

# The Languishing of the Falling Man: Don Delillo and Jonathan Safran Foer's Photographic History of 9/11.

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## **The Languishing of the Falling Man: Don Delillo and Jonathan Safran Foer's Photographic History of 9/11**

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**The Languishing of the Falling Man:  
Don Delillo and Jonathan Safran Foer's Photographic  
History of 9/11**

*Aaron Mauro (bio)*

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Fifteen seconds past 9:41 am, on September 11, 2001, Richard Drew took a photograph of a falling man. After being uploaded to the Associated Press news network, the photograph was swiftly picked up by the media. The following day the photograph appeared on page seven of *The New York Times* and in hundreds of other newspapers around the world. Due to the ensuing public outrage directed toward editors for what was deemed an obscene representation of a man's death, many newspapers were forced to issue apologies and refrain from publishing the image or images like it. Although the photograph continues to appear in other contexts—most notably in Tom Junod's 2003 *Esquire* article simply called "The Falling Man" and the 2006 documentary *9/11: The Falling Man* directed by Henry Singer—the image remains highly taboo within the mainstream media and continues to evoke questions regarding the limits of representation and history: is it possible to accommodate the brief emergence in the print media of such an image within official history? If this photograph attains the status of official history, how will it be possible to understand this image as an aesthetic object alongside the horrifying certainty of this man's death? As a means of cautiously approaching such questions, I will describe how two post-9/11 novels define photographic history **[End Page 584]** within the realm of trauma theory and the aesthetics of falling. These falling figures, which are central to both Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, have become photographic and historic nodes that have greatly marked our literary imagination regarding the events of 9/11.

While many novels attempt to accommodate the terrors of that day, both Foer's and DeLillo's novels are influenced by the profoundly visual record of the attacks. This conflation of forms between the visual and the textual becomes the primary means by which these authors derive their different representative strategies. DeLillo's novel enacts the loss of this image from the public domain by translating it into a written form. In this way, *Falling Man* leaves gaps between the titular subject of the

novel, the photograph, and the event. Like the disappearance of the towers, this moment in history is only gestured at through absences that demand attention. By contrast, Foer reconciles the photographic and traumatic history of the event by imagining the possibility of another life in a fictional world that eases sorrow and mourns the memory of those lost on that day.

To best imagine this intersection of photography, history, and the novel, Eduardo Cadava's *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History* describes how Walter Benjamin suggests that the flash or shock of photography is the only means by which modern society is able to understand historical events. "The state of emergency," explains Cadava, "the perpetual alarm that for Benjamin characterizes all history, corresponds with the photographic event" (3). This double exposure of sudden and shocking events identifies photography's relationship to traumatic memories and the media through which history is recorded. As Benjamin writes in his essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History," "The true picture of the past flits by [*huscht vorbei*]. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up [*aufblitzt*] at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again. . . . For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably." Thus aligning photography and memory, Benjamin claims that any given society must be ready to "retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger [*Augenblick einer Gefahr aufblitzt*]" ("Theses" 255; "Über" 253). While this "state of emergency [*Ausnahmezustand*]" is in reference to the specific threat of the Nazi military ("Theses" 257; "Über" 254)—which would enter Paris only six months after Benjamin wrote these words—this concept of history is not out of place when discussing the events of...



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