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Coda: Narrativity and the City

By way of a coda to the previous chapter on *Cosmopolis*, but also to address a final issue to conclude this study as a whole, I would like to consider an essay by Don DeLillo, “In the Ruins of the Future” (2001). The text is an early response to the events of 9/11 (published in *Harper’s* in December 2001)¹, discussing terrorism, but also global capitalism, technology, and the drive towards the future, all firmly anchored in its presentation of New York City – in short, it covers much of the same ground as *Cosmopolis*, and could almost be read as a companion piece.²

More importantly, the essay takes head on an issue that has been tacitly present throughout my argument so far, but which still requires explicit discussion: the issue of narrative. In the previous chapters, I have explored the postmodern city, spaces, and discourses as represented in literary works, leaving the question of the nature of these representations themselves largely untouched – the primary focus has been on the urban rather than on the literary, for example. However, the fact that these representations are in narrative form cannot be discounted, of course. It is unnecessary for me here to engage in broader debates on questions of language, text, or visibility and the city, for such discussions have been carried out at great length elsewhere.³ However, in the context of this study, as well as the representation of the postmodern city generally, some consideration of narrative is needed here.

There are two additional reasons to specifically raise the question of narrative in this study. Firstly, the literary works discussed here, *as narratives*, all move away from “standard” conventions of narrative, which are basically those of a realist mode of representation (or perhaps even more specifically the conventions established by the nineteenth-century

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1 The essay was reprinted in the UK in *The Guardian* as well (on Dec. 22, 2001).

2 Linda Kauffman explores another interesting connection between this essay and DeLillo’s much better received later novel *Falling Man* (2007), which (unlike *Cosmopolis*) directly concerns 9/11. For the sake of clarity, I want to emphasize here that my aim is not to engage in any debates directly about 9/11 or its aftermath. My reason for engaging “In the Ruins of the Future” is DeLillo’s approach of New York – not because the text’s subject matter is 9/11.

3 Of the studies already mentioned in the introduction, particularly insightful examples of such studies are Douglas Tallack’s article “City Sights: Mapping and Representing New York City,” Steven Marcus’ article “Reading the Illegible: Some Modern Representations of Urban Experience,” and Anthony King’s volume *Re-Presenting the City* (and particularly Rob Shields’ article “A Guide to Urban Representation and What to Do About It: Alternative Traditions of Urban Theory” in that volume).

novel). The works addressed in the previous chapters initially appear familiar – as stories with events unfolding – but at the same time they all feature a frustration or departure from narrative conventions. Both *The Crying of Lot 49* and *City of Glass* start off with a detective plot (drawing on a genre with strong conventions regarding narrative structures), but in both novels the quest for meaning (the epistemological motivation behind the plot) derails entirely, resulting in suspension rather than resolution of the plot. Furthermore, despite its episodic structure of an “odyssey” across Manhattan, *Cosmopolis* revolves more around its theoretical reflections than around its plot; or as Walter Kirn remarked in his review (not entirely incorrectly), “the novel stuff (like story) comes second.” Lastly, Barthelme’s “The Balloon” features a narrative about placing the balloon over the Manhattan sky and removing it, but this is minimal and nominal; the text revolves more around the juxtaposition of spatialities than about its plot. Therefore, none of them features a straightforward plot that plays itself out from start to finish. In fact, I would even suggest that in these works “the plot” (in the sense of the “main”) is only of secondary interest at best, if not largely beside the point.

Of course this is a matter of my selection here too, but I would argue that the different narrative structures in these works is not accidental, but meaningful in light of the postmodern (urban) world to which they relate. I would argue that narrative as a device for representing the world is in much the same situation as language generally is for Barthelme (in his essay “Not-Knowing,” as discussed in chapter 1): a world characterized by postmodernity is difficult to speak about with existing words (with all their ideological charge, or hollowness, for example) and perhaps it has become equally difficult to render this world in narrative form, at least within the conventions we are used to. From a Lyotardian perspective, one might conjecture that narrativity itself is a sort of grand narrative that can no longer be maintained in the postmodern in the first place.

Secondly, on a more general level there is also the question of how narrative and the (postmodern) city relate to each other. It is easy to see how the spatial, temporal, social, economic, political, etc. are all important dimensions of the city, but one cannot simply assume that narrative is too. For example, throughout this study I have favored space as a key category in which to think of the city. Yet the key feature of narrative is

the sequentiality of events, so the primary distinctive category here is time.⁴ One possible way to bridge the gap between the city as a spatial entity and the temporal category of narrative is to turn to *experience*, which can be narrativized.⁵ However, this would limit the idea of representation of the city to a realm that then hinges on the subjective (with the risk of reinstating a subject along Cartesian lines) and which would therein be severely reductive. Another difficulty would be that, however much the chronology of a plot may be altered, the structure in which a narrative is presented in a literary text is necessarily *linear* – a further reduction of the urban. If one were to play devil’s advocate and return to Lefebvre’s framework in *The Production of Space*, one might even argue that a narrative of the city is always a reductive “representation of space,” belonging to his second category of “conceived space” – a dominant category that needs to be counterbalanced, which would lead (as it does for Lefebvre, in his aversion to the textual/semiotic) to apprehension when it comes to narrative in relation to space. However, I would argue that narrative can certainly be part of “representational space” and can certainly represent the city – but that calls for narrative forms that do not reduce the spatial in favor of the temporal and that can accommodate the plurality of the city.

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Bringing these two points together shows that the development towards a postmodern world entails that the frameworks for narratives of the city developed in modernity can no longer function in the same way. The dominant conventions for city narratives – from which the texts discussed in the previous chapters depart – are those rooted in the nineteenth-century novel (e.g. Dickens, Balzac), where the city functions as the backdrop for a sequence of events to unfold. Often the city prominently features at the start, to “set the scene,” frequently with

4 To give just a few examples where time is considered to be the primary aspect of narrative: Marie-Laure Ryan takes as a starting point “the representation of a sequence of events, the most universally accepted feature of narrative” (25); Paul Ricoeur explicitly takes “narrativity to be the language structure that has temporality as its ultimate reference” (169); and lastly, for Mieke Bal “time is a given, a self-evident for the time-based arts... - narrative, theatre, film, video, dance, music, to name but the most obvious ones” (77).

5 Another potential avenue of exploration in the relationship between the city and narrative – worth mentioning, though not one to be pursued here – could take off from recent work in narratology such as that by David Herman (e.g. in his *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative*) on “worlds,” or the world-building aspects of narrative. However, since Herman’s work is oriented mainly towards developing a narratology (for the purpose of reading narratives), it would be a completely different undertaking to attempt to see how these narratological tools can be put to work in understanding the relationship between the space of a world and actual urban spaces, for example.

a description of the city seen from above and from afar.⁶ The spatial dimension of the city, then, acts as the ground for a narrative structured by time. The works discussed in the previous chapters display a different relation between urban space and plot. For example, in *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa finds herself in urban landscapes permeated by the Tristero, teeming with possibilities for “projecting a world.” The city does not act as a stable (back)ground for a plot to play itself out to the end, but gives access to what is almost an *explosion* of tiny plots, with each connection to the Tristero spawning a new story, none of which leads to “resolution.” Urban space, then, is not a passive backdrop for a (linear) sequence of events unfolding (foregrounding the temporal), but instead the city constitutes a world of possible narratives. Narratives here take a different form than the “big” narratives one is used to from either the realist novel or the detective genre, for example, but they rather take the form of a constellation of smaller narratives emerging as individual episodic stories (e.g. of a funeral procession for a Sufi rapper in *Cosmopolis* or the history of the Peter Pinguid society in *Lot 49*) or small-scale spatial practices (like walking in the streets, or playing on top of a balloon). Not time, but space ties these narratives together.

To further explore the question of narrativity and the postmodern city, I want to consider DeLillo’s essay “In the Ruins of the Future,” which precisely investigates the possibilities of narrative in its response to 9/11. Furthermore, while the essay does not provide any definitive answers to the question how to respond to the catastrophic event, it (re)presents the city as at least the place to turn to. This move, I argue, ties the question of narrative (taken to its extreme in the context of a catastrophe like 9/11) to the issue of representation of the city, and demonstrates the kind of narrative that belongs to the postmodern city.

In the ruins of the story

Even though DeLillo’s essay on 9/11 begins by offsetting the attacks against a picture of global capitalism, the issues that the essay takes on revolve not so much around the global socio-economic or political context, but around how to respond to the catastrophic event. The *form* of his response, then, is itself perhaps best seen as the essay’s main

6 As also mentioned in chapter 2, Burton Pike’s book *The Image of the City in Modern Literature* is excellent on this point.

argument, and the crux of that form is that one cannot turn to simple answers. One can therefore read the essay on two levels: on the one hand there is what DeLillo talks *about* (ideologies, actors, events, etc.); on the other hand, there is the variety of ways in which these elements are addressed, engaged, and suspended. Though perhaps obvious, this distinction bears emphasizing because on the level of “content” DeLillo evokes many of the elements one would expect (e.g. familiar oppositions, such as the U.S. vs. the terrorists, “us” vs. “them,” and most importantly past vs. future), yet he does not take any clear stance toward them on this level. In fact, as Marco Abel convincingly argues, “DeLillo’s essay demonstrates the impossibility of saying anything definitive about 9/11 – especially anything that captures the event’s meaning” (1237). Instead of argumentatively making a point, the text demonstrates that one cannot turn to existing or conventional straightforward frameworks (such as an essayistic argument) to come to terms with the event, but instead the essay seeks an appropriate response in the form of an abundance of stories and reflections.

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Instead of simply condemning the attacks or choosing sides in the political/ideological oppositions raised, DeLillo casts the problem explicitly in terms of *narrative*. From the outset, DeLillo claims that after 9/11 “the world narrative belongs to the terrorists” (33), and he initially presents the attacks not so much as events, but as a narrative:

It was America that drew their fury. It was the high gloss of our modernity. It was the thrust of our technology. It was our perceived godlessness. It was the blunt force of our foreign policy. It was the power of American culture to penetrate every wall, home, life and mind.

Terror’s response is a narrative that has been developing over years, only now becoming inescapable. (33)

The task that DeLillo seems to be setting himself, is likewise framed in similar terms: “The Bush administration was feeling a nostalgia for the cold war. This is over now. Many things are over. The narrative ends in the rubble and it is left to us *to create the counternarrative*” (34, emphasis added). In these passages, the word “narrative” is key (and it recurs often in the essay), but it is just that – a word, a statement. DeLillo claims

that terror's response "is a narrative," but he does not *tell* this narrative. Positing these elements as narratives does not serve as an introduction to recounting them, but as a priming device, to call attention to what is at stake in the essay – which is not so much politics or capitalism, but narrativity.

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Accordingly, DeLillo answers a call "to create the counternarrative," which seems not to consist so much in finding a single, suitable (counter-), but more in finding the right form. The involvement of stories in the event is presented as evident: "There are a hundred thousand stories crisscrossing New York, Washington, and the world... People running for their lives are part of the story that is left to us... There are stories of heroism and encounters with dread... There are stories that carry around their edges the luminous ring of coincidence, fate, or premonition" (34). However, the scale of the impact of 9/11 raises, for DeLillo, the question of the *adequacy* of narrative in the first place: "There are configurations that chill and awe us both. Two women on two planes, best of friends, who die together and apart, tower 1 and tower 2. What desolate epic tragedy might bear the weight of such juxtaposition?" (34). Evidently, finding a story itself is not the problem (DeLillo tells a basic story in a single sentence, after all) but what he is looking for is a narrative that can "bear the weight," that can adequately convey not so much the facticity of events, but the force or charge inherent in them. The question, as the consideration of the genre of epic tragedy also indicates, is what narrative *form* (or genre) is required.

This framing in terms of narrative is all the more relevant because two common modes of representation of events are deemed inadequate for the magnitude of 9/11: news coverage on the one hand, and analogy on the other. To make the first point, DeLillo draws a comparison with the (first) war in Iraq: "eleven years ago, during the engagement in the Persian Gulf, people had trouble separating the war from coverage of the war" (38). The intense coverage made it difficult to "honor the fact the war was still going on, untelevised" (38). In this case, the distinction between the events and their media representation became blurred, with the reality of the war entirely enveloped in the formats of broadcast media; the CNN coverage of the Gulf War collapsed war and media event into each other. DeLillo's implication here is that this coverage is

emblematic for today's regime of representation in news media.⁷ In the case of 9/11, however, even with incessant news reports, the catastrophe could not be reduced and captured by television cameras:

There was no confusion of roles on TV. The raw event was one thing, the coverage another. The event dominated the medium. It was bright and totalizing and some of us said it was unreal. When we say a thing is unreal, we mean it is too real, a phenomenon so unaccountable and yet so bound to the power of objective fact that we can't tilt it to the slant of our perceptions. (38-9)

The events of 9/11 were "too real" to be mediated by television; the events could not be subsumed in the type of coverage along the lines of the Gulf War. However, this does not mean that coverage of 9/11 returned to "objective" or "transparent" journalism either. What was at stake was not blurring or neutrality in the media: DeLillo's argument is that the impact of 9/11 exceeded what such media are able to adequately represent in the first place.

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More importantly, just as the events could not be "directly" conveyed by news cameras, they could also not be conveyed *indirectly* by making comparisons, for "[t]he event itself has no purchase on the mercies of analogy or simile. We have to take the shock and horror as it is" (39). The point here, for DeLillo, is a more fundamental one: the shock and horror of the event cannot be approached by way of comparison, because nothing could do them justice - "In its desertion of every basis for comparison, the event asserts its singularity" (39). The singularity of the (traumatic) event cannot be represented by (straightforwardly) employing conventional rhetorical devices.⁸ There is only the shock and horror "as it is"; they are not "like" anything else. Yet this does not preclude reflection on the event, nor does it entail that one cannot speak adequately about the event at all, for DeLillo: "But living language is not diminished. The writer wants to understand what this day has done to us" (39). In other words, he recognizes the singularity of the event and

⁷ DeLillo's point here is in line with familiar discussions of the relations between media and war, such as emerge from the work of Baudrillard or Virilio, whose works *The Spirit of Terrorism* (2002) and *Ground Zero* (2002), respectively, directly address the terrorist attacks of 9/11 - and war and representation are major themes throughout Virilio's work, of course.

⁸ For an insightful discussion of this issue, see Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996).

its implications, but simultaneously does not shirk from a (self-imposed) task as a writer to somehow come to terms with the event through language, through writing.⁹

The argument in DeLillo's essay, then, is that the event requires a response in narrative form. However, straightforward stories will not do, and the possibility of a single or correct ("the") narrative of 9/11 is out of the question. Instead, DeLillo presents shards of narratives that are difficult to understand productively in terms of conventional frameworks; little can be gained by focusing on temporality to understand the narrative parts of the essay, for example, rendering ideas like plot or fabula irrelevant. In my view, what DeLillo turns to in the abundance of (minimal or skeletal) narratives in this essay, is instead the representation of the city, of city scenes. Simply put, *DeLillo calls for narrative, and turns to the city* – shifting the focus in narrative from the temporal (sequences of events) to the spatial. The result is a profusion of narratives, embedded in and springing from the city.

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A key element in finding an appropriate narrative form is to undercut any idea of a story as a means to uncover some "truth" or "meaning" in or behind the event. This strategy is particularly carried out in the essay's formal aspects. At the start of the text, it speaks of the situation in the world, and one would take the author to bear responsibility for what is said – as with journalistic/essayistic writing generally. However, part 4 of the text suddenly changes genres, presenting very clearly a (seemingly conventional) narrative recounting the experiences of a couple, Karen and Marc, and their children. Here is an illustrative passage:

They all moved into the stairwell, behind a fire door, but smoke kept coming in. It was gritty ash and they were eating it.

He ran back inside, grabbing towels off the racks and washcloths out of drawers and drenching them in the sink, and filling his bicycle water bottles, and grabbing the kids' underwear. He thought the crush of buildings was the thing to fear most. This is what would kill them.

9 Marco Abel's argument is that DeLillo's essay takes up this task by assuming an "aesthetic stance" that avoids representational language, focusing on "the affective quality of the event's singularity and on how language can stylistically image and, in the process, reconfigure what it means for contemporary thought to respond ethically to whatever the event's content might be(come)" (1237).

Karen was on the phone, talking to a friend in the district attorney's office, about half a mile to the north. She was pleading for help. She begged, pleaded and hung up. For the next hour a detective kept calling with advice and encouragement. (36-7)

Since the text was written by a major American novelist, this "excursion" into a familiar narrative mode might not be surprising; one could see this as DeLillo turning to literary techniques for the sake of his argument in the essay. One could easily take this account, for instance, as an elaboration or magnification of the type of story DeLillo identified in single sentences before. In that sense, this could illustrate, or be part of the narrative response that DeLillo calls for.

However, the point of the story of Karen and Marc is precisely to dismiss this type of narrative as an adequate response. The suggestion of the story as emblematic, for example, is undermined by the question of who is speaking. As the story progresses, suddenly a first-person narrator emerges:

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When the second tower fell, my heart fell with it. I called Marc, who is my nephew, on his cordless. I couldn't stop thinking of the size of the towers and the meager distance between those buildings and his. He answered, we talked. I have no memory of the conversation except for his final remark, slightly urgent, concerning someone on the other line, who might be sending help. (37)

Up to this point, there seemed to be only a non-intrusive, external narrator. The sudden appearance of a first-person narrator *in* the story, contacting Marc over the phone, suddenly throws a spanner in the works. One could attempt to equate this narrator with DeLillo (to whom we would attribute the essay in the first place), but that would run into the problem of the curious mix of personal involvement (Marc being his nephew) and apparent omniscience throughout the rest of the story of Marc and Karen (narrating their thoughts and fears, for example). This does not seem to be a personal account by DeLillo, then, but instead it seems to be *fictional*. Yet DeLillo's point does not seem to be to turn to fiction, as if a stylized fictional account could metonymically represent the "shock and horror as it is" (39), for the essay explicitly argues against

that. The effect of this passage is a sudden rupture in the semblance of realism, calling attention to the narrative form; one sees how the story of Karen and Marc does not present the events “as they are,” but in a visibly artificial form.

Hence, the point of the story seems to be precisely its failure, as a singled out and stylized narrative, to constitute an adequate response. This point is underlined by tone of the ending of the section, with the main characters joining other people in the city streets, looking for safety:

They were covered in ash when they reached shelter at Pace University, where there was food and water, and kind and able staff members, and a gas-leak scare, and more running people.

Workers began pouring water on the group. Stay wet, stay wet. This was the theme of the first half-hour.

Later a line began to form along the food counter.

Someone said, “I don’t want cheese on that.”

Someone said, “I like it better not so cooked.”

Not so incongruous, really, just people alive and hungry, beginning to be themselves again. (37)

The section ends here, with a scene and a tone that indicate a different perspective than at the start. The contrast between, on the one hand, the terror and fear of the attacks and the towers collapsing, and on the other hand highlighting a preference for food without cheese on top is a juxtaposition in which one could see ironic or cynical overtones (even when faced with global terror, people quickly return to their everyday lives of luxury and picky behavior). If one had had any hope for the story of Karen and Marc to be a “truthful” account that might indicate some sort of “meaning” in the event, the narration and the rhetoric of the stylized ending together make sure that the point comes across: a straightforward, familiar narrative cannot do the event justice.

Instead, DeLillo seems to insist on the importance of *plurality* in a narrative response to 9/11. In his many examples and instances of small narratives, he moves away from the primacy of time as a structuring principle for narrative – a move towards the spatial, which allows DeLillo to escape the reductiveness of “large” and linear narratives. As mentioned

above, the text presumes a multiplicity of stories running through the city and the world, and immediately continues by listing some of them:

There are a hundred thousand stories crisscrossing New York, Washington, and the world. Where we were, who we know, what we've seen or heard. There are the doctors' appointments that saved lives, the cellphones that were used to report the hijackings. Stories generating others and people running north out of the rumbling smoke and ash. Men running in suits and ties, women who'd lost their shoes, cops running from the skydive of all that towering steel. (34)

One can imagine how these stories might be expanded and filled in with greater detail, but DeLillo already continues by zooming in on details, presenting them as stories themselves:

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The cellphones, the lost shoes, the handkerchiefs mashed in the faces of running men and women. The box cutters and credit cards. The paper that came streaming out of the towers and drifted across the river to Brooklyn backyards, status reports, résumés, insurance forms. Sheets of paper driven into concrete, according to witnesses. Paper slicing into truck tires, fixed there.

These are among the smaller objects and more marginal stories in the sifted ruins of the day. We need them, even the common tools of the terrorists, to set against the massive spectacle that continues to seem unmanageable, too powerful a thing to set into our frame of practiced response. (35)

One can see here a multitude of stories, each object itself capable of spawning a story. The idea here is not that there is one "overall narrative" ("the" counternarrative) that would tie everything together, but rather that these "marginal stories" are part of a response that is itself a plurality. At the same time, one can also see here that these "objects and marginal stories" are not, in the strict sense, narrative at all, for they contain no events: DeLillo simply presents a list of objects *as a story*. In other words, the sequence of events that usually makes up a narrative is replaced by description, by the piling up of objects/stories. The

principle here, therefore, is not a progression in time, but a *compiling* of elements. As a part of the “strategy” of DeLillo’s narrative response, then, this list approach therefore accomplishes two things. On the one hand, it underscores the need for a perspective built on a conception of the event as in itself plural (or, conversely, it underscores the impossibility of a single perspective or story). On the other hand, it seeks narrativity not in (the causality or sequentiality of) events, but in the objects scattered randomly throughout the ruins. The combination results in a type of narrative that revolves around building up a plural world – a world that is close to (or even, I might suggest here, is) the city.

One can see this turn to the city in the middle of this part of the text, where DeLillo moves from kaleidoscopic accounts to a more sustained description of Union Square Park:

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In Union Square Park, about two miles north of the attack site, the improvised memorials are another part of our response. The flags, flowerbeds and votive candles, the lamppost hung with paper airplanes, the passages from the Koran and the Bible, the letters and poems, the cardboard John Wayne, the children’s drawings of the twin towers, the hand-painted signs for Free Hugs, Free Back Rubs, the graffiti of love and peace on the tall equestrian statue.

There are many photographs of missing persons, some accompanied by hopeful lists of identifying features. (Man with panther tattoo, upper right arm.) There is the saxophonist, playing softly. There is the sculptured flag of rippling copper and aluminum, six feet long, with two young people still attending to the finer details of the piece. (35)

This is a description of spontaneous memory practices that are highly public: people coming together in a public place, reappropriating it as a site for mourning and remembrance. In this regard, this type of practice is also typically urban, relying on the availability of public spaces as well as on the coming together of the diverse population of the city. Moreover, this practice is also an instance of Augé’s non-place: it hinges on a reappropriation of urban space by way of signage (flowers, candles, photographs, etc.), and it is a practice that is not rooted in the space in which it takes place. One could even take the act of placing flowers or

lighting candles as equivalent to the paradigmatic identity check in the non-place of the airport lounge – adding the participant in such memory practices to the list of “generic subjects” of non-place, like the driver on the freeway, passenger in transit, or supermarket consumer. Even though these memory practices emerge spontaneously, produced by the participants themselves rather than by a company or other institution (like with airports or supermarkets) they produce a spatial arrangement that configures new relations between individuals like in any non-place. In short, even though the scene is prompted by the singular catastrophe of 9/11, what DeLillo describes here is the non-place of the postmodern city.¹⁰ Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly here, seeing Union Square Park as a non-place not only underscores the urban dimension of DeLillo’s essay, but one can also read it as providing a model for the type of narrative that he calls for: a formation that can move away from temporality (as one finds in the historical rootedness inherent in anthropological place, for example) and instead finds ways of accommodating relations in the here and now in terms of spaces, signs, and objects – in line with the objects-as-narratives that DeLillo discusses.

Lastly, the end of the essay likewise affirms the different take on narrative and the turn to the city. DeLillo describes a scene on Canal street, a few days after 9/11 and a month before.¹¹ Again, the accent is not on events progressing, but on building up an urban world:

On Friday of the first week a long series of vehicles moves slowly west on Canal Street. Dump trucks, flatbeds, sanitation sweepers. There are giant earthmovers making a tremendous revving sound. A scant number of pedestrians, some in dust masks, others just standing, watching, the indigenous people, clinging to walls and doorways, unaccustomed to traffic that doesn’t bring buyers and sellers, goods and cash. The fire rescue car and state police cruiser, the

10 This scene can be understood in terms of Pierre Nora’s well-known *lieux de mémoire* (1989) as well, of course. While it is not my aim to employ that concept here too, such a perspective would be compatible with my understanding of Augé’s *non-lieux*.

11 At this point in the text, and at several others, the description of street scenes in the first person singular can unproblematically be attributed to DeLillo (or at least equated with the overall speaker of the essay). It is telling that, apart from the narrator in the story of Karen and Marc, DeLillo reserves the first person singular for presenting direct experiences in the street. By contrast, the first person plural is used in the more general passages reflecting on global politics etc. (along the lines of “we Americans”). One could surmise from this distinction that the kind of subjectivity suggested in this essay is one that is rooted much more in the immediacy of urban space than in abstract discourses, for example.

staccato sirens of a line of police vans. Cops stand at the sawhorse barriers, trying to clear the way. Ambulances, cherry pickers, a fleet of Con Ed trucks, all this clamor moving south a few blocks ahead, into the cloud of sand and ash.

One month earlier I'd taken the same walk, early evening, among crowds of people, the panethnic swarm of shoppers, merchants, residents and passers-by, with a few tourists as well, and the man at the curbstone doing acupoint massage, and the dreadlocked kid riding his bike on the sidewalk. This was the spirit of Canal Street, the old jostle and stir unchanged for many decades and bearing no sign of SoHo just above, with its restaurants and artists' lofts, or TriBeCa below, rich in architectural textures. Here were hardware bargains, car stereos, foam rubber and industrial plastics, the tattoo parlor and the pizza parlor. (40)

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These descriptions are in a form that is familiar from realist narratives, where this type of description often establishes the setting for the plot. However, in DeLillo's essay these descriptions do not "set the scene" at all – they *are* the scene. In effect, these two street scenes follow the model for narrative set out in the essay: their logic is that of compiling, putting together objects and events, people and machines – in line with the rest of the essay. For example, the first scene presents what DeLillo described earlier as "part of the story that is left to us" (34), the city showing the signs of the destruction of the towers. The scene a month earlier follows the same model: elements adding up to shape the representation of the city. The structure here is not that of realist narrative (a backdrop of urban space, in which a plot unfolds in time), but instead urban space is the structuring principle – the city is where the multitude of tiny narratives comes (and is held) together.

Yet there is, of course, also an obvious (temporal) contrast between the two scenes: the ruin in the first scene is mourned, while the panethnic jostle and stir of the spirit of Canal Street are enjoyed. However, the juxtaposition should not be read as simply setting up a mournful eulogy for the second, for example. The event can only be done justice if taken "as it is," within or behind which one should not try to find meaning by

“reading into” it.¹² This is succinctly illustrated in a comment by another person looking at the ruins, in another description of a street scene close to Ground Zero a few days afterward, where DeLillo describes a comment made by a person next to him: “‘Oh my God, I’m standing here,’ says the man next to me” (38). The response of the man here is self-affirming and logically redundant, yet at the same time it is a perfect response that does not interpret (and thereby attribute meaning to) the event, but it simply *responds*. This is the type of response that DeLillo proposes: not a (sequential) narrative that leads to a “meaning” (or “reads into” the event), but a response to the “shock and horror as it is,” which (in my view, not coincidentally) foregrounds not so much the temporal but the spatial – “standing *here*,” in the street.

The description of the scene a month before works towards an affirmation of the city as a plurality that can accommodate all. DeLillo presents an example with elements that could easily evoke the oppositional mode of thinking and interpreting so readily available, especially in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. However, DeLillo uses his example for a final and very explicit turn to the city:

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Then I saw the woman on the prayer rug. I’d just turned the corner, heading south to meet some friends, and there she was, young and slender, in a bright silk headscarf. It was time for sunset prayer and she was kneeling, upper body pitched towards the edge of the rug. She was partly concealed by a couple of vendors’ carts and no one seemed much to notice her. I think there was another woman seated on a folding chair near the curbstone. The figure on the rug faced east, which meant most immediately a storefront just a foot and a half from her tipped head, but more distantly and pertinently towards Mecca, of course, the holiest city of Islam.

Some prayer rugs include a *mihrab* in their design, an arched element representing the prayer niche in a mosque that indicates the direction of Mecca. The only locational guide the young woman needed was the Manhattan grid.

I looked at her in prayer and it was clearer to me than ever, the

12 In the context of this study, I might draw a parallel here between DeLillo’s essay and Barthelme’s story “The Balloon,” in which the idea of taking the city as it is also features prominently: “we have learned not to insist on meanings, and they are rarely even looked for now, except in cases involving the simplest, safest phenomena” (54).

daily sweeping taken-for-granted greatness of New York. The city will accommodate every language, ritual, belief and opinion. (40)

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The example of the Muslim woman praying in the streets presents persons, objects, and actions, yet the point is not some (limited or reductive) sequence, but the totality of the urban world that it builds up, working towards the affirmation of the “greatness of New York,” inclusive and plural.¹³ The city is presented as capable not only of accommodating and including, but also of extending outward toward the world, with the Manhattan grid serving as a guide for the qibla, the direction for Islamic prayer. The woman uses the grid “as it is,” – not, as presented in “The Balloon,” as a symbol for an instrumentalist logic that leads to lives being “rather rigidly patterned.” (57) Instead, the woman uses the grid almost as the balloon: as a space to be used in everyday practices (like walking in *City of Glass*), without being fully predetermined (as in Lefebvre’s abhorred abstract space). In effect, the city is a space of possible narratives, plural, for spontaneous memory practices after a catastrophe as much as for religious practices taking place in public amidst stores and street vendors. In this sense, the woman’s prayer is akin to the scene in Union Square Park: the woman creates her own non-place – a space without roots yet establishing spontaneous (global) relationships – out of the city itself and her prayer rug, with the markers of her religion serving as the signs that delimit non-place. DeLillo turns to the city, I would argue, precisely for the possibility for even a single person to freely create their own space, to make use of the city in their own way, or (to go along with DeLillo’s phrasings) “to tell their own story.”

This example of the woman praying thus shows how to read the story “that is left to us” (or “the counternarrative” for that matter): as parts that can be tied together in New York as a plural and complex (and post-modern) city.¹⁴ The “hundred thousand stories” circulating after 9/11

13 Obviously, the prayer scene draws upon elements that, in the context of the attacks on the World Trade Center, were highly charged. In fact, DeLillo ends his essay with an image of the hadj, as an image of equality and inclusion, and the phrase “*Allahu Akbar*. God is great” (40). This use of an image and phrase from Islam to round off his response should be seen, in my view, as a highly argumentative attempt to exclude any possible readings of DeLillo’s essay as supporting any oppositional perspective (“us vs. them,” and specifically “West vs. Islam”), which might underlie responses along nationalist lines, for example. In any case, DeLillo’s essay uses these images and oppositions to open up possibilities for a positive and inclusive outlook, as emerges from the prayer scene he describes, for example, which is in line with his argument throughout.

14 I should perhaps re-emphasize here that I explicitly read DeLillo’s essay with the benefit of over a decade’s hindsight, and therefore hope to avoid the oppositions (“us vs. them”) often mobilized in the aftermath of the event. For example,

continue what took place in the city in the first place, namely a narrative that works through compiling objects and people, events and histories. The type of narrative that DeLillo calls for and demonstrates throughout the essay is one that focuses on the possibility of accommodating the diversity that goes with the “greatness of New York” – a narrative geared towards the city. This different take that DeLillo calls for as a response thus seems to search for ways of telling that can adequately convey, or do justice to, the urban world he focuses on, its plurality, complexity, diversity. Therefore, the narrative DeLillo seeks to construct, I would argue, is not so much a story in or of the city, but is the city.

Narrative cities

In my reading, therefore, DeLillo’s “In the Ruins of the Future” presents the city under extreme circumstances, which intensify precisely those elements in the representation of the postmodern city that I have tried to bring out throughout the previous chapters. The point of DeLillo’s essay is that the *reflection* of the city, in the narrative response to the events of 9/11, is at the same time a complex *reflection* on the city, a meditation on how to understand and experience the city. What DeLillo demonstrates is that the two types of reflection are part of the same, double gesture.

This, finally, is also where his reorientation of narrative stems from. The idea is not to dismiss temporality, of course, or to dismiss the capacity of stories to convey meaning or to have a meaningful impact – in fact, DeLillo constantly plays with these very characteristics. Instead, the idea is to keep in view what is at stake, which in the essay is “the greatness of New York,” which concerns urban space more than time here – with the city as a social space where different individuals (but also discourses, subjectivities, and narratives) are possible alongside each other, for example. What one reads such reflections of/on the city for, then, is not plot but the construction of spatialities (be they non-places or heterotopias, for example) and subjectivities that go along with them. DeLillo’s essay produces a subject in the here and now, part of a plural city of lived/

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I do not take the example of the praying woman as suggesting that the “greatness of New York” would lie in some multicultural idyll to counterbalance perceptions of New York as city of trauma. Speaking (and reading) with some distance to 9/11, I would suggest that even though the image of the woman praying is charged (in the immediate, historical context of 9/11), the elements at play in the example are rooted in the city, not in the (traumatic) event, and thereby point towards the city precisely as a space for overcoming oppositions (such as a “pre- and post-9/11” framework developing as a master narrative for viewing New York, for example).

representational space and everyday practices that can (re)shape that city and those subjectivities. The relationship between individual and city in the essay, then, could even be read as each facilitating the possibility of affecting and extending into the other – an understanding of the type of virtuality that Hayles distilled in the context of technological advancement, but which I maintain is equally pertinent when it comes to the individual and the postmodern city.

In short, in reading DeLillo's essay, one could deploy any of the concepts I have been using in the previous chapters – be they drawn from Lefebvre, de Certeau, Augé, or Hayles, for example. The point, of course, is that each of those concepts approaches the same issue from different angles – and the same is true for the literary texts I have discussed: they all address questions of the position of the individual in the late-twentieth century city, or (in the appropriate terminology) the question of the subject in the postmodern city.

For all of them, the same elements are at play: having reached the conclusion that straightforward language, transparent representation, and simple stories do not suffice in the face of an urban reality that is complex and plural, new ways of thinking about the city need to be found. Barthelme's "The Balloon" is perhaps the most conceptual in its treatment of the complexity of the postmodern city. With respect to the story's narrative, the constellation of spaces is what motivates what (minimal) plot there is, with the balloon as the site where different signifying practices come together with individual usage – a compilation of "small" narratives explicitly not leading to a "meaning" behind the balloon. By juxtaposing the spatialities of the grid and of heterotopian space, the story zeroes in on the reductiveness inherent in (the abstract space of) the modern city, and the concomitant straitjacket for the individual subject in the city. The alternative of the heterotopian balloon brings into view the need for new spatialities and subjectivities, free from strict signifying regimes and instead based more on spatial practice. What such practices can look like, though, is brought into view better in *City of Glass*. Here the city literally acts as a signifying space, though not in the vein rejected in "The Balloon" (or by Lefebvre), but as a "canvas" for signifying tactics. The subject is accorded agency in the city, capable of signifying through spatial practices like walking, but also in encountering and engaging objects in urban space, thereby spatializing language.

As a narrative, Auster's novel has a clear trajectory: not towards the end of the sequence familiar from detective fiction (e.g. private eye solves the crime), but rather frustrating that sequence, ending up instead in disappearance (rooted in walking the city streets) – or what in “The Balloon” was presented as the desirable alternative of “mislocation of the self.”

However, the type of spatiality and subjectivity put forward in Barthelme and Auster do not imply a return to a (re)centered Cartesian subject, as becomes clear in *The Crying of Lot 49*. The landscape of the postmodern city cannot be understood as a whole, and does not allow for a meaningful totalizing view. Instead, postmodern urban space is characterized by non-place – spaces organized through signage, to which an individual (or rather: some intended individuals, but not everybody) can gain access for a specific purpose, though requiring a shedding of particularity. Non-places can then be located “over by the freeway,” and individuals adopt the position of a generic individual – like the traveler in an airport lounge, or Arnold Snarb, looking for a good time. In an urban world saturated with clues and signs, *Lot 49* is emblematic as a narrative in which conventions (of the detective) spiral out of control, so that instead of a main plot there is a profusion of tiny ones – tied together not through the logic of temporal sequence, but in the space of the city (and the spatialized symbol of the post horn).

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Lastly, *Cosmopolis* adopts a different narrative strategy, an odyssey across the city. The novel is largely chronological, but progress in the sequence is marked by the position in the city – which part of Manhattan the limo is in – and the discourses that are brought into play in those spaces (and come under discussion inside the limousine). DeLillo makes time, and to some extent character, second to the exploration of theme engrained in the city of global capitalism. In doing this, DeLillo's novel adds to the consideration of the spatialities, subjectivities, and spaces of the postmodern city the question of the body – and the virtuality that marks its relationship to the city. What emerges is a conception of an embodied subject in the postmodern city, where the body and the city can extend into each other. This virtuality of the body and postmodern urban space also expands the conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between urban spaces, discourses, and the individual (embodied) subject.

All in all, then, the literary works I have discussed in this study complement each other, in that each adds another component for an interdisciplinary approach of the postmodern city. I should stress, though, that at the end of this study I cannot present a “clear picture” of the postmodern city – for the idea of a single, clear picture is precisely what my argument hopes to move beyond (in line with Soja’s argument, discussed in the introduction here). Like DeLillo’s essay, perhaps, the crux of my argument is that if one wants to understand the postmodern city, its spaces, and its discourses, what one needs is an approach that does not reduce, but that is capable of including different concepts, of expanding, of accommodating the plurality that marks postmodernity. As I have tried to show, this calls for an interdisciplinary approach, combining literary works, theory, and urban studies. Specifically with regard to literature (the “ground” for my approach) and the city, I hope to have shown the value of taking a work of literature as a reflection both *of and on* the city – not just as a representation of the real city, but also a discourse that addresses issues and problems of its contemporary urban world, and that can be brought together with other fields and other (new) ways of thinking about the city.