däwes sees intentional ambiguity blurring the boundary between self and other, I see a narratorial struggle over controlling the slippery subject.
[360] Ibid., 64.
[361] Amis is playing with the famous often quoted, interpreted and sometimes ridiculed statement made by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in 2002 with regard to the motives of the US intervention in Iraq: "[T]here are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know." (Former United States Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Defense Department Briefing on February 12, 2002) In an article about Abu Ghraib and Rumsfeld's response to the media scandal, Slavoj Zizek refers to this category left out by the Secretary of Defense as: "the 'unknown knowns' – the disavowed beliefs, suppositions and obscene practices we pretend not to know about, even though they form the background of our public values." Slavoj Zizek, "What Rumsfeld Doesn't Know that He Doesn't Know about Abu Ghraib," *In These Times*, May 21, 2004, accessed June 25, 2010, http://www.lacan.com/zizekrumsfeld.htm. The same fourth element missing from Rumsfeld's equation, the unknown known, is interpreted by Amis as knowledge or belief based on the unknown, "any belief system that involves a degree of illusion, and therefore cannot be defended by mind alone." "Religious belief", "God", "paradise", and "scriptural inerrancy" are Amis' unknown known.
[362] Amis, *The Unknown Known*, 9.
[363] See interview with Dougary.

in Saudi Arabia, autobiographical anecdotes, references to non-fiction books about Islamist fundamentalism and "New Atheist" ideas echoing Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens.

The essay form allows even his most controversial statements to brew and expand offering a rare outlook into the inner world of the author and his struggle with a topic, laying bare the process of fiction writing and, the possible reasons for its failure. What makes this perspective different, and perhaps more politically nuanced than his short story having Mohamed Atta as a character, is the fact that the author lays bare his tools, political views, biases and sources:

> There is almost an entire literary genre given over to sensibilities such as Sayyid Qutb's. It is the genre of the unreliable narrator - or, more exactly, the transparent narrator, with his helpless giveaways. Typically, a patina of haughty fastidiousness strives confidently but in vain to conceal an underworld of incurable murk. In *The Unknown Known* I added to this genre, and with enthusiasm.[364]

Since the real life 9/11 terrorists did not leave many traces or written accounts behind, Sayyid Qutb, the grandfather of Al Qaeda, seems to have been a great source of inspiration and a point of reference for both Updike and Amis, his memoirs offering a unique insight into the mind of an Islamist. It is particularly the excerpt in which Qutb writes about his life as an exilé and student in the US, in the late fifties, his diatribes against the lack of morals of the society in which he is a guest and the open sexuality of Western women that have been incorporated by the writers in their work and adapted to suit the perspectives of their terrorist characters, be they completely fictional or based on real life ones: "The American girl is well acquainted with her body's seductive capacity. She knows it lies in the face, and in expressive eyes, and thirsty lips. She knows seductiveness lies in the round breasts, the full buttocks, and in the shapely thighs, sleek legs — and she shows all this and does not hide it."[365]

Satire and irony are Amis' weapons of choice against fundamentalism, but, as he himself declares, they become less effective in a post 9/11 context: "Islam, as I said, is a total system, and like all such it is eerily amenable to satire. But with Islamism, with total malignancy, with total terror and total boredom, irony, even militant irony (which is what satire is), merely shrivels and dies."[366] The reason satire falls short both in the unfinished novella and in *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta* could be because he fails to admit what the real target of his satire is and he breaks "the unofficial law of satire (*lex per saturam*)."[367] The satirist is by

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[364] Amis, *The Unknown Known*, 9.
[365] Qutb quoted in: Robert Siegel, "Sayyid Qutb's America: Al Qaeda Inspiration Denounces US Greed, Sexuality," *NPR* online, May 6, 2003, accessed June 23, 2011, http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1253796
[366] Amis, "The Unknown Known, 9.
[367] Ruben Quintero, *A Companion to Satire: Ancient and Modern* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007).

definition engagé; he points to what he perceives as an evil of society and through his biting irony exposes it in the hope and with the ultimate aspiration of bringing about change and amelioration. In order for satire to function its subject must be amenable to betterment, the main condition for it being that the "evil act must be an evil of error, not pure evil, nor can X be hypothetically incorrigible, that is, beyond punishment. The immutably divine or demonic cannot be made satiric, except through a humanizing or a thoroughly iconoclastic perspective…"[368] According to Patricia Meyer Spacks the satirist "shows us ourselves and our world; he demands that we improve both".[369] Both Ayed and the character based on Mohammed Atta, however, are created under "the freshly fortified suspicion that there exists on our planet a kind of human being who will become a Muslim in order to pursue suicide-mass murder."[370] Reducing the characters to their urge to commit genocide is a way of declaring them to be "pure evil," which in turn makes them impermeable to satire and runs the risk of morphing the discourse into something akin to the war on terror propaganda: "when one national leader demonizes another, calling him a Hitler or a devil, satire ends and propaganda begins. Satire requires the inclusion, not the exclusion, of human failing."[371] Furthermore, the biting critique must also include, or indirectly suggest a positive solution to the crisis, "a standard against which readers can compare its subject" so that change can become possible. Both of the above mentioned fallacies are committed in *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta* in which the character is stripped of his humanity and turned into a self-destructive killing machine. All the traits and motivations that could make Atta into a sufferer for a cause, like religious belief, political convictions, a desire for personal or historical revenge are undone one by one and he is instead presented as an unscrupulous nihilist.

The character is dead inside, completely devoid of emotions or spirituality, and his act of terror is a means of externalizing this death unto the world. Disgusted by life in all its forms and despising everything from the sound of music to women in general, Atta goes through the motions of his preparation for martyrdom mechanically and the third person narrator insists on

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[368] Ibid., 2. Quintero discusses several failed instances of satire, Mel Brooks' representation of Hitler in his film *The Producers* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: "Hitler, *qua* genocidal monster, cannot be dressed down, satirized, though it appeared possible before full disclosure of his atrocities, as in Chaplin's cinematic satire *The Great Dictator* (1940). As another example of the limits of satire, Joseph Conrad first drafted *Heart of Darkness* (1902) with expressed intent of writing a political satire of colonial exploitation in the Congo, but when he added and then developed the character Kurtz into an 'unlawful soul' who went 'beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations,' Conrad's novel became more of an exploration of the mystery of human evil than a satiric condemnation of institutional misconduct."

[369] Ibid.

[370] Amis, 87.

[371] Quintero, 2.

the minutia of daily routine and personal hygiene, taking out all the potential heroism or thrill of it. His only pleasure, around which he organizes his last day, is tormenting his fellow plotters about the repercussion of their deed and casting doubt on the promise of paradise awaiting them. Right before the attack, he tells one of his co-conspirators of his suspicion that their act is not one of martyrdom, but a sin, and they might not get to the paradise promised to the jihadist, but instead to hell. The title of the short story itself is an allusion to hell as the final destination for Atta and his peers. The action takes place during one day only, but the title suggests that it represents the "last days" of Atta. In the Koran, the punishment for suicide is eternal suffering in hell and it is hinted throughout the short-story that Atta is bound to repeat this last day in his after-life: "The themes of recurrence and prolongation, he sensed, were already beginning to associate themselves with his last day."[372]

Still, the question that arises here is why Amis would choose to put himself in the shoes of Atta, rather than the other terrorists who are tormented by him because of their genuine beliefs. The answer might lie in a switch from the early self-declared intention of satirizing Islamism to an exploration of human evil in a process similar to that described by Quintero in his analysis of the failure of Conrad's attempted satire in *Heart of Darkness*. Although the character claims that it is not "jihadi ardour as much as nihilistic insouciance"[373] that created the peer group dynamics based on competitiveness within their terrorist cell, he still reflects on how he would be the only one that is going along with the death inducing plan for the "core reason" only and that others, particularly Jarrah, might be driven by genuine religious and political convictions. While Atta cannot laugh because he finds no reason to, the character based on Jarrah says he cannot laugh as long as people are dying in Palestine.[374] Still, later on in the story, the same Atta ponders that, although Jarrah might look like he is committed to the cause for love, he is nonetheless animated by the same nihilistic "core reason" as himself. The undecided, contradictory portrayal of this secondary character illustrates the problem a humanized terrorist "other" would pose to both author and reader.

A reviewer of *The Second Plane* claims that Amis misuses Northrop Frye's definition of satire as militant irony because he fails to see that "satire is 'militant' not because it is irony with cannons blazing, but because it is a distinct genre with its own characteristics and distinguishable moral norms. If Amis now finds satire inconceivable it's because he has left all norms

[372] Ibid., 99.
[373] Ibid., 107.
[374] Ibid., 102.

behind. Amis's irony "shrivels and dies" because "he's forgotten that irony depends on a certain distance, without which it can only collapse."[375] To this I would add that satire collapses because it does not address its real target: the liberal public intellectualists that espouse what the author calls Westernism, an ideology of tolerance and blind multiculturalism. The paradox here is that, on the one hand, Amis embraces a rhetoric similar to that propagated by the war on terror supporters, accusing Leftists of indirectly siding with Osama bin Laden, but, at the same time, his essays also reveal that he does not agree with the strategies of the war in Iraq. Satire is constructed around a desire for the reformation of society and "cannot function without a standard against which the readers can compare its subject," while it tries to sway the reader towards "an ideal alterative."[376] A new type of atheism and rationalism and an Enlightenment based code of ethics is the alternative to fundamentalism that Amis pleads for in the conclusion of his essay "Terror and Boredom:" "the time has come for a measure of impatience in our dealings with those who would take an innocent personal pronoun (which was just minding its own business) and exalt it with a capital letter. Opposition to religion already occupies the moral high ground, intellectually and morally. People of independent mind should now start to claim the spiritual high ground too."[377] However, both of his terrorist characters (the fictional Atta and the diminutive Ayed of his unfinished satire) seem to be opportunistic nihilists and not devout Muslims. Furthermore, both of them seem to embody the author's claim that suicide mass murder "is maximum malevolence."[378] Perhaps on account of the total vilification, or pathological affliction of the characters, which allows no room for betterment, but instead, by dehumanizing them, might serve as justification for a politics of violent retaliation, *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta* cannot stand alone as a piece of satirical writing. Ultimately, Amis' cannons seem to be satirically blazing not against religious fundamentalism, but against those intellectuals who treat the fundamentalist terrorist as a human being. He rails against voices like that of Jose Saramago, who condemns the terrorist act, but asks for a consideration of the political context that "can bring a human being to turn himself into a bomb."[379] Such rationalizations appear as futile to Amis: "We are not dealing in reasons because we are not dealing in reason." The terrorist is, in his view, the follower of an irrational cult of death bent on destruction to whom the only "rational response would be something like an unvarying factory siren

[375] Soar.
[376] Quintero, 3.
[377] Amis, 93.
[378] Ibid., 71.
[379] Saramago quoted in Amis, 70. Paul Berman uses the same article from *El Pais* to accuse Saramago of representing Leftist anti-Semitism. Jose Saramago, "January 8: From David's Stones to Goliath's Tanks," *The Notebook*, trans. Amanda Hopkinson and Daniel Hahn (London, New York: Verso, 2010).

of unanimous disgust."[380] This call for "unanimous disgust" may as well be a statement of the programmatic effort behind his fictional portrayal of Atta.

The narrative voice in *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta* suffers from a schizoid case of ventriloquism. The third person narrative with Atta as the focalizer is interrupted by the occasional unannounced and unmarked slip into auctorial comment, most of the times reiterating ideas from the essays included in the same collection. The short story makes use of a problematic version of metalepsis, blurring the boundaries between the real and the fictional and creating a hybridized text that hovers between two genres, the novella and the essay. As a narratological term, metalepsis is a fluid and hard to pin down strategy. The most comprehensive definition is that offered by Genette as "any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe," which has the effect of "undermining the separation between narration and story" causing "a short circuit" between "the fictional world and the ontological level occupied by the author" and "a sudden collapse of the narrative system."[381] In *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta*, the reader's immersion into the narrative is often disturbed by the "lifting of the mimetic illusion" through essay like digressions on the subject of America's role as a superpower, to give just one example, or the following humorous flash forward to a post-9/11 world and its repercussions: "And he didn't solace himself with the thought that this was, after all, September 11: you could still get to airports without much time to spare."[382]

Coming from a self-declared admirer and follower of formally conscious Vladimir Nabokov, who has famously declared that "style is morality,"[383] Amis' metaleptic digressions may hardly be considered accidental. In his study of major contemporary British fiction, Peter Childs distinguishes between two types of authors, "the masochists" and "the imposers," positing Amis as a typical example of the latter category. The "imposer" author is distinguished by a propensity towards ambivalent, morally corrupt characters that sometimes also take on the role of unreliable narrators, while "the reader is not supposed to sympathize with the characters, but to appreciate the aims of the author."[384] The characters inhabiting his fictional works, ranging from a suicidal businessman to a gulag detainee, are notoriously grotesque figures, often despicable and created with the obvious purpose of repulsing or challenging the reader rather than tempting him to identify with them. The limited third person narration in *The Last Days*

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[380] Amis, 68.
[381] John Pier, "Metalepsis," *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, accessed 3 June, 2014, http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/metalepsis-revised-version-uploaded-12-may-2014.
[382] Amis, 107.
[383] Peter Childs, *Contemporary Novelists* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 35.
[384] Ibid., 36.

of Muhammad Atta falling imperceptibly into metaleptical auctorial comment follows the author's idea that contemporary writing should combine "realism and experimentation… calling on the strengths of the Victorian novel together with the alienations of post-modernism."[385]

Still, these metaleptical moments paradoxically bring him closer to the authoritative omniscient narrator than to the programmatically self-aware one typically associated with post-modernism. These episodes are particularly problematic in so far as they are not moments of transparent self-reflexivity as one would find in the works of postmodern authors, but barely perceptible, unmarked transitions from the character's perspective to that of the author. Generally self-reflexivity is a means of casting doubt over the authority of the narrator, of complicating the fictional discourse by emphasizing the unstable nature of identity and its representation, which would align with Hal Foster's call for self-reflexivity on the side of "the artist as ethnographer" while speaking for the other. In Amis' case, however, the metaleptical moments are a showcase of auctorial power over the character and the reader. A telling instance of this type of metalepsis is when the narrator's voice suddenly provides more than the character's thoughts and unwaveringly makes claims that go beyond human knowledge: "He didn't expect paradise. What he expected was oblivion. And, strange to say, he would find neither."[386] The disruption of the fictional world through auctorial intervention entails a degree of brutality:

> Even at its mildest, metalepsis disrupts the boundary of a fictional narrative – the one between inside and outside, between story and world. When a text repeatedly indulges in such subversion, the result is inevitably jarring, and its effects run the gamut from startling diversion to destabilization and disorientation to outright violation. If I emphasize a violent streak underlying this constitutive breech of constitutive boundaries, it is because I detect, even in the metaleptic joke or game, a certain aggression towards the subject, whether internal or external to the text.[387]

The narrator's disruptive metaleptic digressions in *The Last Days of Muhammad* are a display of auctorial power over the fictional subject. The boundary of the fictional narrative in this case is not broken in order to lay bare the constructed nature of representation, although that is an inevitable result, but rather to display the power of the narrator over the fictional terrorist character. A terrorist act is the ultimate act of disruption and it unveils the frailty of the apparent order and stability of the mundane, in the most violent manner. The narrator adopts a similar strategy within the framework of the fictional world he creates, by disrupting it any time he

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[385] Ibid., 37.
[386] Amis, 102.
[387] Debra Malina, *Breaking the Frame: Metalepsis and the Construction of the Subject* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002), 3.

sees fit. Assuming a position of power, the narrator invites the reader to join in the process of representing the real-life terrorist and imagining alternative scenarios to the real-life one:

> A hypothesis. If he stood down from the Planes Operation, and it went ahead without him (or if he somehow survived it), he would never be able to travel by air in the United States or anywhere else – not by air, not by train, not by boat, not by bus. The profiling wouldn't need to be racial; it would be facial, merely. No sane man, or woman would ever agree to be confined in his vicinity. With that face, growing more gangrenous by the day. And that name, the name he journeyed through life under, itself like a promise of vengeance: Muhammad Atta.[388]

For post-Foucaultian theorists like Judith Butler, the construction of "reality" through discourse inescapably entails "brutality… for it can only construct through erasing."[389] Following Levinas, Butler suggests that the humanity of the subject cannot be truly represented, but in order "to convey the human," the representation must "*show* its failure:"

"There is something unrepresentable that we seek to represent, and that paradox must be retained in the representation we give."[390] The "imposer" narrator in *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta*, however, does not seem to be interested in offering what Butler has called a "critical image" of the other, one that is not only aware of the limits of representation in general and of the limits of representing the human in particular, but also concurrently lays those limitations bare. Instead, the narrator (ab)uses his omniscience in order to condemn his subject to eternal suffering and to develop alternative scenarios to the real-life one, while breaking the fictional illusion on several occasions according to his rhetorical whims and committing what could be considered fictional acts of terrorism.

An American Idiot: John Updike's *Terrorist*

In his earliest literary representation of September 11, his short story *Varieties of Religious Experience*, John Updike approached the subject connecting it to a spiritual crisis. "There is no God" is the opening sentence of his short story published in 2002, a plotless mosaic combining

[388] Amis, 98.
[389] Malina, 2.
[390] Butler, 144.

four different limited third person points of view and three different varieties of religious experience.[391] The first one belongs to Dan Kellogg, an aging lawyer visiting his divorcé daughter and granddaughter in New York, who happens to witness the collapse of the first tower from the safe distance of his daughter's loft. Pondering God's non-interventionism during the attack, the character goes through the days that follow abhorring the national patriotic hysteria that ensues, while trying to formulate a comforting interpretation of the event for his traumatized young grand-daughter.[392] Cynical and detached, Dan observes the reactions of the general public and the main-stream media. Rather than join the general turn to religiosity and sentimentalism, he has the revelation of his lack of belief in God and of his own insignificance when faced with a tragedy to which the universe, which he had hitherto perceived as miraculously benevolent, seemed to be utterly indifferent: "Sensory impressions hit Dan harder than usual, because God had been purged from his brain. In his previous life commonsense atheism had not been good enough for him, nor had it seemed sufficiently gracious toward the miraculous universe. Now he had been shown how little the universe cared for his good opinion."[393]

The point of view then abruptly turns back in time and to an altogether different scene, a strip bar somewhere in Florida, where some of the 9/11 plotters try to "blend in" with the Americans during a night out, in a fictional take on an allegedly real occurrence. A fictional version of Mohamed Atta forces himself to gulp down alcohol and disgusting junk food and reflects on the "excessive and wasteful" mores of his host country epitomized by the strip bar with its soulless lurid sexuality and excessive consumption. Summoning the image of the overly referred to and abused promise of paradise where virgins are waiting to cater to the desires of the martyr, Updike parallels two different world views, the individualist American one based on instant gratification in this life and focused on the material, with the self-effacing one of Islamism that promises heavenly rewards in the afterlife to those who detach themselves from worldly pleasures in their earthly life:

> The whore's globular breasts hung down parallel to her lowered sheet of hair while her shaved or plucked crotch twinkled and flashed. Through half-shut eyes and the shifting transparencies of whiskey Mohamed fancied a semblance to the ignorant *fellaheen*'s conception of Paradise, where dark-eyed virgins wait on silken couches, among flowing rivers, to serve the martyrs delicious fruit. But they are manifestations, these houris, of the final purity,

[391] John Updike, "Varieties of Religious Experience," *The Atlantic Monthly*, November 2002, accessed June 29, 2011, http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/2002/11/updike.htm.
[392] Ibid., "Dan marveled at the human animal: Like dogs, we creep back to lick the hand of a God who, if He exists, has just given us a vicious kick. The harder He kicks, the more fervently we cringe and creep forward to lick His hand. His sense of alienation persisted in the weeks that followed, as flags sprang from every porch bracket and *God Bless America* was written in shaving cream on every shop window."
[393] Ibid.

> white in their limbs and in the whites of their eyes, radiant negatives of the underfed sluts who mechanically writhed on this soiled stage.[394]

The scene, although a common sight in popular culture, appears particularly decadent when seen through the judging eye of the would-be martyr who is portrayed almost as a hero bent on preventing these perverted mores from spreading. The fictional terrorists are not lured by the attractions of the type of Western (sexual) freedom embodied by the strip club and their presence there appears as one of the necessary self-sacrificial steps in their martyrdom. The desire for destruction behind their act is idealized as a desire to go back to a more primitive simplicity and a purifying rejection of this hubris of artificiality and materialism. Unlike Martin Amis' Atta, Updike's character is not a (self)-destructive nihilist, but appears to be acting according to certain moral principles and to be capable of genuine camaraderie and empathy towards other human beings:

> Mohamed felt a great love for his brother in conspiracy, the younger brother he had never had; he had been raised in a flowery Cairo suburb with a quartet of sisters. It was to keep them from ending as sluts that he had dedicated himself to the holy cause. They were too light-headed to know that the temptations twittering at them from television and radio were from Satan, designed to lure them into eternal mire. Their parents, in their European clothes, their third-rate prosperity measured out in imitation Western goods, were blind to the evil they wrought upon their children. Hoarding their comforts in their curtained, servant-run house in Giza, they were like eyeless cave creatures, blind to the grandeur of the One who will wrathfully reduce this world and its distractions to a desert. Mohamed carried that sublime desert, its night sky clamorous with stars, within him.[395]

In the same abrupt manner, the point of view changes, moving into one of the twin towers minutes before the collision. A family man blue collar worker is having the most banal phone conversation with his wife, quarrelling about necessary shopping as the plane hits the building. The moment holds no spiritual revelation, just a blind going through the motions, although the word God punctuates the last part of the conversation between the victim and his wife. The next sequence is written from the perspective of an elderly lady on board of the flight United 93. Through this particular choice of character, the tragic moment is stripped of heroism. The celebrated acts of heroism by several passengers on the flight, who apparently resisted the terrorists causing the plane to crash before reaching the White House, are briefly observed by the woman who is otherwise engrossed into her own thoughts. Instead, the focus is on the inner monologue of the woman in the last minutes of quiet panic before her death and the gradual realization that a banal day was turning into their last one. Her last thoughts turn to

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[394] Ibid.
[395] Ibid.

God in her urgent need to find some comfort through prayer.[396] In the closing of the short story, the perspective returns to the first character, Dan Kellogg, who may well be an alter-ego of the author, in a time leap of six months after the event. In a similar manner to the closing part of Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, the event seems to be fading from media attention as other violent acts take center-place:

> A woman in Texas was being tried for systematically drowning her five children; Catholic priests were revealed to have molested their immature charges in numbers larger than ever imagined or confessed; almost every week, somewhere in the United States, angry or despairing or berserk fathers murdered their wives or ex-wives and their children and then, as if in adequate atonement, killed themselves. Meanwhile, war had been declared and pursued, with its usual toll of inane deaths—colliding helicopters, stray bombs, false intelligence, fatal muddle unmitigated by any biblical dignity of vengeance or self-sacrifice. The masterminds of evil remained at large; the surrendered enemies appeared exhausted and confused—pathetic small fry. They complained about the climate of Cuba and the shortage of suitable mullahs. They claimed, and others stridently claimed for them, their international legal rights. Religious slaughters occurred in India and Israel, fires and floods and plagues elsewhere. The world tumbled on, spewing out death and pain like an engine off the tracks.[397]

The passage is revelatory for the anti-exceptionalist perspective on September 11, placing it as one event in the endless cycle of human violence. At the same time, the excerpt juxtaposes Atta's portrayal as an idealized fighter for a cause with "the fatal muddle" of structural violence exercised through war and "unmitigated by any biblical dignity of vengeance or self-sacrifice." As Hal Foster, following Walter Benjamin, has pointed out, idealization is another facet of othering and, as it will later be discussed in more detail, it is a recurrent and problematic feature in the representation of the ethnic and terrorist other in John Updike's fiction. However, in this particular case, the Orientalist idealization of Atta is partly compensated by the larger framing of the short piece of fiction as a collection of different religious experiences, each valid in its own terms and none having ascendency over the other. Even the author's alter-ego, Dan Kellogg, discovers after six months that he has recovered from his post-9/11 bout of atheism, or rather that a form of religious feeling has been creeping in without his control: "He was alive, and a shadowy God in him. Human consciousness had curious properties. However big things were, it could encompass them, as if it were even bigger. And it kept insisting on making a narrative of his life, however nonsensically truncated the lives of others—crushed in an instant, or snapped off on the birthing table—had been."[398]

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[396] Ibid.
[397] Ibid.
[398] Ibid.

Religion and spirituality have been key themes in Updike's work before 9/11 and he has often dealt with the drama of trying to reconcile "the ambiguities of the flesh with the vision of the spirit,"[399] a theme that he continues to explore in light of the new historical developments, particularly the rise of attention and interest bestowed by the public on Islam and Islamism and on the so called "clash of civilizations." Updike has covered religious crises in his work before from a Christian point of view. In an often neglected novel from 1978 entitled *The Coup*, Updike has also written from a Muslim perspective.

Both *The Coup* and *Terrorist* were written during periods of crisis connected to the Middle East. While *Terrorist* was published after September 11, *The Coup* appeared around the time of both the Russian Afghan War and the Iranian revolution. The 1978 novel is set in an imaginary sub-Saharan country characterized by unsolvable paradoxes and on the brink of exploding into conflict at any given time, and it is written from the perspective of its charismatic, ambivalent leader, General Ellellou. Although published after a historical attack on the United States by Islamist terrorists, *Terrorist* is less an exploration of terrorism, but rather examines of the moral state of American society in the new century, marked by the iconic Islamist attack.

"My books are all meant to be moral debates with the reader"[400] declared Updike in an interview. *Terrorist* is no exception, encoding in its plot some of the thorniest questions with regard to the moral fiber of the United States in the twenty-first century: the present state and the future of a society driven by an individualistic and materialistic ideology, the survival of spirituality in a world driven by consumption and physicality, the downside of civilization, the incorporation of dissent and the latest spin on the age old generation gap. The central character in the coming of age story is an American teenager (with an Egyptian father he has never met) who tries to lead a pure, godly life in a society that fosters excess and instant gratification. Embracing the rigor, self-restraint and purity required by the Islamic faith, he rebels against the apparent moral laxity and disorderly life-style of his single Irish-American mother, an amateur artist. His decision to observe the Islamic faith can also be seen as a means of compensating for the missing father figure through an adherence to the absent father's heritage. The plot traces the spiritual crisis of the character and his maturation, which entails a struggle be-

[399] William T. Stafford, "Review: 'The Curious Greased Grace' of John Updike, Some of His Critics, and the American Tradition," *Journal of Modern Literature* 2, no. 4 (November 1, 1972): 569-575.
[400] James O. Yerkes, *John Updike and Religion: The Sense of the Sacred and the Motions of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999).

tween his ideal of spiritual purity and the challenges of the materially-minded society he inhabits, dramatized in his eventually deterred attempt to become a suicide-bomber. Illustrating this problematic coming of age process as a rite of passage from spiritual idealism to an acceptance of material corruption, the novel opens with the character, Ahmad, regarding the violent and overly-sexualized teenagers at his high-school as "devils" trying to "take away" his "God." In a circular fashion, the novel closes with his final decision not to carry out the planned terrorist attack, which is paradoxically presented as a moral defeat, prompting him to remark while watching the busy crowds on the streets of New York that "[t]hese devils… have taken away my God."

Several critics and reviewers have pointed out Updike's schematic or Orientalist treatment of the other, as represented through Ahmad, while others have focused, I would say more productively, on the novel's wider engagement with race and multiculturalism in post-9/11 American society. "Brown-ness and its discontents are central to the novel" argues author Amitav Ghosh in his review of the work.[401] I agree with the importance of discussing the position occupied by race, both in Updike's depiction of the Islamist terrorist character and in his critical depiction of American multiculturalism in the new millennium.[402] Still, despite the often reductive and stereotypical depiction of race, and the often Orientalist approach to Islam in the novel, I agree with Anna Hartnell's critical defense of the novel her conclusion that "*Terrorist* begins the work of displacing the victim/perpetrator binary that binds America to the compulsion to repeat stories of its own innocence."[403] Nonetheless, placing the representation

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[401] Amitav Ghosh, "A Jihadist from Jersey," *Washington Post*, June 4, 2006, accessed June 4, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/01/AR2006060101520.html. While Ghosh merely enumerates the cases of racial stereotyping and the interpretable color gradation in Updike's description of his characters and points towards his problematic take on American multiculturalism, Mita Banerjee sees the novel as the flag-bearer of a supposed post-9/11 obsession with whiteness as the gateway to citizenship, which the novel duplicates through its schematic treatment of characters respective of the shade of their skin. She argues that the racism of the novel is beyond the reach of postcolonial critique and needs to be perceived as a fall back in time and analyzed through recourse to nineteenth century judicial racial profiling. Ghosh's remarks about race in this novel point to an important issue regarding the novel's problematic embrace of multiculturalism and American exceptionalism. While I agree with Ghosh's more moderate and somewhat bemused critique of Updike's linguistically anachronistic racial character descriptions, I believe Banerjee's accusation of "racial profiling" to be exaggerated and to ignore Updike's satirical tone. Mita Banerjee, "Whiteness of a Different Color"? Racial Profiling in John Updike's Terrorist," *Neohelicon*, December 2008, Volume 35, Issue 2, 13-28, accessed June 23, 2014, http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11059-008-4002-x.

[402] For a discussion of racial and ethnic diversity, which moves beyond the debatably racist character descriptions and linguistic use, to the political implications of the novel's engagement with race, class and the state of the contemporary US liberal democratic order see: Katherina Dodou, "America After 9/11: Ethnic Diversity and Patriotism in John Updike's *Terrorist*," *Transcultural Identities in Contemporary Literature*, eds. Irene Gilsenan Nordin, Julie Hansen, Carmen Zamorano Llena, (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2013).

[403] Anna Hartnell, "Violence and the Faithful in Post-9/11 America: John Updike's *Terrorist*, Islam, and the Spectre of Exceptionalism," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 57. 3 (2011): 477-502, 498. See also the more recent reworking of her article: Anna Hartnell, "Writing Islam in Post-9/11 America: John Updike's Terrorist," *Culture, Diaspora, and Modernity in Muslim Writing*, eds. Rehana Ahmed, Peter Morey, Amina Yaqin (New York:

of the terrorist in the context of Updike's earlier attempt at the representing the other in his novel *The Coup*, I would like to argue that there is a continuation in Updike's use of the other as a tool of defamiliarization, which provides the gateway to cultural self-criticism. The act of romanticizing the subaltern, to use Gayatri Spivak's term, in *The Coup* is coupled with a paradoxical triumphalist defeatism, to which I will refer to in more detail in what follows, and which makes the democratic criticism exercised in the novel partly futile. A similar phenomenon is also noticeable in *Terrorist*, where the act of speaking for the other, and using the other as a gateway to the self, is complicated by the still recent historical antecedent of the September 11 attacks.

In a continuation of his strategy of representing Mohamed Atta as a sufferer for a cause and a defender of moral purity in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Updike's depiction of a homegrown Islamist in *Terrorist* is guilty of the same fallacy of idealizing the other. It is worth pointing out in this context that the author had initially set out to write a novel about "a young Christian seminarian who sees everyone around him as a devil trying to take away his faith."[404] Distancing himself from authors like Philip Roth, who write from the often stifling perspective of one individual character, usually a Jewish intellectual like himself, Updike perceives the role of the artist as that of putting himself in the shoes of other people coming from backgrounds other than his own, through empathy:

> I think I felt I could understand the animosity and hatred which an Islamic believer would have for our system. Nobody's trying to see it from that point of view. I guess I have stuck my neck out here in a number of ways, but that's what writers are for, maybe… I sometimes think, 'Why did I do this?' I'm delving into what can be a very sore subject for some people. But when those shadows would cross my mind, I'd say, 'They can't ask for a more sympathetic and, in a way, more loving portrait of a terrorist.'[405]

Still, despite the author's declarations of sympathy, the novel's terrorist character falls flat as most critics agree; both those condemning the novel as racist or as a failure in dealing with the divide between "us" and "them," and those who see the merits of Updike's criticism of American liberal democracy. Perhaps the failure of the character lies precisely in Updike's afore mentioned dual scope in this novel, that of providing a critical outlook on contemporary society from the standpoint of a religious idealist and that of creating a sympathetic terrorist figure.

Routledge, 2012), 135-149.

[404] Charles McGrath, "In 'Terrorist,' a Cautious Novelist Takes On a New Fear," *The New York Times*, May 31, 2006, accessed June 4, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/31/books/31updi.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

[405] Ibid.

While the Christian seminarian character may have provided an inner perspective of a society at odds with its own ideals, replacing him with an Islamist idealist brings forth a plethora of cultural dichotomies, which seem to enforce the notion of a "clash of civilizations." The question that begs to be asked in light of this parallel between a potential Christian criticism of contemporary liberal democracy and the novel's critique offered in part through the voice of the supposed Islamist other, is whether the accusations addressed to Updike's novel by numerous critics and reviewers could not in fact be returned to sender. By discussing the representation of Ahmad solely through the prism of his racial and religious otherness, critics reify the very otherness they criticize. To put it simply, leaving aside racial and post-colonial critical paraphernalia, Ahmad's home-grown Islamism may be seen a case of the typically American teenage rebellion pattern preying on the current cultural capital of Islamist terrorism, and, at the same time, problematically inscribing Islamist terrorism in what Sacvan Bercovitch has called the ideology of American consensus. Furthermore, the idealization of the character may also be seen as a literary tool, rather than as a failure in representing the other. The idealized Ahmad bears many features of the "holy fool" typology in Russian literature, of which Fyodor Dostoyevsky's Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* would be the archetype. The idealized character of the "holy fool" functions as an ideal paragon emphasizing the moral failures of society. In her exploration of this typology in American literature, Dana Heller argues that:

> Dostoevsky's Prince Myshkin may indeed represent the social and philosophical problems inherent in the Christian ideal of goodness, however, the American Idiot represents the contradictions inherent in our utopian ideals of equality, democracy, and freedom, our well ordered -- one might say "religious" - manufacturing of social consensus and social consciousness at the cost of revolution.[406]

As in any American coming of age story, the notion of a generation gap comes into play, shaping and circumscribing the pattern of rebellion available to a given generation in a given historical context as a response to the rebellion pattern of the earlier generation. In *Terrorist*, the dilemmas of two different generations are put side by side: the radical and relativist generation of the sixties and the materialistic, apparently devoid of clear values, yet-to-be-defined generation coming of age in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The embodiment of the sixties generation is a character just as central to the story as Ahmad, namely Jack Levy, a non-observant American Jew, working as a high-school counselor trying to do right by a system he no longer believes in: "He sees himself as a pathetic elderly figure on a shore,

[406] Dana Heller, "Holy Fools, Secular Saints, and Illiterate Saviors," *American Literature and Popular Culture*, CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 5.3 (2003), accessed June 25, 2014, http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol5/iss3/4.

shouting out to a flotilla of the young as they slide into the fatal morass of the world – its dwindling resources, its disappearing freedoms, its merciless advertisements geared to a preposterous popular culture of eternal music and beer and impossibly thin and fit young females."[407] The angst-ridden, soon to retire former teacher is an everyman middle-class type tormented by the lack of meaning of his sedate suburban life, alongside an overweight German Lutheran wife and their declawed, spayed cat. Clearly a product of the sixties, a generation that still believed "the world could be reimagined by young people,"[408] the character is disenchanted with the compromises living in a "civilized" society entails: "This is life, living in housing, gulping down grease, shaving in the morning, taking a shower so you don't disgust the other guys at the conference with your pheromones."[409] A non-believer, both religiously and ideologically (he comes from a line of non-observing Jews, but who had been militant socialists, a legacy he does not pursue either), Jack Levy lives in a quiet desperation and with an unfocused constant feeling of guilt. Bits and pieces of philosophical reminiscences from his university years, the principles of a generation that had replaced the Bible with Camus, do not give him any peace of mind while he fantasizes that "the whole neighborhood could do with a good bomb."[410]

The teenagers in the novel have grown up in the culture of relativism that is an offshoot of the sixties, the post-Cold War "death of ideologies" and a new millennium unraveling the many failures of American imperialism. Ahmad's generation, caught up in the rampant consumption characterizing late capitalism, seems far from even imagining being able to revolutionize the world. Authors like Henry Miller, who in Jack Levy's youth have been marginal provocateurs, are now part of the high-school curriculum and the students are immune to this once shocking type of prose. As a former blooming industrial center, now a Third World-like slum, New Prospect, the fictional version of New Jersey in which the novel takes place, is an ironical reference to the degradation of the American Dream. The lack of rules and parental authority has the effect of turning the students Jack Levy is supposed to guide either into mindless addicts of some kind sinking into the same vicious circles as their parents, or into conformists finding the order and discipline they lack at home in religious belief and ritual. In light of this, Ahmad's conformism and religiosity appear to be his paradoxical means of rebellion. In a similar vein with J.D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield who felt stifled by the "phoniness" of the

[407] John Updike, *Terrorist*, (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 25.
[408] Ibid.
[409] Ibid., 28.
[410] Ibid., 32.

adult world, Ahmad too feels surrounded by a society that threatens to take away his God, his youthful purity. His relationship to God is very personal, an almost individualistic one as it manifests itself particularly in solitary moments, while the presence of others is seen as spiritually threatening. He suspects even his religious mentor Shaikh Rashid of having gone astray:

> He protects his God from this weary, unkempt, disbelieving old Jew, and guards as well his suspicion that Shaikh Rashid is so furiously absolute in his doctrines because God has secretly fled from his pale Yemeni eyes… Ahmad in his fatherless years with his blithely faithless mother has grown accustomed to being God's sole custodian, the one to whom God is an invisible but palpable companion. God is ever with him. As it says in the ninth sura, Ye have no patron or helper save God. God is another person close beside him, a Siamese twin attached in every part, inside and out, and to whom he can turn at any moment in prayer. God is happiness.[411]

It is this idealistic core, his faith, that Jack Levy recognizes in the youth and that sets him apart from the rest of the high-school students for whom he sees no hope of salvation and whose desires and personalities are indecipherable to him, "like a succession of CDs whose shimmering surface gives no clue to their contents without the equipment to play them."[412]

Updike brings to the foreground aspects of contemporary American culture and society that drown or threaten the spiritual lives of the population. The indiscriminate mindless consumption typical of late capitalism is embodied in Jack Levy's wife Beth, a self-conscious overweight librarian, going about her day constantly munching on something and watching brain-washing soap operas in her "Lazy Boy" armchair. Just like the family's declawed and spayed overweight cat that cannot leave the house anymore because it can no longer defend itself against other non-domesticated animals, the characters in the novel demonstrate how civilization and safety involve compromising the more violent, but at the same time vital elements of humanity. Levy contemplates the failure of both communism and capitalism. He sees capitalism as a ruthless "dog-eat-dog" system masked under the euphemism "free enterprise" that is numbing Americans into submission with the shallow and short lived gratifications of some "trashy –flashy new outfit they've bought at half price, or the latest hyper-violent new computer game, or some hot new CD everybody has to have, or a ridiculous new religion."[413] In his darkest hours, Jack Levy cannot imagine an escape from the present state of "civilized" society, save a return to an earlier stage of development, which entails a greater degree of violence, but also renewed vitality: "The basic problem the way I see it is, society tries to be decent, and decency cuts no ice in the state of nature. No ice whatsoever. We should all go back to being

[411] Ibid., 40.
[412] Ibid., 34.
[413] Ibid., 137.

hunter-gatherers, with a hundred-percent employment rate, and a healthy amount of starvation."[414]

Updike's systematic criticism of the state of the "free enterprise" society shows how the rhetoric of freedom in the West masks a more perverse form of oppression of the individual. Without explicitly making the connection to the major accusations brought against Islam, the novel engages with some of the paradoxes of "civilized" society and capitalist democracy, debunking claims to the moral primacy of the West as advocated by Martin Amis. The question of women's rights is oft cited by the critics of Islam and, although not directly addressing this issue, the novel also debunks claims of Western moral superiority in this respect by illustrating the effects of a consumer driven society on gender: the over-sexualization of women by the advertising industry and the over-sexualization they impose on themselves in order to compete on the "free" sexual market. Joryleen, Ahmad's African American love interest, is a case in point. Her evolution, or rather involution, from a good student and choir girl to prostitute after high-school graduation dramatizes the lack of options available to the underprivileged of a free society. The Third World-like slums of New Prospect paint an ironic picture of the lack of prospects available to its inhabitants, particularly to the African-Americans. Updike seems to make the case that the population of the slums is stuck in its dead-end situation. Many of the ctizens of New Prospect are the victims of a system that does not allow them to escape their condition, while consumerism and diverse types of addiction absorb the energy necessary for revolt. To make this even more poignant, not only are they victims of the system, but they perpetrate the chain of injustice by exploiting each other. Joryleen actually prostitutes herself for her boyfriend Tylenol, who is also her pimp and, as she makes clear, "owning" her is the only capital that the man can claim and his only means of survival in a neighborhood where such cases are not an exception. The description of a Methodist service at the Black church that Ahmad attends in order to hear Joryleen sing, shows a more luminous perspective of the African American community. A genuine togetherness and spirituality are fostered by the exaltation created through participatory gospel music and the call and response sermon structure that draws even Ahmad in, despite his rejection of "infidel" religion. Ahmad likens this trance like religious experience to that of Sufism, the more mystical side of Islam, that he perceives as missing from the very intellectual and sophistic kind of religious practice adopted by his imam and mentor from whom he feels increasingly estranged as the novel progresses. This depiction of the African American community as possessing a primitive spirituality is problematic and

[414] Ibid., 136.

the association between race and primitivism is recurrent in Updike's work. However, to put a spin on Walter Benn Michael's argument in *The Trouble with Diversity* in this context, the critical focus on the novel's stereotypical depiction of race and ethnicity,[415] has obscured its relevant social critique. Among the novels concerned with September 11, *Terrorist* is one of the very few which even bother to move beyond the status of the middle class. Offering a glimpse of the inequality at home, with New Prospect as a home-grown version of the Third World, the novel dramatizes on a smaller scale, the larger global implications of liberal capitalist expansion, contextualizing the terrorist attacks of September 11.

The fictional Mohammed Atta in Updike's earlier short story was committed to the preservation of his sisters' purity by protecting them from the corrupting influences of Western popular culture. Similarly, Ahmad is preoccupied with Joryleen's fate and asks the imam to send his martyr "paycheck" to her so that he can save her from her life as a prostitute. Due to his lack of apparent shortcomings, Ahmad is one-dimensional in comparison to the more complex portrayals of Jack Levy and even of secondary characters like Terry Mulloy, Ahmad's Irish-American mother, or Charlie, his boss and undercover secret service agent. The author himself remarked humorously that he felt he was treading on "so much shaky ground in the writing of this novel" that was happy "when Jack began to hit on Terry Mulloy… I felt I was in a scene I could handle. That little romance was very real — to me, at least. I liked those two because they're normal, godless, cynical but amiable modern people."[416] Here Updike gives away the limitations of his empathic approach when extended to the portrayal of the cultural other. Instead of engaging in an Orientalist critique of this endeavor, I would rather like to argue that the character of Ahmad is used as a tool of defamiliarization. Ahmad represents the ideal of moral perfection in a desacralized society; an idealized paragon which highlights the failings of contemporary America. His adherence to Islam is a spiritual quest rather than an act of cultural belonging and Updike unambiguously sets him apart from the Arab-American community:

> The younger Arab-Americans, idle and watchful, have adopted the bulky running shoes, droopy oversize jeans, and hooded sweatshirts of black homeys. Ahmad, in his prim white shirt and his black jeans slim as two stove pipes, would not fit in here. To these co-religionists, Islam is less a faith, a

[415] The satirical mode of the novel, I would argue, gives the same stereotypical treatment to characters of all shades. Interestingly, different critics have referred to different instances of racism. While Banerjee interprets Jack Levy's fullness of character in comparison to Ahmad's flatness as a privilege accorded due to his whiteness, in his review of the novel, critic James Wood finds the same character's portrayal to bear traces of anti-Semitism. James Wood, "Jihad and the Novel," *New Republic*, July 3, 2006, accessed June 1, 2011, http://www.newrepublic.com/article/books-and-arts/jihad-and-the-novel.
[416] McGrath.

> filigree door into the supernatural, than a habit, a facet of their condition as an underclass, alien in a nation that persists in thinking of itself as light-skinned, English speaking, and Christian. To Ahmad these blocks feel like an underworld he is timidly visiting, an outsider among outsiders.[417]

The other Arab-American characters that are given a voice in the novel, albeit secondary ones, are Shaik Rashid, Ahmad's mentor, who teaches him the Koran, and Charlie, the second generation Lebanese-American, whose father is a typical old school immigrant who has made it in the New World and who still believes in the American dream. Following the coming of age story framework, they are father figures for the fatherless Ahmad and they are both landmarks in his personal development. Ahmad's adjustment to society happens gradually as he becomes more and more critical of Shaik Rashid's intellectual, rationalizing approach to spirituality. Charlie plays a very important role in this process of societal integration by replacing the imam as a surrogate father in Ahmad's life. He attracts Ahmad into his terrorist plot and at the same time lectures him on the American revolution and how Washington and his troops have a lot in common with Al Qaeda, as they both represent the "underdog", the more primitive "Other" fueled by revolutionary energies, while fighting against the mightier, but ossified structures of empires. The type of sympathy for the "underdog" implied in this comparison between the American revolutionaries and the contemporary Jihadist is exactly what Amis was preaching against in his essay: "The jihad and the Revolution waged the same kind of war, Charlie explained – the desperate and vicious war of the underdog, the imperial overdog claiming fouls by the rules he has devised for his own benefit."[418] However, towards the end of the novel, it is revealed that Charlie, despite his rhetoric, has actually been working for the "overdog" as a secret government agent all along. Although this revelation casts a doubt over his earlier claims, he showcases the same contradictory affiliation with the novel as a whole, he is critical of American society, but remains nonetheless loyal to his country and in the end unheroically dies for it.

Instead of taking this opportunity to reevaluate its role as a superpower in the post 9/11 world, as Slavoj Zizek suggests, the US has reasserted "its traditional ideological commitments,"[419] one of the most problematic ones being the free market economy's dependence on consumerism that the Bush administration consolidated by calling on his countrymen to prove their patriotism by increasing their consumption: "All America wants of its citizens, your president has said, is for us to buy – to spend money we cannot afford and thus propel the economy

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[417] Updike, *Terrorist*, 244.
[418] Ibid., 286.
[419] Zizek.

forward for himself and other rich men… They all want Americans to be selfish and materialistic, to play their part in consumerism. But the human spirit asks for self-denial. It longs to say 'No' to the physical world."[420] Although born and raised in the US, Ahmad refers here to the president using the second person possessive pronoun instead of the first person, pointing to his rebellion against and detachment from his own national identity. Nonetheless, the narrator is very careful to also distance Ahmad from the hyphenated identity of Arab Americans, emphasizing his attachment to Islam as an act of rebellion and search for the father he has never known, rather than an act of ethnic belonging. His "exploration of Islamic identity ends at the mosque"[421] and he never enters the Arab American neighborhood nearby. Ahmad is not described as a violent, (self)-destructive person; quite the contrary, he understands jihad as an inner struggle for purity and is literally incapable of hurting a fly. His eventual cooption in a terrorist plot and planned martyrdom are not fueled by the destructive desires that are "the core reason" behind Martin Amis' Atta, but rather the only means of preserving the purity he so desperately clings to, by removing himself from a world of constant temptation and a life that threatens to draw him into its whirlpool and away from his ascetic relation to God. Incapable of going through with the suicide bombing, Ahmad embraces life at the expense of his saint-hood, accepting that being in the world entails inevitable corruption.

Ahmad's contrived outsider status and ascetic saintliness function as an idealized paragon against which the ills of American consumer culture which have preoccupied Updike throughout his career become more starkly contoured. For an author celebrated as the chronicler of provincial suburban American middle class life the perspective used in *Terrorist* seems to be a novelty. There is however an antecedent for the use of the contrived other's perspective to critically explore the absurdities of modernity and the paradoxes of liberal democratic societies: Updike's lesser known 1978 novel *The Coup*. Set in the fictional Black, Islamic, sub-Saharan land of Kush, *The Coup* is the memoir of the fictional general Ellellou, a charismatic leader who takes over his (waste)land in a military coup, in an attempt to keep his country free from both the more indirect influence of the US through humanitarian aid, diplomatic interventions or the wider global reach of liberal capitalism, and from the military presence of the USSR. In order to achieve this independence from the influence and interference of the two super-powers, he instates a Marxist-Islamic rule over a country at a tribal stage and ravaged by famine and drought. Ellellou is a charismatic leader in Max Weber's understanding of the term,

[420] Updike, 72.
[421] Ibid., 99.

a grotesque, contradictory and multifaceted figure who tries to keep his country from the contagion with Western materialism and consumerism and preserve it in a more primitive state that allows a certain spirituality that would become impossible in a "civilized" state. This romanticized and problematic representation of the other as a noble primitive in the Rousseauian tradition again lends itself to a postcolonial critique.[422] My interest lies in how his previous encounter with the other relates to his later, post 9/11 encounter with the supposed other within.

Despite the fact that the novel has been called Updike's least realistic one, the description of the land of Kush is extremely elaborate, in the author's famed ornate and intricate style. Written in a time when Third-World magic realism was living its days of glory, the novel has visible influences of this literary trend. The recourse to magic realism can also be an offshoot of the complex act of speaking for the Third World as a white Western author. Kathleen Lathrop demonstrates that the novel is at the same time indebted to literary modernism through its use of "the inversion of mythic elements."[423] The narrative construction of his post 9/11 *Terrorist* is more conservative, using a classical omniscient narrator and being extremely plot driven, while also borrowing elements from established Western literary genres like the coming of age story, or the thriller. *The Coup* is written in a deliberately volatile narrative voice belonging to General Ellellou that shifts from an almost mythical third person narrative, which has the tone of a comic hagiography, to a first person narrative with a more lighthearted autobiographical tone. The implications inherent to this use of narrative technique could be that the character's personality is torn between two world views, a mythological one of integration into a larger community closer to the state of nature, and the individualistic alienation of modern culture that he struggles against. His voice has both the archaic mythological tone of the Koran and that of a self-deprecating, self-conscious Western, postmodern trickster. The changing narrative voice also signals the complex dynamics at play when representing the cultural other, and keeps the reader guessing and always alert with regard to whose voice tells the story; the identity of the narrator being strategically withheld until the end of the novel. The very convoluted plot verging on magic realism involves a military coup and the beheading of the king by Ellellou himself, encounters with Russian troupes and American diplomats, the burning alive

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[422] Malini Schueller, "Containing the Third World: John Updike's *The Coup*," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, Volume 37, Number 1, Spring 1991, 113-128.

[423] Kathleen Lathrop, **"***The Coup*: John Updike's Modernist Masterpiece**,"** *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, Volume 31, Number 2, Summer 1985, 249-262. "… although the mode of *The Coup* is comic, employing grotesque exaggeration and the inversion of mythic elements, the underlying message is serious: Western technology and its attendant consumer ethic are reducing the earth to a spiritual wasteland in which the integrated man has been doomed to oblivion."

of an American relief aid worker on a pyre of relief aid cereals, the general's numerous love interests (he has three wives, including an American, and two mistresses) and a quest for a mythical source of water through the desert. The general's understanding of Islam has very little in common with Ahmad's ascetic approach to religion and his quest for purity and sublimation. He is adamant about rejecting Western consumer capitalism, but other than that he is a hopeless womanizer, commits murder with no apparent remorse and combines a very intellectual understanding of the world (he is versed both in the Koran, several foreign languages and in Western philosophy, his references ranging from Adam Smith to Heidegger and Voltaire) with a charismatic leader persona reminiscent of Arab folk tales. As in the case of Ahmad, Ellellou's adhesion to Islam is a matter of personal choice rather than a part of his ethnic identity, and a means of rebelling against Western values. Significantly enough, he converts to Islam during his stay in the US as a university student while attending a Black-Muslim mosque, but he quickly becomes disenchanted with the lack of revolutionary ethos of his African-American brethren. The incorporation of dissent typical of what Sacvan Bercovitch has called the American ideology is perceived by Ellellou as an annihilation of the American Black-Muslim revolutionary energies.

Updike's portrayal of characters is always a bit tongue in cheek and he clothes his postmodern irony in an apparently old fashioned realism. The characters in *The Coup* are grotesque and flat. They are typologies meant to illustrate a certain societal function or dysfunction. The mode is satirical and successfully so, unlike Amis' attempts at the same effect, and that is the case because Ellellou is humanized: he is a murderer, a misguided fool and a dictator, but also a utopian idealist and a quixotic hero. The targets of the satire are both the revolutionary (in)capabilities of many African countries and particularly the role of US intervention in the region, the indiscriminate Westernization of the Third World and its tragic consequences. According to Malini Schueller, satire in *The Coup* "serves ostensibly to question the validity of both imperialistic and revolutionary ideologies."[424] Despite taking on the role of a despot, Ellellou discovers he has no power over his own land. He wants to be its spiritual leader, but knows very little about the material conditions of the country. His quest for water during a severe drought uncovers the diffusion of power within the country. He discovers Russian agents using the people's superstitions to turn them against their ruler, while his own minister Ezana, the typical bureaucrat, is gradually usurping his charismatic authority and taking over with the support of

[424] Schueller, 118.

the Americans. The ultimate proof of the defeat of the charismatic leader model through bureaucratization and technologization is his discovery of an oasis of Western capitalism and consumerism in the desert that was created around an American oil exploitation authorized by Ezana behind Ellellou's back. The city bears the general's name and has his statue in the center, but, in a postmodern twist, none of its citizens recognize him in person. This copy of an American small town in the middle of the desert is contrasted to the primitive nomadic herder life on the brink of starvation led by the majority of the population. The inhabitants of the town Ellellou are completely taken with the mirage of the apparent affluence offered to them in this simulacrum of middle class American life. After being defeated in his attempt to start a revolution among the proletariat there, ironically through an offer of free beer by the oil company, Ellellou settles for anonymity and a job in a fast food restaurant, as his countrymen consider him dead. His revolutionary impetus succumbs under the lulling comfort offered by a consumer capitalist society, although he is still aware of how it corrupts human vitality, vigor and spirituality:

> They had lost, make no mistake, the attractive muscular lightness of alert predators, the leanness that balanced them upon the land as airily as our maidens balance bundles of tamarisk faggots upon their heads. People no longer looked carved, as they had in the village, in the army, and even in those early days of independence and monarchy in Istiqlal. These bodies sauntering along the Avenue of the End of Woe, clothed in decaled denim that did for holidays as well as labor days, had been less whittled than patted into shape. A loss of tension, of handsome savagery, was declared also in their accents, which had yielded the glottal explosiveness of their aboriginal tongues to a gliding language of genial implication and sly nonchalance. . . The business of oil, of the businesses that clustered around the business of oil, preempted the mental spaces formerly devoted to battle and ritual, to earth and God, so that these last two came to loom (I suspected) as not only strangers but monsters, unthinkables, like the abstruse formulae of science whereby oil was lifted from its porous matrix and its tangled molecules sorted into saleable essences.[425]

The Romantic nostalgia for the primitive visible in *The Coup* affiliates it to literary modernism, but its irony are recognizably postmodern. Particularly postmodern is the Foucaultian treatment of the shifty and diffuse nature of power over this fictional African land. Ellellou finds that he has never really had any power over it and that, aside from him, several other agents claimed their authority over this barren land. The Americans use trade and diplomacy to further their influence, bribing the bureaucrat Ezana to usurp the power of the charismatic leader. On another front, the Russians, through their secret agents and not so secret military presence, use

[425] John Updike, *The Coup* (London: Penguin Books, 1979), 220.

the superstitions of the people and the image of the former beheaded king in order to usurp Ellellou's rule. The comedic tone of the novel ironically covers a nihilistic core in postmodern spirit. Although it glorifies of the primitive and the pastoral, while negatively depicting Western capitalism with its expansionist technologization of production, the novel ends with the apparent victory of the latter over the former in an example of what I have previously called defeatist triumphalism. Ellellou seems to be pacified by his job in a fast food restaurant in the island of capitalism founded by the Americans around an oil source in the desert. The capitalist technologically driven affluence, while contrasted to the hardship and scarcity of traditional, primitive pastoral Kush, is depicted both as leading towards inevitable doom, and at the same time as inescapable and overpoweringly attractive to the individual. The natural landscape of Kush allows its inhabitants their meager survival as long as they preserve the natural balance through keeping up their traditional nomad pastoral life. Western technological interference accelerated production, but at the same time destroyed the natural order by making it possible to dig wells. This technological enhancement paradoxically brought on the total exhaustion of the water supply by allowing a stationary life for the former nomadic population, which in turn caused herds to over-feed on the little vegetation available, thus leaving the land utterly barren and eventually even the newly built wells dry.

Still, the question that looms over this flamboyant narrative construction is why an American author, generally known for his exploration of middle class America, would choose to invent a mythical land in Africa. Ellellou's Marxist and Islamic education takes place while he is a student in the USA and upon return to his native land he sets about creating a country that would be a negative double of the US and the Western values that he had learned to despise. Even though he describes this fictional African country in great detail, the vivid image of this Third World landscape where every day is a struggle for survival is often contrasted with a sudden flash of American middle class affluence and tame tranquility. The alterity of the African landscape allows for a contrasting look back at the West. Ellellou has frequent flashbacks in which he remembers, with paradoxical nostalgia, the time he spent in the US. This is even more obvious in Updike's repeated use of the black gaze over the white character in order to achieve the same effect of defamiliarization through a reversal of racial roles:

> When he stood beside me, I could smell on the victim, under the sweat of his long stale wait and the bland, oysterish odor of his earnestness, the house of his childhood, the musty halls, the cozy bathroom soaps, the glue of his adolescent hobbies, the aura of his alcoholic and sexually innocent parents, the ashtray scent of dissatisfaction. What dim wish to do right, hatched by the

watery blue light of the television set with its curious international shadows,
had led him to the fatal edge of a safety that he imagined had no limits?[426]

Both in *Terrorist* and *The Coup*, Updike's radicals cannot resist the temptations of the middle class and of the American ideology, but the real life 9/11 terrorists, who were part of the middle class in their respective countries of provenance, or as graduate students in Europe, could. The power of the "pursuit of happiness" project initialized by the American Revolution is still the mirage that holds society in order in Updike's novels: "'you… may wonder why the American revolution has lasted nearly two hundred years, and yours is limping after only five. The answer is. All our Founding Fathers promised was the pursuit of happiness. Our people are still pursuing it, they'll never catch up to it; if they did, they'd turn right around and blame the Revolution.'"[427] Just as Ellellou's revolutionary fervor is absurdly tamed by the comforting routine of a fast-food chain job in a simulacrum of American suburbia in the African desert, Ahmad's ascetic martyr fervor is quelled by a sexual encounter with Joryleen, signaling an awakening of the flesh and a weakening of the spirit. Finally, the act of terror planned without conviction is deterred through the timely intervention of Jack Levy. In the last scene of the novel, Mr. Levy intercepts Ahmad and his truck full of explosives right before entering the Lincoln tunnel connecting New Jersey to Manhattan. A flawed, but amiably benign representative of American liberal ideology, Jack Levy replies to Ahmad's anti-Semitic remarks, which are part of the youth's cliché-laden Jihadist repertoire, by resorting to American exceptionalist multiculturalism: "'Hey, come on, we're all Americans here. That's the idea, didn't they tell you that at Central High? Irish-Americans, African-Americans, Jewish-Americans; there are even Arab-Americans.'"[428] Levy's final meager attempt at being the spokesperson meant to convince the suicide bomber to choose life comes in contradiction to the character's previously expressed critical view of civilization and the US and the thoughts that his own neighborhood would do with a good bomb. The forced dialogue between Levy and Ahmad includes, aside from the conciliatory remark quoted above and several parallels between the vengefulness of the Torah and the Koran, the revelation that Charlie, Ahmad's Jihadi mentor, has been an undercover CIA operative all along. Charlie, with his contradictory love of American popular culture and half-baked parallels between the American revolutionaries and Islamist terrorists, stands as an example for what a successful Arab-American may be. Charlie's ambiguity, along

[426] Ibid., 43.
[427] Ibid., 196.
[428] Updike, *Terrorist*, 301.

with Levy's turn from cultural pessimist to multiculturalist, however, echo the novel's unconvincing final conciliatory tone and reveal Updike's conflicted take on terrorism and liberal capitalism.

In his review of the novel, Amitav Ghosh presents the above quoted remark as Levy's highest argument meant to persuade Ahmad against committing the act of terror. The author sees this appeal to American multiculturalism as limited, and argues instead that a wider humanist approach may have been more appropriate. Jack Levy's remark is partly taken out of context by Ghosh. To be more accurate, Ahmad's final decision not to go through with the terrorist act seems less the result of Levy's appeal to conciliatory Americanism, but is rather motivated by his own inability to commit murder. His dormant humanism is awakened by the presence of two little children in the car in front of them in the traffic jam at the entrance of the tunnel. The dialogue between Levy and Ahmad is punctuated repeatedly by the visual interaction between the two children and Ahmad. The humanist image of the playful "children in the vehicle ahead, lovingly dressed and groomed by their parents, bathed and soothed every night"[429] is paralleled, however, by the recurrent appearance in the traffic jam of an aggressive driver "too young to have earned a Mercedes;"[430] a "presumptuous and unworthy investment thief of a driver."[431] The aggressive presence in the traffic of the young stock broker, who is perceived by Ahmad as an exponent of the type of young investment professionals who have jumped from the burning towers on September 11, brings back into focus the novel's critique of neoliberalism.

The recourse to multiculturalism comes in contradiction to the novel's general criticism of the economic implications of race, in another instance of defeatist triumphalism, arguing both that the system does not work and that it will inevitably prevail. In a prophetic moment in *The Coup*, Ellellou predicts that, irrespective of how deeply flawed and self-destructive the liberal capitalist system actually is, it will win the Cold War for the Americans: "when the whistling section of 'The River Kwai March' penetrated us, we knew, knew in our bones, that we would win the Cold War. Freedom, like music, rolled straight through the heart."[432] General Ellellou's use of the first person plural here shows his final identification with the culture that he has previously seen as the antagonist and his incorporation by it. In *The Coup*, it is implied

[429] Ibid., 307.
[430] Ibid., 291.
[431] Ibid., 308.
[432] Updike, *The Coup*, 260.

that through the global expansion of liberal capitalism and consumption, the American ideology of consensus (understood here in a wider sense, as a civilizational process) becomes globalized as well. *Terrorist*, on the other hand, circumscribes the threat of Islamist terrorism into the pattern of American dissent, illustrating the main character's passage through "the rites of assent," in a final contradictory resort to American exceptionalism. The question that remains to be answered is if "the American way" still has what it takes to win the war on terror, as *Terrorist* seems to suggest.

Writing "Novels about Human Beings:" Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*

> *The politicians want to see it as black and white, good and evil, and art wants to see it as a human thing.* [433]

In recent discussions about post 9/11 literature, particularly when it comes to the representation of terrorism, there is the inevitable reference to one of DeLillo's much discussed, but perhaps not entirely well understood novels, *Mao II*. The idea put forth by a character, the writer Bill Gray, that in contemporary society terrorists are taking over the role of the artist in altering "the inner life of the culture" is often taken out of the context of the novel and considered to be the author's artistic credo. [434] A look back at this novel published in 1991, in connection to his post 9/11 work, shows a more nuanced view of the nexus between art and terror than this isolated and overly used quote suggests. The complex female characters in DeLillo's works have rarely been treated as spokespersons for the author himself although they play central parts in his more recent novels. He has actually refuted the recurrent identification with his writer character in *Mao II* in an interview:

> Well, believe it or not, Bill and I have very little in common. In fact, even though we are both writers he was very difficult for me to discover, to find. There is a female character in Mao II named Karen, and as soon as I began

[433] Palestinian director of *Paradise Now* Hany Abu-Assad quoted in Dan Glaister, "'It Was a Joke I Was Even Nominated,'" *The Guardian*, January 20, 2006, accessed June 7, 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/film/2006/jan/20/israelandthepalestinians.comment.

[434] James Wood, "Tell Me How Does It Feel?," *The Guardian*, October 6, 2001, accessed June 6, 2012, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/oct/06/fiction

"For who would dare to be knowledgeable about politics and society now? Is it possible to imagine Don DeLillo today writing his novel Mao II - a novel that proposed the foolish notion that the terrorist now does what the novelist used to do, that is, 'alter the inner life of the culture'?"

> to create this character I felt I knew exactly who she was and it was easy… The fact that he's a writer didn't give me particular access to him. He is an absolutely fictional character.[435]

According to his editor, Don DeLillo kept two files, one on "art" and the other on "terror," which eventually became merged.[436] DeLillo's perspective on the connection between terror, violence and art can best be understood by adopting a more holistic view of his novels *Mao II* and *Falling Man*, rather than focusing on the statements of a single character.

The visual arts have been a constant interest and source of inspiration for DeLillo and all his major novels use ekphrasis[437] as a tool in conveying complex themes and commenting on the role, the potential and the limits of artistic representation. In *Mao II*, the references to Andy Warhol's work by the same title quite overtly point to the central theme of the novel: the power, danger and attraction represented by the masses, by ideologies that propagate self-effacement and a group mentality, set in contrast to the individualist ideology of the artist understood in the modernist sense, whose ultimate goal is originality, distinguishing himself from the masses and operating "raids" on their consciousness. According to the author, the starting point for the novel were two images that seemed to stand in contrast to each other. One represented the cult novelist J.D. Salinger ambushed by photographers after a long self-imposed period of seclusion and the other a Moonie wedding, a crowd of hundreds of identical pairs getting married on Yankee Stadium. Put side by side, these two images represent extreme individualism juxtaposed to extreme uniformity.[438] The protagonist, Bill Gray, is a fictional representation of the modernist conception of the Western artist constantly striving for originality. Frank Lentricchia traces this artist typology back to the Romantics, to Wordsworth, continuing in modernism and postmodernism and connecting the artist to the terrorist as they both commit symbolic acts of violence.[439] Terrorists, he argues, in the same vein as Jean Baudrillard, choose their targets not according to their strategic or military significance, but for their symbolic value. The avant-garde school of modernism is particularly prone to associations with symbolic acts of terrorism, as its aim has been to "épater la bourgeoisie," to shock and attack accepted

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[435] Thomas DePietro, *Conversations with Don DeLillo* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 155.
[436] Ibid., 80.
[437] In *Mao II* the reference to Warhol's work by the same name is self evident, in *Underworld* he describes Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Triumph of Death* and a lost film by cult Russian filmmaker Sergey Eisenstein, *The Body Artist* includes a detailed description of the main character's work of art, *Falling Man* abounds with references to Giorgio Morandi's still lifes and the "happening" of a fictional performance called Falling Man, and even the more recent *Omega Point* is inspired by an installation by visual artist Douglass Gordon, *24 Hour Psycho*, to name but a few instances.
[438] DePietro, 80.
[439] Frank Lentricchia and Jody McAuliffe, *Crimes of Art and Terror* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

societal conventions, to shake societal mores to the core. In the novel, Gray's writing is under the threat of becoming irrelevant, or rather it has already become so, due to two societal phenomena, both encoded in Warhol's painting: the culture of mechanical reproduction that leads towards the commodification of avant-garde art and the attraction ideologies proliferating uniformity and self-effacement, like Maoism, Moonism or Islamism, hold over the masses, threatening the individualism that is at the heart of both liberal society and modernist art.

The novel's development seems to imply that individualism creates a vicious circle leading towards the very consumerist society that absorbs originality in the same way as liberal democracy incorporates dissent. Although adopting a modernist counter-cultural conception of art, Bill does not want to enroll himself in the cause of real life terrorists and he dismisses the myth of the "terrorist as solitary outlaw:" "These groups are backed by repressive governments. They're perfect little totalitarian states. They carry the old wide-eyed vision, total destruction and total order."[440] Coming out of his reclusive hide-away, Bill is thrown into a terrorist plot and is forced to grapple with the real life embodiments of what he had previously only approached rhetorically or symbolically and gradually grows to reject the association between artist and terrorist, seeing the latter as the tool of repressive regimes and the former as the vessel through which human individuality finds a voice; one stands for totality and uniformity, while the other for "ambiguities, contradictions, whispers, hints." Moving away from his early associations between the novelist and the terrorist, Bill reconfigures his definition of the novel as "a democratic shout" setting it in opposition to the totalizing tendencies of terrorism: "Even if I could see the need for absolute authority, my work would draw me away. The experience of my own consciousness tells me how autocracy fails, how total control wrecks the spirit, how my characters deny my efforts to own them completely, how I need internal dissent, self argument, how the world squashes me the minute I think it's mine."[441] Bill's decision to travel to war-torn Beirut and trade himself in exchange for a Swiss poet taken as hostage by a Maoist terrorist group is a particularly ambiguous turn of events. His gesture could both be interpreted as a final act of self-effacement through suicide, or, quite the contrary, as the egotistical finishing touch in creating the mysterious artist persona that he has been cultivating all his life.

The other artist who plays a central role in the novel is Brita, the photographer who is assigned to immortalize the reclusive Bill. As a photographer she does not work to change the world, but rather to capture it through her art, to catch the fleeting significant moment and

[440] Don DeLillo, *Mao II* (London: Vintage, 1991), 158.
[441] Ibid., 159.

immortalize it. Although she doesn't embrace radicalism, Brita is aware of the human desire to belong to and to blend in with a crowd bound by ritual, perhaps as a nostalgic reenactment of the lost "oceanic feeling:"

> Bill doesn't understand how people need to blend in, lose themselves in something larger. The point of mass marriage is to show that we have to survive as a community instead of individuals trying to master every complex force… Think of the future and see how depressed you get. All the news is bad. We can't survive by needing more, wanting more, standing out, grabbing all we can.[442]

Brita offers here a critique of the liberal individualism which is both at the core of liberal capitalism and of modernist art.

The other female character, Karen, one of the hundreds of identical brides in the Moonie wedding that opens the novel, is constantly searching for a larger cause into which to immerse herself by becoming the anonymous, but purposeful member of a group. The ultra individualist Bill finds her presence in his home comforting and he also implies that, although an unbeliever himself, he needs the self-sacrificing crowds to believe for him, to preserve the balance of the world. Despite the inglorious death of the modernist artist embodied by Bill, which might suggest that the modernist conception of art, which requires endless innovation, is becoming obsolete in a world where terrorism and mass production conspire to make such art irrelevant, the novel concludes with a glimmer of hope both for art and for the individual. Echoing the opening of the novel that depicts a mass wedding characterized by uniformity, the ending describes an almost surreal image of another unintentionally unique wedding, a beautiful crowd of people celebrating life at the break of dawn in the rubble of war torn Beirut. The representational art epitomized by photography, which captures the uncanniness of fleeting lived experience, seems to have survived in the same unlikely setting:

> There is a flash out there in the dark near a major check point. Then another in the same spot, several more, intense and white. She waits for the reciprocating flash, the return fire, but all the bursts are in one spot and there is no sound… Someone is out there with a camera and a flash unit. Brita stays on the balcony for another minute, watching the magnesium pulse that brings an image to a strip of film… The dead city photographed one more time.[443]

The same dialectics of the modern alienated individual and the individual integrated in a group united by a self-effacing ideology is also present in DeLillo's post 9/11 exploration of terrorism and art in *Falling Man*. The fragmented narrative structure mirrors the individuality of the characters in their search for meaning and belonging, having the democratic quality that

[442] Ibid., 89.
[443] Ibid., 241.

DeLillo's character in *Mao II* described as the essential function of the novel. Both victims and perpetrators are put on equal footing and allowed to have a voice. Still, as in the case of Updike and Amis, the use of the limited third person narrative makes the appropriation of the voice of the terrorist problematic. Through the intradiegetic discussion on terrorism, which is treated from a variety of angles, however, the novel achieves a degree of self-reflexivity, which partly legitimizes the act of speaking for others.

Unlike Amis and Updike in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, who base their characters on Mohammed Atta, DeLillo's character, Hammad, is probably based on Ziad Jarrah, described by his acquaintances as a good humored young man and known to have had a Turkish-German girlfriend. If Amis' Atta is an embittered life-denying nihilist and Updike's is an idealized ascetic Romantic avenger, DeLillo's Hammad is a stocky young man, eating junk food and having an active sexual live and a girlfriend. Despite occasional moments of doubt, he becomes entangled in the brotherhood created in the process of plotting the attack. In *Mao II*, terrorism is central to the plot, but the terrorists don't have a voice and the approach to this thorny topic is constantly mediated through the point of view of Western characters, while remaining mostly on a theoretical level. *Falling Man* contains its share of theoretical discussions about terrorism, but allows the reader to become immersed in a few episodes from the unspectacular everyday life of a terrorist in the making. Hammad is presented as having certain doubts with regard to his mission when he wishfully thinks that they will not be able to go through with the plan without getting caught. There is a dreamlike quality to his choices, which, as is often the case with DeLillo's characters, seem to be beyond his grasp. At the same time, Hammad's perspective is an occasion for a defamiliarized look at the United States and at the gap between the apparently harmless sedateness of everyday life in a developed Western society and the structural violence exercised by the super-power in other parts of the world: "These people jogging in the park, world domination. These old men who sit in bench chairs, veined white bodies and baseball caps, they control our world. He wonders if they think of this, ever. He wonders if they see him standing here, clean-shaven, in tennis sneakers."[444]

The novel problematizes terrorism intra-diegetically through the polemic approach on the subject in the opinions expressed by characters, but also through the juxtaposition of three characters who represent different types of violence and terrorism. Despite his doubts, Ham-

[444] DeLillo, *Falling Man*, 173.

mad ends up following the plan unflinchingly, his act being motivated by the spirit of camaraderie, the manly connection to his fellow plotters and the inner peace that comes from following instructions, respecting a ritual and pursuing a path that had been laid out for him:

> They felt things together, he and his brothers. They felt the claim of danger and isolation. They felt the magnetic effect of plot. Plot drew them together more tightly than ever. Plot closed the world to the slenderest line of sight, where everything converges to a point. There was the claim of fate, that they were born to this. There was the claim of being chosen, out there, in the wind and sky of Islam. There was the statement that death made, the strongest claim of all, the highest jihad.[445]

The same tendency to romanticize the terrorist as the embodiment of a more primitive, purer, albeit more violent stage of human development seems to have influenced both DeLillo and Updike. For DeLillo, nonetheless, this group dynamic and desire for self-effacement and discipline is not an attribute exclusively characteristic of the more primitive exotic other, but rather a larger human propensity explored in *Mao II* through the central theme of the power of crowds. In *Falling Man*, Hammad's surrender to the rituals of the terrorist fraternity is mirrored by the post-traumatic struggles of Keith, who, after surviving the attacks, enters the ritualistic world of competitive poker and struggles to deal with what Lianne voices in his stead as an unconscious desire "to kill somebody."[446] The connection between the two characters is restated in the narrative construction of last chapter depicting Hammad's last moments before his plane hit one of the World Trade Center Towers, which seamlessly slides into Keith's experience in one of the towers right after the impact.[447] The narrative strategy captures the notion that "parts of our world, have crumbled into theirs, which means we are living in a place of danger and rage," from DeLillo's article "In the Ruins of the Future."

The juxtaposition of two different types of terrorism, the political Western radicalism of the sixties represented by Martin, the art dealer with a shady past (he may have been part of the German Commune One), and Hammad, the Oriental other, pursuing a radical religious path, reveals the complicated dynamics of representing the other, as formulated by Nina: "Maybe he was a terrorist, but he was one of ours, she thought, and the thought chilled her, shamed her – one of ours, which meant godless, Western, white."[448] The revolt against Western capitalism and its insidious power, resorting to violence as the only means to achieve political or spiritual goals and the cell organization are elements which unite these two forms of terrorism in Martin's view: "He thinks these people, these jihadists, he thinks they have something

[445] Ibid., 174.
[446] Ibid., 214.
[447] Ibid., 239.
[448] Ibid., 194.

in common with the radicals of the sixties and seventies. He thinks they are all part of the same classical pattern. They have their theorists. They have their vision of world brotherhood."[449] Because it is a radical extension of Western culture, the sixties type of radicalism seems to be "the devil we know," an easier to accept aberration, which can glide into heroism when the acts of terrorism are seen as the ultimate gesture of self-criticism. In the same manner, the shock value of avant-garde art is absorbed by the culture by being perceived as an extension of its democratic values and freedom of expression and turned gradually into the norm. Martin's views on September 11 echo Jean Baudrillard, who argued that the attack was the natural outcome of Western capitalist hubris embodied in the Twin Towers and that subconsciously the rest of the world desired the destruction of these colossal monuments glorifying capitalism and the free market economy. Like Noam Chomsky, Martin argues for a historicization of the event, for understanding it in the context of American imperialism and the unequal power it has exercised over Third World countries. In this respect, he antagonizes his life partner Nina who sees the terrorist out of history, as fanatics acting to fulfill the will of their vengeful God, a regression to an earlier stage of humanity, to an age of simple "an eye for an eye" dichotomies, as opposed to the complex dynamics of technologized postmodern contemporary society. This difference of opinion gradually erodes the relationship between the two characters, who in the end break up, mirroring the wider intellectual debates of the time and the division of the Left.

Both human compulsions discussed in *Mao II*, radical individualism and the power of crowds, may lead individuals to terrorist violence. If the white Western terrorists committed their acts as a response to the cooption mechanisms of capitalism, in a radical attempt at individuation, the Islamist other is presented as guided by group dynamics:

> This is not the self-watcher, the soft white dangling boy who shoots someone to keep from disappearing into himself. The terrorist shares a secret and a self. At a certain point he and his brothers may begin to feel less motivated by politics and personal hatred than by brotherhood itself. They share the codes and protocols of their mission here and something deeper, a vision of judgment and devastation.[450]

The type of Western radicalism epitomized by Martin is also connected to a radical view of art distilled from Romanticism. Aspiring to have as much power over the human consciousness as a terrorist, the artist is reduced to a pornographic imitator of the real life act of terror, as is the case with the performance artist self-entitled Falling Man, whose "happenings" are shocking reenactments of the terror inflicted upon "the public" of the real attack that do not

[449] Ibid.,147
[450] DeLillo, "In the Ruins of the Future."

allow the experience of catharsis. More emphatically than in *Mao II*, the novel allows for hope with regard to the fate of Western art, contrasting the dissolution of avant-garde art (like Bill, the Falling Man also dies in a similarly ambiguous self-sacrificial way)[451] with a return to a more austere and modest idea of art. The use of ekphrasis in the novel illustrates two competing views on the role of art. The avant-garde repetitive performance of the Falling Man who reenacts a singular life experience is set in contrast to the still lifes of Giorgio Morandi, an austere artist who does not fit any categorization and whose work captures the complexity of banal everyday objects.

The title of the novel carries many potential significations. Falling implies movement, a negative type of progression towards an unavoidable crash, which may stand for the fate of the modernist conception of art, as well as for Western liberalism, both being based on notions of constant innovation or progress. The original title under which the first excerpts from the novel have been published, namely *Still Life*, on the other hand, evokes a static and representational type of art. Like, the role of photography in *Mao II*, a still life arrests time, while at the same time being a reminder of the universality of death. Through the use of ekphrasis, the novel seems to suggest that the maturation of Western art implies a departure from the ideals of the avant-garde and a return to what one would have previously described as bourgeois art. This development is illustrated through the change in Martin's perception of Morandi's works, as described by his partner and post-9/11 political antagonist, Nina:

> 'When we first knew each other I talked to him about Giorgio Morandi. Showed him a book. Beautiful still lifes. Form, color, depth…Went to Bologna to see the work firsthand. Came back saying no, no, no. Minor artist. Empty, self-involved, bourgeois. Basically a Marxist critique, this is what Martin delivered.'… 'Twenty years later.' 'He sees form, color, depth, beauty.' … 'He sees the light.'[452]

Using ekphrasis to reflect on the role and ethics of representation, the novel achieves a degree of self-reflexivity, which, as Hal Foster following Walter Benjamin has suggested, makes the act of speaking for others less fallacious. Furthermore, by creating an intradiegetic open conversation on terrorism among characters coming from different ideological standpoints, the novel offers a dialectical approach to the complex topic. The recurrent discussions between Nina and Martin on the causes of terrorism and the proper response to it remain open. Echoing

[451] Lianne researches the Falling Man's death and discovers it may have been caused by his dangerous acts of falling and their long term traumatic impact on his body. As in the case of Bill in *Mao II*, the Falling Man remains a mysterious figure, appearing in turn to be a misguided provocateur and heroically self-sacrificial in terms of his artistic endeavors.

[452] DeLillo, *Falling Man*, 145-146.

Martin Amis' perspective on terrorism Nina argues that: "'It's not the history of Western interference that pulls down these societies. It's their own history, their mentality. They live in a closed world, of choice, of necessity. They haven't advanced because they haven't wanted to or tried to.'"[453] The former sixties radical character, Martin, argues in lines partly similar to Updike's critique of American imperialism and neoliberal globalism, but without the author's emphasis on religion, which the character perceives only as the provider of a language in which political, historical or economical grievances can be articulated: "'Forget God. These are matters of history. This is politics and economics. All the things that shape lives, millions of people, dispossessed, their lives, their consciousness.'"[454]

In the spirit of William James' argument about the validity of the different varieties of human religious experience, the novel doesn't allow any of its character perspectives to have primacy over the other. In a narrative voice that has the austerity of Morandi's brush strokes, all the limited third person perspectives represent valid and at the same time flawed individual struggles for achieving a sense of purpose and meaning in a complex world. While Lianne unsuccessfully seeks comfort and meaning in religion or different group affiliations post-9/11, she eventually finds a degree of self-awareness and solace despite remaining undecided and unaffiliated in her spiritual quest. Hammad and Keith follow a similar compulsion of being part of a group bound by ritual and discipline, partly in order to avoid confronting their own doubts. Like objects in a still life, some of the characters occupy the foreground, like Lianne, Hammad and Keith, while others, like Nina and Martin, remain in the background, but all of them are necessary for achieving the balance of the whole. Reviews of Morandi's paintings tend to become quite poetical in describing the essentially human life experience they capture, despite their inanimate subjects. The following one might as well apply to DeLillo's *Falling Man*: "On closer inspection, I discovered how strange the painting was, how the objects seemed to be fighting for each other's space. One could not determine their size or location. They appeared both flat and dimensional, and were so tenderly painted that the paint itself seemed to be the subject."[455] In the immediate aftermath of September 11, critic James Wood expressed his dissatisfaction with the development of the Anglo-American novel in the decade before the attacks and called for a renewed novelistic sensibility in light of the historical occurrence. In particular, Wood targeted the claims to sprawling sociological insight in Don DeLillo's pre-

[453] Ibid., 47.
[454] Ibid.
[455] Peter Schjeldahl, "Tables for One: Giorgio Morandi's Still-lifes," *The New Yorker*, September 22, 2008, accessed May 8, 2012, http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/artworld/2008/09/22/080922craw_artworld_schjeldahl#ixzz1FCQCLZlR

9/11 large canvas novels. Almost appearing to have taken Wood's advice to heart, *Falling Man* is a novel "about being human," reflecting "the newly dark lights of the age"[456] like a broken mirror made up of several individual consciousnesses, including that of the terrorist.

Conclusion

In the Palestinian film *Paradise Now*, two would-be-suicide bomber characters are presented in the last days before the attacks in their familiar surroundings and through their familial relations, which are crucial for their radical final decisions. Despite the narrow temporal focus of the narrative, their (in)decisions to commit an act of terrorism are contextualized both politically and personally. Comparing terrorist novels written after 9/11 by authors with Muslim backgrounds with those by Western authors, a very significant formal difference becomes evident. The non-Western authors choose a less authoritative auctorial strategy and a more complex point of view that does not offer the reader direct access to the mind of the terrorist character, framing the story in such a way as to create a context for the act of violence and, most importantly, problematizing the issue of representing the terrorist other by adopting self-reflexive narrative strategies. The distancing narrative strategies lay bare the many layers of othering which may be involved in the depiction of a terrorist; an act which represents not only a cultural challenge, but also one related to class and power relations. A broader challenge to representation comes from the otherness of the perpetrator of murderous violence in general; radical violence is partly incomprehensible regardless of its motivation.

Turkish author Orhan Pamuk's political novel *Snow* is in part concerned with Islamist fundamentalism in Turkey. The terrorist characters are portrayed indirectly through the diary of a poet called Ka, who visits a remote village in Turkey on a journalistic research trip. Ka's story in turn is mediated through the self-reflexive third person narration in which Orhan, the alter ego of the real-life author, reflects on the complexities and limits of trying to put oneself in the shoes of the other. Both Ka and Orhan the narrator are very much aware of how their belonging to a middle-class secular and intellectual elite limits their ability to completely understand and empathize with the religious radicals whom they encounter. The Algerian-born author Yasmina Khadra has addressed the topic of Palestinian terrorism in his novel *The Attack*,

[456] Wood, "Tell Me How Does It Feel?"

in which a Palestinian-Israeli doctor investigates his wife's death in a suicide bomber attack, of which she is discovered to have been the perpetrator. The doctor pursues her path to radicalization, presenting the reader with his findings. While contextualizing the terrorist act both politically and personally, the novel also dramatizes the ultimate unknowability of the terrorist other, as the wife partly remains a puzzle to her own husband. Although not directly dealing with Islamist terrorism, Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* uses a second person narrative to dramatize the complex post-9/11 "us versus them" dynamic and the racial and cultural dimensions of othering and terrorist profiling. The authors whose works are discussed in this chapter, on the other hand, opt for a decontextualizing limited third person narrative, which is an authoritative narrative strategy claiming access into the mind of the other.

Commenting on Said Qutb's memoirs, Amis notices that, as a reader, he cannot grasp or understand the real man's character from his writing and all he is left with is the fundamentalist rhetoric meant to cover "an underworld of incurable murk." This "incurable murk" and "the unknown known" the title makes reference to "is of course God,"[457] Amis admits. The religious motivation of the terrorist character is perhaps at the core of his multilayered otherness. In his works of non-fiction, Amis criticizes religious belief as the manifestation of a "dependent mind." When confronted with the actual challenge of entering the "dependent mind" of Mohamed Atta through fiction, Amis choses to bypass the perhaps impossible access altogether by presenting him as a callous nihilist instead.

Taking a more traditionally liberal stance on religion, in the spirit of William James, John Updike places religious motivation at the center of his portrayals of the terrorist other, both in *Varieties of Religious Experience* and in *Terrorist*. Although Mohamed Atta's perspective is presented as one among many equally valid religious experiences in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, the terrorist is othered through an idealized portrayal as the exponent of a more primitive form of religious purity and violence. The home-grown Islamist Ahmad in *Terrorist* is a reiteration of the novelist's propensity towards Romantic idealization going hand in hand with civilizational critique. Distinguished from his Arab-American coreligionists, Ahmad is not the representative figure for an ethnic affiliation to religion, but rather a millennial version of the "holy fool" typology, revealing the struggle between the spiritual and the material in post-9/11 American society. While this use of the other as a literary tool does not completely absolve the novel of accusations of racism and Orientalism, it does provide the means for a self-critical, albeit contradictory, appraisal of neoliberal politics in contemporary America. No

[457] Amis, "The Unknown Known," 9.

unlike Updike's approach in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Don DeLillo places the perspective of the terrorist other in a democratic chorus of individual characters taking different, if often misguided, steps to cater to or silence their spiritual needs. DeLillo circumscribes terrorism as a phenomenon in his wider novelistic exploration of the contradictory human compulsions for individuation on the one hand and for self-effacement through group assimilation on the other.

Both *Falling Man* and Updike's *Varieties of Religious Experience* display a Jamesian sensibility towards the different types of human religious feeling and experience. The routine and ritual entailed by the poker tournaments that Keith immerses himself in after surviving the attacks reflect the same human need as that quelled through the powerful camaraderie that is created between the members of the terrorist cell. While the poker playing ritual might be a means for Keith to hold his violent tendencies sedated, the group dynamics and the rituals of the terrorist cell are what make Hammad go ahead with a plan that he has doubts about. Another type of religious experience and perhaps the most Jamesian of them, is the complex and self-conscious search for spirituality exercised by Lianne in *Falling Man* and Dan Kellogg in Updike's short story. The two characters distinguish themselves among the many voices included in Updike's short-story and DeLillo's novel by being aware both of the human need for a totalizing religious experience and of the self-delusion it entails.

Representative of what Paul Dawson has called the return of the omniscient narrator, all three authors make use of problematic forms of omniscience or limited third person narrative voice. *Terrorist* displays an almost nineteenth century-like form of omniscience, unlike Updike's postmodern, ironic take on the other in his earlier novel *The Coup*. This adoption of an omniscient perspective is coupled with elements of the coming of age story and the classical terrorist novel,[458] which signal Updike's general approach to treating Islamist terrorism in the established American literary and cultural patterns and paradigms. DeLillo and Amis both make use of the limited third person narration, coupled with intrusive auctorial intervention in Amis' case and with non-intrusive self-reflexive tactics on DeLillo's part. In *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta*, metalepsis functions as a means of exercising narrative power over the terrorist subject. In the non-fiction framework of the essay and in his unfinished short piece *The Unknown Known*, Amis manages to achieve self-reflexivity and more transparency. The essay form allows him to frame himself not as a means of displaying his narratorial power, but in an

[458] For a discussion of *Terrorist* in the context of the terrorist novel see Francis Blessington, "Politics and the Terrorist Novel," *Sewanee Review* 116.1 (2007) 116-124, accessed May 5, 2011, https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/sewanee_review/v116/116.1blessington.html.

effort to reveal his auctorial biases and impasses. The three excerpts written from the limited third person perspective of Hammad in DeLillo's *Falling Man* offer only a scanty contextualization for the terrorist act. The intradiegetic discourse on terrorism, however, provides the reader with a complex range of views on the subject, none of them being given precedence.

All three works mirror different perspectives on the subject of terrorism in the public sphere. Informed by his adherence to the ideas of the New Atheist movement, Amis' take on the terrorist other is filtered through his dismissal of religious belief, on the one hand, and the notion put forth by Paul Berman that Islamism represents a threat akin to Fascism and Stalinism for the liberal democratic Western world, on the other hand. In this way, the terrorist other becomes the negative backdrop allowing a clearer and more flattering look at oneself. His depiction of Mohamed Atta dehumanizes the other by presenting him as the face of evil in a manner similar to that operated by the war on terror propaganda in the mainstream media that Judith Butler has criticized for conducing to a perpetration of violence instead of fostering contextualization and deeper political understanding. In John Updike's takes on the Islamist terrorist, the characters are dehumanized through idealization and used to reflect critically on the neoliberal American society. Through the use of the *Bildungsroman* or the coming of age novel convention, nonetheless, *Terrorist* duplicates "the rites of assent," or the assimilation of dissent characteristic of the liberal capitalist culture of the "civilized world" that is being scrutinized in the author's work. The idealistic conception of *Bildung* is an offshoot of the Enlightenment and the coming-of-age literary genre both mirrors and contributes to the dissemination of the "incorporative process of socialization"[459] entailed by Western liberal society. It critically reflects on and it is at the same time a tool in "the rites of assent" that it criticizes. Through its multiplicity of voices offering a democratic range of perspectives on the subject of terrorism, Don Delillo dramatizes the struggle over the meaning of the terrorist act in the public sphere, without taking sides. At the same time, his terrorist character is humanized through his inclusion within a collection of flawed characters who all respond and adapt to the challenges of a complex world through different spiritual mechanisms. Although the novel itself deliberately eschews political affiliations, it confers the terrorist other a "face" mirroring the precariousness of life, which, according to Judith Butler, is the prerequisite for beginning to understand the causes and wider implications of the terrorist act and for the formulation of an ethical political response to it.

[459] Joseph R. Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 19.

Chapter 4: "In No One We Trust:" Cosmopolitanism after 9/11

> *What seems to have been lost, ultimately, is that absolute trust that lurks somewhere in the mist of memory of those of us who were old enough before that Tuesday morning thirteen years ago to understand what was happening. It's hard to make it out, there on the periphery of the mind, through the thick fields of mistrust, suspicion, and anxiety that have become a standard lens of perception.*[460]
>
> *It seemed as if the only way this lure of violence could be avoided was by having no causes, by being magnificently isolated from all loyalties. But was that not an ethical lapse graver than rage itself?*[461]

In the last decade of the twentieth century, due partly to Martha Nussbaum's 1996 essay *Cosmopolitanism and Patriotism* and the subsequent responses it engendered, cosmopolitanism became a hot topic in academic circles and "cosmopolitan" a common adjective to describe mundane experiences of a globalized, interconnected world. In her post-9/11 reedited version of her seminal article and several of the responses it has received, Nussbaum restates the importance of developing a cosmopolitan education and sensibility in the American public. A cosmopolitan outlook, Nussbaum argues, is particularly timely in light of the terrorist attacks, which have prompted a potentially damaging revival of patriotism. Nussbaum's argument that the revelation of American vulnerability on September 11 should serve "as an occasion for expansion of our ethical horizons"[462] anticipates Judith Butler's Levinasian ethics of mourning, which also entails an acceptance of vulnerability and presents this newly acquired awareness of the precariousness of life as the basis for an ethical encounter with the other on the scene of global politics.

The decade following the attacks of September 11 saw an increase in publications on cosmopolitanism as seen from a variety of angles, many of which refer to the attacks as a chal-

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[460] Geoff Watkinson, "What We Lost: On Teaching 9/11," *Guernica Magazine*, September 11, 2014, accessed September 16, 2014, http://www.guernicamag.com/daily/geoff-watkinson-what-we-lost-teaching-911/.
[461] Cole.
[462] Martha Nussbaum, Introduction to *For Love of Country*, Joseph Cohen ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), xiii. I find Nussbaum's repeated use of the possessive first person plural pronoun to slightly disaccord with her cosmopolitan stance, but it is also telling of the fact that the cosmopolitan stance she argues for is specifically directed towards US Americans among whom she includes herself. This nationally specific call for a cosmopolitan education comes in response to Richard Rorty's earlier call for more patriotism from the American Left. As a non-American, I find quoting her references to "our nation" awkward, but telling of her approach to cosmopolitanism. Semantically avoiding the use of such possessives would introduce a distance to the subject which is my own, but does not reflect Nussbaum's rhetorical approach.

lenge to any complacent understanding of the term. The more popular and widely used, however, the vaguer and more opaque the notion of cosmopolitanism seems to become. Stan Van Hooft attempts a definition of cosmopolitanism highlighting its ethical thrust in Nussbaumian fashion. In descriptive terms, Hooft refers to cosmopolitanism as "the view that the moral standing of all peoples and of each individual person around the globe is equal." In prescriptive terms, cosmopolitanism is based on the notion that "[i]ndividuals should not give moral preference to their compatriots, their co-religionists or fellow members of their demographic identity groups."[463] This attempted definition, barely exhaustive of the many contemporary discursive claims over the term, is automatically followed by a self-defensive statement that "cosmopolitanism is not just another name for egalitarian or liberal humanism."[464]

The old cosmopolitanism supported by Nussbaum is often dismissed as the human face of Western imperialism, which allows the West to impose its values on a diverse world under the pretext of defending universal humanism. Attempting to escape this Western-centric universalizing imposition, postcolonial practitioners of cosmopolitanism base their perspectives on the particular rather than the general. Bruce Robbins distinguishes between the old notion of cosmopolitanism as an ideal, in the tradition of the Stoics via Kant, of which Nussbaum would be a contemporary professor, and miscellaneous already existing forms of cosmopolitanism. Looking at cosmopolitanism as a practice, particularly through the lens of migrants and postcolonial diasporic communities, what Bruce Robbins refers to as "new cosmopolitanism" avoids the universalizing claims of the old cosmopolitans, presenting itself in Derridian terms as an open practice, "yet to come, something awaiting realization," "because specifying cosmopolitanism positively and definitely is an uncosmopolitan thing to do."[465]

Alongside the postcolonial focus on already existing forms of cosmopolitanism, a "rooted" version of cosmopolitanism is another rejection of Nussbaum's "uprooted" cosmopolitanism that she defined in opposition to patriotism. Made popular particularly through the work of Kwame Anthony Appiah, "rooted" cosmopolitanism contends that it can and should coexist with local or patriotic affiliations.[466] The effectiveness of the ethical approach proposed by the old cosmopolitanism is contested by its critics on grounds of its idealist universalism.

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[463] Stan van Hooft, *Cosmopolitanism: A Philosophy for Global Ethics* (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2009), 4.
[464] Ibid., 5.
[465] Carol A. Breckenridge, Sheldon Pollock, Homi K. Bhabha, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Cosmopolitanisms," *Cosmopolitanism* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2002), 1.
[466] Bruce Robbins, *Perpetual War: Cosmopolitanism from the Viewpoint of Violence* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012). In his introduction, Robbins offers an overview of the many competing contemporary theories of cosmopolitanism, of which I offer here only a very brief and reductive outline, limited to those aspects relevant for the discussion of the literary works included in the chapter.

For the critics of Nussbaumian universalist cosmopolitanism, taking humanity in general as the beneficiary of one's benevolence in fact paralyzes action. Thus, for the advocates of a "rooted" cosmopolitanism, actual involvement can only spring from more partisan, local attachment and affiliation, which makes the case for patriotism as essential in grounding ethical agency. Inspired by the Stoics, Nussbaum acknowledges several "concentric circles" of individual attachment beginning with the self, the immediate family and community, "fellow city dwellers" and "fellow countrymen," all eventually paving the way to the ethically superior, all-encompassing circle of global citizenship and of humankind.[467] While her critics consider patriotism and local attachment as the stepping-stone for ethical action, Nussbaum argues that detachment from local allegiances and an openness towards the other and towards other points of view makes for better self-knowledge and ethically grounded local decision making: "By looking at ourselves through the lens of the other, we come to see what in our practices is local and non-essential, what is more broadly and deeply shared." A nation "ignorant of others," in Nussbaum's view, is a nation "ignorant of itself."[468]

As Robbins points out, however, the newer theories of cosmopolitanism suffer from their own failures when it comes to translating ethical claims into global ethical practice. The idealization of "vernacular" forms of cosmopolitanism, particularly in pre-9/11 postcolonial studies, was partly blind to other, more complex phenomena evading the frame of cosmopolitanism, where globalism is not a playground for hybrid identity making, but instead the background for the spread of fundamentalism:

> In a sense, the noncosmopolitan side of globalization struck back on September 11. Migrants whose visions of their home cultures were more conservative and ideological than the originals figured prominently. Indeed, most of the terrorists were Arabs who had spent considerable time studying in the West—even at seemingly cosmopolitan Oxford, in the case of Osama bin Laden. A dark side to globalization was brought to light: criminal activity and flows of weapons, people, ideas, money, and drugs that challenged state authority but hardly in the name of international civil society, and sometimes financed terrorist networks.[469]

Moreover, theories such as Appiah's in *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* bridge cosmopolitanism with forms of patriotic belonging, while at the same time evading some of the large ethical issues posed by Nussbaum. The role of global capitalism in Third World

[467] Nussbaum, 8.
[468] Ibid., 11.
[469] Craig Calhoun, "The Class Consciousness of Frequent Travelers: Toward a Critique of Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101.4 (2002) 869-897, 871.

poverty or global ecological issues can best be addressed through the framework of old cosmopolitanism and its Kantian insistence on global institutional regulation.[470] At the same time, the dominance in scholarly discussions of the Stoic positive conception of global citizenship as attachment to humankind instead of a particular *polis* has obscured the original negative conception of world citizenship provided by the Greek Cynic Diogenes, who refused all forms of local attachment, without replacing them with an ideal of belonging to humankind.[471]

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha differentiates between two synchronous, already existing forms of cosmopolitanism (as opposed to the Nussbaumian ideal cosmopolitanism): what he calls the "global" and the "vernacular" incarnations of cosmopolitanism. The former is a cosmopolitanism that is the product of or comes as the appanage of liberal market capitalism. As a system, liberal capitalism is inherently expansionist and thus constantly moves into newer territories in order to exploit their marketable potential and materials, including their human resources, creating a globalism of "the dual market." Being profit oriented, this type of cosmopolitanism hides a double standard and often creates an underworld of poverty alongside the "islands of prosperity" it prides itself on having founded:

> A global cosmopolitanism of this sort readily celebrates a world of plural cultures and peoples located at the periphery, so long as they produce healthy profit margins within metropolitan societies. States that participate in such multicultural multinationalism affirm their commitment to 'diversity', at home and abroad, so long as the demography of diversity consists largely of educated economic migrants – computer engineers, medical technicians, and entrepreneurs, rather than refugees, political exiles, or the poor.[472]

In line with W.E.B. Du Bois, Bhabha draws attention to how this type of global cosmopolitanism starts at home and is mirrored in the social structures of large Western cities where certain groups live in a "*quasi-colonial status*."[473] The other type of cosmopolitanism identified by Bhabha, namely the vernacular one, requires a change in view point, as it starts from the individual, rather than from a societal or economically-based form of organization. Having V.S. Naipaul's Trinidadian character presented as its embodiment, the vernacular type of cosmopolitanism is that of "the world of migrant boarding-houses and the habitations of national and diasporic minorities." This latter form of cosmopolitanism allows for the assessment of "global

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[470] For a review including a critique of Appiah's limited cosmopolitan ethics see: Mohammad Hossein Seifikar, "Kwame Anthony Appiah, 2006, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*," *QUEST: An African Journal of Philosophy / Revue Africaine de Philosophie*, XXI: 307-314.
[471] Pauline Kleingeld, *Kant and Cosmopolitanism: The Philosophical Ideal of World Citizenship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 2.
[472] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2010), xv.
[473] Bhabha, quote from W.E.B. Du Bois, xviii.

progress from the minoritarian perspective," while "[i]ts claims to freedom and equality are marked by 'a right to difference in equality.'"[474]

The most recent post-9/11 works of fiction discussed in this chapter grapple with the complex dynamics of already existing forms of cosmopolitanism both at home and globally, while at the same time critically examining the fate of the cosmopolitan ideal in the new millennium and in the shadow of the fallen towers. The already existing forms of cosmopolitanism are at odds with the resurgence of patriotism in the United States after September 11. The process of commemorating the September 11 attacks and of inscribing them within the national narrative has been the subject of ample cultural and political negotiations within the American public sphere, with reverberations of global proportions. Inevitably, these acts of remembrance and commemoration are shaped by the allegiance to particular approaches to national self-understanding. In the aftermath of September 11, Martha Nussbaum argues, national self-understanding becomes a choice between "narrowing" or expanding "our ethical horizons," between patriotism and cosmopolitanism.

Addressing the issue of cosmopolitanism in the interviews revealing their post-9/11 positions on the global political situation and its ethical conundrums, Jacque Derrida and Jürgen Habermas discuss the causes and possible repercussions of the September 11 attacks in relation to their conceptions of démocratie à venir,[475] hospitality, and deliberative democracy respectively. The notions of democracy to come, hospitality and cosmopolitanism are intertwined in Derrida's constant reformulations. In his essay *On Cosmopolitanism*, whose original French title *Cosmopolites de tous les pays, encore un effort!* implies a connection to the ever unfinished democratic process, Derrida argues that "we are still a long way from the idea of cosmopolitanism as defined in Kant's famous text and the right to (droit de) universal hospitality."[476] At the same time, in his discussion of 9/11, Derrida redefines the notion of "democracy to come" in relation to, but in terms that go beyond the cosmopolitan ideal: "What I call 'democracy to come' would go beyond the limits of cosmopolitanism, that is of a world citizenship. It would be more in line with what lets singular beings (anyone) 'live together,' there where they are not yet defined by citizenship, that is, by their condition as lawful 'subjects' in a state or legitimate

[474]Bhabha, xvi-xvii.
[475] *Démocratie à venir* or *democracy to come* implies that "democracy will never exist in the present" (Borradori, 120) and that "the inherent concept of democracy is the only one that welcomes the possibility of being contested, of contesting itself, of criticizing and indefinitely improving itself." (Borradori, 121)
[476] Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), 11.

members of a nation-state or even of a confederation or world state."[477] At the same time, Habermas's post-9/11 explanation for terrorism is framed in terms of his conception of deliberative democracy extended beyond the nation state. As the offspring of a "communicative pathology" terrorism is the final manifestation in "the spiral of violence" beginning "as a spiral of distorted communication that leads through the spiral of uncontrolled reciprocal mistrust to the breakdown of communication."[478]

Inherent to Derrida's post-9/11 discussions of *hospitality* and *tolerance*, as well as to Habermas's discussion of terrorism, trust, at a societal as well as at a global level, becomes a central concern contiguous to the cosmopolitan entanglements dramatized in the novels discussed in this chapter. Referring to the patriotic resurgence effected after September 11 as an act of "distrusting the rest of the world and feeling solidarity with Americans alone,"[479] Nussbaum indirectly connects the cosmopolitan approach with an adherence to trust in relation to human beings regardless of their national affiliations. Unmasking the political entanglements and the psychological mechanisms underlying individual and collective memory, both novels question the trustworthiness of memorialization practices. Thus, by critically examining memorial practices in a global context, both novels, albeit in different ways, point towards a cosmopolitan ethics of mourning and of remembering.

[477] Borradori, 130.
[478] Ibid, 64.
[479] Nussbaum, xiii.

Between Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism: Communicative Pathologies in Amy Waldman's *The Submission*

> *Perhaps, rather, one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly for ever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say submitting to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance.*[480]
>
> *Il faut cultiver notre jardin.*[481]

Opened to the public in 2011, the 9/11 Memorial in New York City represents a new stage in the memorialization process taking place within American culture and society. The monument complex at Ground Zero both reifies the public emotions triggered by the event, and represents the nation's search for a manner in which the trauma can be worked through. The monumental pools that mark the previous foundations of the Twin Towers and recreate the collapse of the buildings are surrounded by and contrasted with a garden, which consists of four hundred trees that go through seasonal changes and continue to grow.[482] The monumentality of the pools, which the architect Michael Arad has referred to as "voids," evokes the trauma suffered, while the tree garden, which has been intended to incorporate the daily life of the city and invite passersby to repose,[483] could be interpreted as representative of life as it goes on in spite of the tragedy. At the same time, the tree-garden makes visible the inevitable, soothing effects of time, change, and renewal over the development of collective memory.

The unspeakable quality of the tragedy is encoded in the "voids" at the center of the memorial and is paralleled in the fact that the events of September 11 have been named after the date when they have taken place. This act of naming, or rather lack of naming, according to Jacques Derrida, leaves them devoid of meaning, creating a dangerous void that can be filled with different interpretations and used for political reasons by entities who exploit victimhood to propagate their own interests in a similarly terrorist fashion: "What is terrible about "September 11," what remains infinite in this wound, is that we do not know what it is and so do

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[480] Butler, 21.
[481] Voltaire, *Candide*, Free Kindle edition.
[482] "Design Overview," The National September 11 Memorial & Museum at the World Trade Center Foundation, Inc., accessed May 22, 2012, http://www.911memorial.org/design-overview.
[483] Todd Leopold, "The Making of a Memorial: Reshaping Ground Zero," *CNN*, August 31, 2011, accessed May 22, 2012, http://articles.cnn.com/2011-08-31/us/911.memorial_1_ground-zero-freedom-tower-paula-grant-berry?_s=PM:US.

not know how to describe it, identify or even name it."[484] By inscribing the attacks in the wider historical context of atrocities committed both by terrorists and by nation states, Derrida downplays their exceptionality, pleading for mourning and turning the page, "as is so often done, and done so much more easily when it comes to things that happen elsewhere, far from Europe and America."[485]

In the aftermath of September 11, the American public sphere became flooded with different approaches to memorializing the lives lost, which answered the human need to mourn the dead. The notion of commemoration semantically incorporates a communal act of (re)membering and mourning, but to what extent can a society divided into ideologically, socially, religiously or ethnically antagonistic groups unite in order to go through this collective curative process together? The realm of public art had been a battle ground for the "culture wars" in the US even before September 11, 2001 and a source of conflict between conservatives and liberals, as well as their different conceptions of national identity, democracy and liberalism. A memorial is a form of public art which is accorded particular civic significance and in which the public tends to become emotionally invested. An exploration of the civic involvement in the official memorialization of September 11, reveals how the terrorist attacks deepened the already existing societal fissures, causing mutations within the respective antagonistic groups, and it created an atmosphere that fostered mistrust and a binary way of thinking.

Amy Waldman's 2011 novel *The Submission* dramatizes the ways in which trust based relations between individuals and differently affiliated groups waver and collapse in a post-9/11 world. The plot surrounding a fictional contest for the 9/11 memorial at Ground Zero unravels the various interconnected levels on which lack of trust can affect the democratic processes of a society, starting from the private sphere of several individuals, moving on to the public sphere, and having reverberations in the global, transnational civil society. Using the lens of Jürgen Habermas' and Jaques Derrida's discussion of the future of Western democracy after 9/11 to analyze Waldman's novel, this chapter section will examine how art and memorialization related controversies pose challenges to the democratic order and how the media and self-interested agents exacerbate the communicative pathologies of a divided public sphere. In the novel the communicative pathologies at home, which isolate the ethnic other propagating a reductive, uncosmopolitan understanding of citizenship, are mirrored by a similar development in America's self-presentation in a global context. The contested meaning of

[484] Giovanna Borradori, Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 94.
[485] Ibid., 97.

the attacks in the public sphere, their endless visual repetition in the media, and the hijacking of the memorialization process by self-interested political agents are some of the factors which have perpetrated the reproduction of the act of terror, to go back to Derrida's claims, beginning another spiral of distorted communication resulting in further communicative pathologies.

In a rather dystopian "what if?" scenario,[486] Waldman creates a fictional account of a 9/11 memorial project competition that declares a Muslim American architect as the winner of the blind jury selection. The opening chapter depicts the struggle of members of the committee who have to decide between two very different projects that have been chosen as finalists: a monumental and abstract one bearing the name "The Void," and another one consisting of a walled garden with a symmetrical, grid-shaped pattern of canals. Set in opposition to one another, the two fictional memorial proposals make an interesting parallel to the actual 9/11 monument that seems to contain elements of both in one. The "counterfactual history" literary model, which the novel uses in imagining an alternate memorial building scenario at Ground Zero, is more than a fantasy indulgence. Novels that use this model expose potentially dangerous tendencies that lay more or less dormant in a society, but could erupt at a certain historical or political juncture, as Jason Siegel points out in relation to Philip Roth's alternate history in *The Plot against America*:

> [T]he identity of a nation cannot be encapsulated in a chronicle of actual events, but … the innumerable potential plotlines that do not come into being largely on account of historical contingency reveal the plurality that comprises any given place at any given time… [H]istorical truth is not defined by actions, events, and outcomes, but by the various possibilities inherent in any moment that reveal the divided consciousness of the body politic.[487]

The fictional conflict springing from the selection of a Muslim American as the architect of a 9/11 memorial[488] allows for an exploration of the divisions within contemporary US society and the dangerous undercurrents of the debates in a public sphere marked by mistrust directed at the Muslim other, but also between the groups adhering to different ideologies, and amplified

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[486] Catherine Gallagher, *Telling It Like It Wasn't*, FHI, Duke University, March 22-April 3, 2010, lecture, accessed June 29, 2012, http://ondemand.duke.edu/video/21573/catherine-gallagher-why-we-tel. Gallagher refers to "what if?" scenarios also as "counterfactual histories," or "alternate histories" mentioning their growing recent popularity, particularly since the 1990s, both in popular history and in literature. Supposedly, many of them are cautionary tales that hope to achieve "historical justice" and their development goes hand in hand with the development of an international judicial system that judges historical crimes in retrospect.

[487] Jason Siegel, "The Plot Against America: Philip Roth's Counter-Plot to American History," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 37, nr. 1 (2012): 131–154, 131, accessed June 20, 2013, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/mel/summary/v037/37.1.siegel.html.

[488] The fictional scandal surrounding Waldman's Muslim 9/11 memorial architect echoes the discussions caused by the controversial Vietnam Veterans Memorial, won by the then undergraduate architecture student of Asian descent Maya Lin, both in terms of the controversial ethnicity of the designer and of the potential meaning of the project, which avoids a heroic or nationally purposeful historical narrative.

by fear-mongering media reporting. The real life scandal over plans to build an Islamic cultural center two blocks from Ground Zero ("The Cordoba House," later renamed in a less charged manner "Park51", which the media repeatedly and inaccurately referred to as a mosque)[489] would be one instance of a striking parallel to the depiction of public reaction in Waldman's alternate history. The memorial plan dedicated to the United 93 flight crash victims, which has initially been called "The Crescent of Embrace" due to its shape, has caused some outrage on account of the allegedly Muslim symbolism and subsequent associations[490] and is another telling real life example of the same rush to purge Islamic elements, be they aesthetic or symbolic, from the public sphere, in order to protect the supposed integrity of Western heritage and culture.

The binary logic of a society steeped in fear and distrust clashes with its own constitutive hybridity, in an "autoimmunitary" reaction, to use Derrida's term,[491] which can have self-destructive effects. Paradoxically, while the protection of the "hallowed" Ground Zero or of the crash site of flight United 93 from being tainted with Islamic elements is often evoked as a patriotic duty by militant groups in the public sphere, the fact that the original World Trade Center Plaza was designed having the Mecca as a source of inspiration and some of the architectural details of the towers' façade have Islamic art-inspired elements remains largely unknown to the general public.[492]

Increasingly rational, bureaucratic and secular, post-Enlightenment Western societies transferred the notion of trust from the religious realm into that of civil society and the public sphere, setting it indirectly, through the notion of virtue, as an essential component of liberalism. In her study of trust in modern societies, Barbara Mitzstal remarks that, from Tocqueville's emphasis on "interpersonal trust" as indispensable for "fostering democratic values and as the basis for sustaining republican society or civic community" to Habermas' communication ethics in which the speakers "act in accordance with a sincerity rule," lack of trust is seen as a

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[489] Bobby Ghosh, "Islamophobia: Does America Have a Muslim Problem?" *Time*, August 30, 2010, accessed June 30, 2012 http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2011936,00.html.
[490] *Flight 93 Memorial*, accessed June April 12, 2012, http://www.thesubmissionnovel.com/187.
[491] Derrida in Borradori, 94. "As we know, an autoimmunitary process is that strange behavior where a living being, in quasi-*suicidal* fashion, 'itself' works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself *against* its 'own' immunity."
[492] Laurie Kerr, "The Mosque to Commerce: Bin Laden's Special Complaint with the World Trade Center," *Slate*, December, 28, 2001, accessed May, 21, 2012, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2001/12/the_mosque_to_commerce.html. The second generation Japanese American architect Minoru Yamasaki, who designed the WTC, has a combination of Islamic and modernist elements as his signature style. He used the sacred space of the Mecca as a source of inspiration for the WTC plaza, which he called "a mecca, a great relief from the narrow streets and sidewalks of the surrounding Wall Street area."

dangerous social phenomenon, because, in Sissela Bok's words, a "society whose members are unable to distinguish truthful messages from deceptive ones, would collapse."[493] To explain her turning from journalism to fiction,[494] Waldman describes American self-understanding as undergoing a process of refashioning as a consequence of the violent encounter with the other on September 11, further pointing out that global relations are shaped by these yet unsettled cultural self-redefinitions and the adjoining emotional reactions like "fear" and "trust" towards the other, which they trigger:

> I had come to feel that journalism didn't offer the language to explore the uncomfortable questions and uneasy emotions that lingered in the years after the attack. The more we learned about Islam, the more confused we became. Who should we fear? Who should we trust? I had never thought so much about what it means to be American, what kind of country we should be, as I did in those years. And in South Asia and elsewhere, I was reporting on Muslims asking similar questions about their religion. These were parallel, if very different, identity crises, and they seemed ripe for fiction. Maybe I just wanted to be in a quieter space, where I could explore this recent, raw history without being assaulted by the din of the news, or where I could let my imaginary characters explore it for me.[495]

"[T]he din of the news" that Waldman mentions is always in the background of her story, often rising to a deafening effect, complicating the relationships between her characters, widening the gap of mistrust between them, and preventing a Habermasian type of communication from taking place.

When the fact that a Muslim architect has won the contest for the memorial is intentionally leaked to the press, a public scandal unfolds, involving different actors, whipping up sentiments, and resulting in a cacophony of contradictory reactions that makes it impossible to reach a rational conclusion that would best serve the public interest. Alyssa Spier, the journalist who breaks the story to the public, is a character who stands for a particular kind of journalism that feeds on novelty and on breaking unverified news regardless of the consequences. The winning architect Mohamed Kahn, or Mo in his Americanized appellation, first finds out about his victory from the press and does not get a chance to present himself to the public before he is (re)presented and defined by the media and other involved actors. Increasingly depicted by voices in the debate as a threatening Other, a subversive Muslim intent on 'hijacking' the commemoration process by building an Islamic garden or a paradise for the suicide bombers in the

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[493] Barbara A. Misztal, *Trust in Modern Societies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996) 13.

[494] As a *New York Times* correspondent in South Asia, Amy Waldman visited and was stationed in countries such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh and India, gaining a wider knowledge of the complex challenges faced by these countries and their relation to the world and the U.S. in particular.

[495] Darryl Campbell, "Amy Waldman on "The Submission,"" *Omnivoracious*, August 16, 2011, accessed September 23, 2011, http://www.omnivoracious.com/2011/08/amy-waldman-on-the-submission.html.

guise of a memorial for the victims, Mo himself struggles to overcome his double identity crisis, both as an American and as a Muslim, finally taking refuge in an uprooted professional cosmopolitanism.

In a parallel, but also connected development, Claire Burwell, the 9/11 widow who has been the champion of Mo's design during the blind jury deliberations, begins to struggle with doubts about the significance of the memorial, as well as with regard to her own liberal values, once she learns about the architect's identity. Under pressure as the only representative of the 9/11 families on the jury, Claire finds she is going against the majority by supporting Khan. While opponents of the project begin to threaten her violently, she feels offended by Mo's apparent lack of gratitude for her support and his refusal to clarify the meaning of the garden. Her doubts and self-doubt are amplified by the interference of the media, particularly Alyssa Spier's reporting that twists every scrap of news on the issue into a potential scandal. An article in *Time* magazine written by an architecture expert casts an even darker shadow over the project, further fuelling the fear-mongering of the yellow press, and causing Claire to wonder whether she is defending the right cause or betraying the trust of the other 9/11 families:

> According to the paper's architecture critic, the elements of Khan's garden she loved – the geometry, the walls, the four quadrants, the water, even the pavilion – paralleled gardens that had been built across the Islamic world, from Spain to Iran to India to Afghanistan, over a dozen or more centuries … the possible allusions may be controversial. Some might say the designer is mocking us, or playing with his religious heritage. Yet could he be trying to say something larger about the relationship between Islam and the West? Would these questions, this possible influence, even be raised if he were not a Muslim?"[496]

The questions raised by the architecture critic become looming certitudes as they are echoed by the conservative-leaning TV-station Fox News that presents the garden as a "martyr's paradise," while the *Wall Street Journal* calls it "a covert attempt at Islamization," the bellicose tone of its conclusion echoing the rhetoric of the culture wars of the 1990s: "Two decades of multicultural appeasement have led to this: we've invited the enemy into our home to decorate."[497]

Aside from exacerbating the feelings of self-doubt and mistrust, the media also plays a role in increasing the political, cultural, or actual capital of several characters who shrewdly or involuntarily ride the wave of the scandal. The initially mysterious leak to the press that a Muslim has won the memorial competition is later revealed as the machination of Governor

[496] Amy Waldman, *The Submission* (New York: Picador, 2011), 115.
[497] Ibid., 116.

Geraldine Bitman, who had discovered that she could successfully exploit public sentiment to gain support for re-election: "Every time she had gone on an offensive against Khan she had risen in the polls. He was her oxygen."[498] Other characters also use the scandal to further their personal causes or gains, like Sean Gallagher, who has lost a brother on 9/11 and Debbie, a housewife turned anti-Islamic activist overnight. In Sean, Waldman creates a complex character who represents the American right, the lower middle class conservatives, showing how his private life, particularly his strong family ties and wounded pride as the supposedly less brave and accomplished son, plays a role in forming his choices in the public arena. Sean's character has a similar evolution to that of Claire, whom he initially stands in opposition to. Like Claire, he is torn between his inherited political and ideological allegiance and the desire to do the right thing at a time when pinpointing it becomes the most difficult task.

The most tragic consequence of the media's propensity for creating or amplifying scandals is the killing of Asma Anwar, the Muslim Bangladeshi illegal immigrant and 9/11 widow, who has been largely ignored by the state and the organizations supporting the families of 9/11 victims until her surprising public appearance during the hearing concerning Khan's monument project. Her moving intervention defending the garden brings a short-lived touch of idealism into the scandal, reminding the public that the apparent separation between "us" and "them" is much more complex than the binary opposition perpetuated by the media, and that there have also been Muslims among the victims of the 9/11 attacks.

All the actors involved in the public discussion regarding the winning memorial project are presented both within their private sphere and through their actions in the public sphere. At the same time, the novel's immersion into the private life of each character, regardless of ideological affiliation, is conducive to a potentially empathic reader response and, in this manner, it unpacks the oppositions between them, which the media tends to focus on and thereby amplify. Jacques Derrida pointed out that one needs to distinguish between one's personal "impression" of 9/11 as an event and the second "impression"[499] imposed by the media on the same historical moment, adding that the terrorism perpetrated during the actual attack was in turn exploited by the media and the authorities to further their own agendas in a similarly terrorist manner, and concluding that "the more they talk about terrorism the more they empower it."[500] The above mentioned characters in the novel are either involved, voluntarily or involuntarily,

[498] Ibid., 249.
[499] Borradori, 149.
[500] Ibid., 153.

in the process of creating the second type of impression, or struggling to separate the two impressions and to preserve their own interpretation of the event that will allow them to work through the trauma suffered.

According to Hannah Arendt, the source of totalitarianism is "the impoverishment of the Western conception of citizenship," or more precisely "the triumph of the bourgeois, the greedy individual in search of wealth and power at any cost, over the citoyen."[501] The novel's Governor Geraldine Bitman uses the media to generate sympathy for the families of 9/11 victims, and to transform it into votes in her favor. In a similar manner, Debbie, the anti-Islamic militant, pursues her newly embraced activism by stoking interethnic and inter-religious hatred, while journalist Alyssa Spier's endeavors are not guided by the ethics of her profession and a desire to provide the public with information, but rather by her own professional ambitions, which can be fulfilled only as long as she is able to increase the dimension of the public scandal she is reporting on by fuelling enmity and suspicion. The ethical agents in the novel, Claire and Sean, who both represent the interests of their families within the public realm, have their good intentions constantly undone in the atmosphere of mistrust created by the other self-interested agents, and are set in conflict with each other.

The main characters stand for different social strata, coming from different ethnic and religious backgrounds and they bring their own ideologies, causes or personal interests to the table when negotiating the memorial project. The public hearing concerning Mo's design is a moment when all parties are brought face to face and even silenced or publicly invisible actors like Asma Anwar get to express their point of view. Meant as an outlet for the hotheaded groups involved in the scandal, and as a forum for public opinion in general, the hearing offers them the possibility of taking active part in the mock democratic process and gives them the impression that they actually have a say in the final decision, an illusion maintained and manipulated by the actual decision-maker, Governor Bitman. Art critics discussing public art conflicts cynically remark that direct democracy is nowadays only used to get rid of inconvenient art. The results of this fictional public hearing on an art project seem to point in the same direction. Arguments are mustered both for and against the garden; some experts reveal several of its potential meanings, while others violently denounce it as an Islamic paradise.

Although apparently a laudable example of democracy in action, seen from the perspective of the journalist Alyssa Spyer, it becomes clear how few from the multitude of voices heard will make their way out of the hearing room, to the general public. Spier takes notes during the

[501] Ibid., 174.

hearing, favoring the most emotional responses that bring little on the level of rational decision making, but make for dramatic sound bites, and what she calls the "comic relief" moments provided by the inevitable eccentric figures. The more intellectually complex interventions, like that of an expert pointing out that the Twin Towers themselves had Islamic elements intentionally included in their architecture, are left out because they are too intellectual or ambiguous in nature to satisfy the audience's presumed hunger for the sensational and the Manichean.

At the same time, this multi-perspective depiction of the hearings reveals that even the individuals who by being there have the most unmediated access to the proceedings are conditioned by their, to use Hans-Georg Gadamer's term, "horizon of understanding."[502] Thus, the same circumstances and statements that are ignored by some are grave offences to others. A case in point would be Mo's historicist explanation that gardens had a pre-Islamic existence and were connected with the development of agriculture rather than with a certain religion, and may have found their way into the Koran as an image of paradise at a particular historical conjecture. This revelation has no impact on the opinions of the anti-Muslim organization members, who continue harassing him, while the same statement shocks parts of the devout Muslim community for whom the implication that the Koran was written by man is considered a blasphemy and who issue a fatwa against him. This situation highlights the fragility of Mo's position in-between two communities who find his allegiances equally suspicious; one who he had seen himself as part of before 9/11, and another one that he was born into.

In the end, although the communal hermeneutical exercise of the hearing does create a temporary "fusion of horizons,"[503] this happens mostly at an emotional level, but only ephemerally, and is immediately followed by a withdrawal of the participants into their initial stances, preconditioned by their allegiances to their families and religious, ethnic, intellectual, or political communities. Although characters like Claire and Sean come out of the hearings with an altered sense of self, these individual expansions of horizon cause them to feel isolated and confused and have little bearing on the final decisions regarding the monument, which is built under public pressure and political manipulations. The complex symbolism of a grid-shaped garden of Islamic influence is finally replaced by a "Garden of Flags" that offers no comfort to the families and has little, if any, aesthetic value, being an empty statement of patriotism. The scene of the hearing exemplifies the manner in which "partisan loyalties" sabotage "political

[502] Jeff Malpas, "Hans-Georg Gadamer," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), accessed January 29, 2014, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/gadamer/.
[503] Ibid.

deliberation," which, according to Martha Nussbaum, could be instead enhanced through a "fundamental allegiance to the world community of justice and reason."[504]

Projecting the novel's concluding chapter into a future twenty years after the memorial project contest, Waldman shows the effects of time over collective and individual memory. While the memorial scandal seems to have left few traces on the collective memory, for individual participants like Claire and Mo, it remains a crucial point in their self-understanding. In retrospect, Claire realizes she has let her mistrust cloud her rational side and reveals her interpretation of the garden as an allegory for the individual and societal need to constantly tend civic virtues, in a manner similar to the implications of Voltaire's dictum that one should constantly tend one's garden. She explains her initial positive reaction to the memorial project and how it has been clouded and turned around by the revelation of Khan's identity and the controversy it engendered: "She had, at first glimpse, made it an allegory for Cal's [he dead husband's] perpetual optimism. In walking away from it, she had walked away from him. The real act of will was not in the creating of a garden but in the sustaining, the continuous stand against wildness. She had let herself be overtaken."[505]

Art controversies in the last several decades have revealed blind spots in the democratic process, with cases like that of *The Tilted Arc*, which, according to art critic Gregg Horowitz, is "an early version of the strategy of censorship as liberation used by regressive political forces."[506] Freeing the public from a work of art that is 'unwanted', or not appreciated, may hide an attempt to "free" the public from a work that raises uncomfortable questions or provokes debate. However, when it comes to a public work of art that is at the same time a memorial for a tragedy still recent, discussions with regard to the legitimacy of direct democracy appear as callous sophisms, despite their being justified, when faced with the reality of an authentic negative emotional response on the side of the genuinely affected public. Even after twenty years, the novel's Ariana, the representative of the world of art in the jury, reproaches Mo for caving in to public pressure and not fighting for his democratic rights and artistic prerogatives. The realization that "he could use his country's own laws against it, judo his way to victory, force his vision onto a people who seemed more foreign to him by the day"[507] leads to

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[504] Nussbaum, 8.
[505] Waldman, 297.
[506] Gregg M. Horowitz, "Public Art/Public Space: The Spectacle of the Tilted Arc Controversy," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (Winter, 1996): 8-14, 8, accessed May 2013, http://www.jstor.org/stable/431676. Richard Serra's *The Tilted Arc* is a famous example of the clash between the world of art and public opinion, as well as of the challenge to democracy and legislation posed by the decision making process with regard to public art. *The Tilted Arc* was met with hostility by the public and defended by the art world, only to end up being dismantled by the authorities during the night.
[507] Waldman, 276.

Mo's withdrawal from the memorial contest. Mo's dilemma of having to choose between using the democratic legislative machinery to defeat the will of the majority, who are against his project and have no qualms with regard to stripping him of his own democratic rights, echoes one of the aporias of democracy identified by Derrida.[508]

A similar pathological communication pattern to that identified by Habermas as the source of terrorism is set in motion starting with the revelation of Mo's ethnic and religious identity after winning the blind jury selection. The plot unravels the complex web of individual reactions to Mo's identity; some of them self-interested (in the case of Alyssa Spier and Governor Bitman), or fueled by grief, fear and anger (in the case of Claire and Sean). Typecast without appeal, on the one hand, and pressed by others to reveal his allegiances, on the other hand, Mo becomes the most ambiguous participant in the public dialogue. The more the media and the people around him doubt him and adopt a "you are either with us or with the terrorists" attitude towards him, the more he withdraws into silence and sends off consciously ambivalent messages about himself, hiding under the ambiguous cover of a modernist understanding of the role of the artist. Derrida emphasized that literature and "democracy to come" are interconnected by both being dependent on a society which allows artistic secrecy and ambiguity to exist. In this sense, the societal response to Mo's enigmatic stance, like the post-9/11 societal pressure to declare one's allegiance, comes from a totalitarian impulse.

The counterfactual history approach and its projection into the future are means of revealing the negative consequences of a politics of mistrust towards the country's own citizens and aspiring citizens of Muslim descent, but, most importantly, it functions as an exercise in imagining the possible divisive long term impact of post-9/11 politics in the US and globally. Like an untended garden, a nation overtaken by "wildness," to refer back to Claire's words, with a civil society in which dialogue is marred by fear and mistrust, no longer provides an environment in which the virtuous individual can thrive. This is the case with Asma, the hopeful immigrant chasing her version of the American dream, who is killed after becoming an overnight media sensation, and Mo, who is in a way forced to move back to the country his own parents emigrated from in order to be able to achieve his individual dream. The garden of flags, which is built instead of Mo's monument project, is an architectural structure that suggests a type of fear-fueled stasis replacing the perpetual mobility, which the United States and particularly New York City have stood for during much of their history. On the other hand,

[508] For an outline of Derrida's discussion of "democracy to come" and "autoimmunity" see A. J. P. Thomson, "What's to Become of 'Democracy to Come'?" *Postmodern Culture*, 15.3 (2005), accessed, May 2, 2013, http://muse.jhu.edu/.

Mo's garden, with its balance between the mutable and the immutable, its walls, grid like structure of water canals, and its steel trees that provide the stable frame for the natural cycle of growth, death and rebirth, can be seen as an allegory for a healthy society, a system that allows its various inhabitants to flourish and fulfill their potential.

The garden is a symbol so complex that it resists any single or simple explanation and which can have both positive and negative connotations. Waldman offers several interpretations in her novel, but denies the attainment of fixed meaning, focusing rather on the very mutability and hybridity that it represents. In her study concerning the function of the garden as a trope in literature, Shelley Saguaro remarks that "[t]he garden … is a familiar diachronic and multi-determined trope used variously. On the one hand, gardens can signify a pre-lapsarian and harmonic bliss; on the other, the inevitability of a failure and Fall."[509] In another line of argumentation, Robert Pogue Harrison points out that "the garden, whether real or imaginary, … has provided sanctuary from the frenzy and tumult of history."[510] A memorial in the shape of a garden carries then the acceptance of human vulnerability, of the precariousness of human life, to go back to Judith Butler's discussion of effective mourning going against the grain of manipulative exceptionalist interpretations of 9/11. At the same time, according to Harrison's interpretation, a memorial in the shape of a garden represents an escape from history, placing the act of commemoration outside the realm of political entanglements and historical strife and creating a place of comfort and rest, instead of making a partisan political statement.

Furthermore, for Robert Pogue Harrison, the garden is not only a locus of escapism from the forces of history, but rather a metaphor for a society, or rather a cosmopolitan civil society, in which civic virtue can be cultivated and the public good tended to. This becomes apparent in his interpretation of Voltaire's famous dictum in *Candide*:

> Where history unleashes its destructive and annihilating forces, we must, if we are to preserve our sanity, to say nothing of our humanity, work against and in spite of them. We must seek out healing or redemptive forces and allow them to grow in us. That is what it means to tend our garden. The pronominal adjective used by Voltaire – *notre* - points to the world we share in common. This is the world of plurality that takes shape through the power of human action. *Notre jardin* is never a garden of merely private concerns into which one escapes from the real; it is that plot of soil on the earth, within the self, or amid the social collective, where the cultural, ethical, and civic

[509] Shelley Saguaro, *Garden Plots: The Politics and Poetics of Gardens* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), x.
[510] Robert Pogue Harrison, *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), Kindle Edition, Kindle locations 22-23.

> virtues that save reality from its own worst impulses are cultivated. Those virtues are always ours.[511]

The preislamic origin of the garden as well as its subsequent developments in both the Muslim and the Western world seem to make it an appropriate trope for cultural hybridity that defies binary logic and simplistic notions of a clash of cultures. In his study, Harrison mentions the universal quality of the garden as a symbol, but also points out differences in its subsequent development within Western and Oriental cultures respectively. The ambivalent symbolism of the garden in Western culture starts with the banishment from the Garden of Eden and continues with emblematic figures like Ulysses or the epic hero Orlando Furioso who reject the stasis of Edenic gardens in order to reimmerse themselves in the world of *Cura*, of "care", or in its Heideggerian interpretation, *Sorge*.[512] Harrison interprets the recurrent theme of this refusal of garden-like harmony in Western literature as an expression of the restlessness that is at the core of Western culture and finds its outlets in the form of a liberal capitalism that is based on continuous innovation or in the tenants of modernism in art that operates a destruction of established forms, but places little emphasis on cultivation.[513] He points out "the paradox… that Islamic extremists long for a garden where all is moderation and temperance, while we in the modern West are driven by the need to constantly act, contend, achieve, overcome, transform, and revolutionize - in other words, we are driven by compulsions that assume any number of extreme manifestations."[514] Keeping this in mind, the title of the novel receives several connotations:[515] it may refer literally to the submission of the memorial project, but also to Mo's submission to the pressure exercised by the media, the civil society and, in the end, even by his coreligionists and family, to give up fighting for his contested architectural plan. At the same time, on a less literal level, and as hinted at in the quote above, the act of submission or lack thereof may also be related to a culture's attitude towards death, mutability and loss. The speed at which society finds it necessary to build a memorial seems to come less from an inner

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[511] Harrison, Kindle Locations 33-37.
[512] Ibid., 100.
[513] Ibid., 1594-1597, "One day we will hopefully overcome this limitation and realize that it is not so much our modern Western values (freedom, democracy, gender equality, etc.) but rather the unconstrained frenzy of the West-our relentless demand for action, change, innovation, intervention, and a systematic transgression of limits-that offends the very core of Islam in the eyes of the extremists. Where paradise is imagined as a garden of perfect tranquility, our incurable Western agitation takes on a diabolical quality."
[514] Harrison, Kindle Locations 1705-1707
[515] Journalist Tom Junod refers to the polysemous quality of the novel's title noting that "it easily bears the weight of at least four meanings, because in being lightly ironic yet endlessly suggestive, it provides the model for Waldman's prose," but does not offer his several interpretations. Tom Junod, "Best Books 2011 - The Best New Books of the Year," *Esquire*, December 2, 2011, accessed March 10, 2012, http://www.esquire.com/fiction/best-books-2011-1211-2?src=soc_fcbk.

need for commemorating the dead, but rather from ongoing mechanisms of self-recovery of the capitalist system and its above mentioned drives:

> …everything happened faster these days - the building and tearing down of idols; the spread of disease and rumor and trends; the cycling of the news; the development of new monetary instruments … So why not the memorial, too? Commercial exigencies were at work, it was true: the developer who controlled the site wanted to remonetize it and needed a memorial to do so, since Americans seemed unlikely to accept the maximization of office space as the most eloquent rejoinder to terrorism. But there were patriotic exigencies too. The longer that space stayed clear, the more it became a symbol of defeat… A memorial to America's diminished greatness…[516]

The competing memorial projects that the members of the jury discuss in the opening chapters of the novel dramatize the different potential attitudes and ideologies that inform the building of a memorial site and the latent repercussion of choosing one over the other. On the one hand, "The Void" with its tall slab of granite in which the names of the victims are encrusted set in a reflecting pool that emphasizes the structure's monumentality and denies sensory access to the actual monument can been seen as a reification of what Harrison calls the restlessness of Western culture and the traumatic wound that refuses to heal, which Derrida warned against. Its initial defender among the jurors, the reputed artist Ariana, depicts The Void as "visceral, angry, dark, raw, because there was no joy on that day. You can't tell if the slab is rising or falling, which is honest – it speaks exactly to this moment in history. It's created destruction, which robs the real destruction of its power, dialectically speaking."[517] On the other hand, Mo's garden has a grid-shaped canal structure and natural trees that bring to mind the processes of forgetting, with an emphasis on peacefulness and contemplation, rather than cerebral monumentality. The added steel trees built out of the metal scraps collected from Ground Zero and the walls inscribed with the names of the victims in a type of filigree reminiscent of the one covering the fallen towers represent the immutable, or the aspiration towards immutability, and those elements that need to remain untouched by the passage of time. These traits of the garden cause Ariana to dismiss the project due to what she perceives as a quality akin to that of a graveyard rather than a memorial. She further dismisses the garden memorial as a project that speaks "to a longing we have for healing. It's a very natural impulse, but maybe not our most sophisticated one."[518] The same traits, however, motivate Claire Burwell's instinctive attraction towards the garden, which she initially perceives as "an allegory," which

[516] Waldman, 8.
[517] Ibid., 5.
[518] Waldman, 5.

insists "that change was not just possible, but certain."[519] Instead, "The Void" induces a sensation of dread in Claire, causing her to literally have nightmares. As the scandal provoked by the revelation of Mo's religious identity progresses and reaches its climax, however, the two women end up switching roles. Claire becomes doubtful of "The Garden" and Ariana defends Mo's right to have his monument erected and not to comment upon his supposed affiliation with the terrorists (or lack thereof) at the pressure of the public.

What starts off as a divergence between two perspectives on memorialization, one favoring an emotional approach, the other an aesthetical one, turns into a discussion on the role of public art and the prerogatives and obligations of the artist in relation to civil society. Nonetheless, although they apparently drastically change their position vis-à-vis the monument, the two characters essentially remain consistent with their initial emotional versus aesthetical positions. In one of their early debates Ariana argues that "[s]orrow can be a bully," while Claire responds that "[s]o can taste."[520] This exchange places the debate over the role of public art, or art in public,[521] in the sphere of what critics see as the conflict between a populist and an elitist view of art. For Claire, the memorial should consider the response of the community; it should soothe the families of the victims in their process of mourning. Ariana's concerns, on the other hand, are mainly aesthetic. The latter's perspective comes from assumptions founded in modernism that "art ought to be at least somewhat enigmatic if not downright mysterious"[522] and that the domain of the arts is or ought to be an autonomous realm. With this in mind her radical change of allegiance is only apparent, while she actually maintains her modernist elitist credo. At first, she supports a project that seems a more detached aesthetic statement on the event (probably submitted by a protégé of hers, as it becomes apparent), against the apparently populist project of the garden. Finally, once society and Claire turn against the garden, she becomes its fierce supporter. Due to its ambiguity and Mo's adamant refusal to comment on the alleged significance of the garden and the subversive idea of its being an Islamic paradise

[519] Ibid., 11.
[520] Ibid., 7.
[521] For a discussion of the role of art in democratic society, its limits, the "culture wars" fought over public funding for the arts and the related controversies over artistic freedom of expression, see Lambert Zuidervaart's Habermasian perspective for a potential appeasement of this already age old conflict: *Art in Public: Politics, Economics, and a Democratic Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
[522] Michael Kammen, *Visual Shock: A History of Art Controversies in American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), xxi. Kammen discusses some of the major controversies concerning art and public art in the US, particularly monuments, and identifies modernism as a harbinger of public conflict due to its propensity for ambiguity that is, on the one hand, the result of democratic principles, but, on the one hand, a source of suspicions on the side of the public. According to him, the number of public controversies surrounding art projects has multiplied since the 1960s due to the affiliation of art with forms of anti-establishment protest that hail from the ideology of the modernist avant-garde.

for the martyrs, the garden turns into an epitome of the modernist work of art. The garden becomes a veritable Jamesian "figure in the carpet,"[523] defendable and embraceable according to Ariana's principles, but questionable from Claire's lens. Ariana remains adamant in her position against populism, or a type of dictatorship of the majority penetrating the artistic realm. The following exchange with Claire reveals that she perceives art as the domain of the heroic individual artist acting as an independent agent in the tradition of modernism:

> "You didn't even like the Garden," Claire reminded Ariana.
> "It's not about like, it's about the fate of art in a democracy," Ariana said. "We all watched – well not literally, because they did it in the dead of night – Serra's *Tilted Arc* being carved up and carted away from Federal Plaza because 'the public' inveighed against it. Now they don't like Khan's religion or what his design might or might not mean. Empower the public in this way, and anything ugly or challenging or difficult or produced by a member of and out-of-favor group will be fair game."[524]

While losing her faith in the project under the pressure of suspicions coming from the media and public opinion, Claire remains constant in her populist approach to which she adds a questionable demand for clarity on the side of the architect, causing Mo to remain adamant in his refusal to comply with it, in a conflict that boils down to a question of trust:

> "Wouldn't you assume that any non-Muslim who entered this competition thinks the attack was wrong? Why are you treating me differently?"...
> "You want us to trust you even though you won't answer questions about your design – what it means, where it came from."
> "But you are only asking those questions because you don't trust me."
> "And I don't trust you because you won't answer, so we're stuck."[525]

In this ambiguous change of allegiances, the complexity of the garden as a symbol becomes even more apparent and makes a pertinent comment on the undemocratic and uncosmopolitan tendencies inherent in the act of purging supposedly Islamic elements in a work of art, as has been done in the real-life case of the flight United 93 memorial project, "The Crescent of Embrace."

A component of the traditional Islamic garden that is replicated by Mo in his project, namely its grid-like structure, complicates the significance of his proposed memorial even more. In the visual arts, during modernism, the grid was used as a means of exploring the very origins of art and as the expression of the purity "emblematic of the sheer disinterestedness of

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[523] Significantly, the patterns of traditional Oriental carpets are stylized representations of gardens, as Harrison points out.
[524] Waldman 236. The case of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* has shown the potentially undemocratic underside in the interaction between popular opinion and pressure and public art, as well as over the matter of artistic value. Serra himself commented at the time: "I don't think it is the function of art to be pleasing," adding that "[a]rt is not democratic. It is not for the people." "Visual Arts: Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*, 1981," *PBS Culture Shock*, accessed July 2, 2012, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/cultureshock/flashpoints/visualarts/tiltedarc_at.html.
[525] Ibid., 270.

the work of art, its absolute purposelessness, from which it derives the promise of its autonomy."[526] Interestingly enough, Rosalind E. Krauss refers to the grid repeatedly as "an indisputable zero-ground beyond which there is not further model, or referent, or text" which has "facilitated this sense of being born into the newly evacuated space of an aesthetic purity and freedom. … Perhaps it is because of this sense of a beginning, a fresh start, a ground zero, that the artist has taken up the grid as the medium with which to work, always taking it up as though he were just discovering it…" Moreover, the grid has been described as the eminently modernist element because it represents a "hostility to narrative," thus fostering "silence as a refusal of speech."[527] This ambiguity and open-endedness of the symbolism of the garden and its grid-shaped structure are in tune with Derrida's understanding of the role of literature in a democratic society, which can be extrapolated to include the arts in general. Aside from being a hybrid and elusive element shared by Western modernism and traditional Islamic gardens, the grid incorporated in Mo's memorial design could also be a tribute to the grid structure of the city planning of New York. As Mo himself points out in an exchange with Claire, the grid is a versatile symbol, adding to the planned memorial's cosmopolitan dimension:

> It's all of those things, or maybe none of them. It's lines on a plane, just like the Garden… Geometry doesn't belong to a single culture. The grid is the quintessential modernist form, as I'm sure that *Times* critic grasps. It barely appeared in art before the twentieth century, then suddenly it's everywhere. Mondrian wasn't a Muslim. Mies, Agnes Martin, LeWitt, Ad Reinhardt – none of them were. I can't help the associations you bring because I am."[528]

Mo's attitude during the memorial scandal can be seen as an adherence to what Stephen Dedalus has called "the self imposed code of the avant-garde artist" that involves "[s]ilence, exile and cunning,"[529] but in the ethnically and religiously charged conflict, his behavior is seen as a suspicious fraternization with the terrorists. His refusal to declare his allegiance is repeatedly interpreted by other characters as a publicly damnable lack of patriotism, instead of being understood as an adherence to world citizenship. In the last decades, the art world has increasingly been the subject of more or less disproportionate episodes of what sociologists call "moral panic," with artists being turned into "folk devils."[530] After 9/11, the use of such

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[526] Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 158.
[527] Ibid, 160.
[528] Waldman, 269.
[529] Ibid., 162, 158.
[530] Kammen, xix. For the origin of the terms used by Kammen to discuss art related controversies see Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (Oxford: Robertson, 1980).

terminology has become a sensitive topic, with instances like the 2010 New York Islamic cultural center controversy being seen by sociologists as walking a tight-rope between "moral panic" and "another battle in the culture wars."[531]

The allegory of the state as a garden that is subject to continuous change and at the same time needs constant care and maintenance is in line with Derrida's *démocratie à venir* and also with Habermas' defense of the Enlightenment as an unfinished project. Both thinkers stress the perpetually unfinished status of democracy, the constant necessity to reassess and model its present manifestations in light of its guiding ideals. In the Habermasian model, it is essential to let the voice of the minorities be heard in the rational process of communication and win over the majority if their argumentation should rationally prevail in the democratic contest of voices: "… the democratic project feeds off the resistance of minorities, whose hostility to the will of the majority at the present moment may renew the majority's own self-understanding in the future."[532] The replacement of Mo's garden with a static "garden of flags" suggests a post-9/11 departure of Western liberal societies from Derrida's *démocratie à venir* defined by perpetual becoming. The human rights gaps created by self-protective nationalist isolationist tendencies and measures hinder the process of constant self-improvement, or, in Voltaire's words, the cultivation of "our garden."

The novel's motto, a Pashto poem, with its haiku-like visual strategies is open to several interpretations: "Like the cypress tree, which holds its head high and is / free within the confines of a garden, I, too, feel free in / this world, and I am not bound by its attachment." From one point of view, the motto may be seen as a restatement of the novel's wider criticism of the manner in which Western materialism influences commemorative practices. From another perspective, it is a poetic reflection of the novel's dialectic approach to patriotism and cosmopolitanism. Introducing a vision of freedom as expressed in an Afghan poem, the novel adheres to an old cosmopolitan vision in a Nussbaumian vein, but avoids the leveling effect of universalizing Enlightenment values by critically examining the very notion of freedom in its many incarnations, Western or otherwise. The allegory of the nation as a garden and the individual as a cypress tree is illustrated in the six graphic elements that mark the several parts of the novel, five of which are in the shape of a square containing a cross shaped grid that is probably a sketch of Mo's garden. While the first grid is empty, the next four contain a growing number

[531] Kenneth Thompson, "Foreword," *Moral Panic and the Politics of Anxiety*, ed. Sean P. Hear (London: Routledge, 2011) ix-x. In view of the post 9/11 societal transformations, many sociologists see the need for a reconsideration of the concept of "moral panic."
[532] Ibid., 74.

of sketched cypresses that may represent the growing number of individual perspectives the novel gradually encompasses. Significantly, the last part of the novel, which is set in the future and away from American soil, in Mumbai, is demarcated by a single cypress tree, larger than the previous ones and unframed, unless one is to take the very page of the physical novel into account. The unframed individual cypress may stand for the human aspirations that will survive, despite the inevitable rise and fall of countries or empires, because the garden is carried within each individual. Thus freedom is presented as an individual quest and aspiration and not the exceptional appanage of American democracy.

A nation state overcome by mistrust, misguided forms of patriotism and undemocratic tendencies can only lose from suppressing individuals like Asma and Mo, who, from their positions as apparent others, in fact sustain the nation's democratic core. On the other hand, the individuals themselves may find refuge and explore their potential in more favorable contexts, as Mo does as an expat architect and a cosmopolite:

> America had offered his immigrant parents the freedom to reinvent themselves. Mo had found himself reinvented by others, so distorted he couldn't recognize himself. His imagination was made suspect. And so he had traced his parents' journey in reverse: back to India, which seemed a more promising land.[533]

As an immigrant, Asma's aspiration was to leave behind a society with institutions corrupted by nepotism and bribery in which certain individuals pursued their personal interest taking advantage of the failure of the system. For Asma's fellow first-generation immigrant, Nasruddin, the American dream is embodied by a system that ensures the rule of meritocracy through a fair bureaucratic system and where the relations between individuals are based on trust due to the functioning legal machinery regulating their behavior:

> What Nasruddin revered about America was its system – its predictability. You could trust the government, even perfect strangers, not just your family or fellow villagers, as was the case back at home. There, outcomes too often depended on the capricious – or rather covetous – whims of individuals. And almost nothing happened without a bribe to grease the way. … What was expected by most Americans, to him seemed heroic. When he went to the construction-permit office they gave him the right forms and accepted his applications without demanding more money than the form specified. Nasruddin never stopped missing his own country, but he loved this one.[534]

Adding to the complex symbolism of the garden, architectural ekphrasis appears extensively in the novel with implications that include America's present and past role on the scene of world politics, the major historical layers of conflict in Afghanistan, as well as the potential approaches to

[533] Waldman, 293.
[534] Ibid, 227.

memorialization. The different types of buildings present in the Afghan capital, whose significance Mo meditates on during a work trip to Kabul representing his architecture firm in a pitch for building safer American embassies in the Middle East, include "the Russian Cultural Center, a decaying, pockmarked wreck that now sheltered refugees and drug addicts." The sight of the building leads Mo to the consideration that it represents "[t]he way of all empires … [t]hat's how our embassy is going to end up."[535] This perspective on the role of the US in global politics is reinforced through another architectural reference, namely a restaurant retreat for expats in Kabul, significantly, a walled garden with a pool where Afghans are not allowed. In their cynical bantering, Mo's American companions compare this "forbidden" garden with the Islamic representation of paradise:

> "Wonder what the Afghans think of this," one if the architects said, waving his hand to take in the bikinied women and beery men….
> "Hot chicks and fruit trees: they're missing their own paradise," said someone else at the table… "I'm surprised they are not blowing themselves up to get in here."
> "Some of them don't have to," his seatmate from the van said, his eyes on Mo.[536]

This oasis of Western life-style in the heart of Kabul is paralleled by another walled, but at the same time open garden that Mo visits during his solitary wanderings. An island of tranquility in an environment pervaded by suffering and deprivation, the well-kept Islamic garden of Kabul appears to Mo as a promise of redemption. Whereas the walls of the expat restaurant garden are the embodiment of fear and mistrust and exist in order to separate two worlds and worldviews, to keep the other out from this materialist mock-up paradise, the walls of the Islamic garden serve the symbolic function of separating the mundane, the world of history and suffering, from the immanent world of spiritual life, while the garden offers unlimited access to everyone through its open gate. Occasioning an epiphany for Mo, this public garden in Kabul is probably the main influence on his subsequent 9/11 memorial project. However, the core of this experience has little to do with what the media has presented as the incendiary subversive message of a memorial that supposedly represents the Islamic paradise for the terrorists, but rather more to do with his personal response to the oasis of tranquility surviving in troubled Kabul. The potentially subversive element in having a memorial in the shape of a garden is that it defies conventional Western conceptions of memorialization that focus on "engraving" an event in the public memory and consciousness and instead may function as a place of recollection that fosters healing, a process similar to Derrida's suggested commemorative practices, which emphasize mourning and turning the page: "Gardens are not memorials. They may, as

[535] Ibid., 46-47.
[536] Ibid., 47.

long as they last, be places of memory or sites of recollection, but apart from a few lofty exceptions they do not exist to immortalize their makers or defy the ravages of time. If anything they exist to reenchant the present."[537]

The epiphany Mo has in the Islamic garden of Kabul reveals one of the potential meanings of "submission," which adds another dimension to the novel's title. Seeing a man completely absorbed by his prayer in the Afghan garden, Mo remembers a self-conscious visit to the mosque alongside his father who had become religious in the discriminatory post-9/11 climate that prompted him to an attitude of solidarity with his coreligionists. Unlike his father, he is unable to connect with the praying community and whole-heartedly join them, but in the environment of the garden he experiences a "reenchantment [of] the present," to use Harrison's phrase, and follows the "muezzin's wail" joining the other man in prayer:

> Mo felt a pull, more passive than volition, to follow them, as if he were a drop being absorbed by a body of water whose size he had no way to measure. … the Afghan, deep in his prostrations, did not acknowledge Mo, even as together they formed a line, a wall, a mosque; he cared not at all for Mo's judgment. He had forgotten himself and this was the truest submission.[538]

The submission to an oceanic feeling is a unique experience for Mo whose only religious-like allegiance appears to be to his job and it reveals how the garden as a memorial may have achieved the redemptive act of uniting a community in mourning as a place of detachment from history and politics fostering both individual and communal reflection. According to Judith Butler, the process of mourning is completed through the acceptance of the change to the self effected through the loss suffered, in an act of submission to the transformation one is subjected to inadvertently through loss. Mo's project in the shape of a garden could have contributed to an approach to mourning which implies such a submission. Instead, the scandal surrounding Mo's ethnicity leads to a suspension of the process of mourning made visible through the static garden of flags built in the place of the winning controversial project. The garden of flags stands for the unhealthy rejection of change and transformation, which according to Butler are inevitable in order to successfully undergo a process of mourning. At the same time, the garden with its hybrid symbolism represents a cosmopolitan approach to mourning, which, unlike the frozen patriotism of the garden of flags, projects the tragic event in a context of complex global entanglements. Thus the garden commemorates the victims without treating their death as a tragedy that has happened to "our nation," inscribing it in a wider narrative than the limited one of patriotism that Martha Nussbaum identifies as potentially conducive to violence.

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[537] Harrison, Kindle Locations 461-463.
[538] Waldman, 281.

Like Asma, who sees the promise of a democratic future for her country in the modernist parliament building of Bangladesh built by an American architect, Mo is also overtaken by nostalgia with regard to the post World War II "glory days of embassy architecture, when great modernists – Saarinen, Gropius, Breuer (all immigrants, Mo had noted to himself) – where sought out to design buildings that embodied American values like democracy and openness."[539] In a post 9/11 world, however, these architectural emissaries of the United States are to be replaced with buildings whose features are dictated by safety measures and which are surrounded by thick "blast walls" reminiscent of Crusader castles and medieval fortresses built in the Middle East. These embassies no longer function as exemplary, "City upon a Hill"-like structures, but serve the function of hermetic bastions embodying the hostility and mistrust that characterize recent US foreign policy, as one character in the novel suggests: "We barely even pretend anymore that we're trying to spread good in the world; it's only about protecting us because we are good."[540] Moreover, the novel's projection into the future allows for a wider transnational perspective, including commemorative practices, which are associated with ongoing processes of Westernization. A second generation Indian immigrant, Mo returns to the country his parents come from and, as a cosmopolitan expat architect with a global array of customers, takes advantage of the dynamic environment of growth and development of the young "Gatsby nations… in a hurry to buy identities with their new found wealth."[541] Already visible, along with the staggering process of development and Westernization of Mumbai, is a newly found obsession with commemoration. The act of memorialization is fueled by the fear of forgetting of a society developing at a fast pace and can be seen as a means of countering the "relentless demand for action, change, innovation, intervention" that goes hand in hand with Occidentalization:[542]

> … memorializing had metastasized. As India continued to Westernize, it had become obsessed with naming its dead just as America did. The plaques where everywhere: at the train station, listing those who had fallen from overcrowded cars; at the airport, remembering those felled by ongoing terrorist attacks; in the slums, whose handwritten signs recorded those lost to sewage-born infections or police brutality.[543]

The negative reference to memorialization spreading like a disease brings once again to mind the Derridian autoimmunitary reaction of a culture that embraces constantly accelerated pro-

[539] Ibid., 46.
[540] Ibid., 82.
[541] Waldman, 286.
[542] Harrison, Kindle locations 1705-1707.
[543] Waldman, 286.

gress and change, which in turn create the anxiety of forgetting and an attachment to the material world leading to a growing need for commemorative practices. Ironically, many of the types of victims enumerated in the quote above are nowadays most often ignored by the commemorators, as is pointed out by a character in the novel, referring particularly to the number of non-U.S. victims who have lost their lives in the post-9/11 retaliatory military actions. It is endlessly repeated, the character points out, that it takes three hours to read the names of the 9/11 victims out loud, but no one mentions that it would take twenty-one days to read the names of the children who have lost their lives during the Iraq War.[544] The disproportion between the silence over certain deaths and the intense mediatization of others is a telling example of the post-9/11 politicization of the act of commemoration in the US and of the disparities created through a patriotic approach to commemoration.

The etymology of the word "commemoration" points to a communal act of remembering, a ritual through which a community celebrates or mourns a past event or person. The "functional essence of commemoration … is participation in a common process."[545] Without downplaying the necessity of commemoration as part of the process of working through and healing, Waldman intensely scrutinizes the complications of it taking place within a divided public sphere. In Edward Casey's view, "ultimately we remember through such a memorialization, which defies reduction to the separatist categories of "matter" or "psyche" – indeed to "self" and "other," or even to "past" and "present." In this memorialization all such metaphysically determined dyads begin to dissolve, and the inner connection of their respective members – their intimate participation in each other – becomes apparent."[546] A memorial in the shape of a garden and with a grid-like structure defies any reduction to binary opposites, as it incorporates a complex symbolism that places it beyond political and historical strife. A society unable to recognize its own complexity reflected in the hybrid signification of the memorial design is suffering under an "autoimmunitary" syndrome that threatens the very democratic order it is striving to defend. Waldman's novel reveals the many layers of the struggle of American democracy against itself in its post-9/11 self-defensive reaction, both on the "home front" and on the global one. Mo's withdrawal into an enigmatic stance followed by his withdrawal from the memorial competition and his subsequent move to India are his means of rejecting the constant societal pressure to declare his allegiance and to accept a binary way of thinking, which are

[544] Ibid., 80.
[545] Edward Casey, "Remembering: A Phenomenological Study," ed. Jeffrey K. Olick et al., *The Collective Memory Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 184.
[546] Ibid.

symptoms of the totalitarian tendencies in society. His embrace of complexity and hybridity in a time of crisis make him suspect. The static national self-understanding implied in a memorial in the shape of "a garden of flags,"[547] like the one eventually built in Waldman's alternate history is one based on a reductive understanding of citizenship, which excludes members like Mo and Asma, preventing commemorative practices from honoring "the past by carrying it intact into new and lasting forms of alliance and participation."[548]

According to one of the characters in The Submission, "the process of creating a memorial was itself part of the memorial."[549] Seen as part of the larger process of memorialization, the novel performs the type of cultural work that is not available to other media, like the press, which is constrained by its own nature to deal with the more complex aspects in too rushed a manner. The expansive nature of the novel offers an environment where the self-destructive effects of the binary ways of thinking fostered in an atmosphere of fear and distrust can be explored and deconstructed through more subtle details, while emphasizing the hybrid meeting points where the divide between "us" and "them" is dissolved. In this sense, despite its somewhat dystopian take on the undemocratic underside of memorialization, the novel itself opens up a democratic space allowing voices on different sides of the ideological divide in American society to be heard, while "the din of the news," which prompted Waldman to move from journalism to fiction in order to explore post 9/11 American identity, becomes itself a subject of critical examination in the novel.

[547] Simplistic as it may seem, the reduction of a complex process of commemoration to a garden of flags is reminiscent of the compromises made after the controversy surrounding Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The memorial design was considered by many to be a defeatist, not-patriotic statement and, although it had won a blind expert jury selection, it was almost not built because of public pressure. To appease its critics, a flag-pole was added in its center and it was accompanied by another figurative monument representing three racially diverse soldiers.
[548] Casey, 187.
[549] Waldman, 286.

Trusting Memory: Cosmopolitanism between Tolerance and Hospitality in Teju Cole's *Open City*

Memory says: What to do right? Don't count on me.
I'm a canal in Europe where bodies are floating
I'm a mass grave I'm the life that returns
I'm a table set with room for the Stranger
I'm a field with corners left for the landless
I'm accused of child-death of drinking blood
I'm a man-child praising God he's a man
I'm a woman bargaining for a chicken
I'm a woman who sells for a boat ticket
I'm an immigrant tailor who says A coat
is not a piece of cloth only
I sway in the learnings of the master mystics
I have dreamed of Zion I've dreamed of world revolution
I have dreamed that my children could live at last like others
I have walked the children of others through ranks of hatred
I'm a corpse dredged from a canal in Berlin
A river in Mississippi
I'm a woman standing with other women dressed in black
on the streets of Haifa, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem
There is spit on my sleeve there are phone calls in the night
I stand on a road in Ramallah with naked face listening
I am standing here in your poem unsatisfied
lifting my smoky mirror[550]

You are not killing anyone by going to the opera.[551]

In the counterfactual history take on the memorialization of September 11 in *The Submission*, the event at the core of the novel is never actually named, nor is it represented through the eyes of witnesses or victims, the focus being instead on the cultural afterlife of the attack. Similarly inclined, Teju Cole's *Open City* reflects on the global repercussion and reverberations of the event by showing how it has insidiously altered the everyday life of particular individuals who have not been directly involved in it. Despite the fact that the main character and narrator of the novel, as well as the different individuals he comes into contact with, live in the ominous "shadow of no towers," to resort to Art Spiegelman's phrase once more, there are few direct

[550] Adrienne Rich, "Eastern War Time," *Bridges*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Fall 1991/5752), 124-128, 128, accessed August 3, 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40357519.
[551] Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 167.

references to the actual attack for reasons revealed by the author in an interview: "I tried to focus on a particular aspect of this historical moment: the failure of mourning. This is something I haven't seen a great deal of in the writing around this disaster. And my view is that you write about disaster by writing around it, by writing allusively. There's a reticence necessary when you consider the suffering of others."[552]

Both *The Submission* and *Open City* revolve around the notion of a "failure of mourning," which Cole is referring to here, and its negative effects on democratic processes within the homeland and in a global context. Through her wide-canvas social, cultural and political exploration of a failed process of commemoration, Waldman's novel depicts the complex layers of mistrust between individuals, differently affiliated groups, or nations, all leading to communicational pathologies both within American society and in a global context. *Open City* instead begins its exploration at an individual level, intensely scrutinizing the liberal cosmopolitan self in the new millennium to reveal its darkest corners, particularly in relation to the politics of memory, on a personal as well as on a global level.

Written in the first person, the novel is a plot-less immersion into the inner life of one individual, Julius, a psychiatrist with Columbia University. A Nigerian national of German descent on his mother's side, Julius has moved to the US for his studies at the age of seventeen. His half-African, half-European descent, Nigerian upbringing, and American education give him a complex racial and ethnic identity and direct access to a wide variety of cultural experiences, making him a citizen of the world, but also turning him into a perpetual outsider. In a manner reminiscent of Toni Morrison's self-aware refusal of racially identifying her characters in *Paradise*, letting the reader make assumptions, the first person narration offers an abrupt entrance into the inner life of the main character, with key biographical and personal information, including his racial identity, gradually being revealed. The following disclosure of his German ancestry on his mother's side adds a new dimension to the character. These gradual revelations play with the established notions of character reception making the transition to the final, striking disclosure towards the end of the novel regarding Julius' forgotten past, which changes the paradigm of his self-representation. Making the reader aware of her potentially complacent reception of the character, the final disclosure I am referring to casts doubt over Julius's claims and self-representation and points towards larger questions with regard to the

[552] Teju Cole, "Palimpsest City," *3am magazine*, interview with Max Liu, August 16, 2011, accessed September 1, 2012, http://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/palimpsest-city/

ethics of the liberal humanist ideology, selective memory and unconscious omissions in the representation of history.

Depressed after a breakup, overworked and alienated, Julius begins to compulsively walk the streets of New York and later of the city of Brussels, meditating on still visible but neglected traces of painful history and their transnational implications. In the process, he comes into contact with and records the stories of several individuals from different milieus, most of whom have experienced or witnessed firsthand different historical acts of barbarism. As a narrator, Julius displays a propensity towards uncovering the remnants of historical injustice, violence and human suffering hiding in plain sight. This tendency links him to the narrator of W.G. Sebald's *Rings of Saturn*.[553] His eye for decrypting the hidden messages and underlying structures in the architecture of the city give him a family resemblance to Walter Benjamin's flâneur, the explorer of the modern phenomena visible beneath the surface of everyday life in a metropolis. The dreamlike conception of reality combined with documented historical interventions, create an image of a present that is haunted by its tormented past.[554]

The history that Julius unearths during his urban walks is not that of history books, but rather that which has been forgotten willfully as a result of its unbearable gruesomeness, or because it does not fit into the larger narrative of Western historical progress: the forgotten figure of the genocidal Dutch colonial official Cornelis Van Tienhoven of the early New Amsterdam settlement, or the Syrian enclave and the Black slave cemetery that were erased in the process of building what is today the financial district and whose historical layers lie underneath the space formerly occupied by the two towers. The protagonist also brings to light urban historical trivia, which has an almost spectral effect over-imposed on the mundane present. One such haunting image is of the albino whale stranded in the Hudson River in the early colonial days. Traces of a painful or almost fantastic past are intertwined with the-invisible-to-the-inattentive-eye contemporary personal histories of individuals Julius meets through his wanderings. The account of a Haitian immigrant making his living as a shoe shiner in New

[553] Sebald's conception of history, as well as the melancholy, saturnine tone of his writing have repeatedly been linked to Walter Benjamin. See Martin Blumenthal-Barby, "Holocaust and Herring: The Resuscitation of the Silenced in W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*," *Monatshefte* 103.4 (2011): 537-558, accessed, 13 Sep. 2012, <http://muse.jhu.edu/>.

[554] Howard Eiland, "Superimposition in Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project," *Telos*, Spring 2007 vol. no. 138, 121-138, quoted in Michael Bacal, "Walter Benjamin, the Flâneur, and Redemption," *Telos*, November 12, 2011, accessed September 1, 2012, http://www.telospress.com/main/index.php?main_page=news_article&article_id=485.

York, or the confession of a Liberian refugee imprisoned immediately after landing on American soil, who has been waiting for more than two years for his fate to be decided by the authorities, reveal the unjust and dark realities hiding behind the surface of a bustling metropolis like New York. All these old and recent stories of disenfranchisement and violence are discordant with the mainstream narrative recording the progress of a nation in official history.

Taking place around 2006, Julius' wanderings lead him inevitably to Ground Zero, then still a construction site. This encounter with the gaping void left behind after the attacks prompts a meditation on the apparent indifference of passersby and the manner in which the urban palimpsest continually regenerates itself while inevitably covering up the strata of human suffering erased like the image of the falling bodies from the main-stream media after 9/11:

> I felt conspicuous, the only person … who stopped to look out from the overpass at the site. Everyone else went straight ahead, and nothing separated them, nothing separated us, from the people who had worked directly across the street on the day of disaster…. But atrocity is nothing new, not to humans, not to animals. The difference is that in our time it is uniquely well-organized, carried out with pens, train carriages, ledgers, barbed wire, work camps, gas. And this late contribution, the absence of bodies. No bodies were visible, except the falling ones, on the day America's ticker stopped. Marketable stories of all kinds had thickened around the injured coast of our city, but the depiction of the dead bodies was forbidden. It would have been upsetting to have it otherwise.…
> The site was a palimpsest, as was all the city, written, erased, rewritten. There had been communities here before Columbus ever set sail, before Verrazano anchored his ships in the narrows, or the black Portuguese slave trader Esteban Gómez sailed up the Hudson; human beings had lived here, built homes, and quarreled with their neighbors long before the Dutch ever saw a business opportunity in the rich furs and timber of the island and its calm bay…. I wanted to find the line that connected me to my own part in these stories.[555]

Placed in the context of other historical atrocities and erasures that have been forgotten, the exceptionalism of the terrorist attack is downplayed, without diminishing the dimension of the human tragedy it involved. The narrator points out that New York itself was founded on the atrocious erasure of local Native American tribes, whose often forgotten mass extermination is studied by one of Julius' patients. A Native-American historian, Julius' patient suffers from depression amplified by the revelations of her research on the atrocities committed against the indigenous population at the time of the early settlements. While she manages to maintain the professionally required distance in her writings as a historian, the patient's inner life is deeply affected by the past that she unearths, a turmoil that eventually leads her to suicide:

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[555] Teju Cole, *Open City* (New York: Faber, 2011), Kindle Edition, 58-59.

> I can't pretend it isn't about my life, she said to me once, it is my life. It's a difficult thing to live in a country that has erased your past…. There are almost no Native Americans in New York City, and very few in all of the Northeast. It isn't right that people are not terrified by this because this is a terrifying thing that happened to a vast population. And it's not in the past, it is still with us today; at least, it's still with me.[556]

For Homi Bhabha, colonial history is a "counter-history" to the traditional history of the West and by putting "the history of the West as a despotic power, a colonial power … side by side with its claims to democracy and solidarity," the savageness underlying "the ideals of civility and the mythology of civilization" is revealed.[557] Much of the metropolitan history uncovered by Julius and presented mostly without commentary provides such a "counter-history," which becomes particularly poignant when paralleled with the revival of exceptionalist patriotism in the wake of 9/11.

In historian Peter Burke's view, the victors of history can afford to forget a violent past, while the losers are often "condemned to brood over it, relive it and reflect how different it might have been."[558] At the same time, on a societal level, "the official erasure" of certain "memories of conflict" can be "in the interest of social cohesion." As Burke points out, there is an interrelation between "amnesia" and "amnesty," which applies to both individuals and groups, representative for a type of forgetting that functions as an inner "censor" in the Freudian sense, unconsciously erasing what is too painful or inconvenient to remember. Despite the emphasis on the potentially unconscious nature of certain, for some groups, painful historical erasures, he nonetheless pleads for a historiography in the spirit of Benjamin that acts as a guardian of "awkward facts" and of "the skeletons in the cupboard of social memory."[559] In a sense, Julius' flâneurial activities turn him into an unofficial archeologist of the awkward historical fact that has been recorded in the urban landscape, but whose meaning and origin has been forgotten, or ignored through routinization.

At the same time, certain memories of the past are not necessarily forgotten, but rather silenced as a means of individual self-preservation; a phenomenon represented by members of the World War II generation whom Julius is related to, or whom he encounters on his journeys. The parallel experiences of these characters, like Julius' German grandmother who may have been the victim of rape by Soviet soldiers in post-war Germany, his Japanese-American literature professor Dr. Saito, who was sent to one of the internment camps for Japanese-Americans

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[556] Cole, 27.
[557] Jonathan Rutheford, "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha," *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 207- 211, 218-219.
[558] Peter Burke, "History as Social Memory," in Olick et al., 191.
[559] Burke, 192.

after the Pearl Harbor attack, or the Belgian Dr. Maillote who lived the experience of the Nazi occupation of Belgium, make up a transnational outlook on a generation's means of coping with a painful or unsettling past, by more or less silencing it and moving on.

As a doctor educated in the United States, Julius has the status of an acceptable, viable migrant in the global capitalist understanding of cosmopolitanism discussed by Homi Bhabha. When it comes to perceiving him through the lens of the "vernacular cosmopolitanism" of the Trinidadian type, despite his hybrid identity which would fit the bill, Julius reveals himself as a slippery figure hard to characterize and categorize.[560] Paradoxically, his identity becomes more opaque the more he reveals about himself. A final game-changing revelation towards the end of the novel is meant to illustrate the extent to which each individual is a stranger to him or herself thereby questioning claims of stable ethnic identities and unsettling complacent views of the self in relation to others. Although undeniable, his racial, ethnic, and cultural hybridity does not altogether fall into the pattern of Bhabha's use of the term. He defies Edward Said's binary relation between the colonizer and the colonized, but also moves beyond Bhabha's deconstructionist take on the same relation, which emphasizes the ambivalence of the colonized manifested through "sly civility." In Bhabha's perspective the colonized has more agency in appropriating the colonizer's features and customs, which he reinterprets and often makes his own turning them into something new. As an African, Julius is claimed as a "brother" by various individuals of African descent whom he encounters, but he answers with annoyance to most of the attempts to fraternize and does not see himself as belonging to any of their diasporic or ethnic groups:

> There had earlier been, it occurred to me, only the most tenuous of connections between us, looks on a street corner by strangers, a gesture of mutual respect based on our being young, black, male; based, in other words, on our being "brothers." These glances were exchanged between black men all over the city every minute of the day, a quick solidarity worked into the weave of each man's mundane pursuits, a nod or smile or quick greeting. It was a little way of saying, I know something of what life is like for you out here.[561]

When an African-American post-office clerk recognizes him as an African coming from the continent and invites him to his civil rights activist poetry readings, he makes a mental note never to step into that post-office again. Julius is not moved by the African-American's claim of brotherhood based on shared racial features. He is, however, mostly put off by the man's

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[560] In an article discussing his encounter with Naipaul, Cole mentions his being influenced by the author, while also distancing himself from the cosmopolitan author, on whom he bestows an ambivalent admiration: Teju Cole, "Natives on the Boat", *New Yorker*, September 11, 2012, accessed September 11, 2012, http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2012/09/natives-on-the-boat.html#ixzz26G75fuiA

[561] Cole, *Open City*, 212.

political engagement and his class-affiliation. Throughout the novel, Julius expresses his reticence if not downright suspicion of political engagement, which contradicts his possibly (self)deceivingly superior and comfortable liberal detachment, a feature which the novel critically scrutinizes. In another instance, he is signaled as a "brother" by a group of black youths he encounters in a poorer neighborhood, only to be severely beaten up and mugged by the same people later on. On another occasion, he is scolded by a black taxi driver, for not acknowledging their racial kinship and acting as a common distanced customer. The above mentioned episodes in which Julius snubs a "brotherly" racial connection, or in which the apparent brotherly signaling is made irrelevant through an act of violence, suggest the novel's sensitivity to issues moving beyond race into the realm of class, or, rather, its unpacking of multicultural politics to reveal other mechanisms at play in the interaction between individuals. The racial self-awareness at being one of the few, if not the only, black person at a Mahler concert and having people measure him up with curiosity, does offer a moment of almost political reflection: "… it never ceases to surprise me how easy it is to leave the hybridity of the city, and enter into all-white spaces, the homogeneity of which, as far as I can tell, causes no discomfort to the whites in them. The only thing odd, to some of them, is seeing me, young and black, in my seat or at the concession stand."[562]

At the same time, he feels a certain kinship with other individuals he meets based on intellectual affiliation rather than ethnicity or race. The connections he makes to similarly educated individuals, regardless of their race or ethnicity, suggests Julius identifies with a cosmopolitan liberal bourgeois elite, instead of seeing himself primarily as the exponent of a racially based imaginary community. Thus his cosmopolitanism embraces ethnic diversity, but has a stable elitist bourgeois core, which leads him to find little affinity to individuals of the underclass only on the basis of a common racial denominator. The individuals with similar intellectual inclinations towards whom he feels a connection include his former literature professor, the Japanese-American Dr. Saito, doctor Maillote, an elderly Belgian doctor living in the US, whom he encounters during his trip to Brussels, or Farouq, a young Moroccan versed in critical theory, whom he also meets in Brussels. He generally presents himself as a Nigerian and does not reveal the fact that he is also of German descent to his interlocutors, not even when that fact would be relevant to the given situation. His relation to Western culture does not seem to be characterized by subversive "sly civility," but rather is an organic, integral part of his hybrid identity.

[562] Ibid., 251-252.

The partial German identity becomes a synecdoche for the novel's double edged take on the liberal West, which is informed by Walter Benjamin's assertion that "every act of civilization is an act of barbarism."[563] Julius' cultivated self is fed mostly on Western high-culture (his admiration for classical music is described in detail repeatedly). This attachment to high-culture is coupled with an uneasy, half-conscious awareness of the barbaric underside of civilization illustrated through numerous references to the historical traces and remnants of colonialism and the atrocities of World War II. The guilt accompanying his German identity becomes visible in the several instances when he hides this side of himself from his interlocutors. One such instance takes place during a brief exchange with an elderly German émigré at a photography exhibition including photo documents from Berlin during World War II: "I did not tell him that my mother and my oma had been there, too, as refugees near the end of the war and afterward, and that I was myself, in this distant sense, also a Berliner. If we had talked more, I would have told him only that I was from Nigeria, from Lagos."[564] Later, during the same visit to the Martin Munkácsi photo exhibition, looking at an image representative of Nazi Germany next to a couple of Hasidic Jewish-Americans, Julius is unexpectedly overtaken by an uncanny feeling of guilt:

> … the undiluted hatred I felt for the subjects of the photo was, in the couple, transmuted into what? What was stronger than hate? I did not know, and could not ask. I needed to move away, immediately, needed to rest my eye elsewhere and be absent from this silent encounter into which I had inadvertently barged. The young couple stood close to each other, not speaking. I couldn't bear to look at them, or at what they were looking at, any longer.[565]

Gliding seamlessly from being an atypical representative of the victimized African other to carrying the burden of collective ethnic guilt through his German ancestry, Julius' complex identity shares a similar dilemma with Adrianne Rich's poetic alter ego, in the poem *Eastern War Time* discussed by Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*: he is unconsciously "anxious about who [he] is, or what [his] community can be, in the larger flow of transnational history."[566]

Seemingly more bothered by unrequested claims of brotherhood than by his potential status as a racial other, Julius' position is mainly the privileged one of the "good migrant," in the global cosmopolitanist understanding of the term; he is integrated, at least at a superficial level, professionally accomplished and thus economically viable. His situation is paralleled by

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[563] Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, accessed June 4, 2012, http://www.sfu.ca/~andrewf/CONCEPT2.html.
[564] Cole, 153.
[565] Ibid., 154.
[566] Bhabha, xx.

that of other individuals whom he encounters and who, due to historical, political, ethnic or personal circumstances, have not been as fortunate as he. His apparently smooth integration is an unexpressed constantly accusatory paragon placing the fault for other individuals' lack of success or integration on themselves rather than on the failures of the liberal democratic system they are part of or aspire to be part of. In the post 9/11 "surveillance culture of 'security,'" these individuals have the misfortune of belonging to the category of "bad migrant"[567] and treated with distrust. Such is the case of Saidu, the Liberian refugee, who tells Julius his heart-wrenching odyssey of escaping from a country torn by civil war and atrocities under the threat of exploitation as a child soldier. Saidu gives an account of the hardships and humiliations of illegal migration to Europe and then to the US, ending with his internment in a prison for two years, while indefinitely waiting for his destiny to be decided in court and keeping alive his dream of starting anew on American soil. Julius visits Saidu in prison as part of a program led by an NGO dedicated to the assistance of illegal migrants under indefinite detention. His gesture is not motivated by personal conviction or charity, but by the desire to impress his girlfriend. Julius is not much moved by Saidu's harrowing case and instead doubts the veracity of the man's narrative. The lack of trust towards the man comfortably allows Julius to move on without an interrogation of the systemic injustice possibly responsible for Saidu's extra-legal status: "I wondered, naturally, as Saidu told his story, whether I believed him or not, whether it wasn't more likely that he had been a soldier. He had, after all, had months to embellish the details, to perfect his claim of being an innocent refugee."[568] Ironically, while traveling with a fake passport, he insists on having his real name on it: Saidu Caspar Mohammed. The Muslim-sounding name may have been the cause of his being singled out by the authorities to begin with, but it is also his only connection with his past and his identity, as he doesn't know his birth date and owns no real identification papers other than his deceased mother's birth certificate. Despite what his name might imply, Saidu identifies himself as a Christian, which goes to show how the system indiscriminately filters the individual as potentially dangerous, but cannot have access to his complex hybrid identity by using solely bureaucratic means. His situation characterized by statelessness and lack of citizenship rights confirms that Hannah Arendt's emphasis on a more universal and less nation state-based understanding of "a right to have rights"[569] is still very much necessary today, as new groups of individuals become dispossessed of their basic human rights due to historical developments that are beyond their grasp

[567] Ibid., xvii.
[568] Cole, 67.
[569] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951).

and control. Saidu's stateless state, while physically present on American soil, is representative for the undemocratic distrust towards the other inherent in a legal system under "the state of exception" in which the accused is automatically presumed and treated as guilty. On the other hand, Julius' casual dismissal of the undemocratic phenomenon behind Saidu's indefinite detention is one instance of the general anomie characterizing his detached cosmopolitan self.

On his trip to Brussels to search for his German grandmother from whom he has become estranged, Julius has the occasion to become a flâneur in a new city, with its own dark history. His wanderings through Brussels expose subtle connections between the European city and the American metropolis he lives in. The individuals he meets during his travels reveal the transnational reverberations of 9/11. Working in an international call center with clients from all over the world, Farouq is fluent both in English and in French, aside from his native tongue, and is an avid reader of critical theory, in which he should have obtained a Master's degree. Yet, his cosmopolitan credentials do not translate into a traditionally cosmopolitan worldview. His thesis on Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* was rejected for plagiarism in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. In his discussions with Julius, he implies that his ethnicity might have had something to do with the professors' drastic conclusion. It becomes evident that the rejection suffered has affected both his self-perception and his initial perspective on his host country and on the West in general, placing him, Julius concludes, this time with more sympathy, among "the thwarted ones," alongside the illegal immigrant Saidu:

> The department rejected my thesis. On what grounds? Plagiarism. They gave no reason. They just said I would have to submit another one in twelve months. I was crushed. I left the school. Plagiarism? This had nothing to do with me. The only possibilities are either that they refused to believe my command of English and theory or, and I think is even more likely, that they were punishing me for world events in which I had played no role. My thesis committee had met on September 20, 2001, and to them, with everything happening in the headlines, here was this Moroccan writing about difference and revelation. That was the year I lost all my illusions about Europe. [570]

As in the case of Saidu, the Liberian refugee, Julius has no access to the truth with regard to Farouq's story. Thus, interpreting both their destinies remains a matter of trust. It is left to Julius who hears their stories, and indirectly to the reader, to decide whether they believe them. Trusting them, instead of adopting a suspicious or irresolute attitude towards them, would mean having to take on the complex ethical responsibility of assessing the system perpetrating such injustices. Instead, it is easier to see them as cases of personal failure. Unlike Saidu, who has a

[570] Cole, 129, 128.

stoic acceptance of his unfortunate circumstance, Farouq is very much aware of his position as Other in a society that is distrustful of him. He uses the tools of critical theory to meditate on his outsider status. As Julius first meets him, he is reading a critical or explanatory work on Walter Benjamin's famously ambiguous *On the Concept of History* and in their later discussions he drops names ranging from Edward Said, Paul DeMan, or Benedict Anderson to Norman Finkelstein.[571] Drawing from many of the critics whom he admires, Farouq argues that the Enlightenment, with its crowning of rationality, dethroned religion, but left only a gap in its place. Putting a spin on DeMan's concept of "blindness and insight," Farouq concludes that only a return to religion, specifically to Islam, can fill that gap:

> His theory has to do with an insight that can actually obscure other things, that can be a blindness. And the reverse, also, how what seems blind can open up possibilities. When I think about the insight that is a form of blindness, I think of rationality, of rationalism, which is blind to God and to the things that God can offer human beings. This is the failure of the Enlightenment.[572]

Here Farouq seems to echo Bhabha's postcolonial critique arguing that the "notion of the West itself or Western culture, its liberalism and relativism – these very potent mythologies of progress – also contain a cutting edge, a limit," and the conclusion that "rationalism is an ideology and not just a way of being sensible."[573] Saidu is imprisoned at the gates of the society he so ardently wants to enter and be assimilate into, an act which he perhaps naively perceives as his only salvation. Instead he is deprived of his rights and made to wait indefinitely in a kind of legal limbo for forces beyond his control to decide his fate. Farouq is a problematic member of a society that perceives him as Other and from which he feels increasingly estranged. Whether his "thwarted" destiny is the result of his own academic failure, or of discrimination against him in a post-9/11 atmosphere of distrust, remains unclear. Nonetheless, Julius records the undeniable animosity against immigrants, particularly from the Middle East and Africa, which plagues a city and a nation that have been leaning towards the extreme right in recent years. To illustrate the racial and ethnic tensions palpable in the Belgian capital during his visit, Julius mentions several actual violent occurrences: the case of two Middle Eastern youths who have

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[571] Finkelstein's radical stance on what he calls "the Holocaust industry" and his controversial views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly his attack on a Zionist scholar whom he has accused of plagiarism, have cost him his tenure. Having this controversial figure mentioned in the discussions between Julius and Farouq may be a means of introducing the connection between academia and ideology in the context of Farouq's own rejection by the institution where he was in the process of completing a Master's degree and casting doubt on the veracity of the plagiarism accusations. For a contextualization of the Finkelstein case, see the documentary *American Radical: The Trials of Norman Finkelstein*, directed by David Ridgen and Nicolas Rossier (Baraka Productions, Ridgen Film, 2009), DVD.

[572] Cole, 127.

[573] Rutherford, 209.

been wrongfully accused of killing a Flemish boy, the racist shooting in Antwerp committed by a teenage extremist and other post-9/11 incidents including minority victims, but which have paradoxically resulted in strengthening the nation's extreme Right and causing its deeper descent into "anomie."[574] At the same time, he also records the ancient struggle between the Walloons and the Flemish that is still going on today, placing discrimination in a multi-ethnic context, which diminishes the exceptionality of post-9/11 anti-Muslim feeling.

A self-declared follower of the bellicose Malcom X approach, instead of Martin Luther King's passive resistance much glorified by liberals, Farouq questions the civil-rights tactic in which the oppressed turn the other cheek in order to eventually have their rights recognized: "There's always the expectation that the victimized Other is the one that covers the distance, that has the noble ideas; I disagree with this expectation." To this Julius replies in his invariable liberal conciliatory tone: "It's an expectation that works sometimes, I said, but only if your enemy is not a psychopath. You need an enemy with a capacity for shame."[575] The other difference that Farouq emphasizes between the two civil rights activists is that King's focus is on the common humanity and Christianity of both sides, whereas Malcom X "recognized that difference contains its own value, and that the struggle must be to advance that value."[576] This difference is also at the core of what Habermas and Derrida see as a cosmopolitanism based on hospitality rather than tolerance. In a cosmopolitanism based on tolerance, the other is accepted on the condition that he adapts to the requirements of the host culture, whereas a cosmopolitanism based on hospitality implies an unconditional embrace of the other as he is, in spite of his otherness.

In a globalized world, "the disenfranchised" have to "witness the spectacle of the offensive prosperity of others"[577] causing animosities and a breakdown of communication between the two parties. According to Habermas, "unbounded capitalism and rigid stratification of world society are at the root of the collapse of dialogue"[578] and it is the privileged Western countries that have to be the ones reestablishing the communication channels and creating an empathic exchange, turning the other cheek first as it were. Both he and Derrida agree that the application of tolerance does not suffice in achieving that goal and that the term "tolerance" itself is tainted in its religious etymology which connects it to the troubled early history of Protestantism in Europe: "Tolerance is always on the side of the "reason of the strongest,"

[574] Cole, 95.
[575] Ibid., 105.
[576] Ibid.
[577] Borradori, 122.
[578] Ibid., 64.

where "might is right"… it is the good face of sovereignty, which says to the other from its elevated position, I am letting you be, you are not insufferable, I am leaving you a place in our home, but do not forget that this is my home… Tolerance is a conditional, circumspect, careful hospitality."[579] For Derrida true cosmopolitanism must, in Kantian spirit, be one based on hospitality rather than tolerance. Hospitality requires a leap of faith and trust in the stranger and is an ideal that should guide the encounter with the other; like his notion of "democracy to come," it is a goal that can never be fully achieved, but must be constantly striven for:

> … pure or unconditional hospitality does not consist in such an *invitation* (I invite you, I welcome you in to *my home* on condition that you adapt to my language, tradition, memory and so on). …hospitality *itself* opens, or is in advance open to someone who is neither expected, nor invited, to whomever arrives as an absolutely foreign *visitor*, as a new *arrival*, nonidentifiable and unforeseeable, in short wholly other. I would call this a hospitality of *visitation* rather than *invitation*. The visit might actually be very dangerous, and we must not ignore this fact, but would a hospitality without risk, a hospitality backed by an immune system against the very other, be true hospitality? [580]

Julius at once admires Farouq's strong opinions and rejects them because they go against his own liberal relativism: "I was starting to respect those who were fervent. It was a cause, and I was distrustful of causes, but it was also a choice, and I found my admiration for decisive choice increasing, because I was so essentially indecisive myself."[581] As was the case when hearing Saidu's story, his compassion for the other is mixed with a hint of distrust with regard to his character. Dr. Maillote's response to Julius' retelling of Farouq's criticism with regard to the manner in which the West responds to the "strangers" who are increasingly present in their societies echoes Julius' own suspicions. Immediately dismissive of "complainer" types, Dr. Maillote, who has herself lived through her own share of troubled history and loss, believes dwelling on one's suffering blinds one to the universality of suffering. Without Farouq's complex argumentation techniques, she depicts a society ruled by tolerance, to which the other is supposed to adapt:

> Look, I know this type, she said, these young men who go around as if the world is an offense to them. It is dangerous. For people to feel that they alone have suffered, it is very dangerous. Having such a degree of resentment is a recipe for trouble. Our society has made itself open for such people, but when they come in, all you hear is complaints. Why would you want to move somewhere only to prove how different you are? And why would a society like that want to welcome you? But if you live as long as I do, you will see that

[579] Ibid., 127, 128.
[580] Ibid., 128.
[581] Ibid., 196.

> there is an endless variety of difficulties in the world. It's difficult for everybody.[582]

Her stance shows how widespread the idea of tolerance towards the Other is, without considering its negative connotations and the power relations that it implies, as emphasized by Habermas and Derrida. Although possessed by a sense of "well-being" in the company of the outspoken Belgian lady, Julius is slightly disturbed by her "dismissal of Farouq's story." Still, as is the case with his other interlocutors, he does not pursue his thoughts and initial instinctive reactions further, nor does he engage her in a debate, or challenge her. He does, nonetheless, mention the fact that Dr. Maillotte has lost a son and expresses his unsatisfied curiosity with regard to his death that his interlocutor does not dwell upon. This has the role of showing that Dr. Maillotte's stance on "complainers" is consistent with her own personality and may not necessarily have predominantly racial or ethnic undertones.

As a liberal character, Julius is a receptacle for the variety of perspectives that surround him. He dispassionately observes other people's passions or suffering and is always somewhat doubtful of the truth of their confessions. Keats' concept of "negative capability," which entails an awareness of "one's limited horizon," is a characteristic of the liberal self[583] that Julius appears to possess, sometimes perhaps in excess. His "secret admiration for men of action," while "he himself prefers to remain uninvolved" because, purportedly, "[h]is belief in individual liberty makes him afraid to impose his will on others," puts him in the larger category of the liberal literary character as identified by C.B. Cox.[584] The liberal hero's self-aware pursuit of impartiality and distance often brings with it a lack of historical agency. In a critical essay on Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, Elaine Hadley sees a problematic return of what she calls Victorian liberalism's "fantasy of agency."[585] Unlike the typical liberal hero who is white and middle class, Julius' Nigerian-German-American identity makes him a peculiar addition to the lot because, as the author himself declares, "he is not your Everyman narrator:" "[h]e is not only involved, not only implicated, but also among the oppressed."[586] In his positive review of the novel, critic

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[582] Ibid., 143.
[583] Rowe, 4.
[584] Charles B. Cox, *The Free Spirit: A Study of Liberal Humanism in the Novels of George Eliot, Henry James, E.M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, Angus Wilson* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 1.
[585] *Elaine Hadley,* "On a Darkling Plain: Victorian Liberalism and the Fantasy of Agency," *Victorian Studies,* Vol. 48, No. 1 (Autumn, 2005), 92-102, accessed August 23, 2012, http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/3829882.pdf?acceptTC=true. "I have a confirmed belief in the Victorian and present-day ineffectiveness of liberalism, in particular the cognitive forms of the liberal project that Anderson, Thomas, and McEwan so differently animate. I think its story is now too often about itself, about the drama of its confrontation with the world, its melancholic pleasures in its limitations, too often formulated as heroism." (100)
[586] Supriya Nair, "Teju Cole - The Voice of the Mind," interview with Teju Cole, *Live Mint*, December 30, 2011, accessed September 1, 2012, http://www.livemint.com/Leisure/B1Fzos9jUiB3EI31eocl5O/Teju-Cole--The-voice-of-the-mind.html.

James Wood formulates Julius' both empathic and critical stance on Farouq as an almost heroic form of liberal "solipsism:"

> Julius is not heroic, but he is still the (mild) hero of his book. He is central to himself, in ways that are sane, forgivable, and familiar. And this selfish normality, this ordinary solipsism, this lucky, privileged equilibrium of the soul is an obstacle to understanding other people, even as it enables liberal journeys of comprehension. Julius sets out only to put people's lives down on paper, and not to change them, as Farouq, his secret sharer and alter ego, would want to do. But then it is because Julius set out not to change Farouq's life but to put it down on paper that we know Farouq so well.[587]

Interestingly, however, despite his detailed analysis of the novel, the reviewer chooses to leave out any mention of the striking revelation with regard to Julius' past that takes place before its closing chapter. After returning from Brussels, Julius casually encounters Moji, the sister of his closest friend during his school years in Nigeria. It is she who recognizes him and starts the conversation, while he seems not to know who she is at first. The episode in which Julius' memory is questioned and he is gradually revealed as an unreliable narrator follows another apparently banal episode consisting of a mild anxiety attack at having forgotten his ATM pin number. The mundane episode of involuntary memory loss stirs a meditation on the fallibility of the human mind and sets the ground for the larger disclosure of Julius' selective memory practices. After they get reacquainted, Moji unexpectedly reveals that, as a teenager in Nigeria, she has been raped by Julius in the context of a party hosted by her brother. Although obviously disturbed by this confession, Julius' reaction is more ambiguous and less detailed than the one occasioned by forgetting his ATM pin number:

> And so, what does it mean when, in someone else's version, I am the villain? I am only too familiar with bad stories—badly imagined, or badly told—because I hear them frequently from patients. I know the tells of those who blame others, those who are unable to see that they themselves, and not the others, are the common thread in all their bad relationships. There are characteristic tics that reveal the essential falsehood of such narratives. But what Moji had said to me that morning … had nothing in common with such stories. She had said it as if, with all of her being, she were certain of its accuracy.[588]

Without directly verbalizing his personal guilt, but not denying it either, Julius confirms the veracity of Moji's assertion in the context of her own life story, but implies a lesser importance of the occurrence in the context of his own life story:

> We have the ability to do both good and evil, and more often than not, we choose the good. When we don't, neither we nor our imagined audience is

[587] James Wood, "The Arrival of Enigmas," *The New Yorker*, February 28, 2011, accessed July 28, 2012, http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2011/02/28/110228crbo_books_wood.
[588] Cole, 243-244.

> troubled, because we are able to articulate ourselves to ourselves, and because we have, through our other decisions, merited their sympathy. They are ready to believe the best about us, and not without good reason. From my point of view, thinking about the story of my life, even without claiming any especially heightened sense of ethics, I am satisfied that I have hewed close to the good.[589]

It is perhaps important to make clear that the above mentioned rationalizations of the Moji incident appear in the novel before the rape accusation is made and that it is followed by no other direct comments from Julius who returns to his flaneurial meditations and draws his conclusion. The different manners in which the oppressor and the oppressed, the victors and the losers of history choose, consciously or unconsciously, to tell their version of the same story, reveal the unreliability of memory and the instability of cultural memorial practices. The striking disclosure of Julius' crime has the effect of waking the reader from a perhaps placid identification with Julius' first person account and inviting a reconsideration of his earlier attitudes and assertions. Julius' hybrid identity provides him with an entry into the different layers of society, but his outlook on life and society appears to be easy to identify with for a particular class of individuals, as Wood suggests: "we also learn a lot about Julius's liberalism—about its secret desires, its dissatisfaction with itself, and its passivity. More than anything, "Open City" seems a beautifully modulated description of a certain kind of solitary liberalism common to thousands, if not millions, of bookish types."[590]

The revelation that the easy to identify with character may be a villain in another person's life story is a means of reflecting back on Julius' previous assertions and seeing them again in a new light. In contrast to the brevity of his thoughts about the Moji incident, his rather lengthy anterior descriptions of random episodes in which he has acted in a laudable manner, in some cases taking on the role of a savior, appear in retrospect a means of building up his positive identity before it gets challenged by a different perspective. He offers an apparently gratuitous account of how he has saved another boy from drowning during his childhood in Nigeria. In another such episode, Julius shields a young mother and a baby from a windswept panel in Brussels, on a very windy day.[591] In other instances, however, he self-consciously meditates on the self-serving reasons for his interest in the stories of others: "Perhaps she fell

[589] Ibid., 243.
[590] Wood.
[591] Cole, 83, 145.

in love with the idea of myself that I presented in that story. I was the listener, the compassionate African who paid attention to the details of someone else's life and struggle. I had fallen in love with that idea myself."[592]

When he is severely beaten and mugged by a group of young African-Americans in New York, his response is the stoic endurance of the pain. He is at once German and Nigerian, Western and African, and in turn oppressed and oppressor, victim and perpetrator, as are many of the characters whose destinies he learns about in conversation. The rape incident places Julius' oppression in the realm of gender and not in that of the culture wars, of the clash of civilization, or of racial animosities, showing once again that oppression and suffering have many facets and that each individual is part of a network of connections based on power and submission, taking on possibly contradictory roles successively or even synchronously. The interpretation of the past, as is the case with the different reactions of the novel's reviewers to the rape accusation,[593] is a matter of "blindness and insight," to go back to DeMan's idea that any insight implies a certain amount of blindness, but, most importantly, that blindness cannot be avoided and one is not competent to ask "the question of his own blindness."[594] Too acute a

[592] Ibid., 70.

[593] The different reactions of the literary reviewers of the novel is an example of "blindness and insight" in action. If Wood mentions the incident in which Julius forgets the ATM pin code in some detail, he totally eludes the shocking rape related amnesia, in spite of his extremely thorough and praiseful review. Michiko Kakutani is critical of the novel and offers a very general assessment of it that never even reaches this particular aspect. Another reviewer, otherwise impressed with the novel, cannot help confessing his being unsettled by the sudden revelation with regard to a character he had until then easily identified with, but, rather than attempt an interpretation of the revelation, dismisses it as the immature gimmick of a young author: "I did have one larger objection, to a discomfiting turn the novel takes toward its end. A woman from Lagos whom Julius knew in his youth shares an ostensibly shocking revelation about a transgression in his past. To this forgotten or repressed or secreted memory he responds ambiguously. In any other story, such a twist would send tremors across the pages, yet here, set against the novel's grand scope, it feels unnecessary, either a misstep by a young author or an overstep by a persuasive editor. Could the denouement not simply have comprised the undramatic culmination of the book's ideas?" See: Miguel Syjuco, "Book Review – 'Open City' - by Teju Cole," *The New York Times*, February 25, 2011, accessed July 22, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/27/books/review/Syjuco-t.html and Michiko Kakutani, "'Open City' by Teju Cole – Review," *The New York Times*, May 18, 2011, accessed July 22, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/19/books/open-city-by-teju-cole-book-review.html.

[594] Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Blindness," in *Blindness and Insight* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 106. De Man's biography makes an interesting parallel to the character of Julius as a scholar whose reputation has come under scrutiny after his death due to the revelation of his collaboration with the Nazi regime during his time as a young literary journalist in occupied Brussels. Never having revealed this collaboration publicly during his life time, the question and degree of his guilt have become the post-mortem focal point of both defenses and accusations from fellow critics, who have only his work and what is known of his life in order to make their interpretation with regard to the importance of the matter itself and to the character of the man. For more on the post-mortem controversy surrounding the critic see: Richard Bernstein, "The de Man Affair; Critics Attempt to Reinterpret a Colleague's Disturbing Past," *New York Times*, July 17, 1988, accessed September 15, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/1988/07/17/weekinreview/ideas-trends-de-man-affair-critics-attempt-reinterpret-colleague-s-disturbing.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm, Tilottama Rajan, "Allegories of Intertextuality: The Controversy over Paul de Man," *Modern Philology,* Vol. 89, No. 2 (Nov., 1991), 231-246, accessed September 24 2012, http://www.jstor.org/stable/438397 and Dominick LaCapra, "The Personal, the Political and the Textual: Paul de Man as Object of Transference," *History and Memory*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Spring - Summer, 1992), 5-38, accessed September 24, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25618625.

preoccupation with one's own suffering may also be a cause of blindness to other people's suffering, as Dr. Maillote suggests with regard to the character of Farouq, while Farouq in turn accuses the Israelis of using their historical suffering to justify inflicting further suffering on the Palestinians.

On a larger scale, the novel shows how the suffering caused by 9/11 in America and indirectly in the West (as exemplified by its far-reaching repercussion on the city of Brussels) has desensitized the citizens of the First World to the plight of the oppressed others, as the author himself explains in an interview, echoing Martha Nussbaum and Judith Butler: "Mourning should be about becoming aware that others have suffered. I think the shock of it was so great that it made Americans callous."[595] As an art critic, Teju Cole specializes on Dutch art, which might explain his familiarity with the city of Brussels and its museums, as well as the general approach of his novel. He parallels Julius' concentrated gaze, focusing on the telling detail of the city that remains unobserved by the indifferent passerby with that necessary for the interpretation of a painting. In the spirit of Bruegel's works, like the famous *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* that is mentioned in the novel,[596] *Open City* emphasizes how individual tragedy, viewed in a larger context of history and constant human suffering, loses its centrality, the focus remaining on the life that goes on in spite of it.

The notion of the "open city" is central to the novel and links the mysterious underside of Julius' hybrid consciousness with the complex theme of cosmopolitanism and the failings of liberal cosmopolitan politics, which are laid bare in the unequal structure of the contemporary metropolis: "The main fiction in it was matching Julius' generous and self-concealing character to New York's generous and self-concealing character."[597] An open city is one that under siege chooses to open itself up to its enemies and allow them to enter it in the effort of saving itself and its infrastructure from destruction. Brussels, where a significant part of the novel takes place, has been an open city during World War II. On a less literal level, the metropolis is open to the exploration of a flaneur like Julius, revealing parts of itself to his attentive gaze. At the same time, many contemporary Western cities face the challenge of a postcolonial inner structure with citizens or would-be-citizens who are often denied basic human rights. The multiculturalism of cities like New York or Brussels make them appear open to the other, to the stranger, but at a closer glance, as that performed by Julius, it becomes obvious that this inner cosmopolitanism is ruled at best by the limiting apparent openness of *tolerance*, rather

[595] Nair.
[596] Cole, 145.
[597] Liu.

than the genuine openness embodied by Derrida's notion of *hospitality*. The revelation of Julius' past functions as a means of turning the gaze from the other and his suffering to oneself and one's own complicity in it. A hospitable rather than tolerant attitude towards the stranger may be achieved if one becomes aware of the stranger inside each one of us, which is what Julius, and in turn the reader who has identified with him, are forced to consider in light of Moji's accusations:

> The image of hatred and of the other, a foreigner is neither the romantic victim of our clannish indolence nor the intruder responsible for all the ills of the polis. … Strangely the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder. By recognizing him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself. …
> But it is perhaps on the basis of that contemporary individualism's subversion, beginning with the moment when the citizen-individual ceases to consider himself as unitary and glorious but discovers his incoherencies and abysses, in short his "strangenesses" – that the question arises again: no longer that of welcoming the foreigner within a system that obliterates him but of promoting the togetherness of those foreigners that we all recognize ourselves to be.[598]

Julius' half empathic, half distrustful attitude towards characters like Saidu or Farouq comes back to him through the revelation of his own selective memory and his status as a stranger to himself. Cole confirms the disclosure of Julius' past as essential to the understanding of the character in an interview, when asked if Moji's allegations are true:

> Oh, it's absolutely true. I can't imagine Julius' story without it. I knew right from the beginning the book would end like that: three vicious thwacks of the hammer, and then a soft exit to strings. I'm attracted, in art, to things that trouble the complacency of the viewer or reader. I was interested in that move that went from "He's one of us" to "Is he one of us?" Many people were upset that I put Julius through that. But there's no such thing as a right to remain untroubled.[599]

Images of migratory birds significantly appear both in the beginning and at the end of the novel with a slight twist. Observing the many bird species crossing the skyline of New York City prompts Julius' meditation on the process of migration and its cycles. The unnoticed migration of birds over the city creates the half-conscious auspices for his flaneurial exploration of the city's human migrational processes, which go equally unnoticed by the busy urban dweller wrapped up in his own complicated life rhythm. At the same time, the parallel between

[598] Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 1, 2-3.
[599] Liu.

animal and human migration serves to contextualize the latter as an equally mysterious phenomenon, but still in the realm of the familiar and the harmless, debunking common post-9/11 associations of migration with a threatening invasion:

> Not long before this aimless wandering began, I had fallen into the habit of watching bird migrations from my apartment, and I wonder now if the two are connected. Often, as I searched the sky, all I saw was rain, or the faint contrail of an airplane bisecting the window, and I doubted in some part of myself whether these birds, with their dark wings and throats, their pale bodies and tireless little hearts, really did exist. So amazed was I by them that I couldn't trust my memory when they weren't there.[600]

Significantly, at the same time, the last sentence in this paragraph opening the novel sets the tone for the work's wider exploration of the relation between memorial practices and trust. In concluding the train of his wandering-fueled thoughts, Julius reflects on the strange occurrence of migratory birds getting distracted by the flame of the Statue of Liberty and dying in the process, in large numbers: "… the flame that shone from the torch guided ships into Manhattan's harbor; that same light, especially in bad weather, fatally disoriented birds. The birds, many of which were clever enough to dodge the cluster of skyscrapers in the city, somehow lost their bearings when faced with a single monumental flame."[601] If we are to take this phenomenon as an allegory for contemporary migration, the capitalist order symbolized by the image of the skyscrapers seems to exert a more benign attraction and a more easily manageable terrain that the "clever" other, Bhabha's "good migrant," may successfully navigate. On the other hand, the "single monumental flame" of Libertas, the Roman goddess of freedom, which has come to visually epitomize the democratic values of the West, attracting migrants like Farouq or Saidu in their shining distant appearance, may prove to be fatally deceptive when approached. The symbolism of the image is quite obvious, but no less powerful because of that, and it parallels Julius' explorations of the different types of human immigration, which encompass both successful individual cases like his own and troubling ones like that of the Liberian Saidu. Farouq's initial dream of Europe was connected with his intellectual ambitions and the desire to experience freedom of thought. Left jaded by his post-9/11 academic failure and the xenophobic atmosphere in Brussels, however, he confesses to Julius that "Europe only looks free," and concludes that his European "dream was an apparition."[602] Closed to the public in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, and only partially and restrictively opened ever since, the Statue of Liberty, once a symbol of hospitality and of the city's and the nation's idealized

[600] Cole, 3-4.
[601] Ibid., 258.
[602] Ibid., Kindle location 1697.

openness towards the "tired," "poor" and "huddled masses yearning to breathe free,"[603] seems, in this context, to have turned into the epitome of a culture made up of strangers and paradoxically ruled by distrust and fear towards the stranger exacerbated through the nation's post-9/11 auto-immunitary reaction.

If the novels discussed in this study are mostly written in response to the troubled state of civil society under the Bush administration, *Open City* dramatizes the challenges faced by the liberal democratic self under the presidency of Barack Obama. In an article critical towards President Obama's global defense policies and his increasing reliance on drone strikes, Teju Cole identifies the president as representative for today's liberal cosmopolitanism, pointing out his literary interests and his penchant for complex works of fiction and poetry:

> Barack Obama is an elegant and literate man with a cosmopolitan sense of the world. He is widely read in philosophy, literature, and history—as befits a former law professor—and he has shown time and again a surprising interest in contemporary fiction. The books a President buys might be as influenced by political calculation as his "enjoyment" of lunch at a small town diner or a round of skeet shooting. Nevertheless, a man who names among his favorite books Morrison's "Song of Solomon," Robinson's "Gilead," and Melville's "Moby Dick" is playing the game pretty seriously. His own feel for language in his two books, his praise for authors as various as Philip Roth and Ward Just, as well as the circumstantial evidence of the books he's been seen holding (the "Collected Poems" of Derek Walcott, most strikingly), add up to a picture of a man for whom an imaginative engagement with literature is inseparable from life. It thrilled me, when he was elected, to think of the President's nightstand looking rather similar to mine. We had, once again, a reader in chief, a man in the line of Jefferson and Lincoln.[604]

The president's literary sensibility, which, one would assume, involves an ethical empathetic propensity, is presented by the author as at odds with the partly indiscriminate violence against innocent civilians resulting from the controversial drone strikes, whose targets he is said to personally approve. This contradiction at the heart of Western civilization, most poignant in the historical precedent of the "the Nazis' affection for high culture [which] did not prevent their crimes," is also central to the development of Julius as a character in *Open City*. Julius' penchant for high culture is extensively illustrated in the novel particularly through his fondness for classical music. His double German and African ancestry links him with the complex

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[603] Emma Lazarus, *The New Colossus*, 1883, accessed June 23, 2014 http://xroads.virginia.edu/~cap/liberty/lazaruspoem.html. The iconic patriotic poem dedicated to the Statue of Liberty presents her as a "Mother of Exiles," the embodiment of an empire built on humanist impulses. As a new, feminized colossus standing as a beacon of hospitality for the world's "homeless" she is contrasted with "the brazen giant of Greek fame" standing for ancient imperial pomp. Paralleled to Saidu's destiny in the novel, the message of the poem turns into bitter irony.

[604] Teju Cole, "A Reader's War," *The New Yorker*, February 10, 2013, accessed May 7, 2014, http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/a-readers-war.

legacy of World War II atrocities and echoes President Obama's dual racial and ethnic background, all the while placing today's liberal cosmopolitanism in a shadowy light. The question whether high aesthetic achievement can obscure or justify pardoning acts of barbarism committed by the same "civilization" is a recurrent one throughout the novel. This Benjaminian dialectics of civilization and barbarism is echoed in the novel's mention of critic Paul de Man and his controversial past, as well as in the quote from a poem by W.H. Auden in which he defends controversial conservative writer figures like Rudyard Kipling or Paul Claudel, arguing with regard to the latter that his artistic achievements will in time overcome his negative political reputation: "Time will pardon Paul Claudel, pardons him for writing well."[605] Chancing upon a statue of Claudel in Brussels, Julius wonders whether "indeed it was that simple, if time was so free with memory, so generous with pardons, that writing well could come to stand in the place of an ethical life."[606] In light of the revelation of Julius' own shocking ethical lapse, the reader following his first person narrative is faced with a similar dilemma, which metonymically echoes the novel's wider concern with whether the liberal democratic values of the West and the high culture produced in the West are accomplices in the historical blindness surrounding acts of barbarism synchronous with the historical landmarks in the timeline of Western civilizational "progress."

Conclusion

The two novels that make the subject of this chapter share the preoccupation with the fate and challenges faced by liberal democracy and the liberal individual in a context of growing mistrust both at a national level, within the complex class and ethnic structures of the US, and at a transnational, cosmopolitan level. The dangerous human rights gaps created by the self-protective national isolationist tendencies and measures that function as a Derridian auto-immunitary reaction are central to both novels. At the same time, both works offer a broader outlook on the effects of September 11 on a global scale, which allows a look back at the American public sphere and the state of US democracy both from the inside and from the outside. Thus, the novels use a convergence of inner and outer perspectives to transnationally perform the cultural

[605] Cole, *Open City*, Kindle location 2014. Original quote from W.H. Auden, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," *Selected Poems* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 80-83, 83.
[606] Ibid.

work of putting "the liberal ideas and expressions of the present time … under some degree of pressure," as Trilling has suggested the task of the liberal imagination may be.[607]

Perhaps one of the harshest perspectives on the state of liberalism in the twenty-first century becomes evident when taking on the lens of the "bad migrant," Homi Bhabha's category representing the outcasts of what he calls the global capitalist cosmopolitanism, in which the characters Saidu and Farouq in *Open City* or Asma in *The Submission* can be included. These characters lend the two novels what Bhabha calls a "postcolonial perspective," which "forces us to rethink the profound limitations of a consensual … 'liberal' sense of community," suggesting that "the language of rights and obligations, so central to the modern discourse of citizenship, must be questioned on the basis of the anomalous and discriminatory legal and cultural status assigned to migrant and refugee populations who find themselves, inevitably, on the other side of the law."[608] In *The Submission*, the not fully assimilated immigrant, or rather the aspiring citizen coming from the Third World, who is both an insider and an outsider to society, embodied in an idealized manner by Asma Anwar, serves the task of holding up to a divided society its own momentarily forgotten or distorted democratic ideals. Similarly, a discussion among members of the Bangladeshi-American community in New York reveals the dangers to the process of democratic deliberation posed by the emotionality involved in the act of public mourning:

> The store owner was arguing with Dr. Chowdhury … over whether the effort to take away Khan's victory mimicked Bangladeshi history. …
>
> "It's just like Pakistan did to us, not wanting to recognize the election because it didn't like the results. Exactly the same. America should be better."
>
> "This wasn't an election," Mr. Chowdhury said. … "It was a small group of people deciding. Because if it was an election, you think Americans would vote for a Muslim? So it's the opposite. They tried to give it to him without an election. Now Americans are saying they don't want him. We had the majority then; they have it now."
>
> "We wanted freedom. They want to discriminate."[609]

Mo's character, despite being an American citizen in the eyes of the law, comes to perceive himself as an outsider under the discriminatory pressure exercised by majoritarian parts of the public sphere. Refusing to declare his allegiances, both as an American and as a Muslim, Mo is denied by societal forces the patriotic sense of belonging which has prompted him to participate in the memorial project contest to begin with. Instead, the events that unfold after his submission push him into an uprooted cosmopolitan status, which allows him to practice his

[607] Trilling, x.
[608] Rutheford, 218-219.
[609] Waldman, 99.

profession without censorship, but which, at the same time, disengages his work from the domain of *democracy to come*, placing it in the realm of liberal capitalism.

Central to the connection Derrida makes between literature and his notion of *democracy to come* is the freedom to not declare one's allegiance, to remain an enigma in a manner similar to Melville's Bartleby and his iconic "I would prefer not to." Mo's refusal to deliver an exhaustive explanation for his project and his refusal to declare his allegiance, which, in the context of public outrage, would have been limited to the Manichean range of "you're either with us or you're with the terrorist," leads to his exile from the US and his transformation into a cosmopolitan professional in the service of the world's "Gatsby nations." Furthermore, rejected through the misused mechanisms of direct democracy, his garden-shaped memorial project, which could have conferred a cosmopolitan dimension to the efforts of commemorating 9/11, while also mirroring the hybridity of American culture, is actually built for a rich emir, thus serving the aggrandizement of an individual successful in the global capitalist cosmopolitan order. Suggestively, whereas the original public garden project was grounded in his cosmopolitan American patriotism, his actually built private garden contains sculptures of uprooted trees, with their roots facing upwards, illustrative of the uprooted cosmopolitanism of his exile. The static memorial in the shape of a garden of flags actually built instead of Mo's perpetually growing and changing one suggests the suspension of practices supporting the notion of "democracy to come" and the Habermasian idea of modernity as an unfinished project.

Cole's novel too offers a reconsideration of individual and collective suffering in a transnational context. The innocent bystander to history, as represented in Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, does not exist for Cole, in whose novel no one is innocent as long as there is suffering in the world and today's victim is often yesterday's perpetrator in a complex web of historical entanglements. The revelation of Julius' crime brings to mind Derrida's assertion in his essay on forgiveness that "[w]e are all heir, at least to persons or events marked in essential, interior, ineffaceable fashion, by crimes against humanity."[610] Everyone is in turn oppressor and oppressed, like Julius, who feels both the burden of his German identity that he silences, and his Nigerian one with its racial implications, and, finally, at the level of gender, he has to face his own image as an aggressor in Moji's life-story. Jonathan Safran Foer's transnational approach to commemoration in his post-9/11 novel focusing on the innocent bystander in the violent flow of history seems to be informed by what Robbins calls the "human rights consensus," namely "the general willingness to extract civilian suffering from its historical

[610] Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 29.

(national, causal) contexts, from all narratives of provocation, collective responsibility, just retaliation, or 'what goes around comes around.'"[611] Starting from the ethical implications of W. G. Sebald's effort of bringing to public attention the Allied bombings of Nazi Germany and of exploring the silence surrounding these events in German culture, Robbins draws his conclusion on what the ethical approach to cosmopolitanism may be. Foer's use of German characters who have survived the Allied fire-bombing of the city of Dresden during World War II further connects him with what Robbins perceives as a problematic and not "self-evident" form of cosmopolitanism, stressing universal human rights, while at the same time relieving the individual or the nation of historical responsibility and the acknowledgement of historical guilt. This type of "human rights individualism," Robbins further argues, has made "the pleasures of pure detachment… generously available" to the public, encouraging at the same time the general acceptance of "the presumed ethical superiority of forgiveness."[612] Concluding his effort to formulate a brand of cosmopolitanism which would be least conducive to violence and would avoid the mere restatement of already existing global hierarchies, Robbins asserts, along lines drawn by Benedict Anderson, that cosmopolitanism needs to be grounded or rooted in some form of national attachment which would allow the individual to take responsibility for historical guilt and shame. Keeping September 11 and its global repercussions in mind, Robbins stresses that "modern Americans have no ethical choice" but "to forego the pleasures of pure detachment"[613] afforded through the "human rights consensus." Thus, Robbins adheres to a form of rooted cosmopolitanism, which is not one based on national pride, but rather one based on collective "shame" and the collective assumption of responsibility. Along similar lines, *Open City* offers a critique of the uprooted and detached cosmopolitanism espoused by its protagonist, revealing the layers of shame-worthy elements hidden under the liberal veneer of his elegant global citizen persona.

Both novels point to the example of previous generations, particularly that of World War II survivors, who seem to have managed to adopt a more stoic attitude towards history, in line with Derrida's suggestion of mourning and then moving on. Dr. Maillotte's dismissal of what she calls "complainers" like Farouq, Professor Saito's silence about his time in the Japanese-American internment camps, or the similar silence of Julius' German grandmother (who may have been raped by Russian soldiers at the end of World War Two) are reactions which

[611] Robbins, 184.
[612] Ibid. 189. Interestingly, both Foer and Cole are influenced by Sebald's work in their focus on traumatic history and memory, but also in their literary approach, albeit, paradoxically with opposite results.
[613] Ibid.

involve victimhood, but at the same time, also the acknowledgement of individual shame and guilt:

> I saw [Dr. Maillotte] at fifteen, in September 1944, sitting on a rampart in the Brussels sun, delirious with happiness at the invaders' retreat. I saw Junichiro Saito on the same day, aged thirty-one or thirty-two, unhappy, in internment, in an arid room in a fenced compound in Idaho, far away from his books. Out there on that day, also, were all four of my own grandparents: the Nigerians, the Germans. … I saw them all, even the ones I had never seen in real life, saw all of them in the middle of that day in September sixty-two years ago, with their eyes open as if shut, mercifully seeing nothing of the brutal half century ahead and, better yet, hardly anything at all of all that was happening in their world, the corpse-filled cities, camps, beaches, and fields, the unspeakable worldwide disorder of that very moment."[614]

Waldman's character, Mo, while becoming a scapegoat for the post-9/11 anti-Islamic feeling and undemocratic tendencies pervading society, similarly wonders whether he could have mustered the grace under pressure shown by Japanese-Americans during World War II:

> Mo's mind wondered off for a moment, to photographs he had seen of gardens at Manzanar, the Japanese American internment camp. Its internees had laid rocks, dug pools, even sculpted faux-wood limbs and logs from concrete. Would he have had the same tenacity of spirit? He pictured himself within the confines of a wire-fenced camp, marking off the borders of a small garden, digging its canals, planting its trees–[615]

By drawing local and global historical parallels, both novels point towards a cosmopolitan mode of commemoration without overlooking the historical and ethical importance of locality. What I would like to call a cosmopolitan mode of commemoration stresses the universality of human suffering, which unpacks exceptionalist claims. Conversely, the emphasis placed on the locality of suffering is just as important in the process of assuming responsibility for causing the pain of others and in understanding the origins of violence. It is precisely this locality of violence that prompts Bhabha to contrast what he calls the "provincial" universalism of the old cosmopolitanism espoused by Martha Nussbaum with the "unsatisfied" cosmopolitanism he finds in Adrienne Rich's poem *Eastern War Time*. Bhabha points out the presence of the "I" of Rich's poetic persona in different physical and temporal locations to emphasize, in lines similar to Robbins' argument, the inescapability of the local in taking responsibility for the past: "For it is precisely there, in the ordinariness of the day-today, in the intimacy of the indigenous, that, unexpectedly, we become murderous, unrecognizable strangers to ourselves."[616] The recourse to historical parallels in both novels, thus, serves the purpose of di-

[614] Cole, 96.
[615] Waldman, 175.
[616] Homi Bhabha, "Unpacking My Library Again," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*,

minishing the impression of exceptionality surrounding the events of September 11 and of refuting the rhetoric of national innocence by unearthing problematic instances in American history. The effect of these historical parallels is in line with the rooted cosmopolitanism based on the acknowledgement of a national shameful past advocated by Robbins.[617] Furthermore, Robbins draws a parallel between the individual and the nation as ethical agents, which can and should take responsibility for their shameful acts. In this context, the initial apparently admirable and superior uprooted detachment of the cosmopolitan individual represented by Julius in *Open City* becomes ethically questionable. Similarly, Mo's memorial, which could have added a cosmopolitan dimension to the process of national re-definition involved in the act of commemorating and remembering the past, is built with significant alterations for a private individual and possibly ends up representing an uprooted form of cosmopolitanism available to the privileged few of the global capitalist order.

The Submission dramatizes the potential dangers of an unhealthy, mistrust- and fear-laden public sphere in a democratic society, as well as on a global scale, stressing the importance of perceiving the nation from the lens of the other in order to achieve superior self-knowledge and to become more ethically self-aware. Pervaded by a humanist cosmopolitanism, *The Submission*, with its multi-ethnic, multi-racial and religiously as well as politically diverse cast of characters, showcases the universality of certain human aspirations like that of achieving freedom and dignity. At the same time, it manages to capture the hybrid cultural origins and the different manifestations of these supposedly universal aspirations, which complicate the communicative efforts involved in the struggles towards their achievement, as sustained by individuals with diverse backgrounds.

Open City asks what it means to be a liberal cosmopolitan individual in the twenty-first century, highlighting the ethical issues involved in acting as a detached observer or a by-stander to the suffering of others. Not incidentally, after returning from Brussels to New York, Julius sends Farouq a copy of Kwame Anthony Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism*,[618] asking the post-office clerk to put a stamp that has something other than the American flag on it;[619] a gesture through which he performs his identity as a twenty-first century cosmopolitan liberal individual. For John Carlos Rowe, in his study transposing Trilling's notion of a "liberal imagination" beyond the realm of modernism, Appiah's stance on cosmopolitanism represents the necessary twenty-

Vol. 28, No. 1, Identities (Spring, 1995), 5-18, 7, accessed June 17, 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1315240.
[617] Robbins, 189. Robins follows Benedict Anderson's wider claims in *The Spectre of Comparisons*.
[618] Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism.*
[619] Cole, 186.

first century expansion of the notion of liberal cosmopolitanism. Sharing some "qualities of Western bourgeois culture" with Lionel Trilling's liberal cosmopolitanism, Appiah moves beyond Trilling's "highly limited and very familiar" understanding of "other" cultures to encompass "cultural encounters [that] offer drastic challenges to his (and many readers') social conventions."[620]

Biographically, as well as class-wise, *Open City*'s main character and narrator, Julius, has a hybrid background similar to that of Appiah himself, who is half Ghanaian, half British (on the British side being part of a family prominent in the colonial structures),[621] but also reminiscent of President Obama's own American-Kenyan heritage. These two biographical parallels of belonging both to the First and to the Third World do *not* place Julius at the margin of society giving him the perspective of the outsider, but rather point towards the idea that the liberal cosmopolitan individual is now at the center of power, of political power in Obama's case, and of cultural power in the case of Appiah, who is a celebrated and influential academic figure. The ethics suggested by Appiah in his work on cosmopolitanism is one based on conversation. His cosmopolitan ideal is not the universal one proposed by Nussbaum, but rather a more bendable one in which one is not supposed to fraternize with one's fellowmen in general, but to be open to converse with the individual other without having the obligation to agree with his or her perspective. Through repeated exposure to the stranger and his or her idiosyncrasies in conversation, Appiah further suggests, the unfamiliar and the unacceptable features of the other may, in time, become understandable, if not acceptable. Through mutual "contamination," the participants in the dialogue influence each other and the free floating ideas they exchange compete with each other and are pragmatically transformed in the process. Appiah's notion that "the larger human truth is on the side of contamination - that endless process of imitation and revision,"[622] can be seen as a cultural equivalent of liberal laissez faire. Like its social and economic equivalent, the cosmopolitan cultural laissez faire proposed by Appiah suffers from the same disregard for global economic inequality and other connected concerns like environmental degradation.

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[620] Rowe, 22.

[621] For a discussion of Appiah's problematic ethnic and class-related background see Robbins, "Cosmopolitanism, New and Newer: Anthony Appiah," in *Perpertual War*, 31-47. Appiah's hybrid background informs his understanding of cosmopolitanism in crucial ways and is often used to ground his more abstract claims empirically, a strategy found by Robbins to be quite problematic. In an article on slavery, Appiah also mentions his family's slave-holding past: Kwame Anthony Appiah, "A Slow Emancipation," *The New York Times*, March 18, 2007, accessed September 5, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/18/magazine/18WWLNlede.t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

[622] Kwame Anthony Appiah, "The Case for Contamination," *The New York Times*, January 1, 2006, accessed September 5, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/01/magazine/01cosmopolitan.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

According to Robbins, Appiah's new cosmopolitanism "has become a comfortable piety: an ideal whose periodic reiteration helps us evade the actual, pressing complexities of the case, a credo that can be easily affirmed because it makes no unpleasant weekday demands."[623] Julius' act of sending Farouq a copy of Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism* combined with the disclosure of his past are revelatory for the novel's ambivalence towards the liberal cosmopolitanism represented by the main character and professed by Appiah. Julius' partial openness towards conversations with strangers includes individuals with whom he does not necessarily agree, but the range of his interlocutors is partly limited by his elitist bourgeois intellectualism and marked by his emphatic disregard for militancy, whether political or environmental, which is another feature he shares with Appiah.[624] While for Rowe, Appiah's take on liberal cosmopolitanism represents a necessary expansion of horizons, which was missing from Trilling's Western-centric, or rather Anglo-centric cosmopolitan approach, Cole's *Open City* unmasks the limits and self-serving pieties of the latest incarnation of liberal cosmopolitanism, critically scrutinizing and unpacking its politics of "detachment."

[623] Robbins, 32.
[624] In "The Case for Contamination" Appiah expresses his disapproval of anti-globalization advocates by drawing an extended ironic parallel between their militancy and the fundamentalism of Al Qaeda members.

Instead of a Conclusion:

"Mistakes Were Made:" the Neoliberal Imagination and the Post-9/11 Novel

> *None of the major problems facing humanity in the 21st century can be solved by the principles that still dominate the developed countries of the west: unlimited economic growth and technical progress, the ideal of individual autonomy, freedom of choice, electoral democracy. As is evident in the case of the environmental crisis, facing these problems will require in practice regulation by institutions, in theory a revision of both the current political rhetoric and even the more reputable intellectual constructions of liberalism. The question is can this be done within the framework of the rationalist, secularist and civilised tradition of the Enlightenment.*[625]

> *The feeling that the future does not exist, that it is only more of the same, means that all utopias are meaningless. Literature has always been related to utopia, so when utopia loses meaning, so does literature.*[626]

Neoliberalism, Liberal Democracy and the Left

After September 11, Francis Fukuyama's end of history thesis seemed particularly untimely. In the recent years, thinkers are returning to Fukuyama's controversial hypothesis, arguing that it has insidiously become the consensus not only among triumphalist neocons, but among the Left as well.[627] Liberal capitalism has long been seen as the only viable ideology, a view so entrenched and unchallenged, according to some, that it makes systemic change unimaginable. With the advent of neoliberalism, Mark Fisher suggests, following Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, it has become "easier to imagine the end of the world as the end of capitalism."[628]

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[625] Eric Hobsbawm, "The Big Question: Left and Right Defined the 20th Century. What's Next?," *Prospect Magazine*, March, 2007, 134, accessed June 3, 2014, http://pages.citebite.com/a1c1j9x7l6fwt.

[626] Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle: A Death in the Family*, trans. Don Bartlett (London: Harvill Secker, 2012), 221.

[627] Several leftist books on the 2010 to 2012 wave of protests all over the globe refer directly or indirectly to Fukuyama's end of history theory. See Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*, (London: Verso, 2012). See also Slavoj Žižek's analysis of the failure to coagulate into meaningful social change of the many global incarnations of the "occupy movement" and the offshoots of the Arab spring: Slavoj Žižek, "Trouble in Paradise." *London Review of Books* 35 no. 14 (2013): 11-12, accessed November 4, 2014, http://www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n14/slavoj-zizek/trouble-in-paradise. The argument of the article is further expanded in his book discussing the potential for moving beyond the neoliberal consensus: Slavoj Žižek,*Trouble in Paradise: From the End of History to the End of Capitalism*, (Penguin, Allen Lane: London, 2014).

[628] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There Really No Alternative* (Zero Books, John Hunt Publishing Ltd, 2009), 2.

According to Wendy Brown, September 11 has created a context favorable to the expansion of the neoliberal status quo, thus contributing to the speedier erosion of liberal democracy in the United States and in the West. The controversial policies adopted by the Bush administration in response to the attacks are described by Brown as "neoliberal policies and actions taking shape under the legitimating cloth of a liberal democratic discourse increasingly void of substance."[629] The US-appointed interim governor of Iraq Paul Bremer declared in the aftermath of the occupation that "Iraq is open for business." The war in Iraq is offered by Brown as an example of the manner in which American neoliberal imperialism uses the rhetoric of liberal democracy to impose a supremacy of the market, where the only strict requirement for newly created regimes is to support an opening towards the global market. As long as this requirement is fulfilled, a blind eye is turned to their illiberal or undemocratic features.[630]

The 2008 global economic crisis has accentuated the necessity to critically analyze the effects of global market capitalism and its neoliberal ideology. The financial crash has partly overshadowed that of the twin towers, giving new impetus to liberal democratic (self-) criticism. At the same time, the revelation of the complex inner contradictions of capitalism during the crisis prompted a revival of leftist activism, which took off with the global Occupy Movement, and ended in apparent inconclusiveness. Still, leftist activism and calls for radical systemic change begin to be visible in mainstream culture, with anti-neoliberal rhetoric surfacing for instance in the political program of neo-leftist parties like Syriza in Greece, or Podemos in Spain, in the sermons of Pope Francis, in the discourses of US presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, or British Labor Party leader Jeremy Corbyn.

Neoliberalism is an "ambiguous label" which has become popular starting with the nineteen-nineties and has been ever-present in the media in recent years. It has been mostly used by its critics in a pejorative sense. Its practitioners do not necessarily identify with the neoliberal label, however, they "share some affinity for 'neoliberal' policies aimed at deregulating national economies, liberalizing international trade, and creating a single global market."[631] "The neoliberal ideal of the 'self-regulating market' as the main engine powering the individual's rational pursuit of wealth"[632] has become unanimously accepted across party lines in the Western world, with former Democrat president Bill Clinton and former Labour

[629] Wendy Brown, "Neo-liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," *Theory & Event* 7, no. 1 (2003), accessed April 2, 2015, https://muse.jhu.edu/.
[630] Wendy Brown, *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 48.
[631] Manfred B. Steger and Ravi K. Roy, *Neoliberalism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), x.
[632] Steger and Roy, 2.

Party British Prime Minister Tony Blair doing as much to further the global dominance of neoliberal capitalism[633] as their conservative predecessors Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher have done in the eighties. I use here the notion of a neoliberal consensus, by which I understand what Tom Frank has described as "the general belief that there is something natural, something divine, something inherently democratic about markets." Referring to the global reach of this quasi-sanctification of the market, Frank further suggests that "[a] better term for the 'New Economy' might simply be 'consensus.'"[634] In their introduction to neoliberalism, Steger and Roy offer a brief account of the global supremacy of the unregulated market:

> In its heyday during the 1990s, neoliberalism bestrode the world like a colossus. It ate its way into the heart of the former Soviet bloc. It confronted countries of the global South with the new rules and conditions for their economic development. Showing itself to be a remarkably versatile creature, neoliberalism even charmed the post-Mao Chinese Communist Party cadres whose reformed 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' looks suspiciously like its supposed ideological nemesis.[635]

Increasingly, Slavoj Zizek suggests, capitalism in this global neoliberal stage seems to be able to do without liberal-democracy and the heritage of the Enlightenment.[636] Through its consecration of profitability and an entrepreneurial rationale, neoliberalism is depicted by Wendy Brown as more than an economic strategy: it is an all pervasive ideology effecting an erosion of the liberal democratic order by gradually divorcing liberalism from democracy.

The global consensus surrounding neoliberalism raises questions with regard to the liberal narrative of historical progress to which two other interconnected significant global phenomena provide counter-narratives. The first one would be the resurgence of different manifestations of fundamentalism throughout the globe, of which Islamism is perhaps the most visible in the mainstream media. The second significant and perhaps most pressing challenge to a liberal monolithic self-understanding is the ecological toll of modernity and industrial development. The imperative of growth inherent in neoliberal capitalism is, according to Naomi Klein, the major impediment to taking effective action against climate change.[637]

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[633] Ibid., 50. The authors refer to Clinton's and Blair's "third way" market globalism as the cluster of policies, which have made them neoliberal champions.
[634] Tom Frank, *One Market under God: Extreme Capitalism*, *Market Populism and the End of Economic Democracy* (London: Vintage, Random House, 2002).
[635] Steger and Roy, x.
[636] Zizek has referred to this development as a turn to "capitalism with Asian values." Slavoj Zizek, "Interview with Slavoj Zizek: Capitalism with Asian values," *Al Jazeera*, November 13, 2011, accessed December 4, 2015, http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/talktojazeera/2011/10/201110281336073176 4.html.
[637] Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything, Capitalism vs. the Climate* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014).

Often, terrorist fundamentalism is referred to in the mainstream media or political discourse as a historical relic from "barbaric"[638] stages of human development springing from areas of the globe that are lagging behind civilization-wise. Referring to similar reactions surrounding the fatwa issued against Salman Rushdie in 1989, Homi K. Bhabha argues that such interpretations placing fundamentalism outside of civilization take for granted a liberal progressive view of history. For Bhabha, fundamentalism seems to be the outcome of the inner contradictions of modernity.[639] The Charlie Hebdo attackers were French citizens who, like a growing number of European citizens who have joined the ranks of ISIS, found fundamentalism more attractive than liberal republicanism.

Currently, liberalism seems to be undergoing a subtle redefinition from within, while being subjected to critical inquiry from the far-left (a type of criticism which is increasingly harder to distinguish from liberal self-criticism) and being misappropriated by the far-right. Edmund Fawcett condenses his understanding of liberalism as "a search for an ethically acceptable order of human progress among civic equals without recourse to undue power."[640] Framing liberalism as a political practice rather than a philosophical concept narrows down the historical outlook of Fawcett's study, allowing him to start from the nineteenth century and reach the present day. At the same time, refusing to define liberalism in relation to the slippery notion of a pursuit of "liberty," as it is most often the case in studies of the kind, the author avoids confronting the conundrum of its historical coexistence with practices such as slavery, colonialism or imperialism. In another approach to the history of liberalism, left-leaning historian Domenico Losurdo outlines a "counter-history" of liberalism as a philosophy, whose tenets he confronts with the actual practice or political stances of its prominent practitioners. Losurdo traces liberalism back to Adam Smith and John Locke, whom Fawcett, on account of his political-practice-centered approach, does not include in his study. The juxtaposition of liberal discourse with the oft overlooked support for illiberal practices by certain thinkers from the liberal pantheon allows Losurdo to advance the thesis that liberalism did not bring forth a gradual process of democratization. Instead, Losurdo further suggests, liberalism sets in motion a "dialectic between emancipation and de-emancipation," promoting the rights of some while

[638] President Francois Hollande has used the term "barbaric" to describe the terrorists and their deed in his official response to the attacks. S.N. Eisenstadt's theory of multiple modernities, among others, has been used as an alternative explanation for the rise of Islamist fundamentalism in the Middle East. None of these theories reach as wide an audience as the monolithic view of liberalism proliferated in the mainstream response to terrorism.
[639] Rutherford, 215.
[640] Fawcett, 134.

condoning the subjugation of other groups.[641] Fawcett, who also tackles the undemocratic underside of liberal history, however, argues that liberalism is concerned "not so much with liberty, but with order," which, with the advent of industrial capitalism, "was no longer static but dynamic." The ethical order liberalism is striving for, in Fawcett's view, is one "without appeal to divine authority, established tradition or parochial custom."[642] Fawcett dismantles current critiques of liberalism by pointing to its self-revisionist history and disarms its critics, even those on the left, by labeling them "liberal worriers." The conundrum of the illiberal practices of canonical liberals upon which Losurdo builds his argument is dodged by Fawcett, who relegates the issue of who exactly has access to the rights demanded by the liberals to the development of the democratic state. For Fawcett, the adoption of democracy is a process parallel to the growing espousal of a liberal ideology, with the two eventually becoming confluent in the historical conjectures leading to the birth of liberal democracy:

> I call non-exclusion the democratic germ in an otherwise undemocratic creed. The democratic idea is that nobody can be excluded. Liberalism had to learn that lesson. And it was a long, hard fight. And out of that you get liberal democracy. Liberalism and democracy are conceptually and historically distinct. I see liberalism as being guided by those four ideas—acceptance of conflict, resistance to power, faith in progress and civic respect. But they don't tell you who you're talking about, who is included in this happy circle. Democracy is about who is included. Only once everybody becomes included, do you really have true liberal democracy. Liberalism lays out the feast. Democracy draws up the guest list.[643]

The flexibility of the term and of the principles it stands for is both the strength and the weakness of liberalism, making it easier to define in the negative, in opposition to other illiberal ideologies. Communism and fascism, Fawcett suggests, "provided liberalism with a captivating image of itself in the negative."[644] In the twenty-first century, it is harder to pin down the antagonists of liberalism under the term "ideology," yet Fawcett names "competitive authoritarianism", "national populism" and "Islamic theocracy" as its most recent rivals.[645] Out of all these forms of state organization, Islamism and Islamic theocracy seem to provide liberalism with the starkest negative backdrop against which to make its positive features visible.

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[641] Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter-History*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London and New York: Verso Books 2011). Losurdo builds his case referencing cases of liberals supporting slavery or the use of colonial power, while advocating the rights of citizens against undue power.
[642] Fawcett, xiii.
[643] Jonathan Derbyshire, "Liberalism—The Life of an Idea: A Conversation with Edmund Fawcett," *Prospect Magazine*, June 18, 2014, accessed December 23, 2014, http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/blogs/jonathan-derbyshire/liberalism-the-life-of-an-idea-a-conversation-with-edmund-fawcett
[644] Fawcett, 13.
[645] Ibid., xiv.

Liberalism's propensity to avoid stable definitions and instead define itself in the negative has also been used as a loophole for evading critical self-examination. In a partial reiteration of the public responses to September 11, the global solidarity summoned in defense of liberal values after the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris has also provided an occasion for a partly self-congratulatory celebration of liberal ideals. Over 200 intellectuals and recipients of the PEN award have protested against awarding the prize for freedom of expression to the staff of Charlie Hebdo, mostly as a reaction to the politics behind the decision and the wider "Je suis Charlie" phenomenon, which some have described as "a way for people to re-pledge their commitment to the War on Terror that had been announced by the United States in 2001."[646] The responses of intellectuals in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo attack have been largely predictable, in that they seem to follow patterns established after 9/11 in the public sphere. Individual thinkers have used their already defined ideological standpoints or previously established individual theoretical frameworks to respond to and provide an interpretation of the event.[647]

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman refers to the Charlie Hebdo attack as the continuation of the type of terrorism made famous on September 11. In Bauman's view, the attacks of 2001 represent a shift from the historical political assassination directed towards individuals perceived as the carriers of power (he refers to Abraham Lincoln or Archduke Ferdinand, but the less distant political assassinations of the nineteen-sixties in the United States could also be

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[646] Keith Gessen, "On PEN and Charlie Hebdo: Why I Signed the Letter Protesting the PEN Annual Gala," *n plus one mag online*, May 5, 2015, accessed May 10, 2015, https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/on-pen-and-charlie-hebdo/.

[647] On the left, Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek refused to join the "Je suis Charlie" bandwagon and used the occasion to reiterate their thesis that Islamist fundamentalism has filled the gap left behind by the weakening of leftist militancy in the Middle East and Western Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Iron Curtain, thus framing Islamist terrorism in terms of class struggle rather than a culture clash paradigm. Žižek published a second article commenting on the popular responses to the attack. Liberals like Paul Berman restate their post-9/11 support for a more self-assertive liberal stance in the face of Islamism, reiterating the overwhelmingly popular "Je suis Charlie" chant. Another position is the postcolonial-self-aware-stance proposed by author Teju Cole in *The New Yorker*, who is critical of the indiscriminate embrace of the "Je suis Charlie" slogan pointing out the imbalance between the popular response to the symbolic acts of mourning for the death of the Charlie Hebdo staff and the conspicuous absence of representation and public acts of commemoration for the many non-Western victims of Islamism. See: Alain Badiou, "The Red Flag and the Tricolore," *Verso Books Blog*, trans. Mike Watson, February 3, 2015, accessed February 25, 2015, http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/1833-the-red-flag-and-the-tricolore-by-alain-badiou, Slavoj Žižek, "Are the Worst Really Full of Passionate Intensity?," *New Statesman*, January 10, 2015, accessed February 25, 2015, http://www.newstatesman.com/world-affairs/2015/01/slavoj-i-ek-charlie-hebdo-massacre-are-worst-really-full-passionate-intensity, Slavoj Žižek, "In the Grey Zone," *London Review of Books*, February 5, 2015, accessed February 25, 2015, http://www.lrb.co.uk/2015/02/05/slavoj-zizek/in-the-grey-zone, Paul Berman, "The Charlie Cover: Slander, Ridicule, and Terror in Post-1968 France," *Tablet Mag*, January 14, 2015, accessed February 24, 2015, http://tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/books/188320/the-charlie-cover, Teju Cole, "Unmournable Bodies," *The New Yorker*, January 9, 2015, accessed February 25, 2015, http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/unmournable-bodies.

relevant). Instead, fundamentalist terrorists target landmark institutions "symbolising the economic (in the case of the World Trade Centre) and military (in the case of the Pentagon) power." With Charlie Hebdo, Bauman argues, "the target has shifted to another institutional realm, that of public opinion:" "In our media-dominated information society[,] people employed in constructing and distributing information moved or have been moved to the centre of the scene on which the drama of human coexistence is staged and seen to be played."[648]

The attack made even more visible the contradictory response of liberalism to "militant Islam," which Fawcett mentions as one of the contentious issues liberals are "torn about" and at the same time need to face in the twenty-first century: "They want protection from religiously inspired terror, but do not like what the warfare state does in secret to protect them. They wish not to demean or stigmatize new citizens in their midst, but they want liberal ways upheld and defended." [649] At the same time, the liberal West does not only face Islamist religious fundamentalism, but also a resurgence of right-wing fundamentalism, which Bauman ascribes to a failure of the political middle-ground to engage what he calls the "precarians," "the humiliated and deprived, left behind and abandoned, cast-out and excluded, frightened, angry and vengeance-seething desperadoes," who deflect "to the camps located on the opposite extremes of the political spectrum" which promise "in unison to replace the already discredited high-mindedness with yet to be tried high-handedness of autocracy."[650] Significantly, Michel Houellebecq's controversial 2015 novel *Soumission* is set in the near future when the French presidential elections are a confrontation between a conservative Muslim candidate and far-right-winger Marine Le Pen. The satirical reflection on the mores and discontents of contemporary liberal France reveals the degree to which the liberal West has become haunted by the specter of fundamentalism(s). The fundamentalists of Houllebecq's novel, however, have little to do with extremist movements like ISIS or Al Qaeda, but could more accurately be described as paternalistic conservatives. The novel's "what if?" scenario is far from being an alarmist dystopian vision of an illiberal future. Quite the contrary, it is a blasé satire of liberalism and individualism as practiced in the present.

Fawcett argues that liberalism today has to find a manner in which to deal with the abuse of power veiled under the notion of a "democratic" self-regulating market, without recourse to undue state power: "Granting the state supremacy is not liberal. Granting the market

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[648] Zygmunt Bauman, "The Charlie Hebdo Attack and What It Reveals about Society," *Social Europe*, January 13, 2015, accessed February 24, 2015, http://www.socialeurope.eu/2015/01/charlie-hebdo/
[649] Fawcett, 403.
[650] Bauman.

supremacy is not liberal either."[651] Furthermore, Fawcett joins the chorus of mostly left-minded critics of neoliberalism, listing what he perceives as its problematic traits, particularly with respect to its influence on the public space essential to a democratic order:

> It takes individualism for granted. It neglects history. It neglects the fact that there's nothing natural about property relations—all of that is a social construct and is determined by politics. Above all, the neoliberals' economic theory does not seem to have been borne out by experience: markets do **not** correct themselves. There has been, over 30 to 40 years, a degradation of public space, public goods. And a degradation of belief in what governments can do.[652]

Fawcett's study is not a defense of liberalism per se, but rather of liberal democracy, which he presents as the merging of liberal ideas with democratic institutions; a merger which comes into its own in the twentieth century, after the Second World War.

For Wendy Brown, neoliberalism, "a loose and shifting signifier,"[653] extends beyond the realm of economic relations and is best understood as a synthesis between what Marx saw as the tendency of capital to penetrate every sphere of life and Max Weber's rationalization thesis.[654] The universalization of market rationalization leads to "the reduction of moral and political judgment to a cost-benefit calculus," which represents "precisely the evisceration of substantive values by instrumental rationality that Weber predicted as the future of a disenchanted world" in which "there is no morality, no faith, no heroism, indeed no meaning outside the market."[655] Drawing on Michel Foucault's lectures on bio-politics, Brown puts forth the idea that neoliberalism has altered the realm of politics and quotidian life by imbibing them with the logic of the market and thus reducing or even eliminating the spaces where the individual can act as a *homo politicus* by participating in the democratic processes and being an actor in the public sphere. Instead, the individual is made to believe he is solely responsible for his successes or failures, while increasingly functioning as a *homo oeconomicus* expected to fashion himself to fit the demands of the market, which have permeated every aspect of everyday life. This extension of market logic within the realm of the political and that of everyday life (from education to dating) erodes the core of the democratic order undoing the very notion of *demos*.[656]

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[651] Fawcett, 18.
[652] Derbyshire.
[653] Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 20.
[654] Wendy Brown, *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics*, 45.
[655] Ibid.
[656] A brief account of Brown's take on neoliberalism in her 2015 book is available in an interview with Timothy Shenk, "What Exactly is Neoliberalism?," *Dissent Magazine*, April 2, 2015, accessed April 5, 2015. http://www.dissentmagazine.org/blog/booked-3-what-exactly-is-neoliberalism-wendy-brown-undoing-the-demos.

The crisis of liberal democracy affects its critics from the left, in that they are now placed in the position of defending the very ideology which has functioned as a negative backdrop for their self-definition. For the left, liberalism has become, in Gayatri Spivak's words, "that which one 'cannot not want.'" According to Brown, the left is overtaken by "melancholia about liberal democracy" as it witnesses its gradual degradation through the infiltration of neoliberal ideology into every sphere of life. In this context, Brown warns that while going through the process of "mourning" liberal democracy, its once major subject of criticism, the left will reenact and defend the tenets of liberal democracy and thus give up "being left."[657] In *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, Brown pleads for the urgency of salvaging the modest achievement of liberal democracy, namely that of maintaining "a tension between a capitalist political economy and a liberal democratic political system."[658] This tension between the realm of capital and that of politics is essential for preserving the sovereignty of the demos over that of the market and it is a means of preserving public spaces where democratic criticism and political participation are possible.

The recent boom in the cultural critique of neoliberalism coincides with a leftist revival and redefinition,[659] which is centered on the preservation of democracy against the effects of a neoliberal supremacy of the market. While Fawcett and Brown advocate the necessity of defending liberal democracy from the effects of neoliberalism, leftist academics like Domenico Losurdo continue performing the task of critiquing liberalism. At the same time, however, Losurdo stresses the necessity of reforming Marxism in a pragmatic manner, not unlike the process of constant adaptation to historical realities, which is seen by Fawcett as the trademark of liberalism. Marxists strive towards redefining the left in order to solve two of its historical blind spots, namely the distribution of power and the preservation of democracy. Despite his critique of liberalism and its tendency to differentiate between the "sacred space" of liberty and a "profane space" where subjugation is tolerated, Losurdo suggests that Marxism has something to learn from liberalism when it comes to the notion of limiting power:

> … [L]iberalism has the great historical and theoretical merit of having taught the limitation of power within a determined, limited community. Yes, it is only for the community of the free, but still it is of great historical importance. On this score, I counterpose liberalism to Marxism, and rule in

[657] Brown, *Edgework*, 54, 55.
[658] Ibid., 45.
[659] Aside from the intellectual residues of the New Left in the sixties, which are still visible in publications such as *Dissent*, or *The New Left Review*, a wave of millennial leftism has coagulated around recent publications such as *Jacobin Mag* and the Leftist cultural magazine *n+1*.

> favor of liberalism. I have criticized liberalism very strongly, but in this case I stress the greater merits of liberalism in comparison to Marxism.
> Often, Marxism has spoken of the disappearance of power as such—not the limitation of power, but its disappearance—the withering of the state and so on. This vision is a messianic vision, which has played a very negative role in the history of socialism and communism. If we think that power will simply disappear, we do not feel the obligation to limit power. This vision had terrible consequences in countries like the Soviet Union.[660]

Furthermore, Losurdo argues that competition is another aspect Marxists should come to terms with in drawing their alternatives to the contemporary supremacy of the market. Thus, while Fawcett suggests a return of liberalism to its Keynesian or "New Deal" interventionist egalitarianism could be a way out of its current neoliberal impasse, Marxists are redefining leftism in a liberal-democratic key which clearly disavows its totalitarian manifestation in the twentieth century. Thus, these apparently divergent approaches appear to converge, with Fawcett suggesting that liberalism needs to lean more towards the left and with Losurdo arguing that the left needs to learn from its own historical mistakes in a manner typical of liberalism.

Paradoxically, it seems that "the end of history" dominance of liberalism has impoverished and diminished its self-critical function, due mostly to the political inefficacy of a radical left haunted by the specter of totalitarianism.[661] For Slavoj Zizek, the political impotence of the left is caused by the predominance of anti-totalitarian discourse in the liberal democratic public sphere. In *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism*, the critic suggests that the left has been struggling to define itself within a liberal democratic frame which is based on the dichotomy between democracy and totalitarianism. The discourse on totalitarianism within the liberal democratic public sphere, in his view, hinders radical criticism, functioning as a "stopgap": "instead of enabling us to think, forcing us to acquire a new insight into the historical reality it describes, it ... actively prevents us from thinking."[662] Thus, for Zizek, the liberal discourse on totalitarianism traps liberal democracy in a "kind of a hall of mirrors"[663] in which, instead of gaining historical insight, it endlessly self-righteously reflects back on itself.

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[660] Pam C. Nogales C. and Ross Wolfe, "Liberalism and Marx: An interview with Domenico Losurdo," *Platypus Review*, 46, May 2012, accessed September 23, 2014, http://platypus1917.org/2012/05/01/liberalism-and-marx-domenico-losurdo/.

[661] For a discussion of the political failure of the left in the last decades (which includes Zizek among the culprits for this failure) see: Gregory Smulewicz-Zucker and Michael J. Thompson, "The Treason of Intellectual Radicalism and the Collapse of Leftist Politics," *Logos*, Winter 2016, Vol. 15, no.1, accessed February 20, 2016 http://logosjournal.com/2015/thompson-zucker/.

[662] Slavoj Zizek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?: Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion* (New York: Verso, 2001), 3.

[663] Ellen A. McLarney, "American Freedom and Islamic Fascism: Ideology in the Hall of Mirrors," *Theory and Even*t 14.3 (September, 2011), accessed November 1, 2015, https://fds.duke.edu/db/attachment/1683-PDF.

Ellen McLaney uses Zizek's theoretical stand point on totalitarianism to analyze post-9/11 portrayals of Said Qutb, the intellectual figure who has inspired Al Qaeda. Paradoxically, pre-9/11, Qutb "has been seen as an exemplar of Islamic liberalism, 'John Locke of the Islamic world.'" Post-9/11, however, Qutb has been made known to a wider Western public mostly by the same figures who have pushed forward the need to discuss and indict Islamism as a form of totalitarianism. The same intellectuals have coined and helped spread the term Islamofascism. In articles by public intellectual figures like Paul Berman, Christopher Hitchens or Martin Amis, Qutb was popularized as a "'philosopher of terror,' inspiration for Bin Laden, and totalitarian."[664] McLaney shows how the incrimination of Islamist totalitarianism, going hand in hand with the denunciation of Qutb, offer a flattering outlook on Western freedom, aligning the discourse of the intellectuals who practice this accusatory strategy with the Manichean post-9/11 rhetoric of the Bush administration. The conflict between liberalism and fundamentalism is for Zizek not a genuine conflict, but rather a vicious circle in which the two extremes need each other to justify and perpetuate themselves. Rephrasing Max Horkheimer's dictum regarding capitalism and fascism, Zizek argues that those unwilling to discuss liberal democracy critically, should also be silent with regard to religious fundamentalism.[665] Critics have interpreted this claim as an example of Zizek's misguided anti-liberalism.[666] To the contrary, by invoking a middle way between sanctimonious extremes, arguing that the practice of liberal self-criticism should accompany the indictment of illiberal practices on a global scale, Zizek's suggested approach is not out of tune with Said's notion of "democratic criticism."[667]

There is, on the whole, a pervasive sense that the heritage of the Enlightenment, liberalism, democracy and the left are all currently in the process of undergoing subtle redefinitions.[668] These interconnected conceptual reconfigurations still in the making focus on the preservation of liberal democracy by challenging the neoliberal supremacy of the market, with an eye to tackling the global environmental crisis and growing wealth inequality. At the

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[664] Ibid.

[665] Slavoj Zizek, *Blasphemische Gedanken: Islam und Moderne*, trad. Michael Adrian (Berlin: Ullsteinbuchverlage, 2015) ebook version.

[666] Martin Altmeyer and Martin Dornes, "Der Ruf auf die Barrikaden erreicht nur noch Nervenbündel," *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 17 February, 2015, accessed June 7, 2015, http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/slavoj-i-ek-byung-chul-han-ueber-die-liberale-demokratie-13432593-p2.html?printPagedArticle=true#pageIndex_2.

[667] Romain Leick, "Interview with Slavoj Zizek: 'The Greatest Threat to Europe Is Its Inertia,'" *Spiegel*, March 31, 2015, accessed June 4, 2015, http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/slavoj-zizek-greatest-threat-to-europe-is-it-s-inertia-a-1023506.html.

[668] Mishra suggests that "We must move past the tired debate that pits the modern west against its backward other and recover the Enlightenment ideal of rigorous self-criticism." Pankaj Mishra, "After the Paris Attacks: It's Time for a New Enlightenment," *The Guardian*, January 20, 2015, accessed June 2, 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/news/2015/jan/20/-sp-after-paris-its-time-for-new-enlightenment.

same time, the perceived threat of religious fundamentalism often divests public and political engagement, triggering an impulse towards "auto-immunity" (to go back to Derrida's term), which involves a static view of liberal democracy as already achieved and in need of protection even through undemocratic and illiberal means.

The (Neo)liberal Imagination

The cultural dominance of neoliberal ideology has inevitably affected the functions of the liberal imagination. Updating Fredric Jameson's theory regarding the dialectics between postmodern culture and late capitalism, Mark Fisher develops the notion of "capitalist realism." Through "capitalist realism," a spin on the term "social realism," Fisher means "the widespread sense … that it is now impossible to even imagine a coherent alternative" [669] to capitalism. Even more, Fisher argues that capitalism has claimed the realm of "realism" and common sense for itself, thus completely disarming its critics. In an attempt to label the return to realism in post-postmodern culture, the editors of the collection *Reading Capitalist Realism* adopt Fisher's terminology using the notion of "capitalist realism as *both* an ideological formation (as Fisher describes it) and a mode." For Fisher "capitalist realism" is "an ideological formation" describing "the pervasive logic of capitalism in the present." The pathologies of late capitalism, which Fredric Jameson identified in postmodern cultural production have only aggravated in the decades following the so called "end of history" after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Thus, Fisher argues, with the disappearance of the Eastern bloc as a "generative site for the discursive production of an outside," the processes identified by Jameson as specific for late capitalism "have suffered a change in kind" and require new terminology.[670]

The editors and contributors to *Reading Capitalist Realism* adopt Fisher's term to discuss "a mode" in literature and a trend in cultural production in general. According to Shonkwiler and La Berge, capitalist realism as a cultural mode holds a subversive streak by potentially conjoining "both conservative and critical impulses – on the one hand retaining the conservatism of representational realism in its commitment, as Jameson puts it, to the status

[669] Mark Fisher, 2.
[670] Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge, "Introduction: A Theory of Capitalist Realism," *Reading Capitalist Realism*, eds. Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 6.

quo, while on the other hand modeling the very transformative capitalist processes of commodification and financialization that it records."[671] This positive spin on capitalist realism, claiming that the mode's critical approach towards the current version of capitalism may indirectly contribute to its reformation, contradicts Fisher's own discussion of cultural production under the ideological rule of "capitalist realism." Fisher, drawing on Zizek, claims that, unlike the programmatic ideology-building function of "socialist realism," capitalist realism paradoxically allows and encourages approaches critical to capitalism, which offer one a cathartic experience of dissent, while one may continue consuming "with impunity:" "[t]he role of capitalist ideology is not to make an explicit case for something in the way that propaganda does, but to conceal the fact that the operations of capital do not depend on any sort of subjectively assumed belief."[672]

Fisher points out that while capitalist realism allows critical perspectives, it tends to annihilate utopian tendencies, which could prompt systemic change: "Capitalist realism can be characterized by its repudiation of any utopianism. That repudiation is what the "realism" consists of." [673] The utopian impulse in literature and cultural production has been a longstanding preoccupation for Fredric Jameson, who turns once again to this topic in the conclusion to his study *The Antinomies of Realism*, which is dedicated to the fate of the historical novel. Born during the age of Romantic nationalism, the historical novel as Georg Lukacs theorized it captured the complex processes of national emancipation, or the historical reverberations of Events like the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars. Unpacking the claim that the historical novel is concerned solely with the past, Jameson points out that Lukacs came to perceive the realist novel as truly historical. Lukacs discovered that he is "not really interested in the historical novel at all, but rather in the novel as such, in realism and the realistic novel, which when it comes into its own will be profoundly historical and will let History appear more effectively than its earlier, more specialized vehicle."[674] Literary realism emerged as the result of an alignment between historical conditions and the tools of literary production and cannot be repeated as such, Jameson suggests. Instead, literature has stylistically adapted to reflect and engage with the mutations taking place in the capitalist order and to meet specific historical challenges.

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[671] Ibid., 15-16.
[672] Fisher, 12-13. "Interpassivity," the paradoxical mixture of interactivity and passivity, is a term Fisher borrows loosely from Robert Pfaller and Slavoj Zizek to describe how capitalism not only does not need propaganda to sustain itself, but it can allow critical cultural representations, which perform our "anti-capitalism for us." (18)
[673] Mark Fisher, "We Can't Afford to Be Realists: A Conversation with Mark Fisher and Jodi Dean" in Shonkwiler and La Berge, 34.
[674] Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013), 264.

In Perry Anderson's view, the historical novel has changed its focus from traditionally chronicling the progress of nationhood and national emancipation to chronicling life in the aftermath of disaster. Thus, historical novels have moved from a progressive narrative structure to a narrative of historical decay or stagnation in the modern and postmodern age: "Military tyranny; race murder; omnipresent surveillance; technological war; and programmed genocide. The persistent backdrops to the historical fiction of the postmodern period are at the antipodes of its classical forms. Not the emergence of the nation, but the ravages of empire; not progress as emancipation, but impending or consummated catastrophe. In Joycean terms, history as a nightmare from which we still cannot wake up."[675] This transformation of the historical novel mirrors the transformation suffered by historiography in general and the move from the notion of history as a record of human progress to a more complex and negative view of the very notion of progress, in line with Walter Benjamin's famous interpretation of Paul Klee's "Angelus Novus." In Benjamin's description the angel of history is facing the past, while being blindly propelled backwards into the future: "Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead and make whole what has been smashed."[676] For Perry Anderson, the angel's wish is akin to the "the impulse behind the contemporary historical novel."[677] The literature of trauma would make an interesting case study from this point of view. Novels like Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *Everything Is Illuminated* project a view of history as a sum of disasters, which offer the background for a universal human drama, thus eliminating historicity and ignoring historical causality. Many of the novels discussed in the previous chapters deal with September 11 without offering a sense of historicity in Fredric Jameson's understanding of the term. The novels focusing predominately on individual experiences of the event are often cut off from a wider social, political and historical nexus, privileging a perspective dominated by "affect" and a trauma centered discourse which furthers a sense of "perpetual present."[678] What such trauma-laden historical fiction lacks in particular is a vision of the future.

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[675] Perry Anderson, "From Progress to Catastrophe," *London Review of Books*, 33 no. 15 (2011): 24-28, accessed June 12, 2014, http://www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n15/perry-anderson/from-progress-to-catastrophe.
[676] Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimplico, Random Hause, 1999), Kindle editions, location 4116.
[677] Anderson.
[678] Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, 28. To oversimplify, what Jameson calls "affect" is a primacy of the body and the sensory experiencing of the present, which became a dominant feature of literary naturalism, thus undoing the project of realism and paving the way for modernism and then for the "perpetual present" of postmodernism, which he calls a "reduction to the body."

In order to preserve the utopian streak of the historical novel, salvage its historicity and enable it to be something more than a mere costume drama, Jameson suggests that it should incorporate the future in its chronology. The preservation of utopianism is for Jameson a means of resistance against the closure of the imagination operated by the neoliberal ideology's all-pervasive sense that we have reached the end of history and that systemic change is no longer possible or to be desired: "conceivably, utopian texts act as counterweights to the neo-liberal celebration of globalization."[679] For Jameson it is crucial to "develop an anxiety about losing the future," analogous to "Orwell's anxiety about the loss of the past and of memory," with utopian projections of the future functioning as "a rattling of the bars and an intense spiritual concentration and preparation for another stage which has not yet arrived."[680] Two strands of utopian thought are identified by Jameson: one postulates that a different future can be achieved through radical systemic change, while the other, a liberal appropriation of the utopian impulse, advocates piecemeal societal reform. Jameson's exploration of realism and the historical novel ends with the appeal to salvage historicity through the preservation of a utopian dimension. This desideratum may be achieved by including the future in the temporality of the novel: "our history, our historical past and our historical novels, must now also include our historical futures."[681] In this context, the role of art for Jameson is not that of expressing "a call to arms" for particular pedestrian causes, but rather a reminder of the timelessness of the human impulse towards the "good" transmitted through aesthetic means:

> But the moment of the aesthetic is … [a] reminder that all those impulses exist: the revolutionary Utopian one full as much as the immense disgust with human evil, Brecht's "temptation of the good," the will to escape and to be free, the delight in craftsmanship and production, the implacably satiric, unremittingly skeptical gaze. Art has no function but to reawaken all these differences at once in an ephemeral instant; and the historical novel has no function save to resurrect for one more brief moment their multitudinous coexistence in History itself. After that the reader sinks back into the current situation, which may or may not have any similarity with what has just been glimpsed.[682]

Finding the tools of journalism insufficient or not up to the task of probing deeper into the realities of American society and its global role in the twenty-first century, former *New York Times* correspondent Amy Waldman turns to fiction and to alternative history in order to be

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[679] Kyle A. Wiggins, "Futures of Negation: Jameson's Archaeologies of the Future and Utopian Science Fiction," *Postmodern Culture*, 17, no. 3 (2007), accessed July 21, 2015, https://muse.jhu.edu/.
[680] Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), 233.
[681] Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, 313.
[682] Ibid.

able to tackle issues regarding the post-9/11 state of liberal democracy. The conclusion to her novel imagines an alternative future of American decline or stagnation, accompanied by economic growth in the Global South. This fictional take on the future suggests that the rise and fall of nations and cultures does not diminish the human impulse for the good, a claim which subverts the post/9/11 wave of American exceptionalism. Although inspired by Proust's past oriented masterpiece *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is a meditation on the passage of time and its effects on individuals, which includes a speculative take on the future, in a time frame ranging from the 1970s to 2020. In the version of the future depicted in the novel, technology changes the manner in which individuals relate to each other and to language itself, at the same time speeding up the reproduction, commodification and dissemination of works of art, music in this case, and making everything available literally at the pointing of a finger. This ever accelerating process of commodification, however, does not diminish the human hunger for authenticity and unmediated experiences. The closing scene of the novel takes place in the future at a location called the "Footprint," which is a fictional version of the site of the World Trade Center attacks in New York, where a crowd is gathered to experience the music of an artist who has lived and created outside the sphere of "the culture industry." Alongside a not altogether optimistic view of our technological future, the conclusion of the novel includes nonetheless a utopian promise in the redemptive image of a crowd in which numerous families with young children stand out and which reverberates to the artist's music. In similar lines, in a mildly sentimental formally experimental chapter, the cold, corporate medium of the PowerPoint slide is used as a means of personal expression and non-professional interaction between individuals. Like Waldman's *The Submission*, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* combines the sense of utopian promise as described by Jameson, with the acceptance of inevitable loss and decay.

In Egan's novel, the acceptance of death is illustrated through the metaphor of pauses in rock songs, a phenomenon with which one of its characters is obsessed. This metaphor of the pause in the midst of a musical piece has implications on an individual existential level and on a wider generational or cultural level. Breaks in rock songs prefigure the inevitable ending of the piece, but at the same time they function as fissures in the pattern, breaking the monotony and bringing forth a new rush of vitality before the actual inexorable coda. The novel's diverse cast of characters experience such life altering breaks, which most of the times allow them to reemerge changed for the better, more mature and aware of the inevitability of death. At the same time, the location of the final scene of the novel at Ground Zero suggests the possibility of assessing the impact of September 11 on American culture in a similar key, as a

transformative historical moment and a possible prefiguration of decline, but also as the potential harbinger of a more mature cultural self-perception, albeit tragic in its nature, and of a wiser rush of cultural vitality.

The liberal imagination, as Lionel Trilling envisioned it, has the function of counterbalancing the tendencies of political liberalism. With its increasing rationalization and a bureaucratization process not unlike that described by Max Weber, political liberalism tends to simplify its definition of humanity:

> So far as liberalism is active and positive, so far, that is, as it moves toward organization, it tends to select the emotions and qualities that are most susceptible of organization. As it carries out its active and positive ends, it unconsciously limits its view of the world to what it can deal with, and it unconsciously tends to develop theories and principles, particularly in relation to the nature of the human mind, that justify its limitation.[683]

According to Seyla Benhabib "today's resort to 'culture' as a group-identity marker and a justification for claims against or within the state constitutes a challenge, sometimes even an affront, both to the originary humanist liberalism whose passage into bureaucratic administration Weber and Trilling lamented, and to what is best in universalist liberalism that evolved from the original affirmations of autonomy and individual dignity."[684] Benhabib seems to believe that liberalism can still return to what Trilling has called "its great primal act of imagination" through a culture which takes up its oppositional role again in a more universalist manner, learning the lesson of multiculturalism, but moving beyond being merely the scene of culture wars between various "corporate identities." Others, like Walter Benn Michaels, see the liberal turn towards multicultural politics and the "recognition" of "corporate identities" as the cultural manifestation of the transition from welfare-state liberalism to neoliberalism. Unlike Benhabib, who seems nostalgic for the earlier form of liberal universalism inherent in Trilling's position, Benn Michaels is critical of both the former and the latter, suggesting that a process of aggravation has taken place in the passage from welfare-state liberalism to neoliberalism: "at the heart of the liberal imagination, as Trilling understood it, was the desire not to have to think about class difference, at the heart of the neoliberal imagination is the desire not to have to get rid of class difference."[685] The focus on diversity of the multicultural age encourages a

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[683] Trilling, Kindle edition, location 186.

[684] Seyla Benhabib, "The Liberal Imagination and the Four Dogmas of Multiculturalism," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 12.2 (1999) 401-413, accessed June 4, 2015, https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/yale_journal_of_criticism/v012/12.2benhabib.html#REF2

[685] Walter Benn Michaels, "Class Fictions," *The Boston Globe*, October 9, 2005, accessed June 4, 2011, http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2005/10/09/class_fictions/?page=full. See also Walter Benn Michaels, "The Neoliberal Imagination," *n+1 mag*, Fall 2005, accessed June 4, 2015, https://nplusonemag.com/issue-3/essays/the-neoliberal-imagination/.

politics of acceptance and tolerance, which, according to Benn Michaels, has been extended to include class and financial inequality issues. Thus, in the "neoliberal imagination," poverty or class are no longer dealt with as problems which need to be eradicated, but rather as another manifestation of diversity to be tolerated and acknowledged.

More than the cultural fragmentation of the age of multiculturalism, for John Frow, it is the increasing commodification of the public sphere and of culture, which has transformed the liberal imagination into a "neoliberal imagination." The adversarial role of culture as proposed by Trilling is no longer imaginable after Andy Warhol. What Frow calls the "neoliberal imagination," locates "its vision of freedom in an expanded realm of economic transactions rather than in a separate realm of culture."[686] The neoliberal novels, argues Jeffrey J. Williams, are not the multicultural novels Benn Michaels criticizes, but rather novels concerned with reflecting the changes in society and politics suffered in the last thirty years of increasing global reach for the free market. What he alternatively dubs "the plutocratic imagination" is in fact a failure of the imagination of a culture that no longer embraces its adversarial role with the hope of a better future. Lacking a vision of social progress, "the plutocratic imagination" presents a resigned, albeit critical, view of society in which radical change is no longer possible "through normative democratic channels." Instead, only the super-rich, the plutocracy, are seen as able to bring forth some semblance of societal reform.[687]

The leftist appropriation and reinterpretation of Trilling's notion of the liberal imagination, as in the case of the previously discussed uses of a supposed "neoliberal imagination," misinterpret its original meaning. For Trilling, Henry James' protagonist in *The Princess Casamassima* is the embodiment of the ethos associated with the liberal imagination. Torn between radical politics promising social justice and his devotion to culture, Hyacinth, the hero of the novel, comes to a view of the world in which there will always be a balance between beauty and squalor, oppression and emancipation, and whose unsolvable contradictions he embraces before committing suicide: "He understands no less clearly than before 'the despotisms, the cruelties, the exclusions, the monopolies and the rapacities of the past.' But now he recognizes that 'the fabric of civilization as we know it' is inextricably bound up with this injustice; the monuments of art and learning and taste have been reared upon

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[686] John Frow, "Cultural Studies and the Neoliberal Imagination," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 12.2 (1999) 424-430, https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/yale_journal_of_criticism/v012/12.2frow.html

[687] Jeffrey J. Williams, "The Plutocratic Imagination," *Dissent Magazine*, Winter 2013, accessed May 6, 2014, https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/the-plutocratic-imagination.

coercive power."[688] Thus, for Trilling, the adversarial role of the liberal imagination was not revolutionary in spirit, but rather characterized by a conservatism of the classical kind and an awareness of human and historical complexity. It is this conservative impulse and an accompanying distrust of radical politics, which form the adversarial attributes of Trilling's liberal imagination, and have the role of compensating for the rational, pragmatic and simplifying tendencies of the liberal bureaucratic apparatus. At its best, the liberal imagination is able to achieve what Trilling calls "moral realism," exposing both a certain ethical impotence of the liberal individual and the hidden dark side of the most noble sufferers or fighters for a cause.

The qualities that Trilling sought in literature, and found in what he perceived as the exemplary work of Henry James, seem to have become the standard for appreciating world literature. The criteria behind electing the recipients of prestigious literary prizes, such as the Nobel Prize, seem to be based on the traits of the liberal imagination. In turn, these prestigious prizes form the literary tastes of a global audience: "They favor works that explore an individual's psychic life in ways that are complex and ambivalent. They avoid emphasizing features of the work that could be perceived as explicitly political, meaning explicitly committed to the truth of a particular point of view about an identifiable problem that could be redressed by human actions."[689] Critics from the left have also noticed the transformation of the institutions of World Literature into a Global Literature, "the mark of the global" being that it is "more broad than deep." With the institutionalization of postcolonialism and the rise of cosmopolitan novelists in exile who are appointed at prominent universities upon having entered the machinery of world-literature publishing and the international literature festivals and awards circuit, global literature has lost most of its political edge. The success of cosmopolitan writers in exile mirrors the rise of a class of global corporate professionals, whose existence does little to alter the inequalities between the First and the Third world, but rather proliferates a liberal politics of diversity on a global scale. This seemingly declawed global, or transnational literature often produces "backward-glancing narratives of trauma," but which, "pried from their original political context" become "devices of blindness more than insight":

> The obsession with past trauma refracts World Lit's sense of belatedness, even when the genre advertises its contemporaneity. You can argue that we're still haunted by Hiroshima or the Holocaust, that people refuse to speak about this haunting… Past horrors, unlike contemporary ones, also tend to be events liberal readers agree about. But they displace the contemporary world,

[688] Trilling, Kindle location 1372.
[689] Sarah Brouillette, "Literature Is Liberalism," *Jacobin Mag* Online, October 15, 2014, accessed June 7, 2015, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/10/literature-is-liberalism/.

> locating politics always elsewhere, in some distant geography and irrecoverable past. Present day confusions and controversies are neglected or sentimentalized.[690]

As discussed in a previous chapter, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is a case in point for this depoliticized turn to trauma. The past-oriented transnationalism of his novel about September 11 does little to shed light on the contemporary global political entanglements. This commodification and institutionalization of the global liberal imagination pointed out by leftist critics raises pertinent questions with regard to the adversarial potential (or lack thereof) of culture in a neoliberal age of global multiculturalism.

Although dismissed by the authors of the above quoted "World Lite" article as part of the same backward glancing transnational trauma literature as Foer, Teju Cole's *Open City* dramatizes the contradictions of the liberal imagination in an age of neoliberal globalism. The voice of the novel's protagonist and narrator, who is representative for today's liberal cosmopolitan global elite, becomes increasingly unreliable and his excavations into layers of urban historical trauma are in contradiction with his lack of reaction to the plights of the Third World migrants he encounters, or his lack of engagement with contemporary politics or causes. The Nigerian-German narrator is moved and overcome by historical guilt when viewing an image of the Holocaust in a photography exhibition, but coldly dismisses as not trustworthy the harrowing account of systemic maltreatment of a refugee in indefinite detention whom he meets face to face. The novel embraces the genre of the global cosmopolitan novel only to subvert it, unmasking a global middle brow readership's comfortable engagement with diversity and political correctness, which eschews actual involvement with the issues of global inequality.

What is then the cultural work that literature does in the current imaginative impasse caused by the neoliberal consensus? If no alternative to the status-quo is imaginable, does that make democratic criticism simply the façade of democratic semblance of an increasingly immovable system? In her study of Ground Zero fiction, Birgit Däwes argues that it is laudable for literary works to have embraced a transnational mode of commemorating September 11. Still, if the transnational breath of commemorative practices goes hand in hand with exceptionalist narratives, like the notion of American innocence perpetuated through the use of the child's perspective in Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, then its political

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[690] The Editors, "World Lite," *n plus one mag*, Issue 17, Fall 2013, accessed January 6, 2014, https://nplusonemag.com/issue-17/the-intellectual-situation/world-lite/.

transnational agenda is defeated. Writing about the future of American Studies after the transnational turn, Winfried Fluck argues that transnationalism in itself is not enough, but that it is just as important to assess the uses transnationalism is put to: "[a] transnational American Studies approach can only justify its politicized agenda if it continues to show that the assumptions of an American exceptionalism are untenable."[691] Furthermore, a transnationalism ignorant of the traps of universalist humanism as exposed by Bruce Robbins in his work on cosmopolitanism, or the appeal to past traumas, which ignores or obscures the entanglements of contemporary global politics, is a sanitized transnationalism in line with the neoliberal embrace of diversity. As a transnational perspective on the global reverberations of September 11, Teju Cole's *Open City* significantly moves from New York and Ground Zero to Western Europe, where the terrorist attacks and the subsequent war on terror have an impact on the perception of Muslim migrants or citizens. Amy Waldman's *The Submission* is a transnational meditation on the role of commemoration, uncovering the political undertones of memorial practices, demystifying the role of the US as a global superpower in the present, but also reflecting on its possible future. Both novels allow a "look at the United States no longer in an insular way but in terms of international embeddedness,"[692] and do so in a manner that eschews reproducing an exceptionalist narrative.

Historical Synchronicities: Neoliberalism and the Utopian in Benjamin Kunkel's *Indecision*, Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* and Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge*

The complexities of the twenty-first century become visible not only in the transnational dimension of historical events, but also in the multiple layers of historical processes which tend to interlace or which compete for public attention. Narratives of fundamentalist terrorism capture the public's attention stirring emotional responses and offering an antagonist against which the liberal-democratic self can define itself in a self-flattering manner. On the other hand, grave issues such as growing wealth inequality, global warming or the surveillance apparatus

[691] Winfried Fluck, Ingrid Thaler and Stefan Brandt, "Introduction," *Transnational American Studies*, *REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature*, eds. Winfried Fluck, Ingrid Thaler and Stefan Brandt, Vol. 23, 2007, 7.
[692] Winfried Fluck, "A New Beginning?: Transnationalisms," *New Literary History*, Volume 42, Number 3, Summer 2011, pp. 365-384, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/nlh/summary/v042/42.3.fluck.html.

created along with the informational freedom brought forth by the digital revolution are less likely to capture the civic imagination and to receive significant political attention. This is the case partly because these issues require critical self-examination, but also due to their scale and complexity. Thus, the task of democratic criticism should also be that of historical prioritization and of emphasizing how certain historical conjectures are used to divest public involvement with perhaps graver issues. To conclude, I briefly tackle three works of fiction, which deal with the interaction between the attacks of September 11, their social and political consequences, and other pressing issues which have been connected to the neoliberal consensus. These works treat September 11 as an important historical marker, while at the same time subverting its centrality by showing how it has divested attention from the inner contradictions of liberal democracy, or how it has influenced or intertwined with larger ongoing historical processes.

The first novel is Benjamin Kunkel's 2005 *Indecision*, a *Bildungsroman* set in the aftermath of September 11. *Indecision* paradoxically uses the time-worn quintessentially bourgeois genre of the coming-of-age story in order to describe the pathologies of maturing in an age dominated by neoliberalism. The plot culminates in an almost mystical experience of conversion to leftist activism. Although acknowledged as a watershed historical moment, September 11 plays an apparently insignificant role in the self-making of the protagonist who declares himself personally marked and possibly marred by an earlier historical moment, znamely the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 and the ideological inertia characterizing the following decade of his formation as a young adult.

For Franco Moretti, following Mikhail Bakhtin, the classical *Bildungsroman* is a genre documenting the emergence of the individual in the passage from youth to maturity. At the same time, the *Bildungsroman* masters "historical time" by using the private development of the individual to record larger historical processes.[693] In *Indecision*, the coming of age of the protagonist Dwight Wilmerding is framed in the context of neoliberal "end of history," with his awakening and belated rite of passage towards maturity happening in the aftermath of September 11. The character suffers from a chronic form of indecisiveness (diagnosed by a another character as a fictional condition called "abulia"), which is repeatedly referred to in direct relation to the ideological climate of the age after the fall of the Iron Curtain, and to the act of living in the "perpetual present" of late capitalism: "When I first read about this ground for the individual's action, I could at last put an unwieldy and foreign name to what I had felt had been missing from my life ever since puberty struck and my prep-school days commenced,

[693] Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (New York: Verso, 2000), vii.

more or less at once, and I'd begun to proceed unsteadily from day to day as if I were on a bridge swaying in the wind while both sides of the canyon—I mean past and future—disappeared in foggy weather."[694] The narrator claims that his "abulia" is a reaction to historical stimuli and to living in "a consumer society in which tiny portions of desire are constantly being solicited from you and frittered away so that you can never save up enough passion to spend on any one thing." His personal identity crisis is fueled by an approaching college class reunion and being laid off from his under-achiever job as a customer service operator for the pharmaceutical company Pfizer. The company decided to outsource this department to India in order to cut expenses, thus causing Dwight to personally experience the effects of globalization and to acknowledge that it is "for real."[695]

In the novel, September 11 functions as a historical *memento mori*: "I tried not to be reminded of the eternal endingness of everything by Ground Zero down the street."[696] For Dwight, the attacks seem to be an unconscious factor in his awakening from the inertia of a "perpetual present" and a ticket of entrance into historical time. This achievement of a sense of historicity is sealed through Dwight's embrace of leftist utopianism, which offers the grounds for individual action he was missing. Although the event is referred to sparingly in the novel, the narrator gradually reveals more details regarding his personal experience of the attacks as he proceeds with the narration of his ideological awakening. His ironic, self-deprecating tone is a means of coping with the conundrum of adhering to leftist activism after postmodernism. The openly assumed ideological lens revealed in the conclusion of the narrator's memoir influences his view of history in which the end of the Cold War is given primacy over the events of September 11 that seem to offer little to a left-leaning narrative of events. The end of the Cold War is assigned a formative role in Dwight's individual development. September 11, instead remains unexplained and apparently devoid of historical or personal meaning. While the novel's plot offers a sketchy description of the negative effects of neoliberalism on the developing world and particularly on native peoples in South America, terrorism is brushed aside rather blatantly:

> 'What do you think is important to have happened in the last ten years?' 'I don't know, the creation, following the fall of the Soviet Union, of an unprecedented opportunity to regulate the world by law and justice? Which was spoiled by the global hegemony and frequent lawlessness of the US? And of course I should mention the badly flawed Washington-led model of

[694] Benjamin Kunkel, *Indecision* (New York: Random House, 2005), Kindle edition, location 266.
[695] Ibid., location 291.
[696] Ibid., Location 240.

> global economics and the rise of the internet. How about that? I'm not going to deal with the terrorism issue. I don't know what to do about that.' 'I think there is nothing to do but to kill them.'[697]

The attacks have posed a challenge to the anti-globalization, anti-imperialist left. The far left shares the same adversary with the terrorist organizations, but they differ fundamentally in terms of the means and the goals they pursue. The political response to the attacks and the policies surrounding the war on terror have also functioned as an excuse for authorities to silence and marginalize part of the left.[698] In developing a self-deprecating and self-conscious brand of leftist militancy, Dwight is constantly confronting or dodging common-place accusations against the left, including the one that the left is siding with the terrorists. Although he witnesses the crash of the second plane into the World Trade Center Tower from the rooftop of his building in Manhattan, the narrator, still hungover from using drugs the night before, gives his account in a humorous key, unlike the trauma-laden acts of witnessing in the previously discussed novels by DeLillo or Foer and devoid of the self-conscious guilt of David Foster Wallace's early reaction. The novel's overall approach to history paradoxically combines a postmodern playful detachment and (self-)irony with a plea for social commitment.

The coming of age narrative chronicling the conversion from postmodern anomie to self-conscious leftist activism influences the focus of its historical lens. The main character moves from being a passive bystander to history, to working towards the achievement of historical agency. After personally experiencing the effects of neoliberal globalization while being laid off, Dwight travels to South America. The trip further reveals to him the effects of the global free-market, particularly the ecological toll of the politics of constant economic growth dramatically visible in the accelerating process of deforestation in South America, which interferes with the life-style of indigenous tribes. In his trip to Ecuador, he meets and falls in love with an anthropologist studying the emergence of what she calls "indigenous absolutism" particularly among indigenous individuals who have been exposed to Western life-style and subsequently rejected it. Such members of the indigenous population decide instead "to live absolutely in the former style" and become "very deliberate about being indigenous."[699] While under the influence of a drug during his South American trip, Dwight simultaneously

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[697] Ibid., Kindle location 3796.

[698] For a Marxist anti-globalization discussion of September 11, its causes and impact on the left see: Ellen Meiksins Wood, "Explaining September 11," *Studies in Political Economy*, Vol. 67 (2002), accessed January 3, 2016, http://spe.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/spe/article/view/6042.

[699] Kunkel, Kindle location 2147. Interestingly a similar phenomenon may be at the bottom of Islamist radicalism, Said Qutb the Islamist intellectual whom Lawrence Wright considers the forefather of Al Qaeda became radicalized after being exiled to the United States. Some of the major figures behind the September 11 attacks were also educated and living in the West.

falls in love with Brigid, the leftist anthropologist, and appropriates her utopian vision of a future in which every consumer product will reveal its origin and the production chain behind it at the moment it is touched by its potential buyer, thus contributing to fairer trade and conscious consumption. As the spokesperson for his college class, he is responsible for the organization of the class reunion, which becomes an occasion for him to publicly present and defend the cause of what he calls "democratic socialism." The self-mocking tone with which Dwight outlines his plan for political self-making is reminiscent of David Foster Wallace's post-post-modern self-irony, but his unironic commitment to social activism suggests the emergence of a self-critical utopianism, which claims to have learned the hard lessons of the past. The narrator's commitment to leftist activism coincides with the author's own transformation into a leftist public intellectual. His more recent work *Utopia or Bust: A Guide to the Present Crisis* is a collection of essays documenting his engagement with contemporary Marxist thought in an effort to better understand the current crisis of capitalism.[700]

The use of the coming of age narrative in *Indecision* is at odds with the narrator's leftist ideals and the author's engagement as a Leftist public intellectual. As Fredric Jameson repeatedly highlights, realism and its subgenre the *Bildungsroman* have an "ontological commitment to the status quo as such."[701] The subversive element that Jameson finds in instances of nineteenth century realism is the commitment to historicity displayed by novels of the period which include a dimension of collectivity. More than any other subgenre of realism, the Bildungsroman is focused on individual subjectivity. Furthermore, the classical *Bildungsroman* is, in Franco Moretti's description, a genre characterized by compromise. The coming of age story includes an element of rebellion against the status quo, as well as a drive towards upward mobility; its focus on youthful restlessness making it a particularly modern genre. In the end, the process of maturation and *Bildung* results in the acceptance of one's role in society. This makes the genre particularly apt at recording and fostering the liberal approach to social and political transformation achieved through a process of individual dissent followed by eventual assent, and not through radical mass revolutionary means.

The narrator of Kunkel's novel matures and finds his place in society by overcoming his chronic indecision with the help of two parallel conspiracies. His close friend diagnoses his state as a mental affliction called "abulia" and provides him with the cure, an experimental pill

[700] Benjamin Kunkel, *Utopia or Bust: A Guide to the Present Crisis* (New York: Verso, 2014).
[701] Jameson, 145.

called Abulinix. The pill turns out to have been a placebo, but nonetheless seems to help him discover his "ground for individual action" and overcome his chronic indecisiveness. In a parallel development, his sister, a leftist academic with whom he has an almost incestuous infatuation, has masterminded his encounter with Brigid, the Belgian anthropologist and fellow activist. The frame of the *Bildungsroman* offers no sense of "a collective dimension" and the character's connection to the underprivileged of the world, whose rights he makes it his purpose in life to further, is missing, with the exception of a very sketchy encounter with an indigenous guide during a touristic jungle trip. His political awakening appears more like the individual realization of one's *Berufung*, in Max Weber's sense of the word, which helps the character find his place in society rather than provide a vision for wider societal change. Furthermore, his commitment to the greater good appears more like a return to an older form of liberal ethics than an embrace of radical politics:

> "… the weird thing about freedom to choose would seem to be that no one knows what to do with it unless they give it to others. Which I think was a large factor in the horrible confusion that until recently I selflessly took it upon myself to exemplify. Until the bobohuariza, and the love, and the democratic socialism…
> I mean to say that only when other people have the same freedom which we have devoted ourselves to squandering—only then will we really finally know what we should have done with ours in the first place. So let us remain faithful to those privileged kids we were by seeking to honor and cancel our condition by making it general throughout the world."[702]

On the other hand, the narrator's embrace of the role of spokesman for his generation, both through the speech given at his class reunion and through the self-declared motivation behind writing his memoir, involves a utopian possibility not unlike that suggested by Jameson as the main ingredient for a return to historicity: "Meanwhile I let myself hope that to publish this memoir on the growth of my mind may bring these issues more notice than our press releases attract. But I don't mean to bring you down as a reader, and one main effort of my life is to try not to spoil my own mood."[703] Still, while this self-aware and self-ironic utopianism, with its focus on the future, saves the protagonist from the pathologies of living in a "perpetual present" and provides him with a calling, it also blinds him to the complexities of contemporary phenomena like that of terrorism, which he so easily brushes aside.

The second novel which I would like to briefly discuss is Jonathan Franzen's 2010 *Freedom*. Having as a foreground the inner conflicts of a middle class American family,

[702] Kunkel, Kindle locations 3906, 3910.
[703] Ibid., 3967.

Freedom chronicles the first decade of the twenty-first century marked by September 11. Pursuing the different trajectories of family members going through midlife crises or coming of age, the novel's wider canvas offers a view of the societal landscape, highlighting the exacerbation of the cultural wars between liberals and conservatives following September 11. Central to the novel is the failure of a societal involvement with environmental issues, which exposes some of the inner contradictions of liberalism and of its focus on individual freedom. Published on the eve of the attacks of September 11, Jonathan Franzen's 2001 novel *The Corrections* was a family-centric exploration of consumer society in late capitalism and of the social climate in the end of history decade of the nineties when historical Events no longer seemed possible:

> It seemed to Enid that current events in general were more muted or insipid nowadays than they'd been in her youth. She had memories of the 1930s, she'd seen firsthand what could happen to a country when the world economy took its gloves off… But disasters of this magnitude no longer seemed to befall the United States. Safety measures had been put in place, like the squares of rubber that every modern playground was paved with, to soften impacts.[704]

The novel captures this sense of the end of history, of historical uneventfulness, but also the sense of anxiety pervading a decade of adventurous financial speculation easily available to all Americans on the newly enlarged global market after the fall of the Iron Curtain. The generations of the family on which the novel centers experience the consequences of the transition from a Fordist economy, to a post-Fordist neoliberal one. Written almost a decade after *The Corrections*, Franzen's 2010 novel *Freedom* returns to the same locus of cultural critique, but with a focus on late capitalisms' contradictions, viewed this time from an environmentalist point of view.

September 11 visibly casts its shadow over the novel's family dramas, but it is directly referred to only in a brief account of how it has affected the future plans of young and ambitious Joey Berglund, a freshman in college who is the only student attending his lectures on that day, only to be greeted by an empty auditorium. The event itself is only described as a personal nuisance for Joey, yet its political repercussions play a role in the individual lives of characters. Coming of age post-September 11, Joey Berglund seizes the chance to get rich fast through unethical business transactions with army contractors in the Middle East, a choice for which he later repents, moving on to engage in equally profitable ecologically-friendly coffee trade.

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[704] Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections* (London: Harper Collins, 2002), Kindle edition. Kindle locations 10473, 10476.

According to his father, Walter, a liberal preservationist and population control activist, the terrorist attacks have been used by conservatives in the United States to strengthen their position and annihilate the left by turning the Democratic Party and the traditionally liberal media into the center-right; all contributing to a decrease in societal involvement with environmental issues, often played down as a liberal fad.

Freedom is a term that has often been unreflectively used in the aftermath of September 11. A few examples of the overwhelming presence of the term in public discourse would be the global war on terror bearing the official name "Operation Enduring Freedom," while the new World Trade Center tower is called "Freedom Tower," or president Bush's famous speech in which he blames the attacks on the terrorists' hate of "our freedom." For Wendy Brown, liberal democratic rhetoric and particularly such abstract terms as freedom have been used to propagate a neoliberal ideology globally and to push through policies which result in an impoverishment of democracy and instead ensure the supremacy of the free market and of profiteering. The notion of freedom is a leitmotiv in the novel, which scrutinizes its many facets to reveal its negative and contradictory features and consequences. A dinner table conversation between Joey Berglund and the neoconservative father of an upper class girl he would like to impress satirizes the neoliberal use of the rhetoric of liberal democracy hollowed out of its meaning and ethical dimension in order to justify the post-9/11 interventions in Iraq:

> "And so I'm guessing you've already had the experience of being frustrated with people who aren't as bright as you are. People who are not only unable, but *unwilling* to admit certain truths whose logic is self-evident to you. Who don't even seem to *care* that their logic is bad. Have you ever been frustrated like that?"
> "But that's because they are free," Joey said. "Isn't that what freedom is for? The right to think whatever you want?" …
> "That's exactly right," Jenna's father said. "Freedom is a pain in the ass. And that's precisely why it's imperative that we seize the opportunity that's been presented to us this fall. To get a nation of free people to let go of their bad logic and sign on with a better logic, by whatever means are necessary."[705]

Although downplayed by Fawcett in his recent study on liberalism, individual liberty is considered the cornerstone of the liberal ideology and, in *Freedom*, it appears as a leitmotif, often in a negative light, particularly when viewed from the point of view of the environment. The main source of humor in the novel comes from the absurdities ensuing from Walter Berglund's effort of promoting population control as a means of environmental protection. Despite its sound rational grounding, population control militancy goes against a strong human instinct towards reproduction and appears impossible to enforce in a society in which individual

[705] Jonathan Franzen, *Freedom* (London: Harper Collins, 2010), 336-337.

freedom is placed at the center: "Imperfectly hidden at the back of his mind was a wish that everyone in the world would reproduce a little less, so that he might reproduce a little more, *once* more, with Lalitha."[706] A similar instance of cognitive dissonance is experienced by Walter as he is preaching reproductive abstinence to young volunteers with bodies brimming with fertility. The liberal emphasis on civil liberties in the United States has moved beyond the rational, becoming a matter of emotion, according to Walter, who identifies it as one of the reasons behind a specifically American reluctance to governmental regulation, which hinders environmentally conscious action:

> "People came to this country for either money or freedom. If you don't have money, you cling to your freedoms all the more angrily. Even if smoking kills you, even if you can't afford to feed your kids, even if your kids are getting shot down by maniacs with assault rifles. You may be poor, but the one thing nobody can take away from you is the freedom to fuck up your life whatever way you want to."[707]

At the same time, Walter also identifies class as an obstacle to a unified societal response to the environmental crisis. A public rant on the subject costs him his job as a corporate sponsored environmentalist activist and earns him Internet fame among young radical activists:

> "Welcome to the middle class! … You too can help denude every last scrap of habitat in Asia, Africa, and South America! ... It's a perfect system, because as long as you've got your six-foot-wide plasma TV, and the electricity to run it, you don't have to think about any of the ugly consequences. You can watch *Survivor: Indonesia* till there's no more Indonesia. … Now that you are working for LBI, you can finally make enough money to keep your kids from joining the Army and dying in LBI's broken-down trucks and shoddy body armor."[708]

At the core of the American dream is social advancement, or the achievement of middle class prosperity. This consumption-based progressive impulse at an individual level is at odds with the ethos of frugality and renunciation, which is required for effectively protecting the environment. In lines similar to those suggested by Naomi Klein in her book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Environment*, characters argue not only that environmental action requires regulation which has to stifle certain human biological and social instincts, but that population control becomes a taboo issue in a capitalist society ruled by the ideology of constant growth: "fewer babies means talking about limits to growth. … And growth isn't some side issue in free-market ideology. It's the entire essence. … In free-market economic theory you have to leave stuff like the environment out of the equation. … Capitalism can't handle

[706] Ibid., 618.
[707] Ibid., 453.
[708] Ibid., 608.

talking about limits, because the whole point of capitalism is the restless growth of capital."[709] The novel's exploration of liberty and its paradoxes goes back to the foundation of "the land of the free" through Walter's musings on the history of his family, particularly his paternal grandfather, a first generation Swedish immigrant, whose search for personal freedom in America is the consequence of his asocial tendencies: "The person susceptible to the dream of limitless freedom is a personality also prone, should the dream ever sour, to misanthropy and rage."[710]

The novel is critical of the fragmentation of society due to the incessant culture wars and ambivalently portrays the centrality of individual liberties in American culture and politics. Still, its own formal adherence to literary realism and its focus on the individual perspective and the family as a social unit elude the collective dimension that Lukacs and Jameson saw as necessary in order to achieve a sense of historicity. The sympathetically satirical narrative of Walter's activist endeavors unpacks one by one all the possibilities for unified societal action. The only mention of what seems like a viable solution to the preservation of endangered bird species (Walter's specialty as a corporate-backed activist) involves commitment by rich and powerful individuals to close down areas under their control and hinder further real-estate development. The reservations are allowed to exist however, only after the territory has been drained of natural resources through "mountaintop removal." Paradoxically, this solution to endangered species conservation involves the exploitation of fossil fuels, which contributes to global warming. Walter is employed by such a benevolent one-percenter, which leads Jeffrey J. Williams to single out Franzen's novel as representative of what he calls the "plutocratic imagination" or the "neoliberal imagination," in which collective societal and governmental action appear to no longer be a viable option, while change is presented as only possible through the individual efforts of benevolent plutocrats. I agree with Williams that the novel is pessimistic about the possibility of large scale collective action due to the prevalence of an individualistic civic rights-centered form of liberalism in America. At the same time, Walter's involvement with corporate-backed environmentalist action is far from presenting plutocracy in a positive light, but rather illustrates the aporias of environmental action within a capitalist framework.

[709] Ibid., 453-454.
[710] Ibid., 560.

The ecological issues raised by Walter are depicted as urgent and poignant, but they are at the same time subverted by the correlation between Walter's militancy and his personal mid-life crisis; two trajectories which reach their peak at the same time. After breaking up with his wife, Walter starts a relationship with his much younger assistant Lalitha with whom he launches a project for population control awareness. His most radical outburst, in his speech demolishing the myth of the middle class, comes at the peak of his marital conflict and plunges him into the territory of radical activism. Walter's speech leads to the withdrawal of corporate funding from his awareness campaign project, which in turn alienates Ivy League volunteers, who are replaced by young radicals. The turn to radicalism subverts the original logic of the enterprise meant to create public consensus on the topic of population control. The escalation of radical involvement in the population control cause culminates with the accidental death of Walter's lover, Lalitha. In this last stage, as a grieving middle aged man, Walter himself personifies some of the contradictions of militancy. His environmental activism is revealed to come partly from an inherited individual antisocial tendency, and not always from a selfless concern with the collective good.

Secluded on his family estate in the woods to grieve for his lost lover, Walter undertakes a small-scale, quixotic activist effort to convince the inhabitants of the newly built housing project nearby to keep their cats indoors and prevent them from killing the rare birds taking shelter on his still wild estate. Walter's plea to his neighbors to keep their cats indoors and thus curtail their freedom brings him into conflict with one of them. After the "disappearance" of her cat, the neighbor retaliates by acquiring several other felines, which she then directs towards Walter's estate. This episode is a small scale satirical take on the complex mixtures of human and ideological factors behind the large scale societal failure to reach common ground on environmental issues. The conflict between Walter and his neighbor reveals the process through which a well-intentioned, but undiplomatically pursued initiative, fueled by cultural misunderstandings, may turn into another fight in the culture wars, with Walter in the role of the intrusive, highfalutin liberal (in the American sense of the word) and the neighbor in the role of the conservative fighting for her individual liberty. Finally, the conflict between the two neighbors is resolved by the arrival of Patty, Walter's wife, who acts as a mediator and connects Walter socially to his neighbors, leaving the environmental issue raised by him pending. Walter's aggressive activism seems to be a chapter in his personal trajectory, a result of his midlife crisis, which he will eventually overcome. Significantly, in the conclusion of the novel he decides to leave his estate, closing it and turning it into a bird sanctuary named after his former lover Lalitha, and moves back to the city with his wife.

The sentimental reunification of the spouses offers a false sense of closure. The complex contradictions of liberalism and of a society organized on the basis of individual freedom revealed in the novel nonetheless remain open. The conclusion of the family drama with a spousal reconciliation which in turn facilitates a degree of social cohesion is reminiscent of the strategies of an early American novel similarly concerned with the environmental toll of liberal democracy, namely James Fennimore Cooper's *The Pioneers*. Cooper's novel registers the contradictions of liberal capitalism and modern civilization as practiced on the American frontier and provides a pessimistic perspective on its environmental consequences. Finally, however, the environmental challenge posed by the Western advancement of the colonists is left unresolved. Still, social cohesion is maintained through a contrived union between opposing forces under the umbrella of a wedding (where the groom stands for both the British colonists' and Native population's claim on the land, and the bride is the offspring of an illuminated patrician committed to keeping the mob of unruly frontiersmen from abusing their freedom). In *Freedom*, Walter's reunification with his wife allows for social reintegration, reconciliation with his conservative neighbors and possibly an end to his radical militancy which is relegated as a symptom of his midlife crisis-induced misanthropy. In Cooper, a fragile social cohesion is maintained, as the general good is tended to by well-meaning privileged citizens. In Franzen, despite the neighborly reconciliation brought about through Patty's domestic diplomacy, there is little sense that societal consensus on a large scale can be achieved. Furthermore, Walter's retreat within the newly reunited family unit after renouncing his activist efforts seems to suggest, in Margaret Thatcher's (in)famous words, that "… there's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families."[711]

On the other hand, as is the case with Benjamin Kunkel's *Indecision*, Franzen's novel presents political activism in a satirical mode, but without diminishing its importance. On account of realism's commitment to the status quo and its investment in how things are rather than in how things should be, nineteenth century realist novels largely avoid activist or politically active characters or depict them with "satiric hostility."[712] Far from being idealized, the characters of Dwight and Walter are complex and the motivations behind their militancy are not necessarily selfless or noble. The absurdities and incongruities of their respective endeavors are the main source of humor in both novels, but unlike the hostile satiric tone

[711] "Margaret Thatcher Quotes," *The Guardian*, April 8, 2013, accessed December 12, 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/apr/08/margaret-thatcher-quotes
[712] Jameson, 215.

identified by Jameson in the classical realist novel when dealing with politically involved individuals, both characters are subjected to a benevolent satirical treatment. The realism of both novels is one that has learned the lesson of postmodern irony and self-irony. In spite of this, both novels still proceed to mildly challenge the status quo through the benevolence accorded to these militant protagonists and their quixotic investments into the future.

A third novel which confers historical centrality to September 11 only to subvert its exceptionality by presenting it in a wider context, is Thomas Pynchon's 2013 *Bleeding Edge*. The work which reviewers have called Pynchon's September 11 novel is set in 2001, covering a year in the life of an independent financial fraud investigator, in the months leading to September 11 and those of its aftermath. Despite providing the temporal axis of the narrative, the status of September 11 as a watershed moment is undercut by the novel's plot structured as an investigation into the post-dot com bubble world of high tech entrepreneurship. In Pynchon's vision, September 11 is used by the complex Foucaultian neoliberal system as an occasion to encroach upon the latest outlet of free expression and unregulated underground creativity and coopt it for commercial purposes. Beginning in the spring of 2001 and ending in the spring of 2002, the chapters of *Bleeding Edge* are divided according to seasonal change and the holidays structuring the life rhythm of a middle-class family in New York. The central figure of the novel is Maxine Tarnow, a mother of two young sons and private fraud investigator, who is propelled into the world of high-tech business and its political entanglements in the months preceding September 11.

Pursuing the dubious financial dealings of the rising high-tech company "hashslingrz" and its former geek now capitalist mogul owner Gabriel Ice, Maxine's investigation is a means for the novel to explore the changing face of neoliberal capitalism. Critics have argued that all novels by Pynchon follow, to different degrees, a detective novel pattern and at the same time have a historical dimension. *Bleeding Edge* is no exception. The novel does not finally untangle the complex web of historical interactions which it uncovers by way of Maxine's investigation, but rather highlights the elusive quality of history which is still in the process of making. Both embracing and subverting a paranoid perspective on the future of high-tech global capitalism and its surveillance machine, the novel makes an ambiguous connection between the rise of the internet and Islamist terrorism. Gabriel Ice's financial divestments to the Middle East are revealed to be part of a possible governmental anti-terrorist ploy that nonetheless does not prevent September 11 from happening and is finally left unclarified in classical Pynchon fashion.

Hinting towards the future consequences of a new stage of neoliberal global advancement brought about by the Internet, the novel is more invested in the past and the dissolution of the former stage of neoliberalism, or late capitalism to use Jameson's term. An aura of nostalgia surrounds the novel's many references to the violent US interventions in South America meant to ensure the expansion of the global free market, including a significant direct reference to what has been called the South American September 11, namely the CIA backed coup on Chilean president Salvador Allende on September 11, 1973. Maxine's investigation, as well as her brother-in-law's employment with Gabriel Ice's firm and his apparent involvement with Israeli counter-terrorism, bring her into contact with governmental agent Nicholas Windust, a former Cold War neoliberal thug involved in the darkest US ventures in South America. Maxine is both repelled by and attracted to Windust, with whom she eventually has an affair. She is aware of his past involvement in government backed crimes and torture, but is at the same time baffled by the financial disinterestedness behind Windust's actions. His refusal to cash in despite being constantly in an advantageous position at the forefront of free market advancement turns him into an unwanted figure in the post-September 11 climate and leads to his assassination. Pondering Windust's contradictions, Maxine imagines him in his early Cold War career as "one of a globetrotting gang of young smart-asses, piling into cities and towns all over the Third World, filling ancient colonial spaces with office copiers and coffee machines, pulling all-nighters, running off neatly bound plans for the total obliteration of target countries and their replacement by free-market fantasies."[713]

A master of conspiracies and paranoia, Pynchon reviews all the major conspiracy theories circulating around September 11 and the role of the Internet as the medium where these alternative histories find a growing audience. The novel gives way to a degree of conspiratorial paranoia including numerous premonitory elements in the months preceding September 11. Finally, however, the popular conspiracy theories arguing that the attacks have been an inside job, or that they have been planned by the Israeli secret police remain disputed. Maxine and other characters get into trouble due to the circulation of a video showing Gabriel Ice's employees during a missile shooting exercise on a Manhattan rooftop prior to 9/11. Other premonitory elements include the warning of a "professional nose" who senses in advance the peculiar smell which is going to envelop Manhattan after the fall of the towers and decides to flee the city. Maxine's husband notices dramatic changes in the sales of stocks by soon to be

[713] Thomas Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge* (London: Jonathan Cape, Random House, 2013), Kindle edition, Kindle location 1622.

involved in the attacks companies such as American Airlines. Massive clearing efforts take place at an inactive dumping ground near New York, ominously called Fresh Kills, where the actual September 11 debris will later be stored and sorted in an effort to collect human remains.

Pynchon's depiction of the months following September 11 is both ironically detached, darkly humorous, and slightly emotional and sentimental. The characters experience firsthand the patriotic excesses of its aftermath, including the calls for an end to irony and a return of the real. Maxine's children are forbidden to read fiction by a zealous teacher in school. Heidi, Maxine's friend who is an academic specializing in popular culture, notices an infantilization of society, an abundance of jeremiad rhetoric blaming the irony of the nineties for the attacks. She jokingly adds that the demand for everything "to be literal now" contradicts the "delusional state" of the country.[714] Popular culture cashes in on this turn to the "real" through a reality show boom.

At the same time, the novel includes non-ironic moments of post-September 11 human bonding. Maxine's protectiveness towards her family manifests itself after the attacks when, due to her investigation, her family is under threat. The heroic efforts of New York fire fighters are also mentioned: "If it isn't the pay, isn't the glory, and sometimes you don't come back, then what is it? What makes these guys choose to go in, work twenty-four hour shifts and then keep working, keep throwing themselves into those shaky ruins, torching through steal, bringing people to safety, recovering parts of others, ending up sick, beat up by nightmares, disrespected, dead?"[715] The attacks seem to strengthen family bonds, causing Maxine to reconcile with her husband and become more accepting with regard to the shortcomings of other members of her extended family. In a turn to magic-realism, the novel includes a non-ironic poetic account of Maxine's virtual experiences in DeepArcher, a complex Internet program. In the virtual world of DeepArcher, which provides a kind of second life, she encounters the avatars of real life acquaintances, but also, in the weeks after September 11, the avatars or possibly ghosts of World Trade Center victims.

Ignoring the clash of civilizations narrative that has dominated the mainstream, Pynchon's novel treats September 11 almost as a blank slate event, on which individual characters project their own more or less paranoid theories, its significance remaining open to interpretation. At the same time, the fall of the twin towers stands as a visual historical marker,

[714] Ibid., Kindle location 4815.
[715] Ibid., Kindle location 5465.

the reification of a more complex invisible historical process: the transformation of neoliberal capitalism after the advent of the internet and the dot com boom. The cover of the novel featuring the corridor of a server farm, which at the same time brings to mind a night-time view of the World Trade Center towers as seen from below, is revelatory for this complex transformation of neoliberalism at the turn of the millennium from the realm of real-estate to that of "virtual-estate." The tendency of capital to permeate all realms of life, visible in what characters repeatedly refer to as the yuppification of New York City real-estate through gentrification and commercialization, is mirrored by a similar tendency in the virtual world of the Internet.

The notion of "bleeding edge" technology referred to in the title of the novel is illustrative of particular historical moments when great innovation takes place and idealistic tendencies seem to prevail, only to be eventually coopted and integrated into the wider map of capitalist exploits. The DeepArcher program Maxine finds so fascinating and Gabriel Ice is keen on acquiring is an example of such bleeding edge technology. Its creators are torn between their ideal of creating an oasis of virtual freedom exempt from the pressures of monetization or the long arm of governmental surveillance, and the temptation to cash in and to be financially rewarded for their work. September 11 occasions a period of vulnerability for the program, which is cracked by mysterious forces, possibly government or corporate-backed (the difference between the two actors being increasingly harder to delineate). This instance of historical opportunism highlights the entanglements between increasing surveillance and technological developments.

The opinions of different characters contribute to a dialectical perspective on the transformative effects of the Internet and related technological breakthroughs. The online world offers whistleblowers like the old left-leaning activist March Kelleher an audience, but it also turns her into an outcast when she releases the video of Gabriel Ice's pre-9/11 rooftop missile shooting practice. As March herself observes, the Internet enables a genuine democratization of information, but may at the same time become a dangerous tool through the pressure of the market: "'[t]heir idealism,' … 'their youth … I haven't seen anything like it since the sixties. These kids are out to change the world. 'Information has to be free' - they really mean it. At the same time, here's all these greedy fuckin dotcommers make real-estate developers look like Bambi and Thumper.'"[716] Real-estate occupies an important role in earlier novels by Pynchon. In *Inherent Vice*, real-estate contributes significantly to the failure of the hippy utopian project.

[716] Ibid., Kindle location 1709.

Bleeding Edge captures the mutations of capitalist mechanisms of control as they expand beyond real estate to the virtual realm of the Internet. Maxine's father, a sixties militant, reminds her that the origins of the Internet have not been informed by utopian idealism, but that instead it has been intended as an instrument of control during the Eisenhower era. The type of control that it makes possible is of a more covert and insidious nature than the rather straightforward type of brainwashing operated by television:

> "…your Internet…, this magical convenience that creeps now like a smell through the smallest details of our lives, the shopping, the housework, the homework, the taxes, absorbing our energy, eating up our precious time. And there's no innocence. Anywhere. Never was. It was conceived in sin, the worst possible. As it kept growing, it never stopped carrying in its heart a bitter-cold death wish for the planet, and I don't think anything has changed, kid… Call it freedom, it's based on control. Everybody connected together, impossible anybody should get lost, ever again. Take the next step, connect it to these cell phones, you've got a total web of surveillance, inescapable. You remember the comics in the *Daily News*? Dick Tracy's wrist radio? it'll be everywhere, the rubes'll all be begging to wear one, handcuffs of the future. Terrific. What they dream about at the Pentagon, worldwide martial law."[717]

As she constantly searches for the ever diminishing "unyuppified" corners of New York, Maxine is also absorbed by the yet to be regulated, sanitized and commercialized corners of the Deep Web, like the world of DeepArcher, which is described in almost mystical terms. Despite its dark predicaments with regard to the future of the Internet age, many of which have already become reality, the novel still ends on a positive note. Notwithstanding the inescapable drive towards commodification which takes over "bleeding edge" territories, there is a sense that the utopian impulse behind these moments of innovation survives and finds new outlets for itself, being inexhaustible. As the young idealistic techy avant-garde move away from almost completely yuppified Manhattan to find refuge in Brooklyn (another process accelerated by September 11),[718] whistleblowers, hackers and idealistic innovators continue to find new venues for their work:

> "After the September 11 attack," March editorializes one morning, "amid all that chaos and confusion, a hole quietly opened up in American history, a vacuum of accountability, into which assets human, and financial begin to vanish. Back in the days of hippie simplicity, people liked to blame 'the CIA' or 'a secret rogue operation.' But this is a new enemy, unnamable, locatable

[717] Ibid., Kindle location 6048.
[718] Ibid., Kindle location 5563. "'It's all going over to Brooklyn. Feels like we're the last of the old-time Alley folks.'" A similar perspective on the yuppification of New York speeded up after September 11 is also to be found in Jonathan Lethem's *Chronic City*, or from a more positive outlook in Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*.

> on no organization chart or budget line- who knows, maybe even the CIA's scared of them."
>
> "Maybe it's unbeatable, maybe there are ways to fight back. What it may require is a dedicated cadre of warriors willing to sacrifice time, income, personal safety, a brother/sisterhood consecrated to an uncertain struggle that may extend over generations and, despite all, end in total defeat."[719]

The high-tech specialists and self-sacrificial freedom fighters March sees as the only hope for the future seem to require the same brand of heroism as the previously mentioned fire-fighters who have worked at Ground Zero. In Dave Eggers' 2013 *The Circle*, a dystopian novel about the age of the Internet, high-tech companies paradoxically use the democratic façade of technological advancement to totalitarian ends. The imposition of an unprecedented degree of control on the individual with his or her own consent causes the neoliberal entrepreneurial understanding of the self to reach an extreme level. Pynchon's perspective, however, allows for a degree of optimism particularly through the inclusion of the utopian vision of a future New York City created by Maxine's sons in DeepArcher. The virtual version of New York called Zigotisopolis (a play on the names of the two boys, Ziggy and Otis) is an enhanced one combining old parts of the city that have disappeared in the gradual process of yuppification, with imaginary elements, which provide a utopian projection of the city's future.

Like Franzen's *Freedom*, *Bleeding Edge* uses September 11 as a central historical marker, but resists assigning it a meaning while focusing instead on how it has been used by the neoliberal apparatus to further replicate itself. The attacks are not presented as a moment of rupture but rather as an occasion to further stabilize the status quo by freezing radical self-criticism:

> "Do you remember that piece of footage on the local news, just as the first tower comes down, woman runs in off the street into a store, just gets the door closed behind her, and here comes this terrible black billowing, ash, debris, sweeping through the streets, gale force past the window … that was the moment, Maxi. Not when 'everything changed.' When everything was revealed. No grand Zen illumination, but a rush of blackness and death. Showing us exactly what we've become, what we've been all the time."
>
> "And what we've always been is?"
>
> "Is living on borrowed time. Getting away cheap. Never caring about who's paying for it, who's starving somewhere else all jammed together so we can have cheap food, a house, a yard in the burbs … planetwide, more every day, the payback keeps gathering. And meantime the only help we get from the media is boo hoo the innocent dead. Boo fuckin hoo. You know what? All the dead are innocent. There's no uninnocent dead."

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[719] Ibid., Kindle location 5739.

Pynchon's character describes September 11 as a violent outbreak of the brewing tensions caused by the neoliberal global expansion of the free market. In all three of the novels discussed, September 11 functions as a temporal axis, but its historical centrality is challenged or subverted. Benjamin Kunkel's *Indecision* gives primacy to the end of the Cold War, offering no historical interpretation of September 11, but instead presenting it as *memento mori* moment which provides impetus to his character's leftist awakening. In Franzen and Pynchon, the historical flamboyance of the attacks works to divest public attention from the inner contradictions of liberal democracy. Through their reflections on activism, all three novels seem to have moved beyond the "perpetual present" of postmodernism achieving a degree of historicity, in Jameson's sense of the term, by projecting some utopian hopes for the future and unpacking mainstream exceptionalist narratives at the same time.

Each novel in its own particular manner offers a perspective on the millennial generation, detecting a utopian streak among its defining features. In Kunkel's *Indecision*, Dwight is a late bloomer, which makes his coming of age representative for the millennial generation despite his belonging to a slightly older one. As a writer, Kunkel has internalized David Foster Wallace's critique of postmodern anomie moving beyond it to offer a way out by professing a self-conscious brand of activism and political commitment.[720] In *Freedom*, Walter, the activist character, embraces the hipster generation and its non-belligerent quest for authenticity. This generational change is depicted in the novel when Walter takes his rock musician college friend Richard Katz to see the real life hipster band Bright Eyes in concert. Old school former punk Katz feels ill at ease among the polite and subdued crowd of "bright eyed" youths, who have given up on the violent rebellion through sex, drugs and rock'n'roll practiced by the previous generations. Youth cultures in the twentieth century shared the ethos of the artistic avant-garde in their rebellion against the status quo and bourgeois culture, which

[720] Kunkel belongs to a generation of intellectuals that critics have dubbed "millennial Marxists" who have embraced a "radical chic" tailored for the hipster generation, but are supposedly disconnected from actual class struggle and politics: "The new radicals reject the hard-work of confronting the present, have nothing positive to present as a political agenda, and instead render esotericism into a "hip" virtue.
In many ways this is the very product of the system they shallowly critique. The class basis of the new radicalism no longer sounds in key with working people; no longer is it the expression of organic intellectuals. With no movement to attach to, no working class politics to inform their political sensibilities, theory becomes a fetish. Exploitation and domination are real problems, but the words lose their meaning if they are not attached to concrete referents. This is a disservice to the exploited and dominated. It is to place them – as Bertolt Brecht wrote at the conclusion of the film version of his Threepenny Opera – back in the dark. They retain their ignominious invisibility. Radical theory should illuminate present social relations. Sadly, millennial Marxists only fetishize it. This purported revival of Marxian politics is not a revolt by the generations raised during the conservative Reagan revolution and economic complacency of the Clinton-era's credit economy. Their Marxism is the product of the sensibilities cultivated by late capitalism. It's facile and unreflective cant a mere sound-byte radicalism ready-made for and by a cultural consciousness mauled by Facebook and Twitter." See: Smulewicz-Zucker and Thompson.

seems to have been in part lost in the case of the millennials. Katz sees himself as a relic from the past, being at the same time critical of the newer generation:

> The nation was fighting dirty wars in two countries, the planet was heating up like a toaster oven and here … were hundreds of kids … with their sweet yearnings, their innocent entitlement – to what? To emotion. … To being left to themselves to ritually repudiate, for an hour or two on a Saturday night, the cynicism and anger of their elders. … They seemed … to bear malice toward nobody. Katz could see it in their clothing, which bespoke none of the rage and disaffection of the crowds he'd been a part of as a youngster. They gathered not in anger but in celebration of having found, as a generation, a gentler and more respectful way of being. A way not incidentally more in harmony with consuming. And so said to him: die.[721]

Anger is a leitmotiv in the novel and Walter's righteous activist anger is central to the novel's satiric take on militancy. This strong emotion underlying Walter's more radical stances repeatedly prevents him from achieving mainstream consensus on the causes he espouses. Unlike Katz, however, Walter, who has been out of pace with his own generation by embracing militancy instead of cynical coolness, identifies with the spirit of the hipsters: "'They're all about belief,' Walter said. 'The new record's this incredible kind of pantheistic effort to keep believing in something in a world full of death.'"[722] Finally, Katz too succumbs to the ethos of the age and to Walter's suggestions that he should use his music to further significant causes. The album entitled *Songs for Walter*, which Katz dedicates to his estranged friend, suggests that he has moved away from the rebellion of punk characterizing his early work, to an attempt at creating change from within the mainstream. The numerous references to the independent music scene is a way for the novel to engage with the fate of literature after postmodernism and its own relation to the mainstream, an issue which Franzen has repeatedly tackled in his non-fiction. The mainstream consensus necessary for effective environmental action is used in the novel to highlight the political inefficacy of art fueled by anger and a hermetic avant-garde aesthetics.

The complex portrayal of characters in *Freedom* comes closest to displaying the "moral realism" Trilling saw as the distinguishing accomplishment of the liberal imagination. Equally critical of radical politics and of the inner incongruities of liberalism, the novel presents the status quo as both untenable and unchallengeable. While Kunkel's main character directly advocates a leftist revival and Franzen both satirizes and elevates the cultural capital of activism, for Pynchon the utopian potential of the future lies in the inherent "goodness" and idealism of the younger generation. The free corners of the Deep Web are colonized by capital

[721] Franzen, 463-464.
[722] Ibid., 464.

at an even greater speed after 9/11 and Maxine's investigation is brutally shut down by threats to the life and safety of her family. By all appearances, the utopian potential of the internet seems to have been defeated as it is turning into a dystopia of surveillance. Still, the novel closes with Maxine's motherly gaze directed at her young sons. Their utopian Deep Web version of New York City ("still safe from the spiders and bots that one day too soon will be coming for it, to claim-jump it in the name of the indexed world")[723] offers a glimmer of hope for the future. In Pynchon's vision of history, the aspiration for freedom and goodwill continue to counteract the forces of cooption and commodification. History appears as an endless dialectic of innovation and commodification, of human selflessness and venality. The different degrees of self-aware utopianism and activism portrayed in the three works discussed here may be a sign that the liberal imagination and liberalism, understood here in the broad lines drawn by Edmund Fawcett, may still reinvent themselves beyond the constraints of "capitalist realism" and of neoliberal ideology. If "the return of the real" called for after September 11 favored an acceleration of neoliberal global politics, perhaps the current impasse of liberalism may be countered through a reconsideration of utopianism as Slavoj Zizek paradoxically suggests: "Fundamentalism is a reaction — a false, mystifying reaction, of course — against a real flaw of liberalism, and this is why it is again and again generated by liberalism. Left to itself, liberalism will slowly undermine itself — the only thing that can save its core values is a renewed Left. In order for this key legacy to survive, liberalism needs the brotherly help of the radical Left."[724]

The calls for an end to irony after September 11 have gone hand in hand with the legitimation of a self-congratulatory (faux) liberalism. On the other hand, the patriotic excesses of the period have called for a return to an older form of engaged irony and satire, more appropriate for the occasion than the "degenerative irony" prevalent in postmodernism. This (re)turn to an older more engaged form of irony is a perhaps a parallel development to the need for liberalism to turn to its past incarnations in order to reconfigure itself to fit the current situation. At the same time, the discourse of victimhood brought a high degree of emotionality into the public sphere, which hindered liberal self-criticism. Trauma-centric perspectives of the attacks favored a limited historical view, or engaged in sprawling historical parallelisms, which did little to illuminate on the current global political situation. A politics of fear is a means of

[723] Pynchon, 476.
[724] Slavoj Žižek, interviewed by Slawomir Sierakowski, "Utopia and Its Discontents," *LA Review of Books*, February 23, 2015, accessed July 5, 2015, https://lareviewofbooks.org/interview/utopia-discontents-slawomir-sierakowski-talks-slavoj-zizek.

holding a society hostage in a "perpetual present" in which the future is reduced to a disquieting dystopian possibility calling for more security measures. Literary portrayals of terrorists after 9/11 say more about the conflicting self-understanding of the liberal West then they do about the violent other. These representations of the terrorist other have been both an occasion for liberal self-aggrandizement and for a self-criticism that often problematically uses the other as a romanticized or idealized paragon.

In view of this encounter with the violent other, the notion of liberal cosmopolitanism requires a reconfiguration for the twenty-first century. The already existing forms of vernacular cosmopolitanism exalted by the postmodernists are challenged by transnational fundamentalist terrorism, while the global cosmopolitanism of the free market has played a significant part in the growing levels of income inequality and may be at the root of fundamentalism. Another challenge to liberal cosmopolitanism is the "state of exception" patriotism with which the United States reacted to the 2001 terror attacks. A similar non-cosmopolitan impulse seems behind the more successes of the extreme right within the European Union, particularly after the Paris terrorist attacks and in response to the migration crisis. Cole's *Open City* offers a critique of the detached liberal cosmopolitanism championed by Anthony Appiah, which is little equipped to tackle global warming or the plight of stateless migrants.

Open City pinpoints the Achilles' heel of liberalism in the present historical conjecture through Julius' disengagement and distrust of all causes. The leftist response to this liberal sense of inadequacy is a revival of utopian thinking. The central figure of Kunkel's *Indecision* professes to have found a way out of the anomie of a postmodern "perpetual present" by embracing a life of activism and championing the cause of a yet to be defined "democratic socialism." The character's trajectory mirrors that of the left, which appears to be in the process of formulating the terms of a return to utopian thinking, like the Green New Deal proposal put forth by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. For Fredric Jameson, both the far-left notion of utopia through revolution, and the piecemeal reformist utopianism of social-democracy have failed. He suggests "a third way" of bringing forth political change fueled by a "cynicism of the mind" and a "utopianism of the will."[725] Grassroots environmental activism like that espoused by

[725] See Fredric Jameson's idea of a "universal army," an American utopian alternative to the current capitalist system: Fredric Jameson, "An American Utopia: Fredric Jameson in Conversation with Stanley Aronowitz," Graduate Center at City University of New York, talk, New York, March 14, 2014, accessed June, 5, 2015, http://www.gc.cuny.edu/Public-Programming/Calendar/Detail?id=22754.
See also the upcoming publication: Fredric Jameson, *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army*, ed. Slavoj Zizek (London, New York: Verso, forthcoming June 2016).

Extinction Rebellion have an approach based on principles not unlike those suggested by Jameson, embracing “the truth” of the climate crisis however somber it may be, but acting as if utopian radical change were still possible. Whether this self-questioning return of utopianism is a way out for liberal democracy, as Zizek suggests, or another trend deepening its present identity crisis, remains to be seen.

As for the liberal imagination and the task of democratic criticism, the humanistic approach championed by Edward Said appears to be timelier than ever. Said’s humanism paradoxically embraces the critical tools of postmodernism while rejecting its radical anti-foundationalism and linguistic obscurantism; it displays a leftist utopian impulse devoid of a revolutionary Marxist eschatology, while its anti-imperialist core still allows a self-aware form of universalism. This approach to humanism which preserves its core principles but engages with its own historical misuses, being simultaneously self-affirmative and self-critical, represents the liberal impulse at its best and offers rigorous tools to tackle the cultural complexities of the twenty-first century.

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