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9/11 Trauma in U.S. Literature: A Comparative Analysis

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Introduction

9/11 was a turning point for society. The trauma that it left is still present nowadays, not only in the U.S. but globally. During the days and weeks after the attack, newspapers and media all over the world were filled with images, writings, and news about what had happened. The documentary *9/11: The Falling Man* defines it as “the most photographed and videotaped day in history” (Singer, 2006). However, speaking in terms of literature, few were the writers that could express themselves right after the tragedy. As Suheir Hammad stated in her poem “First writing since” (2003),¹ “There have been no words. | i have not written one word”.² This impossibility of writing due to the shocking nature of the attacks shows how 9/11 trauma went beyond the personal level, touching all spheres of the American society, from history to economy or culture.

When dealing with 9/11 trauma we can refer to it both as an individual and a cultural trauma. It did not only affect the direct victims of the attack but America as a nation. The way in which trauma works and its effects were different in both cases and so was the way people dealt with them. According to Sonia Baelo-Allué, “whereas physic trauma is a wound on the mind, cultural trauma is a wound on group consciousness as a whole” (2012, 64). She adds that response also changes between one and the other. People suffering from individual trauma can develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD),³ whereas in cultural trauma the consequences can be more complex. In spite of that, “[m]any people experienced 9/11 as both individual and cultural trauma and, in the aftermath, the difference between these two types of trauma was blurred” (Baelo-Allué, 2012, 65).

The way in which narratives around 9/11 have been presented by the media and literature has also been shaped by those two different types of trauma. Taking this as a reference, Baelo-Allué discusses how the focus of 9/11 literature varies, and how that variation creates two different types of work. On the one hand, those centered in the personal trauma and on the other, the ones dealing with collective trauma. Whereas essays, articles and writings published soon after the attacks took place tended to focus

¹ Although the edition I have used is from 2003, Hammad wrote the poem shortly after the attack, and she has revised it several times since then. To see her reciting the whole poem, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDyLNGLHprI>

² Although the spelling is unusual it respects Hammad’s original.

³ Explained below.

on the collective consequences (e.g. “The Dead of September 11” by Toni Morrison addressed the victims and the nation in a general way), the first novels took individual trauma as a frame of reference. Among those early narrative works we can find *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer (2005)⁴, *The Emperor’s Children* by Claire Messud (2006), or *We All Fall Down* by Eric Walters (2006).

Literature has become one of the ways of dealing with the trauma of that day, and of expressing the emotions of the victims, their families and of every American who felt that their life and the world as they knew it fell with the towers. This essay explores the role of literary works as a means to present 9/11 trauma by making a comparative analysis of two 9/11 novels: *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005) by Jonathan Safran Foer and *Falling Man* (2011)⁵ by Don DeLillo. In both cases, the novels deal with the individual trauma rather than the cultural one. This means that they focus on how 9/11 affected specific people individually, rather than America as a nation. My choice to focus on novels about psychological trauma is based on the idea that they tend to concentrate on 9/11 consequences in more depth, allowing writers to present a different perspective and narrative than the one published by the mainstream media.

In the case of Don DeLillo, “since the 1985 publication of *White Noise* [...] he has become one of the most significant contemporary American novelists” (Duvall, 2008, I). He was one of the first to react to the events with his essay “In the Ruins of the Future” (December 2001), which talks about the collective trauma.⁶ Contrary to that, *Falling Man* presents the story of a worker at the World Trade Center who escaped from the towers on 9/11 and the consequences that the tragedy had not only for him but also for those around him. On the other hand, there is Jonathan Safran Foer, who is also a contemporary American author. His first novel, *Everything Is Illuminated*, was published in 2002. Winning a National Jewish Book Award and a Guardian First Book Award, it already set him as one of the great American contemporary authors. *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* was one of the first fiction novels about 9/11. It soon became one of the most popular and relevant writings among the genre and it

⁴ All the references to this book, which is a primary text in this thesis, have been taken from the 2006 edition.

⁵ All the references to this book, which is a primary text in this thesis, have been taken from the 2011 edition.

⁶ The essay will be further explored in section 1.2.

presents the consequences that 9/11 had for a nine-year-old boy, Oskar, who lost his father in the Towers.

By using a comparative approach to 9/11 and literature I will try and prove that the narrative techniques used in 9/11 literature reflect the individual trauma of that day. Moreover, I will explore how through their works writers have been critical about the official narrative, showing elements and dealing with issues that were hidden by the authorities and the media, such as the case of the people that fell or jumped from the towers. As mentioned above, the essay will present a comparative analysis of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and *Falling Man*. The study will be based on how PTSD and trauma theories are applied to the construction of novels, always with a focus on 9/11. Section 1 will discuss the common characteristics of trauma literature, with a focus on the writings of the genre in the U.S until 9/11. The second part of the section will introduce 9/11 literature in general, and the two novels that will be discussed in Section 2. This second section will have two subheadings which will focus on the structure and narrative techniques, and on the use of images within the story, respectively.

1. Trauma Literature

1.1. Introducing Trauma and Trauma Literature

In order to define Trauma Literature, we need to be familiar with the concept of *trauma*. According to Kali Tal, “an individual is traumatized by a life-threatening event that displaces his or her preconceived notions about the world. Trauma is enacted in a liminal state, outside of the bounds of ‘normal’ human experience and the subject is radically ungrounded” (1996, 15). Thus, trauma literature can be defined as “a work of fiction that represents an emotional and/or cognitive response to profound loss, disaster, disruption, or devastations on the individual or collective level” (Zindziuviene, 2013, 66). The term was coined between the 1970s and 1980s and it was related to the clinical development of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Although the development of this theory was key to the emergence of Trauma Literature as a literary genre, it does not necessarily mean that before that date we do not find writings that share similar characteristics.

The term *Post Traumatic Stress Disorder* was included for the first time by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in the 1980 *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. The association refers to it as a “psychiatric disorder that can occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, a serious accident, a terrorist act, war/combat, rape or other violent personal assault” (APA, n.d.). Among its symptoms, Daniel Freeman and Jason Freeman highlight three different types: remembering the traumatic event through flashbacks, nightmares, and recurrent thoughts of what happened; the avoidance of the traumatic experience –memory sometimes blocks those situations of shock and horror creating gaps; and the constant feeling that something terrible is about to happen, resulting in a constant state of alert of anything that evokes their trauma (2012, 114). Authors who based their writings on traumatic experiences, transferred those characteristics into literature:

The literary techniques that tend to recur in trauma narratives mirror, at a formal level, the effects of trauma and include intertextuality, repetition and fragmentation. [...] The chaotic aspects of trauma are underlined through shifts in time and memory, a variety of voices and subject positioning, visual images, textual gaps, repetitions and shifting viewpoints. In this way, readers are able to feel the disorienting position of characters going through traumatic experiences. (Baelo-Allué 2012, 69-70)

Amongst the recurrent topics of trauma literature, we find those events that trigger trauma itself: wars and their consequences, sexual violence, postcolonial trauma, racism and slavery, or terrorism. Although all of them are global topics and aspects of transnational concern, the history of each country shapes the predominance in writing and reading of different types of trauma literature. Focusing on U.S. literature, and looking at the connection between literature and history, I would highlight three main themes around which most of American trauma novels are built: the question of race, the Vietnam War, and 9/11. One of the pioneering works in trauma literature is *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison, which focuses on the topic of race. In the novel, the Afro-American writer deals with the story of a slave who runs north with her daughter, trying to escape from bondage. Morrison approaches the traumas that the women endured under the hood of slavery and the drastic decision that the protagonist makes to prevent

her daughter from undergoing the same horrors. The theme of race is still present in literature nowadays, with contemporary authors introducing a continuum to the question of slavery in their writings, such as in the case of Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*. The novel, written in 2016, goes back to the slave narratives and shows the runaway system that helped slaves to go north. To do so he tells the journey and the difficulties that Cora, a slave girl, had to endure during her way to freedom.

Moving to the case of Vietnam Literature, as the label suggests, it is based on the Vietnam War, which took place between 1955 and 1975. Most of those who wrote about this topic were war veterans, for whom literature was both a way of revealing the wounds of the war and of trying to heal them at the same time. This, added to the fact that people in the United States wanted to have authentic information of what accounted in Vietnam, boosted that new literary genre. Among the most outstanding writers there is Tim O'Brien. A veteran of the war himself, O'Brien published his first book in 1973, *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box me up and Ship me Home*, which is a memoir about his war experiences. He also wrote a short story collection about the conflict, *The Things they Carried* (1990). Vietnam War Literature is still written nowadays, and it has become a way of dealing with the past. After the Vietnam War, the other historical event that created a new genre in the trauma literary corpus was September 11, 2001.

1.2. 9/11 Literature

9/11 Literature is a term that was coined

to indicate a series of novels that, directly or indirectly, describe the feeling of loss, terror and catastrophe ascribable to the event. Taken as a whole, as a single narrative corpus, in the progression of works that make up this new literary genre one can identify an analogy with the reactions that gradually manifest themselves in a person who has suffered a trauma or a loss. The narrative representations of the destruction of the Twin Towers seem to follow the same phases of the reactions to trauma. (Gramantieri, 2018, 49)

This is important because the language and narrative techniques that writers have used to present their works within this genre tend to reflect that trauma. For that purpose,

9/11 literature made use of experimental devices such as images, gaps, repetitions or shifting viewpoints.

The most common characteristics of 9/11 Literature are presented by Ingrida Zindziuviene in her essay “Elements of Trauma Fiction in the 9/11 Novel” (2013). She highlights the individualization of the events, contributing to give the readers a sense of reliability, because they can see themselves in the narrative. Zindzuviene also focuses on the use of characters that are lost in the post-9/11 society, who are unable to go back to their lives as they were before and, at the same time, find it impossible to move forward. These characters are usually lonely, and they do not feel understood by society, only by those who have undergone the same horror. Moreover, she mentions the importance of images about the fall of the towers, which on many occasions are used to make a comparison or a metaphorical connection between that physical destruction that 9/11 left behind and the inner situation of chaos and confusion of the survivors and families of the victims. In general terms, features that represent the actual feeling and sense of trauma that many felt after the attack.

It is important to bear in mind that 9/11 narratives comprise not only novels or poems, but also plays, articles, essays and pieces of news published by mainstream media, and thus there have been different ways of telling or describing the same event. In the case of the media, the main purpose was that of informing people, and of providing the latest news so they could hit the market and benefit the media contributors. Journalists who wrote about the attacks in newspapers and magazines were usually constrained by the deadlines and objectives of making profit for their corporations. Moreover, they had to keep in line with the political ideology of the medium they were writing for. In the case of novels, and contrary to the stories in news media, they “are not delimited by stringent deadlines and word limits, they can offer narratives that explore the events of 9/11 in much greater depth and from atemporal distance that allows for the possibility of sharper and more sustained critical insight” (Michael 2015, 7).

In their attempt to inform and communicate, news and articles published by the media on the days, weeks and months after the attacks tended to stick to the evidence, to the number of victims, the data, and to how a whole nation was hurt. The focus right

after the first plane hit the North Tower was to broadcast what was happening. All over the world people were seeing how the symbol of U.S. economic power was destroyed, turning it into a pile of ashes and rubble. The role of newspapers and broadcasting companies was very important for the creation of a narrative of the event that would support the governments' positioning against the attacks and the decisions that were made afterwards. Journalists contributed with their publications to the account of how the U.S., that great nation, had been attacked. America as a whole was the victim of that day and as President George W. Bush stated in his speech on September 20, 2001: "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" (Bush, 2001). He referred to what had happened as "an act of war" against America, an attack to freedom based "destruction" or "hate" and he defended the need of "fighting and winning that war" (Bush, 2001).

The government's definition of the attack as a war against the U.S. was from the first moment backed up by the media, and so were the policies that the executive took afterwards. The speech by the President contributed to create a sense of revenge. Moreover, his words and the actions that the authorities carried out in the aftermath of 9/11 contributed to the growth of racism against Arabs and Islamophobia on U.S soil. The War on Terror did not only affect the countries governed by the Taliban, to whom the president addressed his verbal attack, but also American citizens who had Arab origins or practiced the Muslim religion. Although the mainstream media backed up the government's ideas, some of the first literary works about 9/11 challenged those vengeful and racist beliefs, whilst trying to give voice to the unspeakability of the horror of 9/11. Writing was use as a healing process, and the fact that authors were showing other perspectives from the ones in the mainstream media allowed to the creation of counternarratives.

Amongst those first literary works we have "The Dead of September 11", which was also one of the first 9/11 poems to be composed. Written by Toni Morrison, it was published in *Vanity Fair* just two days after the attack. In this poem, the author directly addresses the victims. She writes to everyone who died in the WTC, including people from all nationalities and not only Americans. Morrison expresses how there are no words to explain what happened, the narrative voice is speechless, mourning the attack. She appeals to humanity as the only thing they had left and suggests stepping aside from

the feelings of hate, revenge and vengeance that had spread within the society after W. Bush speech.

Moreover, the fear of negative consequences on those with a different religion and background was tangible within society and some writers dealt with it in their writings. Such was the case of Suheir Hammad's poem "First writing since" (2003). In her work, Hammad writes about the fear of Americans wanting revenge, the worry that all Arabs were depicted as the same when it was not the case. She does not understand why there was being such a hyper generalization when on other occasions of history, nobody talked like that about Americans. She ends the poem by making a direct reference to George W. Bush's speech about 9/11 as she transforms his phrase "either you are with us or with the terrorists" (Bush, 2001) into "you are either with life, or against it" (Hammad, 2003).

These two poems by Morrison and Hammad suggest how from the beginning 9/11 literature was able to produce "narratives with a critical edge that refuse merely to mime the dominant official narratives and that insist on addressing the complexities of the events of 9/11" (Michael 2015, 8). One of the most controversial and critical poems written about 9/11 was that of "Somebody Blew up America" (2002) by Amiri Baraka. Written in long lines in the form of a speech, it makes a critique to America through questions. By doing this, Baraka presents a subversive idea about the 9/11 attacks, questioning who was responsible for them, and to what extent America was not to blame at all. The poem was heavily condemned by critics as it "lambasted the Bush administration as well as racism in America" (Michael, 2015, 10). As a consequence, it was banned from many written media and Baraka was removed from his position as Poet Laureate of New Jersey.

All these works show how the writings that were produced after 9/11 tended to focus on the collective trauma rather than on the individual one. Not only poems dealt with it but there were also essays, plays or articles around the same question. One of the most significant essays was "In the Ruins of the Future" by Don DeLillo, which was published for the first time on December of 2001 in *Harper's Magazine*. The essay shows how 9/11 was not a global attack but an attack to America, its economy, its freedom, its "high glass of modernity" or "the thirst of (their) technology". All in all, an

offensive against “the power of American culture to penetrate every wall, home, life and mind” (DeLillo, 2001). He states that the terrorists had lived in America before the attack like any other citizen, and how nothing stopped them from destroying the symbol of the country, taking away thousands of lives. The essay shows how the attack brought fear, danger, and rage to society, with protests held against what had occurred, not only in America but also worldwide. As Don DeLillo suggests, the trauma of that day crossed all boundaries, and it affected society as a whole regardless of nationality, religion, or background.

As months and years passed more texts were being produced about the attack and around 2004, the first 9/11 novels were published. These new narratives showed an approach to 9/11 based more on the individual trauma than on the collective one. Novels tended to focus on specific characters, both direct and indirect victims⁷ of the attack and how they coped with what happened. Although it has already been stated that these 9/11 fiction works share some common characteristics, “two people can represent the same experience, using similar imagery and descriptive terminology and create literary works with entirely different meanings – meanings which are located not in the words themselves, but in the interaction between writer and text, between reader and text, between reader and writer” (Tal 1996, 18). The focus that each writer used, the characters on each literary work and the time in which novels were set regarding the attack allowed the creation of a varied corpus of 9/11 literature. Most fiction novels tended to center their attention on the aftermath of that day, and few were those who dealt with the moment of the attack and the situation inside the towers.

Among those who based their novels on the afterwards of September 11 there is Jonathan Safran Foer’s, who deals with the consequences that 9/11 had for a boy who lost his father in the attack. The main narrative is around the traumatic process that the child has to undergo after his father’s death. Presenting a completely different point of view, one of the few novels that is set inside of the north tower from the moment of the

⁷ In this sense, *direct victims* refers to those who escaped the towers, their relatives, and the families of the ones who died, whereas *indirect victims* includes people who also suffered the consequences of what happened although they did not have any personal connection to it.

plane crash to its collapse is *Windows on the World* (2003) by Frédéric Beigbeder.⁸ Beigbeder's work "represent[s] the specific experiences of the persons trapped at the top of the World Trade Center towers and doomed to die, who remain for the most part unrepresented [...] in most fiction that addresses 9/11" (Michael 2015, 6). Nonetheless, there were some writers that combined both perspectives, such as in the case of Don DeLillo. In his work *Falling Man*, the reader is presented mainly with scenes that occurred in the aftermath of the attack, although there are also parts set in the inside of the tower before the main character was able to escape.

The last important feature of 9/11 literature is the fact that many authors address themes which had been banned by media and mainstream narratives. That was the case of the people who jumped from the towers, the racism against the Muslim community as a consequence of the War on Terror, a focus on the terrorists or the silence about the victims who were working illegally in the WTC when the attack took place and who were not included in the official number of victims. The two last cases were addressed by two poems written in 2002 and 2003, respectively: "Curses" (2002), by Frank Bidart, which addresses directly the masterminds behind the attack, the terrorists, and "Alabanza: In Praise of Local 100" (2003), by Martin Espada. In the case of Espada, the poem was dedicated to the employees of the Windows on the World Restaurant, and it was an elegy praising those illegal immigrants who were working there, and who were not acknowledged among the official number of victims. Regarding the other two aspects, one of the works that directly presents the reader with images of the people who jumped was Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, which depicts one of the most controversial points of 9/11, the visual impact that images of the jumpers had. On the other hand, we have authors who have dealt with the consequences that September 11 had for the Muslim community. Moshim Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) is one of the best examples of a novel that introduces characters with a Muslim background who were living in the U.S when 9/11 took place and the aftereffects that it had for them. The following section will reflect upon the characteristics and features of 9/11 literature that have been mentioned by approaching two novels within the genre, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and *Falling Man*.

⁸ Beigbeder is a French author, the novel was first written in French and it was afterwards translated into English, thus, it does not belong to the corpus of U.S. Literature. In spite of that, it is used as an example due to the peculiarity of the moment in which the novel is set in relation to 9/11.

2. 9/11 Trauma in *Falling Man* and *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*: A comparative analysis

Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* narrates the story of Keith and his wife Lianne, and the son they have in common, Justin, after the man survived the attack to the WTC and managed to make it out of the tower where he used to work. DeLillo shows the consequences that 9/11 brought to Keith and to those surrounding him. Moreover, it brings to light one of the most controversial aspects of that day, which was the people who jumped from the towers, by basing a character on one of the actual photographs of those people. In turn, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* presents the story of Oskar, a child who lost his father in the 9/11 attacks. Throughout the novel Foer shows the reader how Oskar dealt with his father's death. A couple of years after the "worst day" (as the boy calls it), the boy finds a key in one of his father's belongings, and he starts a search to discover what it opens. The adventure allows him to stay closer to his father in spite of him being dead as a way of not letting him go. Foer represents the individual trauma not only through the character of Oskar but also through his grandparents, who went through two traumatic experiences: the loss of their son during 9/11 and the Dresden Bombings in WWII.⁹

2.1. Structure and Narrative Techniques

Amongst the most relevant features that both Foer and Don DeLillo use in their novels to portray 9/11 trauma we have the structure of the books and the narrative techniques that they work with. Although they are very different, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and *Falling Man* share some common characteristics that present the reader with the feeling of shock and chaos of 9/11 and its subsequent trauma. However, and even though both literary works explore the same event, they deal with it in two different ways. *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* focuses on the family of one of those who perished at the World Trade Center, whereas *Falling Man* concentrates on a survivor of the towers and how the attack affected his life and that of his family. Moreover, DeLillo's novel gives an insight into one of the terrorist's life and his preparation for the attack.

⁹ Both his grandparents were survivors of the Dresden Bombings, although this essay will not go in depth into that as its main focus is 9/11 trauma in literature.

A key factor for the representation of trauma in 9/11 literature is time. Thus, the moment in which stories are set in relation to the WTC attack are of high relevance. In the case of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and *Falling Man* the main action takes place after the attacks, not necessarily just in the days or weeks that followed, but also in the months and years to come. In spite of that, both locate some of the storyline inside the tower, in the moment when the planes crashed. In the case of Foer's work, readers are not given an insight on what was happening inside, but they are presented with the voice messages that Oskar's father, Thomas, left on the phone. The approach to the time inside the tower is different in the case of *Falling Man*, where we get the memories of Florence and Keith before they escaped ground zero. Florence recalls the moment of the crash and her way through the stairs to get out of the building. In the case of Keith, and though he struggles to remember what happened, he ends up recalling the moments just after the explosion. Lastly regarding to time, *Falling Man* also presents the moments previous to the attack by telling the story of one of the terrorists.

The use of different time frames allows the writer to create confusion in the reader, as the action is not presented in a traditional linear way; it is fragmented. In *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, Oskar's story takes place chronologically. The narration takes the reader through Oskar's quest from the beginning when he found the key to the very end when he learns that his mother knew about his research and he ends up facing up his trauma by reversing the photographs of the falling man. In spite of the fact that Oskar's journey is presented in order of time, the narration is fragmented. The parts of the novel where the grandparent's account is presented are the biggest contributors to that fragmentation as they are placed in between the sections where Foer narrates Oskar's story. These parts involving the narration of the grandparents correspond to the chapters named "Why I'm not where you are" and "My Feelings". The chapters titled "Why I'm not where you are" present the grandfather's story whereas the ones named "Feelings" show the grandmother's point of view.

Moreover, the child's narrative is not only interrupted in some chapters by the story of his grandparents but also by flashbacks from Oskar's memory. Through the use of flashbacks as a narrative technique Foer presents some relevant aspects that affected the way in which Oskar dealt with the trauma of his father's loss. The reader encounters throughout the narrative the messages that Oskar's father left just before the tower

collapsed, the last story that Thomas told to his son and which has its own chapter, “The Sixth Borough”, or the day of the burial. Keeping the messages as a secret, he “could never let her Mom hear [them]”, not being able to pick up the phone before the fifth message sounded, and the fact that the coffin of his dad was empty, “it was not like we were *actually* burying him anyway”, “Dad isn’t even there! [...] It’s just an empty box” (4, 169), were amongst the most difficult things to cope with for Oskar, and two of the things that caused him “heavy boots”.¹⁰

Falling Man, on the other hand, does not follow a chronological order, it presents moments that took place at the moment of the fall, “[h]e heard the sound of the second fall”, “three years after the planes” and even right after the crash took place, when “he felt rubble underfoot, there was motion everywhere, people running fast, things falling” (5, 229, 246). The narrator is continuously jumping from one moment to other, sometimes even within the same chapter. Indeed, the novel has a circular structure, this is, it starts and ends at the same point, from the beginning with “It was not a street anymore, but a world, time, space of falling ash and near night”, “He watched it coming down. As shirt came down out of the smoke... and then falling again”, to the last sentence, “[t]hen he saw a shirt come down out of the sky. He walked and saw it fall, arms waving like nothing in this life” (3, 4, 245). This structure represents a sign of stagnation, the impossibility for the character to move on after what happened. As Spahr stated, “with the final scene, the reader is once again returned to the event itself. There is no vision of the future” (2012, 228).

The only case in which conventional chronology is respected in Don DeLillo’s novel is in Hammad’s story, which is always told in the last chapter of each part, and which takes place previously to the attack. The author shows Hammad joining the jihadist group, training and preparing himself to complete the mission, and even having doubts about what they were going to do. In the last chapter, we see the terrorist in the plane moments before it crashed into the South tower. At that point of the novel Hammad’s story is merged with the one of Keith when

¹⁰ “Heavy boots” is the expression that Oskar uses throughout the novel to express how he felt after his father’s death, and which was a feeling of sadness, anxiety and depression.

[a] bottle fell off the counter in the gallery, on the other side of the aisle, and he watched it roll this way and that, [...] and he watched it spin more quickly and then skitter across the floor an instant before the aircraft struck the tower, heat, then fuel, then fire, and a blast wave passed through the structure that sent Keith Neudecker out of his chair into a wall. (239)

Aside from the main narrative both novels develop some secondary stories. In the case of Foer, the parallel story that he presents to Oskar's one is that of the grandparents. Both of them were survivors of the Dresden Bombings, which took place in 1945. The novel shows how their survival of that event left a trauma that was irreparable for them, especially for the grandfather, for whom it was a turning point in life. Foer connects the trauma that the grandparents experienced after the bombings of their city with the loss of their son at the WTC attacks, which in this case was particularly harmful for the woman. By doing this, Foer is combining two different types of Trauma Literature, the one around 9/11 and WWII Literature.

As it has been said before, the other story that DeLillo introduces is that of one of the terrorists, being one of the few authors who focused on that in a book. Most narratives tended to avoid talking about the attackers, indeed the stories that were told used to have their focus on the victims, the survivors, the families, or the heroes of that day: the firefighters, police officers, and paramedics who died trying to save those inside the towers. By choosing to reflect the journey that Hammad followed, from the point he joined the radical group in Hamburg to the pilot training course and the terrorist attack, DeLillo is already presenting the reader with a counternarrative: he is giving voice to one of those silenced by the media.

Another important narrative technique in the primary texts selected here is the use of polyphony. In *Falling Man*, we have a third-person narrator who presents the story from the perspective of the three main characters: Keith, Lianne and Hammad. Keith's and Lianne's viewpoints are constantly being exchanged throughout the whole novel, whereas Hammad's perspective is only present in the last chapter of each part. This aspect helps to create that feeling of confusion in the reader, as sometimes the changes are so abrupt that we wonder whose perspectives we are seeing at each time, which gives the novel a chaotic aura. Contrary to this, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly*

Close is written using in first-person narrator. There are three first-person narrators within the novel, the main characters: Oskar, Thomas Schell (the grandfather), and the grandmother. Oskar is the one telling the story of his research, the grandfather the one narrating his experience, from the Bombings of Dresden to when he encountered Oskar's grandmother in New York and how their marriage developed, and finally, the grandmother tells the same story as Thomas but from a different perspective, hers.

Besides the use of time and the different narrators Foer introduces some elements in the narrative that help to shape the structure of the novel away from the canonical writing. In the first place, he mixes the narrative genre with the epistolary, as the grandfather's story is told in the form of letters. Foer presents his narrative through the epistles that the man wrote to his son. In those pieces of writing, which he never sent, he tried to explain the reasons for his absence. The way in which he titled the letters gives name to the chapters where they are presented (e.g. "Why I'm not where you are"), and each of them is followed by a date, the day in which they were written, "5/21/63" or "4/12/78". In addition to this, Foer introduces different elements across the narrative such as images, blank pages, one phrase pages, parts where the writing decreases its size and becomes blurred until it is illegible, or pages where some of the words are circled.

In the case of Don DeLillo, the structure is that of a narrative novel. It is divided in three sections, each of them being titled with the name of someone within the novel. However, when the reader first encounters those names, which is at the beginning of each part, there has not been mentioned yet who those characters are, and thus it helps to create disorientation. Part 1 is given the name of "Bill Lawton", part 2 that of "Ernst Hechinger" and part 3 is named "David Janiak". In the case of part 1, the name refers to the way in which Justin (Keith's son), and two of his friends refer to Bin Laden. After 9/11 many children were prevented from seeing anything related to the attack, but it was inevitable that they knew what had happened. This created confusion on them, and on many occasions, it led to misunderstandings, like in the case of Bill Lawton: "[h]e was hearing Bill Lawton, they were saying Bin Laden" (73). In this case, the character appears for the first time in part 1, and the reader gets to know who he is in that same section, however, that is not the case with the character's in the titles of parts 2 and 3.

Part 2, “Ernst Hechinger”, refers to the lover of Lianne’s mother. In his case he already appears in part 1, but under another name, Martin. The reader does not know his real name until part 2, and not only that, but to Lianne herself it took 20 years to get to know it. This, and the fact that she has little knowledge about the man’s life, drives her to be suspicious about him. She even believes that he could have been a terrorist, or someone wanted by the police, just because her mother had told her that he used to belong to a radical group that protested against Nazis in Germany. After getting to know that information, Lianne starts to compare him with the terrorists of 9/11: “Isn’t this the kind of man they would have seen as the enemy?” (148). That new knowledge and the use of a fake name also lead Lianne to think that maybe the man had murdered someone in the past. The way in which she thinks about Martin is an example of the War on Terror and the fear that arose after 9/11 toward everyone considered mysterious or suspicious. Finally, part 3 is named as “David Janiak”, who is related to the title of the book, *Falling Man*.¹¹

All these structure and narrative techniques, both in Foer’s and Don DeLillo’s novels are related to some of the symptoms of trauma that are included under the definition of PTSD. The fragmentation, polyphony, use of images or the changes in time that take place throughout the novels help to create the feeling of chaos and confusion that most felt after the attack. The idea that everything after 9/11 was chaotic and uncertain, and that the victims were stuck in the past and could not move forward. We can see this through the characters of Keith and Oskar. In the case of the man, he is unable to leave behind what happened to him and to keep on with life as if nothing had happened: “[t]his were the days after and now the years, a thousand heaving dreams, the trapped man, the fixed limbs, the dream of asphyxiation, the dream of helplessness” (230). A similar feeling to that of Oskar, who kept holding on to the key and the search of the locker as a way to stay close to his father even though he was already gone.

2.2. Intermediality

Images can have a great impact in the way narratives and history are perceived. The 9/11 attacks and their aftermath filled media all over the world with photographs and videos of that moment producing a huge visual impact, which helped to shape the

¹¹ This character will be analyzed later.

narrative of that day as they got stuck in everyone's mind: "For most people, September 11 was, above all, a visual event. [...] The planes crashing, the buildings collapsing, the blanket of gray ash that cast the city into darkness, and the smoking wreckage afterward were the dominant images through which the event was witnessed" (Frost 2008, 185). The effect of the visual narratives was such that some authors went back to them to include them in their works. This combination of different media within the same work is known as *intermediality*. Baelo-Aullé defines it in her article "The Depiction of 9/11 in Literature: The Role of Images and Intermedial References" as "the interplay between different media forms: photography, film, and the written word combine in novels that draw both from reality and from fiction" (2011, 186).

Foer and Don DeLillo used that combination of different media in their works as a way of presenting the traumatic experiences of their narratives in a more effective way. In *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* pictures are actually present in the book, whereas in *Falling Man* they are introduced through the written form. To do so, DeLillo uses very detailed descriptions. For instance, when he depicts the scene that opens the book: people

had handkerchiefs pressed to their mouths [...], shoes in their hands [...]. They ran and fell, some of them, confused and ungainly, with debris coming down around them [...] This was the world now. Smoke and ash came rolling down the streets and turning corners, busting around corners, seismic tides of smoke, with office paper flashing past, standard sheets with cutting edge, skimming, whipping past, otherworldly things in the morning pall. (3)

In both novels the photographs and the references to them are used in different ways. They show how footage of the attacks was everywhere, it was impossible to avoid it, and they make a critical point of view on how certain aspects of that day were hidden. One of those issues was that of the people who jumped from the towers, which the two books address through the use of images. The footage of the jumpers was one of the biggest impacts, along with the visual disappearance of the towers. The latest is portrayed in *Falling Man* with the reaction of Keith, Lianne and Justin towards the tower's collapse. In the case of Foer's work, the use of visual content goes beyond that

of 9/11 as images play a big role in Oskar's process of dealing with the trauma and they "are necessary as insights into Oskar's traumatized mind" (Baelo-Aullé 2011, 188).

That idea of an overwhelming use of the footage of 9/11 by the media is present both in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and in *Falling Man*. In the first case we get this idea from Oskar's grandparents. The grandmother tells in one occasion how on the night of September 11, 2001, everything on television was around the attack: "The same picture over and over. Planes going into buildings. Bodies falling. People waving shirts out of high windows" (230). It was the same feeling that her husband had when he was in Dresden and heard about what was happening. He stopped in front of "a grid of televisions, [and] all but one of them were showing the buildings, the same images over and over, as if the world itself were repeating" (272). In the case of *Falling Man* it is Lianne who experiments that sense of being all the time surrounded by what happened on that day and the feeling that she needs to see or read any news about it. She watched the videotape of the attack several times, "read everything they wrote about [it], the stories in the newspapers until she had to force herself to stop, [...] [the] profiles of the dead, everyone that was printed" (67, 106). Her attitude is also a reflection of how some people dealt with the attack, of how the "repeated viewing of images of the crumbling towers, first one, then the other, was probably the only way to absorb that mind-boggling spectacle" (Frost 2008, 190).

This fact of 9/11 as "one of the most represented disasters in history since it produced an unprecedented visual impact" (Baelo-Aullé, 2011) does not match with the fact that some images were banned from the media. *Falling Man* presents this argument when Lianne researches about the character of David Janiak, who was also known under the nickname of the Falling Man, and her reaction to his performance. For her, the artist's acting was shocking, as it showed something about the attacks that they had not seen in the news nor anywhere. Indeed, when the artist died and Lianne looks for information about him, she discovers that none of his jumps appeared in the media among the images of his performances. Lianne seems confused at the fact that there is no record of those pictures, which reaffirms Don DeLillo's criticism of the media's silence regarding the jumpers. This concern about the information that was denied to Americans is also discussed in Foer's novel when Oskar talks about how he has to look into foreign websites to find out about the people who jumped. He "found a bunch of

videos on the Internet of bodies falling. They were on a Portuguese site, were there was all sorts of stuff they weren't showing here, even though it happened here" (256).

Those pictures of the jumpers were considered to be one of the most controversial aspects of the attack. When "the next day newspapers published photos of the horror, there were some images so awful that provoked rage across the world. These were the pictures of people falling" (Singer, 2006). Soon after being published, those photographs "had disappeared from public view in a remarkable spontaneous act of self-censorship. Newspapers and magazines decided not to run [them] again. No one wanted to confront the existence of the jumpers" (Singer, 2006). Those photographs were considered a violation of the victims' privacy in their last moments of death, and moreover, they made people think of what they would have done in the same situation, which one would have been their choice, jumping to their deaths or burning alive inside of the tower. In *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, there is a point in which Oskar reflects precisely on that: "Would I jump or would I burn? I guess I would jump, because then I wouldn't have to feel pain" (244-5).

The insertion of a series of illustrations about a man falling from one of the towers in Foer's novel is used as one of the most relevant elements in Oskar's assimilation of the trauma. To him it is of great importance to know how his father died. He just wants to know if he jumped or he died trapped inside the tower so he "can stop inventing" because if he

could know how he died, exactly how he died, [he] wouldn't have to invent him dying inside an elevator that was stuck between floor, which happened to some people, and [he] wouldn't have to imagine him trying to crawl down the outside of the building, which [he] saw a video of one person doing on a Polish site, or trying to use a tablecloth as a parachute, like some of the people who were on Windows on the World actually did. There were so many different ways to die, and [he] just need to know which was his. (257)

The thought that his father could have jumped and thus, he could be the man in the picture of a falling man that he has is present from the beginning of the novel. But at the end of the work he also suggests the possibility that the man was inside the tower when the building collapse. The reader is given this idea when he tells William Black, the owner of the key, about the fifth message that his father sent from the tower. Oskar explains how he 'time the message, and it's one minute and twenty-seven seconds.

Which it means it ended at 10:24. Which was when the building came down. So maybe that's how he died" (257).

In spite of that, it is this image of the falling man that is constantly going through the boy's mind. The reason for that may be that although "Oskar considered other kinds of death for his father [...] the only visual images of death that he has are the falling people" (Frost 2008, 188). Analyzing the boy's behaviour throughout the novel we can see that he insists on the fact that if his father had jumped from the tower, he could be one of those in the pictures. This shows Oskar's attitude of trying to keep his father as close as possible to him, of not letting go, and he can only do that if he can have the hope for his father being the man in the images. In the end, it is the series of photographs that he has about a falling man that helps him to deal with his trauma. He places the sequence of images in reversed order, so the man would be going up back to the tower instead of falling. "In the same way as we can flip those final pages in the novel and make the falling man return to the window, Oskar imagines time going backward" (Baelo-Aullé 2011, 189). He thinks of how "if [he] had more pictures, he would've flown through a window back into the building, [...] Dad would've left his messages backward, [...] [h]e would've taken the elevator to the street", all in all, they "would have been safe" (325, 326).

In the case of *Falling Man*, the image that Don DeLillo uses has a more critical role, as he opted for one of the most controversial pictures of 9/11, the one of the falling man by Richard Drew. The picture showed image "was branded [as] distasteful, exploitative, voyeuristic" (Singer, 2006) and it was soon banned from all the media. Although

the images that came to symbolize the day were those of the heroic rescuers working in the rubble, some argued that the picture of the falling man needed to be confronted. It not only acknowledged the story of the people who were forced to jump, it alone gave a true sense of the horror of that day. (Singer, 2006)

The choice of this photograph by Don DeLillo can be seen as a response to the approach that media had towards the images of the jumpers, who were also victims of the attack, but they were silenced and never recognized as such. Therefore, the fact that the American novelist gives them relevance in his novel portrays his attitude against the

oblivion of those victims. This idea is presented through the title of the novel, which is the same as the photograph's, the way in which the images of people falling affected Keith and through the character of David Janiak, also known as the Falling Man.

In the case of Janiak, DeLillo portrays him as a performance artist. His performances throughout New York consisted on hanging himself upside down in the middle of the street. The way in which he is described by Lianne the first time she sees him is that of “a man... dangling there, above the street, upside down. He wore a business suite, one leg bent up, arms at his sides” (33). This description clearly reminds the reader of Drew's photograph of the falling man, but not only that; Lianne as a character makes the same connection: “She [...] knew at once which photograph the account referred to. It hit her hard when she first saw it the day after, in the newspaper” and she questions if that “position intended to reflect the body posture of a particular man who was photographed falling from the north tower of the World Trade Center, headfirst, arms at his sides, one leg bent, a man set forever in free against the looming background of the column panels in the tower?” (221)

As it was mentioned before, Keith and Lianne were also affected by the idea of people jumping from the towers: “The integration of the image of the falling man is a necessary step for Keith to overcome 9/11, as it is for Lianne to deal with her father's suicide” (Baelo-Aullé 2011, 191). Whereas Lianne saw the image on television and on the newspapers, Keith saw the people falling in real time when he was inside the tower and walking out of it. To him, the idea that people in the upper floors were jumping through the windows was so hard to believe that his memory could not cope with it, and as a consequence, he had gaps of what he saw inside the tower. He recalls seeing them when he was out of the building, when he thinks how that “was the world as well, figures in windows a thousand feet up, dropping into free space” at the same time as he “watched it coming down. A shirt come down out of the high smoke, a shirt lifted and drifting in the scan light and then falling again, down toward the river” (4). In the case of the people that he saw falling from the floors above him inside the tower, the image was so hard to conceive for him that Keith that although he went through it all over again when he was inside: “[h]e could not stop seeing it, twenty feet away, an instant of something sideways, going past the window, white shirt, hand up, falling before he saw” (242) , he had problems remembering it in the aftermath.

Leaving this aspect aside, Foer's use of images goes beyond the one of the jumper. For Oskar, images are a way of having "lighter boots"¹² and he collects them in a scrap-book that he calls *Stuff that Happened to Me*. Amidst all the pictures that Oskar has, Foer includes some of them in the novel. Although the picture of the falling man is the only one that directly addresses the attacks, there are others that are also of high relevance within the story and which can be interpreted as a metaphor of the man's image. Pages 166 and 167 of the book present a blurred picture of some birds. The black color of the animals, and the fact that they cannot be easily distinguished, can be related to the quality of the images of those who jumped and whose identity was impossible to identify by looking at the pictures. The image of a cat in the middle of a jump is shown in page 191. The standstill of the cat in the air reminds of the figures of those falling from the towers in the images of 9/11, as they were also captured stagnant in the air. Finally, there is a photograph of a rollercoaster in Coney Island (page 148), which comes to represent the action of falling into the void. Oskar himself when he rode on it "kept wondering if what [he] was feeling was at all like falling" (147), on a clear attempt to put himself on the feet of the jumpers at 9/11.

The other group of pictures that is really important in the story is that of the images of lockers, which represent Oskar's quest in the novel. For him, the search goes beyond finding the locker that the key opens. It is a way of keeping his father close to him after his death, of not losing him, and most importantly of getting rid of the "heavy boots" he wears since his father died. However, there is a point in which the boy questions if what he is doing is being useful, as he states that "[he] miss[es] dad more now than when [he] started, even though the whole *point* was to *stop* missing him" (255). In the end, when he discovers everything surrounding the key and his search, he feels that nothing had changed and that he is still suffering about losing his dad. He feels disappointed because it had nothing to do with his father, he could not keep looking anymore, and above all he wonders if he would wear heavy boots all his life and as he states, "looking for it let [him] stay close to him for a little while longer" (304). In the end the key and the quest can be seen as metaphors of the journey that Oskar had to undergo to walk through his trauma, and the locker the idea that to heal his pain, Oskar would have to face his trauma first.

¹² The contrary of having "heavy boots", that is, being less depressed.

Finally, we have the images of the towers falling, which highly impacted everyone: “The gap were the twin towers had stood, [...] their visual absence was traumatic” (Kaplan 2003, 97). It is Don DeLillo that presents this issue on his novel. He does so through the characters of Keith, Lianne, and Justin. In the case of the boy, as he was not allowed to watch any images of the attack, he does not believe that the towers had actually fallen and they were not there anymore. Even though he is told by his parents what happened, he refuses to assimilate the idea that the towers are gone. That feeling of not wanting it to be true is also present in Lianne, as every time she watches the video of the planes crashing and the towers collapsing, she keeps repeating that they look as an accident, as something hard to believe. Finally, the collapse of the towers is used as a metaphor in the case of Keith and the consequences that 9/11 had for him. “He heard the sound of the second fall [...] That was him coming down, the north tower” (5). All in all, DeLillo shows the reader how the tower’s collapsed was a big issue not only for those who survives the attacks and directly saw them falling but for everyone as they had become the symbol of New York.

Conclusion

The consequences of 9/11 were so immense that some people are still facing them nowadays. After September 11, 2001, there were many ways of dealing with the attack and its effects. Amongst those, one of the most prominent ones was literature: “The representation of traumatic events in literature has proven a bone of contention for decades” (Baelo-Aullé 2011, 185), and 9/11 Literature became part of the genre of Trauma Literature. As it has been explained in the first section of this essay, the literature around the World Trade Center attacks has been used to portray the two types of trauma that 9/11 provoked: the collective trauma and the individual one.

The latest is the case of two of the most well-know 9/11 novels, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer and *Falling Man* by Don DeLillo. To show and analyze how the two works present trauma through literature, a comparative analysis has been made, focusing on the narrative techniques used by the writers. Amidst those, we can find fragmentation, the use of different time frames, polyphony, the inclusion of other elements besides the written word (in the case of Foer’s novel) or

the way in which the works are structured. All these methods can be seen as interconnected with some of the symptoms of trauma.

Fragmentation and polyphony give the reader a sense of confusion, of chaos, which resemble the situation after the planes crashed. The feeling of those who witnessed the attack was that of not knowing what was going on, everything was chaotic, with people trying to escape the area, security forces evacuating the surrounding streets, and multitudes observing with horror from the distance what was happening. The same feeling was perceived by those who survived and the families of the victims, as their lives were completely altered by the attack. Many felt an utter confusion which was on many occasions generated by the impossibility of moving on from what had occurred and the constant flashbacks of that day. These last two aspects are present in the character of Keith, and in the circular structure of *Falling Man*, which starts and ends at the same point, portraying that impossibility of leaving behind what happened.

As well as the narrative techniques, the use of intermediality in the novels contributes to give a broader view of 9/11 and its trauma. In the case of Foer, images are included in the novel as a complement to Oskar's story, and they allow to a better understanding of the boy's suffering. Foer uses pictures of a man falling from one of the towers, which represent Oskar's thoughts about the possibility of his father as one of those who jumped from the towers. This is of great importance for Oskar, as he is convinced that knowing what exactly happened to his dad would allow him to start getting over his trauma. Moreover, the book also includes images that introduce a metaphoric view of the jumps that took place at the WTC on September 11, 2001, such as a cat in the midst of a jump, a flock of birds or the slope of a rollercoaster. At last, Foer includes several images of a locker, which symbolize the path that Oskar had to go through to face the trauma of his father's death and being able to deal with it.

Finally, in the case of *Falling Man*, images are presented through the use of the written word by using detailed descriptions. Those depictions of photographs are mainly related to a specific image known as *Falling Man* and which was very controversial. Images of people falling disappeared from the media soon after they were published, as nobody wanted to face the fact that people had chosen to jump from the towers given

the desperation of the moment. Don DeLillo criticizes the way in which the jumpers were silenced, and he presents a counter narrative to the one of the mainstream media by giving them a main role in his novel. The picture by Richard Drew gives name to the title of the book and to one of the characters. The position of the man in the photograph is presented through the character of a performance artist that imitated it throughout the city during the days after the attack and that irremediably evoked those horrific images from the WTC attack. Moreover, Keith's traumatic experience is worsened because of the people that he saw jumping from the windows when he was first inside the tower and later walking away from it. All these features in both novels are representative of how literature has been used to present the individual aftereffects of 9/11.

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