

Spring 2022

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Recommended Citation

Walsh, Julia, "Disorientation of Memory: Trauma, the 9/11 Novel, and Don DeLillo's Falling Man" (2022). *English Honors Theses*. 61.
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Disorientation of Memory:

Trauma, the 9/11 Novel, and Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*

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Professor Wientzen

EN 375: What Was Postmodernism?

Spring 2022

September 11th, 2001 was an incredibly pivotal moment in American history. Between the rise of technology in the average American household and the twenty-four-hour news cycle, 9/11 became one of the first live television tragedies. Because of the oversaturation of media surrounding the attacks, anyone who was a witness to the event, or witnessed the coverage of the event, vividly remembers their experience. Many who have detailed memories of September 11th can remember the feelings of confusion and disorientation as the attacks were occurring and as they were being covered on the news. 9/11 was a poignant day for American citizens and globally as well, as the attacks were broadcasted beyond the borders of the United States. Though everyone has their own memory regarding the event, it caused widespread national feelings of grief, disbelief, and shock. The emotions of the event have severely impacted all realms of life, as people have been left for decades after 9/11 searching for meaning within one of the most confusing and terrifying moments of American history. The attacks on the World Trade Center disturbed American life and affected the socio-political landscape; causing many changes to the post-9/11 world.

It wasn't long before the events of 9/11 began to be reflected in literature as well as film and visual arts. Within literature, there has been a genre¹ that has formed in the past few decades since 9/11 that interacts with the event on the page to make sense or challenge notions about September 11th. This genre, the 9/11 novel, often explores trauma, familial relationships, xenophobia, and memory as ways to unpack the events of 9/11 and make sense of the tragic day. Many of these novels situate themselves in family or spousal relationships to make sense of twenty-first-century tragedy in a private space. The genre also allows for authors to explore

¹ The 9/11 novel has been categorized as a genre by many scholars, one being Elizabeth Anker in her work on *Falling Man*, as some 9/11 novels put the events of 9/11 at the center of the work, while others deal with the event implicitly. Therefore, using the term "genre" creates an umbrella category for all of these works.

emotions away from the media and public spectacle of the event. Scholar Arin Keeble defines the 9/11 novel as “artifacts [that] have cumulatively much to say about the nuances and patterns of the wider Western response to 9/11... it is the novel form that allows for in-depth textual analysis of this conflictedness” (Keeble 5-6). These novels can be treated as artifacts of the post-9/11 condition by detailing how the event affected the American landscape both privately and publicly. Authors like Don DeLillo, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Claire Messud took the space on the page to conceptualize a fictional world that mimics the reality of 9/11 in order to explore the “conflictedness” of how the event impacted the world.

Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, published in 2007, is the quintessential 9/11 novel. The novel follows a family living in New York City as they deal with the lasting impacts of 9/11 on their family dynamics. Keith, the patriarch, is a survivor of the attacks as he was working in the first tower when the plane hit. The narrative jumps from one family member to the next, attempting to unearth meaning from the event and resituate the family in a disrupted post-9/11 world. Scholar Linda Kauffman analyzes DeLillo’s motives, writing:

DeLillo simultaneously pays tribute to 9/11’s victims. His helplessness and grief— for them, the city, the nation— is profound... There is something empty in the sky. The writer tries to give memory, tenderness, and meaning to all that howling space...

[DeLillo] tries ‘desperately’ to imagine the unspeakable: the horror of the moment of impact in the towers (Kauffman 22)

DeLillo’s novel not only pays tribute to the survivors, but also acknowledges the struggles they endure privately, within the family, and in their personal life in a post-9/11 world. From PTSD triggers to memory gaps, DeLillo investigates what a survivor’s world looks like on the page. Scholar Silvia Caporale Bizzini examines DeLillo’s motives further by arguing that *Falling Man*

“seeks to understand, through depictions of grief and memory work, the events that took place... [the text] projects onto the reader the epistemological chaos, insecurity, and uncertainty of Western societies in the wake of 9/11” (Bizzini 41). DeLillo writes not only for survivors by depicting “grief and memory” but also attempts to allow non-survivors, readers who were not directly impacted by the attacks, to grasp what trauma from 9/11 looks like. DeLillo is experimental in his form within the novel, using fragmentation and disorientation to explore the nuances of memory function during and after a traumatic event. These nuances of memory delve into complications of remembrance such as PTSD, memory impairment diseases, and the impact of media on memory. Through DeLillo’s usage of literary forms, he is suggesting that memory and trauma are complicated parts of a survivor’s identity, and he uses the space on the page to portray this to non-survivor readers.

Narrative Structure as Mimicry of PTSD

9/11 novels not only help the reader understand characters’ emotions or feelings regarding the traumatic event but also immerses the reader within the traumatic event. Alan Gibbs, a scholar of trauma narratives, suggests that in many texts of the late twentieth century there was “a fascination with the experimental forms employed in the representation of trauma... There emerges at this time [after 9/11] a preoccupation with formal devices that become established methods of depicting trauma, including fragmentation, dislocation, and repetition” (Gibbs 47). In order to represent the experience and emotion of a traumatic event, authors of 9/11 novels employ many different literary and thematic techniques. DeLillo employs fragmentation and disorientation in the plot and form of the novel to mimic the event of 9/11 and the manifestation of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in trauma victims.

DeLillo creates a fragmented narrative structure within his novel to disorient the reader, mimicking the overall emotions of survivors and victims of 9/11 during and directly after the event. In doing so, DeLillo also emphasizes the aftermath of 9/11, as the novel dedicates space to detailing how Keith and his extended family come to terms with trauma in the months after the event and how this affects familial relationships. To further emphasize the aftermath of 9/11, DeLillo frames the actual falling of the towers in only the beginning and ending chapters. By not giving much narrative space to the actual moment of the towers falling, DeLillo is looking to convey how citizens of the United States absorbed the trauma of 9/11 and how the trauma manifests itself into new behaviors and emotions as a result of this world-shattering event. The opening page of the novel, depicting the towers' impact on the surrounding cityscape, frames the streets of New York with distinct unfamiliarity: "the roar was still in the air, the buckling rumble of the fall... Smoke and ash came rolling down streets and turning corners, busting around corners, seismic tides of smoke, with office paper flashing past, standard sheets with cutting edge, skimming, whipping past, otherworldly things in the morning pall" (DeLillo 3). By beginning with this scene on the first page, DeLillo places the reader into the thick of the event, causing readers to scramble to make sense of the setting and plot. This causes disorientation for the reader, which DeLillo portrays as the simultaneous confusion and terror that the event provoked in the citizens of New York. DeLillo paints the mundane streets of New York City with descriptions that deliver a new kind of location, one that is "otherworldly" and unfamiliar to the narrator and reader. By implementing a disruptive narrative structure, DeLillo creates a juxtaposition between pre-9/11 and post-9/11. The streets are no longer familiar, and neither is the world of the person who once walked them.

The novel ends with a moment just as intense and disorienting, as DeLillo wraps up with the monumental scene of the plane colliding with the towers. He begins with the perspective on the plane and quickly switches to Keith's perspective from inside the towers. As the plane collides with the towers, the narrator, who is currently on the plane, describes "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. He found himself walking into a wall. He didn't drop the telephone until he hit the wall. The floor began to slide beneath him, and he lost his balance" (DeLillo 239). The "blast wave that passed through the structure" depicts the plane hitting the towers, and also simulates the unanticipated transition of narration, where the narrator on the plane passes the narration privileges to Keith who is in the towers. This abrupt transition from one perspective to the next is jarring for the reader, causing disorientation. The transition, from the plane to Keith's location, warrants a moment of pause for the reader to gather and resituate themselves in the narrative. At this moment, DeLillo is mimicking both the shock and impact of the plane hitting the tower and also juxtaposing the feeling of a "blast wave" of trauma memory for a person with PTSD, as PTSD can trigger overwhelming waves of emotions for trauma survivors. This disruption in the narrative structure serves a purpose deeper than creating a transition back to Keith's perspective, as it is a shocking moment for the reader that unsteadies them along with Keith. This moment is a case of form and content in the novel working in harmony to register and mimic 9/11 trauma to create disorientation for the readers.

Once the narrative transitions to Keith's perspective, we can see fragmented narration develop as a direct result of Keith's disorientation. The narrator claims that the blast sends Keith into a wall, but then immediately recounts him walking into a wall. The narrator, a third-person perspective of Keith, does not provide clarity as to which action really occurred. Later on, Keith

absentmindedly picks up a briefcase that is not his which resolves the missing narrative gaps in the earlier parts of the novel surrounding his connection to another survivor. We can see here that DeLillo implements these small and fractured details to capture the level of shock that this event brought on in the moment it occurred and what this shock means for the memory of survivors when being called to recount their experience. This moment speaks to the genre of trauma narratives overall, as the task set forth for a trauma novelist is to have their protagonists recount an event that is inherently inexplicable due to the level of shock and disorientation that survivors experience. The novel's fragmented structure thus helps the reader understand the perspective of a traumatic event.

DeLillo employs fragmentation and disorientation in his narrative structure not only to help the reader understand the gravity and intensity of the event but also to help the reader better understand Keith's motives and behaviors as a survivor of this event. It has been established that Keith's narration becomes unreliable due to the disorienting effect of the event, but DeLillo furthers this fragmentation by disorienting Keith's senses in the narration, allowing readers to empathize and situate themselves in the body of someone experiencing trauma. As Keith tries to exit the tower, DeLillo describes the journey as "hot and crowded... things came back to him in hazy visions, like half an eye staring. These were moments he'd lost as they were happening, and he had to stop walking in order to stop seeing them. He stood looking into nothing" (DeLillo 243-244). In the moment of the traumatic event, we can see Keith struggling to orient himself in a space that was once familiar and now resembles nothing comprehensible to him. His surroundings are hard to distinguish for readers as well because both people and sights are vaguely described. Bizzini examines the purpose of Keith's narration in the tower scenes. She argues that the novel "probes how we react to terror and how we seek reasons in order to come to

terms with a reality that is falling to pieces not only metaphorically but also physically. This is exemplified by... Keith Neudecker's story... in order to stress the sensation of chaos and loss of understanding" (Bizzini 41). Through Keith's experience, DeLillo mimics trauma responses to simulate how humans react to terror and make sense of a traumatic historical event such as 9/11. This fragmented narration is a "verbal reconstruction" (Bizzini 42) of Keith's selective memory due to symptoms of shock during the traumatic event. Through DeLillo portraying Keith's experience in the towers with unreliable and frantic narration, readers gain a better understanding of the 9/11 victim mentality and their trauma responses.

This unexpected narrative structure from DeLillo is well-planned to situate the untraumatized reader in the chaos of the immediate aftermath of 9/11. Beginning with the chapter of Keith entering the streets and ending with the plane hitting the tower, DeLillo creates a sense of a circular narrative, a never-ending loop of trauma. This simulates the emotions of PTSD survivors working through trauma and additionally it shows the cyclical nature of healing within a post-9/11 world. As new socio-political changes are implemented into society due to the events of September 11th, the path to healing falters. This event has disrupted the fabric of the United States and the world is still cyclically adapting to the changes brought on by the event, dragging on the grief and shock that the nation felt from day one. Gibbs, in his analysis, accurately portrays DeLillo's motives for creating this cyclical narrative structure when he says that a traumatic narrative form "does not succumb to closure and coherence but retains within itself the traces of traumatic disruption... experimental forms are employed primarily to demonstrate the fiction writer's superior powers of representation" (Gibbs 47). DeLillo's circular and disorienting structure does not leave the reader with any type of closure but instead allows

them to sit in the discomfort of fragmentation and disorientation to better understand trauma responses.

Mapping a Post-9/11 World on the Page

From the conception of 9/11 as a traumatic event and onward, DeLillo uses fragmentation and disorientation to portray that when the plane hit the first tower, understandings of the world changed. Some specific changes in the fabric of American society that followed the event were defamiliarization with the cityscape, feelings of fear and abandonment by the American government, and the wavering faith in American nationalism. Some scholars use 9/11 as an event through which to situate and work through Jameson's theory of cognitive mapping² with a twenty-first-century lens. Scholar Leerom Medovoi argues that "these [9/11] writers also employ a set of specific narrative strategies, cognitively mapping geopolitical space across a temporality that often juxtaposes a 'before' to an 'after' of the September 11 attacks... for works of literature, the representational impossibility of world-systemic totality could be circumvented" (Medovoi 100). The event of 9/11 introduced a new form of cognitive mapping for American citizens at the time, as daily life changed drastically afterward. The permeability of American life by terrorists was something that challenged America's sense of nationalism as a global superpower. Therefore, Medovoi argues, 9/11 authors and scholars created their own cognitive mapping strategies that infiltrated their stories, distinguishing the "before" and "after" of the event as two separate narrative plot structures.

² Fredric Jameson describes cognitive mapping as "the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and to map cognitively its position in a mappable external world" (Jameson 15-16). See *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998* for more information.

We can see these attempts at cognitive mapping in a post-9/11 era rooted in DeLillo's work, as he clearly distinguishes chapters that are set post-9/11 and ones that occur during the event. DeLillo challenges the worldview of the characters within the event by creating an innate unfamiliarity with a post-9/11 cityscape. When Keith steps out onto the street after escaping the towers, he describes his disorientation by saying:

It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night... [he] began to see things, somehow, differently. Things did not seem charged in the usual ways, the cobbled street, the cast-iron buildings. There was something critically missing from the things around him. They were unfinished, whatever that means. They were unseen, whatever that means. (DeLillo 3-5)

DeLillo writes Keith's understanding of the space he inhabits to significantly change in a matter of minutes. In combination with shock from the trauma, Keith has difficulty understanding his cognitive map of a route and street he once was familiar with, a fact registered by his repetition of the phrase "whatever that means." On a larger scale, the "something" that Keith is missing is the familiarity of what his world once was, a pre-9/11 existence, now disrupted by trauma. Additionally, his world will continue to be "unfinished," as the circular narrative of trauma will not allow closure for grieving the pre-9/11 world. By Keith detailing that the street has shapeshifted into a "world," we see him struggling to cognitively map the space he is inhabiting, as he has lost familiarity with his space. Infiltration from terrorists mixed with the disorientation of the self creates an otherworldly setting that displaces Keith's sense of safety and normalcy. Scholar Leif Grossinger states that "In *Falling Man*, society as a whole has fallen victim to such a catastrophe; it happened here and now — and this is too much for the masses; they are unable to absorb the scale of the event" (Grossinger 86). Grossinger's quote in conjunction with

Medovi's work helps us understand the national and global confusion surrounding this event, as 9/11 dismantled people's understanding of how America functions as a global superpower. The large-scale trauma that implicitly comes along with these emotions clouds a post-9/11 cognitive map, as people become fixated on what once was, the pre-9/11 world. The cyclical nature of trauma prevents survivors, and citizens living in the wake of the traumatic event, from moving forward and keeps them trapped in the past which manifests itself through PTSD triggers and mourning the pre-9/11 world.

One impact of 9/11 that consequently impairs cognitive mapping is the instability of capitalism and the corporate world following the attack. Many 9/11 scholars make note of this when discussing the lasting effects of the event on American society, but Medovi makes the point most succinctly. As he puts it, "The symbolic murder of the first world staged in the smashing of the World Trade Center hardly portended the end of capitalist power, of course, but we can understand it as a global sign of America's waning status as the hegemon of the late capitalist world system" (Medovi 98). America's capitalist viewpoint of itself as a first-world superpower is that it is an untouchable force, that cannot be penetrated by outside influences, yet 9/11 dismantled this viewpoint. What does it mean to have two gleaming, prized towers that host multitudes of businesses and corporations be impacted so greatly by a terrorist attack?

Psychology scholar Tom Pyszczynski explains that "the destruction of these cherished symbols severely undermined the functional integrity of the psychological shield that ordinarily enables us to feel secure in a world" (Pyszczynski et. al 94). The World Trade Center stood as the amalgamation of American success and power, and its fall consequently created a presence of deep-seated instability for the American people. Because of this, people fixate on the loss of the Twin Towers as a marker for the post-9/11 world. Within the concept of cognitive mapping,

there is a relationship between the cognitive map of the cityscape and a cognitive map of the geopolitical order. These maps intertwine, as one implies the other, and additionally, the loss of the Twin Towers affects both of these maps. The missing buildings registers in the minds of survivors, not just as trauma but as a sign that the American people lack an understanding of the way global systems work. Therefore, it is difficult for Americans to understand that the Twin Towers as symbols of power no longer represent capitalist success. Even to this day, this is true, as the memorial site now functions as a place of American resilience and respect. The themes of resilience and respect counteract the representation of capitalism, as the site now functions as a humanistic space that contrasts the unemotional connotations of capitalism.

By looking at the events of September 11th through a lens of American corporatism, we can better understand the literature on 9/11. For this event to occur so easily against innocent victims, many of whom were corporate workers, it is hard to cognitively map what capitalistic America looks like once it's been infiltrated, contributing to a sense of disorientation in narratives of the event. DeLillo plays on this idea in the earliest section of the book, when the streets are filled with "office paper flashing past, standard sheets with cutting edge, skimming, whipping past" (DeLillo 3). Amid the event, with unfamiliarity due to tragedy on every street corner, DeLillo places a familiar object out of place within the scene to continuously disorient the reader while perpetuating the idea that capitalism is in a moment of unknown destruction. To have office paper, an object of design, ideas, and stability, whip around the city streets suggests that havoc has descended upon New Yorkers, and specifically on the American corporate world. The disorientation that DeLillo sets up in this passage not only frames the introduction to the novel as one that feels fragmented but also comments on the difficulties of cognitively mapping trauma in a post-9/11 world, as the structures of capitalism falter.

The Post-9/11 World for Traumatized Children

DeLillo frames memory differently throughout the novel to portray the hyper-mediated trauma of 9/11. Survivors' memories can be fragmented due to shock and PTSD, as PTSD can disorganize a survivor's linear timeline, or block triggering events. Fragmentation in this context looks like disorganization with gaps in memory, which is exemplified in Keith's experience of the towers falling. We already know that DeLillo is interested in traumatic memory through his creation of Keith's narration; it forms a major part of the content and form of the novel. But why, then, does DeLillo devote space to people whose memory functions quite differently than Keith's? DeLillo examines what memories of 9/11 look like in memory-impaired groups such as children, whose memories are not yet fully developed, and Alzheimer's patients. In conjunction with the analysis of children, the memory impairment that comes along with the disease leaves Alzheimer's patients rendered in the same category of memory function as a child.

DeLillo investigates how memory retention for traumatic events functions when these memory-impaired groups are unable to comprehend themes from 9/11 such as death, violence, and general politics surrounding 9/11. DeLillo's exploration of memory can help us make sense of the general anxieties that surrounded the event of September 11th, the integration of misinformation into the daily stream of consciousness, and the struggle to internally process a traumatic event. Within this exploration of memory, DeLillo is examining what a post-9/11 world looks like for citizens who cannot fully comprehend the severity of the event and who are unaware of the larger implications of 9/11 stemming from media coverage. Additionally, DeLillo is highlighting the widespread effect that trauma has on citizens, permeating even people who are memory-impaired.

The children in the novel provide commentary surrounding the psychological effects that trauma has on young minds. Though most of the characters in DeLillo's novel are adults and take up the majority of the narrative space, the portions that DeLillo dedicates to children provide depth to the narrative regarding trauma memory. These characters provide a sense of comic relief through DeLillo depicting the innocent nature of children, but also a deeper understanding of how widespread the trauma from this event was, as it affected even the most vulnerable populations. In the weeks following 9/11, Justin, the child of Keith and Lianne, becomes fixated on the sky and spends his playtime with friends discussing secretive information. Justin reveals the information to Keith, who then relays it to Lianne. Keith says that one of Justin's playmates "thought, from television or school or somewhere, that he was hearing a certain name. Maybe he heard the name once, or misheard it, then imposed this version on future occasions. In other words, he never adjusted his original sense of what he was hearing... he was hearing Bill Lawton. They were saying bin Laden" (DeLillo 73). The spread of fragmented news between these children shows exactly the ways children are both impacted by traumatic events and how they comprehend trauma. Considering that these children are absorbing media meant for adults, containing sensitive material that children cannot fully comprehend, their understanding of media content will always be fragmented. To better understand this information, these children discuss 9/11, piecing fragmented information from parents, media, and school to make sense of an event that has implications larger than what the scope of their growing minds can handle, perpetuating misconstrued information within their friend group.

Children of this age have a difficult time cognitively mapping their world, as their worldview is very limited to their immediate surroundings. When a child experiences a traumatic

event, it complicates their cognitive mapping skills even further, especially in a post-9/11 world. For Justin's playmate to mishear bin Laden as an Americanized name makes sense as these children have no sense of the world outside the realm of their immediate life. This cognitive mapping gap can manifest in children's responses to trauma. Pyszczynski's psychological work speaks to the effect of 9/11 on children. His research shows that "whether we like it or not, all but the very youngest of children who have not yet acquired language are bound to be aware of the events of 9/11... [children] may be troubled by diffuse fears that show up in nightmares, unusual play that symbolically reenacts the disaster, or fantasies" (Pyszczynski 130-133). We can see Justin and his friends exemplify their awareness of the traumatic event through their "unusual play" surrounding Bill Lawton. In the children's minds, Bill Lawton is an otherworldly, fantastical figure who has come to disrupt their lives. Their disconnect from reality, through their impaired understanding of 9/11, causes a fascination with the traumatic event which subsequently helps the children make sense of the event.

DeLillo creates the figure of Bill Lawton to bring into focus how trauma functions in survivors who cannot fully comprehend the trauma through which they are living. Children, who fall into this category, come up with creative ways to digest the information they are consuming in their immediate world. Justin and his friends begin to make a game out of Bill Lawton, where they peer at the sky for hours on end looking for more planes and searching for Bill Lawton himself. They develop the character of Bill Lawton, by picking up phrases from the news and embellishing them: "'Bill Lawton has a long beard. He wears a long robe,' he said. 'He flies jet planes and speaks thirteen languages but not English except to his wives. What else?'" (DeLillo 74). Justin and his friends have a general understanding of some themes surrounding 9/11 that manifest themselves in their playtime. They can comprehend that Bill Lawton is a dangerous

character that poses an immediate threat to their lives and their families. They know that he is a foreign figure and that his lifestyle differs from their American upbringing, but they cannot fathom a culture that is vastly different from theirs. Additionally, they understand that Bill Lawton travels in planes and that these planes pose a threat as well. This fragmented list of traits for their figurative character shows exactly how in tune children are with trauma and just how permeable the event of 9/11 is into all citizens' lives, especially the ones most vulnerable. DeLillo includes an analysis of 9/11 surrounding children in this scene to show what the events of 9/11 look like when stripped away from its political implications and complications. Simply put, these child characters simplify the event down to the trauma that is inherited which highlights the changes in the private life that survivors experience through their fragmented memories and understandings of the event.

The Influence of Media on Memory and Trauma

In conjunction with how trauma affects children, DeLillo suggests that the mainstream media that covered the event of September 11th played a negative role in the construction of a post-9/11 world. Justin's fragmented understanding of terrorism and the character of Bill Lawton stem from media exposure. DeLillo takes a negative stance on media exposure by embellishing literary symbols in the novel that reflect his opinions. From bin Laden being constructed into Bill Lawton, to the infamous image from the New York Times of the falling man, who DeLillo warps into a character of a performance artist, DeLillo resists leaning on media as a way to make sense of the event. DeLillo makes a significant effort to step away from media as a positive aspect of 9/11, by contorting the typical images one associates with 9/11 into an unrecognizable plot detail. Grossinger thinks along the same lines in his section on terrorists in *Falling Man*. He

details DeLillo's strategy as portraying "private instead of collective grief, refus[ing] to use emotionally charged and overdetermined terms... the images DeLillo uses are generally known and discernable, but adapted and defamiliarized; he resists the spell of the images and the language provided by mass media" (Grossinger 85). We can see DeLillo working through the idea of private grief in his decision to jump narratively between multiple characters' perspectives, ones who are survivors of the attacks and ones who are adjacent to the attacks. These jumps allow a better understanding of trauma for readers, by providing multiple lived experiences, while simultaneously resisting leaning into the typical symbols and images that mass media uses to cover the event. In doing this, DeLillo is offering a fresh perspective on what trauma looks like for 9/11 survivors. Additionally, when thinking about DeLillo's motives around writing defamiliarized symbols of 9/11, such as Bill Lawton, one aspect of his reasoning is to further disorient the reader. 9/11 is such a well-known event; therefore, readers expect to see the typical symbols of the event in the novel, and by actively avoiding this, DeLillo complicates their preconceived notions of the event.

At the same time, the defamiliarized symbols reflect DeLillo's stance on the dissatisfaction with media treatment of September 11th and the additional trauma it created for survivors. Media scholar Fritz Breithaupt examines the negative implications of media outlets during 9/11. He details the relationship between the media and trauma by saying "that the media force replays on their audience, that they overwhelm the audience, that it becomes unclear who experiences and who does not, and that the temporal order of then and now is confused. Thus, there is a functional similarity between the concept of 'trauma' and the modern mass media" (Breithaupt 68). The events of September 11th, 2001, were steeped in technology. The twenty-four-hour news media outlets covered nothing but 9/11 for weeks on end. The images that were

relayed to the country and the world through news outlets and camcorder footage still circulate in present times, specifically around September of each year. These images can serve as PTSD triggers in survivors or bring up grief for people who lost loved ones. The looping of footage and coverage from the event in the months after September 11th, and even yearly in present times, cheapens the event and overexposes it to a point where people become desensitized to the tragic images. DeLillo resists 9/11 desensitization in his own novel by steering clear from much mention of media and defamiliarizing or warping the well-known images of the event.

DeLillo goes so far as to have his characters actively avoid media, perpetuating the negative effects of media during large-scale traumatic events. Considering Justin's young age, Keith and Lianne make the parental decision to protect Justin by limiting his media intake and avoiding coverage of the event around the child. This attempt is ultimately unsuccessful, which is revealed through Justin's conspiracy about Bill Lawton. When Keith and Lianne discuss this matter, Lianne remarks that "This is what we get for putting a protective distance between children and news events.' 'Except we didn't put a distance, not really,' he said. 'Between children and mass murderers'" (DeLillo 74). Regardless of Keith and Lianne's attempt at sheltering Justin from the horrific news coverage of the event, Justin is still able to absorb fragmented images and themes from the news through other children, or subconsciously pick up segments from his immediate world. This is a prime example as to how widespread and unavoidable news coverage of 9/11 was in the weeks and months after the event. Within this subplot of the novel, DeLillo makes effort to point to the issue of media misinformation and what miscommunication hysteria might look like by framing it in a child's mind. The event of 9/11 is confusing and disorienting for politically and socially aware adults; therefore, framing

media-induced misinformation in a child's mind only accentuates the implications of mass media.

Additionally, Justin has conjured an even more surprising conspiracy theory throughout the novel, but DeLillo never explains why Justin believes in this theory. During a family dinner, Justin explains to his parents that Bill Lawton says

things about the planes. We know they're coming because he says they are. But that's all I'm allowed to say. He says this time the towers will fall. 'The towers are down. You know this,' she says softly. 'This time coming, he says, they'll really come down'...His repositioning of events frightened her in an unaccountable way. He was making something better than it really was, the towers still standing, but the time reversal, the darkness of the final thrust, how better becomes worse, these were the elements of a failed fairy tale. (DeLillo 102)

For Justin to refute the idea that the towers have already fallen, even though it has been explained to him multiple times is a strange and disorienting sentiment, as there is no logical reason for him to believe this. DeLillo may have added this theory into the mind of Justin's character to further disorient the reader or to highlight the extent of misconstrued information. Reading this aspect of Justin's thinking with Pyszczynski and Breithaupt suggests that children's minds work in illogical ways, due to their rudimentary understanding of how the world works. This disorientation in a child's mind exemplifies on a smaller scale the level of confusion 9/11 brought to all citizens, and DeLillo capitalizes on this in his work.

Children absorb bits and pieces of traumatic events and process this trauma through their play, dreams, and fantasies. Justin's obsession with the character of Bill Lawton can be categorized as play or fantasy, but his theory that the towers have not fallen seems to fall further

from play and more into a delusional fantasy. Justin may have created this theory subconsciously searching for more tragedy considering that “children are extraordinarily preoccupied with death.” As Pyszczynski writes, “Children’s concerns about death are pervasive and exert far reaching influence on their experiential worlds. Death is a great enigma to them, and one of their major developmental tasks is to deal with fears concerned with death” (Pyszczynski 130).

Justin’s theories of the towers falling again may be presented as a hyper-fixation on death. The events of 9/11 may be his first encounter with death, or at least random, unreasonable death, and he now expects this tragedy to occur again because his worldview has been opened to trauma. Justin has internalized the horrific events of 9/11, which desensitize him to the point where he expects a high level of tragedy to infiltrate his life again. Regardless, his theory concerning the towers can be attributed to denial-based thinking. Pyszczynski says that “children’s coping strategies are invariably denial-based: it seems that we do not, perhaps cannot, grow up tolerating the straight facts about existence” (Pyszczynski 130). Justin, at a very young age, must cope with the fact that innocent lives were lost in an inexplicable tragedy. Death is not always preventative or forewarned, and this fact about life may instill a fear within Justin that perpetuates his denial-based theories on the towers. DeLillo, through writing Justin with an existential lens, is defamiliarizing the reader with the concept of death, as adult readers have normalized death and are most likely not considering the weight that the concept of death holds in a child’s mind or even death as a concept within the tragic event of 9/11.

We can get another perspective on Justin’s theory by looking at how the media dealt with the events of 9/11. In Breithaupt’s critique of media portrayals of September 11th, he claims that “the media’s September 11 is all about experience... They have presented a truly terrible and traumatizing shock of the past as something yet to come, but still to be experienced... it is the

experience not of an overwhelming shock, but an experience precisely because it seems to hold something back that is not (yet) experienced” (Breithaupt 74). Justin, though sheltered by his parents, still consumes media surrounding 9/11. These images that challenge his narrowed and juvenile worldview desensitize him to the trauma of 9/11. Seeing images of the towers falling multiple times has created a disordered narrative structure in his mind as to how and when the towers fell. Justin’s desensitization, due to media exposure, removes an overarching theme of trauma from his mindset surrounding the event; therefore, feelings of sadness, vulnerability, and grief are absent from his understanding of 9/11. Through Justin’s interactions with media, we can see DeLillo further complicating the negative role that media plays in understanding the events of September 11th. Justin’s narrative framing of the event is disorienting for not only the characters surrounding him but also the readers as well. DeLillo himself is diagnosing the ways that media perpetuate and structure trauma through his motive for writing Justin’s theories as misconstrued information, as Justin is subject to the particular ways that media structures our memories and perpetuates trauma.

Memory Impairment and Understanding 9/11

When thinking about the difficulty of understanding and conceptualizing the mass violence, shock, and grief that 9/11 brought on for American citizens, DeLillo considers the population of citizens who are memory-impaired, and what this event means to them. Several of DeLillo’s characters have been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease; within the novel, Lianne organizes a writing group for Alzheimer’s-affected people. For many people with Alzheimer’s, memory is a fragmented device in their lives. How do patients with Alzheimer’s comprehend a tragedy as large as 9/11, when oftentimes they cannot recall important details to digest the

information, such as American politics, the significance of the Twin Towers, or even the vast location of New York City? How can they understand grief, the loss of a loved one, national fear, and shock? How do they cognitively map a post-9/11 world? DeLillo sets out to investigate these questions and show readers how traumatic memories diminish over time; therefore, the condition of Alzheimer's represents a temporally compressed version of the collective experience surrounding 9/11.

Due to the nature of the disease, Alzheimer's patients understand the traumatic event of 9/11 differently than characters without Alzheimer's. In the first few writing sessions after September 11th, Lianne tries to get the Alzheimer's patients to reflect upon the event through writing, in hopes that the participants will further process the tragic event. Lianne recalls that they "wrote about the planes. They wrote about where they were when it happened... 'I was walking down the street to get my hair cut. Somebody comes running.' 'I was on the crapper. I hated myself later. People said where were you when it happened. I didn't tell them where I was'" (DeLillo 61-62). To these memory-impaired citizens, the easiest way for them to make sense of tragedy is to understand their physical positionality within it, which for the most part is unaffected. They are unaware of the level of tragedy that the world is experiencing at that moment, and they do not understand the political implications and tension surrounding terrorism in the following months after the event. What people with Alzheimer's understand is exactly how they were directly impacted by the event, exemplified through how their day was interrupted by the news. In some ways, their impacted memory prevents them from fully experiencing the trauma that other citizens and survivors experience. In other ways, they are still experiencing trauma but on a different level than people with non-impaired memories. Bizzini offers her theory on DeLillo's creation of these characters when she says

The narratives of these people... highlight their struggle against the deterioration of an irretrievably fading perception of self in the painful and unstoppable progression of the disease... These characters fight against Alzheimer's disease and at the same time contradict theorizations of the society of the spectacle, specifically the notion that history and memory are substituted by images and the commodification of culture. (Bizzini 43-44)

Since these patients are not fully aware of societal nuances such as current media and culture, their understanding of the event of 9/11 is completely different from a person with normative memory patterns. These patients understand the event in the purest form, untouched by media stories circulating or repeated narratives from survivors. Their understanding of the event is from the private sphere: how these citizens experienced the event is exactly how they understand it. There is no public spectacle of 9/11 to people with Alzheimer's. DeLillo continues his commentary on the negative role that media plays in traumatic events, and by introducing these characters, he explores what understandings of trauma might look like without the role of media or circulated images.

These patients' limited memories detail exactly how the event permeates daily lives. The patients are cognizant of the personal implications of 9/11 but fall short of making sense of the event in a global context. One way that we can understand the limiting trauma responses from Alzheimer's patients is what they choose *not* to write about when discussing the event of September 11th. Lianne describes resistance when narrating the writing sessions she held in the weeks following the event: "No one wrote a word about the terrorists. And in the exchanges that followed the readings, no one spoke about terrorists. She prompted them. There has to be something you want to say, some feeling to express, nineteen men come here to kill us" (DeLillo

63-64). Details about the larger implications of the event do not daunt Alzheimer's patients due to their fragmented worldview as an impediment to their memory. These Alzheimer's patients must fixate on a specific time and place to make sense of the event, as seen in their recollections of where they were on 9/11, and any thinking larger than that can cause a sense of confusion. We can conclude that this thinking is a direct implication of difficulties regarding cognitive mapping. Their post-9/11 cognitive maps cannot expand beyond their daily surroundings, and possibly the people around them depending on their level of memory impairment. Kauffman makes a statement on the role these characters play in a post-9/11 world: "Alzheimer's is a metaphor for the post-9/11 condition. That condition is progressing exponentially: history is receding more and more rapidly from us— along with our will, imagination, and power to anchor it in anything approaching the familiar... We are all, as DeLillo suggests, like the patients in the early stages of the disease" (Kauffman 31). Through DeLillo writing Alzheimer's patients into the main plot of the novel, he comments on the disorientation that these patients feel, and how survivors of 9/11 can resonate with that. DeLillo actively places these characters with Alzheimer's amongst survivors of 9/11 as a way to explore how memory functions differently in times of trauma but has major similarities of disorientation and fragmentation.

The 9/11 Novel and Beyond

9/11 has had a lasting impact on American citizens and transcends global borders. Memories of 9/11 have inspired artists around the globe, and 9/11 literature is a manifestation of artists and scholars working through the national emotions of the attack and preserving memories on the page. The memorialization of 9/11 on the page can be compared to the functions of a museum, such as the 9/11 Memorial Museum at the One World Trade Center. The 9/11 novel

that DeLillo writes, amongst others, aims to be a literary tribute to 9/11 that provides representation for survivors and community for families of victims. Additionally, it allows for all citizens to keep memories alive, avoiding involuntary desensitization of memories. These novels, in short, grant people closure or understandings of the event that non-art forms, such as news coverage or the 9/11 Commission Report, cannot bring.

Literature is not alone in this respect. Film, photography, and art all explore the post-9/11 world in ways similar to the 9/11 novel, to make sense of the event or challenge preconceived notions, but film and media take on different forms of presentation than novels. The themes of 9/11 are at the forefront of some art forms that deal with the event, such as the film *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), or Richard Drew's photograph of "The Falling Man." These art forms deal with the event head-on much like *Falling Man* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. These creative landscapes visually explore the grief and violence that 9/11 brought on and attempt to make sense of the event. Some works of art are shaped by 9/11 but aren't directly about the event itself. These media forms deal with 9/11 on a more diluted scale but still interact with the event to portray the shock and grief that permeated American life. The film *Jennifer's Body* (2009) is an example of this: although the plot has virtually nothing to do with the event, the film makes several references to the tragedies of September 11th. Media representations, such as this film, explore lasting impacts on American society and make their own subtle commentary on 9/11 trauma and memory. These diluted interactions with 9/11 can be seen in literature as well, as Ottessa Moshfegh's 2018 novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* explores 9/11 similarly to *Jennifer's Body*. Through many different art forms that portray the tragedy of 9/11, we can understand these representations of trauma as a way for artists to work through their complicated identities in relation to the event and broadcast to a larger audience messages and themes about

the post-9/11 condition. Additionally, the influence of 9/11 on literature, art, and film exemplifies just how widespread the impact of the event was on American life and how raw emotions remain, even decades later.

Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* is an exemplary 9/11 novel that focuses on the aftermath of September 11th as a way to understand the largescale tragedy and how American life has been impacted from that day on. DeLillo leans into the lived experiences of the characters to portray these themes through his narration of multiple characters' perspectives. Readers learn from the post-9/11 condition to better comprehend tragedy in a way that isn't overexposed by the media and doesn't rely excessively on overused images and tropes from the event. One of the virtues of the novel is that, although DeLillo does not give us new purchase on the event, as he does not rewrite history or fictionally fabricate the event, he allows for insight into the traumatic experience. DeLillo explores what collective grief looks like on the page within separate narratives that form a cohesive message toward national healing for survivors. He employs literary devices such as fragmentation and disorientation to allow for non-survivor readers to have a better understanding surrounding trauma responses and simultaneously provides a representation of memory restriction for survivors who may be reading. DeLillo gives a voice to the nation that is healing from 9/11, as he puts on the page stories that Americans can relate to and sympathize with in the years that follow the event. DeLillo uses fragmentation and disorientation to explore the nuances of memory function during and after a traumatic event and additionally provide representation for survivors and their complicated identities in a post-9/11 world. Through writing *Falling Man* as a 9/11 novel, DeLillo encapsulates the American memory of 9/11 in all its confusion, resilience, grief, and terror.

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