

# [The value of artistic responses to 9 11: "september 11, 2001” and "falling man”](https://assignbuster.com/the-value-of-artistic-responses-to-911-september-11-2001-and-falling-man/)

“ Fact or fiction? Which is the best way to handle an event as momentous as 9/11?” – Michael Billington.

In the wake of the 9/11 terror attacks, media and non-fictional responses were rife; the image of the burning Twin Towers is one which has become embedded in the global consciousness. However, amongst these ‘ factual’ depictions, there emerged a new genre of fiction: 9/11 fiction. Indeed, novelists, playwrights and poets all came forward with their attempts at responding to the tragedy through the medium of the literary arts. Don DeLillo’s Falling Man[1] and Michel Vinaver’s September 11, 2001[2] are just two instances of these responses. However, 9/11 fiction is a significantly problematic genre. The necessity to convey something that goes beyond spectacle, combined with the perceived obligation to present the event respectfully, renders it a difficult task to confront. Aimee Pozorski epitomises this perceived dilemma of the literary artist: “ Those artists who choose beauty must answer for their aestheticization of violence. Those artists who choose minimalism must answer for their reductive symbols. Those artists who choose nothing must answer for their silence”[3]. In light of this, it can be argued that fiction is unable to act as an appropriate response to 9/11, and that non-fiction is the only viable means by which to do so. Michael Billington, in his review of Rupert Goold’s anthology of 9/11 playlets, poses the very question which underpins this discussion: “ Fact or fiction? Which is the best way to handle an event as momentous as 9/11?”[4].

It is tempting to argue that art, of both literary and other forms, has no place in response to 9/11. That the attempts of the artist to capture the event are futile bids to represent that which cannot be represented. From this view, a large portion of the ‘ un-representable’ matter surrounding 9/11 lies in the quandary of attempting to recreate and portray human emotion. Certainly, the emotional provocation of 9/11 spanned far beyond those who experienced it first-hand; the televising of the event rendered all the world spectators. This mass sense of shock and grief may be deemed to fall outside of the scope of artistic representation, especially given the relative recentness of the attacks. Sarah Lloyd suggests that Septembre 11, 2001 stands as a prime example of emotion being lost in translation: “ He layers the media accounts and speeches in a precise, unemotional – even cold – manner that makes the play difficult to approach”[5]. Indeed, Vinaver avoids the inclusion of stage directions, and makes no use of punctuation. He offers no indicators regarding tone or action; he gives nothing more than the words themselves in a raw, undramatised state. Although this is true for the entirety of the play, the effects of this technique are particularly evident as Vinaver imitates key moments in the timeline of the 9/11 attack. Immediately before the depiction of the initial collision between Flight 11 and the North Tower, the actual last words of flight attendant Madeline Sweeney appear: “ Oh my god oh my god”[6]. The absence of an exclamation point, or indeed any indication that the words should be infused with emotion, seems to solidify the notion of a distinct ‘ coldness’ underpinning the play.

In contrast, DeLillo’s falling man is a novel which is predominantly focussed with the emotional aftermath of the survivor. Indeed, fictional protagonist Keith Neudecker and his attempts to cope with his experience occupy the core of the novel. The plot opens with Keith in the thick of the attacks; we see the horror and chaos on the ground, but we see it only through the eyes of the protagonist. Christina Cavedon supports and expands upon this notion as she suggests that “ DeLillo portrays the events and their aftermath exclusively in terms of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder”[7]. Here, Cavedon underlines the implications of viewing 9/11 through the eyes of a survivor, as she suggests that everything that is portrayed is done so through the lens of trauma. This is particularly evident as Keith witnesses the fall of the North Tower, and the narrator states that ““ That was him coming down, the north tower”[8]. By forming personal ties between Keith and the North Tower, it becomes clear that this novel is unconcerned with the global, or even national repercussions of 9/11. What it is more concerned with is the internal, emotional repercussions for the individual. It also notable that Keith is not the only character whose emotional journey underpins the narrative; the aftermath for his ex-wife Lianne, although experiencing the event only indirectly, is given considerable consideration. Adam Mars-Jones goes so far as to suggest that her journey is more saturated by emotional fractures than Keith’s: “ Lianne wasn’t in the towers that fell, but she is the one who comes closer to breaking down”[9]. Indeed, she obsesses over the media in a bid to come to terms with what has happened, and subscribes to the sweeping generalisations which condemn the entirety of Islam. This is evident as she attacks her neighbour, Elena, for playing Middle Eastern music too loudly, accusing Elena of doing it as a personal attack. The fragility of Leanne’s mental state is delineated, as she loses the ability to distinguish between that which is harmless and that which demonstrates personal hostility. In contrast, Keith’s ‘ emotional aftermath’ is far less emotional, as a sense of disconnectedness acts as his coping mechanism. It is interesting to note that Leanne is depicted as the more emotionally damaged by the attacks, yet she never experiences them directly. In light of this, DeLillo seems to suggest that, in the wake of such an unprecedented tragedy, all of America are entitled to their own survivor’s journey. In contrast to Vinaver, DeLillo seems to successfully underpin the issue of representing human emotion and trauma by converting the public spectacle of 9/11 into a deeply personal one. Therefore, it can be argued that Septembre 11, 2001 and Falling Man serve as two texts which fail and succeed in confronting the issue of emotional representation respectively.

However, if 9/11 is truly ‘ unrepresentable’, then to deduce that this issue applies solely to the fictional response is contradictory; non-fictional responses, particularly those produced by the media, are equally as problematic. It is tempting to argue that direct recordings of the attacks and their aftermath, in both video and audio format, portray an indisputable truth. However, this truth is limited to the visual; it displays the aesthetic element of 9/11, but it places it against a backdrop of selective context. Jean Baudrillard, in his article “ The Spirit of Terrorism”, alludes to this notion of context being superimposed onto the image: “ In this case, then, the real is superadded to the image like a bonus of terror, like an additional frisson…the image is there first, and the frisson of the real is added”[10]. This is reminiscent of Badurillard’s 1981 discourse on hyperreality and simulacrum, in which he argues that ‘ reality’ has become second to the image. That it is a malignant phenomenon which distorts and disjoints the ‘ real’, until the image comes to “ mask the absence of a profound reality”[11]. Indeed, he goes on to suggest that “ Reality and fiction are inextricable, and the fascination with the attack is primarily a fascination with the image (both its exultatory and its catastrophic consequences are themselves largely imaginary)”[12]. Yet, it is this superimposed sense of ‘ catastrophe’ which pervades the image of 9/11; in Baudrillard’s view, any deeper meaning or significance has been lost been lost behind the ‘ spectacle’. Jean Genet, in his 1983 essay recounting his experiences at a refugee camp, makes a powerful comment on the nature of media representations. Arriving just two days after the Sabra and Shatila massacre, which saw the mass slaughter of Palestinian refugees by militant forces, he underlines the inability of media imagery to adequately capture the “ flies nor the thick white smell of death”[13]. With a sense of broader relevance, he states that “ A photograph has two dimensions, so does a television screen; neither can be walked through’[14]. Here, Genet epitomises the notion that, when severed from the situational and emotional contexts of ‘ the moment’, an image becomes disjointed. In the absence of its original context, a void is created; this void is left open to exploitation by both the media and those with a political agenda. Indeed, Baudrillard delineates the tendencies of the media to pursue an agenda which is separate from truth as he states that “ There is no “ good” use of the media; the media are part of the event, they are part of the terror, and they work in both directions”[15]

In light of this, the style employed by Vinaver throughout Septembre 11, 2001 can be read in a new light. His omission of stage direction or punctuation acts as a component of the minimalist style which underpins the play. Written in the weeks following the attacks, and amongst the height of the proceeding media storm, the emergence of this minimalist artistic response allowed for a sense of distance from this media fuelled ‘ spectacle’. By filtering all perceived emotional and situational context from the events of 9/11, and stripping them down to a “ precise, unemotional”[16] state, Vinaver essentially reopens the ‘ void’. He removes those elements of 9/11 which have so often been manipulated, but omits to offer a replacement; instead, he affords his audience the independence to interpret their own meaning. Giuseppe Sofo aligns himself with this view as he suggests that “ The “ deaestheticization” of Vinaver’s theatre is transmitted through the aesthetic choice to leave art out of art, to transform the author into a translator of reality, rather than into a creator, and it had allowed him to re-represent a reality that had been drowned in its own overexposure”[17]. Indeed, the ‘ artistic’ nature of Vinaver’s play is interesting, as his aesthetic lies in what he removes as opposed to what he adds. What he achieves is essentially a reverse abstraction; all that survives his minimalist filter is that which was indisputably true to begin with. Sarah Lloyd, although initially standing at odds with this view and commenting on Vinaver’s conveyance of ‘ coldness’, goes on to counteract this, as she suggests that: “ by doing so, he requires spectators to participate in the production by bringing their emotions and imagination into play”[18]. Consequently, she realigns herself with the notion that, through the omission of solid emotion, he allows for a new level of personal emotional contemplation. Although this means of fictional response is no more ‘ realistic’ than its non-fictional counterparts, its honesty allows it to adhere more strongly to a sense of ethical responsibility. Art, unlike media and other ‘ non-fiction’ mediums, is self-conscious of its artifice; it does not attempt to present itself as a work of undiluted truth.

Returning to the aforementioned words of Sofo, he ends his statement by referring to 9/11 as “ a reality that had been drowned in its own overexposure”[19]. Indeed, media responses to 9/11 seem to revolve around one pivotal image: smoke billowing from the World Trade Centre, as a second plane approaches for collision. This image is one that inundated audiences after the attack and, to a lesser degree, continues to do so until today. Here, Sofo questions the efficiency of this inundation. Anneke Smelik alight herself with Sofo’s notion, whilst also offering an explanation of reasoning: “ an impressive image only has impact when we no longer see it, because the repetition of these images has a dulling or numbing effect”[20]. Both Sofo and Smelik suggest that the excessive circulation of the aforementioned image of the plane and the smoking twin towers, rather than continuously increasing audience response, actually begins to diminish it. In September 11, 2001, after relaying the final moments of passenger Todd and flight attendant Madeline, the inevitable scenes of destruction are visually excluded. In their place are simply audio effects which echo the sounds of impact; these are indicated by the closest thing to stage directions in the entire play: “ SOUND: THE CRASH OF AN AIRPLANE”[21]. In light of the notion that the poignancy of a constantly repeated image is diminished, together with Sofo’s suggestion that 9/11 has become subject to “ overexposure”[22], Vinaver’s omission of the actual impact between the planes and the towers takes on a powerful significance. Indeed, Vinaver intentionally avoids any direct visual representation of either crash. In doing this, he prevents his play from contributing to the “ overexposure” of this image, and forces the audience to experience the events in a way which they have not become ‘ numb’ towards.

On the other hand, although he does not directly depict the collision, DeLillo does depict the subsequent devastation. As Keith passes through the “ smoke and ash”, the “ stink of fuel fire”, and the “ figures in windows a thousand feet up, dropping into free space”, the image presented seems fitting with the smoking towers of the core media image. However, what DeLillo endeavours to do is to avoid the drawbacks of the photograph and the television screen that Genet underlines. Indeed, he endeavours to write a fictional novel which can in fact “ be walked through”[23]; the “ thick white smell of death” is exactly what DeLillo manages to recreate. Perhaps the most poignant example of this occurs during the final chapter. The narrative returns to the day of the attacks, albeit a slightly earlier point in the timeline, and graphically depicts the death of Keith’s friend and co-worker, Rumsey: “ Something came trickling from the corner of Rumsey’s mouth, like bile…He saw the marks on his head, an indentation, a gouge mark, deep, exposing raw tissue and nerve”[24]. DeLillo, although not omitting the symbol of “ overexposure” in the same way as Vinaver, effectively presents it in an alternative way to the media. He does not reopen the void of context, he simply reimagines what the media has instilled by attempting to create a three-dimensional reality. DeLillo conveys this reality through the eyes of a survivor, whose fictional nature renders him a mouldable figure; Keith can be manipulated as necessary to explore multiple layers of 9/11 devastation.

Another issue facing the post-9/11 literary movement is the possibility of undercutting the world narrative by placing an exaggerated amount of focus on one event whilst obscuring both its preluding and proceeding contexts. This expansive context is emphasized by Baudrillard as he suggests that the issue of terrorism “ reaches far beyond Islam or America, on which efforts are being made to focus the conflict in order to create the delusion of a visible confrontation and a solution based on force”[25]. Here, Baudrillard suggests that the previously discussed image of 9/11 is one which takes into account only a disjointed spectacle; it presents the impossibility an effect without a cause. He also implies that this spectacle is intentionally used to divert focus away from a cause in order to offer an illusion of justice for the attacks. However, Baudrillard also underlines the futility of this diversion: “ we can say that they did it, but we wished for it. If this is not taken into account, the event loses any symbolic dimension”[26]. For Baudrillard, a failure to understand the symbolism of the image in light of its wider context serves to instigate further acts of terror and war. Fiction and theatre writers occupy a position which allows for the discussion and exposure of this wider context; therefore, 9/11 fiction can once again offer a more valuable medium of response than non-fiction. A Key Aspect of Vinaver’s work is the use of multiple angles from which to view the event, and it is one which allows him to fulfil his ‘ responsibility’ in examining the importance of cause and effect. This is perhaps most evident as he layers the political voices of Bush and Bin Laden on top of one another. Their speeches intersect, with each leader speaking alternate lines. The rapid pace of these shifts in focus forces the audience to consider each man’s words in light of the other’s, and reveals distinct parallels between them. In doing this, Vinaver acknowledges that the seeds of terrorism sprout from both sides of the conflict. For example, both leaders perceive their people as having been wronged, and both seek retribution and justice. Indeed, Vinaver suggests an echo of Baudrillard’s stance on the ‘ War on Terror’: “ This is terror against terror”[27]. Furthermore, through the use of this layering technique, Vinaver infuses a sense of irony into their words. Immediately after Bin Laden speaks the words “ May God shield us”[28], Bush says “ May God continue to bless us”[29]. These are taken from actual speeches from the two leaders, both given in the wake of the attacks. By taking both of these excerpts and placing them side by side, Vinaver delineates the absurdity of the conflict. As Bin Laden is motivated to wage war on the “ infidels” of America on the behalf of God, Bush addresses the same God and asks for his continued ‘ blessing’. Perhaps, in terms of a world narrative, this implies that both Bush and Bin Laden are using God as an excuse to pursue more self-serving agendas.

Nevertheless, Pankaj Mishra argues that the majority of post-9/11 works fail to utilise the power of the writer; that they evade their responsibility to explore the roots of such acts of violence and to expose the uncut world narrative in a way that the media does not. Indeed, in his article “ The End of Innocence”, he questions the ability of 9/11 fiction to discuss the event in terms of its long term political and ideological triggers: “ Composed within the narcissistic heart of the west, most 9/11 fictions seem unable to acknowledge political and ideological belief as a social and emotional reality in the world – the kind of fact that cannot be reduced to the individual experience of rage, envy, sexual frustration and constipation”[30]. In particular, Mishra criticises the novelist’s attention to the domestic aftermath of the survivor as he poses the question: “ Are we meant to think of domestic discord as a metaphor for post-9/11 America?”[31]. DeLillo appears to subscribe to this accusation throughout Falling Man. Indeed, his focus on the domestic aftermath has become the subject of significant criticism. In the wake of the attacks, Keith and Lianne’s relationship begins to fracture; this is often read as an attempt to reflect the fractures of a post-9/11 America, both in itself and with the rest of the world. In contrast, in DeLillo’s initial, non-fictional response to 9/11, published in Harper Magazine three months after the event, he pointedly acknowledges the complexity of the wider world narrative: “ Terror’s response is a narrative that has been developing over years, only now becoming inescapable”[32]. However, In Falling Man, he seemingly disregards this notion, opting instead to focus on the “ individual experiences”[33] of Keith and Lianne. Mishra draws on this initial, non-fiction response of DeLillo to inform his reading of Falling Man as he argues that “ he remains strangely incurious about their pasts and their societies, and he makes little attempt to analyse, in the light of the biggest ever terrorist atrocity, the origin and appeal of political violence”[34]. Here, Mishra underlines the contrast between DeLillo’s two responses; the comparison suggests that his political understanding of 9/11 is lost in translation from non-fiction to fiction.

However, in contrast to the view of Mishra, DeLillo does not entirely disregard the broader significance of extremist terrorism; he does grapple with the necessity of cause and effect. Similarly to Vinaver’s depiction of Bin Laden, he does so through the implementation of the terrorist as a point of view character. Whether implementing real-life characters or superimposing fictional representations, the characterisation of those responsible for such suffering is difficult to navigate. If handled incorrectly, writers become susceptible to accusations of misplaced sympathies or a lack of respect for the dead. DeLillo himself has expressed a conflict between his reluctance to consider the viewpoint of the terrorist and his perceived “ novelistic responsibility”: “ I didn’t think I could tell the entire story without the presence of at least one of the men — or a fictional version of one of the men — who was involved in those attacks”[35]. Here DeLillo challenges any notion that it is unethical to consider the motivations of terrorist; instead, he suggests that that it is a necessary step towards an understanding of the attacks. Certainly, without an acknowledgment of cause and effect, 9/11 is stripped down to a senseless tragedy; to examine it as a product of this cause and effect is to make sense of it. Indeed, DeLillo depicts the character of Hammad. He is the fictional counterpart of the terrorists who hijacked the planes, and portions of the narrative unfold from his point of view. In contrast to the two-dimensional renderings of the ‘ evil’ attackers almost universally presented by the media, DeLillo endeavours to humanise the terrorist. He does this by offering an insight into the conditions which lead one to commit such an extreme act of violence. It is clear that Hammad believes Islam to be under attack, and seems to genuinely believe that what he is doing is for the good of its people. He is influenced by Mohammed Atta, one of the few real-life characters to appear in the novel and a ringleader of the 9/11 attacks. Atta tells him that “ The world changes first in the mind of the man who wants to change it”[36], and encourages him to focus on their ‘ mission’. This underlines the ability of young people from countries saturated by violence to be influenced by the promise of belonging, and the allure of a martyr’s afterlife. Baudrillard underlines the necessity for the exploration of characters such as Hammad, who offer an insight into the private world of the terrorist: “ The prodigious success of such an attack presents a problem, and if we are to gain some understanding of it, we have to slough off our Western perspective to see what goes on in the terrorist’s organization, and in their heads”[37].

In addition to the placement of Bin Laden’s words against those of Bush, Vinaver also gives the terrorist a voice. Like DeLillo, Vinaver selects Atta as the terrorist to whom he allows this voice. Although he makes little attempt to humanise him in the way that DeLillo humanises Hammad, he does convey the ritualistic nature of his preparation for his own death. This solidifies the notion that 9/11 is far more than a senseless, standalone act of violence; rather, it is a part of a much larger picture of religious fundamentalism and cultural unrest. Lee Essif actually suggests that Vinaver’s terrorists are more united in their objectives than the American people: “ Vinaver’s September 11 presents a radiophonic projection of a voice of America, the disjointed narration of a spectacle that is unpresentable except through newspaper headlines, and the only sense of community in the text’s polylogic narrative is developed as a primitive, fundamentalist, terrorist one”[38]. A primary issue for writers attempting to capture the essence of a real-life act of violence is the portrayal of its victims and survivors. Here, DeLillo and Vinaver follow two contrary, but both as potentially problematic, literary routes. Throughout September 11, 2001, Vinaver utilises actual victims as characters; this contributes to his style of imitation, as he attempts to recreate the events of the day. In fact, he goes further than this, as he aestheticizes documented speech of actual 9/11 victims. A fitting example occurs as, as briefly aforementioned, the play echoes the last recorded words of American Airlines flight attendant Madeline Sweeney. Vinaver condenses the recording of the phone call made by Sweeney to her manager just moments before Flight 11 collided with the North Tower: “ I see water and buildings/ Oh my God oh my God”[39]. Furthermore, the final recorded words of Flight 93 passenger Todd Beamer, spoken before his attempts to overpower the hijackers, are also imitated by Vinaver: “ let’s roll”. Guy Gavriel Kay likens the implementation of real-life characters by writers to a “ contemporary pandemic”[40]“, characterised by “ a general erosion of the ethical value of privacy and a parallel emergence of a widespread sense of entitlement to look at – or to make use of – the lives of others”[41]. In light of this, the representation of Beamer and Sweeney’s final words can be seen as an intrusion; the last living moments of another human being are perhaps the most private of all. However, it is notable that these moments undergo minimal editing. For the most part, Vinaver simply imitates, creating a collage of real in its rawest form. As his sources are taken mostly from the media and other non-fictional responses, the notion of his ‘ intrusion’ is diminished.

DeLillo, on the other hand, veers further towards the imaginary as he avoids the explicit portrayal of real-life characters. Instead, he dilutes the representation of fact with enough fiction to increase its palatability. However, the insertion of fictionalised characters such as Keith Neudecker and his girlfriend, Lianne, can be seen to shift focus away from the suffering of actual victims in favour of producing rounded characters whose identity can be manipulated to achieve any intended dramatic effect. However, Sofo rejects this notion, as he suggests that “ If type characters have constantly lost ground to round characters in the theatre over the last centuries, the real world has sometimes done the opposite”[42]. Here, Sofo implies that the real world promotes those two-dimensional individuals who fit the ‘ mould’ of societal expectation. In the case of 9/11, placing the focus on such easily malleable survivors allows the media to propagate their own ideas on the event. However, by opting to place fictional rather than real-life characters within his 9/11 setting, DeLillo overcomes the real-life promotion of these “ type characters”, in order to portray those “ round characters” who can act and perceive things differently. Furthermore, DeLillo’s fictional protagonist allows him to evade the anonymising effect that artistic depictions can have on the real-life individual. Indeed, the reduction of those who experienced 9/11 – both survivors and fatalities – to ‘ artistic representations’ can be seen to obscure their humanity. On the contrary, in the case of Falling Man, DeLillo attempts to reverse the anonymization of the ‘ factual’ responses to 9/11, which are often more focussed on the emotional response of the spectator rather than the memorialisation of the victims. With regards to the novel’s title, DeLillo draws on Richard Drew’s infamous photographic image, similarly titled “ The Falling Man”. Published just one day following the attacks, the image appeared in the New York Times alongside a caption by journalist N. R. Kleinfield: “ A person falls head first after jumping from the north tower of the World Trade Centre. It was a horrific sight that was repeated in the moments after the planes struck the towers”[43]. This caption, although partnered with a ‘ real’ image, epitomises the anonymising effect of an even with mass fatalities. Laura Frost both supports and expands upon this notion as she argues that ““ The Falling Man” ends up as a generalized memorial to anonymity, a cenotaph or “ empty tomb”, while the spectator’s reaction becomes particularized”[44]. Indeed, Frost juxtaposes the anonymization of the photograph’s subject against the caption’s attention to his mass of watchers; the “ horror” invoked by the image is attributed to the sight of the man as opposed to his own experience. John Freeman also adheres to this view as he suggests that “ the human component became secondary to that of the spectacle it created” [45]. In light of this, DeLillo’s rendering of a fictional but fully fleshed out survivor of 9/11 takes on a deeper significance. He attempts to reassert a sense of individuality and identity to those who, much like “ The Falling Man”, have been reduced to a ‘ monument’ for the mass experience.

Artistic responses to 9/11, in all of their broadness, endeavour to achieve an array of things: political protest and trauma reconciliation amongst them. However, rarely do they attempt to directly recreate the event. Even in the case of Septembre 11, 2001, Vinaver’s play acts as a template for the imagination. His precise collage of real-life speeches, audio and media headlines illustrate the event as if it were stripped of all emotion; he does not attempt to recreate 9/11, but rather to make sense of an event by removing the conflicting interplay of emotion. Similarly, DeLillo depicts the events of 9/11 largely through the abstracted lens of a survivor who appears to be suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, rendering his novel a self-conscious diversion from a faithful representation of events. However, non-fictional responses, particularly those of the media, come no closer to a faithful rendering of the attacks. Instead, they strip away the surrounding context, leaving only a catastrophic image on which to project a selective context. In light of this, art offers a medium through which to reassess these lost pieces of context, and to subsequently make sense of the ‘ senseless’ by means of the imagination. Arin Keeble underlines the importance of the creation of art in response to traumatic events as he suggests that “ because 9/11 was such a visual spectacle, newspapers and magazines sought literary authors – experts at exploring the human condition through the written word – to interpret or narrate the trauma”[46]. Indeed, “ interpretation” is the epitome of what fictional and theatrical responses to 9/11 are concerned with. They should not be read as faithful renderings of reality, but rather as ambiguous representations which aim to provoke a wider understanding of an event which seems to lie beyond comprehension.

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