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## Representing the Incomprehensible: The Postmodern Condition in *Dispatches* and *Falling Man*

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*Criticism of Michael Herr's Dispatches (2015) and Don DeLillo's Falling Man (2007) can be divided into two mainstream interpretations. On the one hand, they are both marked as psychic trauma texts. Herr's writing of Dispatches can be read as a therapeutic process that allows him to deal with his trauma experienced as a war correspondent during the Vietnam War. The intimate and domestic trauma in DeLillo's Falling Man focuses on the disconnected lives of a couple and their child in the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Center. On the other hand, critics have aligned each text with the national trauma narrative. This article aligns itself with the latter interpretation. I propose, through a postmodern reading, that the national trauma narrated in both Dispatches and Falling Man is an example of Lyotard's "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxix). I argue that both texts represent the failure of the metanarrative of American Exceptionalism; the ideology that defines the essence of America as the embodiment of "supremacy" and "power". Narrative fails in each text when the nature of each conflict deconstructs this metanarrative of national identity. This deconstruction arises from the way conflict appears to alienate Herr as author, and DeLillo's characters from preconceived notions of knowledge. As a result of this, both authors explore the fictive nature of the human condition to present the national trauma caused by each conflict.*

In this article, I will argue that both Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (2015) and Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) expose the failure of the metanarrative of American Exceptionalism. The failure of narrative as argued in this article is the result of what Jean-Francois Lyotard refers to as an "incredulity towards metanarratives" in conflict situations (xxix). Both texts explore the failure of narrating conflict using the familiar narrative of American "power" and "supremacy" (Grandin); the fact that the narratives fail deconstructs the legitimacy of the metanarrative of American Exceptionalism. The mythologised narrative

of America's identity as impenetrable is for Uri Friedman "belief in America's special character and role in the world". American Exceptionalism connotes a distinct national identity predicated on its uniqueness as self-determined entity. *Dispatches* explores how the concept of power and military strength failed during the Vietnam War, and Herr achieves this through depicting the inability of the journalist to provide an objective account of the war. This deconstructs the metanarrative of American Exceptionalism through revealing America's inability to contain the experience. This is evident in the fact that the war remains largely unknown to Herr as a journalist, which suggests that it is outside of American control. Differently, in *Falling Man*, DeLillo explores how the events of 9/11 escape narration. This is because it is an unprecedented event where the United States' newfound fragility causes an existential crisis for his characters. Both texts explore the way the national trauma<sup>1</sup> precipitated by each conflict alienates America from its own preconceived notions of its supremacy as a unique nation which, in turn, leads to an expression of the postmodern condition within each novel. Both Herr and DeLillo explore the need to create a fictionalised narrative to derive meaning from the deconstructed national identity. The postmodern condition to which I refer is an expression of Lyotard's attack on the notions of monolithic universal truths, which in the case of *Falling Man* and *Dispatches* manifests as the end of American Exceptionalism. Each text reflects the postmodern condition when it embraces the lack of distinction between reality and illusion. This is seen through the use of metafiction, which is a form of fiction that methodically alludes to its own artificiality. Both Herr and DeLillo employ metafiction to represent the end of metanarrative of American Exceptionalism. Metafiction becomes a convenient medium for both authors to represent the failure of American Exceptionalism and expose it as a narrative construct. Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as "writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as artefact" (2). A metafictional text bares its own fabricated construction to demonstrate how the external reality of the text is similarly fabricated. In Herr and DeLillo's writing, the national trauma explored is the loss of faith in metanarrative which leads to the need to make sense of the deconstructed human condition through the process of representation.

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<sup>1</sup> Critics such as Rodica Mihalia and Wendy Smith have aligned each text with the national trauma narrative. Rodica Mihalia claims that DeLillo's *Falling Man*, serves to represent the "major paradigm shifts in American consciousness and culture" the nation faced in the wake of the events of 9/11 (87). Wendy Smith explains how *Dispatches* "is the timeless portrait of war's bedrock realities—fear, death, murder, madness" in its depiction of "the human truths and political truths" of the Vietnam war and America's involvement in it.

### **The Failure of Narrative: The End of American Exceptionalism**

Both *Dispatches* and *Falling Man* represent Lyotard's "incredulity towards metanarratives" by expressing, through narrative failure, the way the nature of each conflict deconstructs the metanarrative of American Exceptionalism (41). A metanarrative refers to when legitimation takes the form of a narrative that claims to make sense of the human condition using universal reason. Lyotard (41) argues that in the postmodern era, there is a "legitimation crisis" where we experience an increasing skepticism towards these totalising narratives. American Exceptionalism is a metanarrative as it is an ideology that claims that America as a nation embodies supremacy and power. Metanarratives of American Exceptionalism can take many forms. The version explored and deconstructed in *Dispatches* pertains to America's military strength, whilst in *Falling Man* it is the American political imaginary of the idealised (and mythological) self-perception of its secure boundaries, national strength, solidarity, and insularity, that comes under threat. Both texts resist the totalizing gesture of metalanguage - the rhetoric of the metanarrative of American Exceptionalism - in their self-conscious representation of narrative failure.

The nature of the conflict represented in *Dispatches* is resistant to objective narration. Herr demonstrates the difficulty of his job as a war correspondent when he uses the declarative statement, "I went to cover the war, but the war covered me" (20). Herr explains how the unknowable nature of the Vietnam War destabilises the reliability of maps as, "even the most detailed maps didn't reveal much anymore" (3). Here cartography is established as an expected form of narrative, a further form and medium of storytelling. Maps impose order and control over a space. However, such objectivity is rendered impossible during the conflict in Vietnam as Herr implies that trying to impose meaning onto the Vietnamese landscape is "like trying to read the wind" (3). This simile suggests that narration fails because knowledge of the war cannot be pinned down and targeted. Instead, it is elusive. Herr cannot derive facts or fixed margins by which to measure the progress of war and his desire to impose a structure of order onto the events of the war soon fails. The Vietnam War cannot be covered using traditional means of an objective form such as journalism. Instead, it requires an adaptive form of journalism such as New Journalism that both captures and "highlights the problematical status of facts for the production of meaning" (Cobley 97). The term was coined by Tom Wolfe during the late stages of the Vietnam War and refers to the

“discovery [...] that it just might be possible to write Journalism that would read like a novel” (8). An intensive form of reportage in which journalists immersed themselves into their writing as an almost observable character, the style became a radical deviation from traditional journalism where the reporter was an objective and invisible presence. New Journalism is a style of news writing characterised by its stylistic and literary features that are reminiscent of fiction. Herr makes use of New Journalism in *Dispatches* to communicate the way the Vietnam War radically challenged and eroded America’s self-perception of its own Exceptionalism.

The fact that Vietnam as a space cannot be controlled and contained by previous forms of American logic and undermines the superpower nation’s arrogant and confident self-belief, demonstrating the failure of American Exceptionalism. America cannot dominate and seize Vietnam as a country. This contradicts American historical understanding of their capacity for war and combat. As contemporary journalist Spencer Kimball puts it, “guided by an uncritical national pride inherited from America’s victory over fascism in World War Two”, the loss of the Vietnam War was incomprehensible because it “displayed the limits of US military power”. Thus, the Vietnam War eludes narration because it is an unprecedented event. Herr communicates this narrative challenge by explaining how “the problem was that you didn’t always know what you are seeing” (20). The Vietnam War cannot be contained by a narrative technique that seeks to impose a structure of American Exceptionalism onto it. It is an experience that is out of reach. Moreover, prior means of objective narrative technique, such as cartography and traditional means of journalism, cannot be used, which in turn means the imposed structure of American Exceptionalism fails.

Narrative fails in *Falling Man* when Keith looks up to at the sky and witnesses a falling “shirt com[ing] down out of the high smoke” (4). For Keith, the sight is “like nothing in this life” and keeps replaying itself in his memory (305). The latter expression suggests that he cannot offer a sufficient representation of the events of 9/11. The use of simile implies that Keith is unable to articulate what he is seeing. Kristiaan Versluys claims that 9/11 “exists outside of the interpretive schemes that are imposed upon it” (3). Events cannot be communicated as already established systems of rationale, such as the metanarrative of American Exceptionalism and impenetrability, fail to contain them. 9/11 is independent of any already established systems of knowledge, and DeLillo communicates this postmodern skepticism when he represents the way in which the fall of the World Trade Center destabilises America’s perception of its national identity. For instance, DeLillo describes how

the towers that were once “fantasies of wealth and power” have become signifiers of “destruction” (141). Here, DeLillo simultaneously establishes the Twin Towers as an embodiment of American Exceptionalism and reveals an apparent incredulity towards this metanarrative of American identity. The fact that the towers have become signifiers of fragility and ‘destruction’ suggests that previous forms of knowledge about America’s ‘power’ are baseless. The fact that DeLillo qualifies them as ‘fantasies’ suggests that American Exceptionalism is an imaginative concept. For instance, if the towers become signifiers of instability then that which they signify, American power, are just as unstable. They are empty signifiers. Signifiers, or transcendental signifiers refer to a perceived meaning that outranks all other signs, and which Jacques Derrida sees as embodying a “fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude” (215). However, Jacques Derrida claimed that transcendental signifiers do not exist. Consequently, an absence of these fixed landmarks outside linguistic processing domains results in and reveals the instability of language. From a poststructuralist perspective, if perceived notions concerning the human condition derive from interpretation rather than from fixed truths, then the self-perception of national power and stability similarly lack reliability. The preferred and *mythologised* version of American identity reveals itself as illegitimate and imagined. Therefore, within each text, narrative fails as a result of the failure of American Exceptionalism. Each conflict is an unprecedented event, and the nature of both the Vietnam war and 9/11 cannot be contained by preconceived notions about the distinctively American human condition. The fact that narrative fails implies that there is an inherent contradiction with American Exceptionalism – an inherent contradiction central to the Postmodern Condition.

### **Postmodernism: A Reality Made Unreal**

American Exceptionalism is a sign that conceals an absence. Herr implies that the inherent contradiction behind this metanarrative derives from the “loss of the real” (Baudrillard 424). In his 1981 philosophical essay, “Simulacra and Simulation” Jean Baudrillard analyses the way in which society constructs reality through the process of “simulation” (423). Simulation replaces the “real” and results in the creation of a “simulacra”, which is a representational image that usurps reality. Herr plays with these ideas of simulation upon demonstrating how the reality of mechanised warfare is made comprehensible through popular culture. He writes “Godzilla never drew that kind of fire”

when his platoon “really rip into” a group of Vietcong (59). Comparing the US army’s weaponry with an example of Hollywood and Japanese Sci-fi, Herr implies that mechanised warfare is an example of progressive and speculative engineering – it is at the frontier of technological innovation and advancement. T.J. Walsh claims that “sophisticated nuclear technology” reflected “America’s military supremacy” (185). He argues that weaponry during the Vietnam war was an emblem of American power and strength. Additionally, Herr’s description of the Vietnam chopper as “the sexiest thing going; saverdestroyer, provider-waster, right hand-left hand, nimble, fluent, canny and human...” suggests an almost fetishization of American military force (57). The ‘Godzilla’ allusion suggests that the innovative technology is beyond comprehension, it sits outside of achievable and familiar lexicon, or narrative. The fact that Herr uses cinema, which is a further mode of narration, to depict the sight, suggests that there is no relationship between weaponry as an embodiment of American ‘supremacy’, and an external reality, since the only connection he can use to describe the act is fictional. Technological warfare is an example of Baudrillard calls the “hyperreal”, where in the modern world, the idea of the ‘real’ becomes contested (423). He argues that the ‘real’ is presented through layers of representation, which creates a false and highly constructed reality or a “hyperreality” (424). As with Herr’s Godzilla allusion, representation takes the form of images from media. This results in a loss of distinction between the ‘real’ and imagined, as well as reality and illusion. In *Dispatches*, the sign — weaponry as an emblem of American strength — does not reveal an underlying reality even if it still has material consequences. The fact that it is narrated through an artificial representation, suggests that ‘Godzilla’ is supposed to represent a similarly artificial and fictional construct. The ‘Godzilla’ allusion conceals the fact that the supposedly ‘real’ American identity as exceptional, no longer exists.

In a world of images, Herr identifies what Frederic Jameson, in his 1991 book *Postmodernism, or The Culture of Late Capitalism*, calls a “weakening historicity” (5). Jameson argues that the loss of the real means we become skeptical of historical depth. Existing in a state of ‘hyperreality’ means we can no longer centre ourselves in the previous margins of time. Herr loses faith in history when he states, “you couldn’t find two people who agreed when it began” (46); competing narratives make history impossible to interpret. He does not know what year the war began, which is quite an admission for a journalist. Herr explains how “‘Realists’ said it began in 1961, and the common Mission flack insisted on 1965” (47). Previous margins by which to measure time have become unreliable as “you

couldn't use standard methods to date the doom" (47). This leads to a sense of chronological uncertainty whereby the once familiar "straight" understanding of history and time has disappeared (47). Herr's lack of faith in history demonstrates what Mark Taylor identifies as the "powerlessness" that historians "face [in] the complexity and disorder" of the Vietnam War (10). Taylor argues that this derives from the war's pervasive media coverage which meant that fact was difficult to differentiate from propaganda (Taylor 10). Thus the 'loss of the real' as well as the lack of faith in history for Herr derives from the layers of mediated representation.

In *Falling Man*, the linearity of time is also disrupted. Time and narrative are circular; the traumatic event is inescapable for Keith. The events of the 9/11 repeat themselves and resurface in his consciousness. The text begins with a dazed Keith walking through the "rubble" filled streets after the collapse of the first tower and then ends just before this opening scene when Keith witnesses the "high drumming rumble" of this collapsing first tower (3 and 304). Time and space collapse. For instance, DeLillo writes, "it was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night" (3). 'Night' connotes images of oblivion and annihilation as darkness has descended at noon. DeLillo's other man character, Lianne, also experiences annihilism as a result of the attacks. She states that "nothing is next" because "there is no next" (12). In the words of, Versluys, DeLillo's characters "exist in a state of suspension" (40). He argues that the postmodern condition in this text is one of drift. The characters are experiencing and re-experiencing the shattering repercussions of 9/11. Chronology has been disrupted alongside notions of the American human condition.

For Keith, the attacks signify a disappearance of a recognisable reality. He becomes alienated from previous forms of knowledge when he experiences cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance refers to perception of contradictory and confusing information. Inside the towers, Keith comments on the falling office objects that he sees from his office window. In qualifying these objects as unspecific and unrecognisable "things", DeLillo reveals the uncanniness of 9/11 (299). In his seminal 1919 essay "The Uncanny", Freud defines the uncanny as a disturbance of the familiar. He states that, "what is 'uncanny' is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar" (17). Freud's definition in many ways lends itself to the postmodern condition as it connotes a sense of decentering. In *Falling Man*, Keith's experience of the uncanny stems from the context that he finds himself in (17). Whilst the objects should be familiar to him, their "falling" context makes them unfamiliar



(299). DeLillo emphasizes this absence of normality, in the line; “There was something critically missing from the things around him” (5). The sense of disturbance becomes intensified when Keith notices “figures in windows a thousand feet up, dropping into free space... and he walked away from it and into it at the same time” (5). Keith is both within his familiar routine, of his work sphere, and within a national trauma. His sense of disorientation renders him unable to sufficiently identify and narrate what he is witnessing. He is disorientated because it is an unprecedented event whereby objects associated with his office space become signifiers of a crisis.

### **Metafiction: Writing the Unreal**

Both texts represent a paradoxical impossibility and necessity of narrating conflict. Herr and DeLillo engage with Jameson’s notion of the postmodern when they seek “to undo postmodernism ... by the methods of postmodernism” (Jameson et al 19). Jameson illustrates this concept in his 1989 interview with Anders Stephanson “Regarding Postmodernism- A Conversation with Frederick Jameson”, and Both authors directly engage with the notion through the use of metafiction. Metafiction calls attention to the process of writing itself, whereby fiction becomes self-reflexive and writing depicted as a constructed artefact. And in Herr and DeLillo’s fiction these *fabrications* are discernible in the textual representation of the act of representation itself. DeLillo uses pastiche, while Herr employs New Journalism to communicate the difficulty of representing the incomprehensible. A pastiche is an artistic work that imitates earlier texts or objects (Rose 27). “The Falling Man” within the text is a street performer who enacts a scripted free fall (272). Lianne interprets his act as a performative event. For instance, the noun “puppetry” and adjective “stylized” imply that his fall is artificial (39). It is self-consciously a fictitious act used to represent the effects of the attacks. The street artist represents Richard Drew’s photographic image of one of the 9/11 jumpers [fig.1]. DeLillo writes:

There were people shouting up at him, outraged at the spectacle, the puppetry of human desperation, a body’s last fleet breath and what it held. It held the gaze of the world, she thought. There was the awful openness of it, something we’d not seen, the single falling figure that trails a collective dread, body come down among us. And now, she thought, this little theater piece, disturbing enough to stop traffic and send her back into the terminal. (33)

The relationship between the artist and Drew's image becomes apparent when DeLillo describes how the street performer falls "head first" (206). "The single falling figure" suspended in an "awful" moment in time, before their "last...breath", is a representative imitation of the "collective" 9/11 jumpers. The seeming 'realness' of the performance which is indicated in the lines "disturbing enough to stop traffic" and "held the gaze of the world", echoes the public reaction to both the real 9/11 jumpers and Drew's photograph. As Graley Herren explains, Drew's photograph which "ran in dozens of media stories in the days following 9/11", produced a reproving public reaction. According to Herren, "The American outcry against the 'Falling Man' (image) was instantaneous, widespread, and vitriolic" (160). Just like Drew's falling man image, DeLillo's street artist serves as an audacious reminder of the human consequence of 9/11.



[Fig.1] - Richard Drew's photograph captures one of the 9/11 jumpers. He is falling head first with one knee bent.

The discomfort Lianne feels upon bearing witness to someone falling to their death, implies that the performance is a confrontational representation. For her, "the worst of it was the stillness itself and her nearness to the man" (206). She is unnerved because he represents America's new-found fragility. DeLillo uses the performance artist to represent the existential oddities of 9/11 that disrupt the conventional narrative expectation. It explores the uncanny event of the tragedy through emphasising how Drew's image itself represents the fall of man, and by extension the breakdown of metanarrative. Here, the artist represents ontological

uncertainty. He is decentred, suspended in mid-air. Lianne refers to the scene as “something we’d not seen” (39). This evokes the question of something larger than Drew’s image. The falling man street performer resonates a sense of interconnectivity. This arises from the way characters in the novel are all victim to having to re-centre themselves within a new world order. Lianne is unnerved because she identifies with the artist. Her ‘nearness’ thus refers to their shared experience of America’s fall from grace. The differentiation between the real jumper, Drew’s image and the street artist becomes hazy. The blurring of the lines between the reality and representation means he possesses an elusive presence. The man’ is ambiguous. The ‘real’ falling man, is replaced by a mediated version, signified by Drew’s photograph which DeLillo in turn relies upon as an artistic representation. The real is unknown here. DeLillo is representing the world of the hyperreal. Whether it is the real falling man, the image of the falling man, or the new American man - aware of the limits of the end of metanarratives, the performer reveals how America’s national trauma is an existential crisis. This crisis is skepticism towards American Exceptionalism.

Herr employs a metafictional approach when he uses New Journalism. He combines the documentary reportage with the creative techniques to intentionally blur the line between fiction and fact and, in doing so, questions the nature of truth, knowledge, and objective representation through his writing. Brenda Boyle states that “New Journalism is characterized by the very visible and audible presence of the writer himself” (35). Herr constructs himself *into* the narrative when he explains how “whichever way you went [...] [it] was your choice of story” (60). Objective understanding and objective narrativization fails the war journalist in Vietnam. The proposition, ‘your choice’ suggests that Herr’s account of the war fails journalistic standards of truth, veracity, and fact. Instead the war appears subjective, with documenting war being synonymous with storytelling. He even admits that the “real places” and events he reports on may well be “sustaining serious dislocation, mind slip and memory play” (226). In *Dispatches*, “factual assertions lose their reputation for innocent objectivity; they are now seen as interested discursive elements, unable to ground the text’s truth” (Cobley 97). Herr states that “the place was all yours” and establishes himself as a spectator of his own experience (60).

Herr employs a metafictional approach when he constructs his own account of war on the foundations of fiction-making. In *Dispatches* the narration is overloaded with cultural references to represent how Herr cannot confront empirical reality within the war. For instance, he resorts to art to explain the war. In one scene, he describes a collage featuring

popular cultural icons such as “Jimi Hendrix [and] Dylan” alongside images of “stacked Viet Cong” bodies (178). In the eighteen-line description and sentence, images from the war and images of popular culture sit alongside each other. This implies that the two are inextricably linked. Media coverage and popular culture become intertwined, and reality lost. For Herr, media becomes oversaturated and distorts the reality and experience of the Vietnam War. Consequently, media coverage replaces the ‘real’ and Herr self-consciously explores this in his metafictional writing. He expresses how the extensive media influence causes soldiers to “run around” during fights, acting out “war movies in their heads” (20). They cannot distinguish themselves from the stars of war films and Westerns like John Wayne. By invoking the image of John Wayne who is “simultaneously a potent symbol of toughness and bravery,” Herr brings to life the constructed artifice of American Exceptionalism in his writing (Anderegg 28). He alludes to the earlier myths, or metanarratives, of the western frontier. The soldiers see themselves as the cinematic war heroes that they want to be. They believe that they are “cowboys” who conquer and kill “the Indians” (58). When fictional war heroes determine the soldiers’ behaviour, Herr infers that these are attempts to find faith with American Exceptionalism. Behaviour is no longer natural, it is performative. Thus, Herr in his expression of metafiction, employs the conflated artifice of popular culture to represent and communicate the way distinctions between reality and fiction has eroded due to the pervasive media influence.

To conclude, both Herr and DeLillo use metafiction to question the relationship between fiction and reality. Fiction in this case is American Exceptionalism; it is a metanarrative that lacks a basis in reality. Conflict reveals the fictive nature of America’s preconceived identity. Each national trauma gives way to an expression of the postmodern condition, characterised by skepticisms towards these metanarratives. Each author uses skepticism to elucidate the way each textual conflict alienates the characters from preconceived forms of knowledge. Characters become decentered. American Exceptionalism no longer grounding them. It cannot contain experience within a narrative. In order to represent the conflicts discussed, each author chooses to represent them in a self-reflexive way. Herr and DeLillo use a deliberately fictitious and artificial means of representation to demonstrate how reality, when radically disrupted by the traumatic national events, is revealed to be similarly fabricated and illusory.



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Tia Byer works as an Associate Editor and freelance journalist. She received her MSc in US Literature and Cultural Values from the University of Edinburgh in 2019, with a dissertation entitled “Transatlantic Flirtation and Cultural Insecurity: A Postcolonial Reading of Cosmopolitanism in Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* and Henry James’s ‘The Europeans’ and *Daisy Miller*”. Tia received her undergraduate degree in English Literature from York St John University and has previously written for FORUM.