

After the event: Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and September 11 narratives

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Abstract. In this article I enquire into the conceptualisation and construction of the event, a topic much neglected in International Relations, but one which has become increasingly central to recent debates in continental philosophy. I juxtapose the fictional event depicted in Don DeLillo's brilliant novel, *White Noise*, with the non-fictional event of September 11. I suggest that apprehending any kind of socially or politically significant event, depends on narrative. To take the argument further, I argue that narrative is a crucial device by which we moderns (and postmoderns) actually experience such events and social reality.

Introduction

Humans are, among other things, story-telling beings. This Aristotelian insight has always been overshadowed by his better-known assertion that humans are political beings. But recalling that Aristotle authored *The Poetics* as well as *The Politics* may serve as a useful corrective to the assumption that aesthetics do not deserve the political theorist's attention.¹ I do not wish to rehearse the arguments about the relationship between politics and aesthetics here, though I do want to explore how literature, as one specific form of aesthetic art, can dramatise the performative constitution of reality. In other words, I want to enquire into the way that story-telling or narrative helps construct political worlds.

My specific purpose is to show that September 11's construction, including the meaning and significance attached to it, is intrinsically tied to narrative; that in the absence of story-telling devices, there would be no meaningful event. Narrative plays a vital role in sifting and organising the material and immaterial elements of any event into a plot enabling onlookers and participants alike to make sense of it. A focus on events therefore provides an opportunity to think again about the narrative character of political experience.

The first part of this article provides a brief preliminary account of the relation between narrative and events. The second part turns to DeLillo's novel for insights into the narrative construction of events. DeLillo's *White Noise* presents a

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¹ Aristotle, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, trans. Stephen Halliwell (London: Duckworth, 1987) and *The Politics*, trans T. A. Sinclair and Trevor J. Sinclair (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992).

provocative and at times comical account of how events are mediated by narrative. Reading DeLillo might lead us to pay more attention to the way that September 11 has always already been a mediated experience, rather than a straightforward or direct experience with self-evident meaning. The third part examines September 11 as an event. In what sense is it an event? As what kind of event is it presented? Answering these questions will require paying attention to the narratives in which the event is recounted and accounted for. The fourth and final part will conclude by reflecting on how a certain injudiciousness and imprudence overcame the White House after the event of September 11, leading to disastrous strategic policy decisions regarding Iraq.

Narrative and the event

It is not uncommon for historical studies in International Relations to revolve around major events. The Defenestration of Prague that led to the Thirty Years War (1618), the Peace of Westphalia that ended it (1648), the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand that sparked the Great War (1914), appeasement at Munich that opened the way to the Second World War (1939), the attack on Pearl Harbor that plunged America into the Pacific War (1941), the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombs that ended it (1945), the Cuban Missile Crisis that nearly triggered a Third World War (1962) and the fall of the Berlin Wall that ended the Cold War (1989) are just some of the events that structure historical narratives in International Relations. But why call these wars, peace settlements, assassinations, attacks, crises and falls ‘events’? What do we mean by ‘event’?

We cannot do justice to the wide range of both historical and philosophical accounts of the event, but we can briefly note two such accounts. Paul Veyne, the eminent historian of Greek and Roman antiquity, says that an ‘event stands out against a background of uniformity; it is a difference, a thing we could not know a priori’.² The Peace of Westphalia and the fall of the Berlin Wall would appear, in their singularity, to conform to Veyne’s definition of an event insofar as they marked a ‘difference’, changing the way politics took place thereafter. They transformed international political experience erecting or dismantling dominant expectations and modes of conduct. In keeping with Veyne’s definition, the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard defines an event as an occurrence or caesura after which nothing will be the same.³ An event truly worthy of the name disrupts, perhaps destroys, any pre-existing frame of reference; it exceeds intelligibility within prevailing frameworks of understanding. In so doing it unsettles received theoretical categories and political practices. So an event carries both historical and philosophical significance in denoting a rupture, in marking and making a difference. The event changes experience itself; it changes how the everyday world is experienced, modifying our relations to ourselves, to others, to things and to other events.

² Paul Veyne, *Writing History: Essay on Epistemology*, trans. Mina Moore-Rivoluceri (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), p. 4.

³ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges van den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

But assessing whether an event 'stands out against a background of uniformity' or 'is a difference' depends on an understanding of what went before and what came after. It is for this reason that another eminent historian, François Furet, argues that events must be placed in a narrative for them to be intelligible. According to Furet:

Events are unique points in time in which something happens that cannot be assimilated to what has come before it or what will come after it. That 'something' – the historical fact promoted to the rank of event – can never be compared, strictly speaking, to a preceding or subsequent fact, since it is its empirically unique nature that determines its importance.⁴

For 'an event to acquire significance', Furet continues, 'it must be integrated into a pattern of other events, in relation to which it will become meaningful'.⁵ Its significance, what we might call its 'eventness', therefore depends on its place in a narrative, and how it compares to other events that precede and follow it. That is why references to Pearl Harbour were so common after September 11. If its significance was to be determined there needed to be another event against which it could be measured.

Narratives, or stories, are therefore essential to the process of understanding events. Though often associated with fashionable literary theories, narrative is indispensable to making events intelligible and meaningful. The 9/11 Commission acknowledges as much in its reconstruction of the historical and political contexts of the 1990s as necessary background to the growth of the terrorist threat and the event of September 11.⁶

In International Relations, there has been little reflection on the concept of event. David Campbell and Roland Bleiker are among the few who have bothered to theorise the event. Campbell reinforces the point made by Veyne and Furet; 'There is', he says, 'a relation between an event, its event-ness, and the way that event-ness is produced through narratives subsequent to the event'.⁷ Bleiker concurs, aphorising that 'Events are actualizations of reality in language'.⁸ In the following section we shall see how eventness takes shape in and through narrative. But it is not just narrative produced after the event which is vital, an event's 'eventness' is also the product of contemporaneous narratives, or narratives 'internal' to the event. In fact, such narratives are neither inside nor outside the event in any clear sense since they constitute them.

In the following sections I show how 'eventness' is produced in and by narratives. But beforehand, it should be noted that a focus on narrative by no means reduces history to fiction. The argument developed here builds on the work of historians Hayden White and Paul Veyne, and international relations theorist Hidemi Suganami, among others, who see history as a particular form of narrative,

⁴ François Furet, 'From Narrative History to Problem-Oriented History', in Geoffrey Roberts (ed.), *The History and Narrative Reader* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 270.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*, Authorised Edition, (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2004), see pp. xv, 339 on the importance of narrative, and p. 340 on the historical reconstruction.

⁷ David Campbell, 'Time is Broken: The Return of the Past in the Response to September 11', *Theory and Event*, 5:4 (2002), §5.

⁸ Roland Bleiker, 'Retracing and Redrawing the Boundaries of Events: Postmodern Interferences with International Theory', *Alternatives*, 23 (1998), pp. 471–97 and p. 480.

one where, unlike fiction, statements about actors, events, and states of affairs must be accounted for on the available evidence. But like fiction, history involves the narrative unfolding of a plot.⁹ Furthermore, literary fiction can supply political insight by dramatising the narrative shaping of events, or what Campbell refers to, following White, as the ‘narrativisation of reality’.¹⁰ To put it simply, literature shows how words create worlds; not just the imaginary worlds of fiction, but the real worlds of politics. Story-telling is an art that produces worlds, both fictional and real, literary and political. So the more we can learn about this art, the more we can learn about the political world of international relations.¹¹

The ‘airborne toxic event’: the novel experience in DeLillo’s *White Noise*

The narrativisation of imaginary events: simulations of the real

In this section I want to provide a brief sketch of Don DeLillo’s brilliant novel, *White Noise*.¹² In the novel, the ‘white noise’ of everyday life is disrupted by a major industrial accident that turns life in the small college town upside down, spewing toxic pollutants into the air, and causing the population to evacuate. My purpose is to draw a comparison between the fictional ‘airborne toxic event’ and the non-fictional event named ‘September 11’. Without wishing to downplay the moral and political horrors of the latter, my intention is to show that both events, the fictional and the real, unavoidably depend on narrative. The value in closely reading DeLillo’s literary handling of ‘the event’ is that he shows the extent to which our experience of events is shaped by the narrativisation of reality.

White Noise is a difficult book to categorise. On the one hand, we might categorise it as modern in that it utilises the ‘middle voice’ that several great modern writers of the twentieth century used. Erich Auerbach sketches some of the key features of this modern writing style, noting the stylistic device employed by writers like Marcel Proust and Virginia Woolf, to completely erase the ‘writer as narrator of objective facts’. Instead, everything in the novel ‘appears by way of reflection in the consciousness of the dramatis personae’. There is no all-seeing position outside the novel’s text. The story’s ‘reality’ is inseparable from the ‘consciousness of the characters’.¹³ This condemns the novel to a particular point

⁹ Hidemi Suganami, *On the Causes of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 145–7.

¹⁰ David Campbell, *National Deconstruction: Violence, Identity and Justice in Bosnia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 34.

¹¹ Among the works on literature that I have benefited greatly from reading are: J. Hillis Miller, *On Literature* (London: Routledge, 2002), and ‘Narrative’, in Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (eds), *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), and Simon Critchley, *Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (London: Routledge, 2005). The exchange between Gerard Holden and Roland Bleiker was also very illuminating. Gerard Holden, ‘World Literature and World Politics: In Search of a Research Agenda’, *Global Society*, 17:3 (2003), pp. 229–52; Roland Bleiker, ‘Learning from Art: A Reply to Holden’s “World Literature and World Politics”’, *Global Society*, 17:4 (2003), pp. 415–28. Also excellent is Bleiker’s ‘The Aesthetic Turn in International Political Theory’, *Millennium*, 30:3 (2001), pp. 509–33.

¹² Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York: Picador, 1984).

¹³ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 534.

of view, however coherent it may be. It also removes the possibility of arriving at a true account of reality which the reader (or the author) can somehow verify.

On the other hand, because of the novel's setting, we might categorise *White Noise* as postmodern in the senses elaborated by Frederic Jameson and Anne Norton.¹⁴ As Frederic Jameson notes of postmodern society, it is a society fashioned around technologies with in-built obsolescence, social saturation of advertising, mass media and telecommunications, and the spread of suburbanisation and car culture.¹⁵ It is a society that reproduces the logic of consumer capitalism, as Jameson argues. A society where, to use Marxist terms, exchange value replaces use value. Therefore, a society built around 'an economy of artificial value'.¹⁶ These features shape the universe of *White Noise*, making up the background hum or 'white noise', like the supermarkets, the highways, the television commercials and quiz shows, the radio voice-overs and other random sounds that intersperse the text. *White Noise* is saturated with random, apparently unconnected and meaningless sound bytes: 'MasterCard, Visa, American Express', 'Toyota Celica', 'Panasonic'.¹⁷ These fragments and the constant presence of consumerism tend to confirm Peter Euben's observation that *White Noise* dramatises the postmodern condition, without necessarily endorsing it.¹⁸

In the postmodern condition events tend to be experienced as images, where the distinctions between image and reality, presence and representation, sign and signified break down. In this condition, where people are constantly bombarded with signifiers often bereft of meaning, as sociologists Scott Lash and John Urry argue, 'What is [sic] increasingly being produced are not material objects, but signs'.¹⁹ Take, for instance, the scene where the novel's lead character and narrator, Jack Gladney, travels with a friend and colleague, Murray Jay Suskind, to a nearby tourist attraction – 'THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA', as the many signs announce.²⁰ Jack and Murray are among scores of tourists there to see America's most photographed barn and to reconfirm the claim by taking photographs themselves. "No one sees the barn," says Murray. "Once you've seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn," he says.²¹ Signs, which point or refer to absent things, announce their primacy in this scene. Murray continues, enquiring,

"What did the barn look like before it was photographed? [...] "What did it look like, how was it different from other barns, how was it similar to other barns? We can't answer these questions because we've read the signs, seen the people snapping the pictures. We can't get outside the aura".²²

¹⁴ Frederic Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', in Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983); *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), and Anne Norton, *Republic of Signs: Liberal Theory and American Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

¹⁵ Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', pp. 124–5.

¹⁶ Norton, *Republic of Signs*, p. 25.

¹⁷ DeLillo, *White Noise*, pp. 100, 155, 241.

¹⁸ J. Peter Euben, *Platonic Noise* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 66.

¹⁹ Scott Lash and John Urry, *Economies of Signs and Space* (London: Sage, 1994), p. 15.

²⁰ DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 12.

²¹ DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 12. When quoting direct speech from the novel, I retain DeLillo's double quotation marks and dispense with single quotation marks.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

Whatever Murray means by the aura's inescapability, his curiosity at the confusion of signifiers and signifieds seems understandable. The barn has lost its sense of reality and has instead become 'a simulacrum mediated by signs'.²³ The barn can no longer, if it ever could, be experienced directly and immediately through sensory perception. It can only be experienced as a sign. Signs, both the literal signposts pointing to the barn and the photographic images that represent the timber structure, become more important than the barn itself (the signified) in DeLillo's postmodern world.

DeLillo writes with great irony and dark humour by playing on the characters' difficulty in distinguishing representations and simulations from real events in this postmodern universe. In *White Noise* simulations are employed to train and prepare emergency services for future 'real' disasters, yet when confronted with the 'real' disaster of the 'airborne toxic event' (ATE) it is dealt with as if it were a simulation.

"That's quite an armband you've got there. What does SIMUVAC mean? Sounds important."

"Short for simulated evacuation. A new state program they're still battling over funds for."

"But this evacuation isn't simulated. It's real."

"We know that. But we thought we could use it as a model."²⁴

The 'real' ATE here becomes a rehearsal for the simulation. So intertwined are the real and the simulated that it becomes difficult to separate the one from the other in the 'precession of simulacra' depicted by DeLillo.²⁵ But it is not only in novels where the distinction between reality and simulation needs clarifying. In the middle of the September 11 attacks an exchange took place which indicates the intrusion of simulation into reality.

FAA: Hi. Boston TMU [Traffic Management Unit], we have a problem here. We have a hijacked aircraft headed towards New York, and we need you guys to, we need someone to scramble some F-16s or something up there, help us out.

NEADS: Is this real-world or exercise?²⁶

In the 'real world', where exercises and simulations are normal, it is not always apparent when 'real' events rather than simulations present themselves. A further instance of this blurring of the real and the simulated during the September 11 terrorist attacks has been noted by Richard Jackson. Many onlookers, he notes, felt as though they were watching a Hollywood movie, such was the cinematic experience of the spectacle. The man who filmed the second plane crash into the World Trade Centre, Clifton Cloud, is reported to have said, 'I looked up and saw this hole in the World Trade Centre building. And I-I couldn't believe it. I thought, you know, this can't be happening. This is a special effect; it's a movie'.²⁷ For

²³ Euben, *Platonic Noise*, p. 163.

²⁴ DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 139.

²⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983).

²⁶ *The 9/11 Commission Report*, p. 20. FAA stands for the Federal Aviation Administration. NEADS stands for Northeast Air Defense Sector, one of the three sectors under North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD).

²⁷ Quoted in Richard Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics and Counter-Terrorism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 30.

everyone aside from the New Yorkers who witnessed the event with their own eyes, September 11 was and remains predominantly a cinematic, televisual or pictorial experience. The images, moving or still, of crashing planes or collapsing buildings, are the medium through which September 11 was experienced by many. This was as true for the US administration as it was for everyone else. As the 9/11 Commission Report states, 'Most federal agencies learned about the crash in New York from CNN'.²⁸ Even Vice-President Cheney kept a close eye on events by watching a TV in one of the White House's tunnels.²⁹

The strikingly visual character of September 11 still requires narrative framing for the images to convey meaning. There is, as Thomas Keenan notes, a misguided assumption 'that an image's content or meaning is self-evident', that it speaks for itself and therefore requires no interpretation.³⁰ But as his analysis of media coverage of Sarajevo during the Bosnian War shows, it is a 'naïve consolation' to suppose that images contain or convey self-evident meaning. Rather, he insists, they require 'interpretation and reinscription' into a context which can ascribe meaning and significance to an image.³¹

DeLillo's construction of the ATE

What DeLillo does to wonderful effect in *White Noise* is highlight the interaction between the physical and social, material and immaterial dimensions of the 'airborne toxic event'. His novel reveals the way that the event is mediated and enacted through narrative. It is the stories people tell to themselves and to others – relayed through conversation and rumour as much as through official statements and news reports – that constitutes the event. The system of signs and the flows of information, data and images are inseparable from the event as it is experienced by the story's characters. Narrative thus functions as a productive power at two levels here: it produces the imaginary world contained within the pages of the novel, and within the imaginary world it produces the event at the heart of the novel's narrative, the 'airborne toxic event'.

Fragments of information are gathered by individuals and families as they try to grasp the nature of the ATE, but the event remains elusive. 'True, false and other kinds of news radiated through the dormitory' where evacuees took refuge,³² but it was impossible to discriminate between reliable and unreliable news fragments. In the midst of the 'event', all knowledge became uncertain. 'In a crisis the true facts are whatever other people say they are. No one's knowledge is less secure than your own', Jack confides to the reader.³³ It is not simply that personal insecurity has always prompted Jack to seek authority elsewhere, it is that an individual's experience of events or social reality will always be mediated by what Shapiro calls 'pre-texts of apprehension'. As he explains, 'the meaning and value

²⁸ *The 9/11 Commission Report*, p. 35.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

³⁰ Thomas Keenan, 'Publicity and Indifference (Sarajevo on Television)', *PMLA*, 117:1 (2002), p. 113.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 113–4.

³² DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 129.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

imposed on the world is structured not by one's immediate consciousness but by the various reality-making scripts one inherits or acquires from one's surrounding cultural/linguistic condition'.³⁴ When statements are made by public officials or broadcast by news agencies they appear to carry a degree of authoritativeness which then frames the way in which the event is interpreted or meaning is attached to it by others.

In *White Noise*, DeLillo plays on the constantly evolving description of the 'chemical event' to disclose its 'man-made' or social construction.³⁵ To begin with, the spill produces what Jack describes, looking through binoculars, as a 'heavy black mass hanging in the air . . . more or less shapeless'.³⁶ An hour later, again looking through binoculars, Jack describes it as 'a slightly larger accumulation, a towering mass in fact, maybe a little blacker now'.³⁷ Over time Jack's children provide him with regular updates on how radio broadcasts are describing it. First, it's a 'feathery plume', then later it's described as a 'black billowing cloud'.³⁸ Finally Jack is informed that it's no longer being called a black billowing cloud, instead, it is 'The airborne toxic event' – a name that not only partly describes the nature of the accident, but also auto-ascribes its status as an 'event'.³⁹

As Paul Patton notes, 'much of the irony and humour in DeLillo's account derives from the implicit claim that there is no social reality outside or unaffected by the forms of representation of events'.⁴⁰ To put this into my terms, *White Noise* plays with and upon the narrativisation of reality; it isolates and dramatises the social significance of story-telling to amusing affect. But there is a deeper and more serious philosophical upshot of DeLillo's handling of the event's narrative construction – that experience of reality is not given in any immediate or direct sense, but is always mediated through language in general and stories in particular. In telling his story, DeLillo dramatises the way that the event is 'performatively' constituted. In other words, DeLillo's *White Noise* demonstrates 'how to do things with words', to borrow the title of J. L. Austin's marvellous book.⁴¹ This is the point Patton makes in a passage worth quoting at length.

The airborne toxic event exemplifies the dual character of the event in modern technological form. It is at once the attribute of bodies and states of affairs (the physical interactions of chemicals, machinery and people), but at the same time irreducible to these alone since [it is] constituted by what is expressed in verbal or visual statements, in the immaterial realm of the content of television coverage, radio and newspaper reports. The nature of the event is conditioned by the meanings of these contents, along with the fears and hopes which these produce.⁴²

Patton argues that any event, as a complex political phenomenon, has both a material and an immaterial existence. It is constituted by the 'attributes of bodies

³⁴ Michael J. Shapiro, 'Textualizing Global Politics', in James Der Derian and Michael J. Shapiro (eds), *International / Intertextual Relations: Postmodern readings of World Politics* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1989), p. 11.

³⁵ DeLillo, *White Noise*, pp. 135, 128.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 111, 113.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

⁴⁰ Paul Patton, 'The World Seen from Within: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Events', *Theory and Event*, 1:1 (1997), §10.

⁴¹ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

⁴² Patton, 'The World Seen from Within', §13.

and states of affairs': real human bodies, real planes, real buildings, real collisions, real collapse. But it cannot be reduced to the material dimension. It is also constituted by written, verbal and visual statements. The immaterial dimension of what people see, hear, read and say, plus the media reports and coverage, government statements and actions, and the fears and hopes all combine to produce the event. This applies equally to the perpetrators of September 11 as much as to the victims, the onlookers, and the governmental authorities. Patton believes that DeLillo's novel confirms that narrative and other modes of representation give effect or actualisation to events.⁴³ Worlds, real or imaginary, are always already shot through with narrative. Narratives do not stand apart from the events they represent, but are folded back into them, becoming part of the assemblage of 'facts', including 'True, false and other kinds of news', vivid rumours and chilling tales.⁴⁴

This implies that there are no events independent of the narratives in which they are depicted, analysed and judged. We should not suppose that first there is an independent historical event and then follows its narration. Events do not precede narrative, but are articulated through them. Narrative helps 'to actualise particular events in the social field'.⁴⁵ Outside of narrative there are no events because there is no 'pattern of uniformity', no 'pattern of other events' which allows an historical fact to rise to the 'rank of event', as historians Veyne and Furet explained. This is a commonplace of contemporary constructivism, that social and political reality is constituted in part at least by representations, including narrative.

DeLillo's narrative reveals the event, the ATE, both as a construction and as something which changes the way the novel's characters experience everyday reality. The ATE ruptures normal, everyday experience: "Isn't the definition of a serious event based on the fact that it's not an everyday occurrence?" asks Jack's wife Babette.⁴⁶ After the ATE nothing remains the same, not the sky, not the sunsets, not the supermarkets, and not even Jack's body, which now carries death around inside it. "That little breath of Nyodene has planted death in my body. It's now official, according to the computer. I've got death inside me," Jack confides to Murray after being diagnosed by a SIMUVAC official.⁴⁷ Jack says of the ATE: "It's an event all right. It marks the end of uneventful things".⁴⁸ In short, the ATE is a caesura after which nothing appears to be the same; it changes how Jack experiences reality, modifying his relationship to himself and to others in the process.

DeLillo charts one aspect of the change in experience with some humour, and in so doing reveals the lack of any causal determinism when it comes to the ATE's effects. Against the tendency to imply that an event necessarily causes certain effects, DeLillo shows how even the effects, in this case symptoms, are constructed and disconnected from the 'cause'. After the event, the symptoms of exposure to the ATE are updated and revised regularly. 'At first they said skin irritations and

⁴³ Ibid., §20.

⁴⁴ DeLillo, *White Noise*, pp. 120, 153.

⁴⁵ Patton, 'The World Seen from Within', §7.

⁴⁶ DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 174.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 150.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 151.

sweaty palms. But now they say nausea, vomiting, shortness of breath'.⁴⁹ Later reports say exposure to the ATE causes 'heart palpitations and a sense of *déjà vu*'.⁵⁰ But by the time his daughter starts to display these symptoms the medical experts have again changed their view; she should have been displaying 'coma, convulsions, and miscarriage'.⁵¹ Jack wonders whether 'she was in a position to be tricked by her own apparatus of suggestibility'.⁵² After all, she had been lagging all day with the symptoms. 'Is it possible to have a false perception of an illusion? Is there a true *déjà vu* and a false *déjà vu*?'.⁵³ The symptoms thought to arise from exposure to the ATE are far from certain in *White Noise*. Experience becomes overshadowed by shifting theories about the after-effects of the ATE, creating confusion in the minds and bodies of its victims. DeLillo's novel suggests that the symptoms cannot be detached from the event's representation in narrative. How the senses respond to an event will partly depend on what is being said about it.

The proliferating accounts of the ATE and its effects generate confusion in Jack's mind. Most of all, the ATE generates fear. 'The airborne toxic event is a horrifying thing. Our fear is enormous', said someone Jack encountered during the ATE.⁵⁴ This is certainly true for Jack. He had always been afraid of death, but the ATE intensified this fear, no doubt robbing him of his powers of reasoning and judgment as we shall see below.

September 11: narratives of the event

What kind of event was September 11? Or in James Rosenau and Mary Durfee's words, 'of what is it an instance?'.⁵⁵ The answer, an act of terrorism, would seem so obvious as hardly to need stating. Yet, if Ronald Krebs and Jennifer Lobasz are right, 'September 11, like all political events, did not speak for itself. It required interpretation, and it did not have to lead to a War on Terror'.⁵⁶ Krebs and Lobasz do not deny the reality of the death and destruction, nor do they deny that the attacks were acts of terrorism, but they do deny that what became the dominant narratives inside, and perhaps outside, the White House was inevitable. I shall come to the dominant narratives shortly, but before then I want to point out that as an 'event', September 11 is conceived as much more than simply an act of terrorism. There are always other meanings ascribed to it, meanings that draw on prior moral and political scripts or narratives, and that predispose towards particular policy responses.

While there are, in principle, an infinite number of narrative representations of September 11, there are at least five dominant constructions: September 11 as

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁵⁵ James Rosenau and Mary Durfee, *Thinking Theory Thoroughly: Coherent Approaches to an Incoherent World* (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1995), p. 3.

⁵⁶ Ronald Krebs and Jennifer Lobasz, 'Fixing the Meaning of 9/11: Hegemony, Coercion, and the Road to War in Iraq', *Security Studies*, 16:3 (2007), pp. 409–451 at p. 413.

trauma, September 11 as world-changing event, September 11 as an act of terrorism, September 11 as an act of war, and September 11 as an act of evil. It is precisely because events do not offer themselves up as possessing self-evident meaning that different narratives are constructed. To tell the story of September 11 is to foreground one or other of these narratives. At stake is not only how the relevant facts are selected and interpreted, but also how the narrative functions to serve particular purposes. It is likely that the purposes served by individual narratives will be more important in determining which narratives become dominant than how well they account for the relevant facts. In other words, it is not so much the truthfulness of a narrative that determines whether it will be taken seriously; it is what can be done with it, politically speaking. That is, the narratives should be seen as performative rather than constative. We shall see that certain narratives of September 11 have been used for the purpose of justifying neoconservative policies articulated both within and without the White House.

September 11 as trauma

In his first major speech after the events of September 11, President George W. Bush spoke emotionally of the harm inflicted on the USA by the terrorist attacks. 'I will not forget this wound to our country', he promised.⁵⁷ The event was traumatic; leaving a wound that could not and would not be forgotten for a long while. Not only was a gaping hole cut into the Pentagon and into the ground where the Twin Towers used to stand, a deep and painful wound was inflicted on the American psyche. September 11 left its marks both physically and mentally on America. A similar feeling was expressed by Jonathan Schell who, writing in *The Nation* three weeks after the event, tells of how 'a piece was torn out of our world'.⁵⁸ A leading Australian journalist, Paul Kelly, wrote, 'It has left a permanent gap in the sky and an enduring hole in the American soul'.⁵⁹ These are but different ways of noting the traumatic character of the event, of recognising the physical and psychic harm inflicted by the events of September 11.

These reflections on September 11 are hardly surprising given the violence and destruction enacted on that specific day. But Jacques Derrida, in an interview on the topic of September 11, has remarked on the relation between trauma and event in general.⁶⁰ Trauma and the event are indissolubly linked: 'An event always inflicts a wound in the everyday course of history.' On this view, events, insofar as they are traumatic, cut into or across the ordinariness of everyday life; and have the potential to cut new historical paths, not least by appearing to cut off alternatives. Jenny Edkins makes a similar point, saying that trauma 'alters the

⁵⁷ George W. Bush, 'Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People', 20 September 2001. Available at {<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/print/20010920-8.html>}

⁵⁸ Jonathan Schell, *A Hole in the World: An Unfolding Story of War, Protest and the New American Order* (New York: Nathan Books, 2004), ch. 1.

⁵⁹ Paul Kelly, 'The American Ascendancy', *The Weekend Australian*, 15–16 December 2001.

⁶⁰ Jacques Derrida, 'Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides – A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida', in Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 96.

linearity of historical, narrativized time'.⁶¹ In both cases, events and traumas are thought to disrupt time or, more accurately, the experience of time. Australian novelist Peter Carey made the same point more poetically when in the wake of the event he wrote, 'Time is broken'.⁶² This cannot fail to evoke Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: 'the time is out of joint'.

September 11 as a world-changing event

Before the sun rose on September 12, 2001 there was a palpable sense that the world had fundamentally changed; 'night fell on a different world' said President George W. Bush.⁶³ Several similar remarks were made by the President and members of his administration in the days following September 11. In his *Bush at War*, Bob Woodward reports a remark by the President in a September 12th NSC meeting, 'This is a new world'.⁶⁴ The terrorist acts that damaged the Pentagon and destroyed the Twin Towers of the WTC, cutting a gaping hole in Manhattan that would become known as 'Ground Zero', had decisively opened the world to the prospect of what the White House liked to call the 'first war of the twenty-first century'. Immediately, September 11 was hailed as a defining moment for America, comparable to the 7 December 1941 Pearl Harbour attacks. With this in mind President Bush entered in his diary: 'The Pearl Harbour of the 21st century took place today'.⁶⁵ For Bush and many others, these two events are thought to abide by a similar historical sequencing and to entail the same moral grammar, as Cynthia Weber points out.⁶⁶ They are both presented as dramatic surprise attacks that shattered America's isolation and innocence, demanding a forceful response.

Yet what would very quickly become a defining moment, was initially characterised by President Bush in very matter-of-fact terms. 'Two planes have crashed into the World Trade Centre in an apparent terrorist attack on our country', he said in brief remarks made at the school where he was when the attacks took place.⁶⁷ At this point in time (9.30am EDT, September 11, 2001), the attacks were already identified as 'an apparent terrorist attack'. This wasn't obvious until the second plane crashed into the South Tower at 9.03am. Before the second plane crashed into the WTC, live on television before a global audience, it appeared that a terrible accident had occurred when the first plane crashed; after all, nobody outside of the Federal Aviation Administration knew the plane had been hijacked.⁶⁸ Indeed, the first information received by the President was that 'a

⁶¹ Jenny Edkins, 'Forget Trauma? Responses to September 11', *International Relations*, 16:2 (2002), pp. 243–56 at p. 246.

⁶² Quoted in Campbell, 'Time is Broken', §1.

⁶³ 'Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People'.

⁶⁴ Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), p. 62.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁶⁶ Cynthia Weber, *Imagining America at War: Morality, Politics, and Film* (London: Routledge, 2006), ch. 1.

⁶⁷ 'Remarks by the President after Two Planes Crash into World Trade Center', Emma Booker Elementary School, Sarasota, Florida, September 11, 2001. Available at {<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010911.html>}

⁶⁸ *The 9/11 Commission Report*, p. 35.

small, twin-engine plane had crashed into the World Trade Center'. 'The President's reaction', naturally enough, 'was that the incident must have been caused by pilot error'.⁶⁹ It was only on the second plane crashing into the South Tower that the first gloss of the incident could be dismissed. Until then however, as reported by the 9/11 Commission, 'the prospect of another plane hitting the second building was beyond the contemplation of anyone [...] such a scenario was unimaginable'.⁷⁰ Because the unimaginable happened, unimaginable outside a literary or cinematic imagination perhaps, the event was quickly appropriated as world-changing.

From an act of terrorism to an act of war

After the event the Bush administration put its effort into devising and disseminating an ideologically and politically-driven narrative of what had happened on September 11, 2001. There is a temptation to presume that the meanings of events in the social and political worlds are transparently revealed by the facts, that the 'facts speak for themselves'.⁷¹ But although what happened on that date is widely known and key facts are largely indisputable, it is far from clear what September 11 *means* or *signifies* or *reveals*.⁷² Indeed, its meanings have to be assigned or appropriated, its significations and significance have to be induced, and its revelations have to be interpreted. Giving meaning to an event is thus an active process.

According to Richard Jackson, the Bush administration embarked on a mission to 'fix the exact nature and meaning of the events'.⁷³ In what he describes as 'probably the most important discursive move' made by the Bush administration, the terrorist attacks were constructed, or as he puts it, 'grammatically reconstructed', as acts of war. Closely reading post-September 11 speeches made by President Bush and other senior White House figures, he shows how this shift was made. Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld's words are especially telling in this regard. Of the September 11 attacks he said, sixteen days after the event: 'They were acts of war, military strikes against the United States of America. As such, those Department of Defense employees who were injured or killed were not just victims of terror. They were combat casualties'.⁷⁴ Rumsfeld is here adding a new layer of meaning to the event. No longer simply terrorist attacks, as the President's words of the morning of September 11, 2001 attested, the attacks were now construed as acts of war. Subsequent events reaffirmed the construction of September 11 as an act of war, including the decision by Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, to invoke the ANZUS agreement on 14 September 2001, committing Australia to support any American military response.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 288–9.

⁷¹ Krebs and Lobasz, 'Fixing the Meaning', p. 413; Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism*, p. 29.

⁷² Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism*, p. 29.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 38.

⁷⁴ Cited in Ibid., p. 39.

⁷⁵ ANZUS stands for Australia, New Zealand and US, an alliance formed in 1951.

September 11 as an act of evil

The day after the terrorist attacks, the headline of the Australian tabloid, *The Herald Sun*, screamed: 'Pure evil' (13 September 2001). Evil was a word that quickly, and perhaps understandably, came to mind. It certainly came to President Bush's mind, over and again. 'Today our nation saw evil', he told the American public on the day of the attacks.⁷⁶ In the months and years ahead he would repeatedly invoke the word to describe America's enemies as 'evil-doers' or 'evil folks'. His infamous 'axis of evil' State of the Union address, and several subsequent speeches portrayed the post-September 11 world as driven by a conflict between good and evil.⁷⁷ Indeed, so unsparing was Bush with this discourse, that the philosopher Peter Singer has named him the President of Good and Evil.⁷⁸ President Bush used the term in some 319 speeches between January 2001 and June 2003, according to Singer.⁷⁹ Moreover, he tended to use the word as a noun rather than adjective, creating the impression that evil was a force of nature, something with an existence independent of the actions of human beings.⁸⁰ For neoconservatives, September 11 was a salutary reminder that 'evil exists in this world'.⁸¹ It was also a clarion call to rid the world of evil. There can be little doubt that labelling the enemy as evil was psychologically reassuring for many Americans, including the principals in the White House, but it tended to foreclose attempts to understand the sources of terrorist anger. It also gave rise to the forlorn hope that evil was eliminable.

Counter-narratives of September 11

The naming of an event seems a trivial matter. But there may be more to it. Jacques Derrida says that naming an event after a date (like September 11) indicates that 'we perhaps have no concept and no meaning available to us to name in any other way this "thing" that has just happened, this supposed "event"'.⁸² Calling it an 'act of "international terrorism"', Derrida suggests, would not help us to grasp the event's singularity.⁸³ It is perhaps for this reason that some, like David Campbell and Jenny Edkins, have suggested retaining the non-specific designation, 'the event'.⁸⁴ The idea behind this suggestion is that

⁷⁶ George W. Bush, 'Remarks by the President in His Address to the Nation', 11 September 2001. Available at {<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010911-16.html>}.

⁷⁷ George W. Bush, 'President Delivers State of the Union Address', 29 January 2002. Available at {<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>}. Also see George W. Bush, 'Remarks by the President Upon Arrival', 16 September 2001 for an example of such references. Available at {<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916-2.html>}.

⁷⁸ Peter Singer, *The President of Good and Evil: The Ethics of George W. Bush* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2004).

⁷⁹ Cited in Renee Jeffery, 'Review Article: Beyond Banality? Ethical Responses to Evil in Post-September 11 International Relations', *International Affairs*, 81:4 (2005), pp. 175–186 at p. 180.

⁸⁰ Singer, *The President of Good and Evil*, p. 2.

⁸¹ Lawrence F. Kaplan and William Kristol, *The War Over Iraq: Saddam's Tyranny and America's Mission* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2003), p. 3.

⁸² Derrida, 'Autoimmunity', p. 86.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Edkins is cited in Campbell, 'Time is Broken', §1.

naming an event inevitably fixes its meaning, whereas Campbell and Edkins hesitate, for political reasons, to assign meaning to an event which cannot be represented, that 'exceeds experience'.⁸⁵ It is this 'inexperiencability' of the event that Derrida also wants recognised.⁸⁶ An event worthy of the name is first 'experienced' as something that cannot be comprehended, something that eludes the grasp of our extant concepts. An event calls for an effort of appropriation; it calls for attempts to make sense of it, to recognise it, to comprehend it, to identify it, and to describe it. And yet, precisely because it is an event worthy of the name, it will resist, elude or exceed all such attempts at appropriation.⁸⁷

This is certainly true of attempts to appropriate September 11 as an act of war. In truth, the White House has oscillated between constructions of the event as an act of terrorism and an act of war, but for strategic reasons it made sense to the White House to revert to the language of war. Despite the well-documented drawbacks of this rhetoric, the war narrative was intended to provide the US with a more conventional range of policy responses; most importantly, it would allow the US to target sovereign states rather than elusive terrorist networks in its 'War on Terrorism'.⁸⁸ It was imperative to broaden the war on terror beyond terrorists to include states, Vice-President Cheney insisted, because 'it's easier to find them than it is to find Bin Laden'.⁸⁹ However, the White House also argued that a 'new type of war' was instigated by September 11, rendering old war-fighting methods dangerously passé. This created confusion in US policy to the extent that rules governing the War on Terror became unclear. To Bush's mind, the enemy was fighting without any constraint, free of agreed international rules.⁹⁰ Doubt was therefore cast over the relevance of the Geneva Conventions and other rules meant to 'humanise' or at least limit the destructiveness of war. Such rules were thought to be 'quaint' or antiquated in an asymmetrical war where only one side was a traditional military force. At any rate, as the US legislated to remove limits on interrogation methods, a certain symmetry was established – America's moral authority was in tatters as it descended to the tactics and techniques of its enemy.

Attempts to construct September 11 as world-changing are equally elusive. There is no doubt that the terrorist attacks were profoundly felt around the world and that they deeply and traumatically affected the US. But the question of whether the world changed is a different matter. No doubt it is too early to tell. But already some things are clear. First, it is clear that there is now a widespread *belief* that September 11 has changed the world.⁹¹ This alone may be significant insofar as it is a view held by decision-makers in the White House; however, it needs to be balanced against a second, converse factor, namely, that, as David

⁸⁵ Campbell, 'Time is Broken', §1.

⁸⁶ Derrida, 'Autoimmunity', p. 90.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ On the errors associated with declaring a war on terror, see Michael Howard, 'What's in a name? How to Fight Terrorism', *Foreign Affairs*, 81:1 (2002), pp. 8–13.

⁸⁹ Cited in Woodward, *Bush at War*, p. 43.

⁹⁰ For the terrorists, according to President Bush, '[t]here are no rules'. See George W. Bush, 'Guard and Reserves "Define Spirit of America"', 17 September 2001. Available at {<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010917-3.html>}

⁹¹ Caroline Kennedy-Pipe and Nicholas Rengger, 'Apocalypse Now? Continuities or Disjunctions in World Politics After 9/11', *International Affairs*, 82:3 (2006), pp. 539–52.

Campbell argues, it is clear that the US response is strongly informed by Cold War narratives of heightened insecurity and militarised responses.⁹² A world-changing response, he argues,

would have seen Presidents and Prime Ministers stand before the cameras and say that because it was the principle of respect for civilian life that had been assaulted, we would unite with others in the laborious, step-by-step, time-consuming task of justice, so that our reactions would not be ones which validated the terrorist logic of ends justifying means.⁹³

Campbell's main point is that Western governments and media have shown no hesitation in adopting narratives that reproduce Cold War tendencies. This applies equally to the construction of September 11 as an act of evil, after all, during the Cold War President Reagan famously called the USSR the 'evil empire'. For both Reagan and Bush and their neoconservative supporters, America embodies a transcendental apotropaic power, a power capable of defeating evil. Indian writer Arundhati Roy is doubtless correct to say that President Bush 'can no more "rid the world of evil-doers" than he can stock it with saints'.⁹⁴

Jean Bethke Elshtain is among the most prominent of those commentators who accept the President's narrative of a battle between good and evil and believe in America's apotropaic powers.⁹⁵ She wants us to believe that when confronted with competing narratives of the same event we must decide on the basis of trust or moral authority.⁹⁶ Who is the more trustworthy narrator of September 11, she asks, Pope John Paul II or Osama bin Laden? Elshtain implies that the more trustworthy description of the event will issue from the more trustworthy person. Now as far as we know, neither man was an eyewitness to the event itself, if by that we mean, experiencing 'first-hand' the crashing planes in New York, Washington or Pennsylvania. That does not worry Elshtain because her intention is not to set out the facts, but simply to decide whether it is better to describe the events of September 11 as an 'unspeakable horror' or a 'glorious deed'. Indeed, the facts are not actually in question;⁹⁷ John Paul II, Osama bin Laden and Jean Bethke Elshtain all agree that planes were flown into buildings killing thousands. What is in question is how to interpret certain facts, how to decide which facts are most salient in constructing a narrative, and how to normatively judge the actors for their decisions and actions both during and after the events. It is indeed a question of 'politics and the capacity for judgment', to borrow from Elshtain, because it involves choosing between competing interpretations.⁹⁸

Elshtain wants to argue that any description of events must inherently carry a moral evaluation.⁹⁹ The factual world has a moral nature, she says, rather evoking the natural law theology of early modern Christendom.¹⁰⁰ But if we put to one side

⁹² Campbell, 'Time is Broken', §17.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, §12.

⁹⁴ Arundhati Roy, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (London: Flamingo, 2002), p. 207.

⁹⁵ For a devastating critique of Elshtain see Anthony Burke, 'Against the New Internationalism', *Ethics and International Affairs*, 19:2 (2005), pp. 73–89. See also Elshtain's feeble and ill-tempered response, 'Against the New Utopianism', *Ethics and International Affairs*, 19:2 (2005), pp. 91–6.

⁹⁶ Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Just War Against Terror: The Burden of American Power in a Violent World* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), pp. 12–3.

⁹⁷ With the exception of a few conspiracy theorists.

⁹⁸ Elshtain, *Just War*, p. 11.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14–16.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

her natural law theology, Elshtain's point is a reasonable one: facts and values are difficult to separate. The facts we select, the interpretations we give, and the narrative shape we give to the events will betray a moral perspective and even a moral judgment. In her own words, 'Our depiction of the event carries our moral evaluation'.¹⁰¹ I fully agree with Elshtain on this. But interestingly, her example from Albert Camus is notable for its lack of explicit moral judgment. In his story about a mother forced at gunpoint to choose which of her three sons should not be murdered, told with 'admirable economy', says Elshtain, Camus withholds explicit condemnation. He writes without the self-righteous, moralistic tone of Elshtain. Why? Because there is no need. His 'spare description of events' can still convey the horror of the mother's choice. The author does not need to tell the reader what kinds of emotional sensibility or moral reaction should be provoked, the modern imagination is capable enough.¹⁰²

For Elshtain, deciding on the truth of an experience appears to depend on appeal to an appropriate authority. Should we take the word of a Pope or a terrorist? she asks. But this is a disingenuous question. For I know of not a single Western academic critic of the War on Terror who would agree with Osama that the events of September 11 were a glorious deed. So why does Elshtain persist? Because she wants to insinuate an affinity between critics of the War on Terror and the terrorists themselves. She wants to create the impression that if you are critical of the War on Terror, whether you like it or not, you are taking sides with terrorism; you must have accepted Osama's normative depiction of events. Readers can decide for themselves whether that line of argument deserves their trust, but refusing Elshtain's quasi-Manichaeic discourse of good and evil allows distance to be gained from both President Bush and Osama bin Laden.¹⁰³ What this brief discussion of Elshtain shows is that interpretative conflict is unavoidable. It is not at the level of the 'facts' that this conflict plays out. Rather, it is at the level on which the narrative emplots the sequence of event, characterising the story in a particular way.¹⁰⁴

After the event

After the event, that is to say after DeLillo's 'airborne toxic event', the lead character and narrator Jack descends into a violent madness. He becomes obsessed with violence, convinced that committing violent acts gives him greater perceptual

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁰² Elshtain deals with Camus' story on, pp.11–12.

¹⁰³ I say 'quasi-Manichaeic' because, as Richard Bernstein points out, 'the original Manichaeans believed that God is coeternal with Satan. Consequently, there can be no final victory over evil'. Richard Bernstein, *The Abuse of Evil: The Corruption of Religion and Politics Since 9/11* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), p. 48.

¹⁰⁴ On plot and story see amongst others, Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (London: Routledge, 2002), ch. 11; J. Hillis Miller, 'Narrative', in Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (eds), *Critical terms for Literary Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1995); and Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), ch. 2, *Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), ch. 1.

and epistemological clarity. Violence seems to transcend representations, granting him a direct access to, and a heightened perception of, reality.¹⁰⁵ 'I knew the precise nature of events. I was moving closer to things in their actual state as I approached a violence, a smashing intensity', Jack discloses.¹⁰⁶ Violence seemed to make him feel immune to death, or at least, no longer fearful of it. It was as if he were storing up 'life-credit', or as he calls it elsewhere, 'existential credit'.¹⁰⁷ Jack's violence is a pre-emptive strike against death, an attempt to defy human mortality that can only ever fail.

After the ATE and the revelation of his wife's infidelity, vengeance overwhelms Jack; 'I was in a vengeful and near savage state', he confesses.¹⁰⁸ It quickly becomes apparent that Jack's ability to distinguish between right and wrong, prudent and foolish conduct, is seriously diminished. His course of action seems disproportionate and wild, lacking the 'measure and proportion' that Michel de Montaigne thought proper to wisdom, 'a controlled handling of our soul'.¹⁰⁹ Jack displayed the same irrational fear of death that Montaigne mocked in the sixteenth century. 'You are not dying because you are ill', Montaigne sardonically remarked, 'you are dying because you are alive; Death can kill you well enough without illness to help her'.¹¹⁰ Almost entirely bereft of the Stoic virtues that Montaigne prized, Jack's actions were always unlikely to assuage his fear of death.

It may simply be coincidence, but as Peter Euben points out, the acronym of 'airborne toxic event' is ATE, and in ancient Greek, *ate* is 'the kind of madness that blinds men to the distinctions between right and wrong, advantageous and ruinous conduct'.¹¹¹ By any modest assessment, Jack has descended into a madness of this kind. He has lost his capacity to make wise or prudent judgments and is hell-bent on killing the man who in return for sexual favours supplied Jack's wife with the drug Dylar, which is alleged to relieve the fear of death. After making this decision to hunt down and kill his nemesis, Jack believed he grew in power, becoming impervious to mortal fears and harms: 'My humanity soared', he declared.¹¹² However, the attempted murder of Willie Mink (aka Mr Gray) goes comically awry, with Jack sustaining a gunshot injury himself after shooting his target. After the ATE, Jack loses touch with reality, no longer able to distinguish the real and the imaginary. As he confesses, 'I could not distinguish words from things, so that if someone said "speeding bullet," I would fall to the floor and take cover'.¹¹³ This absurd philosophical 'anti-realism' leads Jack to believe that his words have a magical substantialising power. It was enough simply for him to utter words for them to become reality. 'Hail of bullets', he said to the equally delusional Mink, who obliged by hitting the floor 'showing real terror'.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁵ Euben, *Platonic Noise*, p. 79.

¹⁰⁶ DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 305.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 312, 84.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

¹⁰⁹ Michel de Montaigne, *Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 390.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1239.

¹¹¹ Euben, *Platonic Noise*, p. 146.

¹¹² DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 315.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 311.

The Iraq War: the madness of President Bush?

After the terrorist attacks neoconservatives knew a more amenable environment had been created to drum up support for war against Iraq. If Halper and Clark are correct, it was a kind of post-September 11 'neurosis', contrived they think, which shaped the context in which 'disparate and uncorroborated fragments of information about Iraq [were] formed into a mosaic of specific threats and dangers'. Worst-case scenarios became the norm in the White House.¹¹⁵ 'There was a growing respect for the vivid rumour, the most chilling tale', to use DeLillo's words, which allowed for flimsy and unverified claims to be used to sell the war against Iraq. Countless unverified claims were made regarding Saddam Hussein's Iraq – about the existence of an Iraqi WMD programme, about Iraq's ability to launch chemical and biological weapons within 45 minutes, about Iraq purchasing uranium from Niger, about operational links between *Al-Qaeda* and Iraq, about Iraqi culpability for the September 11 attacks – all later proven to be false.¹¹⁶ Whether an honest mistake or the figment of a neurotic imagination, these erroneous claims which formed the pretext of the war against Iraq suggest a disconcerting inability of the US and UK governments to distinguish fact from fiction. After the event of September 11, the White House took a turn away from reality much like DeLillo's Jack Gladney, believing that words created truths. Apocryphal intelligence, *suggestio falsi* and worst-case scenarios stood in for serious analysis.

Even if it is true that neoconservatives in Washington viewed deposing the Iraqi dictator as 'unfinished business' after the first Gulf War, it was the sense of post-September 11 fear and anger that spurred the White House into action and that imparted to it a veneer of legitimacy. As early as September 13, it had become apparent to Secretary of State Colin Powell, that President Bush 'was tired of rhetoric. The president wanted to kill somebody'.¹¹⁷ He was not alone. Many Americans felt the urge to kill someone in revenge. Lance Morrow, writing in *Time* magazine in the days after September 11, pronounced: 'A day cannot live in infamy without the nourishment of rage. Let's have rage'.¹¹⁸ This 'war psychosis' as Michael Howard calls it, was perhaps a natural response to an event conceived as world-changing and traumatic, but as Emma Hutchison and Roland Bleiker argue, the political manipulation of fear and anger after traumatic events almost inevitably leads to violence and vengeance.¹¹⁹ This may soothe fears of annihilation, as Michael Ure points out, but it does so by creating an illusory feeling of

¹¹⁵ Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke, *America Alone: The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 230. Also see Lawrence Freedman, 'War in Iraq: Selling the Threat', *Survival*, 46:2 (2004), pp. 7–49 at p. 16.

¹¹⁶ For judicious accounts of the fanciful catalogue of claims made to rationalise war against Iraq, see Freedman, 'War in Iraq', Halper and Clarke, *America Alone*, ch. 7, Alex Danchev, 'The Reckoning: Official Inquiries and the Iraq War', *Intelligence and National Security*, 19:3 (2004), pp. 436–66, and Seymour M. Hersh, *Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), Part V.

¹¹⁷ Woodward, *Bush at War*, p. 53.

¹¹⁸ Lance Morrow, 'The Case for Rage', *Time*, 13 September 2001.

¹¹⁹ Howard, 'What's in a Name?', p. 9. Emma Hutchison and Roland Bleiker, 'Emotions in the War on Terror', in Alex J. Bellamy, Roland Bleiker, Sara E. Davies and Richard Devetak (eds), *Security and the War on Terror* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 61.

power.¹²⁰ That, at least, is how Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud viewed the matter, showing their debt to Stoics such as Seneca, for whom ‘mental raving’ is the ‘outcome of violent anger’.¹²¹

The Iraq War has proven to be a great folly. Born out of anger and a desire for revenge after the event of September 11, it has plunged the US into a ‘long war’ from which it will be difficult to exit. Achieving victory is likely to be even more difficult. In any case, it has done nothing to eliminate terrorism or evil. In fact, if anything, it has exacerbated the problem of terrorism, doing more harm than good in Adam Roberts’ judgment.¹²²

Conclusion

Philosophers from Plato to Kant have repudiated literature. Plato disparaged literature, poetry in particular, for being mimetic, nothing but a copy or derivation of an original. It encouraged people to become actors in their imaginary worlds, he thought. So for these reasons he wanted to banish poets from the *polis*. Kant takes a similarly negative view of literature, especially novels. Novels weaken memory and destroy a person’s character, he thought. They generate emotional attachment to fictitious people rather than the oral obligation demanded by the Categorical Imperative. Other thinkers, philosophers and political writers included, from Aristotle to Machiavelli, from Montaigne to Derrida, have recognised literature’s power in activating the imagination, and producing insight into, rather than retreat from, the so-called real world.

The argument developed here draws on the original Aristotelian idea that humans are story-telling animals. They depend on narrative to endow their worlds with meaning. Literature then is not so far removed from politics to the extent that both realms engage in the narrativisation of reality. From literature we can learn more about the means by which we make our worlds, not just the imaginary worlds of fiction, but the real worlds of politics and international relations. It is this constitutive or performative aspect of narrative that DeLillo dramatises to such good affect in *White Noise*, an aspect that deserves the close attention of international relations theorists if events such as September 11 are to be better understood.

Such ‘events’ are moments of difference that change how we experience our political worlds. Yet that experience only makes sense through narrative. Events, as complex political phenomena, draw on material and immaterial elements: bodies, planes and buildings, as well as words, images and texts. But how these material and immaterial elements interact and are assembled in an event cannot be determined in advance or dictated by claims to objectivity. Interpretation is unavoidable to the way these elements are selected and put together in a narrative.

¹²⁰ Michael V. Ure, ‘Stoic Comedians: Nietzsche and Freud on the Art of Arranging One’s Humours’, *Nietzsche-Studien*, 34, (2005), pp. 186–216 at 191.

¹²¹ Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic*, Trans. Robin Campbell (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2004), letter XVIII.

¹²² Adam Roberts, ‘The “War on Terror” in Historical Perspective’, *Survival*, 47:2 (2005), pp. 101–30, at p. 118.

It is at the level of plot that contestation over events is usually played out. The chief source of dispute is generally not the facts, but the different values assigned to them and different roles they play in a story meant to convey political judgment. If the US-led War on Terror elicits competing judgments it is because September 11 as an event does not possess self-evident meaning and requires choosing between rival narratives to reveal meaning and significance. Ultimately, since there are no events outside narrative, an event's capacity to disrupt or destroy pre-given frames of reference lies more in the stories we tell than in the events themselves.