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Crisis of Experience and Narrative *Fictuality* in the Postmodern Age: Facing the Catastrophe

ABSTRACT

Che cosa significa vivere un evento della portata dell'11 settembre 2001 nell'epoca "dell'inesperienza", come l'ha definita Antonio Scurati? Come si fa a cogliere l'intensità di un tale momento storico, fissarlo nella memoria per poterlo rielaborare e condividere con gli altri, si chiede Mauro Carbone? Partendo dalle riflessioni sulla natura ontologica della catastrofe americana da parte di filosofi, studiosi della letteratura e dell'arte, sulle modalità della sua "fruizione" mediatica e sul più ampio contesto socio-politico che ha potuto generare un evento in grado di sfuggire a qualunque tentativo di facile riduzione o mera categorizzazione, nel presente articolo si indagheranno le strategie che due scrittori, Don DeLillo e Mohsin Hamid, hanno saputo elaborare confrontandosi con la problematica *irrapresentabilità* di un evento come l'11 settembre 2001.

The Falling Man e *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, entrambi pubblicati nel 2007, appartengono a quel genere romanzesco definito dalla critica come *post-9/11*. Se da un lato DeLillo compie una ricognizione più stringente sull'evento in sé, tentando di offrirne una rappresentazione multifocale che si dipana lungo una temporalità ciclica, simile a un loop cinematografico, dall'altro Hamid propone una prospettiva più obliqua e distaccata sull'accaduto, privilegiando una linearità della narrazione che viene consapevolmente limitata a un unico punto di vista.

In entrambi i casi, si avverte un tentativo (riuscito?) di oltrepassare i confini rappresentativi imposti sia dalla rigidità delle strutture narrative, sia dalla natura stereotipata che l'evento ha ormai assunto all'interno dell'immaginario collettivo.



Fig. 1: Photograph by Thomas Hoepker/Magnum.

In the contemporary debate the crisis of experience is deemed to be one of the most essential features of the ontological dimension of our reality. While for Benjamin this condition was intrinsically connected to the major socio-political and cultural transformations brought by the first modern industrialization and urbanization, in the postmodern debate this phenomenon has been frequently related to the interior crisis of the Self. Our “inexperience era”, that started immediately after the First World War and that deepened with the spread of the new mass media, is distinguished by an ever-decreasing capacity of narrating one’s life story [Fig. 1].

According to Antonio Scurati (2006), this condition is directly traceable to our loss of the past. The effect of the new technologies (the contraction of spatial and temporal distances and the disappearance of their ontological dimension) can account for the ghostly absent consistency of the world-perception and world-making processes. The First World War, the naissance of prisons and asylums, the imposing arrival of the mass media are, in Scurati’s benjaminian analysis, the three factors at the roots of the modern weakness of the narrative representation. For Scurati, the current narrative paradigm is dominated by what he calls “fictuality”. This term is the result of the fusion between “fictional” and “factual”, in a confused mixture between imagination and reality, or hyper-reality. The dominance of the visual on the verbal, the result of a long series of historical events such as the advent of the capitalism and the mass media culture, signals a new modality in representation and perception strategies, in which a new dimension of flux strikes us, in a continuous reiteration similar to the Freudian compulsion. The surrounding world has been reduced to a multitude of images, that constantly assert their dominance on both oral and written narrations, leaving us incapable of grasping the complexity of the human experience.

This inextricable labyrinth of fictional structures, collective imaginary and historical events is analyzed by Slavoj Žižek (Žižek 2003) in his interpretation of 9/11, in which he underlines the intrinsic spectacular dimension of the media event. The aesthetic pleasure and the Freudian compulsion to repeat are the unavoidable categories of the fruition: thus the continuous flux of TV images, reiteratively reproducing the moments of the collusion, represents a postmodern/pathologic expression of the impossibility of experiencing of the actual event. The “fictual” aspect is located in the overlap of the Hollywood catastrophic imaginary on its factual materialization. The return of the Real paradoxically erupts in the everyday of the inexperience with a virtual exposition of the hyper-real, which, under the impact of the manifestation, is perceived as unreal. The traumatic event, which seems to be the most fruitful configuration in order to create a possible narrative experience, becomes a trauma without trauma, as Daniele Giglioli exposes in his essay *Senza trauma* (Giglioli 2011). For Paul Virilio the incident is the only mechanism able to break up the “normal” and anonymous flux of the daily routine, so, in this sense, we can think of the incident not as a fatality but as a creation, as an “artistic” invention:

Creare l'incidente e non più tanto l'evento... rompere la concatenazione di causalità che caratterizza così bene la normalità quotidiana – questo tipo di espressionismo è oggi universalmente ricercato, tanto dai “terroristi” quanto dagli “artisti” e da tutti gli attivisti contemporanei dell'epoca della globalizzazione planetaria. [...] Creare l'evento, dicevamo, ma l'incidente non è forse una forma indiretta dell'opera, una conseguenza della sostanza? L'aereo di linea che ha inventato lo schianto al suolo o contro le Twin Towers proprio come il suo decollo all'aeroporto ... la nave, il piroscafo che inventa il suo naufragio insieme al suo varo. (Virilio 2004: 31-33)

The “fictuality” conveys also another important feature in the organization of the narrative strategy of the emplotment: the importance of a conspiratorial construction, where the hermetic semiosis, in the definition of Umberto Eco, attests the impossibility of the knowledge of the world:

Se l'iniziato è colui che possiede un segreto cosmico, le degenerazioni del modello ermetico hanno portato alla persuasione che il potere sia consista nel “far credere” di avere un segreto politico. (Eco 1990: 50)

As Daniele Giglioli argues in his essay *All'ordine del giorno è il terrore* (Giglioli 2007), the poetics of conspiracy is fundamental in the whole postmodern scenario. It is a sign of a general disorientation suffered by the old philosophic and ideological perspectives, which were the instruments that enabled the individual and collective subjects to relate causes and effects. Now, in the contemporary age of terrorism, it is no longer possible to establish a link between rationality and history. It follows that the conspiracy logic, dominant in the postmodern age, could be interpreted as an attempt to rationalize the events: the explanation of the events that coincides with the identification of a human agent rather than remote randomness behind them satisfies our need for rationality. Giglioli also focuses on the a possible application of the Kantian Sublime to 9/11. The Kantian sublime is structured in a double temporality: a sense of fallacy perceived by the subject, caused by the excess of the limits of her/his sensibility; a new consciousness of the powerful “I”, whose reason acquires the capacity to reflect on what cannot be imagined. In 9/11 the perceived object is a fetish: the terrorist experiences only the active side of the sublime, which is not superior to the object, but coplanar. But what about the viewer? [Fig. 2].



Fig. 2: Photographs by Richard Drew.

The answer to this last question can probably be found in the large corpus of textual and cultural representations of 9/11. As Mohr and Mayer (2010: 1-4) point out, among scholars who have attempted to categorize post-9/11 novels, according to the differences of the aesthetic and thematic responses, Christina Rickli has succeeded in identifying three subgroups:

1. texts that incorporate 9/11 as a subversive, traumatic element that is never directly alluded to but haunts the text as an inscribed memory;
2. texts that allude to 9/11 as an element of narrative distortion without allowing it a larger narrative space;
3. those texts that directly deal with 9/11.

The Falling Man is a novel written by Don DeLillo a few years after 9/11 (2007) and it can be taken as an example of the third group of texts according to Rickli's classification. The novel follows two parallel stories: the first one is that of an American family while the second one is dedicated to one of the terrorists actively involved in the attacks against the Twin Towers. The novel opens and ends with the description of what happened outside the Towers immediately after the attack and the their fall (first chapter) and what happened inside one of the Towers immediately after the impact (last chapter). Throughout the novel, as a Leitmotif, appears the image of 'the falling man', an artist who makes his performances in New York repeating, in a shocking simulation, the terrible flight of the victims.

The title of the novel coincides with that of one of the most symbolic images of 9/11: *The Falling Man*, a photograph taken by the Associated Press photographer Richard Drew, a shot of a man falling from the North Tower of the World Trade Center at 9:41:15 a.m. Even if DeLillo has declared he was unfamiliar with the title of this picture when he named the book, the immediate connection between the photograph and the artist of the novel bears testimony to the pervasiveness of a certain imaginary scenario.

As already mentioned, a close description of the 9/11 events takes place in the first and last chapters, where the reader finds herself in the middle of two different temporal dimensions. The first one consists in the complex love relationship between Keith and Lianne after 9/11. We learn that they had been married for several years but had broken up before the actual story begins. The narration starts with Keith, a clerk working in one of the towers, who survives the attack and, in a state of a complete shock, asks to be taken straight to his ex-wife's apartment. He starts a new relationship with Lianne (they have also a son, Justin) even if Keith starts seeing, during the first weeks, also another woman who worked in the same tower. The narration evolves across several months: Lianne is obsessed with the publication of a book related to 9/11, while Keith becomes a gambler at Las Vegas. The second plot involves a young Muslim boy who immigrates to the USA in order to become an engineer and then one

of the terrorists actively engaged in the attack on the Twin Towers. The last chapter constitutes the end of the second plot and the ante-fact of the first.

The circular structure of the novel obliges us to reflect on the metamorphosis of the perception of time in the catastrophic representation: the linear sequence of events becomes infinite/repetitive, bearing a striking resemblance to the images of 9/11 that were continually transmitted on TV. This structure, similar to a narrative loop, acquires shape both in the circularity of the plot and in the specific consciousness of the characters. Keith, who becomes a poker player, in this way expresses the deep distress of his shocked mind, unable to return to the daily routine after the catastrophic event; Lianne gives testimony to the possibility of a contra-narrative of the event with her laboratory of creative storytelling for Alzheimer's patients, with its pathological return of segments, fragments and words; the young terrorist lives in a parallel dimension, where everything is finalized towards the ultimate end, the death in the name of Allah, so his is an a-temporal life, where love and sorrow have no a real significance for the plot and for the character.

The absence of a linear and progressive strategy of emplotment could also be related to the contemporary crisis of experience discussed above. As Benjamin has illustrated in his famous essay concerning Baudelaire (Benjamin 1981), the worker undergoes the same alienation of the worker, in the repetition of the same action through a temporality which is linear and at the same time invisible. For Keith, only the adrenalin intrinsic in the ambivalent "mise en scène" of the poker game becomes a link to the old passion for life.

The conspiracy emplotment typical, as we have seen above, of the postmodern aesthetic, is here represented in the children's game and in the race discrimination, two narrative structures through which the logic of terror, an essential feature of the American post 9/11 politics, is at the same time exhibited and deconstructed. The game played by Justin, Lianne and Keith's son, together with two other children is paradigmatic in exposing the construction of the hermetic semiosis claimed by Eco: the invention of Bill Lawton, a deformation of Bin Laden, the secret story of the intrigue about the airplanes' collision, the fact that none of children wants to take consciousness of the disaster that had taken place: all these elements show the enactment of the logic of terror but, at the same time, they displace it, in a kind of parody. Lianne's violent reaction to Arabic music coming from her neighbourhood is the result of paranoid semanticization in which the logic of conspiracy and complot is, for the contemporary neurotic, the only way to give shape the external world.

Analysing the direct description of 9/11 in New York, the entire first scene of the novel is taken from a bottom-up perspective from the street. The scene is full of objects, ruins, raw materials which have entered in the common scenario of the collective imagination: falling papers, pieces of clothes, rags, ash by now become an irremovable part of the collective imagery of 9/11:

It was not a street anymore, but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night. He was walking north through rubble and mud and there were people running past holding towels to their faces or jackets of their heads. [...] The roar was still in the air, the buckling rumble of the fall. This was the world now. Smoke and ash came rolling down 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. (DeLillo 2011: 5)

The obliteration of signification intrinsic in a lost relationship with the reality and its object is represented and symbolized by the little red briefcase Keith picks up and takes away with him during his escape from the tower. This object, which belongs to a woman who also works there and who falls down the stairs when Keith is passing becomes a compulsive bond with the traumatic experience, exorcised with a brief sexual relationship between Keith and Florence, the briefcase owner.

The alienated perception of the new configuration of the world is rendered on the textual surface with the rhetoric trope of anaphora and repetition applied to the description of the destroyed landscape, as we can read in this passage where Keith is trying to reach his old apartment:

The first cop told him to go to the checkpoint one block east of here and he did this and there were military police and troops in Humvees and a convoy of dump trucks and sanitation sweepers moving south through the parted sawhorse barriers. He showed proof and address with picture ID and the second cop told him to the next check point, east of here, and he did this and saw a chain-link barrier stretching down the middle of Broadway, patrolled by troops in gas masks. (DeLillo 2011: 19)

The last chapter is entirely devoted to the description of what happens aboard one of the airplanes during the very moment of the attack. The narrator tries to offer a possible narration of what happened “inside” the event, its hidden performative dimension. Inside the airplane the focalization is centered on Hammad, the young terrorist whose enrolment in the conspiracy intrigue is exposed in interpolated sections of the novel. His consciousness is completely obliterated and the trope of repetition takes here the form of a prayer he repeats in his head, one of the prayers learnt during the training taught by another terrorist, Amir:

Recite the sacred words.

Pull your clothes tightly about you.

Fix your gaze.

Carry your soul in your hand.

He believed he could see straight into the towers even though his back was to them. He didn't know the aircraft's location but believed he could see straight out the back of his head and through the steel and aluminium of the aircraft and into the long silhouettes, the shapes the forms, the figure coming closer, the material things. (DeLillo 2011: 169)

The shift from Hammad's to Keith's perspective presents itself as an osmotic process that occurs in the same sentence: as the airplane collides with the tower, the perspective shifts to Keith, who escapes from his office:

A bottle fell off the counter of gallery, on the other side of the aisle, and he [the terrorist] watched it roll this way and that, a water bottle, empty, making an arc, one way and rolling back the other, and he watched it spin more quickly and then skitter across the door an instant before the aircraft struck the tower, heat, then fuel, then fire, and a blast wave passed through the structure that sent Keith Neudecker out of his chair and into the a wall. He found himself walking into a wall. (DeLillo 2011: 169)

[Fig. 3]



Fig. 3: Jonathan Torgovnik returned the next morning to take this photo from the fifth-floor window of the neighbouring 1 Liberty Plaza, which was also in danger of falling.

In 2007, the same year when Don DeLillo published *The Falling Man*, another post-9/11 novel hit the bookshops becoming an almost instant international best-seller. As our analysis of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid (2008) will show, this particular text occupies the ambiguous space between the second and the third subgroups proposed by Christina Rickli. Although the novel has been advertised and often presented as a perfect example of the 9/11 genre,¹ it will be argued here that, on the narrative level, the events of 9/11 are one of the links in a longer chain of other episodes in the protagonist's life. From that, we can deduce that the overall purpose would be to give the reader a larger picture of the narrator's view on a number of major contemporary issues such as, first and foremost, America's dominant economic, political and cultural position in our globalized world.

¹ In fact, the most quoted excerpt from the novel is the passage found on p. 83: "I stared as one – and then the other – of the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center collapsed. And then I *smiled*," where the author uses italics in an explicitly provocative way.

The events of 9/11 happen approximately one third way into the narration, with the protagonist out of the country and away from New York, where he had moved shortly before the events. In her essay, Schultermandl (Schultermandl 2010) discusses the “turn to visual” as a representational strategy used by authors of several examples of post-9/11 novels. According to her, in literary representations of the terrorists’ attacks on the Twin Towers, it has become customary to incorporate ekphrastic details accompanied by an extended discussion of the relationship between fiction and “the real”. Hamid’s novel is not an exception to this rule: here is the passage that describes how the protagonist learns about the events that later in the novel are revealed to be one of the causes of profound changes in his life:

The following evening was supposed to be our last in Manila. I was in my room, packing my things. I turned on the television and saw what at first I took to be a film. But as I continued to watch, I realized that it was not fiction but news. I stared as one – and then the other – of the twin towers of New York’s World Trade Center collapsed. And then I smiled. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased. (2008: 82-83)

[Fig. 4]



Fig. 4: 9/11 Footage. Photograph by Francesc Torres. 9/11, as seen live on television in Barcelona, Spain. Photographed at roughly 3 p.m. local time by Maria Iturrioz de Torres, Francesc Torres’s mother, while they spoke by phone.

This scene gives us a good idea of the narratological strategies employed by the author of the book. The entire novel can be defined as a dramatic monologue given by the homodiegetic narrator, according to Gerard Genette’s terminology, whose name is Changez. The first part of the story, that roughly coincides with the pre-9/11 period, is a success story of an immigrant who majestically fulfils his personal

American dream. Changez leaves Pakistan to graduate at Princeton University and, at the time the terrorists' attacks take place, he is twenty-two and employed by a highly prestigious New York based American firm. Changez' monological recounting of the past seven years of his life (he is twenty-five at the time the narration begins, eighteen when the flashbacks start taking him through his autobiographical journey) is cleverly masked as a dialogue with a mysterious silent interlocutor he meets in a café in Lahore, Pakistan. Hamid's choice to present Changez's story in the latter's own words in order to focalize the attention on this one version of the protagonist's past, has led several critics to speak of the narrator as unreliable (Siddika 2008). However, the narrator's reliability does not come into question when we analyse the passage quoted above. The scene it depicts evokes images and memories shared by millions of people all around the globe. The TV footage of the collapse of the Twin Towers has unquestionably become the iconic image of the beginning of the twenty-first century that signalled the major historical, political and cultural caesura with the millennium that had ended a year before. In this light, Hamid's decision to locate Changez, at the time of the attack, several thousand miles away from his new home town, and to represent the collapse of the Towers as seen on TV, can be interpreted as an attempt to make an even stronger and more shocking subsequent impact. In other words, if the majority of the readers will recognize themselves in Changez (who at first mistakes the news for an incredibly realistic film), the same readers will be instantly disgusted and repelled by the description of Changez's reaction upon realization that the collapse did indeed take place in "real life". The sentence «And then I *smiled*», immediately reinforced by the following «Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased» (2008: 83) leave no space for the slightest doubt as to the nature of Changez's reaction to the attacks. This reaction, expressed so explicitly, can easily lead to the condemnation of this fictional character as that of an amoral and unethical person. After this strong opening announcing the beginning of the post-9/11 part of the narration, Hamid immediately endeavours to mitigate the negative impact that these two sentences would almost certainly have on the majority of the readers:

Your disgust is evident; indeed, your large hand has, perhaps without your noticing, clenched into a fist. But please believe me when I tell you that I am no sociopath; I am not indifferent to the suffering of others. When I hear of an acquaintance who has been diagnosed with a serious illness, I feel – almost without fail – a sympathetic pain, a twinge in my kidneys strong enough to elicit a wince. When I am approached for a donation to charity, I tend to be forthcoming, at least insofar as my modest means will permit. So when I tell you I was pleased at the slaughter of thousands of innocents, I do so with a profound sense of perplexity. But at that moment, my thoughts were not with the *victims* of the attack – death on television moves me most when it is fictitious and happens to characters with whom I have built up relationships over multiple episodes – no, I was caught up in the *symbolism* of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees. Ah, I see I am only compounding your displeasure. I understand, of course; it is hateful to hear another person gloat over one's country's misfortune. But surely you cannot be completely innocent of such feelings yourself. Do you feel no joy at the video clips – so prevalent these days – of American munitions laying waste the structures of your enemies? (2008: 83-84)

Considering the number of major contemporary issues such are ethics and the politics of representation on the one hand and the postmodern crisis of experience on the other that are presented here, this is one the key passages in the book. Two points here deserve a closer analysis: the double occurrence of the word “innocent”, in the first case as a noun applied to the people who fell as direct victims of the terrorists’ attacks (line 7 above), and, as an adjective in the second case, when referred to Changez’s interlocutor’s feelings (line 13). This double occurrence of the same term, clearly in contrast between the two occasions, skilfully connects different real events that acquire new meanings when they are inserted in their respective socio-political contexts. The TV coverage of “the slaughter of thousands of innocents” in New York is apparently juxtaposed with the video clips telling the story of America’s war on terror. The subtle link between the representations of these real life events are the unethical reactions of the Pakistani immigrant on the one hand and the American citizen’s likewise (presumed) unethical reactions to this different kind of slaughter on the other. Universal ethics here is brutally transcended and the value of human life is revealed to be attached not to the shared corporeal vulnerability (Butler 2004), but to attributing the innocence to certain victims of certain (un)justified attacks. Hence the rhetoric of innocence, with full justice applied to those who died as a result of 9/11, loses its power in the case of the destruction of “the structures of your enemies”, whether these may ultimately turn out to be (presumably) innocent civilians. This is not merely a question of representation not being *innocent*. More broadly, it can be argued that the question Hamid is trying to pose is that of establishing a link between the concept of innocence, understood as a right to life, and the decision-making process that not just individuals, but entire nations regulate in order to grant this right to some and deprive others of the same right.

At this point, it has to be stressed that there is hardly any novelty in the message communicated in this given passage from *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Indeed, among the intellectuals engaged in debates on ethics and the politics of representation in the aftermath of the attacks that took place on the American soil in September 2001, Terry Eagleton voiced his concerns on the ontological nature of these undoubtedly tragic events: «September 11 was a human catastrophe, but it scarcely registers on the Richter scale of historical atrocity» (Eagleton 2003), he says and continues by stressing the fact that the tragedy of 9/11 should not be attributed a greater weight than other human miseries that happen to take place outside the United States. In this heavily politically-laden article Eagleton is not exercising his profession of a literary critic, but his intellectual right for an opinion expressed by someone with a sharp grasp of the current global socio-political situation. However, elsewhere, as Slavoj Žižek reports (Žižek 2003), the British critic introduces a distinction between two types of a catastrophe, which is very relevant to our discussion of the passage from *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. The differences between these two types can be briefly summarised by presenting their distinguishing temporal and geographical characteristics: the catastrophes of the first type, according to Eagleton, take place in the First World

countries and receive an immediate media response which makes it possible to *experience* the event mediated by TV or the Internet “in real time” anywhere around the globe (and 9/11 is a paradigmatic example of this first type of a catastrophe). Predictably, the catastrophes classified as the second type occur exclusively in the countries of the Third World. These catastrophes often stretch into time and in most cases pass completely unobserved since they hardly receive any due media attention (starting from natural disasters to civil wars and genocides).

Hamid’s message is, arguably, more focalized and can easily be related to the red thread of his argument running through the entire novel. The hegemonic role that the United States play on the global political and economic scene and on the consequences their actions have on the people all around the globe is under scrutiny from different perspectives in several parts of the novel. If we go back to the same passage quoted above, the author, in our opinion, very explicitly presents the events of 9/11 and the episodes of the American intervention in unspecified third countries on the same ontological level of a human catastrophe, be it of the first type or of the second in Eagleton’s terms. However, unlike the British critic, Hamid is capable of making the reader ponder on the same questions in a more effective way presenting them by the means of literary representation. As such, literature here demonstrates the power to convey a profound ethical message, in our case, an appeal to reflect on the value of human life today, by narrating a different kind of story.

The second crucial message that is contained in the same passage of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* concerns the line that separates fiction and the “real reality”, i.e., the crisis of experience in the postmodern age where all of us are engaged in a process of constant negotiation between mediated representations and real life experiences. Going back to DeLillo, this is how the writer expresses his point of view on the matter, this time in a newspaper article published three months after the attacks:

The events of September 11 were covered unstintingly. There was no confusion of roles on TV. 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. (DeLillo 2001)

The unreality of the events when “seen on TV”, highlighted already in the first passage excerpted from *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, is dwelt upon more thoroughly in the next two paragraphs quoted above, when Changez makes a reference to the TV sitcoms. The Pakistani author deliberately evokes the subject of the death of fictional characters («death on television moves me most when it is fictitious and happens to characters with whom I have built up relationships over multiple episodes», lines 8-10 above) as represented in the TV series, once again, in an insensible comparison to the deaths of real people seen in the TV coverage of the 9/11 attacks. It may be deemed opinionable to try to establish what kind of operation Hamid is performing here: whether he is ironically mocking the emotional in-

volevement with the TV-series characters or highlighting the positive side-effects of watching TV (that brings out empathic feeling in spectators). The third hypothesis would be that he is trying to justify the protagonist's initial reaction to the footage of 9/11 by underlining the fictional dimension of the TV representation of the catastrophe. However, the effect that is achieved by drawing this comparison is exactly that of questioning the specificity of media representations of death and our (in)ability to deal with "real" death as represented on TV.

Albeit from a different perspective than that of Antonio Scurati, the crisis of experience is also powerfully evoked by Mauro Carbone in his essay *Essere morti insieme* (Carbone 2007). The starting point for the reflection on what it means to speak of experience in the age of postmodernity is a recollection of an encounter that took place in New York shortly after the events of 9/11. This encounter, that caused an overwhelming emotional impact on the Italian philosopher, occurred when Carbone saw a wall filled with posters and pictures of people who went missing after the attacks on WTC. Four years later, trying to bring back the state of mind he found himself in that day, Carbone starts his essay by asking himself and the reader the following fundamental questions:

Impossibile difendersi. Impossibile non venire travolti dalla violenza dell'impatto emotivo, che colpiva ancora e ancora, senza mai diminuire. Per un tempo interminabile, impossibile anche solo pensare di potersi allontanare. Poi, inevitabilmente andarsene sentendosi per sempre segnati da quell'incontro, per sempre abitati da un'esperienza di intensità sconosciuta e insostenibile.[...] Era possibile *farne parola* senza tradire questa intensità? Possibile elaborarla e condividerla? Ma prima ancora: a che scopo cercare di farlo? (Carbone 2007: 9-10)

In the same newspaper article quoted above, Don DeLillo intercepts Carbone's questions by providing his answers ahead:

The event itself has no purchase on the mercies of analogy or simile. We have to take the shock and horror as it is. But living language is not diminished. The writer wants to understand what this day has done to us. Is it too soon? We seem pressed for time, all of us. Time is scarcer now. There is a sense of compression, plans made hurriedly, time forced and distorted. But language is inseparable from the world that provokes it. The writer begins in the towers, trying to imagine the moment, desperately. Before politics, before history and religion, there is the primal terror. People falling from the towers hand in hand. This is part of the counternarrative, hands and spirits joining, human beauty in the crush of meshed steel. In its desertion of every basis for comparison, the event asserts its singularity. There is something empty in the sky. The writer tries to give memory, tenderness and meaning to all that howling space. (DeLillo 2001)

Carbone, in line with DeLillo, dedicates the major part of his essay to the singularity of the event. By drawing on the thoughts and reflections dedicated to 9/11 by the most prominent thinkers of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries,² the Italian philosopher stresses the *excessiveness* of the event, its

² Carbone discusses in detail the following works: Borradori G. (2003), *Dialoghi con Jürgen Habermas e Jacques Derrida*, Roma-Bari, Laterza; Baudrillard J. (2002), *Power inferno: requiem per le twin towers, ipotesi sul terrorismo, la violenza del globale*, R. Cortina, Milano; Baudrillard J. (2002), *Lo spirito del terrorismo*, R. Cortina, Milano.

key features of *irreducibility* and impossibility to compare it to any other event in our shared experience. The only other major historical occurrence that Carbone places on the opposite side of the scale of events is the Shoah. According to the Italian scholar, 9/11 and the Shoah share the same characteristics of phenomena that exceed the historical and social dynamics of the different eras that had generated them. Once again, their *excessiveness* ultimately results in the affirmation of their *irrepresentability*,³ where this last feature becomes the bridge that connects the two events in the popular imagery.

Hence, drawing mainly on Baudrillard and Deleuze,⁴ Carbone undertakes his own interpretation of the film *11th September 2001* by Alejandro González Iñárritu, assigning to this work of art the capacity to reshape the event in our imagination, to reduce its force, its enormity and excessiveness to more “human” dimensions, transforming the catastrophe into something more tolerable, bearable on an individual level. The Mexican producer achieves this effect by refusing to succumb to the desire to narrate his story of the event and chooses, in Carbone’s words, to recount instead the very impossibility to narrate such a story.

Both Don DeLillo and Mohsin Hamid can be said to have attempted to narrate the story of 9/11 from very different perspectives (and, in DeLillo’s case, from more than one perspective); however, their attempts clearly had to be framed within the imposing boundaries of the narrative representation. The constraints of the chosen genre and the expectations that these texts are bound to do not apply, as Pöhlmann argues, to poetry defined as «a form of expression and imagination [that] operates according to a different set of conventions than fiction» (Pöhlmann 2010) In this light, “L’uomo che cade” (“The Falling Man”) by the young Italian poet Lorenzo Mari (2009), can be presented as a beautifully written and thought-provoking example of how poetry can overcome the limitations of the narrative representation and offer a different approach to both the issue of irrepresentability and the crisis of experience in the postmodern age:

³ On the discussion of the impossibility to represent the Shoah see Didi-Huberman G. (2004), *Images malgré tout*, Paris: Minuit. It. ed. Didi-Huberman G. (2005), *Immagini malgrado tutto*. Milano: R. Cortina. On 9/11, Carbone quotes Derrida (in Borradori 2003) who draws our attention to the fact that the conclusion we all are subjected to to repeat, in an almost obsessive way, the date of 9/11 stands symbolically for the impulse to hide that we do not know what we are talking about, i.e., our inability to deal with this kind of experience (Carbone 2007: 57-60), while Baudrillard argues that the uniqueness of the event and precisely our inability to attribute a meaning to it is what makes it singular and irrepresentable (in Carbone 2007: 65). Belpoliti (in Belpoliti M. (2005), *Crolli*, Torino: Einaudi) can be said to agree with both philosophers: “Le numerose immagini e parole che possediamo - fotografie, filmati, registrazioni audio, testimonianze scritte - di questo evento [...] rivelano l’impossibilità di rappresentare l’evento e la sua enormità”.

⁴ The passage in question is taken from *Power Inferno* (Baudrillard 2002: 17): “Se ha potuto sognare di essere questo evento materiale, che assorbe ogni rappresentazione possibile, l’arte è ben lontana dall’aver raggiunto il suo obiettivo, e nulla oggi può essere equiparato o commisurato a un evento del genere, nulla che appartenga all’ordine dell’immaginazione o della rappresentazione” (quoted in Carbone 2007: 67). The allusion to Deleuze concerns here the philosopher’s reflection on the attempts on the part of the figurative arts to break away from the representative, illustrative and narrative tradition in the twentieth century (Carbone 2007: 67).

L'uomo che cade

(Lo vedi,
l'uomo che cade? –

Che domanda cretina,
tutti lo stanno vedendo, tutti!,
in questo preciso momento. –

E se ne ricorderanno
“come se fosse adesso”,
fossilizzando il gesto...
Ma tu davvero lo vedi,
l'uomo che cade? –

Si. Vedo anche che a nulla è servita
la lotta quotidiana, la polvere,
la paccottiglia in una nuova forma
d'amore e il movimento del viceversa. –

Non ti credo, e non soltanto perchè sei
falsa disperazione: tu non lo vedi davvero,
non lo vedi realmente, l'uomo che cade –

Si. –

No, che non lo vedi. –

Si. –

No. –

(...)

Non ti credo, ti sbagli,
non lo vedi. Te ne fornisco prova
appena si schianta. –

(...) Ecco,

non lo vedevi:
l'uomo morto, contrariamente a quanto sostenevi,
non aveva nessuna mela,
in mano.)
[Fig. 5]



Fig. 5: Image from the film *Man on Wire*, directed by James Marsh, with Philippe Petit.

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