

9/11 and the Dystopian Imaginary

Towards a Periodization of Contemporary American Fiction

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ON THE cusp of the new millennium, the world was opened up in novel ways by developments such as the invention of mobile and remote communication technologies, from the World Wide Web and mobile phone to the smart phones, iphones and tablets of our days, the replacement of public space by cyberspace and of national economies by multinational corporations. The end of the Cold War brought to a close a period of intense paranoia and fear of total extinction, which, as Daniel Cordle points out in his 2008 monograph *States of Suspense*, had been the heyday of dystopia, particularly of the apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic variety. However, utopia and dystopia are by no means absent from the western imaginary post-1990s (as Claire Colebrook, Peter Boxall, Sián Adiseshiah and Rupert Hildyard, and many others point out), although their *topoi* have necessarily been modified by recent evolutions. My discussion of utopia and dystopia as “the defining sensibilities of global times”¹ will therefore begin with an attempt to understand the recent evolution of the cultural imaginary of the western world, taking the apocalyptic imagery of September 11 as a reference point. I will then continue by considering utopia/dystopia, not as a genre, but rather as a fictional mode and a structure of feeling (to use Raymond Williams’s term) that inform a number of contemporary novels which would not otherwise be classified as utopian or dystopian.

In *States of Suspense*, Cordle warns against the temptation of assuming that “seemingly definitive historical moments, like 11 September 2001, mark the closing off of particular phases in nuclear culture” (Cordle 2008, 7). In his book *The State of the Novel*, of the same year, Dominic Head, too, expresses doubt that September 11 has ushered in a new period in the history of the novel or, indeed, a new cultural sensibility. More recently, critics have expressed concern that 9/11 has been represented as too radical a historical caesura, which risks separating the 21st century from aspects of recent history such as America’s economic and cultural imperialism (see Lynda Ng in Miller 2014, 73). To this latter tendency the novel opposes its proclivity for causality and teleology and for strategies of indirection and multiple perspectives. An interrogation of what exactly was modified in the western sensibility on September 11 is therefore *de rigueur* in distinguishing what constitutes contemporary literature in the contemporary world.

As an inaugural date, 9/11 has rendered conceivable a number of smaller, but equally traumatic and similarly mediatized, terrorist attacks and has modified the way in which we conceive of our times. Thus, when a mentally-unstable man threatened an EgyptAir flight with a fake explosive belt in March 2016, a BBC guest commentator exclaimed that the pilot's compliance with the attacker's demands "throws us back into prehistory"—meaning that pilots should have faith that post-9/11 air security measures are such as to prevent armed suicide bombers from boarding planes. Ironically, what post-Berlin Wall scholars took to be the onset of *post-history*² now appears as *pre-history*. The habit of the memorable phrase is not rare in the media, neither are scholars exempt: witness the rapid spread of qualifiers prefixed by "post-," from postcolonial, postfeminist and postnationalist, to postcapitalist, postideological, postidentitarian, even posthuman. These terms have ceased to periodize—they no longer mean that which came after something else had run its course—but they continue to be used, particularly in the media, for their evocative power. In other words, they have acquired a familiar ring, which facilitates economical communication: they have become part of the discourse of our time, as has post-9/11.

Despite the inordinate extent to which our reality is constructed by the media, the early 21st-century imaginary is dominated not by the communication technology that has become almost prosthetic, an extension of our hands and brains, but by flight, signified both by planes and, as Graley Herren points out, by the "two radically different emblematic figures associated with the World Trade Center: 'Flying Man' and 'Falling Man'" (in Miller 2014, 159). Flying Man refers to the French performance artist Philippe Petit whose 1974 walk across a tightrope strung between New York's Twin Towers features in Colum McCann's *Let the Great World Spin* (2009), a novel written in response to the divisive rhetoric emerging post 9/11 (cf. Flannery 2013). Falling Man, originally a photograph by Richard Drew, has been variously appropriated by novelists Jonathan Safran Foer in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) and Don DeLillo in *Falling Man* (2007), performance artist Luke Jerram (2008), and the marketers of the popular TV series *Mad Men* (2012), among others. Yet, while Flying Man has been assimilated (perhaps too readily) to an aesthetic of the redemptive power of art, Falling Man carries the troubling connotations of suicide. In *Cosmopolis* (2003), DeLillo extrapolates this latter implication in his treatment of the self-destructive financier Eric Packer, who is described by his assassin as suffering from the "Icarus falling" complex (DeLillo 2012, 202).

More than recurrent cultural tropes, these images spring to mind every time we see someone hanging out of a window, balcony or cockpit bull's eye; in other words, they have become indexes of our 21st-century anxieties, to which we respond viscerally as well as intellectually. Head notes that while the American imaginary post 9/11 was captivated by Falling Man, the British equivalent is the image of the (burning) plane (witness Martin Amis's *Yellow Dog*, 2003; Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, 2005) (Head 2008, 137-141). This fascination, however, is not unproblematic: the compulsion to revisit is often complicated by a sense of revulsion. Herren, for instance, notes the public outcry against the proliferation of the image of Falling Man in the American media. Yet the most haunting part of this traumatic return to flight and falling men is the incomprehensible, unrationalizable fact that the planes of 9/11, and the suicide attackers that have

followed, did not drop bombs but became bombs and turned living human beings—including innocent bystanders—into weapons and human shrapnel. For all our equivocal fascination with our post-human condition, this hybridization of man and machine is more than a reminder of the stubborn materiality of the human body: it signals a kind of slippage between ontological levels that is the very stuff of dystopia.

As vehicles of the space-time compression that is definitive of globalization, airplanes are so much a part of our daily reality—business, pleasure, migration—that the ambivalence that now clings to them—means of transport and weapons—inevitably extends to other related things: are (some of the) passengers in fact terrorists, and thus weapons? Are drones surveillance devices intended for our safety, or remotely controlled weapons? Is 9/11 an unrepeatable event or is it re-enacted with each new terrorist attack? Is it the kind of event that according to Lyotard is better left untold, like the Holocaust, or is its aestheticization therapeutic? As trauma, can it be narrativized? Airplanes thus do more than displace their cargoes: now they also displace the meanings of signs associated with them and infiltrate narratives of contemporary life as harbingers of dangerous mutations; yet they retain a materiality which both their familiarity and the immediacy of their effects make it hard to ignore.

Flying has been one of humanity's most enduring and most troubled dreams and a central component of the apocalyptic imaginary. Airplanes' participation in World War I places them on the cusp between Early and High Modernism, while the Enola Gay dropping the first atomic bomb, (prophetically?) code-named "Little Boy," on Hiroshima effectively put an end to World War II and modernism. The spaceships of intergalactic warfare in the dystopias of the Cold War period embodied much of the anxiety of flight, this most unnatural of human feats, as well as the enhanced potential for annihilation inherent in advanced technologies. The fact that the attackers of 9/11 reverted to more rudimentary tactics rather than take advantage of intelligent technology taps into an entirely new source of anxiety: the technology that threatens to obliterate traditional ways of life and modes of spirituality can be directed against the civilizations which uphold it. The attackers' suicide thus projects the idea that it is in fact the western world that is self-destroying by producing advanced technology.

A new definition and periodization of the contemporary might emerge from this reconfiguration of the imagery of imminent destruction: along with the new communication technologies, the planes and falling men of 9/11 have modified the western cultural imaginary and may have effected the shift from nuclear culture to a culture in which ideological conflict is manifested as carefully directed micro-attacks on civilian targets that symbolize the western way of life. This shift, from the faceless "airborne toxic event" of DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) to the up-close-and-personal attacks by suicide cells on public places, has sparked a kind of fiction that dramatizes personal, rather than communal, anxiety and malaise, as will be seen briefly.

Despite this significant departure in terms of international conflict and discursive practices, 9/11 was anticipated both imaginatively (e.g. in *The Matrix*, 1999) and in the very concrete terms of a previous Islamist attempt on the World Trade Centre in February 1993. In retrospect, the long 1990s (1989—Sept. 2001) seem like a transitional period and prologue to the destabilization of western self-images brought about by September

11. DeLillo plays upon this idea in *Cosmopolis*, where he self-consciously projects a sci-fi-like anticipation of the fall of the Twin Towers, taking place on “a day in April,” “in the year 2000” (DeLillo 2012, n.p.). The threat, in DeLillo’s simulacra-saturated Manhattan, comes not from foreign terrorists but from a motley, multi-national crowd protesting the infestation of neo-liberal globalization by virtual money: “the rat became the unit of currency,” reads the epigraph from Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert. The indeterminacy accommodated, as we have seen, by airplanes, the movement of people, and the event of 9/11 itself, thus enables a more fluid understanding of the contemporary, one in which the temporal landmark catalyzes imagery and discourse into new forms of expression and enables the proliferation of perspectives. As the 1990s were simultaneously post-history and pre-history, so a cultural product such as the Wachowski Brothers’ *The Matrix* belongs to the post-9/11 age as much as Updike’s *Terrorist* or DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis*: all three texts attempt to narrativize—and implicitly rationalize—how an event such as 9/11 may have come to pass from the diverse vantage points of post-human technologies, social disaffection and capitalist overreach, respectively.

Such fictional teleologies notwithstanding, immediately after 9/11 writers acknowledged the tension between the need to narrate and rationalize, on the one hand, and, on the other, the “touched, wounded, or traumatized . . . conceptual, semantic, . . . hermeneutic apparatus that might have allowed one to see coming, to comprehend, interpret, describe, speak of, and name ‘September 11’,” as Jacques Derrida put it in an interview soon after the attacks (Borradori 2003, 93). Assumptions about the integrity of the social fabric, about a shared ethos articulable in a shared discourse, became problematic. Writing in October 2001, critic James Wood chronicled the extent to which this was true of New York writers such as Jay McInerney and Brett Easton Ellis and wondered if perhaps the American novel would shift gears very significantly. Wood predicted that, having been proven so spectacularly wrong in their generalizations about “how the world works” socially³ but also in their claim to scientific knowingness, novelists would now turn to the kind of fiction that shows “how somebody felt about something”; that is, that they would shift from what he calls “hysterical realism”—i.e., the proliferation of stories at all cost—and the long-held dream of the “Great American Social Novel” to “novels about human beings” (Wood 2001).

Writing seven years later, Dominic Head avoids Wood’s broad generalizations, but confirms that not only in the US but in “Britain and beyond” 9/11 resulted in the rise of fiction in which personal experience takes precedence over social panorama. He notes that one of the things that have changed as a result of globalization, the emergence of pluralistic societies, and, more generally, the “social experience” of the twentieth century, is that it has become “very difficult to deploy the old-style omniscient narrator, or to embed the experiences of a character in the landscape of shared values” (Head 2008, 36). Hence the confessional individualism of early 21st-century fiction, a feature that is by turns problematic and redeeming, foregrounding both an essential and shared humanity and the fragility of the social framework. Moreover, as Head observes echoing a character in DeLillo’s *Mao II*, “the novel is ultimately a form that stands in opposition to systemic utopianism or fundamentalism” (Head 2008, 136),⁴ but it is also a form whose own tendency towards radicalism has been called into question by 9/11,

Peter Boxall argues (Boxall 2013, 13). The democratic genre *par excellence*, by promoting cosmopolitan identities and cross-cultural encounters, the contemporary novel participates in the good work of “combating the worst effects of globalization,” Head hopes (Head 2008, 96).

Two large categories of recent American fiction narrativize the individual’s tenuous position in a society that can no longer be described in terms of a commonality of values and aspirations but instead insists on pluralism and tolerance. The most populous is that of best-selling genre fiction (*The Time-Traveler’s Wife*, *Man Walks into a Room*, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, *Black Box*, *Cosmopolis*, *The Road*, etc.), which usually portrays contemporary US very starkly in terms of consumerism, simulacra, the pathology of everyday life, art and art crime. Despite the superficial cosmopolitanism of the setting, the mood of this fiction tends to be dystopian, rather than utopian, even when it does not describe explicitly (post-)catastrophic circumstances. Often these novels thematize time-travel or belong to subgenres such as young-adult fiction, nostalgia narratives, amnesia fiction, mystery novels, cozy catastrophe and speculative fiction. Some are award-winning novels that break down the divide between literary and genre fiction.

The second broad category is that of ethnic writing, focusing on issues that pertain to the experiences of the migrant, the diasporan, the marginalized, the self-isolated. Stellar representatives include foreign-born women writers such as Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Edwidge Danticat, alongside male writers such as Colum McCann, Khaled Hosseini, Junot Diaz etc. Many of their protagonists test the American utopia (the American Dream, in a way) as they have to make a home for themselves and their families in the USA. For many of them utopia reverts to the etymological sense of there being no such place as what they expected. As Irish writer and filmmaker Neil Jordan points out in his essay, “Imagining Otherwise,” “[The immigrants’] mistake was to assume that we could be at home in a single nation. We fed ourselves on ideologies of violence and instant salvation, the illusion that history is a continuum moving forward to its perfect destiny. We thus forgot that we can never be at home anywhere. Perhaps it is one of the functions of writers and artists to remind the nation of this. To expose old ideologies. To feel in exile abroad and also when one returns home. To remain faithful to the no-place (*u-topos*) in us all” (qtd. in Harte 2014, 1). Two meanings of *utopia* thus meet in the fiction of displaced people: the illusion of “the city upon a hill” and a second covenant, but also the homelessness of the one who feels in exile both in the new culture and in the old.

While globalization has turned every place into something very similar to “America,” with its consumerism and media hype, setting remains the most useful means of signifying alienation. The writers of the first category typically particularize location: the loneliness of wide open spaces in which the characters travel by car or Greyhound buses, the sands of Nevada and the eerie glitz of Las Vegas, the multiculturalism of New York City (in Donna Tartt’s *The Goldfinch*, Nicole Krauss’s *Man Walks into a Room* or Willy Vlautin’s *Northline*, for instance) are unmistakably American. The disorientation of their protagonists is usually of a moral or temporal, rather than geographical, kind. For the writers of the second category, on the other hand, place is seldom so distinctive: more often than not it is described in terms of sensations that differ from the smells,

sounds and sights of the homeland, rather than those that single it out. When they attempt to create an objective correlative for their characters' estrangement, these writers almost never give a panoramic view of American landscape but focus instead almost exclusively on the small displaced, occasionally multicultural, communities in which the protagonists attempt to reconstruct their home culture. This is true particularly of first-generation immigrants—the liminal generation—but remains relevant for the second- and later-generation characters, as they negotiate their hybridized cultural allegiances (e.g. Lahiri's *The Namesake*, Desai's *Inheritance of Loss* etc.).

Revealingly, the latter category of novels seems to have a firmer grip on temporality, which it often thematizes in realistic fashion, as the succession of generations, and in terms of a before and after the moment of migration. Conversely, the former often treats time as a foreign land, whether it is 17th-century Holland (*The Goldfinch*), 19th-century France (Elizabeth Kostova's *The Swan Thieves*), 1960s America (Stephen King's *11/22/63*), or an indeterminate post-human future (Jennifer Egan's *Black Box*). Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife* (2003) is a good example of utopia-dystopia as a mode: otherwise scrupulously realistic, the novel tells the tale of a librarian who suffers from an uncontrollable "chrono-displacement disorder." The story fits Head's description of confessional narratives, being told in alternating first-person episodes by Henry DeTamble and his wife Clare. Henry time-travels to his future in the early 21st century where medicine promises to keep his moods in check. For a while he thinks of that future as utopia, a desirable state, only to learn, as he lives through it, that the drugs do not work and his health is rapidly deteriorating. In other words, the utopia of medically enhanced living turns into a personal dystopia, but scientific progress (specifically, genetic bioengineering) still gives him hope for his daughter, Alba, who suffers from the same condition. Thus, utopia is not necessarily perceived as unattainable, just constantly receding into the more or less distant future.

In both categories of post-9/11 novels, the attacks feature as a before-and-after moment. Novels such as *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, *Falling Man* and Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children* (2006) narrativize the events from the perspective of their impact on American society, rather than in terms of international conflict. Minority novelists such as Khaled Hosseini (*The Kite Runner*, 2003) and Colum McCann (*Let the Great World Spin*, 2009), but also the Pakistani-born British citizens Mohsin Hamid (*The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, 2007) and Nadeem Aslam (*The Wasted Vigil*, 2008) supply an extraterritorial and often allochronic angle, signaling the need for awareness of otherness within as well as without the proverbial gates. Comparisons of these diverse narratives prove revealing. In *The Time Traveler's Wife*, September 11 is a foreknown event, which the protagonists wake up early to watch live on television. In *Cosmopolis*, it is foreshadowed by the protest the protagonist drives through in his gaudy, hyper-technologized stretch limousine, as people hang outside the facades of buildings or set themselves on fire. These narratives suggest that the attacks have been assimilated to American history to such an extent that they modify our memory of the pre-9/11 world. *Let the Great World Spin* offers the most explicit instance: not only does its account of Flying Man evoke the falling men of 9/11, but the towering presence of the WTC becomes inextricable from its current absence. Similarly, in *The Kite Runner* 9/11 is mentioned

briefly towards the end, as a reflection on the previous twenty-five years of war in Afghanistan, which it chronicles in heart-rending detail.

While Hosseini's novel responds to 9/11 indirectly, by proposing an alternative view of 'the enemy,' Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* confronts it directly, by making it the occasion not only for a plot twist, but for a much needed examination of the premises of the protagonist's former enchantment with America. A product of ivy-league education (like his author) and a successful corporate apprentice, 22-year-old Changez is well on his way to becoming Americanized when the attacks on the Twin Towers take place. Nonetheless, witnessing the attacks on television while away on a business trip to cosmopolitan Manila, his first reaction is one of exhilaration at the symbolism of striking at the heart of America's economic power. A visit home and a second assignment, to Valparaiso, make him aware that he is expected to sacrifice his ethnic identity in order to become assimilable and result in the refusal to comply with corporate policies and his subsequent dismissal. Upon his return to New York, Changez's new beard and recently acquired skepticism of market imperialism are met with increasing suspicion and even hostility. Now back in Pakistan, where he has become a university lecturer and anti-American militant, he narrates his life story to an unknown American man who may turn out to be either his assassin or his victim, on a fateful night in Lahore. Thus, although the protagonist declares himself to be "a lover of America" in the opening paragraph, his narrative is far from illustrating the utopia of successful integration or advocating "the American way"; instead, it contemplates the double exile described by Neil Jordan above, the sense of *u-topos* or placelessness attendant on migration, and its perils.

The confessional tenor of these novels notwithstanding, there is no immediacy to the experience of 9/11, only a looming sense of indistinct danger and threat. The attacks are not directly dramatized, nor are the characters involved in them: Henry and Claire, like Changez and Hosseini's protagonist Amir, watch them on television, and DeLillo's Eric Packer watches much of the conflict he is driving through on screens, rather than out of the car window. The event is thus both present and temporally and spatially removed, an experience that cannot be experienced, which is the very definition of trauma.⁵ It is mediated by the "information machine," i.e., the official rhetoric and media hype that soon appropriate and largely constitute any event in the modern world (Derrida in Borradori 2003, 89-90). The tendency to represent 9/11 at one remove is symptomatic of the way in which catastrophe is experienced in our technological times: as a kind of "virtual trauma" that is diffuse and very widely appropriated by writers and readers alike. The diversity of locations and culture-specific responses reflects a world on the move, in which the emerging patterns of migration foreground the need to think globally about the problematics of uprootedness and integration. Thus, while with the exception of *Cosmopolis*, these novels would hardly qualify generically as utopia or dystopia, they operate with the imagery of 9/11 as a way of testifying to a shared experience—a communal bond—but also out of a sense of the inevitability of the dystopia—the sense of determinism, as Sämi Ludwig puts it in his contribution to this volume—that has been inaugurated on 11 September 2001.

As he strives to get his bearings in the war-ravaged parallel reality he suddenly finds himself in, Owen Brick, the hapless anti-hero of Paul Auster's *Man in the Dark* (2008),

repeatedly asks people about September 11 and the war in Iraq: in the ‘real’ world, that war seems to be the single most definitive fact about the United States during the noughties. Other historical moments have equal, if not better, claims to the status of literary and cultural watersheds, most notably the major international economic crisis of 1973–74; the Fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989; 1993, when the Nobel Prize in Literature awarded to Toni Morrison signaled the rise of minority women writers. Equally, there is the view proposed by Franco Moretti according to which no milestone is necessary: literature evolves in cycles of 25–30 years, much like human generations (Moretti 2003, 82). To exemplify, as John N. Duvall notes in his Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to American Fiction After 1945*, by the time Tony Tanner was writing his *City of Words* in 1971, the postwar canon his valuation was based on was already superseded by multicultural reading practices (Duvall 2011, 2). By 2011, when Duvall’s volume was published, the editor was aware that “the post-1945 period . . . , if a person, could now be collecting Social Security” (Duvall 2011, 1). Of all these alternative periodizations, 9/11 has the advantage that its imbrication with technology and representation makes it possible to think of it as an event (in the Derridean sense) rather than a temporal landmark or starting point: an event initiates new discursive possibilities and raises specific questions, in this case questions about cultural interconnectedness and the ethics of artistic and media representation. Thus, while in political and historical terms, the Fall of the Iron Curtain has an undeniably greater claim to paradigm-shifting status, 9/11 has modified the post-1989 cultural imaginary and supplied an interpretive grid for similar situations.

In a 2013 manifesto concerning the status of academics researching contemporary fiction, Robert Eaglestone outlines nine problems that should be considered in order to delineate the discipline of contemporary literature: these problems pertain to “periodisation, the archive, authorship, the ‘business’ of fiction, globalisation, genre, value judgements, and form” (Eaglestone 2013, 1100). To ignore these presents two risks: on the one hand, he points out, the procedure of isolating contemporary themes and seeking illustrations in recent novels is problematic; on the other, applying the old interpretive categories “of (say) sex/class/race/empire” without considering what distinguishes the contemporary is equally suspect (Eaglestone 2013, 1093). Without ambitioning to cover all nine aspects enumerated by Eaglestone, my brief analysis of contemporary American fiction has aimed to show how a more fluid periodization, one taking, for instance, September 11 not as a starting point but as an event catalyzing a certain kind of discourse, can help explain the convergence of the dystopic imagery of displacement and undecidability with the formal appeal of generic hybridity, polyvocality, narrative and confession that characterizes recent novels.

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Notes

1. As Adriana Neagu calls them in her contribution to this supplement.
2. Cf. Fukuyama’s 1989 essay, “The End of History?,” expanded into the 1992 *The End of History and the Last Man*.

3. Tony Tanner describes John Cheever's and Don DeLillo's aspiration to social relevance, exemplified by the opening scene of the latter's *Underworld* (1997), as typical of American writing in the late 20th century (202-205).
4. Cf. Benedict Anderson's notion of the novel as an instrument for constituting the individual subject as well as "imagined communities," but also Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia.
5. See trauma studies as theorized by Judith Butler, Cathy Caruth, Richard Gray etc.

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Abstract

9/11 and the Dystopian Imaginary: Towards a Periodization of Contemporary American Fiction

This paper investigates the ways in which recent American fiction has been modified by historical events, particularly 9/11/2001, in an attempt to propose a relational and workable periodization of the contemporary. More specifically, it describes the impact of such events both on the broader cultural imaginary in the US and beyond, and on generic and formal evolutions such as the prevalence of confessional narrative and the mainstreaming, on the one hand, of the literature of minorities, and, on the other, of genre fiction. Utopia and dystopia are therefore considered here not as genres, but rather as fictional modes and a structure of feeling that inform a number of contemporary texts which would not otherwise qualify as utopian or dystopian.

Keywords

American fiction, the contemporary, periodization, ethnicity, genre fiction, utopia, dystopia