



The insistent realism of Don DeLillo's 'Falling Man' and Paul Auster's 'Man in the Dark'

by Ugo Panzani

During the last decade, many theorists and writers have remarked the peculiar fictionalisation of the facts of 9/11. For instance, as Salman Rushdie explains, “we all crossed a frontier that day, an invisible boundary between the imaginable and the unimaginable, and it turned out to be the unimaginable that was real” (Rushdie 2002: 436-437). Martin Amis pointed out that September 11 “marked the apotheosis of the postmodern era – the era of images and perception” (Amis 2001: G2). Similarly, in relation to the September 11 attacks, Slavoj Žižek argued that “in contrast to the Barthesian *effet du réel*, in which the text makes us accept its fictional product as ‘real’, here, the Real itself, in order to be sustained, has to be perceived as a nightmarish unreal spectre” (Žižek 2002: 19). The Western perception of reality was abruptly disturbed by the fall of one of the symbols of late capitalism operated by terrorist attacks that looked as if they appeared from another, external and exotic, dimension. As Žižek states,

We should therefore invert the standard reading according to which the WTC explosions were the intrusion of the Real which shattered our illusory sphere: quite the reverse - it was before the WTC collapse that we lived in our reality, perceiving Third World horrors as something which was not actually part of our social reality, as something which existed (for us) as a spectral apparition on the (TV) screen - and what happened on September 11 was that this fantasmatic



screen apparition entered our reality. It is not that reality entered our image: the image entered and shattered our reality (i.e. the symbolic coordinates which determine what we experience as reality) (*Ibid.*: 16).

On the literary side, many U.S. novelists such as Jonathan Safran Foer (*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, 2005), Jay McInerney (*The Good Life*, 2006), Ken Kalfus (*A Disorder Peculiar to the Country*, 2006), Don DeLillo (*Falling Man*, 2007), John Updike (*The Terrorist*, 2007) and Paul Auster (*Man in the Dark*, 2008) attempted to confront the events of 9/11 and its aftermath. The aim of this article is to understand how Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* and Paul Auster's *Man in The Dark* tried to find a way to present the uncanny events of 9/11 and the subsequent horrors of the Iraq war through a complex recourse to realism. Both Auster and DeLillo have been defined as two of the most relevant authors of the postmodernist American literature of the last decades. DeLillo has been often considered "the pre-eminent analyst of the age of the spectacle, the poet laureate of the simulacrum, of the depthless image floating above a social vacuum" (Evans 2006: 104), while, at the same time, since the publication of *City of Glass* (1985), "Paul Auster was hailed as the latest in a series of American authors who could be labeled 'postmodernist'" (Brendan 2008: 1). The works of fiction published by these two authors seem to share what Hans Bertens defines as the "common denominator" of all the numberless definitions of Postmodernism, namely "a crisis in representation, a deeply felt loss of faith in our ability to represent the real, in the widest sense" (Bertens 1995: 11). However, if we can still notice the attitude to diagnose this crisis of representation in their latest works of fiction, such as DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997) or Auster's *Oracle Nights* (2004), we can undoubtedly remark "a restoration of access to the real" (Evans 2006: 104) and an attention "to the transient nature of human existence" (Brendan 2008: introd., x).¹

In *Falling Man* and in *Man in the Dark* this double tendency towards the crisis of representation results particularly linked to the uncanny nature of the WTC attacks and the Iraq war and the subsequent traumas turning character's lives and behaviours upside down. In particular, DeLillo's novel is focused on the "days after" (DeLillo 2007: 294) of Keith Neudecker, who survived the Twin Towers' collapse, his wife Lianne and his son Justin. Keith becomes almost unable to sustain the weight of trauma and thus looks for oblivion, becoming a semi-professional poker player,

¹ As Paolo Simonetti points out, "an analysis of Auster's most recent novels" – such as *The Brooklyn Follies* (2005), *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2006), and *Man in the Dark* (2008) – "would underscore the shift from a postmodernist sensibility to a new historical consciousness" (Simonetti 2011: 14). *Man In the Dark* is especially linked to *Travels in the Scriptorium*. As Aliko Varvogli states, "the political parable and the metafictional puzzles provide thematic and structural links between the books, suggesting that Auster may have found a way to reconcile his interest in metaphysical and ontological questions with his need to speak out about the post-9/11 political climate" (Varvogli: 2008/2009: 100).



There were no days or times except for the tournament schedule. He wasn't making enough money to justify this life on a practical basis. But there was no such need. There should have been but wasn't and that was the point. The point was one of invalidation. Nothing else pertained. Only this had binding force. He folded six more hands, then went all-in. Make them bleed. Make them spill their precious losers' blood.

These were the days after and now the years, a thousand heaving dreams, the trapped man, the fixed limbs, the dream of paralysis, the gasping man, the dream of asphyxiation, the dream of helplessness.

A fresh deck rose to the tabletop (*Ibid.*: 293-294).

As DeLillo himself pointed out in an interview, "You have to give the game total concentration, and for that reason, a game of poker helps you forget, for a couple of hours, all the problems you've got" (Amend and Diez 2008). Oblivion is not the only evasive reaction against the difficulty of dealing with the nightmarish experience of 9/11. For instance, Keith's son Justin and other two children merely build an alternative counternarrative, in which the towers never fell down, even if, soon or later, "they'll really come down" (DeLillo 2007: 129). For that reason, the children explore the sky, looking for other incoming airplanes, sent off by "Bill Lawton", an alternative name that designates, through an additional counter-mimetic effort, the terrorist Bin Laden. As Keith explains to his wife about Justin's tales:

"Bill Lawton has a long beard. He wears a long robe," he said. "He flies jet planes and speaks thirteen languages but not English except to his wives. What else? He has the power to poison what we eat but only certain foods. They're working on the list."

"This is what we get for putting a protective distance between children and news events."

"Except we didn't put a distance, not really," he said.

"Between children and mass murderers." (*Ibid.*: 94)

A similar inclination in effacing reality through the creation of alternative narratives is noticeable also in *Man in The Dark*; this feature deeply characterizes the first part of the novel, in which the reader meets the first 'man in the dark', the narrator August Brill, an aged literary critic who, following a car accident, secluded himself in the dark of his bedroom. Suffering from insomnia, the old man spends his time telling himself stories: "They might not add up too much, but as long as I'm inside them, they prevent me from thinking about the things I would prefer to forget" (Auster, 2008: 2). Consequently, Brill imagines a story that begins with a second 'man in the dark', Owen Brick, a children's magician who awakes himself in a hole in the ground, in a completely different America, where, in 2007, George W. Bush's controversial victory against Al Gore (2000) had been rejected by the Supreme Court, provoking the abolition of the Electoral College, a subsequent secession and a civil war between



Democratic and Federal states: "A new movement...led by the major and borough presidents of New York City...secession...passed by the state legislature in 2003...Federal troops attack...Albany, Buffalo, Syracuse, Rochester...New York City bombed, eighty thousand dead...but the movement grows..." (*Ibid.*: 51). As Auster pointed out in an interview concerning the writing of *Man in the Dark*: "How different the world might have been had Al Gore become President – 9/11 might not have happened because they had the intelligence about it and it was ignored" (McGlone 2008). Actually, in the 'heterocosm' imagined by August Brill, 9/11 has *really* never happened,

Now, if I said the words September eleventh to you, would they have any special meaning?

Not particularly.

And the World Trade Center?

The twin towers? Those tall buildings in New York?

Exactly.

What about them?

They're still standing?

Of course they are. What's wrong with you?

Nothing. [...] One nightmare replaces another (Auster 2008: 25).

If, in *Falling Man*, Justin and the other children try to substitute the nightmarish event of the present with an obsessive waiting for an uncertain future, in *Man in the Dark* Brill operates a specular operation, recovering the nightmare of the American Civil War (1861-1865) from the past. As Michael Dirda points out, "Auster's novels repeatedly explore that threshold between the Primary World of life and [...] the Secondary World of art; they lead us into that liminal realm where rich fantasy displaces the dry quotidian" (Dirda 2008). One of the characters populating the parallel universe imagined by Brill, inspired by the theory of infinite worlds proposed by the Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno (*De la causa, principio e uno, de l'infinito universo e mondi*, 1584) clearly explains this problematization of the concept of reality,

There's no single reality, Corporal. There are many realities. There's no single world. There are many worlds, and they all run parallel to one another, worlds and anti-worlds, worlds and shadow-worlds, and each world is dreamed or imagined or written by someone in another world. Each world is the creation of a mind" (Auster 2008: 56).

Moreover, the "corporal" Owen Brick is charged with the paradoxical and metafictional task to kill the narrator August Brill, "because he owns the war. He invented it, and everything that happens or is about to happen is in his head. Eliminate that head and the war stops" (*Ibid.*: 8). However, Brill himself decides to let



the protagonist die, virtually saving his life and pragmatically putting the story to an end. Brill kills his fantasy before imagination can drown him in the dark of the inkwell, disempowering his faculty to remember the dramatic facts of the 'real' world,

My subject tonight is war, and now that war has entered this house, I feel I would be insulting Titus and Katya if I softened the blow. [...] Giordano Bruno and the theory of infinite worlds. Provocative stuff, yes, but there are other stones to be unearthed as well (*Ibid.*: 97).

This unearthing of reality concerns more specifically the destiny of Titus Small, his granddaughter's former boyfriend, who was kidnapped and killed during the Iraq war in 2007,

The man holding the head backs away from the camera, and a fourth man approaches with a knife. One by one, working with great speed and precision, he stabs out the boy's eyes.

The camera rolls for a few more seconds, and then the screen goes black. Impossible to know how long it has lasted. Fifteen minutes. A thousand years (*Ibid.*: 145).

The tale, the pivotal centre of the novel's second part, is a brutal mimesis of the death by beheading of Nicholas Evan Berg, an American freelance contractor who, in 2004, was abducted and beheaded in Iraq by Islamic militants linked to Al-Qaeda (see Hughes 2004). A video of the execution was released online a few days later and it shows an execution almost identical to the one narrated by August Brill in *Man in the Dark*. The visual fruition of the footage is obviously devastating for those who watch it. As the granddaughter Katia explains: "We saw it. We saw how they murdered him, and unless I blot out that video with other images, it's the only thing I ever see. I can't get rid of it" (Auster 2008: 137). Here Auster seems to carry out a literary representation of the vision of the traumatic event mediated by visual media that is analogous to the one represented by DeLillo in *Falling Man*, when Keith's wife Lianne watches the WTC collapse on television,

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. The second plane coming out of that ice blue sky, this was the footage that entered the body, that seemed to run beneath her skin, the fleeting sprint that carried lives and histories, theirs and hers, everyone's, into some other distance, out beyond the towers (DeLillo 2007: 169).

In both cases the footage violently enters the body and the psyche of the watcher. As DeLillo explains in the essay *The Power of History* (1997), the incessant



repetition of the vision is usually able to erode the connection between the watcher and the reality outside the tape,

You're staring at the inside of a convenience store on a humdrum night in July. This is a surveillance video with a digital display that marks off the tenths of seconds. Then you see a shuffling man with a handgun enter the frame. The commonplace homicide that ensues is transformed in the image-act of your own witness. It is bare, it is real, it is live, it is taped. It is compelling, it is numbing, it is digitally microtimed and therefore filled with incessant information. And if you view the tape often enough, it tends to transform you, to make you a passive variation of the armed robber in his warped act of consumption. It is another set of images for you to want and need and get sick of and need nonetheless, and it separates you from the reality that beats ever more softly in the diminishing world outside the tape (DeLillo 1997b).

In the case of the WTC attacks and Titus' execution, the visual experience can be considered even more complex. As DeLillo pointed out in another essay ("In the Ruins of the Future", 2001), the incessant mediatic coverage of the events of September 11 did not lead to a confusion between the role of the event and the one of visual media,

The raw event was one thing, the coverage another. The event dominated the medium. It was bright and totalising and some of us said it was unreal. When we say a thing is unreal, we mean it is too real, a phenomenon so unaccountable and yet so bound to the power of objective fact that we can't tilt it to the slant of our perceptions. [...] We could not catch up with it. But it was real, punishingly so, an expression of the physics of structural limits and a void in one's soul [...] (DeLillo 2001).

Žižek provides a very similar explanation, as he asserts that the footages of WTC collapse are "an 'effect', which, at the same time, delivered 'the thing itself'",

The dialectic of semblance and Real cannot be reduced to the rather elementary fact that the virtualization of our daily lives, the experience that we are living more and more in an artificially constructed universe, gives rise to an irresistible urge to 'return to the Real', to regain firm ground in some 'real reality'. 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* (Žižek 2002: 19).

Both *Falling Man* and *Man in the Dark* can be considered two novels that stand out against this lack of integration of traumatic events, reasserting the possibility of a



proper representation of the uncanny. In DeLillo's novel, Lianne seems to be able to absorb the disaster's images only through the performative art of David Janiak, alias the "falling man" who gives the title to the novel. During the weeks after the events of September 11, Janiak performs a long series of falls from high buildings located in various zones of New York, dressed in a dress shirt, a blue suit and a safety harness that lets him stop "headfirst, arms at his sides, one leg bent, a man set forever in free fall against the looming background of the column panels", in a position that is probably "intended to reflect the body posture of a particular man who was photographed falling from the north tower of the World Trade Center" (DeLillo 2007: 281-282).² As Catherine Morley points out, "by giving us a fictional performance artist [...] who bases his act on an image of a real victim, DeLillo deliberately confronts the issues facing the writer who attempts to aestheticize mass trauma" (Morley 2008: 305-306).³ When, at the end of the novel, Lianne finally tries to recover more information about Janiak's life, she does not find any particular photograph of the performance she previously witnessed. However, she considers, "she was the photograph, the photosensitive surface. The nameless body coming down, this was hers to record and absorb" (DeLillo 2007: 284). As Sven Cvek argues,

Since visual technologies are in *Falling Man* the apparatus of state control, such aesthetic situation represents a moment of counter-hegemonic practice. Here, Lianne takes on the role of the camera, thus asserting her autonomy from the state. The novel suggests that by reenacting the traumatic scene, Janiak's performance, defined in opposition to the traumatizing media image, offers an opportunity for a cathartic working through (Cvek 2009: 347).

Just as Janiak allows Lianne to become a sort of photosensitive surface that holds in her/itself the remembrance of a unique performance, Brill, in *Man in the Dark*, attempts to remember Titus' death in a similar way,

We all knew it would go on haunting us for the rest of our lives, and yet somehow we felt we had to be there with Titus, to keep our eyes open to the horror for his sake, *to breathe him into us* and hold him there – *in us*, that lonely, miserable death, *in us*, the cruelty that was visited on him in those last moments, *in us* and no one else, so as not to abandon him to the pitiless dark that swallowed him up (Auster 2008: 144, emphasis added).

² The photograph that, in DeLillo's novel, Janiak would be intended to imitate is the well-known *The Falling Man*, by Richard Drew. It appeared in many newspapers and in *The New York Times* (12-09-2001, p. 7).

³ See also Morley (2008/2009: 92) and Houen (2004: 240).



One could argue that Brill and Janiak both provide a discursive or artistic intervention that differs from the immediacy peculiar to visual footage. Brill's imagination, mediated by Auster's narrative prose, as well as Janiak's performances, differ from the passive fruition of videotapes because they provide the same degree of realism while reaffirming at the same time the idea of an active and personal representation, where the literary or artistic medium can manage the message. As Žižek points out,

The true choice apropos of historical traumas is not the one between remembering or forgetting them: traumas we are not ready or able to remember haunt us all the more forcefully. We should therefore accept the paradox that, in order really to forget an event, we must first summon up the strength to remember it properly. In order to account for this paradox, we should bear in mind that the opposite of *existence* is not nonexistence, but *insistence* [...] (Žižek 2002: 22).

This kind of "insistence" on representability is precisely what lies behind the artistic strategies of Janiak and Brill. The two characters (and the two authors with them), providing articulated and detailed representations of those brutal events, try to make insistently present the uncanniness of the tragedy, in order to overcome it. The fall performed by Janiak and the ascent from the darkness of the alternative narratives carried out by Brill are movements that can be considered opposite both to the passive and helpless footage watchers' immovability and to some "nonexistence" strategies carried out by many characters (Brill's counter-stories about the destiny of USA, Keith's research for oblivion in poker, Katia's passion for the movies as a visual antidote to the memories of his boyfriend's execution). In this way, DeLillo and Auster contrast the above-mentioned "loss of faith in our ability to represent the real" (Bertens 1995: 11) peculiar to Postmodernism.

With this in mind, it is possible to draw a comparison between the typology of artist expressed in the two novels here examined and the art proposed by the character Klara Sax in DeLillo's novel *Underworld* (1997). In 1992, Klara Sax is about to complete an ambitious artistic project, exploiting an area of the Desert of Arizona as a background in which to place many U.S. Army fighter-bomber airplanes no longer in use after the end of the Cold War. Klara's staff cover the airplanes with bright-coloured paints, in order to as Klara states – "trespass and declare ourselves, show who we are" (DeLillo 1997a: 77). Some scholars such as Mark Osteen and Paul Gleason, considered Klara's installation a form of political art that covers the symbols and exploits waste materials to question the cultural and political context of the Cold War (see Osteen 2000: 245; Gleason 2002: 140). This sort of 'exorcism' appears to be an explicit form of critique negation. Klara needs the presence of the Cold War in order to question it through her art and to feel herself free *from* its threat. Her painting is a way to



obliterate an unequivocal symbology. On the other hand, Janiak's performative art in *Falling Man* is abruptly realistic: it portrays its object with detailed precision. The real issue is not whether to incline towards the first form of art and the other one, but to understand why this insistent mimesis is so explicitly remarkable in the novels focusing on 9/11 and its prolonged aftermath; the same tendency can also be found in those novels, like *Man in the Dark*, where the aesthetics of terror is similarly analysed in such a way that it negates the possibility of dismissing it by resorting to evasive literary inventions.

As the historian Quentin Skinner explains: "Whereas negative liberty is freedom *from* constraint, positive liberty is freedom *to* follow a certain form of life". "Freedom is thus equated not with self-mastery but rather with self-realisation, and above all with self-perfection" (Skinner 2002: 1-2). This concept of positive freedom sounds very different from the "freedom from constraint" typical of U.S. culture and proves to be constructive and problematic at the same time, leading to a redefinition of the concept of individual choice. This point can be more clearly understandable if we briefly consider a quotation from David Foster Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest* (1997). Here, the Quebecker terrorist Marathe explains to a U.S. intelligence agent that the Americans' freedom is, precisely, a "freedom *from* constraint and forced duress" (Wallace 1996: 320),

But what of the freedom-*to*? Not just free-*from*. Not all compulsion comes from without. You pretend to not see this. What of freedom-*to*. How for the person to freely choose? [...] How is there freedom to choose if one does not learn how to choose? (*Ibid.*)

Marathe is consciously a "terrorist" just like Hammad and Amir, the characters from the three interludes narrated in DeLillo's *Falling Man*.⁴ They plan and later succeed in provoking the WTC collapse, and, doing so, they seem to have learnt how to be "free *to*", quite like Marathe himself. For instance, Hammad learnt from Amir to be more careful with his ability to choose his pleasures and his duties,

Amir looked at him, seeing right down to his base self. Hammad knew what he would say. Eating all the time, pushing food in your face, slow to approach your prayers. There was more. Being with a shameless woman, dragging your body over hers. What is the difference between you and all the others, outside our space?
[...]

Hammad in a certain way thought this was unfair. But the closer he examined himself, the truer the words. He had to fight against the need to be *normal*. He had

⁴ Don DeLillo dealt with the representation of terrorism in other novels, such as *White Noise* (1985), *Libra* (1988), *Underworld* (1997), *Cosmopolis* (2003) and especially *Mao II* (1991). See Conte (2008: 180) and Morley (2008: 302-305).



to struggle against himself, first, and then against the injustice that haunted their lives (DeLillo 2007: 105, emphasis added).

To be “normal” would thus appear to mean not to be able to choose the proper form of freedom for ourselves and for the others, in this way resembling the American people on whose behalf Marathe complains.

As Jean Baudrillard states, terrorism “puts the finishing touches to the orgy of power, liberation, flows and calculation which the Twin Towers embodied, while being the violent deconstruction of that extreme form of efficiency and hegemony” (Baudrillard 2002: 59). In view of this, in “In the Ruins of the Future” DeLillo points out that “today, again, the world narrative belongs to terrorists”. For the American writer, “terror’s response is a narrative” in every respect; it affects Western culture so that “our world, parts of our world, have crumbled into theirs, which means we are living in a place of danger and rage” (DeLillo 2001). In this sense, terrorism could be perceived like a narrative based on the concept of positive freedom: it pursues self-determination and self-perfection and it strives to impose a certain way of life. As Cvek points out, “Janiak’s art is completely in line with the logic of terrorism [...]: the spectator is offered the pure body, without any words of explanation. This desire for immediacy is what connects Janiak’s controversial acts with the violence of the terrorists” (Cvek 2009: 334). In view of this, terrorist narratives, as well as Janiak’s and Brill’s ‘insistent’ representations, all try to impose their contents. The main difference obviously lies in the proposed goals: while Hammad and Amir look for destruction, Janiak and Brill’s efforts are directed towards the representation of trauma.

Furthermore, as DeLillo pointed out, the terrorist “gets a unique role for himself that distinguishes him from the rest of the world” (Amend and Diez 2008). This remarkable distinction from the Other is particularly visible in Amir’s thought: “Amir said simply there are no others. 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” (DeLillo 2007: 224). Conversely, Janiak and Brill both differ from this logic, indirectly directing the attention to the Other through the means of their representations. For instance, a few years after Lianne experienced Janiak’s performance, she felt unable to determine properly the elusive identity of the performer; and yet, at the same time, “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” (Ibid.: 285). The mimetic representation of the human fall from the Towers triggers a sort of deep and intimate sharing of the experience. Similarly, in Auster’s novel Brill patiently manages to convince her granddaughter to accept the trauma provoked by the vision of the footage of Titus’ death in order “to start living again” (Auster 2008: 137), where the



new life would probably begin again by writing literary works with Brill himself. In this view, the uncanniness of the catastrophe brings to a reevaluation of what the American literary theorist Ihab Hassan correctly defined (with no religious implications) as a “postmodern aesthetic of trust”, that “brings us to a fiduciary realism, a realism that redefines the relation between subject and object, self and other, in terms of profound trust” (Hassan 2003: 211). This attention to the Other is detectable in many moments in *Falling Man* and in *Man in the Dark* and works as a premise as well as a regulating principle for the ‘insistent’ realism of the representation of catastrophes. As Hassan states: “Realism, you cry, in 2003, realism? [...] I spoke of trust as a quality of attention to others, to the created world, to something not in ourselves. Is that not the premise of realism?” (Ibid.: 203).

Moreover, this insistent mimesis is not only applied to the description of the tragedy, but also to the quotidian aspects of the characters’ lives. In *Falling Man* we can notice a penetration of the public disorder generated by the tragedy into the ordinary disorder of the characters’ private existences. As David Brauner states, “the novel insistently explores how the ‘ordinary run of hours’ that constitutes daily life after 9/11 both differs radically from, and at the same time closely resembles, the quotidian structure that preceded it”. Consequently, DeLillo, inspired by his own short story “Looking at Meinhof”, creates in *Falling Man* a sort of “double vision”, allowing the reader to experience on the one hand how the characters “focus on the immediate concerns of every day” and, on the other, how the fall of the Twin Towers changed every moment of the quotidian (Brauner 2008/2009: 74). An example of this can be found in the history of the suitcase that Keith subconsciously collected during his escape from WTC collapse. The suitcase – belonging to Florence, another survivor with whom Keith had a brief sentimental relationship – contains ordinary objects of everyday life, but carries within itself both the weight of the traumatic event as well as the possibility to overcome it,

[Keith] sat back, looking at her.

“I saved your briefcase.” [...]

“I can’t explain it but no, you saved my life. After what happened, so many gone, friends gone, people I worked with, I was nearly gone, nearly dead, in another way. I couldn’t see people, talk to people, go from here to there without forcing myself up off the chair. [...] Then you walked in the door. You ask yourself why you took the briefcase out of the building. That’s why. So you could bring it here. So we could get to know each other. That’s why you took it and that’s why you brought it here, to keep me alive.”

He didn’t believe this but he believed her. She felt it and meant it.

“You ask yourself what the story is that goes with the briefcase. I’m the story,” she said.

(DeLillo 2007: 137-138)



Here, DeLillo proposes what he defined as the need to focus our attention on “the smaller objects and more marginal stories in the sifted ruins of the day” in order to “to set against the massive spectacle that continues to seem unmanageable, too powerful a thing to set into our frame of practised response” (DeLillo 2001). The suitcase is (like the baseball in *Underworld*) a quotidian object that becomes a historical ‘vector’ capable to link different stories and multiple lives between them. If some scholars, such as Richard Gray and Michael Rothberg, remarked that, for instance, in *Falling Man* “cataclysmic public events are measured purely and simply in terms of their impact on the emotional entanglements of their protagonists” (Gray 2009: 134), criticizing the lack of “a ‘deterritorialized’ grappling with otherness” (Rothberg 2009: 153) in post 9/11 fiction, however, it is possible to argue that the above-mentioned “fiduciary realism” is not simply ‘centripetal’ and focused on U.S. private and intimate lives. Indeed, DeLillo and Auster try to connect their characters’ existential upheavals to *other* cultural realities. In *Man in the Dark*, Brill radically stops imagining an alternative destiny for *his own* country and subsequently matches Titus’ death during the Iraq war to other real-life “war stories” (Auster 2008: 97), starting from a tale set in the Nazi Germany of the 1930s, to the story of a Belgian girl who was quartered in a concentration camp during World War II, and ending with the story of an intelligence agent kidnapped and killed by Russians in 1989 that conceivably foreshadows Titus’ story (*Ibid.*: 97-105). This kind of comparative realism attempting to make the strange more familiar is also present in *Falling Man*. Towards the conclusion of the novel, Keith and Lianne’s son Justin suggests to his mother an extremely simple, meaningful truth,

“What’s the best thing you ever learned in school? Going back to the beginning, to the first days.”

[...]

“*The sun is a star.*”

“The best thing you ever learned.”

“The sun is a star,” he said.

“But didn’t I teach you that?”

“I don’t think so.”

“You didn’t learn that in school. I taught you that.”

“I don’t think so.”

“We have a star map on our wall.”

“The sun’s not on our wall. It’s out there. It’s not *up* there. There is no up or down. It’s just out there.”

“Or maybe we’re out here,” she said. “That may be closer to the true state of things. *We’re the ones that are out somewhere.*”



[...] The sun is a star. It seemed a revelation, a fresh way to think about being who we are, the purest way and only finally unfolding, a kind of mystical shiver, an awakening.

(DeLillo 2008: 238-239)

This “mystical shiver” conceivably reminds us that, as the sun is a star among the others, and as Lianne and Justin are victims “out somewhere” among other individuals shocked by terrorist attacks, U.S. and Western culture have to be considered as a part of what Hassan defined a “new planetary civility”:

Beyond postmodernism, beyond the evasions of poststructuralist theories and pieties of postcolonial studies, we need to discover new relations between selves and others, margins and centers, fragments and wholes – indeed, new relations between selves and selves, margins and margins, centers and centers – discover what I call *a new pragmatic and planetary civility*. That’s the crux and issue of postmodernity (Hassan 2003: 203-204).

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