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9/11 and the (Collective) Trauma in Don DeLillo's *In The Ruins of the Future* and *Falling Man*

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Introduction

Since the 1990s trauma has become a widely researched concept, acquiring interdisciplinary relevance. Already present in literature and filmic representations as a theme, it has become more and more widespread in contemporary culture to which it is inextricably bound. In its original meaning trauma refers to a wound inflicted on the body, however, through its drift from the medical to the psychoanalytic sphere it has acquired a double meaning. In psychoanalytic theory trauma is a wound in one's psyche. As Cathy Caruth writes, it is "the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world"[1]. In his conception of trauma Freud stressed the fact that trauma is acknowledged only belatedly. The impact of a traumatic event is so disruptive that it escapes conscious knowledge at the time it is experienced and returns in one's psyche only afterwards. A fundamental concept underlying trauma studies is that traumatic memory is deeply connected with the image, rather than language. Images connected to a traumatic experience are intrusive and their return in one's mind constitutes a continuous reliving of the past. Narrativising one's trauma is one way of dealing with it and enabling a recovery, yet it is a challenging task. A traumatic experience of the scale of the events happened on September 11, 2001 has the capacity of disrupting not only one's psyche but one's way of life and generate a trauma that is both individual and collective. Literary attempts to narrativize a traumatic experience are challenging and are usually achieved through the use of rhetorical figures, fragmentation, flashbacks, and a non-linear

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[1] Caruth, C., (1996) *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History.* London, The Johns Hopkins Press Ltd. p. 4

chronology. This thesis aims at tracing trauma in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, which constitutes his fictional response to the events of 9/11. As will be argued, the text mirrors the impact of trauma on the protagonists' memory and identity and re-presents a continuous acting out of post-traumatic symptoms. The analysis will also address DeLillo's 2001 essay *In the Ruins of the Future*. The interrelationship between the novel and the essay is quite evident and will be shown in a number of instances.

Beginning with a general overview of the September 11 attacks, the first chapter will discuss the government's reaction. The emphasis will be placed on the fact that the attacks served as a justification to increase the government's authority, attained through the controversial response the Bush Administration adopted in its War on Terror.

The second chapter will focus on Don DeLillo and his essay *In the Ruins of the Future.* After providing a biography of Don DeLillo and an overview of his literary career, the analysis will centre on DeLillo's 2001 essay, which constitutes DeLillo's first writerly response to the events of September 11 and informs much of the themes, imagery and points of view introduced in the novel. As will be argued, the essay stresses the importance of counter-narratives in the sense-making process and provides a view that contrasts the dominant narrative concerning 9/11.

Subsequently, the first part of the third chapter will examine trauma's emergence in literary studies and provide several key concepts underlying trauma studies, which will be relevant to the analysis of *Falling Man.* The analysis will then continue with an investigation of the representation of trauma within the novel, in light of the theories of leading scholars of trauma studies. The concepts

of acting out and working through elaborated by Dominick LaCapra on the basis of Freudian ideas will be of particular relevance to the exploration of the psychological trauma afflicting the novel's characters. The analysis will incorporate issues of identity concerning particularly the male protagonist of the novel, and finally culminate in a discussion of DeLillo's much debated depiction of terrorism.

1

The September 11 Attacks

1.1   9/11: An Overview

On September 11, 2001, 19 terrorists affiliated with the Islamic extremist organization Al Qaeda carried out four attacks against United States objectives killing nearly three thousand people. The terrorists hijacked four airliners on domestic flights and used them to launch suicide attacks against four objectives on American soil, one of which remains uncertain. As is commonly known, the events of that day have come to be referred to as the September 11 attacks or simply 9/11. More specifically, what happened that day is that two of the hijacked aircrafts were flown into the World Trade Center Twin Towers in New York City. At 08:46 am American Airlines Flight 11, scheduled from Boston to Los Angeles, struck the North Tower, and at 09:03 am United Airlines Flight 175, also scheduled from Boston to Los Angeles, crashed into the South Tower, which, despite having been struck later, was the first to collapse. All passengers died instantly along with an unknown number of people who were in the towers. At 09:37 am American Airlines Flight 77, scheduled to depart from Dulles and arrive to Los Angeles, crashed into the Pentagon. And at 10:02 am the fourth plane, scheduled from New Jersey to San Francisco, crashed on a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, due to a passengers' revolt that prevented the hijackers from achieving their goal, which presumably was to strike the Capitol or the White

House.[2] The operation that resulted in the 9/11 attacks was devised by Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, a highly educated, Pakistani Islamist militant, with a degree in mechanical engineering from a US university, who was not only responsible for architecting the September 11 attacks, but also took part in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. Prior to the attacks he frequently travelled, and in 1989 he was able to meet Bin Laden, the leader of Al Qaeda, who shared a similar contempt for the United States and who would prove to be a useful supporter since he possessed the resources to make Khalid Sheikh accomplish his plan.

The events were deemed unprecedented. They differed from previous attacks in that on September 11 commercial planes were employed, something that had not occurred before, and civilians were the target rather than just government institutions. Moreover, the United States with their self-constructed image as a powerful and virtually peerless nation could not manage to integrate into its identity the possibility of undergoing a terrorist attack of that scale on its own territory.

Over the decade of the 1990s the United States had experienced many threats from Islamist extremists, which should have been considered a warning for what was coming, as the *9/11 Commission Report* clearly states. According to the latter in fact, the attacks "were a shock, but they should not have come as a surprise" [3]. Various assaults carried out in the 1990s were conducted by terrorists, mostly associated to Al Qaeda. During 1993 two main terrorist attacks

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[2] National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (2004) *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (9/11 Report).* Available at https://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report_Exec.htm

[3] National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (2004) *The 9/11 Commission Report: Executive Summary.* Available at https://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report_Exec.htm

happened. First the truck bomb that was meant to destroy the World Trade Center, secondly, the "Black Hawk down" incident that caused deaths and injuries when U.S. helicopters were shot. Nevertheless, only during the last years of the century had the U.S. intelligence community realized that Bin Laden was the leader of Al Qaeda and not just a financier of terrorism. After the 1998 bombing of United States embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, Al Qaeda has come to be viewed as a serious threat. In 2003 Khalid Sheikh Mohammed was captured and imprisoned at CIA secret 'black sites' in Poland and Romania and then at the Guantanamo Bay detention camp. He and other four terrorists are still being prosecuted under a covert military commission system for capital charges of terrorism and conspiracy to commit murder.

The events of September 11, 2001, have profoundly changed the nation, from a psychological, social, political and juridical point of view, and are often referred to as a 'watershed event'. The tragic incident, of course, had a massive effect in terms of the number of people who perished or were injured and has left a great psychological scar on New Yorkers and, more broadly, on the American population, leading to what has been referred to as collective trauma.

People were seen jumping from the towers due to the extreme heat and smoke that filled the space. Sheets of paper were flying in the streets, and, as the first Tower collapsed, smoke and ash flooded the streets around. The witnesses and those who were able to escape from the buildings ran in search of a safe haven, covered in ash, with tissues or cloth pressed to their mouths. The police and firefighters advised people to stay wet in order not to breathe the dust. There are plenty of accounts of that day available on the Internet. Some witnesses captured the moment the planes hit the towers on their mobile phone

cameras, none of them, however, imagined a second plane coming. The first strike was initially considered a terrible accident, no one expected it to be a dreadfully well-planned terrorist attack. The shocking images of the second plane crashing into the South Tower and the subsequent collapse of the two towers were watched by millions of people, as they were being broadcasted continuously on all national news channels and, consequently, had a great impact on the viewers. In fact, while it is known that survivors and those who witnessed the disaster first-hand have suffered trauma, some studies[4] suggest that even those who witnessed the event indirectly might have experienced trauma, or "distant trauma"[5] as Amit Pinchevski, Professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, puts it. Specifically in regard to the 9/11 attacks, he writes:

> […] there seems to be an agreement that watching disturbing images on TV, like those memorable pictures of airplanes crashing into the Twin Towers, might indeed cause post-traumatic symptoms in some viewers.[6]

The psychological effects of the disaster will be further discussed in chapter three. The events of September 11, 2001 are forever etched in the collective memory of Americans. Politically, the attacks bore upon the domestic and international policy of the United States and provoked a series of responses on the part of the Bush Administration, that were partly considered controversial. Some examples are the Patriot Act, the conflicts in Iraq and in Afghanistan, and the extrajudicial means used in the detention camp at Guantanamo Bay. The

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[4] Pfefferbaum, B., Palka, J., & North, C. (2022). "Media Contact and Posttraumatic Stress in Employees of New York City Area Businesses after the September 11 Attacks". *Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness*, 16(1), pp. 163-169.

[5] Pinchevski, Amit. (2015). "Screen Trauma: Visual Media and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder". *Theory, Culture & Society*. P. 33.

[6] Ibid. p. 60

response to the events of September 11, by the George W. Bush Administration, was to initiate a campaign that involved the strengthening of domestic security and diplomatic and military action to eradicate and prevent terrorism on a global scale, called the "war on terror".

1.2   The War on Terror

After the 9/11 attacks the Bush Administration launched a campaign known as the "war on terror". The goal of the campaign, as President Bush stated in his *Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People*, was to eradicate the global terror network and to "pursue nations that provide aid or safe haven to terrorism"[7]. To pursue this goal, the United States intended to "direct every resource at [their] command --every means of diplomacy, every tool of intelligence, every instrument of law enforcement, every financial influence, and every necessary weapon of war" [8], as Bush stated in the address. Moreover, President Bush intended to work with the coalition to deny the terrorists and the states that supported them access to "The materials, technology, and expertise to make and deliver weapons of mass destruction"[9].

David Hastings Dunn identifies three main strategies that the United States adopted in the war on terror, which he calls "Counter-terrorism", "Pre-emption

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[7] George W. Bush. (2001) *Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People.* 20 Sept. Available at https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html

[8] Ibid.

[9] Bush, G. W. (2002) *The President's State of the Union Address*. Available at https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html

and pre-eminence" and "Forward strategy for the democratisation of the Middle East"[10].

The first strategy adopted was to use traditional counter-terrorism techniques. Bush straightforwardly reiterated that each state around the world should choose which side to pick, to either be with the United States on this "crusade" or against it. There were no grey areas. In his insightful analysis of the war on terror, Dunn explains how the Bush Administration failed to adopt a multilateral approach, instead, it treated each state as "uncomplicated unitary actors", thus failing in getting valuable support. Working with rogue states was excluded from the beginning, Dunn argues, due to America's mistrust of them. While the Administration operated under the premise that "[m]y enemy's enemy is my friend", the War on Terror's central tenet demanded that states were "either for us or against us", leaving little room for compromise in the determination of priorities. Iran is the perfect example of this according to Dunn, since it could not be considered an ally in the fight against Al-Qaeda while aiding Hezbollah at the same time. The war in Afghanistan and the overthrow of the Taliban regime represented the pinnacle of this first strategy.

The second strategy identified by Dunn was 'pre-emption and pre-eminence'. Pre-emption, as Dunn observes, meant that the United States could take preventive action to neutralize any possible threat. What was meant by this was that the Bush Administration did not intend to wait on a possible threat to materialize, instead, they would take actions even before this happened, thus reserving themselves the benefit of the doubt instead of incurring a national or

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[10] Dunn, D. H. (2005). Bush, 11 September and the Conflicting Strategies of the "War on Terrorism." *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, Vol. 16, p.12

global security risk. In June 2002 Bush stated "[w]e cannot put our faith in the word of tyrants, who solemnly sign non-proliferation treaties, and then systemically break them. If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long"[11]. And continued reaffirming that "[w]e must take the battle to the enemy, disrupt his plans, and confront the worst threats before they emerge. In the world we have entered, the only path to safety is the path of action. And this nation will act"[12]. Pre-eminence, on the other hand, referred to the military domination America intended to retain globally.

1.3   The USA Patriot Act

The USA Patriot Act, whose acronym stands for "Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism", was the first measure adopted by Bush's Administration in response to the 9/11 attacks. The law was enacted to strengthen United States national security by allowing more tools for investigation and enforcement to government agencies. The 342 pages-long act was passed quickly without the usual legislative procedure as no public hearings or debate were held. The controversial nature of this piece of law derives from the fact that according to some, it did not fully respect the Fourth Amendment and violated civil liberties. In particular, the right to privacy of each citizen. In fact, it allowed secret search of property without the presence of the person interested, as well as increased

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[11] George W. Bush, (2002) *Graduation Speech at West Point*. Available at https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020601-3.html
[12] Ibid.

surveillance procedures. It made it possible for law enforcement and intelligence organizations to intercept private communications and obtain personal information without probable cause. It also enabled the law enforcement to detain suspects indefinitely without due trial. Nevertheless, it had large consent among the public, as Kam C. Wong, Professor of Criminal Justice, Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio, argues, mostly due to the "mass ignorance and blind patriotism"[13]. Wong notes that the document was long and complex and was passed quickly, upon the Administration's demand, as the situation was exceptional, and the nation was in a state of emergency. Professor Wong concludes by saying that the administration:

> has (over) reacted to the 9/11 crisis in an instinctive and knee jerk manner, allowing for the passage of an emergency legislation with few serious public discourse and no meaningful Congressional debate, resulting in an Act with little institutional safeguards and Constitutional check and balance[14].

However, this is not the only instance of how the administration acted to subtly circumvent the law. Another scandalous example is what happened at the Guantanamo Bay prison.

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[13] Kam C. Wong, (2006) "The USA PATRIOT Act: Some unanswered questions", *International Journal of the Sociology of Law*, Volume 34, Issue 1, p.8
[14] Ibid. p.38

1.4   Guantanamo Bay Detention Facility

The Guantanamo Bay detention Camp, also known as Guantánamo, GTMO, and Gitmo, was a military prison established by the U.S. government under President George W. Bush in 2002 as part of the War on Terror after the attacks of September 11, 2001. The Center for Constitutional Rights and Amnesty International both deemed this camp's operations to have violated the due process clauses of the Fifth and Fourteenth amendments to the United States Constitution due to indefinite incarceration without charge or trial. Allegedly 779 detainees were held at Guantanamo Bay. They were called by the US 'unlawful combatants', instead of prisoners of war, which was a way to circumvent the laws that assured that the detainees were to be dealt with by humane treatment of soldiers captured in conflict.[15] Notably, Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions, among other things, prohibited "violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture"[16]. One of the solutions found by the United States in order to deal, legally, with terrorists, was precisely to define them "unlawful combatants"[17]. In fact, the Bush Administration used a rhetoric which wavered between crime and war. In his

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[15] *Article 13 : Humane Treatment Of Prisoners.* Convention (III) relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War. Geneva, 12 August 1949. Available at https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/geneva-convention-relative-treatment-prisoners-war#:~:text=Prisoners%20of%20war%20must%20at,breach%20of%20the%20present%20Convention

[16] Convention (III) relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War. Geneva, 12 August 1949. Available at https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/7c4d08d9b287a42141256739003e63bb/6fef854a3517b75ac125641e004a9e68

[17] Cowling, M., Bosch, S. (2009). "Combatant status at Guantánamo Bay — international humanitarian law detained incommunicado", *The Comparative and International Law Journal of Southern Africa*, 42(1), p. 15.

Address to a Joint session of Congress of 20th September Bush said "Al Qaeda is to terror what the mafia is to crime". Nevertheless, he insisted on defining the 9/11 events acts of war, thus blurring the line between crime and war and, therefore, between criminals and prisoners of war. Historian Michael Sherry claims that presenting the war on terror as de facto a war suggested that the Administration's task of fighting terror and asserting United States power was to be endless. Moreover, it safeguarded the Administration from any backfire caused by people's expectations of victory. On the other hand, seeing the war on terror as a crime too, also had its advantages. Sherry argues that:

> [w]ars are to be won and concluded. But no one thinks that policing crime ever ends – crime is like death and taxes, and policing it is the permanent obligation of governments. Conceived as a giant policing action for Globalcop, the 'war on terror' need not, and could not, have any end[18].

Sherry argues that the punitive character of official policy after 9/11 legitimated the invasion of Iraq and the dubious practices of incarceration and torture, or, as the latter was officially called, "enhanced interrogation techniques". These techniques, used at Guantanamo Bay, were based on the SERE training (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape) which is used in US military training to instruct soldiers on how to endure captivity by an enemy.

Among the procedures adopted for the treatment of Guantanamo detainees were the following:

- Indefinite detention

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[18] Sherry, M. (2005) "Dead or Alive: American Vengeance Goes Global", *Review of International Studies*, vol. 31, p. 262.

- Incarceration without plausible proof

- Enhanced interrogation techniques (torture)[19][20]:

  · Waterboarding

  · Cramped confinement

  · Sleep deprivation. Detainees were kept awake for up to 180 hours while occasionally having their hands chained over their heads and standing or in stressful positions.

  · "Wallings" (slamming detainees against a wall)

  · Nudity

Enhanced interrogation techniques, approved by the Bush Administration, were developed by two military psychiatrists, John Bruce Jessen and James Elmer Mitchell, who were hired by the CIA at the beginning of 2002, despite their lack of knowledge of al-Qaeda as well as interrogation experience. According to the United States Senate Report on CIA Detention Interrogation Program, "the use of the CIA's enhanced interrogation techniques was not an effective means of obtaining accurate information or gaining detainee cooperation". As a matter of fact, one can read in the Report that the result of the use of enhanced interrogation techniques was quite opposite, as detainees started giving

[19] Rosenberg, C. (2019) "What the C.I.A.'s Torture Program Looked Like to the Tortured", *The New York Times*, 4 December.
Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/04/us/politics/cia-torture-drawings.html
[20] U.S. Government Publishing Office. (2014) *Report Of The Senate Select Committee On Intelligence Committee Study Of The Central Intelligence Agency's Detention And Interrogation Program Together With Foreword By Chairman Feinstein And Additional And Minority Views.* Select Committee on Intelligence. Report number: S. Rept. 113-288
Available at https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/CRPT-113srpt288/CRPT-113srpt288/context

interrogators fabricated information after the physical and psychological abuse they experienced.

1.5   The War in Afghanistan and the War in Iraq

The events which occurred on September 11 prompted an increase in military budget and the legitimization of the use of force by the United States on foreign land as a preventative measure. Following the ultimatum President Bush had given to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in his Address to Joint session of Congress and the American People, the Bush Administration launched operation Enduring Freedom, which officially began on October 7, 2001. Bush had demanded that the Taliban regime deliver Al Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden, close terrorist training camps, and return four American citizens unjustly detained in the country. However, the Taliban leaders did not comply. United States response was to invade Afghanistan with the purpose of eradicating Al Qaeda, overturning the Taliban regime, and rebuilding that country, as Bush claimed in his State of Union Address[21]. NATO forces were also employed in the fight against Al Qaeda and the Taliban regime.

The first phase of this operation was successful since, by December 6, with the fall of the city of Kadanhar, the Taliban regime ended. This led to the first democratic elections in the country in 2004. The main goal of the United States

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[21] George W. Bush. (2002) The President's State of the Union Address. Available at https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html

and other countries was to capture Osama Bin Laden and other Al Qaeda leaders. Nevertheless, as regime change has had a positive outcome in Afghanistan, Bush switched his attention towards the countries that he identified as threatening. In his State of Union Address he places those countries on the "axis of evil"[22]. The majority of the population condoned the war in Afghanistan due to its success and because it was an effective action implemented by the Government. According to Leaman, the attacks' visually shocking impact prompted a manifestation of national solidarity, but the public was angry and afraid, and demanded that the government take strong action in response to the events.

Leaman also remarks that the political climate that emerged after September 11 was one that "gave the administration wide latitude to use violence as an instrument of policy, as well as a new political justification for massive increases military spending"[23]. The Administration, in fact, adopted a policy of pre-emptive warfare and, Leaman states, quoting Suskind[24], that Afghanistan was used as a "demonstration model" of how the United States would act towards countries that it considered hostile. Thus, the positive outcome of regime change in Afghanistan and the threat that Iraq constituted, with its alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction and its presumed affiliation with Al Qaeda, would lead to the confrontation in Iraq. The war in Iraq started with the invasion of the country in 2003 by the "U.S.-led coalition", in other words an international military coalition led by the United States of America, which saw the participation of

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[22] Ibid.
[23] Leaman, G. (2004). "Iraq, American Empire, And The War On Terrorism", *Metaphilosophy*, 35(3), p. 240.
[24] Suskind, R. (2004) The Price of Loyalty. New York: Simon and Schuster. Quoted in Leaman, G. (2004). "Iraq, American Empire, And The War On Terrorism", p. 240.

countries like the United Kingdom, Australia, Italy, Spain and Poland. The Bush Administration believed that Iraq represented a powerful threat for the United States due to its alleged possession of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). This was one of the reasons that justified the invasion of Iraq, along with the belief that the country's President, Saddam Hussein, had ties with Al Qaeda and could provide weapons of mass destruction to terrorist organization. The links between Saddam Hussain and Al Qaeda and, therefore, the legitimization of the invasion of Iraq, clearly reported by Dunn, were:

(1) that al-Qaeda was an active enemy who would strike again;

(2) that al-Qaeda sought WMD;

(3) that Iraq had WMD;

(4) that Iraq had contacts with al-Qaeda;

(5) that these contacts created a working collaboration between Qaeda;

(6) that this collaboration involved the supply of WMD by Iraq to al-Qaeda; and

(7) that this combination provided an immediate and credible threat to the US.[25]

Pre-emption would have been justified under international law, Dunn argues, only if all of these claims were accurate. However, only the fact that that al-Qaeda was an active enemy who would strike again, that al-Qaeda sought WMD, and that Iraq had contacts with al-Qaeda were true. The latter, however, Dunn clarifies, did not imply that Iraq was collaborating with Al Qaeda and that it supplied weapons of mass destruction to the terrorist organization. In fact, weapons of that kind were never found in the country.

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[25] Dunn, D. H. (2005). "Bush, 11 September and the Conflicting Strategies of the "War on Terrorism"" *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, Vol. 16, p.22.

In conclusion, the events of September 11, 2001, were shocking and unprecedented and, as such, led to a series of responses that are now considered questionable, if not inappropriate, in light of the fact that the attacks were used as political justification by the leaders of the United States to attempt to increase their authority.

2

Don DeLillo's *In the Ruins of the Future*

2.1 Don DeLillo

Donald Richard DeLillo, known as Don DeLillo, was born in New York, in 1936. He is the son of Italian immigrants who moved to the United States during the First World War. He grew up in a working-class Italian neighbourhood in 'the Bronx', namely Little Italy of Arthur Avenue in New York City. The author now lives in a house in Upstate New York with his wife, Barbara Bennett. DeLillo wrote short stories, novels, plays, scripts and essays. Much of his life had remained undisclosed for years, as DeLillo had never been very eager to revealing much about himself. Some critics have described him as reserved in conversation, elusive. Today a few more facts about his life and himself are known. He graduated from Fordham University with a bachelor's degree in communication arts in 1958 and began to work in an advertising firm, Ogilvy, Benson & Mather, on Fifth Avenue, as a copywriter. After some years he decided to leave his job and started writing his first novel, *Americana*, published in 1971, on which he worked for four years. *Americana* was a critique of the corporate world and portrayed the anxieties and conundrums of contemporary Americans, themes that are recurrent also in his later novels. Throughout the 1970s he published several novels, such as *End Zone* (1972), *Great Jones Street* (1973), *Ratner's Star* (1976), *Players* (1977) and *Running Dog* (1978). In the 1980s, a period

which, according to Henry Veggian, DeLillo he considers "as marking a shift in his work"[26], he published three novels, namely, *The Names* (1982), *White Noise* (1985), and *Libra* (1988). *White Noise* was his breakout novel and granted him the National Book Award. The novel deals with a chemical disaster which impacts the life of its protagonist, Jack Gladney, a college professor, and his family, forcing him to confront his greatest fear, his mortality. *White Noise* received extremely positive reviews and very much attention, which was fostered by a real event, a disastrous chemical accident, that took place in the city of Bhopal, India, scarcely two months before the publication of the book. *White Noise* was followed by *Libra* (1988), which deals with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and which was also well-received and became a best-seller. In the 1990s DeLillo published two novels, namely *Mao II* (1991) and *Underworld* (1997), the latter a sort of historical romance. Mao II portrayed the story of a reclusive writer who is working on a novel which he does not want to publish. Terrorism, conspiracy, media images, and crowds are among the book's main concerns. The title for the novel is a reference to Andy Warhol's series of silkscreen paintings portraying Mao Zedong. Both ~~the~~ novels written in the 1990s had had remarkable success and were well-received by both critics and the public.

As regards DeLillo's later novels, the ones written in the first decade of the twenty-first century, in particular *The Body Artist* (2001)*, Cosmopolis* (2003)*, And Point Omega* (2010), are, in the words of Veggian, "more taciturn and introspective"[27]. *Falling Man* (2007) relates the lives of a few individuals, that

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[26] Veggian, H. (2014) *Understanding Don DeLillo*, Columbia, University of South Carolina Press. p.70.
[27] Veggian, H. (2014) *Understanding Don DeLillo*, p.78.

become upturned by the events of September 11, 2001, and does so from various points of view, including that of one of the hijackers. The novel has had a contrasting reception, it received appreciation for its originality in avoiding realistic representation of the events but rather offering a glimpse of their shocking impact on ordinary people's lives. However, it received criticism for failing to let readers grasp the attacks' wider significance. Among DeLillo's latest works there is *Zero K* (2016), which, like *White Noise,* reflects on mortality, and whose protagonists explore the possibility of immortality through cryopreservation, and *The Silence* (2020), DeLillo's latest novel, which deals with a global technological crush. Throughout his lifelong career Don DeLillo has also written five plays, namely, *The Engineer of Moonlight* (1979), *The Day Room* (1986), *Valparaiso* (1999), *Love-Lies-Bleeding* (2005), and *The Word for Snow* (2014). Although they "differ in form and focus, they all emphasize and promote the value and necessity of conversation"[28]. According to Osteen,

> DeLillo's plays, like his novels and stories, affirm and enact the power of language. But the accent on language takes a slightly different direction in his plays, where narrative voice and sculpted prose are supplanted by lively dialogue. [29]

Therefore, language has an extreme importance to DeLillo, who has often emphasized multiculturalism and multilingualism.

Most of DeLillo's novels are set in Texas and New York. In an interview with Robert R. Harris, in 1982, DeLillo remarked that New York has had an enormous influence on him. In particular, he listed "[t]he paintings in the Museum of Modern

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[28] Osteen, M. (2019). "We came for the dirt but stayed for the talk: Don DeLillo's theatre". In K.D. Lewin & K. Ward (Eds.). *Don DeLillo, Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, London: Bloomsbury Academic. P.90
[29] Ibid.

Art, the music at the Jazz Gallery and the Village Vanguard, the movies of Fellini and Godard and Howard Hawks. And there was a comic anarchy in the writing of Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound and others"[30]. Nonetheless, he claimed that he did not necessarily want to write like them.

Literary critic Thomas LeClair defines him and his books elusive. DeLillo's books, he says, are elusive because "for DeLillo, fiction draws its power from and moves toward mystery […] he does not sit on panels, appear on television, judge contests, review books, or teach creative writing. He travels and writes"[31]. At the time of the interview, in 1979, there was almost no information regarding the author; as a matter of fact, the one with LeClair was one of the first interviews DeLillo agreed to. Amusingly, LeClair recalls a moment in which the author, whom he met in Athens, handed him a business card that read his name and the line "I don't want to talk about it"[32]. When asked why reference books would only specify his date of birth and the dates of publication of his books DeLillo replied:

> [s]ilence, exile, cunning, and so on. It's my nature to keep quiet about most things. Even the ideas in my work. When you try to unravel something you've written, you belittle it in a way. It was created as a mystery, in part. Here is a new map of the world, it is seven shades of blue. If you're able to be straightforward and penetrating about this invention of yours, it's almost as though you're saying it wasn't altogether necessary. The sources weren't deep enough. Maybe this view is overrefined and too personal. But I think it helps explain why some writers are unable or unwilling to discuss their work.[33]

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[30] Harris, R. R. (1982) "A Talk With Don DeLillo". *The New York Times* online, Oct. 10.
[31] LeClair, T. (2005), "An Interview with Don DeLillo". In Thomas DePietro (Ed.) *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, University Press of Mississippi, p. 3.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid. cit. p. 4

Nevertheless, Vince Passaro argues that:

> DeLillo is a star now, no longer the shrouded, elusive figure he had been when he was interviewed by LeClair. He does appearances and readings from time to time; on rare occasions, he speaks to the press. When I call to make arrangements to discuss "Mao II," he is cheerful and cooperative[34].

It is in fact true that since the first interview with LeClair DeLillo gave many others, especially after White Noise, and have since participated in public readings, been more eager to talk about his work, although still not as eager to talk about his life.

Henry Veggian locates DeLillo in the group of writers "whose literature appears immune to biographical interpretation"[35], he compares the relationship between DeLillo's fiction and life to that of Joseph Conrad. Referring to Edward Said *in Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography[36]*, Veggian states:

> Said argued that Conrad's seafaring fictions were effective because their author diminished his own maritime experience in those writings, thereby making room for literary characterization and event. In Said's words, Conrad "economized himself." The relationship between DeLillo's fiction and life may be said to do the same.[37]

This 'economization' of oneself is done by DeLillo by keeping his autobiography out of his work, yet his fiction goes deeper in that it makes this "self-effacement", as Veggian claims, become literary art. Moreover, DeLillo consistently incorporates life and biography into his writings, even if these don't constitute his own. Despite the lack of clues that might help readers see a connection between

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[34] Passaro, V. "Dangerous Don DeLillo". In Thomas DePietro (Ed.) (2005) *Conversations with Don DeLillo,* University Press of Mississippi. p. 76.

[35] Veggian, H. (2014) *Understanding Don Delillo*, p.1.

[36] Said, E. W. (2008). *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography.* Columbia University Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/said14004

[37] Veggian, H. (2014) *Understanding Don Delillo*, cit. p. 3

the author's biography and his works, one could argue that as the son of Italian immigrants, some of his early life experiences, like growing up in an Italian community in the Bronx, being exposed to some extent to the Italian language, culture and traditions, might have translated into or influenced some of his works. Veggian notes that "[a]lienation, loneliness, and anonymity form an existential holy trinity in his prose"[38]. Alienation, loneliness, and anonymity are often experienced by the migrant figure. Thus, DeLillo's heritage as the son of immigrants might be relevant as it puts him in a position from which he has a double perspective on American culture, from both the inside and the outside.

In an interview with Adam Begley in 1993 DeLillo was asked whether his origins might have affected his fiction. In his reply DeLillo refers to *Americana* as his "private declaration of independence, a statement of my intention to use the whole picture, the whole culture"[39]. Moreover, he mentions the fact that being the son of two immigrants he was attracted to the view of America as the immigrant's dream. His position of being able to focus on the "whole picture, the whole culture"[40] from the distanced view of the son of immigrants might have allowed, or prompted, him to address themes such as the anxieties of American life, consumer capitalism, violence and terrorism, the media and television, and finally news virtually addictive power to influence the public. In a BBC documentary entitled *Don DeLillo: The Word, The Image, and The Gun* DeLillo says that:

> […] today it's news that has begun to influence the way we see the world.
> It's news that has become so extraordinarily dominant. I think we've come

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[38] Veggian, H. (2014) *Understanding Don DeLillo,* p.9
[39] Begley, A. (2005) "The Art of Fiction CXXXV: Don DeLillo" In Thomas DePietro (Ed.) *Conversations with Don DeLillo,* University Press of Mississippi. p. 88
[40] Ibid.

to depend on news, the darker the better. In a way we need it because it is the tragic narrative of our time.[41]

Even if only marginally, news and mass media also feature in *Falling Man*, DeLillo's fifteenth novel. The title for the novel was inspired by a famous photograph by Richard Drew which depicted a man in a suit falling from one of the Twin Towers. The image was used in the front page of the New York Times on September 12, 2001 and became emblematic of the event despite its censure just days after its publication.

It seems natural that mass media play a significant role in DeLillo's writings, especially if one considers that he began his literary career in an era of economic growth, in a big and culturally and artistically rich city, where the media were being reshaped also by new technology. Even though he refrains from considering himself a postmodern writer, rather seeing himself placed in a line with the modernists, his works do present traits of postmodernism and critics usually classify them as such. He explores themes familiar to the postmodern writer, and often incorporates cinematic technique into his writing, sometimes doing close-ups, sometimes cutting scenes abruptly and moving to the next one before the reader even notices the change, inserting flashbacks, or creating dramatic effects. According to DeLillo cinema or film is part of the contemporary person's mind, directors such as Antonioni, Kubrick, Godard, Fellini, Bergman, and Hawks have played an important role in his life. Moreover, "film is more than the twentieth-century art, it's another part of the twentieth-century mind, the

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[41] Evans, K. (1991) *Don DeLillo: The Word, The Image, and The Gun.* Film. BBC 1 Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0DTePKA1wgc

twentieth-century is on film, it's the film century"[42] DeLillo reads in a BBC

documentary, partly voicing one of his characters' lines - Frank Volterra's - in *The*

Names.

As regards DeLillo's first literary influences, he recalls reading modernist

authors, in particular Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and *Light in August*, Joyce's *A*

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Ulysses, and Hemingway, while working as

a 'parkie', a playground attendant, in the Bronx at the age of eighteen.

It is argued whether DeLillo should be ascribed to the modernist or the

postmodernist current. Although he might locate himself in none of the two, or

rather he prefers not to be labelled at all[43], he definitely embodies some of the

traits of both. Philip Nel suggests that there is affinity between DeLillo's writing

and modernism, that is to say, his ability to find the "epic in the mundane"[44] , as

Nel calls it, and the fact that his style resembles that of the modernist avant-garde,

he "writes a tightly controlled prose, and densely layers his allusive novels"[45] for

Nel indicates that modernism is as much important as postmodernism to fully

understand the author's work. Nevertheless, Nel does not entirely reject the

notion of postmodernism, as a matter of fact, he argues that DeLillo writes about

postmodernity "that set of historical conditions marked by a decreased emphasis

on industrial production and a greater emphasis on service industries and mass

culture"[46]. He goes further claiming that by embracing a "high modernist aesthetic

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[42] Evans, K. (1991) *Don DeLillo: The Word, The Image, and The Gun.* Film. BBC 1
Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0DTePKA1wgc
[43] See Nadotti, M. (2005) "An Interview with Don DeLillo" In: DePietro T. (ed.)
Conversations with Don DeLillo. United States of America, University Press of Missisippi
p.113
[44] Nel, P. (2008). "DeLillo and Modernism". In J. Duvall (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion
to Don DeLillo.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. p.13
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid .p.16

and those postmodernisms animated by a modernist avant-garde"[47], the author challenges the standard divisions between modern and postmodern.

On the other hand, Peter Knight argues that the fact that since the 1960s artists and writers began to acknowledge that the premise of avant-garde modernism—to change the world by altering how people regarded it—did not work. This awareness along with the feeling that works by notable artists, architects, and writers became commodities, is where postmodernism has its roots. On the other hand, acknowledging that what one says is partly something that has already been said by others, reusing it in a different way, style, is also what postmodernity is about, and DeLillo seems to embed this consciousness[48]. Furthermore, Knight notes that DeLillo is also concerned with the role of the novelist in a time of consumption. As a matter of fact, DeLillo gives voice to this preoccupation through the lines of one of the characters in *Mao II*: "I used to think it was possible for an artist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory"[49]. In the character's words, the novelist is unable to influence society anymore, his role has been absorbed by the terrorist:

> In societies reduced to blur and glut, terror is the only meaningful act. There's too much everything, more things and messages and meanings that we can use in ten thousand lifetimes. Inertia-hysteria. Is history possible? Is anyone serious? Who do we take serious? Only the lethal believer, the person who kills and dies for faith. Everything else is absorbed. The artist is absorbed, the madman in the street is absorbed and processed and incorporated. Give him a dollar, put him in a TV commercial. Only the terrorists stand outside. The culture hasn't figured

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[47] Ibid. p. 17

[48] Knight, P. (2008). "DeLillo, Postmodernism, Postmodernity" In J. Duvall (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. pp. 27-28

[49] DeLillo, D. (1992) *Mao II*, London, Vintage. p.41

out how to assimilate him. It's confusing when they kill the innocent. But this is precisely the language of being noticed, the only language the West understands. The way they determine how we see them. The way they dominate the rush of endless streaming images.[50]

Although this view is pessimistic, DeLillo's seems to be less so. He claims that the novel is not dead nor is it seriously injured, however, he admits that writers are "working in the shadows of the novel's greatness and influence"[51]. DeLillo also remarks that literature is sometimes unable to stand out, rather being "too ready to be neutralized, to be incorporated into the ambient noise"[52]. This is why according to him there is a need for a different kind of writer, one that he calls "the writer in opposition"[53], who is able to write back, to write against the system of assimilation in order not to become commodified or "elevator music"[54], as he calls it.

Violence and terrorism are recurrent in DeLillo's work, in novels such as *Players*, *Mao II*, *Falling Man* among others. They are the reflection and maybe the anticipation of the problems of contemporary society, which has lost its grasp on reality and realized that it is not as controllable as formerly thought. Especially after the assassination of President Kennedy, DeLillo perceived that Americans have "developed a much more deeply unsettled feeling about [their] grip on reality"[55]. According to DeLillo the event changed the country's consciousness: "[w]e seem much more aware of elements like randomness, and ambiguity and

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[50] DeLillo, D. (1992) *Mao II*, cit. p.157-158
[51] Begley, A. (2005) "The Art of Fiction CXXXV: Don DeLillo", cit. p. 96
[52] Ibid., p. 96-97
[53] Ibid., p. 97
[54] Ibid.
[55] DeCurtis, A. (2005) "An Outsider in this society": an Interview with Don DeLillo, In: DePietro T. (ed.) *Conversations with Don DeLillo*. United States of America, University Press of Missisippi p. 56

chaos since then"[56]. This is proof of the attentive observer DeLillo is, one able to look from a distance and ask questions, like the ones he posits in his essay written in the aftermath of the events of 11 September 2001. "Is it too soon?"[57] DeLillo asks, that is, is it too soon to comprehend the meaning and the consequences of the event?

Cultural and historical events prompted DeLillo's responses also on other occasions. He wrote an essay in response to the assassination of John F. Kennedy, *American Blood: A Journey through the Labyrinth of Dallas and JFK* (1983), another, called *Salman Rushdie Defense* (1994), co-written with Paul Auster in defence of Salman Rushdie when a fatwa had been issued against the latter for his allegedly blasphemous novel entitled *The Satanic Verses* (1988), and again, in 2001, with *In The Ruins of The Future,* he felt the responsibility of writing about the event that hit many Americans directly and indirectly, including himself and his dears.

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[56] Ibid.
[57] DeLillo, D. (2001) "In the Ruins of the Future": Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September. *Harper's* (December) p. 39

2.2 *In the Ruins of the Future:* Voicing the Counter-narratives

In the wake of the attacks Don DeLillo wrote an essay, first published in *Harper's Magazine,* entitled "In the Ruins of the Future" with the subtitle "Reflections on terror and loss in the shadow of September". The essay was an attempt to respond to the event, and to understand what 9/11 meant to people, and as he writes to "give memory, tenderness, and meaning"[58] (39). He does so by highlighting the need for a counter-narrative to the official narrative which dominated the news for weeks after September 11. DeLillo begins his essay by assessing the US condition in the decade before the event. He speaks of globalization, capital markets, "the utopian glow of cyber-capital" (33) which enables society to live where there is no memory of history, "permanently in the future" (33). A future characterised by the Internet, where capital potential has no limit. As Slavoj Žižek stated in an article published in the Guardian, in 2006, the decade of the 1990s represented "the big utopia of global capitalist liberal democracy"[59], the end of which was reached with 9/11. The attacks, Žižek claims, are for America a return to real history.

According to Linda Kauffmann, DeLillo intends to make a stern remark when he uses the words "utopian glow" and "memory" in the first sentences of his essay, meaning that "technology and cyber-capital lulled us into ignoring

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[58] DeLillo, D. (2001) "In the Ruins of the Future": Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September. *Harper's* (December) p. 39. Henceforth all quotations of the essay will be provided within the text with the number page within brackets.
[59] Žižek, S. (2006) "On 9/11, New Yorkers Faced the Fire in the Minds of Men", *The Guardian* (Sept. 11). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2006/sep/11/comment.september11

history"[60]. DeLillo writes: "[t]oday, again, the narrative belongs to terrorists", echoing the words of Bill Gray in *Mao II*, who remarks that the terrorists have taken the place of the novelist in their ability to influence people's consciousness. However, the target of the attackers, DeLillo argues, is not global economy but rather America, its technological advancement and modernity, which is against the terrorists' beliefs and religious values. Those values are of course displaced and taken to an extreme fundamentalism, to the point that they plot and execute an act of violence beyond comprehension against America's "godlessness" (33) and its culture's power "to penetrate every wall, home, life and mind"(33) and most of all against innocent civilians.

The events of September 11 were termed unexpected and unprecedented, yet American popular culture had already staged such a scenario especially in cinematic representations of the 1990s. Moreover, DeLillo himself has dealt with the theme in a number of works which now seem to be predictive of what occurred. Commenting on a passage from *Mao II* in the quoted interview with Vince Passaro DeLillo says: "[…] In a repressive society, a writer can be deeply influential, but in a society that's filled with glut and repetition and endless consumption, the act of terror may be the only meaningful act"[61]. If once writers used to occupy that marginal space where they were able to oppose to the world's injustices and indeed enter people's consciousness, in contemporary society, filled with excess, it seems that only terror can own this power. He also remarks that "[t]rue terror is a language and a vision. There is a deep narrative structure

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[60] Kauffmann, L. S. (2008) "The Wake Of Terror: Don DeLillo's "In The Ruins Of The Future," "Baadermeinhof," and "Falling Man"", *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (Summer),p.357 Available at http://www.jstor.org/stable/26287626
[61] Passaro, V. "Dangerous Don DeLillo", cit. p.84

to terrorist acts, and they infiltrate and alter consciousness in ways that writers used to aspire to"[62]. The statements are echoed in the essay, where DeLillo writes"[t]oday, again, the world narrative belongs to terrorists" (33) and continues "[t]error's response is a narrative that has been developing over years, only now becoming inescapable" (33), implying that terrorist acts are not a new occurrence, however, blinded by its cultural, political and economic hegemony, America was not expecting them to happen on its own territory.

Following the official narrative, DeLillo proceeds to construct a paragraph of binary oppositions: "we" as opposed to "they", where "they" are the terrorists who live in a dimension that *we* (the West) do not share, a "narrower format" (34), as he puts it, and "we" are the American people, rich and strong and used to living constant everyday exchanges. The terrorist "builds a plot around his anger and our indifference" (34), he follows his own narrative, a reduced one, since plots – DeLillo says – "reduce the world"(34). When this narrative does not suffice to sustain the zeal for the mission, brotherhood is what replaces it. DeLillo suggests that being "rich, privileged, and strong" (34), as America's considered itself and which contributed to form its own perception of being unassailable, is not enough when faced with the terrorists' willingness to die, which, as DeLillo clearly states, is precisely the advantage they possess. Having defined the Self and the Other, DeLillo attempts a way of de-constructing the narrative which was imposed by the Bush Administration when some kind of rationalisation was needed and an enemy had to be identified, defined, and responded to[63]. This was particularly

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[62] Ibid.
[63] In his address to a joint session of Congress Bush constructed an 'us versus them' narrative and to do so he posited three main questions: "Who attacked our country?"; "why do they hate us?"; "How will we fight and win this war?". In his speech he famously

difficult as terrorism is not an enemy of clearcut definition, as Communism might have been during the Cold War. paragraph DeLillo states that:

> We can tell ourselves that whatever we've done to inspire bitterness, distrust and rancour, it was not so damnable as to bring this day down on our heads. But there is no logic in apocalypse. They have gone beyond the bounds of passionate payback. (34)

DeLillo is cautious not to judge, and risk oversimplifying what the happenings symbolise, since, in order to understand the event – an event that it is still too soon to understand – it is necessary to pause, to "slow things down, even things out" (34), as the protesters in "Genoa, Prague, Seattle, and other cities" (34) were predicating. Nevertheless, it is necessary to take a broader context into account. With rapidly progressing technology and economy it is necessary to pause and think matters through ethically, which means to question one's present actions and to consider history. Thus, the phrase: "We can tell ourselves" might have continued saying "but the truth is different" or "but it is not completely true" or "this version is only a partial truth, the more comforting one". America's colonial past, and its present capability of colonising in different ways are here being summoned for deliberation. This necessarily implies that the binary opposition of "we" and "they" might not be so clearly defined: there might be found some points that the two have in common. This reading brings to mind what Slavoj Žižek remarks in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!*:

> Whenever we encounter such a purely evil Outside, we should gather the courage to endorse the Hegelian lesson: in this pure Outside, we should recognize the distilled version of our own essence. For the last five

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declared "[e]ither you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" prompting every nation of the world to take a stance.

centuries, the (relative) prosperity and peace of the ''civilized'' West was bought by the export of ruthless violence and destruction into the ''barbarian'' Outside: the long story from the conquest of America to the slaughter in Congo. Cruel and indifferent as it may sound, we should also, now more than ever, bear in mind that the actual effect of these bombings is much more symbolic than real.[64]

In Žižek's reasoning, the past of the West, the latter's violence and cruelty and indifference towards the Other in the past, is in fact the reason for the 'payback'. "It is our lives and minds that are occupied now" (33), DeLillo writes. While establishing a link to the county's colonial past through the deliberate use of the word "occupied", DeLillo reinforces the claim that terrorism can invade minds. The occupied territories in fact are the lives and the minds of the people who have seen their beliefs and safety collapse. Thus, "[t]he narrative ends in the rubble and it is left to us to create the counternarrative" (34).

Counter-narrative is crucial for DeLillo, as the symbols of American power have collapsed along with American naïve self-perception, the identity of the country is wounded, and people's consciousness traumatised. The only way to attempt at making sense of the event is through counternarratives:

For the next fifty years, people who were not in the area when the attacks occurred will claim to have been there. In time, some of them will believe it. Others will claim to have lost friends or relatives, although they did not. This is also the counter-narrative, a shadow history of false memories and imagined loss. (35)

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[64] Žižek, S. (2002) "Welcome to the Desert of the Real!" *South Atlantic Quarterly,* (April 1); 101 (2), pp. 387-8.

DeLillo writes that people will claim having been at the site of the attacks or having lost their dear ones, even though they might have not had experienced those things. Apart from records of direct experience, those false memories and invented stories are for him as much part of the narrative as all the small objects that have been found at Ground Zero:

> The cell phones, 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 back yards: status reports, resumes, 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)

As Linda Kauffmann puts it, DeLillo "does not reconcile myth with fact"[65] both are relevant as they are part of the public memorialisation and mourning. Especially as they provide meaning to the "massive spectacle" of the day's tragedy endlessly replayed by the media and then exploited for political purposes. DeLillo gives voice to those memories also in *Falling Man,* in the Alzheimer's group Lianne, the protagonist's wife, holds meetings with. He dedicates some pages to make the patients recount what they were doing when the attacks happened and how they felt about the terrorists. This also relates to the broader debate on whether fiction can be a medium that contributes to the sense-making process given that, generally, first-hand testimony is considered to be 'truer'.

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[65] Kauffmann, L. S. (2008) "The Wake Of Terror", cit. p. 354

DeLillo claims that "[f]or many people, the event has changed the grain of the most routine moment" (39). Apart from the losses of family, friends, co-workers, jobs, personal belongings and every other thing that might matter, the event has altered one's perception of the "most routine moment", disintegrating rhythms and ways of life. DeLillo makes this reflection particularly apparent in *Falling Man* as he emphasizes the character's alienated perception of the ordinariness of life.

The enormity of the event, its (global) visual imprint made it impossible to register or to even imagine:

But when the towers fell. When the rolling smoke began moving downward, floor to floor. This was so vast and terrible that it was outside imagining even as it happened. We could not catch up to it. But it was real, punishingly so, an expression of the physics of structural limits and a void in one's soul, and there was the huge antenna falling our of the sky, straight down, blunt end first, like an arrow moving backward in time. (39)

Notwithstanding its unpredictability, according to DeLillo, the event is outside imagination even as it is happening and being witnessed: it is too traumatic to be consciously acknowledged. As will be discussed more in depth in the next chapter, a traumatic experience and the post-traumatic symptoms that it provokes are characterised by a visuality that is able to haunt one's psyche. The words "*punishingly* so" (my emphasis) point to the responsibility of pushing technology to its limits. DeLillo reflects on the structure of the towers, on the physical limits of the two buildings that used to represent what Žižek calls the "center of the virtual capitalism, of financial speculations disconnected from the

sphere of material production"[66]. Because of their digital abstractness, detached from the material sphere, and lacking a balance, their collapse was inevitable. DeLillo suggests that these symbols of the future America was permanently living in fell into the past, "backword in time" (39), like the enormous antenna which fell arrow-like out of the sky, It also seems to underscore the accomplishment of the terrorists' terrible goal to "bring back the past" (34). Furthermore, if the towers are the embodiment of technological fantasy, there is also an element of libidinal fantasy inherent in the collapse of the towers, as Žižek argues:

> Not only were the media bombarding us all the time with the talk about the terrorist threat; this threat was also obviously libidinally invested—just recall the series of movies from Escape from New York to Independence Day. The unthinkable that happened was thus the object of fantasy: in a way, America got what it fantasized about, and this was the greatest surprise.[67]

DeLillo's essay is also concerned with language, or rather, to paraphrase Marco Abel, the author's focus is on how language can stylistically and ethically respond to the event's content: "[t]hus, the essay attempts rhetorically to position readers so that they become capable of seeing that which cannot be perceived in the event's endless televised images"[68]. Indeed, DeLillo affirms that "[t]he event has no purchase on the mercies of analogy or simile"(39). In other words, it is not representable through analogy or simile, rhetoric, even more broadly, by language itself. Nevertheless, DeLillo writes that "language is inseparable from the world that provokes it"(39). Language may be incapable of representing the

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[66] Žižek, S. (2002) "Welcome to the Desert of the Real!", cit. p. 387
[67] Ibid. p. 387
[68] Abel, M. (2003). "Don DeLillo's "In the Ruins of the Future": Literature, Images, and the Rhetoric of Seeing 9/11. *PMLA*, 118(5), p. 1240. Available at http://www.jstor.org/stable/1261462

happening in its wholeness, nevertheless it is inseparable from the latter, it is intrinsic in the event itself, and is the only tool a writer has at his disposition to attempt understanding and conveying its meaning, through feeling and emotion. DeLillo himself noted in an interview with Adam Begley that "[…] before everything, there's language. Before history and politics, there's language"[69]. The writer tries to imagine the moment, stripping it from politics, history, and religion. What remains is "primal terror" (39), this is where he starts to try "to give memory, tenderness, and meaning to all that howling space" (39) that the towers literally and symbolically left. In *Falling Man* DeLillo represents this "howling space" in its initial scene, where he places Keith, the protagonist who survived the attacks, in a street that is no longer a street but "a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night"[70]. It is a place where time and space are no longer discernible in the traumatised psyche of the survivor who has just experienced terror.

Keith becomes fictionally part of the "hundred thousand stories crisscrossing New York, Washington, and the world" (34). As Linda Kauffmann rightly puts it, "[t]he counter-narrative's provenance is the realm of the unspeakable, the unfathomable. It does the work of mourning"[71]. The importance of the non-official narratives lies in their ability to arrive at mourning. DeLillo lists some of these stories which need to be remembered because they are capable of transcending the cold, harsh statistics of the dead and missing. He mentions:

> […] 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

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69 Begley, A. "The Art of Fiction CXXXV: Don DeLillo", p. 107
70 DeLillo, D. (2007) *Falling Man*, London, Picador. p.1.
71 Kauffmann, L. S. (2008) "The Wake Of Terror", cit. p. 354

all that towering steel. People running for their lives are part of the story that is left to us. (34)

The "improvised memorials"(35) which people displayed in Union Square Park, flags, candles and flowers, letters, poems, photographs, among others, are the otherwise insignificant items which help people manage "the massive spectacle that continues to seem unmanageable" (35). Among those objects are also the tools of the terrorists, that technology they used to execute the attacks: "the remote-control detonators they fashion out of radios, or the larger technology they borrow from us, passenger jets that become manned missiles". According to DeLillo, the terrorists want to bring back the medieval past with those "small lethal devices" (38) as they perceive the essence of technology as detrimental for their beliefs and traditions, therefore they "[u]se it as what it is, a thing that kills" (38).

Towards the conclusion of the essay, DeLillo represents the multiculturality that New York city embraces, and which in its ordinariness is taken as a given, with the image of a kneeled woman praying on a rug, turned towards Mecca. A few lines further the author comments:

I looked at her in prayer and it was clearer to me than ever, the daily sweeping taken-for-granted greatness of New York. The city will accommodate every language, ritual, belief and opinion. […] But the dead are their own nation and race, one identity, young or old, devout or unbelieving—a union of souls. (40)

The Muslim woman was part of the great diversity, religious, linguistic, ideological, the city was used to accommodate. And after the attacks all those who lost their lives, regardless of their nationality, language, religion, economic status, are part of a "union of souls". In the last few lines DeLillo mentions the

annual pilgrimage to Mecca during the hadj, which sees millions of devotees all dressed alike as a means of stripping themselves from every indication of status, income and nationality. DeLillo draws a comparison between the victims of 9/11, a "union of souls", and the pilgrims to Mecca, who are "all recalling in prayer their fellowship with the dead" (40). DeLillo's work doesn't offer comfort, as he stated in his interview with Begley, it is not the kind of "work that suggests that our lives and our problems and our perceptions are no different today than they were fifty or sixty years ago"[72], nevertheless, he believes that, at least in theory, fiction has a redemptive quality even if it is deeply disturbing and the novelist is the one who makes an attempt at trying to bridge the gap between the fact and its meaning:

> The novelist can try to leap across the barrier of fact, and the reader is willing to take that leap with him as long as there's a kind of redemptive truth waiting on the other side, a sense that we've arrived at a resolution.[73]

[72] Begley, A. (2005) "The Art of Fiction CXXXV: Don DeLillo", cit. p. 107
[73] DeCurtis, A. (2005) " An Outsider in This Society" cit. p. 64

3

Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*: A Trauma Narrative

3.1 The Concept of Trauma and Its Relationship to Literature

The concept of trauma has gained much attention during the last century. In psychoanalytic theory the study of trauma started towards the end of the nineteenth century, fostered also by the new technologies of the new industrial world, an emblematic example is the train accident. The political situation of the twentieth century, with the two World Wars fought with new military weaponry, and later the Vietnam War, further promoted the necessity of investigating the consequences of traumatic events suffered by the soldiers and the survivors, first and foremost the survivors of the Holocaust. It is only towards the end of the Nineteenth century that the concept of trauma became relevant to literary studies, hence the branch of trauma studies is relatively recent, although by now consolidated and always evolving.

Trauma studies in the humanities emerged in the 1990s at Yale University as result of the work of scholars such as Geoffrey Hartman, Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, among others, who sought to apply psychoanalytic theories of trauma to literature. Scholars such as historian Dominick LaCapra, Dori Laub a psychiatrist and a psychoanalyst, and himself survivor of the Holocaust, and psychiatrist Judith Herman, have also been of great importance for trauma studies. In addition to being influenced by psychoanalytic theories of trauma, particularly those revolving around ideas proposed by Pierre Janet, Jean-Martin

Charcot, and Freud, this branch of studies has its roots in deconstruction and is also informed by sociocultural and postcolonial theory approaches. Yale scholars applied deconstructive readings to literary texts in their investigation into the relationship of trauma theory and literature. Notably, one of the founding texts of trauma studies is Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996). This book, along with *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), a collection of essays edited by Caruth that gathers a series of works by leading scholars of the field, greatly influenced this domain of studies. The interrelated concepts of trauma, memory and identity represent central concerns in the discipline. Memory in particular is a primary issue, as will be seen later in the discussion.

Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* is among the canonical texts that founded literary trauma studies precisely because it is one of the first to apply psychoanalytic theories to literary texts thus also proving that trauma is an interdisciplinary concept, a claim that Caruth herself makes in her introduction to the book. Using literary and critical texts and films Caruth explores the representation of trauma and the complications that stem from it. Part of her analysis draws primarily on Freud's two works: *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939). In the former, Freud explores the concept of repetition compulsion, which consists, as the term itself suggests, of a repetition or constant recollection of an unpleasant experience in one's psyche. This phenomenon occurs when a traumatic event is not immediately assimilated into consciousness but rather remains in the unconscious and is, therefore, repeatedly recalled by the psyche, re-experienced, in the attempt to be worked through and finally assimilated. According to Caruth, trauma in its belated impact

"simultaneously defies and demands our witness".[74] In other words, because trauma is not acknowledged immediately as it happens it can never be fully grasped or 'claimed', its impact is belated and therefore there is a gap between the event and its understanding. For this reason, as Caruth remarks, the investigation of trauma cannot be done if not through a language that is "literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding".[75] This inherent and inescapable characteristic of trauma, that is, its belated impact, is the focal point in Caruth's discussion and creates an aporia of the experience of temporality and knowing.

In her introduction to *Unclaimed Experience* Caruth, drawing on Freud, defines trauma as a wound of the mind "the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world"[76]. The originally Greek term signifies precisely wound or injury, although in the past it was used to refer to a physical injury. As Caruth argues:

> […] trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language.[77]

Thus, trauma is a wound in one's psyche caused by a sudden and overwhelming event which is not registered in one's consciousness as it happens, but is experienced only belatedly, after a period of latency. In Caruth's words this

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[74] Caruth, C., (1996) *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. London, The Johns Hopkins Press Ltd. p.5
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid., p.4
[77] Ibid.

wound "cries out" and the way it does occurs through a series of phenomena or symptoms, such as dreams or nightmares, hallucinations, sudden intrusive recollections, or flashbacks of the event triggered by some sort of reminder. Trauma therefore is not only the traumatic event one experiences, without immediate knowledge of the trauma, but it is the after as well. Trauma in its shocking impact paralyses, disrupts the person's defence mechanisms, and, as Dominick LaCapra epitomises "disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence".[78]

Another trauma theorist, Judith Herman insists that whether they are caused by a natural calamity or inflicted by human beings "[t]raumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning".[79]

Originally a medical and then psychoanalytic concept, trauma has subsequently been incorporated not only in clinical but in literature in general and has become a paradigm of Western culture. Critics have considered and widely written about the relationship between trauma and literature. Literature has been concerned with trauma long before the branch of trauma studies had developed. As previously mentioned, Caruth sees literary language as the best mode of 'writing trauma' or writing about trauma and its effects, as it might be the only language that may be able to capture the meaning of it.

In his famous book *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001), a landmark in trauma studies, Dominick LaCapra also contemplates trauma and its

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[78] LaCapra, D. (2001) "Writing History, Writing Trauma" in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore, The John Hopkins University Press. p. 41
[79] Herman, J. L., (1992) *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, New York, Basic Books. P.33

representations, only with a more focused attention to history and what it is to write about trauma from the perspective of a historian. Nonetheless, while considering fictional and historical narratives, he posits that the former might be able to shed light on some phenomena "by offering a reading of a process or a period, or by giving at least a plausible "feel" for experience and emotion which may be difficult to arrive at through restricted documentary methods".[80] Certainly, this is one of the things Don DeLillo manages to do in *Falling Man* with respect to what LaCapra calls the "aftereffects" of trauma, and particularly the struggle, on the one side, and impossibility, on the other, to work through trauma.

Roger Luckhurst in his monograph *The Trauma Question* (2008) provides an extensive overview of the concept of trauma and its interdisciplinary relevance. Luckhurst identifies some of the novels that according to him are part of the cluster of trauma novels. The first, and particularly influential, is Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987)*,* followed by, among others, Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* (1988)*,* W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001) and what have come to be considered canonical novels, *Everything is Illuminated* (2002) and especially *Extremely Lound and Incredibly Close* (2005) by Jonathan Safran Foer. The latter is part of a sub-category of post-9/11 literature, which also includes Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*.

There seems to exist a particular trauma aesthetics that dictates the criteria for novels to be included in the cluster of trauma narratives. As Luckhurst and Caruth both argue, writing about trauma demands an experimental approach. Trauma does not feature only in the content. Its inherent aporia makes it difficult to define precisely because it escapes knowability, thus a style that disrupts linear sequences, rather favouring fragmentation, omission and analepsis, is

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[80] LaCapra, D. (2001) "Writing History, Writing Trauma", cit. p. 13

characteristic of a trauma aesthetic. A language that mimics how trauma affects an individual or a community, is usually privileged. Trauma novels have some common traits: indirection, gaps, repetitions, distortions, among others. Yet to define a specific aesthetics of trauma narratives is somewhat standardising: "[a]esthetic experimentation is therefore valued because it defies the habituation of trauma into numbing and domesticating cultural conventions"[81].

There is a general agreement among trauma studies scholars – one that raises some concerns regarding the connection between trauma and literature or narrative – that trauma is essentially anti-narrative. This is given by the very nature of trauma, the fact a traumatic event is not integrated in memory as common events are, because traumatic memory does not work in the same way as 'ordinary memory' (or narrative memory as psychologist and psychotherapist Pierre Janet refers to it) does; therefore, it cannot be narrativized – this point will be further explored later in the chapter. Narrative, be it in the form of speech or the written word, has been employed as the therapeutic medium in psychotherapy since the beginning, and still is, although it is worth noting that today other forms of therapy, like expressive arts therapy, Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy, among others, are also being resorted to. To tell one's story is a way to work through the trauma, or in Dori Laub's words, it is needed in order to survive. In an essay, also republished in Cathy Caruth's *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Laub, speaks of the trauma endured by the survivors of the Holocaust, and the importance of recounting it. He remarks that "[t]here is, in each survivor, an imperative need to *tell* and thus to come to *know* one's story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which

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[81] Luckhurst, R. (2008), *The Trauma Question*, (1st ed.) New York, Routledge, p.89.

one has to protect oneself. One has to know one's buried truth in order to live one's life"[82] (Laub's emphasis). Therefore, narrative precisely enables one to make sense of the world and of one's experiences, as thought and language cannot truly be separated. To use Jerome Bruner's phrase, neither do life and narrative, as "[n]arrative imitates life, life imitates narrative"[83]. As Luckhurst points out, inherent in trauma there is a tension between narrative and anti-narrative, and the gap between the two is where cultural articulations of trauma have room to attempt to explicate the latter[84]. Interestingly, scholars note how contemporary culture, especially the media, has supplied the vocabulary used to speak about trauma. Flashbacks, intrusive images, stored and replayed memories are all terms borrowed from the new technology that was in use when the academic branch of trauma studies emerged as well as from cinema.[85] Contemporary culture not only lent the vocabulary, but filled itself with stories of

[82] Laub, D. (1991) "Truth and Testimony The Process and the Struggle." *American Imago*, vol. 48, no. 1, p. 77. Available at http://www.jstor.org/stable/26304032.

[83] In "Life as Narrative" (1987) Bruner writes: "Narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative. "Life" in this sense is the same kind of construction of the human imagination as "a narrative" is. It is constructed by human beings through active ratiocination, by the same kind of ratiocination through which we construct narratives. When somebody tells you his life—and that is principally what we shall be talking about—it is always a cognitive achievement rather than a through-the-clear-crystal recital of something univocally given. In the end, it is a narrative achievement. There is no such thing psychologically as "life itself" At very least, it is a selective achievement of memory recall; beyond that, recounting one's life is an interpretive feat." Bruner, J. (1987) "Life as Narrative." *Social Research*, vol. 54, no. 1, p.13. Available at http://www.jstor.org/stable/40970444.

[84] Luckhurst, R. "Trauma and Narrative Knowledge" in *The Trauma Question*, pp.79-80

[85] Numerous and various are the representations of trauma in film, from the early 1900 until this day. Interestingly, Luckhurst traces the genealogy of the flashback used as a cinematic technique and its representation of the traumatic as early as 1910, and points to the fact that it was only in the mid-80s that the term 'flashback' was first employed to speak about the post-traumatic symptom. Luckhurst, R. *The Trauma Question*, pp. 177-208. Another detailed overview on the subject of trauma associated with the media is provided by Pinchevski, A. (2016) "Screen Trauma: Visual Media and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder", *Theory, Culture & Society* Vol.33 (4)

trauma and thus began to transmit the concept outside the strict boundaries of the clinical realm. In this regard Luckhurst writes:

> […] cultural forms have provided the genres and narrative forms in which traumatic disruption is temporalized and rendered transmissible. Trauma has become a paradigm because it has been turned into a repertoire of compelling stories about the enigmas of identity, memory and selfhood that have saturated Western cultural life.[86]

It is evident how trauma moving from the medical and psychoanalytic sphere has become relevant through and for literature and literary studies, and is today a cultural concept. However, it is noteworthy to also mention a legal aspect to fully comprehend trauma's interdisciplinary significance. In fact, relevant to the emergence of trauma studies was the inclusion in 1980 of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, in the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* by the American Psychiatric Association. Before its introduction, other terms were used to refer to symptoms arising from a traumatic experience: Freud's concepts of traumatic neurosis, hysteria which, nevertheless, was mostly used for women and associated with sexual trauma, shell shock, which was coined to refer to trauma experienced by soldiers, specifically in relation to the First World War. In 1980, however, those terms were substituted by PTSD, which encompasses the whole range of symptoms without gender distinction. As Lisa Diedrich writes, the term created a "transgendered and transgenerational trauma diagnostic category"[87] , thus, also giving a scientific standing to those symptoms that had previously been ascribed to the mind and the soul rather than to the biological

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[86] Luckhurst, R. "Trauma and Narrative Knowledge" in *The Trauma Question*, p.80
[87] Diedrich, L. (2018) "PTSD: A New Trauma Paradigm" in *Trauma and Literature* ed. by Kurtz, J. R. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. p.88

functioning of the brain. Moreover, of crucial importance to the recognition of PTSD was also the acceptance that the brain's functioning could be altered by outside factors. One of the elements that are generally considered to have prompted this revision of the psychological disorder and its popularity among the public, rather than just the scientific circle, were the protests against the war in Vietnam and the consequent growing awareness of post-traumatic stress symptoms suffered by soldiers following combat. Of course, these symptoms were experienced also previously, during World War II, not only among soldiers, but survivors as well, yet it wasn't until much later that they were thus conceptualized, allowing for diagnosis. In DSM-III PTSD was described as the "development of characteristic symptoms following a psychologically traumatic event that is generally outside the range of usual human experience"[88]. This definition is problematic for two reasons, firstly because it assumes that trauma is a single event, whereas trauma can be prolonged, suffered repeatedly throughout a period of life – one need only think of domestic abuse, physical and psychological, the experience of war, racism and other kinds of discrimination. Consequently, and this is the second reason, if it is suffered over and over again it cannot be said that it is unusual or outside ordinary experience. It is interesting to note, however, that the repetitiveness of trauma, the re-experiencing it, does not only entail the repetition of the actual abuse, but also of post-traumatic symptoms, which themselves are the repetition of trauma since they are not turned into the symbolic. Cathy Caruth provides a clear explanation of the nightmare's not being symbolic but literal with regard to the past trauma. This

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[88] American Psychiatric Association (1980). *Diagnostic And Statistical Manual Of Mental Disorders*, (3rd ed.). Washington, DC. p.236.

literality is given by the lack of fantasy, which usually helps turning what is repressed into a partly disguised form so that it appears camouflaged in the dream and the latter can be a pleasant experience rather than the re-ecactment of the traumatic[89]. Apart from re-experiencing the traumatic event, among other symptoms of PTSD are avoidance of reminders of the trauma, hyperarousal and hypervigilance, numbing, feelings of guilt or shame, and inability in sustaining relationships. Diedrich argues that because of the intrusiveness of the traumatic event in the present, some critical theorists, as Ian Hacking and Ruth Leys, often stress the cruciality of memory in PTSD. She quotes Leys' words regarding PTSD being "fundamentally a disorder of memory",[90] Diedrich, however, also notes that:

> [i]n addition, and perhaps even more so than a disorder of memory, PTSD in its original clinical instantiation might be considered a disorder of time, or put differently: PTSD disorders a person's experience of temporality. In PTSD, the past is not past, and thus the present and future are precarious temporalities – the past threatens to crowd out the present and swallow up the future.[91]

Indeed, the experience of time is altered in people who suffer from PTSD to the extent that they are possessed by the past and therefore their future is jeopardized by the constant reliving of the past. The past trauma is a haunting presence in the person's memory.

Focusing back on the issue of memory, in their essay entitled "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma" van der Kolk and van der Hart also place memory at the centre of their discussion, stressing its

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[89] Caruth, C. (2020) *Trauma, Language and Survival.* BTV Academics, 20th December. [video lecture] Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4cJ5jQ9y5hs
[90] Leys, R. (2000) *Trauma: A Genealogy.* Chicago, University of Chicago Press. P.2
[91] Diedrich, L. (2018) "PTSD: A New Trauma Paradigm", cit. p.85

importance in relation to the fact that it had been undervalued in psychoanalysis for most of the twentieth century. Their essay examines, among other things, the contributions of Pierre Janet to psychoanalysis, a relevant figure in modern psychiatry, who, according to van der Kolk and van der Hart, considered the memory system as the mind's primary organizing mechanism.

Relevant to this discussion is Kolk and Hart's revision of Janet's distinction between narrative memory and 'automatic synthesis' or habit memory—the former being a set of mental constructs through which one is able to comprehend their experience, and the latter a process of integration which happens unconsciously—through which they show how traumatic memories are formed. They observe that

> familiar and expectable experiences are automatically assimilated without much conscious awareness of details of the particulars, while frightening or novel experiences may not easily fit into existing cognitive schemes and be remembered with particular vividness, or totally resist integration. Under extreme conditions, existing meaning schemes may be entirely unable to accommodate frightening experiences, which causes the "memory" of these experiences to be stored differently, and not be available for retrieval under ordinary conditions: it becomes dissociated from conscious awareness and voluntary control (Janet 1889, 1919/25). When that occurs, fragments of these unintegrated experiences may later manifest recollections or behavioural reenactments.[92]

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[92] Kolk, B. A. v. d., & Hart, O. v. d. (1991). "The intrusive past: The flexibility of memory and the engraving of trauma", *American Imago*, 48(4). p.425. Available at https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/intrusive-past-flexibility-memory-engraving/docview/1289647492/se-2

The above quoted passage shows how traumatic memory works: the inability of integrating particular experiences into narrative memory, and thus being unable to give meaning to them, leads to dissociations and subsequent emergence of traumatic memories. In contrast to ordinary memories, which are "malleable by constant reworking and recategorization"[93], traumatic memories are not subject to change over time, they recur in the form of dreams or flashbacks without alteration. This is because they have not been organised on a linguistic level. As Caruth also points out, traumatic memories are available to consciousness, and therefore can be narrativized only after a period of latency. Kolk and Hart further elaborate on the reason why people with PTSD reexperience trauma in the form of nightmares, flashbacks, and behavioural re-enactments. As they put it,

> [w]hen people are exposed to trauma, i.e., a frightening event outside of ordinary experience, they experience "speechless terror" (van der Kolk 1987). The experience cannot be organized on a linguistic level and this failure to arrange the memory in words and symbols leaves it to be organized on a somatosensory or iconic level: as somatic sensations, behavioural reenactments, nightmares and flashbacks (Brett and Ostroff 1985).[94]

One way to arrive at registering the traumatic event on a linguistic level is through the process of working through. Notably, Dominick LaCapra, following Freud's notions, distinguishes between two modes of dealing with trauma: acting out and working through. Working through involves addressing or working on post-traumatic symptoms in order to create defence mechanisms against the recurring

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[93] Ibid., p.441
[94] Kolk, B. A. v. d., & Hart, O. v. d. (1991). "The intrusive past", cit. p. 442

post-traumatic symptoms and, consequently, to reduce them. Working through for LaCapra is the process through which "one tries to acquire some critical distance that allows one to engage in life in the present, to assume responsibility"[95]. Acting out, instead, entails flashbacks, nightmares, intrusive traumatic memories and compulsive repetitive behaviours, hypersensitivity or hyperarousal on one extreme or numbing on the other. What happens in post-traumatic acting out is most eloquently described by LaCapra in the following passage:

> […] one is haunted or possessed by the past and performatively caught up in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes—scenes in which the past returns and the future is blocked or fatalistically caught up in a melancholic feedback loop. In acting out, tenses implode, and it is as if one were back there in the past reliving the traumatic scene. [96]

Although they are two different modes, LaCapra stresses the fact that working through and acting out are not in strict binary opposition, in the sense that the occurrence of one does not preclude the occurrence of the other, rather they interact with one another. And if acting out constitutes the constant re-enactment of the event, working through does not necessarily bring to a complete healing – in fact, it hardly does – but it does help to alleviate the symptoms. In LaCapra's view acting out is necessary in order to return to the memory and thus enable the working through process.

A trauma therefore is an overwhelming experience difficult to acknowledge and narrativize and sometimes impossible to integrate into one's life story. Surely

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[95] LaCapra, D. (2001) *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, cit. p. 148
[96] Ibid., cit. p.21

the experience of the events of September 11th was not only a personal trauma

for those who survived and those who lost their relatives and friends, but a

collective one as well, since it did have a bearing on the nation's identity. As

mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis, nearly three thousand people died,

and thousands were injured. Among the victims were also first responders. Their

bravery and endurance served as the basis for a national-hero narrative that the

Bush Administration constructed and which ultimately was part of a greater

narrative that established 9/11 as the foundational trauma for Americans. The

attacks were viewed by millions of people around the world. The second plane

striking the south tower was captured by tv reporters on camera and the videos

of the assaults were played and replayed on all news channels. Martin Randall

cleverly argues that people were watching history unfolding live on national

television[97]. This led to what is referred to as 'virtual trauma' or 'distant trauma':

a kind of trauma that is mediated, in this case by the television screen. The events

naturally prompted many responses, first in the form of first-hand reports of

witnesses, and subsequently also artists, novelists and scholars provided their

contributions to the considerable body of what is now post-9/11 literature. Don

DeLillo, like many others also felt the responsibility of commenting on and trying

to understand or as he says "give memory, tenderness, and meaning"[98] to what

occurred and the situation it created. The traumatic and spectacular nature of the

events and their visibility made the task difficult, not only because of the delicacy

of the subject, given the closeness in time of the event, or the inherent difficulty

of dealing with a traumatic event of that scale, but also because of the difficulty

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[97] Randall, M. (2011) "Introduction" in *9/11 and The Literature of Terror*. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press. P.5

[98] DeLillo, D. (2001) "In The Ruins of The Future", cit. p.39

of representing what almost everyone had somehow directly or indirectly witnessed. As Randall observes,

> A number of questions quickly arose: How can a writer put into words what had already been watched by millions? What could language add to those images that they don't already articulate? Indeed, why write at all given the staggering enormity of the visual symbolism?[99]

3.2 *Falling Man:* A Post-9/11 Trauma Narrative

Some critics have argued that DeLillo's novel does not add anything new to the understanding of the September 11 attacks, it does not convey the full meaning of the events. It could, however, be said that after the tragic spectacle of the attacks what is left is a melancholic loop, and this is precisely one of the things *Falling Man* succeeds in capturing. If the novel did not meet the expectations of critics and readers, it might be that those expectations were misplaced: they were based on the previous experience of anticipation and premonition which have often been considered a characteristic of DeLillo's earlier works. It has in fact been noted that the reference to the towers in *Underworld* along with the motif of terrorism, which DeLillo has employed several times, already evoked 9/11. As Sonia Baelo-Allué rightly points out, "some readers and critics expected him [DeLillo] to write an epic, panoramic, political novel that would illuminate the cultural zeitgeist following 9/11".[100] Thus, in *Falling Man* the

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[99] Randall, M. (2011) "Introduction" in *9/11 and The Literature of Terror*, cit. p.5
[100] Baelo-Allué, S. "9/11 and the Psychic Trauma Novel: Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*", *Atlantis*, 34(1). p. 64. Available at http://www.jstor.org/stable/43486021

public expected a kind of fiction that would speak of the collectivity, that would be possibly more political, more centred on the representation of the collective trauma and on what comes next. However, as DeLillo has one of his characters declare:

> Nothing is next. There is no next. This was next. Eight years ago they planted a bomb in one of the towers. Nobody said what's next. This was next. The time to be afraid is when there's no reason to be afraid. Too late now.[101]

Nevertheless, concentrating on how the event "changed the grain of the most routine moment"[102] to make sense of the loss and "all that howling space"[103] that the towers both symbolically and literally left, is what DeLillo attempts in his novel. In this sense, rather than a strictly personal trauma novel, *Falling Man* can be seen as also evoking the collective trauma, even if it is not its central concern. September 11 marked a rupture in time and history. It became a marker against which everything was measured, a lens through which what was before and what was or would be after were seen, and the collectivity perceived this difference and gap. DeLillo himself emphasises it in the words of his characters, particularly Keith, the male protagonist who survives the attacks, who in many instances reflects on the state of matters in "the days after" (138, 143). A further proof is also represented by the scattered incidents in which the characters comment on or hint at what other people around them think, or how they behave. Lianne, the protagonist's estranged wife, for example notices that ""[p]eople read poems.

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[101] DeLillo, D. (2007) *Falling Man* (2011 ed.)*.* London, Picador. p. 10. Henceforth all subsequent quotations are from this edition of the book and will be provided with the page number within brackets.
[102] DeLillo, D. "In The Ruins of The Future", cit. p. 39
[103] Ibid.

People I know, they read poetry to ease the shock and pain, give them a kind of space, something beautiful in language," she said, "to bring comfort or composure.""(42). This is an instance of what traumatized public resorts to as a means of coping. This is also a reflection on art, fiction, which is capable of transcending grief, although this does not imply that art has to be enjoyable. The beauty of language is not merely in its aesthetic qualities, but also in its power. As DeLillo had stated in an interview, his work does not offer any comforts[104]. *Falling Man* might indeed be the epitome of that statement. It is not a pleasurable reading, neither its subject matter nor its overall mood is reassuring, it is a slow-paced narrative re-enacting the post-traumatic acting out, and the ending as well does not leave room for consolation. Nonetheless, it is instructive precisely because it offers the reader an insight into the 'after-days' experienced by those who were, in varying degrees, directly involved.

Lianne's earlier remark on what people resort to in order to carry on is juxtaposed by another character's response. Martin, Lianne's mother lover, formerly associated with a terrorist group himself, suggests that "[t]here's another approach, which is to study the matter. Stand apart and think about the elements"(42). To stand apart and consider the elements is precisely what LaCapra's working through process requires: acquiring that critical distance which enables one to live one's life in the present without being continuously haunted by the past. This, however, is also what Keith and Lianne are unfortunately unable to do, as the text makes very evident. There is one moment in the novel when Lianne – or according to some critics possibly Florence – watches the televised broadcast of the second plane hitting the South tower:

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[104] Begley, A. (2005) "The Art of Fiction CXXXV: Don DeLillo", cit. p. 107

Every time she saw a videotape of the planes she moved a finger toward the power button on the remote. Then she kept on watching. The second plane coming out of that ice blue sky, this was the footage that entered the body, that seemed to run beneath her skin, the fleeting sprint that carried lives and histories, theirs and hers, everyone's, into some other distance, out beyond the towers. (134)

This is indeed, a very personal thought, but it also points to the collective experience not only of the victims and survivors but also of those who, like her, stood before the screen and watched from a safe but terrifying distance an event they could not fully absorb, yet one that had the capacity to "[enter] the body". The first sentence suggests that the protagonist of this scene is compelled to watch the footage. More broadly, anyone who sees the footage cannot resist watching it. On one occasion Lianne, enraged by the supposedly loud, Middle Eastern music "located in Islamic tradition"(67) her Greek neighbour, Elena, is playing, decides to confront her and insistently asks her why she is playing that kind of music at that particular moment and under those particular circumstances. The Middle Eastern music is considered out of place in a moment when the city has been attacked by Middle Eastern terrorists and "[t]he whole city is ultrasensitive" (120). This is telling of a discriminatory hostility towards Muslims, who became targets of racist acts in the weeks following the attacks. As a result, the attacks had a damaging impact on the Arab community and added to its marginalisation.

Other instances in the text that signal a collective trauma are the appearances of the Falling Man, a performance artist whose performances restage the falls of the people who jumped from the towers on September 11, which inspire "a collective dread" in the public (33). Furthermore, there are the

scenes picturing the Alzheimer's group members discussing the events: the "one subject the members wanted to write about, insistently" (31). Their little group is a microsociety, even if composed presumably only of some elderly, fragile individuals, who indeed may stand for the fragility, the vulnerability of the wounded identity of the American people as a group, and that of the nation. And in this sense the needs of the members might represent more generally the needs of the people, the need to find a script, adequate for their lives and for the nation's history, in which the events of that Thursday morning might be included and which they would be able to articulate and accept as something that happened: "[t]hey worked into themselves, finding narratives that rolled and tumbled" (30). Writing is what allows the working through process for these individuals, in the narrator's words the act grants "a chance to encounter the crossing points of insight and memory" (30). The group speculates on whether there can exist a God that let such horrible things happen, the members speak of their fears and of their desires. One member, Rosellen S., utters her regret for not seeing the people who jumped holding hands. She had heard stories of people who jumped holding their hands (61) and wished to see it likely to find some relieving beauty in the horror. Her comments echo DeLillo's words in *In the Ruins*: "[p]eople falling from the towers hand in hand. This is part of the counternarrative, hands and spirits joining, human beauty in the crush of meshed steel"[105]. This is also that part of the narrative that had been silenced by the media and by the Bush Administration and which DeLillo brings forth – as will be discussed more in depth later – first and foremost in the figure of the Falling Man, but also in these brief instances,

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[105] DeLillo, D. "In the Ruins of the Future", cit. p. 39

which constitute the counternarrative, the necessity of which DeLillo originally reinforced in the essay.

This collective trauma is thus partly expressed not with an overview of the social and political spheres, but with regard to the open questions it created within the public. The imagery and words are somehow connected to the traumatic, as Kai Erikson eloquently puts it,

> trauma becomes so widely shared an experience within an already existing collection of people that it supplies the prevailing mood and temper of the group—dominates its imagery, governs the way members relate to one another. The point to be made here is not that calamity acts to strengthen the bonds linking people together—it does not, most of the time—but that the shared experience becomes almost like a common culture, a common language, a kinship among those who have come to see themselves as different. [106]

Therefore, despite the fact that *Falling Man* is a personal trauma novel, by scattering brief lines that speak of the point of views and needs of other people in the text, and by portraying the domesticity of the novel's few characters – a domesticity whose meaning can be extended to symbolise community – DeLillo also gives voice to the collective trauma that New Yorkers went through, and broadens the novel's accomplishment. As he has Lianne declare, "[t]hese three years past, since that day in September, all life had become public", this is subtly implied in the text. It might be also argued that precisely by reserving so little space to the collective experience and so much to the personal in his novel, DeLillo wants to reject the main narrative that has been politically and mediatically

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[106] Erikson, K. (1991) "Notes on Trauma and Community", *American Imago,* vol. 48, n.4. p. 461

constructed, and builds upon the heroism, altruism, and perseverance of people in order to convey the message that the United States almost recovered from the trauma, that the nation will be unscarred, and that there is indeed some positive to be drawn from this terrible event. James Berger famously notes that,

> […] it was astonishing to me how quickly the media's focus was on triumph: of the nation's spirit, New York's spirit, our resolve, our community, our political system, the president's oratory, our policies, our strategies, our weapons, our soldiers, our way of life.[107]

Falling Man is a trauma novel that deals with the lives of a few individuals that are faced with the necessity and the struggle to work through their traumatic experience. It primarily addresses the personal psychic trauma of its protagonists and in so doing it also comments on the collective trauma that stems from the September 11 attacks.

Style, Structure and Temporality

Rather than dealing with the dynamics of the event in itself, the novel mimics the processes of acting out and working through the trauma as they occur in the psyche of its characters. Don DeLillo choses a third-person narrator and adopts a stream-of-consciousness technique alternating the point of view of Keith Neudecker, the male protagonist who survives the attacks, and Lianne, the wife from whom he has been separated for eight years and to whom he returns in the aftermath of the assaults. Additionally, some parts of the novel, strictly in free indirect speech, provide the account of the events leading up to the attacks from

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[107] Berger, J. (2003) "There's No Backhand to This" in *Trauma at Home: After 9/11* ed. Greenberg J. Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press.

the perspective of Hammad, one of the hijackers, who is onboard the plane that strikes the tower Keith manages to escape. The novel in its fragmented and elliptic style mimics the working of trauma on one's memory and identity. Lianne and Keith's troubled minds switch from one thought to another within one paragraph without any apparent logical link. And the thoughts are often one-line long,[108] one of several such moments can be found on page 67 through 70.

In line with trauma fiction aesthetics, and with the working of trauma on memory, the text is replete with repetitions: words, phrases, and images often recur multiple times, as do some of the character's compulsive behaviours. Keith's rehabilitation exercises after his wrist surgery, which he carries on even when they become no longer necessary, Lianne's morning run and her therapy sessions with her Alzheimer's group, which she has trouble giving up even when it becomes necessary, are just some examples. The memory of the tragedy seems to be looming over the everyday routine of the characters, rendering everything impregnated with new meaning, a doubleness that originates from the juxtaposition of the perspectives of how things were before (ordinary) and how they are after (extraordinary; even though DeLillo does suggest that the ordinariness is there still, but is perceived oddly). Nevertheless, the (repressed) traumatic memory cannot be fully acknowledged if not at the end of the novel. Metaphors and symbolic images are essential elements in the narrative as they are associated with certain semantic domains, such as trauma and death. It is through them that language is made referential, and that the reader is able to obtain what in LaCapra's words is this – already mentioned – "plausible "feel" for

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[108] See pp. 67-70

experience and emotion"[109] to understand the workings of trauma. As a matter of fact, a whole range of metaphors and images is employed to point to the trauma without any explicit reference to it: the word trauma never appears. As Roger Luckhurst affirms, "it is in the image that the psychic registration of trauma truly resides"[110]. At the same time, any direct mentioning of the event as it has been commonly named (9/11, September 11, the 9/11 attacks) or of the site of the towers' collapse (Ground Zero) never appears in the text. It might be argued that this way DeLillo wants to reject categorisation, labelling, and, therefore, simplification, because to fully understand the event it is necessary to strip it from its economical, political, social ramifications and start from "primal terror"[111], as DeLillo states in *In the Ruins*.

Don DeLillo structures the novel in three parts, each of which is entitled after a character, "Bill Lawton," "Ernst Hechinger," and "David Janiak" and each ends with a chapter that, unlike the rest of them, is not numbered but has a title. The three chapters that conclude each section – "On Marienstrasse", "In Nokimis", and "In the Hudson Corridor" – are the ones that recount the events from the perspective of Hammad, a young man who is part of the terrorist organisation that plans and executes the assaults. It is interesting to note that after these chapters the first chapter of each section continues with the progression from the last numbered chapter of the previous section, thereby creating a double structure: on one level are all of the chapters that are numbered and on another the ones that are titled, which could be seen as a kind of disruption in the main plot. Furthermore, the main plot has a complex temporal structure,

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[109] LaCapra, D. (2001) "Writing History, Writing Trauma", cit. p. 13
[110] Luckhurst, R. (2008) *The trauma Question*. Cit. p.147
[111] DeLillo, D. (2001) "In The Ruins". Cit. p. 39

the characters' thoughts and sometimes dialogues are interrupted to be resumed some pages, or even chapters, later. The novel covers the period that starts with the event and proceeds up to three years later, albeit the flashbacks, provided through descriptive paragraphs, that refer to the time before the couple's separation and Lianne's father, whose death is another trauma that keeps returning. It is therefore an 'internal' temporality: "time swings in the mind, which is the only place it meaningfully exist" (105). In between the first and the last chapters the reader follows the unfolding of a seemingly uneventful life of the novel's traumatised characters. The last chapter, "In the Hudson Corridor", is the one that "concludes" – if one could say so with respect to an ending that does not provide a closure – the circle by casting light onto what occurred immediately before the beginning, that is to say, before the reader encounters, in the first pages of the novel, Keith walking away from Ground Zero. Thus, at the end of the novel the reader – but arguably Keith – finally acknowledges, belatedly, what for such a long time has been the looming presence in the everyday life of the novel's characters, that is, the traumatic memory of Keith being thrusted out by the force of the plane's impact and, more importantly, of him desperately trying to save his friend and co-worker Rumsey, who dies in his arms.

The Falling Man and the Symbol of Falling

Traumatic memory is a pivotal element in the novel, it is materialised in its title *'Falling Man',* or rather in the image this title evokes: countless men and women who were forced to jump to their deaths form the towers when faced with the unbearable alternative of burning alive or suffocating in the building, the 'jumpers', as they have also been called. One of them was captured in the famous

photograph known as 'the falling man', by photographer Richard Drew. This picture circulated in newspapers the day after the attacks but was successively deemed too excruciating and censored out of respect for the victims and their families. This happened also with the video footage that reporters took showing the falls from the towers. As a result, that part of the narrative was erased from the main discourse because, as Tom Junod writes in a famous article in the *Esquire*,

> this was an ending as unimaginable as it was unbearable: Americans responding to the worst terrorist attack in the history of the world with acts of heroism, with acts of sacrifice, with acts of generosity, with acts of martyrdom, and, by terrible necessity, with one prolonged act of—if these words can be applied to mass murder—mass suicide.[112]

Yet the novel's title does not directly refer to Drew's photograph, but to a character in the novel, the performance artist named David Janiak, known as the "Falling Man". The reader comes across his performance near the beginning of the novel, then in chapter nine, when Lianne witnesses in first person his preparation for the fall and then the fall itself, and lastly in chapter thirteen. The points of view of Keith and Lianne alternate through chapter nine, creating a rhythm that accelerates as Keith and his son Justin, whom he had just collected from school, try to intercept Lianne as she walks home in a separate direction. Lianne at first perceives a foreboding as she notices the gaze of the schoolyard children and the "faces in the high windows" (160) – which bring to mind the people in the "high windows" at the World Trade Centre – and then realises what is happening: the Falling Man is about to stage one of his unannounced

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[112] Junod, T. (2021) "The Falling Man: An Unforgettable Story", *Esquire*, (Sep. 9). Available at https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a48031/the-falling-man-tom-junod/

performances re-presenting the falls. It is interesting to note how in this chapter, despite the overall atmosphere of foreboding, urgency and anxiety as the artist awaits the right moment to carry out his performance – and the focus keeps switching from Lianne to Keith thereby interrupting the narrative – the chapter culminates in the family's reunion as husband and son run towards Lianne. It is one of the most cheerful moments of the entire novel: Lianne notes how Keith and Justin are "bright with urgent life, that's why they were running, […], thirty-six days after the planes" (170). The last phrase is not just a time complement but suggests that this happy moment is perceived with a certain awareness; it also shows that even moments of joy are experienced in the shadow of the ever-present event of the recent past. Words in the passage have a double inflection. When Justin asks his father why they are going towards his mother and Keith replies "[t]o surprise her. Sneak up on her. Lift her spirits" (157), this element of "surprise" is set against the "surprise" of unexpected performance that Lianne finds herself to witness, a performance that bears a fatalistic undertone. The element of death, which keeps haunting Lianne's thoughts as she recalls her father, and as she thinks of the disintegrating memory of her group members, particularly Rosellen S., is in line with the symbolic reference of the performance she assists to, and stands in contrast with Keith and Justin's "urgent life".

In chapter thirteen DeLillo explicitly parallels the fall re-enacted by Janiak and that captured by Richard Drew of the "man set forever in free fall against the looming background of the column panels in the tower" (221). The description of the man in the photograph summons the reader's memory of it as Lianne, after coming across Janiak's obituary in the newspaper, researches the performer on the Internet and reflects on the resemblance of his pose and that of the man from

the photograph. Thus, when Lianne assists to Janiak's performance – which has no mediatic representation – she, and the reader by extension, becomes a first-hand witness: "[s]he was the photograph, the photosensitive surface. That nameless body coming down, this was hers to record and absorb" (223). Janiak's performances therefore symbolise the return of the traumatic memory albeit the efforts to repress it. The falls are a continuous repetition, a compulsive replay of what happened. The verb itself, as Jen Webb notes, in its present continuous tense, suggests the action's non-finiteness: "the falling man of Drew's photograph, or of DeLillo's novel, goes on falling, suspended as if by magic in that non-finite moment of time"[113]. There is a parallelism between the timeless nature of those performances and the timelessness of the traumatic memory, which can only be placed in the past once it is being worked through.

The figure of the Falling Man evokes that of another artist, the French Philippe Petit, who in 1974 performed a tightrope-walk from the top of one tower to the other, and like the Falling Man, was arrested numerous times. Linda Kauffmann argues that the inspiration for the character might be traced back to the figure of Jeb Corliss, a professional parachute jumper who among others, attempted to jump from the Empire State Building in 2006. In addition, Kristiaan Versluys notes that the Falling Man's performances replicate the art of Kerry Skarbakka, a photographer whose shots depicting himself falling in different poses from buildings, ladders, and other everyday objects are reminiscent of the tragic falls from the towers[114]. Furthermore, as Versluys rightly points out,

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[113] Webb, J. (2011) "Fiction and Testimony in Don DeLillo's Falling Man", *Life Writing*, 8:1, p. 58

[114] Skarbakka's photographs were deemed controversial as they are reminiscent of the tragic falls of the 'jumpers'. On the other hand, they have also been praised by many. On Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art website one can read that Skarbakka's "images

[b]y choosing an image of irredeemable death as the iconic moment that indicates the true place of 9/11 in the cultural repertoire of the nation, DeLillo indicates how his novel provides a counterdiscourse to the prevailing nationalistic interpretations.[115]

Thus, through Falling Man's performances DeLillo voices the taboo of what has by some been defined as collective suicide and thereby restores the repressed memory of those victims that did not fit into the mainstream narrative with the attempt to inscribe them in the reader's and the nation's, narrative memory and, through acknowledging, enable the nation's working through process and mourning. DeLillo's performances' gimmick is particularly apt to do this, since it enables him as a writer to address through the image and the act of imagination that which is unspeakable and unrepresentable if not indirectly: through simile, or art in general. Towards the end of the thirteenth chapter, in fact, the falling man from the famous photograph, as Lianne recollects it, is set in "free fall" (222). The word "free" here could be viewed in a double sense: the free fall as a fall without friction, without resistance, and a freeing fall, which connotes a sense of liberation. The falling men and women are thus redeemed. One line further in the text, the man from Drew's photo, and by extension also the fictional character in the novel, becomes in Lianne's unspoken words "a falling angel and his beauty was horrific" (222).

References to falling are sprinkled throughout the novel and the term is not only employed in its literal sense, as a referent to the falls of the towers or that of

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[…] signify the surrendering of control to external forces. As a result, feelings of helplessness yield to the more expansive sense of release and liberation". Available at https://mcachicago.org/Exhibitions/2002/Kerry-Skarbakka. Skarbakka's projects can be viewed on his webpage at http://www.skarbakka.com/projects/

[115] Versluys, K. (2009) *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel*. United States of America, Columbia University Press. p.23 Available at ProQuest Ebook Central, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unive1-ebooks/detail.action?docID=908774.

the individuals who jumped, or to the items that fell from the buildings. Falling, as many other words and phrases in the novel, has a double meaning as well as symbolic implications. The Alzheimer patients are in a state of falling towards their inevitable loss of memory, Rosellen S., in particular, is "falling, growing fainter. Nothing lay[s] around her but silence and distance" (94). Keith might be seen as gradually falling into a state of apathy, numbing, into a dimension that has "no flash of history or memory that he might unknowingly summon in the routine run of cards" (225). Lianne on the other hand is a witness to Keith's and Janiak's, and, indirectly, of the towers' fall. But she also perceives it in her relationship with Keith: "it seemed to her that they were falling out of the world" (212). It might be said that the lives of Lianne and Keith are suspended as the man in the photograph, they are suspended in a melancholic free fall. All the different meanings are suspended as well in the open questions that find no concrete answer in the text but foster further interrogatives and in the conflicting points of view. However, more generally, the fall is that of symbols. The capitalist glow, the technological advancement on which the Western world relies, God. As Linda Kaufmann eloquently puts it,

> [...] we are all, DeLillo suggests, in free fall. The plots, myths, institutions we once relied on to provide meaning and purpose are suspended. Our idols have fallen too: "God is the voice that says, 'I am not here'" (Falling 236). Like Alzheimer's patients, all we can do is watch in suspense for what is ever-impending.[116]

A symbolic meaning inherent in falling is also the biblical one: the fall of humankind marked by the original sin. As some critics have observed, additional

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[116] Kauffmann, L. (2008) "The Wake of Terror", p. 369.

biblical interpretations might be that the term is resonant of the fall of an angel, Lucifer[117], or the three falls of Jesus carrying his cross on the way to Golgotha.[118] Yet, perhaps the most resounding image connected to falling is that of the fall of another (mythical) tower: the Tower of Babel. The myth concerned the scattering of languages throughout the world. Like the tower of Babel, the World Trade Center harboured many cultures and languages, and as DeLillo suggests in *In the Ruins:* New York could "accommodate every language, ritual, belief, and opinion. In the rolls of the dead of September 11, all these vital differences were surrendered to the impact and flash"[119]. This distinct essence of the city, "the daily sweeping taken-for-granted greatness of New York"[120] is now collapsed or at least gravely wounded.

3.3 Traumatised Individuals: Negotiating One's identity and the Impossibility of Working Through Trauma

The opening line of *Falling Man* provides a vivid image of a city that has drastically changed drastically and has become a disorienting place, as the first sentence makes explicit: "It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night"(1). Time and space are blurred, they have become indiscernible, as New York has turned into a dark and gloomy world of ash. It is an image that DeLillo has used the first time in *In The Ruins* recounting

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[117] Ibid.
[118] Conte, J. M. (2011) "Don Delillo's "Falling Man" And The Age Of Terror", *Modern Fiction Studies.* Vol. 57, No. 3, p. 568.
[119] DeLillo, D. (2001) "In the Ruins of the Future", p.40.
[120] Ibid.

the moment his nephew, Marc, and his wife, Karen, "came out into a world of ash and near night"[121]. It is in this world that the reader encounters Keith, whose name has not yet been revealed. Keith is walking down the street seeing the chaos around him:

> It happened everywhere around him, a car half buried in debris, windows smashed and noise coming out, radio voices scratching at the wreckage. He saw people shedding water as they ran, clothes and bodies drenched from sprinkler systems. There were shoes discarded in the street, handbags and laptops, a man seated on the sidewalk coughing up blood. Paper cups went bouncing oddly by.
>
> The world was this as well, figures in windows a thousand feet up, dropping into free space, and the stink of fuel fire, and the steady rip of sirens in the air. The noise lay everywhere they ran, stratified sound collecting around them, and he walked away from it and into it at the same time. (4)

As the narrator suggests, this chaos is what Keith walks away from and into simultaneously. He physically walks away from the noise and the debris, but his mind is still quite overwhelmed with it. To the point that what he sees he acknowledges only belatedly, if at all. This is the case of the image that emerges in the next line:

> There was something else then, outside all this, not belonging to this, aloft. He watched it coming down. A shirt came down out of the high smoke, a shirt lifted and drifting in the scant light and then falling again, down toward the river.(4)

The shirt – a white shirt, as will be made explicit in the closing chapter – is of course a metaphor for what cannot be knowable as it is experienced: people

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[121] Ibid., p. 37

jumping and plunging down towards what is unknown and known at the same time. Through this metaphoric image the sight of the falls is displaced and transformed into a symbol because it cannot fit into existing mental schemes and be transposed into narrative. It can be made sense of only at the end, when Keith returns to the memory and completes it[122]. The people who jumped reportedly fell at a speed of more than 150 miles per hour (more than 240 kilometres per hour). The white shirt emerges from the smoke and is lifted in the air and seems to be floating for a moment, then falls again. It gives the impression of a slow-motion image, reflecting Keith's state of mind, his shock, rather than the hurry and haste that characterises the havoc all around him. The shirt is arrested for a brief instant. Images of what is happening all around keep popping up, yet the reader is virtually numbed just as the protagonist. The narrative suggests this slowed-down motion by having the runners stop, others walking backwards, and the tai chi gathering standing and watching with their "hands extended at roughly chest level, elbows bent, as if all of this, themselves included, might be placed into a state of abeyance" (4).

As Keith continues to distance himself from the site of the event, he begins to acquire a different view of things that he perceives as "unfinished, whatever that means. [Things] were unseen, whatever that means" (5). This also points to a movement backwards in time: the towers might as well be unfinished, yet to be erected, yet to be seen. But unfortunately, it is clear that they have collapsed. This view evokes DeLillo's argument that "[t]he terrorists of September 11 want

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[122] van der Kolk and van der Hart write "Traumatic memories are the unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences, which need to be integrated with existing mental schemes, and be transformed into narrative language. It appears that, in order for this to occur successfully, the traumatized person has to return to the memory often in order to complete it". "The Intrusive Past", cit p. 448.

to bring back the past".[123] Similarly, ten days after the planes, Lianne perceives New York in a different way. She recalls a haiku by Bashō and changes its object, she transposes 'Kyoto' in 'New York', and thinks: "*Even in New York—I long for New York*" (34). What characterises the city at that moment is the prevalent feeling that something is missing, as the towers are missing from view and many bodies of the victims have not been recovered, the past New York, before the event, and the mood connected to it is what Lianne seems to be longing for.

Keith's thoughts are often followed by some phrases that denote uncertainty, such as "whatever that means" (5,67) or "whatever it was" (22). These phrases are not to be taken at face value, instead, they they signify the opposite of "whatever". DeLillo deliberately positions them in strategic places because, paradoxically, this is where a deeper meaning lies, a meaning imparted by the events. This is shown when Keith undergoes anaesthesia for his wrist procedure and, right before falling asleep, he sees "his buddy Rumsey":

> […] there was Rumsey in his chair by the window, which meant the memory was not suppressed or the substance hadn't taken effect yet, a dream, a waking image, whatever it was, Rumsey in the smoke, things coming down(22).

This "whatever it was" clearly refers to the traumatic image that keeps resurfacing in Keith's mind, a post-traumatic symptom that he keeps re-experiencing. The "waking image" stands in contrast with the radiologist's words, which Keith recalls while undergoing an MRI: "once it's over, […], you forget instantly the whole experience so how bad can it be, she said, and he thought this sounded like a description of dying" (19). The act of forgetting or repression, which are crucial

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[123] DeLillo, D. (2001) "In the Ruins", cit. p. 34

trauma theory concepts, constantly recur in Keith's life in the after-days. When at one point late in the novel Keith meets Terry Cheng, one of the players he used to meet at the poker nights at his apartment, and the topic falls on the past, Rumsey's death in particular, Keith "stare[s] into the waterfall" (204). Terry Cheng tells him that he heard Rumsey was one of those who jumped, but Keith does not attempt to correct him, instead he continues to look "into the waterfall. This was better than closing his eyes. If he closed his eyes, he'd see something" (205). The reader is not yet aware of Keith's direct involvement and his witnessing his friend's death because Keith does not allow himself to remember.

Few instances in the text point to the possibility of working through the traumatic symptoms. One concerns Keith's post-surgical exercises and another his shared experience with Florence, a fellow survivor. After undergoing a wrist surgery, Keith is given a set of exercises which he must repeat ten times consecutive, four times a day, adopting a certain position of the hand and the forearm. He eagerly follows his strict regimen:

> He found these sessions restorative, four times a day, the wrist extensions, the ulnar deviations. These were the true countermeasures to the damage he'd suffered in the tower, in the descending chaos. It was not the MRI and not the surgery that brought him closer to well-being. It was this modest home program, the counting of seconds, the counting of repetitions, the times of day he reserved for the exercises, the ice he applied following each set of exercises.
>
> There were the dead and the maimed. His injury was slight but it wasn't the torn cartilage that was the subject of this effort. It was the chaos, the levitation of ceilings and floors, the voices chocking in the smoke (40).

The mathematical precision that his exercises require, and the safety of the home setting provide restoration for Keith. The exercises function as a temporary healing since they enable Keith to concentrate on a routinely habit and make his mind drift away from what is most painful. Routine provides some kind of structure in the chaos of his memory. It is in repetition, following a pattern, having a structure[124] that Keith is able to alleviate his distress. But, despite the benefice, the exercises do not suffice to enable a true working through process, they are a temporary solution. It could be hypothesized that they represent a private ritualisation that would bring to what LaCapra terms the "conversion of trauma"[125] which, in the social sphere, is attained by "the transformation of the compulsive repetition of the symptom into a ritualised repetition, which may occur in the socio-cultural process of mourning, memorialisation, pilgrimage or prayer"[126]. Nevertheless, the fact that a similar structure of repeated gestures is found in the poker games, which is what Keith ultimately turns to, and that the wrist exercises remain a constant repetition for Keith even when he no longer needs them, point to the impossibility of achieving mourning. Instead, they remain a compulsively repeated symptom.

Similarly, Lianne follows a routine of early-morning daily runs and "count[s] down from one hundred by sevens" (187, 218), which is an exercise the doctor

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[124] Interestingly, structure is a recurrent motif in DeLillo's work. DeLillo has previously stressed the importance of structure for people, particularly when it is applied to the social sphere. In his view, the lack of structure could be dangerous especially for individuals at the margins of society as it might lead to violent actions. DeLillo also paralleled writers and terrorists, this view is also made explicit in his novel *Mao II.* In *Falling Man,* as will be further argued, structure is essential for both Keith and Hammad.
[125] LaCapra, D., (2003) *Narrative Medicine: Trauma and Its After-Effects.* [Lecture] Columbia University, New York, May 3. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gISHt4GFA74
[126] Ibid.

gives her when she does a check-up to find out whether she could have any manifestation of "retrogenesis" (188) that could lead to Alzheimer's disease. Finding out that the results are "uremarkable" (188) and she has "normal morphology" (206, 236), is a relief for her. Since the experience of lapses of memory was in her family history, Lianne continues to practice this counting down as if she were reciting a "form of lyric verse" (188) because it makes her feel good. Most importantly, however, Lianne holds storyline sessions with a group of "five or six or seven men and women in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease" (29). The sessions, "strictly for morale" (29), as the narrator clarifies, play an important role in Lianne's post-9/11 life. They are part of her routine, yet they serve not so much as source of restoration, instead, they represent an absolute need for Lianne. The sessions have a double function: on the one hand, they enable Lianne to momentarily ease her angst and at the same time provide a countermeasure to her "fading into time, dropping back into some funneled stretch of recent past" (127). On the other, they are a reminder of her father's disease and, therefore, a link between her and her father. This connection is first established in the title of one of the topics the group choses to write about: "Remembering my father" (29) and is more explicitly drawn in each successive paragraph concerning the sessions, especially once the reader learns that Lianne's father took his life with a rifle in the early stages of senile dementia. After the attacks, Lianne feels more and more 'addicted' to the meetings with her group:

> She needed these people. It was possible that the group meant more to her than it did to the members. There was something precious here, something that seeps and bleeds. These people were the living breath of the thing that killed her father (61-62).

Lianne acknowledges that her father committed suicide, the words "muzzle blast", which she recalls in a flashback, are the ones her father had used while teaching her to shoot when she was an adolescent. They are like a traumatic image for Lianne: "[t]he news of his death seemed to ride on the arc of those two words" (41). Nonetheless, his act of suicide – which recalls that of the 'jumpers' – is not the only or the real reason for his death: it is the disease. Lianne's traumatisation therefore is double. On the one hand, it is the trauma of the assaults, and the sight of "Keith in the doorway. Always that, had to be that, the desperate sight of him, alive, her husband. […] a figure floating in reflected light, Keith in pieces, in small strokes" (126). It is an image that resurfaces and, in its belatedness, carries even more details: "[s]he recalled things she didn't know she'd absorbed, the fragment of sprangled glass on the lid of his eye, as if sewn there" (126). On the other hand, it is her father's unbearable death. "Died by his own hand" (218, 169) is another recurrent phrase in Lianne's thoughts. It haunts her present and its repeated intrusion in the text points towards Lianne's struggle to overcome her grief and melancholy and be able to mourn. It refers to her father's death and represents Lianne's foundational trauma: "the day that has marked her awareness of who she is and how she lives" (218). On one occasion, Lianne, speaking to Dr. Apter, the clinical psychologist who started the Alzheimer's patients' sessions, suggests that they increase the schedule of the meetings to twice a week, to which he replies ""it's theirs" […] "don't make it yours"" (60). His reply already implies what will be made clear later: that Lianne's personal involvement with the group is turning into an obsession. Despite the fact that the members of the group are "depending on her to make sense" (127), the

text makes it quite apparent that it is her to depend on the group possibly to find out what her father's future would have been had he chosen not to commit suicide, and because she needs evidence that other people share and can understand her feelings, especially regarding the nineteen terrorists. As a matter of fact, she prompts the group to speak about the terrorists out of her own wish for revenge "the small intimate wish, however useless in a hellstorm" (64). At the same time, not being able to truly communicate with Keith, she also needs to share her feelings with the group: "[s]he needed them to listen"(128). Because Lianne did not experience the attacks first-hand, she is an impossible audience for Keith's testimony.

Florence Givens and the Shared Trauma

The one moment Keith comes close to dealing with his past memories and has the chance to narrativize his experience is when he meets with Florence Givens, a "light-skinned black woman, his age or close" (52), who, as him, survived the attacks. Keith returns her the briefcase he carried out of the tower and brought home. Florence is eager to talk and recount what happened during her descent down and out of the building, although Keith does not provide his side of the story, "[h]e listened carefully, noting every detail, trying to find himself in the crowd" (59). The need to recognise himself in their crossing memories is what urges Keith to go visit her again, as their shared experience is the only place that allows for understanding:

> He understood that they could talk about these things only with each
> other, in minute and dullest detail, but it would never be dull or too
> detailed because it was inside them now and because he needed to hear

what he'd lost in the tracings of memory. This was their pitch of delirium,
the dazed reality they'd shared in the stairwells, the deep shafts of
spiraling men and women. (90-91)

Nevertheless, if Florence is seen to be able to tell her testimony and therefore be a witness to herself, Keith is only "a person who might confirm the grim familiarity of the moment" (91) or as Versluys puts it, "merely a sounding board for Florence"[127]. The memory of their shared experience is what binds them together. Yet their communication only goes one way, and it seems that Florence is more engaged than he is, because she believes he "saved [her] life" (108), or saved her from not being able to live, after what happened. Thus, despite his being also invested, not so much in their sexual relationship as in "what they knew together, in the timeless drift of the long spiral down" (137), Keith cannot fully commit to this "unreal" (166) relationship, because it goes against what he has taken as his tenet: that his life "was meant to be lived seriously and responsibly, not snatched in clumsy fistfuls" (137). The inevitable end of the relationship is implied from the beginning: even after the first two meetings, "the sense of ill-matched people was not completely dispelled." (107), and even more explicit when Keith himself, after having had sexual intercourse with Florence, anticipates his leaving:

Later she would say what someone always says.
"Do you have to leave?"
He would stand naked by the bed.
"I'll always have to leave."(137)

His relationship with Florence failed to provide solace for Keith, and to open a path for his recovery, and therefore he remains a silent victim.

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[127] Verslyus, K. (2009) *Out of the Blue*, p.25

Moreover, the affair has complicated his relationship with Lianne, despite her not knowing, and bears upon his own perception of himself: Keith feels "double in himself, coming and going, the walks across the park and back, the deep shared self, down the smoke, and then here again to safety and family, to the implications of one's conduct" (157). Establishing safety is, according to psychoanalyst Judith Herman, the first step towards recovery:

> Establishing safety begins by focusing on control of the body and gradually moves outward toward control of the environment. Survivors often feel unsafe in their bodies. Their emotions and their thinking feel out of control. Issues of bodily integrity include attention to basic health needs, regulation of bodily functions such as sleep, eating, and exercise, management of post-traumatic symptoms, and abstinence from substance abuse.[128]

Keith's emotional outbursts, for instance, the moment when, at a mattress store with Florence, he punches a man who allegedly made a remark on Florence; or the moment when he kicks the door of Lianne's neighbour, Elena, out of his frustration at Lianne's constant complaining about the loud music her neighbour is playing, are signs of his incapacity to have control over his body and emotions. Thus, even though Keith does seem to feel the safety of the family, he cannot fully enter the first stage of his recovery. This prevents him from reaching the second and the third stage: remembrance and mourning, which imply retelling his experience – something Keith has failed to do with even with a fellow survivor – and finally to reconnect with ordinary life. Furthermore, although Keith has now vowed to be a father and a husband, and therefore parted with his lover, he

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[128] Herman, J. (1998) "Recovery from Psychological Trauma", *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences*, vol. 52. p. 147.

cannot fully see himself defined by those roles and accept the responsibilities they carry: "[h]ow is it possible that he was about to become someone of clear and distinct definition, husband and father, finally, occupying a room in three dimensions in the manner of his parents?". (157) The traumatic event that keeps haunting him does not allow him to actively engage in his relationships and in the world. Keith's reconciliation with his wife and son is therefore inevitably jeopardised, not only by the affair with Florence.

The (Im)Possibility of Reconnecting with Others

Despite their reunion, both Keith and Lianne are unable to fully reconnect at an emotional level. Being in the family environment, which is made possible only by cause of an event powerful enough to alter one's inner foundations, is something they have grown unaccustomed to in their individual lives. As Keith's initial perception is that "[n]othing seemed familiar, being here, in a family again, and he felt strange to himself" (65), Keith has to renegotiate his identity in relation to the family and to the outer world. Before 9/11, Keith worked at the World Trade Center as a lawyer and "wore a suit and carried a briefcase" (3). Michael Magali Cornier suggests that it is "the standard costume of the public man within corporate America"[129]: the kind of realm Keith stands for. Keith, in fact, embodies the traditional idea of what is masculine.

Lianne's mother, Nina, a retired art scholar, concerned for Lianne's well-being after the reunion with her husband in the aftermath of the event, comments

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[129] Magali Cornier, M. (2015) *Narrative Innovation in 9/11 Fiction*. Boston, BRILL, p. 156. Available at: ProQuest Ebook Central, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unive1-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1981300.

on Keith as being one who "wanted a woman who'd regret what she did with him" and continues "[h]e was built for weekends" (12). Keith is portrayed as unreliable, one who does not want to commit and does not take his responsibilities. The poker games, with an all-male company of friends who play adopting "cold-war risk analysis" (97) and self-discipline, set rules and restrictions on food and hard liquor, and risk and lose, further underscore this claim. After fleeing the north tower, Keith goes back to the apartment where Lianne and their son live. He does not realise that this act is involuntary until he arrives there. As his masculine world has collapsed, he is searching for the warmth of domestic intimacy, stability, some sense, although he realises that after what happened "most lives make no sense" (214). Magali observes how, after coming back home Keith "heads specifically to the "kitchen" (87), demonstrating his need not simply for the general palliative effects of the domestic space and family ties but also for the physical and psychic nourishment they promise"[130]

After a period of careful hesitation, Lianne also strives for closeness, nevertheless, their temporary reunion does not seem to fully provide what they seek because he "was the man who would not submit to her [Lianne's] need for probing intimacy, overintimacy, the urge to ask, examine delve, draw things out, trade secrets, tell everything"(105). In other words, he was not the man she could trust deep down.

Keith's identity is divided, he is a lawyer, although he is not anymore, he is a husband, despite the previous separation, he is a father, although he seems detached, and, ultimately, he is a semi-professional poker player. All those roles have a bearing in different amounts. As Webb aptly points out, "[s]lippage of

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[130] Magali Cornier, M. (2015) *Narrative Innovation in 9/11 Fiction,* p. 159

identity is one of the devices used in this novel, and its effect is to problematise relationships, causality, responsibility and presence"[131]. Keith's identity as a lawyer is the first to collapse after his physical place of work in the north tower collapses and the company he worked for, Royer Properties, will have to relocate. What is left for him then is to fully embrace his role of father and husband. Keith's relationship to his son, Justin, apart from a few cheerful moments, particularly when the two are seen playing catch together, is characterised by non-presence. Even during their walks from school, when the two have the chance to talk, Keith is said to be "easing inward" (66). His thoughts appear to be perpetually possessed by the past as he

> finds himself drifting into spells of reflection, thinking not in clear units, hard and linked, but only absorbing what comes, drawing things out of time and memory and into some dim space that bears his collected experience (66).

Certainly, the non-presence is not only a trait of Keith's mind but is eventually also given by the physical distance between him and his family once he starts participating in poker tournaments and leaves them to go and play in casinos on the other side of the country. Even though he keeps in touch with Lianne and misses "the kid", as Keith refers to his son – another detail signalling some distance – he doesn't know how to talk with Justin over the phone: "[n]either liked talking on the phone. How do you talk to a kid on the phone?" (207)

His relationship with Lianne is also somewhat detached. Apart from the intimacy that their sexual relationship provides, there seems to be little emotional

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[131] Webb, J. (2011) "Fiction and Testimony in Don DeLillo's Falling Man", *Life Writing*, 8:1, p. 58

connection. The one moment in the text when Keith and Lianne truly relate to one another is when they watch the footage of the second plane striking the tower on television and he takes her hand. Lianne then thinks that "she'd never felt so close to someone" (134).

When the couple discusses their son and his friends' obsession with a secret name that they constantly whisper among each other, Lianne says to Keith that she has forgotten how to talk to him and that that was the longest talk they have had.

Justin is also traumatised, the fact that his father is back in their lives and lives with them is destabilising. He develops a strange behaviour insisting to speak only in monosyllables. Moreover, he suffers from hyperarousal as he and "the Siblings" (16) sit at the window and search the skies for other planes with their binoculars, as if another attack was yet to happen. They look for a man named Bill Lawton, a name they have misheard and transformed, a homophone of Bin Laden. The knowledge of this troubles Lianne, who eventually retorts against Katie, the older of the siblings, while holding the child's face with her hands and "smiling at the girl mock-playfully" (153) and suggests that maybe it was time to stop that behaviour. Lianne's concern for Justin, whom she imagines having trust issues about his father's future presence in their life (101), turns out to predict what *de facto* will happen. Keith's final resolution is to structure his life not around the safe familiar space, but around the deceptive feeling of control that the poker games provide. He stays away for days or weeks playing poker, far from his wife and son, because the game restores the agency that he had lost since the events. Nevertheless, when he goes home for a few days periodically, they "would share nearly four full days of indirection before they talked about

things that mattered" (212). Keith is unable to account for the life that he is living beyond the family borders: the anonymity, his routine of taking a taxi to the casino and back to the hotel, surrounded by the "mingling of countless lives that had no stories attached" (204). Keith finds that "[t]here [is] no language, it seemed, to tell them how he spent his days and nights" (197). During his absence Lianne has to do "double duty" (187), be a mother and a father to Justin. She finds spirituality to comfort her in her visits to Church, a place where "[s]he felt the dead she'd loved and all the faceless others who'd filled a thousand churches" (233). This evokes the dead, the "union of souls"[132] DeLillo mentions in *In the Ruins,* to which the pilgrims in Mecca "recall in prayer their fellowship"[133]. Unlike Keith, she is able to reconnect with others, even if it is in an anonymous glance of "the old man who always nodded to her" (234). Most importantly, however, she is able to reconnect with herself, her body, her past being. This is emphasized by a paragraph towards the end of the novel where Lianne experiences an unusual moment of self-awareness:

> Then one late night, undressing, she yanked a clean green T-shirt over her head and it wasn't sweat she smelled or maybe just a faint trace but not the sour reek of the morning run. It was her, the body through and through. It was the body and everything it carried, inside and out, identity and memory and human heat. It wasn't even something she smelled so much as knew. It was something she'd always known. The child was in it, the girl who wanted to be other people, and obscure things she could not name. It was a small moment, already passing, the kind of moment that is always only seconds from forgetting.

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[132] DeLillo, D. (2001) "In The Ruins of The Future", p. 40
[133] Ibid.

She was ready to be alone, in reliable calm, she and the kid, the way
they were before the planes appeared that day, silver crossing blue. (236)

This short excerpt demonstrates Lianne's readiness to accept herself and her being alone with her son. The text does not provide any details regarding how Lianne and Justin's life was before September 11, whether Keith was a present father or whether he visited them sporadically as he does when he returns from his tournaments. Nevertheless, the phrase "the way they were before the planes appeared that day" points to the fact that, even if Keith might continue to be a father to Justin, Lianne has arrived at the resolution that she cannot sustain her relationship with her husband anymore: before the planes they were separated. As Magali Cornier claims,

the text arguably presents her readiness to be alone as a move forward from her neediness following the 9/11 attacks that does not necessarily indicate a permanent separation from Keith and may instead indicate a readiness for a different and less traditional kind of relationship with him[134].

Indeed, Lianne does move forward from the need for emotional closeness and physical contact as she embraces her being alone, finds "intimacy and ease" (233) in her Church routine, and perceives her "long-distance running as spiritual effort" (233). Magali Cornier might be right in stating that "DeLillo's novel indicates that the times require the forging of new kinds of relationships that move beyond outmoded, binary conceptions of masculinity and femininity and of the domestic and public realms"[135]. This point is sustained by Lianne's acceptance of this long-distance relationship when she tells Keith:

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[134] Magali Cornier, M. () *Narrative Innovation in 9/11 Fiction,* p. 173
[135] Ibid.

"[…] we need to stay together, keep the family going. Just us, long-term, under the same roof, not every day of the year or every month but with the idea that we're permanent. Times like these, the family is necessary. Don't you think? Be together, stay together? This is how we live through the things that scare us half to death." (214)

When Keith asks her to trust him that he is not going to disappear, Lianne seems to abide this less traditional relationship. Yet while trying to understand his new profession, she asks him: "What happens after months of this? Or years. Who do you become?" (216). Her failure to understand his choice indicates her inability to support him in this. Lianne's way of life does not match with that of Keith, in fact, as she ponders in the final lines of the chapter: "[s]he wanted to be safe in the world and he did not" (216). Furthermore, their incapacity to communicate, "[w]ords, their own, were not much more than sounds, airstreams of shapeless breath, bodies speaking" (212) leave little hope for the future of their relationship.

Lianne's self-reappropriation scene is set right before the concluding chapter in which the reader finally learns about Keith's experience. Hammad, one of the terrorists, is on the plane that strikes the North tower and "sen[ds] Keith Neudecker out of his chair and into a wall" (239). Instead of following the line of people directed towards the stairs, Keith goes to Rumsey's office and finds him injured and unconscious. Between the tremors of the building and things falling from ceilings, Keith tries to rescue his friend in vain:

He began to lift, his face warm with blood on Rumsey's shirt, blood and dust. The man jumped in hi grip. There was a noise in his throat, abrupt, a half second, half gasp, and then blood from somewhere, floating, and Keith turned away, hand still clutching the man's belt. He waited, trying to breathe. He looked at Rumsey, who'd fallen away from him, upper body lax, face barely belonging. The whole business of being

Rumsey was in shambles now. Keith held tight to the belt buckle. He stood and looked at him and the man opened his eyes and died. (143)

This passage and his vision of "something sideways, going past the window, white shirt, hand up, falling before he saw it" (242) is the return to the traumatic memory, Keith's foundational trauma. The experience is so unsettling that Keith does not realise right away that a person has jumped out of the window, he sees it belatedly as the narrator suggests: "[f]irst it went and was gone and then he saw it" (242). In this last chapter, Keith's full name is used for the second time, As DeLillo says in an interview, "as if the novel is starting all over again"[136]. This circularity is another reason why there is no positive resolution, because the only reading that may be applied is that of the endless return to the traumatic. Of course, the last pages are also revelatory as they enable the reader to reconsider and make sense of all she or he has learned until that moment in light of this new knowledge.

Keith's Faithfulness to Poker

Keith's resolution to live "seriously and responsibly" (137) proves to be temporary as he fails to commit in rebuilding a meaningful relationship with his wife and son. In an attempt to re-appropriate himself of his identity and take control of his life, Keith turns to poker games and travels across the country to play in Las Vegas' casinos. Separation again prevails over the family reunion. His wavering identity and the struggle to repossess it is emphasized early in the novel in an instance

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[136] Block, M. (2007, June 20) "Falling Man Maps Emotional Aftermath of Sept. 11" [Radio interview] NPR "All Things Considered".

where Keith's surname is misspelled, and he is impelled to correct it. Keith's full name – Keith Neudecker – suggests the character's inner aspiration to find a new deck. Possibly a new deck on which to firmly stamp his feet: a new life with a reliable present which he might live responsibly, devoid of the past's ghost and future-oriented. Nonetheless, this option fades along with Keith's incapacity of working through the trauma. The only possible meaning thus turns out to be that of a new deck of cards: "a fresh deck rose to the tabletop" (197, 227, 231) by which Keith welcomes a vampire-like life, filled with people who "star[e] into dead space" (228) and who "[h]ave to get back to [their] coffin by sunup" (230). Although in a few instances Keith seems to be aware of "how strange a life he was living" (227), pondering on whether "he was becoming a self-operating mechanism" (226), this realization is not sufficient to bring about a change. Keith's narrative remains death-oriented, parallel to that of Hammad, the terrorist embarked on the plane that crashes into the north tower. As many critics have observed, the impact of the collision represents the instance in which the two narratives, Keith's and Hammad's, come across. This, however, is not the only parallelism that DeLillo draws between the two. In an episode shortly after the beginning of the novel, Keith is at the hospital being checked for any major injuries he might have sustained in the tower. The doctor who is removing little pieces of glass from his face tells Keith about what is called an "organic shrapnel" (16), which is a fragment of bone or foreign tissue that becomes stuck under one's skin when one finds him/herself near a suicide bomb attack. Although Keith's is not a case in point, the incident suggests that part of the Other might have penetrated Keith's body. Keith is therefore partly merged with the terrorist and wounded by the violence of the latter's act. As Joseph Conte comments,

"[f]orcibly, physically penetrated by the body of his attacker, Neudecker—and the American psyche of which he is a symbolic case—bears in body and mind the internalized scars of this violation"[137].

Furthermore, what Keith and Hammad have in common is also the need for structure and their lives lived in a certain isolation. Keith is struggling to find it in his life and pursues it in poker: "the game had structure, guiding principles, sweet and easy interludes of dream logic when the player knows that the card he needs is the card that's sure to fall" (211-212). In the game the future appears predictable, whereas in life, "[t]he idea of later was elusive" (200). Keith – as is true for almost every poker player – has the illusory feeling that he has control over the game: "the structure of the game allows for strategic play, which, in turn, allows for a more skilled player to improve his or her odds of winning."[138] The structure of poker, a game made partly of elements of chance and partly of the player's skill, can provide the illusory perception that skill can determine the game's result. The game is apparently able to restore Keith's agency, which was lost since the attacks. Of course, the play of cards has to do with gambling. Gambling is problematic as it is addictive and deceptive, and in Keith's case it is a behaviour symptomatic of his traumatic experience. Traumatic experiences paralyse the victims who are clearly unable to control the event. Control, therefore, is a key issue for survivors, as it is for people in general:

> The perception of control over important events in our lives has been
> studied from many different perspectives in psychology. It allows us to
> predict the consequences of our actions and the actions of others, which

[137] Conte, J. M. (2011) "Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* and the Age of Terror", *Modern Fiction Studies,* Vol. 57 (3). p. 567. Available at https://www.jstor.org/stable/26287214

[138] Bjerg, O. (2010) "Problem gambling in poker: money, rationality and control in a skill-based social game" *International Gambling Studies*, 10(3), p. 243.

adaptively can imply the difference between surviving and perishing. Sometimes, however, perceived control is not real. People often fail to distinguish those events that are controllable from those that are not, which gives rise to the illusion of control (Langer, 1975).[139]

Scholars concur that the false feeling of control is more closely associated with poker, which can be at least partly influenced by the element of skill, than with other games that depend more on chance, as lottery, slot machines, horse competitions. This is evident in Keith's certainty that "the card he needs is the card that's sure to fall" (212) and in his perception of being an agent with the power of choosing his moves: "the choice that reminds you who you are. It belonged to him, this yes or no, not to a horse running in the mud somewhere in New Yersey" (212). The importance of choice over chance is further emphasized in the following lines:

> The cards fell randomly, no assignable cause, but he remained the agent of free choice. Luck, chance, no one knew what these things were. These things were only assumed to affect events. He had memory, judgement, the ability to decide what is true, what is alleged, when to strike, when to fade. He had a measure of calm, of calculated isolation, and there was a certain logic he might draw on. (211)

The perception that chance has little effect on the outcome of the game, along with another cognitive distortion that concerns a player's judgement of his/her own level of competence with respect to other players is according to Orgaz et al. widespread among poker players.

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[139] Orgaz, C., Estévez, A., & Matute, H. (2013) "Pathological gamblers are more vulnerable to the illusion of control in a standard associative learning task" *Frontiers in psychology*, 4, 306, p. 1.

Even if Keith appears to be a cautious and reasonable player, the text points to the fact that poker is a problem for Keith as it casts him in isolation where "[d]ays fade, nights drag on, check-and-raise, wake-and-sleep" (226) and social connections are erased in favour of the "crucial anonymity" (204). Keith is living a reality that feels fictional, made of neon lights, people in constant movement: "[c]rowds moved around the open lounge, which vaguely resembled a carousel, hotel guests, gamblers, tourists, people headed to the restaurants, the lush shops, the art gallery" (202). Such a reality appears disorienting and confusing. This is best exemplified by an instance in the text where Keith is conversing with his old friend Terry Cheng and asks him: "[d]id you ever look at that waterfall? Are you able to convince yourself you're looking at water, real water, and not some special effect?" (204). Keith is seemingly stupefied by the reality that surrounds him. Casinos convey the impression of a setting with an array of special effects and the city of Las Vegas seen from a distance is a "feverish sprawl of light so quick and inexplicable it seem[s] a kind of delirium" (226) to Keith. In another scene Keith is at a sports book and while looking at the screens he is unable to distinguish whether the action is live of replayed:

> wasn't sure whether he was seeing a fragment of live action or of slow-
> motion replay. It was a lapse that should have unsettled him, an issue of
> basic brain function, one reality versus another, but it all seemed a matter
> of false distinctions, fast, slow, now, then, and he drank his beer and
> listened to the mingled sounds. (211)

Keith finds that only in the card's game he can escape the reality of terror's threat and the memory he has repressed and allegedly be himself:

> He was fitting into something that was made to his shape. He was never
> more himself than in these rooms, with a dealer crying out a vacancy at

table seventeen. [...] These were the times when there was nothing outside, no flash of history of memory that he might unknowingly summon in the routine run of cards." (225).

If Lianne's storyline sessions and Keith's poker games with his friends originally represented "the steadfast commitment each made to an equivalent group" (29) after the couple's separation, Keith's continued retreat in poker after 9/11 appears to be an escape from his traumatic past and a way of coping through an illusory and temporary sense of control:

> The capacity for gambling to narrow one's focus of attention (Anderson & Brown, 1984) and produce dissociative states (Jacobs, 1986) may account for the reason why many individuals use gambling as a maladaptive coping strategy to deal with problems, emotional distress and stress/tension.[140]

Yet, it is clear that this means of coping does not provide any relief since Keith is still experiencing the post-traumatic symptoms: "a thousand heaving dreams, the trapped man, the fixed limbs, the dream of paralysis, the gasping man, the dream of asphyxiation, the dream of helplessness" (230). In addition to that, he is becoming more and more addicted to the game to such an extent that he postpones returning home:

> [h]e thought for a moment he might get up and leave. He thought he might walk out and get the first plane, pack and go, get a window seat and lower the shade and fall asleep. He folded his cards and sat back. By the time a fresh deck floated up he was ready to play again. (229)

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[140] Blaszczynski, A. & Walker, M. & Sagris, A. & Dickerson, M. (2011) "Psychological Aspects of Gambling Behaviour: An Australian Psychological Society Position Paper", *Australian Psychologist*, 34 (1). p.14.

If gambling can be a recreational activity or a profession for some, and need not always entail a problematic attitude, for Keith it appears to be harmful. Gambling becomes a major part of Keith's life: "[t]here were no days or times except for the tournament schedule. He wasn't making enough money to justify this life on a practical basis" (230) yet "[o]nly this had biding force" (230). It is clear that Keith does not play for the money but to take refuge from what he cannot cope with. The game has a detrimental effect on him and his life, to the point that it leads him to deteriorate the human relationships that not only characterise his social life but also his family life.

Moreover, it might be further argued that, apart from an escape from reality and trauma, Keith's withdrawal in poker is also a demonstration of his faithfulness to the dead. And a way of paying respect to that sacred ritual that the games represented. Especially after two of the players are dead, Hovanis and Rumsey. Rumsey's death, in particular, represents the core of Keith's traumatic memory as it is him that he has helplessly tried to save. Therefore, Keith's reluctance to return to it to assimilate it properly and conversely his obsession with "the stacking of chips" (228) might somewhat be seen as being faithful to the past. LaCapra explains in the notes to the concluding chapter of his book, that one's resistance to working through, apart from being given by "the pain and feeling of shame attached to the [traumatic] event" is also caused by:

> the sense that one's symptoms are memorials to the dead, and the belief that, by working through those symptoms, one may somehow be betraying those who did not survive a shared experience.[141]

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[141] LaCapra, D., *Writing History Writing Trauma*, note n. 3, pp. 184-5

Keith's self-destructive drive re-enacted through poker can therefore be seen also in light of LaCapra's theories.

3.4 The Portrayal of Hammad: Rejecting Binary Oppositions

Thus, if for Keith the sense of structure is attained through poker, Hammad instead, finds structure in a more dangerous environment. He is a member of the Islamic terrorist organisation that executes the attacks on the World Trade Center Twin Towers, and he finds himself torn between the structured life that is imposed on him and "the need to be normal" (83). DeLillo once told an interviewer that structure is:

> […] something people need in their lives. It's about double lives. The second life is not only the secret life. It's the more structured life. People need rules and boundaries, and if society doesn't provide them in sufficient measure, the estranged individual may drift into something deeper and more dangerous. Terrorism is built on structure. A terrorist act is a structured narrative played out over days or weeks or even years if there are hostages involved. What we call the double life of terrorists or gun runners or double agents is in fact the place where a certain clarity takes effect, where definitions matter, and both sides tend to follow the same set of rules."[142]

Hammad is living a double life, he writes to his parents in a letter that he "worked for an engineering firm" and that "he would be travelling for a time" (173). As in Keith's game of poker, played with the shadowy sense that "they would all be

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[142] Begley, A. (2005) "The Art of Fiction CXXXV: Don DeLillo", cit. p. 96

dead one day" (228), the future for Hammad is also predicted: he and his brothers "were soon to perform another kind of duty, unwritten, all of them, martyrs, together" (175). But Hammad ultimately welcomes this kind of ending because "this is the truth he has always looked for without knowing how to name it or where to search" (176). In the first section dealing with the story of the terrorists, titled "On Marienstrasse", the reader is made aware of the fact that the members of the organisation reside in a flat in Germany, where they attend university and study architecture and engineering. Their life outside the flat is characterised by their pursuit of higher, technical education, whereas inside the flat they gather to discuss "the West corrupt of mind and body determined to shiver Islam down to bread crumbs for birds" (79). Hammad is first described as "a bulky man, clumsy, [who] thought all his life that some unnamed energy was sealed in his body, too tight to be released" (79). He appears to be continuously torn between his basic desires and needs and the behaviour that he is supposed to adopt. Amir, the leader of the group and Hammad's mentor, who is later revealed to be Mohammed Atta, scolds Hammad for his insufficient devotion to prayer, his constant eating, and for "[b]eing with a shameless woman, dragging [his] body over hers" (83). Hammad's relationship with this German-Syrian woman with whom he has sexual intercourse is seen as despicable, an act that Amir does not tolerate. Hammad sometimes wishes "to marry and have babies" (82) with her. Against the group's rules is also the trimming of one's beard. Growing a beard is a Muslim custom that emulates the Prophet Muhammad, however, in the circle of the terrorist this act is not a simple recommendation, but an obligation that serves as a uniting practise. Hammad's wish to trim his beard positions him at a

certain distance from the other group members. His reaction at Amir's reprimand is telling:

> Hammad in a certain way thought this was unfair. But the closer he examined himself, the truer the words. He had to fight against the need to be normal. He has to struggle against himself, first, and then against the injustice that haunted their lives. (83)

Hammad's "need to be normal" makes of him an ordinary person, however, in order to fit in with the others he must suppress his fundamental desires and needs and embrace the group's rules. The fact that Hammad begins to believe in Amir's words by his self-examination is proof of the manipulative power the latter wields over Hammad. The act of establishing rules echoes and contrasts the restrictions on food, beverage and game rules Keith's poker companions started to apply ironically: "[t]hey liked creating a structure out of willful trivia" (98).

On one occasion, Hammad sees a group of college youth in a car "laughing and smoking" (172) he thinks "[h]ow easy would it be for him to walk out of his car and into theirs?" (172). These basic needs, for love, social connections and liking one's appearances, put Hammad on the same level of any other person and enable a partial identification. Identification of similarities between victim and perpetrator also prevents a narrow conceptualisation of the Other as totally other than the self, that in LaCapra's view is generated through the "scapegoat mechanism"[143]. DeLillo rejects this mechanism with respect to Hammad, offering

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[143] LaCapra writes "I think that the binary opposition is very closely related to the scapegoating mechanism and that part of the process of scapegoating is trying to generate pure binary oppositions between (self-identical) self and (totally different) other, so that the other (let's say in the context of the Holocaust, the Jew) becomes totally different from the Nazi, and everything that causes anxiety in the Nazi is projected onto the other, so you have a pure divide: Aryan/Jew – absolutely nothing in common. You can see that this extreme binarization Is actually a way of concealing anxiety and the ways in which the seemingly pure opposites also

instead some insights for further reflection on the Other. This is also evident in the many questions Hammad ponders upon, which in all their variations regard his scepticism towards the necessity of death, his and of others: "But does a man have to kill himself in order to accomplish something in the world" (174) and again "[b]ut does a man have to kill himself in order to count for something?" (175) and "what about the others he takes with him?" (176). To this last question, Amir provides an answer that echoes DeLillo's argument in *In the Ruins* when he writes "[d]oes the sight of a woman pushing a stroller soften the man to her humanity and vulnerability, and her child's as well, and all the people he is here to kill? This is his edge, that he does not see her".[144] In a like manner, Amir replies:

> […] there are no others. The others exist only to the degree that they fill the role we have designed for them. This is their function as others. Those who will die have no claim to their lives outside the useful fact of their dying.
>
> Hammad was impressed by this. It sounded like philosophy. (176)

Hammad's empathy and uncertainty is thus erased by the sharp and seemingly profound words of his mentor. He undergoes the necessary brainwashing that eventually makes him feel "the magnetic effect of plot" (174). In fact, Hammad notes that "[h]is life had structure. Things were clearly defined. He was becoming one of them now, leaning to look like them and think like them" (83). Hammad's de-humanisation happens gradually and arguably never fully. In the last chapter, titled "In the Hudson Corridor" Hammad's plane is about to strike the North tower. Hammad is bleeding because he has been wounded with a box-cutter and he

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mark each other and may share certain things". LaCapra, D. (2001) "Writing History, Writing Trauma", cit. p. 149.
[144] DeLillo, D. (2001) "In the Ruins", cit. p. 34.

appears to be agitated not only because of the pain, which "was becoming hard to bear" (238), but also because of the situation he finds himself in. He is finally accomplishing his and his brothers' goal, yet his thoughts are provided in the texts as if they were a recollection of Amir's compelling words directed to Hammad. Faced with the actual reality of what he and the other terrorists have discussed, Hammad appears to be almost trying to convince himself: "[t]his is your long wish, to die with your brothers" (238), and "[e]very sin of your life is forgiven in the seconds to come. There is nothing between you and eternal life in the seconds to come. You are wishing for death and now it is here in the seconds to come" (239). Furthermore, Hammad is trembling and in the moment before the crush he is seen to fasten his seatbelt. Finally,

> A bottle fell off the counter in the galley, on the other side of the aisle, and he [Hammad] watched it roll this way and that, a water bottle, empty, making an arc one way and rolling back the other, and he watched it spin more quickly and then skitter across the floor an instant before the aircraft struck the tower, heat, then fuel, then fire, and a blast wave passed through the structure that sent Keith Neudecker out of his chair and into a wall. (239)

This instance ends Hammad's story and represents the beginning of Keith's through the narrator's direct shift of focus from the former to the latter. Hammad and Keith are merged in this passage, which symbolises the encounter between the victim and the perpetrator and through the "blast wave" also evokes the image of the "organic shrapnel" (16) that might have penetrated Keith's body.

Parallelism between Hammad and other marginal characters is expressed in the texts partly through the representation of isolation. Rooms in the novel exemplify this isolation. For Keith they are a safe haven in which he can lead his

marginal life in Las Vegas' casinos hiding from reality: Keith "lived and worked in this room and that. He moved only marginally, room to room" (226-7). For the terrorists rooms are where they do everything meaningful, as Amir, their leader, tells the group "a man can stay forever in a room, doing blueprints, eating and sleeping, even praying, even plotting" (79). For them, also at the margins of society, rooms are for prayer and, most importantly for plotting, as it is plot that draws them together and has the capacity to "reduce the world"[145], as DeLillo writes in *In the Ruins,* to a narrative that can match with their perceptions. Therefore, the terrorist "builds a plot around his anger and our indifference"[146] while living a life characterised by "apartness, hard and tight".[147] The continuous isolation is the place where the terrorist talk about "being crowded out by other cultures, other futures, the all-enfolding will of capital markets and foreign policies" (80). The dissociation of hyper-capitalist societies from the material world and the imbalance generated by the uneven distribution of wealth is what inspires the terrorists' plot. If on the one hand rooms are the place where to plan a catastrophic future, on the other they prevent one from dreaming the most essential humane desires, as is the case of Hammad: "[h]is dreams seemed compressed, small rooms, nearly bare, quickly dreamt" (81). Bare rooms also connect Hammad to another character of the novel, Martin. Martin is an art dealer but former terrorist who was once part of the German left-wing terrorist organisation Kommune One and had some minor role in the Italian Red Brigades. Martin's apartment is characterised by bare walls, as he says: "[m]y walls are bare. Home and office. I keep bare walls" (112), which mirror what Lianne

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[145] Ibid.
[146] Ibid.
[147] Ibid.

imagines must be his way of living "[d]ays and nights in seclusion, hiding out somewhere, renouncing every trace of material comfort" (147). Much like the Muslim terrorists, Martin had once relinquished the mundane things in life. Nonetheless, his past has ultimately and paradoxically led him to be devoted to the realm of aesthetics, of art. Martin is portrayed as kind-hearted and accepted in society because of his job, in line with the constant exchanges of contemporary society, and his care for Nina, but most importantly, as Lianne observes, because he is "one of ours. Which meant godless, Western, white" (195). Western and white seem to be the two features that make of Martin a more humane being than Hammad. This orientalist view is deliberately employed by DeLillo. By the same token, Nina is convinced that religious zeal is the central justification for the terrorists' actions: "[b]ut we can't forget God. They invoke God constantly. This is their oldest source, their oldest world. […] How convenient it is to find a system of belief that justifies these feelings and these killings" (112). Martin opposes her view, which according to him "den[ies] all human grievance against other, every force of history that places people in conflict" (112). Martin, instead, considers other, more political reasons: "lost lands, failed states, foreign intervention, money, empire, oil, the narcissistic heart of the West" (113). Martin's view is informed by his past experience, he sees a similarity between the European radical terrorist groups of the 1960s and 1970s and the al-Qaeda terrorists precisely in their political goals. Martin's political view and Nina's religious one echo DeLillo's arguments in *In the Ruins,* where he stresses the terrorists' exploitation of religion because of their dissatisfaction with international politics and America's cultural dominance. As Michael Richardson notes, "terrorists do

not act without political purpose"[148], rather "[w]hat makes terror powerful is its deep rooting within specific social, political, and economic histories"[149]. At Nina's funeral reception Martin remarks to Lianne and Nina's former colleagues that

> [w]e are all beginning to have this thought, of American irrelevance. […] Soon the day is coming when nobody has to think about America except for the danger it brings. It's losing its center. It becomes the center of its own shit. This is the only center it occupies. (191)

Being European, Martin has a view of America also from the outside, he does not justify the terrorists' actions, and neither is he absorbed in America's victimisation. It could be argued that Martin's double nationality and his attitude towards making sense resonate that of the writer in DeLillo's view, one who writes back, questioning power, the "writer in opposition"[150] , and by extension of DeLillo himself. Moreover, Martin's view is also reminiscent of Žižek's argument about the American fantasy of seeing the towers wrecked: "[b]ut that's why you built the towers, isn't it? Weren't the towers built as fantasies of wealth and power that would one day become fantasies of destruction?" (116). John Carlos Rowe claims that:

> [a]gainst his best intentions, DeLillo ends up contributing to the cultural colonialism whereby global terrorism is internalized and accommodated. *Falling Man* is a classic instance of the famous Pogo aphorism: 'We have met the enemy and he is us!'.[151]

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[148] Richardson, M. (2018) "Terrorism: Trauma in the Excess of Affect", in *Trauma and Literature* ed. by Kurtz, J. R. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. p.325.
[149] Ibid.
[150] Begley, A. (2005) "The Art of Fiction CXXXV: Don DeLillo", cit. p. 96
[151] Rowe, J. C. (2012) The Cultural Politics of the New American Studies. Open Humanities Press. P. 194.

Rowe further suggests that if on the one hand this positively leads to acknowledging and tackling problems that the West avoids, on the other hand, "DeLillo may be offering us yet another "misrecognition", in which all we see are reflection of ourselves, rendering the non-Western subject as invisible"[152]. Rowe is not entirely wrong as, indeed, through Martin and Hammad DeLillo gives voice to the issues that lie beneath the terrorists' will for 'revenge' on the West while at the same time acknowledging the West's responsibility for its use of power. Martin in fact asserts that the terrorists "strike a blow to this country's dominance. They achieve this, to show how a great power can be vulnerable. A power that interferes, that occupies" (46). Nonetheless, although DeLillo does not examine the issues affecting Third World nations, he arguably acknowledges the invisibility experienced by the other. As previously argued, DeLillo opposes the scapegoat mechanism by portraying Hammad as humane, therefore allowing for a certain amount of empathy while retaining the distinction between victims and perpetrators. As Hammad learns how to become indifferent towards other lives and to be utterly devoted to his ghastly goal, the reader also discovers the steps it takes to become indoctrinated. The fact that he is manipulated, however, does not make of him a total victim of the terror system, he also inevitably becomes an active part of it. The reader is apprised that Hammad finds no tangible goal in his and the other terrorist's mission:

> He didn't think about the purpose of their mission. All he saw was shock and death. There is no purpose, this is the purpose.
> When he walks down the bright aisle he thinks a thousand times in one second about what is coming. Clean-shaven, on videotape, passing through the metal detector. (177-8)

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[152] Ibid., pp. 194-5

On the one hand "this is the purpose" might be referring to "shock and death" as the primary consequences of the terrorist act. This would underline that shock and death are the only means to render the Other visible, and to influence public consciousness because, in DeLillo's words, true terror is "the only meaningful act"[153] in contemporary society. Hammad, in fact, fantasises about his image being impressed "on videotape". On the other hand, the referent of the phrase is by logic the expression that precedes it in the sentence: "[t]here is no purpose". This matches DeLillo's contention that albeit the fallibility and unfairness of the West, terrorist acts are not justifiable: "there is no logic in apocalypse. They have gone beyond the bounds of passionate payback".[154] The success of this payback is made possible because of a difference between the West and the terrorists. As Hammad affirms, "[w]e are willing to die, they are not. This is our strength, to love death, to feel the claim of armed martyrdom" (178). Hammad's words not only reveal the zeal that terrorists share for their beliefs, but also allude to the loss in the West of those social values for which one would once have fought even at the cost of one's own safety. As Žižek most eloquently puts it,

> There is a partial truth in the notion of the "clash of civilizations" attested here—witness the surprise of the average American: "How is it possible that these people have such a disregard for their own lives?" Does not this surprise reveal the rather sad fact that we, in the first world countries, find it more and more difficult even to imagine a public or universal Cause for which one would be ready to sacrifice one's life?[155]

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[153] Passaro, V. "Dangerous Don DeLillo", cit. p.84 (as cited in chapter 2, p.28).
[154] DeLillo, D. (2001) "In the Ruins", cit. p. 34
[155] Žižek, S. (2002) "Welcome to the Desert of the Real!", cit. p. 388

Conclusions

DeLillo's first response to the attacks on the World Trade Center has inevitably taken the form of non-fiction. In *In the Ruins of the Future*, published less than three months after the disaster, he writes that is still "too soon"[156] to understand the meaning of the event, suggesting the impossibility of articulating it in any way. The basic concept underlying trauma theory is, in fact, that a traumatic experience resists narrativization, trauma is inherently anti-narrative. Critics also virtually agree on the fact that literary representation of trauma requires an experimental approach and that through fiction it is possible to conceive a meaning. Given the event's spectacular and overwhelming nature, it has "no purchase on the mercies of analogy or simile"[157]. News media obsessive broadcasting of the second plane's impact and the fall of the Twin Towers had made the writer's task difficult. To render and symbolise an experience that so many have directly and indirectly witnessed is a great responsibility and implies from the outset the almost certain probability of mixed responses. *Falling Man* has in fact received a number of negative reviews for its disjointedness and lack of resolution. The novel fails to provide a panoramic view of the event, nonetheless, this is not DeLillo's intention. Journalistic accounts, documentaries, and testimonies have already provided the facts. As Joseph Conte suggests, "the novelist has the capacity to reveal that which cannot be presented in predominantly visual media or by nonfiction journalism and exposé".[158] DeLillo's humble ambition is therefore to provide a counter-narrative of the event which

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[156] DeLillo, D. (2001) "In the Ruins of the Future", cit. p. 39
[157] Ibid.
[158] Conte, J. M. (2011) "Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* and the Age of Terror", cit. p. 567.

can contribute to the meaning-making process and resist the mainstream narration.

In his essay DeLillo stresses the value of counter-narratives in the form of small objects recovered from the area of the attacks and of the "marginal stories in the sifted ruins of the day"[159]. According to him, they must necessarily be juxtaposed to the utterly traumatic experience in order to make sense of it and allow for mourning. DeLillo's essay is the starting point for *Falling Man*; many of the ideas expressed in *In the Ruins* are reused or further elaborated in the novel. Long before writing these two pieces had DeLillo realised that contemporary society was becoming conscious of the wavery stability of its times and the profoundly transformative power that terror would acquire. In *Falling Man* terror's power is mirrored in the disrupting consequences it has on the psychological state of the novel's characters, who have lost their hold on ordinary life, and are seeking to rebuild their identities. If the event's essence cannot be conveyed through analogy or simile, as DeLillo writes in his essay, it is through metaphor, symbols, and fragmentation that in *Falling Man* he represents the post-traumatic acting out and the impossibility of working through trauma. Keith Neudecker's repressed memory of the death of his friend and the sight of people falling out of the windows of the north tower, precludes the possibility of his recovery. He remains identified with loss and is therefore unable to distinguish past from present and imagine a future in which he might actively and responsibly connect with others. Similarly, Lianne struggles to work through her double traumatisation that stems from the events of September 11, and the earlier death of her father. She develops a series of behaviours that lead to obsessions. However, despite

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[159] Ibid., p.35.

her attachment to her father's death, which compulsively returns in her mind, often in relation to Falling Man performances, Lianne seems to regain her sense of self and be able to envision a future. Memory, identity, and trauma are the novel's focal points, whereas that of falling is the predominant image. The titular performer artist, Falling Man, is another part of the counternarrative as he is the compulsive reminder of what the official narrative, fostered by the government and the media, has sought to repress from the collective memory of the event: the forced mass suicide. The figure of the Falling Man prompts an ethical reflection on the matter. DeLillo restores the memory of those people who did not only fall, but jumped while being conscious of their act, as there was no other alternative. Out of ethical consideration, DeLillo does not venture to speak for those victims. He does, however, establish a partial identification with the terrorists.

DeLillo's deconstruction of the 'us versus them' dichotomy underscored in *In the Ruins* is pursued in Hammad and Martin's humanisation. Furthermore, albeit brief, the insights provided in the novel of Hammad's political views, instilled in him by Amir, and the point of view of Martin can be seen as complementary, although Martin is "one of ours" (195) and Hammad is not. Their humanisation thus serves the function of questioning the official narrative that stressed the binary opposition of victim (the West) and perpetrator (the Islamic terrorists) regardless of political implications of both America's actions and the terrorist's motives. Both *In the Ruins* and *Falling Man* do not offer a redemptive truth, instead, they voice the importance of counter-narratives and comment upon the sense-making process through them. Through these two texts DeLillo seems to discredit the dominant narration based, in Berger's words, on "a claim that the

traumas consequences will not be traumatic; that it will not have symptoms but, rather, only beneficial lessons and varieties of redemption"[160]. The novel and the essay's aim is rather that of addressing the "primal terror"[161] and prove through rhetoric and the act of imagination required from the reader that language can in fact re-present what is deemed unspeakable.

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[160] Berger, J. (2003) "There's No Backhand to This", cit. p. 55.
[161] DeLillo, D. (2001) "In the Ruins of the Future", cit. p. 39.

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