

DOWN DEATH'S DARK ALLEY · THE EVOLUTION OF TERRORISM  
IN THE FICTION OF DON DELILLO

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## INTRODUCTION

DeLillo's voice is not flashy or instantly recognizable but perpetually distinctive, it is the voice of a collective consciousness that reflects both the slightly nuanced and distinctly momentous workings of society. In the last twenty years, scholarship on Don DeLillo's novels has increased. Full books are devoted to the writer's fiction. However, no one substantial piece of scholarship addresses the theme of terrorism, which appears in almost every DeLillo novel. Articles focus on very specific aspects of DeLillo's portrayal of terrorism in society, but no one source endeavors to cover the full scope of terrorism over the course of the writer's career. The breadth of an undertaking that fully examines the theme of terrorism in the writer's oeuvre is far too expansive for this study. Nonetheless, this thesis endeavors to bridge that gap between peripheral enquiry and comprehensive analysis by tracing the evolution of fear and terrorism within the corpus of Don DeLillo's fiction.

Terror is a prominent theme within American culture, especially in light of September 11. The evolution of a theme in a work of literature usually reflects shifts in the cultural consciousness. The progressive theme of terrorism is the same. To analyze how DeLillo portrays terrorism in his fiction, one must also consider ways that culture affects the writer. Therefore, this study analyzes how culture and literature interact with one another. To maintain focus throughout this study and to illustrate how the theme of terrorism evolves in Don DeLillo's fiction, I will only analyze one decade at a time,

while using only one of DeLillo's novels from that decade to show how the writer's fiction reflects the cultural perceptions of the time I will trace the cultural reflections of terrorism as assimilated in each decade's designated novel This study traces the theme of terrorism from its innocuous position in the culture of the 1970s as illustrated in *Players*, to the later severity of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the writer's latest novel, *Falling Man* Study of this progression, from of inchoate dread to actual victimization, reveals an underlying development of American foreboding.

One notes a significant evolution of thought in regards to the cultural representations of fear and terror when considering these thematic issues chronologically The interplay of culture and fiction is crucial to most literature, but by investigating one theme over the course of a writer's career, in a decade-by-decade manner, one sees how influential this interplay is to the construction and reception of fiction As a writer ostensibly interested in American culture, DeLillo said in an interview with Adam Begley that it was always his "intention to use the whole picture, the whole culture" (88) For a writer who absorbs and writes about the whole culture, it is necessary to embrace culture when analyzing DeLillo's fiction This study does not focus on terrorism or DeLillo's approach to terrorism independently, but instead, the two—fiction and culture—are coupled. I apply levels of scrutiny usually reserved for literary studies to cultural influences of each decade—from the 1970s to now—to understand how DeLillo reflects the cultural reaction or interpretation of terrorism.

As DeLillo states, he uses "the whole picture " In analyzing the cultural attitudes toward terrorism in a decade, I must also embrace the whole picture of a culture, one that is not limited to one field of research or one methodology of analysis My thesis utilizes

relevant fields of study to discover and expose cultural themes of fear and terror, from philosophy to photography, from late-night television to government publications. Diverse data from each decade are consequential to determining the overall attitudes toward an issue in that decade. Therefore, my methodology of using scholarly writing, along with popular non-fiction and periodicals, to uncover the social mentalities of past decades is necessary. The aim of my thesis is to investigate the theme of terrorism in Don DeLillo's fiction as it reflects an evolving mentality in American culture. I do not wish to propose a collection of new historical critiques of four independent periods.

To analyze the evolving perceptions of terrorism in American culture, one must adopt a broad definition of terrorism, for the concept and its nomenclature are constantly shifting. Therefore, a malleable definition of terrorism is necessary, one that may expand and contract to incorporate the changing interpretations of what American culture deems as terrorism. For the purpose of thesis, I will define terrorism, as it applies to four decades, as an emblematic act of violence or destruction that serves to promote an ideological aim through intimidation and fear.

The evolution of America's conception of terrorism as embodied in DeLillo's fiction, begins in the 1970s. The DeLillo novel that I use from this decade is *Players*. The interpretation of terrorism in the 1970s reflects the ineffectuality of the terrorist in American society. Sources from the decade designate the power and threat of terrorism as something foreign. The evolution of terrorism in American culture has an innocuous genesis, as the few active American-terrorist groups of the 1970s were written off as ineffectual. The protagonist of *Players* tries to join an underground terrorist organization in an effort to lend validity to his life and rise above his insignificance in society. The

protagonist's failure to become a successful, (anti-)heroic figure accommodates a culture that views terrorism as harmless.

In the chapter that focuses on the 1980s, I analyze the novel *White Noise*. By investigating the characters' relationships to simulacra and their reactions to catastrophe, I investigate how the decade of the 1980s responded to terrorism by ignoring its significance. This chapter mainly serves to connect the 1970s and 1990s, as the drastic transformation in the evolution of terror greatly changes from DeLillo's *Players*, published in 1978, to *Mao II*, published in 1991. DeLillo's utilization of fear and ignorance in *White Noise* serves to buffer the contrasting perceptions of terrorism in the decades that bookend the 1980s.

*Mao II* predicts the cultural response to terrorism by prompting an investigation of the relationship between terrorists and novelists. DeLillo's concern with terrorism in the early years of the decade precedes the culture's experience with terrorism. The ubiquity of terrorism in the 1990s inspired American culture to perceive the violence and destruction of terrorism instead of the ideologies behind the terrorists' actions.

The tragedy of September 11 commandeered the public's attention for months after the attack. The event significantly changed America's response to terrorism. DeLillo's *Falling Man* deals with personal trauma associated with the terrorist attacks. The effects of 9/11 extended beyond Manhattan and into the hearts and minds of American citizens across the country. My chapter devoted to terrorism in the first decade of the twenty-first century focuses on both the widespread effects of 9/11 and the individual's appraisal of terrorism. The attacks of September 11 forced Americans to reassess conceptions of terrorism and fear on their own terms.

The evolution of America's conception of terrorism as reflected through DeLillo's fiction spans four decades. From the interpretation of terrorists as innocuous in the 1970s, to the indisputable influence of terrorism in the American consciousness after the 9/11 attacks, the role of terrorism in American culture undergoes drastic changes. DeLillo's novels reflect these cultural shifts of perception

## Chapter 1

### *Players*

Don DeLillo begins his career as a novelist in the early 1970s with the auspicious publishing of *Americana*, a Bildungsroman, in 1971 and *End Zone*, which focuses on potential nuclear annihilation and mass terror, the following year. The apprehension of global combat and mass catastrophe is a prominent theme early in the decade. As the state of the Cold War reached new levels of sophistication in clandestine operations, dubious assaults and reveries, the public's reaction to fear and terror evolved. The focus of trepidation shifted from global destruction to individual dread, from nuclear bombs to pipe bombs, from fallout to hijacking. The 1977 novel *Players* exhibits this paradigm shift from mass hysteria to personal interaction with terror. DeLillo's novel follows an upper-class Manhattan couple, Lyle and Pammy, as they wander through their ineffectual lives and attempt to break the bleak chains of their desperation. Pammy chooses a weekend affair with a homosexual in coastal Maine to provide a sense of stimulation, while Lyle embarks on a path of reformation by joining a terrorist organization.

In *Players*, Don DeLillo's fifth novel, the author subverts traditional concepts of terrorism to expose complex notions of identity that simultaneously reflect and critique the social landscape of 1970s America. DeLillo illustrates how American society belittles the significance of terrorism by developing a character who joins a terrorist organization.

as a catalyst for personal change. As the protagonist fails to establish a substantial, distinguished identity, DeLillo represents the cultural stance on the ineffectual reality of American terrorism.

The decade of the 1970s is interesting for many reasons, but the most intriguing aspect of the era is the public's shifted opinion toward the American government. In retrospect, the most historic events of the 1970s are not the celebratory achievements of a nation. The cultural memory of the decade recalls the Watergate scandal that resulted in the resignation of President Richard Nixon and other maligned government interactions with the populace, including numerous Vietnam War protests.

This period of political bedlam and gross distrust of nefarious governmental agencies obfuscated demarcations of good and evil, for terrorists espoused the greater good for the mass population (the Weather Underground and the Symbionese Liberation Army) and politicians egregiously acted as outlaws. These ideological contradictions tested the trust of the nation. *Players* embraces the confusion of this dichotomy by intersecting the police state with the terrorist organization. The leader of an underground, revolutionary organization in the novel admits, "I don't know, but today there's just one terrorist network and one police apparatus. Thing is, they sometimes overlap" (DeLillo 116). DeLillo heightens the suspicions of double agents and cloak-and-dagger politics. In "No There There," Bill Mullen notes, "DeLillo would like us to see virtually everyone in his fiction after Nixon as a conspirator or paranoiac in one fashion or another" (124). This assertion is further validated by the characters in the novel, who, by at least one degree of separation, have one hand in either the police state or the terrorist network (and in some cases, both). In the world of *Players*, characters acknowledge cryptic associations that

involve the Kennedy assassination, the CIA and numerous other foreign government agencies. The novelist does more than deliver an American spy story or a paperback thriller rife with plot twists and espionage excitement. In “DeLillo and the Political Thriller,” Tim Engles recognizes that this blending of cultural critique and genre bending “utilizes many of the thriller’s conventions in *Players* . . . to produce works that ultimately join another genre, the social or sociological novel, by subtly explicating elements within the cultural and political milieu of 1970s America” (67). DeLillo addresses issues of a decade by combining two discordant themes—Wall Street identity crises and terrorism—combating one another within a protagonist

Lyle resolves to overcome his yuppie ennui and metropolitan ineffectuality by engaging in a series of escalating, uncharacteristic engagements, from sexual affairs to terrorist interaction and finally pseudo espionage. His personal choices reflect a desire for action that he never truly satisfies throughout his clandestine involvement with a terrorist organization. This inevitable failure to attain personal autonomy, along with his inept existence, underlines DeLillo’s interpretation of terrorist movements.

At the beginning of the narrative, Lyle has quit eating at work in the New York Stock Exchange luncheon club, “pleasant as it was, restricted to members and their guests” (DeLillo 13). Instead, he has intentionally sequestered himself from his social class and coworkers, chagrined by their habits, their manners and, to an extent, their elitism, which Lyle ironically exemplifies by raising himself above the lunchtime crowd, questioning whether “he’d become too complex to enjoy a decent meal in attractive surroundings” (14). Lyle has lost the social connections to his lifestyle. Lyle’s only friend at work is McKechnie a man, so enmeshed in distress—a brother with gambling debt and

a catatonic, deaf son—that he need not abstractly ponder the complexity of his life. He experiences true complications of life daily. McKechnie asks Lyle, “Did you ever feel you were in a vise?” (66). McKechnie’s genuine troubles mock Lyle’s contemplative complexity by reinforcing how comfortable Lyle’s life really is. Lyle suspects that there is untapped potential buried under the repetitive bleakness of his life. This nascent inkling manifests itself in the meditative questioning of his personal complication within an inherently complex social construct.

Lyle desires change. The TV occupies time away from the office. Instead of passively capitulating to the activity of watching, he sits “about eighteen inches from the screen” in a dark room changing the channel “every half minute or so, sometimes much more frequently” (16). Commercials interest him, and he rarely uses sound. Lyle’s (inter)actions with his television set express his desire for change, which resounds in the ephemeral essence of commercials and the continual shifting through programs. Lyle takes the simplest pastime and imposes his own (limited) agency on it. He watches without sound, only half engaged, always ready for something else. He finds solace in the fresh image. These cycles and substitutions are not actual events or programs but a barrage of images, an amorphous flash of incoherent change without sound, without apprehension. The only program that he focuses his attention on is the low-grade, public-access-channel pornography. During this weekly, one-hour foray into corporeal vulgarity, “Lyle [is] immobile” and unable to stir as pornography “retain[s] his attention completely even as it continue[s] to dull his senses” (17). Lyle’s ennui pervades the one potentially visceral aspect of his leisure activity. And again, after the segment is over, Lyle wonders “if he’d become too complex to look at naked bodies, as such, and not be stirred” (17).

Lyle needs change. He validates this longing by questioning the staleness of his existence, and that longing manifests itself in his (inter)actions with an object of the utmost dormancy, the television. Lyle, all too concerned with his internal conflicts of complexity, can barely tackle his ineffectuality if even on a subliminal level, while the reader clearly acknowledges his internal motivations for change.

Aside from his self-professed complexities, Lyle exhibits other patterns of ineffectuality. In the Exchange, Lyle feels too familiar in the environment. He believes that everyone can read his thoughts, but he cannot read theirs. He is known, yet unknowing of others. This imagined transparency leads the reader to interpret Lyle's emptiness as self-acknowledged. Others, even his closest friends, forget certain characteristics about Lyle—that he smokes, that he does not wear glasses—and he is “secretly hurt by these defects of focus or memory” while “the real deficiency, somehow, he [takes] to be his own” (DeLillo 26). Lyle's only moments of existential validation result in the cataloging of objects on his body, “keys, tickets, cash, et cetera” as it “required no conscious planning yet reassured him, and this was supremely important, of the presence of his objects and their location” (191, 22). In an environment where he feels completely transparent and positively forgettable, his only reassurance of control—power within his existence—is in the paltry items he carries.

DeLillo provides a protagonist whose ineffectual existence is evident to the reader yet remains fully unacknowledged by the character. Lyle illustrates his ineffectualness and subsequent ennui through his habits and disposition. When an attack on the Exchange floor occurs, Lyle abandons his dither and takes steps to elevate himself from his

humdrum existence. These extricating steps begin with a sexual affair and soon escalate to terrorism and espionage.

The corporate lifestyle of the 1970s, yuppie couple, entrenched in their particular boundaries, routines, limitations, conformities, (with the dual incomes to match) not only reflects the downtrodden boredom of marriage within *Players* but serves to highlight the malaise of a group starting to gain significant presence late in the decade. Lyle's interaction with his wife is simply obligatory. In their private moments, they only talk about fruit, places they have eaten, television, and work. Lyle's role in marital sex is perfunctory. Lyle refers to their corporeal interactions as his "time to 'perform,'" and "'service' her," when Pammy "would have to be 'satisfied'" (DeLillo 35). Although DeLillo mentions that their bonds—marital and physical—are a part of their "shared consciousness," Lyle remains mentally outside of that space (34). Lyle is unable to connect or communicate with his wife, thus providing another facet of his life that proves to alienate him from any semblance of society or belonging, further entrenching his persona in the bleak rites of ineffectuality. He cannot even function in his own marriage, one of human nature's most basic institutions.

To combat a broad sense of alienation, Lyle pursues a secretary named Rosemary. The resulting affair temporarily relieves his desire to change and encourages him to embrace more facets of life. In coitus, Rosemary never approaches orgasm, so Lyle liberates himself from the pressures of "performing" or "servicing." Instead, Lyle thinks that "the triteness that pervaded their meetings supplied what he wanted of eroticism," and when the act is over, he "reclines against a mound of silk pillows, recalling how she'd groaned with pleasure" (92, 93). This affair successfully serves to reconcile Lyle's

longing for change and reestablishes his presence in the physical (and emotional) world. Anne Longmuir notes that the affair and Lyle's attached significance of sexual performance "fulfill [their] promises and restore his identity and masculinity, as well as his sense of the real" (133) Lyle's encounter with Rosemary initiates his involvement with the terrorist group after he discovers that Rosemary knew George Sedbauer, the man killed on the Exchange floor. Lyle also learns that his bedmate still holds ties to the organization that George died for.

Lyle now adopts a new method for actualizing himself and creating a significant identity. DeLillo presents this transition in the immediate pages following the affair with Rosemary when Lyle meets the leader of the terrorist organization, Kinnear. This encounter denotes a significant shift in narrative, for it begins section "Two" of the novel. Lyle sees the opportunity to join this clandestine group as an extension of his physical assertion with Rosemary. With the affair, Lyle places his desired eroticism into their physical acts. Lyle finds that this method operates as a means to overcome his ineffectuality by projecting his own aims onto the body of another—making it an intrapersonal endeavor—and therefore, in Lyle's view, undeniable in its efficacy. This external projection significantly contrasts Lyle's former plights to assert himself from the background to the foreground of his own imagination with invented conversations/interviews with people of consequence or police interrogations. Lyle now projects his desire for change and action into the public reality around him. Douglas Keesey writes, "Engaging in terrorist activity allows Lyle to feel connected to his body's strength, the courage of his co-conspirators, and a lively disorder in a way that his dehumanizing, mechanical, and hyperorganized job had never permitted" (91). Meeting

Kinnear, Lyle notes that the leader possesses a manner that “suggested they were fellow believers whose paths had diverged only through the force of horrid circumstance” (99).

For Lyle, this “horrid circumstance” is his repressive job at the Stock Exchange

Kinnear later states, “I operate on basic, really visceral levels. Terror is purification. When you set out to rid a society of repressive elements, you immediately become a target yourself” (DeLillo 102). Lyle recognizes a target as the apotheosis of human essence, something that is exempt from the anonymity of ineffectuality. Had Lyle not suffered through his horrid circumstance, he would have the life he now aspires to attain, one of visceral experiences and ultimate significance. To be a target is to stand out against the crowded mass that suppresses the individual. Kinnear’s organization wants to attack the economic system and the means of living that appropriate Lyle’s existence. This symbolic act would obliterate Lyle’s former self: the depersonalized individual scuttering from work to home, unable to physically interact with his surroundings or his wife. Terrorism gives Lyle a chance to break free from the things that oppress him and establish a new, wholly significant identity, free from the trappings of his horrid circumstance.

Terrorism offers Lyle freedom from his former self. His alacrity to further pursue a role with the terrorist organization reaffirms Lyle’s quest for substantial change in his life. No longer sitting in a dark room, flipping through stations, Lyle now wants to actively pursue an identity through change, regardless of the risk. David Cowart interprets Lyle’s actions as horrific because Lyle acts without political animus, noting that Lyle gratuitously joins the terrorist group “under the banner of anarchy-as-diversion” (47). To live like Kinnear, viscerally, as a target, appeals to Lyle. The act is more than

diversion, it gives meaning to his life “One can gain therapeutic value from conflict, especially if a cause seems worthy. One who stands up for his convictions feels more like a person for doing so” (Rapoport 55). For Lyle, the conviction is autonomy. Joseph Dowling offers a similar interpretation of the aims of terrorism in his 1978 article, “Prolegomena to a Psychohistorical Study of Terrorism,” as he acknowledges that “terrorism can express a desire for freedom, rooted in man’s nature, that is produced by specific times and places . . . and often reflects the distance between man’s potential and limiting social conditions” (229). At this point in the narrative, Lyle shifts from a peripheral figure wafting through the background of his own existence to the embodiment of his desire for change. Lyle now holds the key to freedom from the ineffectual nature that defines the bleakness of his life.

However, before Lyle is an active agent in the establishment of this new, meaningful identity, he must prove his allegiance to the terrorist organization. This oath takes the form of an affair with Marina. Lyle’s affair with Marina is quite different from his earlier affair with Rosemary, for Marina is an active member of the organization. Their interaction is more than a sexual rite of passage. The sex comports itself as more than a dalliance or an adrenaline rush for Lyle. In fact, Lyle does not initiate the episode with Marina. Instead, it is vaguely “decided they would have sex without words or special emanations” (DeLillo 187). Sex is a trade off for Lyle’s full complicity to Marina and the organization. This transaction of “her body for his risk” is something “loosed into the air of possibilities other than death” (187). This scene does more than illustrate Lyle’s ability to beguile a woman into sex, as seen previously with Rosemary, which simply served to elevate his self-esteem. Lyle validates his role in the organization through the

body of Marina. By replacing Marina's former lover (George, the victim from the Exchange floor who facilitated Lyle's entire journey by introducing a level of corporeal excitement to his dull existence), Lyle also substitutes for a terminated operative in the terrorist movement: his action fills two vacancies. It is only through this sexual act that Lyle acknowledges the "critical nature of his involvement, its grievousness" (188). Lyle's earlier actions served only as a game or some possible adventure to add excitement—and thusly lending credence—to his existence. DeLillo acknowledges that Lyle "felt himself occupy his body" while making love (189). This act galvanizes Lyle's awareness to escape the bleak existence shown at the beginning of the novel by providing him an opportunity to physically belong in a moment. It allows him to actualize himself in the most corporeal of actions where he is neither perfunctory nor selfish. The affair is fulfilling and in the context of Lyle's previous existence, their sex is metaphysically preternatural. Marina is an enigma that is "meaningful" somehow with a "seriousness" that Lyle must resolve (DeLillo 188). Marina serves as an opportunity for Lyle to change his perspective, as her mysterious existence purports significance to him because he is an active agent in discovering something that he would not have encountered otherwise. The sexual act, with its implications of his grievous connection to the terrorist organization, establishes Lyle in his environment as a major player, not an ineffectual observer. As Douglas Keeseey states:

Transcending the superficiality of pornography, voyeurism, and dalliance with a secretary, contact with Marina exposes Lyle to the mystery of actual flesh and true involvement. If he participates in sexual and terrorist activity with Marina, Lyle will have to risk body and soul. In her he may

find physical fulfillment and moral conviction, but he might also be killed for expressing his individual beliefs. (92)

When it comes to Lyle's sex and self-actualization, Rosemary embodies the excitement he wishes to attain that will deliver him from boredom, yet the only fully actualized sex he experiences is with Marina, who is not overtly sexual like Rosemary. This carnal exchange solidifies the organization's trust that he will replace George and die trying to destroy the Stock Exchange. Lyle fully appreciates the potential of his pledge to the organization, especially the self-affirmation by suicide. Self-sacrifice makes one the ultimate antithesis of physical ineffectuality because the body fulfills a role, as an instrument to achieve a conclusion. Likewise, terrorists view this rite of using the body to achieve a goal as the epitome of personal worth.

Lyle achieves his corporeal validation as well as social importance. Even though Lyle's physical actualization occurs with Marina, he is simply filling a vacancy. Marina represents the revolutionary terrorist and never fails to breach her fundamental ideology, yet when Marina takes Lyle to meet Kinnear, she first visits the supermarket. Sarah Heaton recognizes this banal occurrence as a symbolic gesture that "locates terrorism in the market place at a mundane level, open to everyone" and "makes a mockery of Lyle's desires for terrorism as a luxury good available only to the chosen few" (135). However, this mundane trip sheds light on the true nature of Lyle's involvement with the organization. Just as Marina has forgotten to pick up cereal, the organization has lost its connection in the Exchange. She will return to the store later so as not to ruin breakfast and later convert Lyle so as not to ruin the plot. Lyle is a commodity. Taking Lyle to bed

is the equivalent of replenishing what is consumed and exhausted with another quick trip to the store.

After finally evaluating his own involvement in the terrorist scheme, Lyle realizes that his only purpose is to replace George, the man initially killed on the Exchange floor, by dying. Lyle realizes that his grievous seriousness is expendable for the organization. Imagined or invented, Frederick Hacker states that identity is crucial for the terrorist, so that she or he can experience the process of possessing “supraindividually inspired commands and demands” (42). As a replacement for another foot soldier in the organization, Lyle will never attain the supraindividuality that would prove his significance. Lyle ignores his chance to achieve a full (although ephemeral) self through the freedom of terrorism and sex with Marina and chooses self-preservation.

Lyle is unwilling to fully abandon his quest for importance because he still desires to participate in and experience the excitement of a new life by remaining an aberrational connection to the network. The inherent complications of espionage surface as clear representations of the police state and the terrorist movement quickly blur. Lyle contacts someone whom he believes is a government agent to divulge information about Kinnear and the organization. Lyle learns that Kinnear might operate as a double agent. Lyle does not care which side he is playing for, as long as he is still involved in a role that provides visceral action. This role still lends credence to his existence in ways the Exchange cannot. Lyle does not believe in the revolution espoused by the terrorist organization because he inevitably cannot sacrifice himself, but he desires the potential to assert himself through the violence and espionage. He tries to turn on operatives from either the police state or the terrorist network, but he cannot decipher which player represents

which side. Lyle refuses to abandon his quest for personal change “[b]y playing both sides of the fence, Lyle tries to maximize the secret information in his possession and to minimize the risk to himself” (Keeseey 93). Lyle surrenders information about Marina and the other members of the terrorist organization to gain further information about Kinnear, which he communicates directly to Kinnear. Evidence suggests that Kinnear is a double agent, yet Lyle needs to contact him again, to gain the truth and possibly legitimize his actions to prove his worth.

Lyle still strives for the body and soul connection that he achieved with Marina by searching after Rosemary for another sexual tryst. Because he has valuable information now, Lyle thinks he can regain the connection of body and soul—reminiscent of that with Marina—through sex with Rosemary. Lyle has attained privileged information about the former phantom terrorist Kinnear and this knowledge would make him a more important character in the now possibly defunct terrorist organization. This knowledge makes Lyle envision himself as powerful and capable of regaining the connection he experienced with Marina. Lyle’s main goal is to validate his existence through corporeal actualization and social justification.

Through his closeness to Kinnear, Lyle still associates himself with a lifestyle that enables a visceral existence. Lyle absconds to Canada to evade Marina and meet up with Kinnear. Instead of finding Kinnear, Lyle meets Rosemary. DeLillo uses dramatic irony to display Lyle’s imagined significance within the game of espionage in *Players*. Lyle thinks that he may have an advantage over Kinnear, due to the connections made and information gained from questionable sources. Lyle states that he likes hotels and the autonomy they provide as an exemption from the daily drudgery of life, “the need to

verify one's status" (197). In the following line, Rosemary emerges from the bathroom with a "plastic phallus harnessed to her body" (197). If Lyle were to try to assert his significance within this closed society and his autonomy, Rosemary represents the futility of Lyle's position. Mark Osteen notes that Rosemary's surprise "discloses the secret that Lyle has missed all along. Like Rosemary, [Lyle] is merely an instrument, a toy of Kinnear as well as his substitution" (151) DeLillo uses this sexual reversal to illustrate Lyle's true ineffectuality. The protagonist, initially, uses his masculine wiles and sexual dalliances to elevate his self-esteem, but by the end of the novel, the true "players" of the novel ultimately emasculate Lyle. Lyle longs to meet Kinnear, and remains in the motel waiting for his phone call while Rosemary sleeps, wearing her dildo. This sexual reversal underlines Lyle's inherent ineffectuality by subverting his most basic biological, gendered identity. Whereas Marina sacrificed her body for Lyle's allegiance, Lyle hopes to forge the same allegiance by receiving Rosemary's phallus (possibly in substitution for Kinnear's)

DeLillo leaves Lyle in the motel room awaiting a call from Kinnear to inform him of his next move. The call never comes. DeLillo employs filmic language to present the equivalent of an overexposed fadeout. A splatter of brightness enters the corner, then morphs into sunlight filling the room, burning away any semblance of the former scene

The angle of light is direct and severe, making the people on the bed appear to us in a special framework, their intrinsic form perceivable apart from the animal glue of physical properties and functions. This is welcome, absolving us of our secret knowledge. (212)

Next, the room is “surrendered” to a moment of “luminous cleansing” and the figure of Lyle, “is barely recognizable as male,” for he can “still be described (but quickly) as well-formed, sentient and fair” (212). The light serves to cleanse the reader’s secret knowledge of who Lyle is, who he was, what he wants to become. By the last line of the novel, before Lyle is gone forever, DeLillo reiterates that, “[w]e know nothing else about him” (212).

The conclusion of *Players* erases Lyle from the story. Throughout the novel, the protagonist endeavors to change his ineffectual nature through the promise of terror. However, in the end, Lyle is neither able to establish himself as a changed character or a significant entity. He is unable to shake the oppression and anonymity of his yuppie ennui. In the process of liberating himself from this ineffectuality, he fails to gain an identity and backslides deeper into a state of insignificance. One that is barely recognized as male, and quickly becoming even less. The great promise of terrorism and espionage do not transform Lyle into a magnificent, autonomous creature. Instead, DeLillo equates the ineffectuality of Lyle’s existence to the feebleness of American terrorism, which is something inconsequential and irrelevant.

DeLillo’s theme of terrorism and its inability to help establish identity is not some insidious ploy of a young novelist trying to gain acclaim through countercultural, underworld realities. In fact, DeLillo, in representing a character who fails to ascend the “unbearable slightness of his being” through terror and violence, actually represents the American zeitgeist of the late 1970s (Dewey 52). Many, if not all, contemporary, global citizens would scoff at such a representation of terrorism today, for the power of terrorists and violent organizations are ubiquitous. Contrary to current concerns about the

malicious essence of terrorism, DeLillo presents an aura of violence and espionage that does more than deride the genre of the suspense novel. He exposes an empty underworld that reflects terrorism as something resolutely foreign and innocuous.

The global presence of terrorism in the 1970s failed to captivate the attention of mainstream Americans, many of whom first experienced the ploys and means of terrorist organizations by way of the Black September kidnappings at the 1972 Munich Olympics. *Terrorism: Documents of International and Local Control*, published in 1979 with 97 subsequent volumes, provides a retrospective, statistical, regional breakdown of international terrorist incidents and lists North America as the target of only 10 percent of global terrorism in the span of a decade (Friedlander 268). With few casualties from international terrorism and even fewer victims of domestic terrorism, the interpretation of violence and fear mongering as a means of political action was a concept largely foreign to Americans.

In an introduction to a protection service guide, *Terrorist Attacks*, Raymond Siljander clearly illustrates a disposition of incredulity regarding the presence of terrorist motivations in America, claiming, “Whether terrorism . . . will strike out at America in the foreseeable future is a matter of speculation” (1). The inherent doubt in this quote acknowledges a cultural ambivalence that counters the content and ambition of the book. The author fails to address American-aimed terrorism as anything more than speculation. This text offers detailed instructions in evasive driving techniques, kidnapping/hostage resolution, firearms training and making/defusing explosives, yet the target demographic of this manual, “if terrorism has not had as direct an impact upon the United States as it has on many countries,” are those representing American multi-national corporations and

“executives living abroad” (1) Siljander suggests that Americans can only experience subjugation to terrorism by leaving the safe haven of their home and embracing a foreign world

Numerous works on the study of terrorism from the 1970s attempt to explain the boom of terror organizations, yet while trying to explain this phenomenon to an American audience, the authors mostly cite examples from foreign countries or foreign cultures. In Robert Liston’s book, *Terrorism*, he attempts to introduce his American audience to the appalling nature of terrorism and its various forms by chronicling numerous instances of terrorism and terrorist methodology. Liston goes so far as to declare, “Terrorism is the disease of the 1970s” (21). However, throughout the pages of the book, American representation in Liston’s analysis occurs only twice. The writer establishes that terrorism is an all-inclusive, global issue but maintains its foreign nature. In “Coping with Terrorism: What Is To Be Done?,” Robert Friedlander recognizes the increasing scale of global terrorism and the resulting need to create legal recourse for those who engage in terrorism. However, his article revolves around legislative and judicial neglect toward this issue. Friedlander states, “To my embarrassment and, I hope, that of my professional colleagues, the American Bar Association has been totally silent” (232). Friedlander recognizes the existence of terrorism as a nascent aspect of American culture, but the powers that be, still refuse to acknowledge that America has any connection or authority in the proceedings of terrorist movements and their affiliations. The actions of the American Bar Association clearly reflect America’s identification of terrorism as extra-national phenomena, one that American law need not address. The global occurrences of terrorism are unavoidable, yet America(ns) refused to acknowledge

the potential significance of terrorism effecting American soil. Because Americans adopt the depiction of terrorism as foreign, they refuse to recognize terrorist actions as anything more than strange, criminal anomalies. This stance reduces acts of social revolution within the nation to little more than vulgar delinquency.

Although America does have a history of terrorism that includes the Molly Maguires and the Ku Klux Klan, violent actions against the state or public receive little attention in the annals of history. The reasons for this under representation of each period remain conditional upon various historical factors<sup>1</sup>. Yet, the decade of the 1970s exemplifies this trend of belittling the presence and aims of terrorist movements. Numerous examples of this neglect exist in relation to the attitudes regarding Weatherman (later adopting the name Weather Underground Organization) and the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA). These political movements used violence and terror as revolutionary tactics. Although the exact aims of each organization are not necessarily important, they did wish to combat the status quo for social and racial equality.

The only American terrorist organization addressed in Liston's aforementioned book, *Terrorism*, is the Weather Underground. Liston calls the movement "obscene," and notes that he shares this belittling view of the affluent freedom fighters with "most of the world's [real] revolutionaries" (88). He also notes that the Weather Underground only wants "personal, destructive, self-aggrandizing, and quite cowardly power over other human beings" (89). This viewpoint on the organization serves to reduce the

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<sup>1</sup> Such an endeavor to identify or theorize the myriad reasons for this misrepresentation would detract from the focus of this research. For a concise history of terrorist revolutions in the nineteenth century and their connection to 1970s terrorism, see Laqueur "The Anatomy of Terrorism."

revolutionaries' action to little more than that of ineffectual violence. By denouncing the actions of Weatherman, the author avoids recognizing any efficacy of the terrorist organization. Thus by belittling the motivations of the Weatherman and denigrating their actions, Liston (like many) actively ignores their presence in the culture as terrorist.

The Weather Underground has roots in the Students for a Democratic Society. A schism in the group led some members to form the radical faction that would eventually use kidnappings, explosives and violence to fulfill their ideological aims. Although Weatherman aimed for social equality and maintained leftist ideals, the core membership was upper-middle-class, white youths. The same is true for the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA), who advocated racial equality, but had only one non-white member. The intentions of these two terrorist groups were largely ignored by the public and viewed as paltry facsimiles of real revolutionaries with legitimate and applicable aims. Society characterized them as rich students "playing" revolutionaries. In his 1977 study, Paul Wilkinson unequivocally states, "the politically motivated terrorism in liberal democracies from the past decade has been committed by the spoilt children of affluence" (93). Similar dismissals of terrorists affirm that this mentality was the consensus of the time. Bernard Johnpoll closes his retrospective article, "Perspectives on Political Terrorism in the United States," with a six-tiered assessment of historical conclusions concerning terrorism in America. His conclusion, entitled "The Futility of Terror," notes that the two major terrorist groups in America in the 70s were unsuccessful and their "political terror [was] counterproductive" (42). He declares that the movements served the "interest of the ruling elite" and failed to "advance their hoped-for revolution" (42). Johnpoll's most interesting insight shows how "[t]error is not a revolutionary

instrument. It attracts romantics, and a revolution, to be successful, requires pragmatic idealists” (42). Johnpoll exemplifies the American perception that terrorists are nothing but maladjusted elitists, senselessly attempting to disrupt the intractable monolith that is the American status quo.

In *The Struggle Against Terrorism*, a 1977 edition of *The Reference Shelf*, the editor provides a terse evaluation of terrorism. A section titled “The Choice for Society” by David Fromkin advocates to “[t]hose who are the targets of terrorism—and who are prepared to defend themselves by doing whatever is necessary” a methodology of defeating terrorism by subverting the aggressors’ intentions (33). The possibility for success (the terrorist’s defeat through proof of her or his ineffectuality) is the choice of the “individual” who must access the aims of the terrorist and respond accordingly. Under this interpretation, the simplicity of the conflict is drastically clear-cut. *The Reference Shelf* establishes a dichotomy to defeat the terrorist or to succumb to the agitator’s objectives. “whether to live a good life or whether to live a long life” (33, 34) The simplicity of this guidebook typifies the rationale of the period. This interpretation of the terrorist act implies that a single dissenter is the oppressor of another individual. This does not work on a large scale. Instead, terror and the subversion of cultural norms are a personal attack on an individual that requires a personal response to validate the success of said attack. This reaction to terrorism suppresses the action of terrorists and places their achievement/failure in the hearts and minds of others. Only the individual in this decade could validate the aims or goals of terrorists.

If the American individual interprets the actions of terrorists and can deny their success, regardless of knowledge of the terrorists’ aims, then the innocent

participant/victim is the active agent in the resolution of the interaction. This viewpoint belittles the endeavors of the terrorists by refusing to acknowledge their political or social ambitions. Therefore, the public can nullify the undertakings of a group of terrorists by refusing to acknowledge the full scope of its endeavors. Obviously, the farther an individual is from an act of terrorism, the more disconnected she or he is from any corporeal repercussions of that violence. Terrorism in its simplest definition revolves around one central notion: using fear to achieve a goal. The easiest way to transform the singularly violent action, which serves as a symbolic action in itself, to an emblematic message that transposes terror to a population is through media coverage. This creates a paradox. For the terrorists to spread awareness of their cause, they must affect as many people as possible. To instill mass fear from instances of isolated violence, the terrorist (act) must appear to the public through an avenue that the public may easily discredit. The SLA gained popularity when the organization kidnapped media-heiress Patricia Hearst. This symbolic act spread awareness of the SLA and hijacked the press, as news of the abduction occupied media coverage for weeks. Once police found Hearst, the organization vanished from the public eye and the movement silently dissolved<sup>2</sup>

The terrorist is an outlaw, regardless of her or his ploys, and must use the media to deliver his or her message, no matter how it is diluted or misinterpreted. Once the message—represented through violence, to inspire fear—enters the public sphere, the terrorist loses control of the symbolic representation and must allow for the individual observer's interpretation of the action. Terrorists forfeit their role in the symbolic

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<sup>2</sup> For a more comprehensive relation of the events surrounding the Hearst abduction, see Hacker, who served as personal council for the Hearst family during the SLA kidnapping. See also, Patty Hearst's memoir.

interpretation when they allow another entity, such as the media, to provide their representation. This disconnect forces an audience or public, which has little to no emotional/social connection to what it witnesses, to interpret the actions in any capacity it so chooses. This turns the bloodshed and violence of the terrorist endeavors into benign images on a screen or vapid words on a page. If the individual has the power to interpret the terrorists' actions and their level of success through this interpretation, then the individual may belittle the violence so much that it becomes another form of entertainment. Bernard Johnpoll qualifies this assertion in his article, "Terrorism and the Mass Media in the United States." He relates the activities of Weatherman and the SLA to the adventures of the Scarlet Pimpernel, Zorro and the Lone Ranger, noting, "In a perverse manner, terrorist activities can be entertaining. As the public is entertained by movies of horror, terror, and catastrophe it is entertained by the reports of acts of violence and terror" (159). Representations of terrorist movements in the media further belittle the aims of these organizations by allowing the American public to detract or impose myriad limitations onto the objectives of the terror campaigns. When culture can dismiss the very public operations of an entity as ineffectual or conceive of that entity's operations as entertainment, then, by right of this repudiation, the very action of dismissing the aim shows the overall ineffectuality of the organization, its ideology and the terrorist's impetus in general.

Popular culture reflects this trend in the pacification of terrorist violence as well. Derision of an event is often the most obvious way of belittling a collective movement. Using satire and plain ridicule, popular culture of the 1970s mocks some of the concepts used by terrorists, and to an extent, the conception of the American terrorist campaign.

Whereas the media is able to facilitate an interpretation of events that allow terrorism to transform into entertainment for the individual, comedians and artists transport this interpretative process to another level by using terrorism as fodder for their material. Sydney Lumet's 1976 film, *Network*, satirizes the SLA with the invention of the "Ecumenical Liberation Army" which takes an heiress hostage, rob banks and work with network television producers to develop programming that will spread their message. This relationship eventually dissolves when the organization's militant leader demands too much from the broadcasting company, displaying the true capitalistic desires of the terrorist group. This satire belittles the ideology of the revolutionary group by illustrating that the main objectives of the terrorist group and its leadership are fame and wealth. This satirical commentary on the relationship between the media and the terrorist entity evokes laughs, but is not outright comedic.

However, the entertainment industry of the decade did trivialize terrorism by using the means and operations of terrorists, as well as the culture that responds to terrorism, as comedy material. In 1975, on the third broadcast of *Saturday Night Live*, the "Weekend Update" news parody segment "covered" a hostage situation with a "group of terrorists, calling themselves, strangely enough, simply *Blowfish* [italics added]" who require that television announcer Don Pardo read a list of their demands. The segment ends with Pardo (off-screen) reading the group's demands as corresponding pictures show a Gotham Chopper Executive Chopper, three kits of brand-new luggage, and finally a picture of a "luxurious" British Pacific airplane, perched high above the clouds that will take the Blowfish to "Havana Cuba, the Caribbean's unchallenging [sic] island paradise." Don Pardo's voice and inflection, along with the cheery, background music, satirize the

“let’s tell them what they’ve won” absurdity of the group’s demands. This short segment toward the end of the “Weekend Update” does more than parody the demands of terrorists. It mocks the relationship between the terrorist organization and the news media that incestuously use one another to gain more attention. In the monologue for the first episode of *Saturday Night Live*, host George Carlin discusses how airport security searches passengers for weapons then gives them “a knife and a fork and all the wine you can drink.” He later states one could take over a plane with some loose-leaf paper, “just hold it under the stewardess’s neck and threaten paper cuts.” Given the media interpretations of terrorist activities and individuals’ rights to evaluate the success of terrorism, people may interpret the events as entertainment, and given the proper perspective or comedic aim, terrorism can be laughable.

When a culture can demean the actions of organized violence to something little more than a punch line, it shows that that culture does not take what it demeans very seriously. The paucity of terrorist acts affected minimal victims in the 1970s, but the millions who never experienced this exposure to violence and loss took it for granted. The small-scale notion of terrorism did not spread universal fear among the populace. It only promoted mass indifference. The apathetic populace ignored the true inspiration of terrorist organizations by discrediting the aims and ambitions of the members. Terrorism was something foreign to the American household, but its few, sparse occurrences throughout society were conveyed through media networks that encouraged interpretations of ineffectuality. Don DeLillo captures these cultural sentiments when he guides his protagonist through an empty adventure, void of resolution or meaning. For DeLillo, terrorism is an empty vessel for making life-affirming changes, because the

terrorist is ineffectual. Lyle cannot escape the blank canvas of his life through terrorism because the endeavor is equally hopeless. DeLillo's use of foiled violence and bleak resolutions through terrorism in *Players* reflects the cultural climate of the 1970s that underlines the interpretation of an American terror campaign as wholly innocuous and irrelevant.

The opportunity to join an organization that has no agency, no goad, consumes Lyle. He cannot even stand out within a group that does nothing. Lyle Wynant simply cannot escape his ineffectuality. DeLillo does not present the failure of a character aspiring to attain enlightenment. Instead, Lyle is just trying to escape the drudgery of his life, which he does for a moment with Marina. Inevitably, even by joining a band of terrorists, he fails to assert an identity within a subculture of society. Trapped under the vacuity of his surroundings he remains anonymous and an object "we can only see as male." DeLillo creates a character who will fail and a society that will keep him subjugated by his ineffectualness. The creation of this character, even in his laughable destitution of influence, tests an audience that could write off this behavior as anything less than repulsive. Inciting the public's apathy as a detriment to the social order, DeLillo exposes a culture that belittles violence and politically motivated terror. It is only appropriate that Lyle fades away in the final lines of the novel. DeLillo does not simply re-envision the crime thriller genre with *Players*, he exposes the reader to the harsh reality of apathy and indifference that defines a decade.

## CHAPTER 2

### *White Noise*

*White Noise* is a story about Jack Gladney, a professor of Hitler Studies at a small, sleepy university, his post-modern, post-nuclear family and an Airborne Toxic Event. The novel is also predominantly about death. In fact, one working title for the novel was “The American Book of the Dead” (Coward 78). The aims and projections of the novel are far-reaching, as DeLillo’s protagonist ruminates on television, supermarkets, crowds, death, murder, fidelity and, of course, Hitler. Scholars have devoted myriad studies to this prominent piece of American postmodern literature.<sup>3</sup> Released in 1985, *White Noise* is DeLillo’s most accessible and popular work. The range of subject and relation to American, cultural themes led Tom LeClair to note in *In the Loop*, that there are “qualities of *White Noise* that make it [DeLillo’s] most emotionally demonstrative book, an expression of his passionate concern with human survival, his rage at and pity for what human kind does to itself—reasons why, I believe, DeLillo was finally recognized with the American Book Award for this novel” (212).

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<sup>3</sup> Several collections of essays are devoted entirely to *White Noise*. See *New Essays on White Noise* edited by Frank Lentricchia, *Don DeLillo's White Noise: A Reader's Guide* by Leonard Orr, *Approaches to Teaching DeLillo's White Noise* edited by Tim Engles and John Duvall and the Viking Critical edition of *White Noise: Text and Criticism* edited by Mark Osteen.

DeLillo maintains several themes throughout the novel, but they only peripherally relate to the continuing evolution of fear and terrorism in American culture. Instead of simply focusing on issues that other scholars usually address in their assessment of the novel—such as the influence of the media, consumerism or Gladney’s all-consuming preoccupation with death—this analysis considers the ways in which DeLillo reflects the larger, cultural perceptions of fear and terrorism. This concise analysis refrains from elucidating Jack Gladney’s fear of his own death—his inevitable loss of the I. Instead, by holding Baudrillard’s philosophical observations of America and the political writing of Edward Herman against *White Noise*, this research demonstrates how DeLillo addresses the cultural milieu of America while maintaining a progressive conception of fear and terrorism.

In a 1988 government document, *Terrorist Group Profiles*, which provides detailed information about fifty-two different terrorist organizations, Vice President George Bush, clearly states the United States’ policy on terrorism and terrorist organizations. Bush adamantly discounts a common phrase found throughout terrorist studies: one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter. Bush says, simply, “I reject this notion. The philosophical differences are stark and fundamental” (iii). Bush then presents these stark differences within the context of murdering “defenseless men, women and children” (iii). In essence, the terrorist kills the civilian, he murders “judges, newspaper reporters, elected officials, government administrators, labor leaders, policemen, priests, and others who defend the values of civilized society” (iii). In contrast, freedom fighters “seek to adhere to international law and civilized standards of conduct,” and “[n]oncombatant casualties in this context are an aberration or attributable

to the fortunes of war” (iii) The distinction seems plain in Bush’s terms. The Vice President addresses these issues (as well as publishes the document) in order to spread public awareness about terrorist organizations as they threaten the general population of the United States.

This warning comes from the government’s chief department for fighting terrorism. The Vice President explains the nation’s official stance on terrorism and freedom fighters as well as citing terrorism as an immediate threat to the nation. In 1986-87, there were only three successful terrorist plots and they were all skyjackings (ii). Bush’s acknowledgement of an immediate threat to the nation lies buried in jargon and political definitions. However, on the following page former Secretary of Defense Frank Carlucci III writes,

The United States represents a prime target for terrorist groups because of our commitment to political reform and constructive change. To terrorists, reform is anathema, for it represents continuation of the system they abhor and co-opts the revolution they hope to lead. (v)

Carlucci recognizes terrorism as a form of political warfare that aims to “undermine confidence in the ability of the national government to provide basic security . . . to create economic and political dislocation . . . [where] a power vacuum is created which those challenging the government will attempt to fill” (v). Reading the prefaces of this document today, without any historical context, promotes an image of America crawling with would-be terrorists, cities with dormant splinter-cells and freedom fighters lying in arms, ready for the revolution. The irony of this implication is overwhelming. As former head of the C.I.A., Bush would have known the inherent inaccuracies of these

statements. Throughout Latin America, the C I A. trained operatives who assisted in numerous U.S.-funded coups and elections. Bush and Carlucci avoid defending U.S.-sponsored attacks on Central American countries such as Nicaragua and El Salvador. This unpopular aspect of foreign diplomacy is missing from the document, as well as an explanation of different contra-affairs that the American government engaged in. This document is written for posterity's sake, to exonerate the actions of Reagan-era politics. Among the fifty-two terrorist organizations recognized within the document, no U S.-based terrorist organizations appear—not even the KKK, an organization with a history of murdering defenseless, noncombatant men, women and children. This type of myopic diplomacy does little to describe the true nature of both foreign and domestic affairs, for the true essence of this policy has come to the surface in the past thirty years. Nonetheless, this official stance does serve to relate cultural perspectives of the decade concerning terrorism and international policies. Edward Herman attacks this misleading representation of terrorism espoused by the Reagan administration and consequently adopted by the American public in his book *The Real Terror Network*.

In Herman's seminal book, *The Real Terror Network*, he attacks simplistic views of American interaction with foreign countries and acknowledges that these interactions are not always as benign as they might seem. Herman states that the semantics of terrorism are not constant. The terms used to define actions of enemy-states (those who support terrorists) are not the same used to define U.S.-friendly nations. Herman breaks down the government's position on terrorism as illustrated by the C.I.A.'s annual enumeration, "Patterns of International Terrorism," which acknowledges actions by "death squads" that kill more than 7,000 citizens as terrorism, but those actions are not

“international terrorism” without the “support of a foreign government” (22-23). This definition seems fairly clear-cut and irrefutable. However, Herman notes that the United States funded police states in Brazil, Chile and Guatemala in monetary amounts that exceeded the Soviet Union’s contribution—from 1946-1979, upwards of 1.4 billion dollars (23, 116). These U.S.-funded police states notoriously abused their power and abused citizens who disagreed with American-endorsed leaders. How does the American government reconcile these huge discrepancies? Herman states that the American government assumes that it “is not supporting any official terrorists. . . . The United States only supports independent governments, protecting them against terrorists, by definition” and the media accept this without question (23). The disparities between American claims and American actions are substantial.

DeLillo’s 1985 novel, *White Noise*, indirectly addresses the issue of U.S.-sponsored interference with foreign countries. At two unobtrusive points in the novel, DeLillo cites the type of espionage and terrorist support that Herman uncovers and denounces in *The Real Terror Network*. These instances involve Jack Gladney’s extended family, specifically his ex-wife, Dana Breedlove—a CIA operative who reviews long, coded books, then “gets a phone call from Brazil. . . . [And] [s]he carries money in a suitcase the length and breadth of Latin America” (DeLillo 48). Another of Jack’s ex-wife, Tweedy Browner, is married to a diplomat who is undercover in Indonesia, “sponsoring a Communist revival” that is “part of an elegant scheme designed to topple Castro” (86). The legitimacy of Herman’s observations resounds in DeLillo’s fiction. The existence of covert operatives in precarious nations as operatives of American agencies surfaces in the popular fiction of the 1980s, not just in political-science investigations.

Herman designates the “Real Terror Network” as a collection of activities around the world that are largely ignored (and not designated as terrorism) because they actually serve the interests of American industry and the expanding political clout of the U S. Herman goes on to recognize terrorist activities as either “constructive terror” (that which positively affects domestic interests), “benign terror” (that which helps U S allies) or “nefarious terror” (acts perpetrated against free-states by U.S. enemies) (140). These designations are unchallenged by American culture, because the mass media or free press refuses to report the negative effects of “constructive terror” for ideological reasons (150).<sup>4</sup> Herman’s observations display how the government circumnavigates its own terminology and political standards, all to facilitate amiable foreign-political connections. Herman’s observations—in retrospect—are more honest than Bush’s and Carlucci’s representations of American policy toward the threat of terrorism. Even though Herman acknowledges American intervention in foreign political movements as unscrupulous, Vice President Bush’s agenda denounces the actions it undertakes. This discourse of blatant dishonesty with the American public leads to a problematic understanding of terrorism. Further investigation shows how this attitude toward foreign states actually results in the denial of terrorism to the American cultural consciousness.

Even though the American government and public are oblivious to (what is considered conventional) terrorism outside of political maneuverings, terrorism still exists in the decade. Marc Celmer recognizes this reality, and acknowledges that U S. citizens are prime targets for terrorist activities but for reasons that are different from

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<sup>4</sup> See *The Real Terror Network* by Edward Herman for a thorough analysis of the ideological, commercial and political influences that restrict/impact public reception of the nefarious foreign policy described in this chapter.

Carlucci's. In *Terrorism, U S Strategy, and Reagan Policies*, Celmer adopts a less politically biased/defensive analysis of international interactions than presented by Carlucci to explain why America is a target for terrorist activity. Celmer cites Americans' "active participation in world economic and political affairs [and] their representation of a nation that most terrorists blame for their problems" as reasons why Americans are salient targets for terrorists (92). Considering these issues, Celmer writes, "no matter how strident U.S. policy is, [terrorism] will continue" (92). Celmer's assessment of anti-American sentiment recognizes Reagan's policy on terrorism as futile and arrogant. Even though the government plays semantic word games—regarding its foreign policy—as a defense for posterity's sake, the cold reality of terrorism remains (Inter)National aggression toward the monolithic United States of America remains, regardless of how politicians spin involvement that fosters terrorist actions in foreign countries

Arnaud De Borchgrave furthers the acknowledgement of the prolonged existence of terrorism regardless of its nomenclature in his article "Censorship by Omission," as he advocates the media's role in his plan to defeat terrorism. De Borchgrave writes, "Terrorism, not nuclear war, is the immediate threat" yet "[m]any crucial facts about international terrorism have been ignored by [the] media" (118). However, another article from the same book, *Terrorism How the West Can Win*, suggests that the media chose reticence when dealing with terrorist activity. In "Deny Them Publicity," John O'Sullivan claims that "[i]f events do not become known, they cannot influence public opinion" (121) O'Sullivan actually prescribes ignoring terrorism to protect the public. This book, as it incorporates varied viewpoints, demonstrates the conflicting mentalities of terrorism in the 1980s. The fact remains that terrorism is an undeniable (and

dangerous) force in the global community, but to defeat it, many suggest that the world ignore it. Ignorance (be it a semantic shift of signification or a shift in media focus) will not and cannot erase the presence of this worldwide issue. This inspection of ignorance and myopic political agenda defines the 1980s and becomes highly apparent in *White Noise* when investigating the role of fear in the novel.

In *White Noise*, the characters adopt a similar attitude of ignorance regarding their own fear. This takes place during the Airborne Toxic Event (ATE)<sup>5</sup> The ATE occurs when a railroad tanker, carrying the modified toxic-chemical Nyodene Derivative—a by-product of various insecticides—leaks, causing the chemical to seep into the air. The characters, specifically Jack, assume that the cloud will not cause any harm because they believe that the nebulous cloud (growing larger and more pernicious by the second) will blow away from them.<sup>6</sup> Jack dismisses any immediate danger because those events only “happen to the poor people” (DeLillo 114). The family continues to ignore and deny the severity of the situation until a government agency insists that everyone must evacuate. Still, the characters deny the urgency, questioning the semantics of the warning, thinking “there’s plenty of time . . . or they would have made a point of telling [the family] to hurry” (119). When the family does finally depart, they join a mass exodus from their

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<sup>5</sup> David Cowart addresses the subtle nature of the ATE acronym “One notes in passing that DeLillo leaves to his reader the working-out of the disaster’s acronym and its symbolism: in Greek mythology ATE is the goddess of discord, sister of Fear, Panic, Terror, and Trembling” (80). For a more semantically inspired analysis of the novel, see *Don DeLillo The Physics of Language* by David Cowart

<sup>6</sup> Mark Osteen notes that the shifts in diction when addressing the cloud—a feathery plume, black billowing cloud, airborne toxic event—belie the chaos of the event. “As all the euphemisms imply, the toxic cloud seems to elude description; people are fascinated with it because only such catastrophic occurrences escape the mediation that turns everything else into tired formulas” (Osteen 177).

hometown, and while pumping gas, Jack Gladney encounters the toxins of the ATE. The ATE occurs in the second part of the novel, and establishes a prominent shift in the narrative of the story. In *American Magic and Dread*, Mark Osteen notes that section two sparks a different stance of narration, for the “[p]lotlessness ends in Part 2, when a toxic cloud mark[s] the ‘end of uneventful things’ . . . [and] mortal panic emerges as the novel’s most potent theme” (176).

The absurdity of this entire event and the significance of the effects of the ATE illustrate a disposition of fear that reflects the American culture in the 1980s. This analogous relationship further reflects America’s perception of terrorism. The characters in the novel do not embrace the actual terror of their predicament, nor do they acknowledge the severity of their present dilemma. DeLillo uses this ignorance or obliviousness of evident danger to illustrate—in Baudrillard’s terms—a failure of the simulacra.

In Jean Baudrillard’s 1986 book, *America* (translated into English in 1988 by Chris Turner), the philosopher writes and ruminates on the qualities that define America. Baudrillard writes about the fiction of America and the necessity of simulation for American society. “[Americans] are themselves simulation in its most developed state, but they have no language in which to describe it, since they themselves are the model” (28-29). The philosopher also addresses the prominence of hyperreality as it defines American mentalities and the ubiquitous quality of death in the American collective consciousness. “America is neither dream nor reality. It is a hyperreality . . . everything here is real and pragmatic, and yet it is all the stuff of dreams too” (Baudrillard 28). Baudrillard believes that as a European he is qualified to discover “the perfect

simulacrum—that of the immanence and material transcription of all values” (28). Only the outsider could discover the nature of the simulation at heart in American culture, for America is the model or the emperor in his new clothes, prancing around nude

For the family in *White Noise*, the simulation, the perfect simulacrum, comes from the TV. Television plays a crucial role in the novel (another working title for the novel was “Panasonic”) In fact, television delivers the cultural codes of terror to the post-nuclear family. Every Friday night, Jack’s family watches television as a group activity, for the matron of the family, Babette, believes “if kids watched television one night a week with parents or stepparents, the effect would be to de-glamorize the medium in their eyes” (16). However, they only watch catastrophes and disaster films. This strangely captivates their attention. “Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping” (DeLillo 64). This forms a disconnect from reality and the simulation that the family cannot experience because—as Baudrillard writes—Americans do not have the language to express it. This disconnection from the reality violates the corporeal connection to mortality and the severity of disaster because “[d]eath on TV efficiently reduces its threat since the audience could keep a safe distance from the suffering and the bloody scenes and consciously know it is the other[’]s, instead of the self” (Chang 160). Yet, when the ATE immediately threatens the family’s safety, the family does not know how to react. The simulacra of disaster and terror are inadequate for the family. The television is unable to express and translate the urgent grievousness of real terror and disaster.

Baudrillard acknowledges that TV in the American household functions as “a video of another world, ultimately addressed to no one at all, delivering its images

indifferently, indifferent to its own message” (50). The television does not provide codes of conduct but relates the (perceived) reality of catastrophe and terror, but these simulacra are false and inadequate. When true catastrophe comes knocking the front door of the American Household, the family waits for a second knock. In *White Noise*, the family has objectified all sense of trepidation by witnessing it on TV. DeLillo demonstrates the detrimental derivatives of this daft desensitizing by showing how the simulacra lead to detachment from reality when the (poorly) replicated reality actually forces a further dislocation from the individual’s authentic, experienced reality. *White Noise* embraces the corruption of humanity’s experience by illustrating the pejorative effects of a culture content with its simulacra. The characters are trained to experience and see catastrophe (as a weekly ritual), but when a real event occurs, the simulacra of fear and catastrophe do not go far enough to prepare the family for the reality of disaster.

The white noise transmitted by television drowns out the pressure and foreboding of Jack’s own death, but when the ATE and Nyodene D. give him an unspecified but lingering date to his mortality, his own death becomes crucial to the plot. The role of the TV becomes less represented and takes a back seat to the real, only occasionally inserting its presence in the non-sequitur lines at the end of paragraphs. “This white noise is at once literal sound and, metaphorically, the tumble of chaotic, thalassic matter that overwhelms the human mind, obliges it to isolate and conceptualize some momentary salient element” and this salient element kept at bay is Jack’s fear of dying (Cowart 83). Thusly DeLillo shows that omni-present simulacra are not adequate in representing the family’s existence and experience when the real exposes the simulacrum.

Baudrillard recognizes a culture propelled by simulation. Baudrillard's notions of simulation and simulacrum permeate *White Noise*. A clear representation of this necessity for simulation is the SIMUVAC (simulated evacuation) program. Jack Gladney's encounter with SIMUVAC underscores the issues of hyperreality and simulated existence in the novel, for he finds that the team is using the real event to perfect their simulation. In "Baudrillard, DeLillo's *White Noise* and the End of Heroic Narrative," Leonard Wilcox addresses the irregularity of this inversion by writing, "The world has been turned inside out; simulation has become ground for the real" (200).

An agent for SIMUVAC tells Jack Gladney that he has traces of Nyodene D in his system, and the SIMUVAC computer data confirms that this will kill him. The irony of SIMUVAC is that it is using an actual evacuation as a "model," as the organization "saw a chance to use the real event in order to rehearse the simulation" (DeLillo 139). After the ATE, when the real danger is gone, the SIMUVAC team remains in Blacksmith and performs simulated evacuations, and Jack Gladney's children participate. Even after the ATE is over, the program still needs to perfect their response. When a suspicious smell turns up one day, well after the ATE, the residents deny its existence because they are waiting for the SIMUVAC or media to acknowledge the occurrence first and therefore validate any fear related to the smell. When the smell dissipates, the residents of the town forcefully forget the event. True catastrophe finds Jack Gladney and introduces him to the dread of acknowledging his mortality. This change in Jack's trepidation reflects how America's relationship with fear is askew. The SIMUVAC project alters the perception of danger further, and the simulation does not actually reflect the reality of catastrophe. The simulation only serves to stimulate the society's sense of complacency

with its simulacra. The SIMUVAC reiterates the inefficacy of the simulacra of terror; it reintroduces the imperfect replication that was challenged during the ATE.

The notions of simulation and simulacra exhibited in DeLillo's breakthrough novel reflect a society that is comfortable not knowing its true nature. Just as the characters of *White Noise* accept their weekly dose of catastrophe on television, while ignoring the fear and trepidation associated with the real counterparts of disaster, American society in the 1980s accepted the lies and manipulations of a government with similar alacrity. By denying a fear of and concern for terrorism, the United States failed to address a growing cultural issue. Regardless of this blissful ignorance, the reality of terrorism and aggression against the U.S. finally shattered the façade of America's position of global benevolence in the 1990s. Early in his career, Don DeLillo embraced thematic issues that inhibit American culture. In *Players*, the author translated the cultural notions of terrorism into those of an individual's ineffectuality. In *White Noise* DeLillo shows a culture that is comfortable in believing false representations of reality, all the while, ignoring issues that are of growing concern. In *Mao II*, DeLillo reveals the effects of this egregious ignorance, as aggression against the U.S. in the 1990s becomes undeniable.

## CHAPTER 3

### *Mao II*

“and people stood around saying, ‘It’s just like Beirut, it looks like Beirut ’”

*Mao II*

“Downtown Oklahoma City looked more like Beirut than America ’”

*The Unfinished Bombing Oklahoma City in American Memory* by Edward Linenthal

The roles of terrorists and novelists are the focus of Don DeLillo’s 1991 novel *Mao II*. Although DeLillo’s (perhaps self-fulfilling) main concerns revolve around the ruminations of a reclusive novelist, Bill Gray, DeLillo’s prescient cultural critique reflects the adopted perception of terrorism that serves to define the 1990s. The novel’s protagonist struggles with the weakening influence of the writer society. Bill Gray cites the capitulation of public interest to terrorism. Throughout the novel, Bill Gray’s near-jealous sentiments of terrorists’ power serves to mask the larger, more abstract confusions of his existence (his inability to finish a book that is twenty-three years in the making, his anxiety toward a post-literate world, his seclusion from society). Whether Bill Gray truly holds an animus toward the reception of terrorists and their influence over a society is moot; the more pertinent discourse of the novel is the cultural shift from a

society influenced by ideas and abstract notions to one affected by actions and safety threats

Written more than a decade after *Players*, *Mao II* addresses the role of the terrorist and the society in which the terrorist operates. DeLillo absorbs the cultural climate of a changing world to reveal an impending shift in society. Near the closing of the Cold War, American people could no longer ignore or demean the influence of terrorism in society. During the 1990s, America experienced the power and rites of terrorist organizations. From the World Trade Center bombing, to eco-terrorism, to racially inspired arson, and the Unabomber, terrorism revealed its ugly face to a dismayed American public that could no longer ignore it. American perception of terrorism in the 1990s was more influenced by incidents of aggression than by representations of animosity from foreign agencies. And, as reflected in *Mao II*, American culture allowed the effects of these attacks to mold its opinions and fears toward terrorism. DeLillo foretells of a society that must interact with terrorism on a very basic level of cause and effect. This perception of terrorism slowly starts to take hold of American society. The reality of a decade rife with terrorists and terrorist aggression reveals the power of those in opposition to the American status quo.

*Mao II* focuses on reclusive writer Bill Gray and his battle against obscurity. Gray feels that the connection between novelists and terrorists is a zero-sum game, and the writers are losing. After allowing a photographer to come to his house and take his picture, Bill embarks on a journey that (he believes) will eventually lead to the end of his twenty-three year seclusion. Gray leaves his isolation to meet with his long-time editor, Charlie Everson, who wants Bill to publish his unfinished book and end the writer's

twenty-three year hiatus from the literary world. Bill resists by claiming that the book is still unfinished. However, Charlie enlists Bill's assistance in another matter that is equally detrimental to Bill's seclusion. Charlie runs a consortium that is indirectly involved with a terrorist organization. This terrorist organization is holding a Swiss poet as a hostage. Charlie wants Bill's help in bringing attention to the ordeal since it could lead to the hostage's freedom. Bill accepts the request, but abandons Charlie's circle of influence and tries to free the hostage by sacrificing himself to the terrorist leader as a surrogate hostage. The writer never makes it to the terrorist group because he dies from injuries sustained in a car accident. Gray dies anonymously on a ferry. Someone steals his passport, thus erasing his identity.

DeLillo's conception of American fear adapts and evolves beyond the obliviousness of mass fear and terrorism, as displayed in *White Noise*. In *Mao II*, the reader recognizes how terror and terrorism become so influential to American culture that they nullify the artist's impact on society. This underlying shift is at the heart of the novel. The 1990s embodies a changed culture that no longer adheres to the ideas or attitudes of artists to influence it. Bill Gray admonishes cultural complacency and cultural mentalities that are no longer altered by novelists with *ideas* and theories. Bill recognizes that society accepts change via violence and pipe bombs. Bill Gray laments the loss of the past, a time when ideas, social progression and revolutionary theories challenged the public and established change within culture. In the 1990s, actions and explosions garner attention. This is why Bill Gray pontificates on the lost influence of the novelist, which has been superseded by the terrorist's power of influence. Even though this response to terrorism reflects a very specific portion of the American population, this microcosmic

reaction to shifting, cultural trends reflects the society's thematic move away from the influence of ideas to the irrefutable power of motivated, symbolic (and real) violence

For Bill Gray—and possibly DeLillo as well—the social roles of the terrorist and novelist relate to one another.<sup>7</sup> Gray's interpretation of the dichotomy is that of a rivalry or a competition to influence society and, in effect, control public consciousness. When speaking to a liaison working between the terrorists and Charlie Everson's consortium, Bill confesses, "For some time now I've had the feeling that novelist and terrorists are playing a zero-sum game" (DeLillo 156) Bill follows this sentiment by explaining what "terrorists gain, novelists lose. The degree to which they influence mass consciousness is the extent of our decline as shapers of sensibility and thought" (157). For Gray, the minds and mentalities of the global community (specifically American society) serve as the playing field for these two disparate groups of people. However, Gray notes that the terrorist's ability to be dangerous exemplifies by contrast the passive (and passing)

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<sup>7</sup> DeLillo's personal research materials, housed at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas, offer insight to the novelist's initial inspirations and thoughts on the relationship between novelist and terrorist. Although, it does not affect the novel, it is interesting to note DeLillo's own ideas without the filter of Bill Gray. In a section that DeLillo strikes, "Terrorists and novelists," he writes:

How terrorism mocks the writer, effects change in consciousness, making the writer seem harmless, overshadowing his efforts to cause a shift in the nature of his time

Secret envy of artist for terrorist. The terrorist commits acts that can't be absorbed and forgotten so easily. The terrorist makes an impact without irony, mockery, ambiguity etc.

The writer can no longer shock; only car bombs shock" (*Research Notebook 2*)

DeLillo writes immediately beneath this: "Terrorism is not a piece of global theater; it's an attack on theater, on global communications, on the idea, the consumer mandate that everything we say and do is readily absorbed and consumed."

influence of the writers. Throughout the novel, Gray acknowledges his declining significance. DeLillo suggests that the writer in contemporary society is unable to influence the world's perceptions. Gray acknowledges that the last writer to alter public perceptions without ploys was Beckett, and the existence of a world that is shaped by a "major work [that] involves midair explosions and crumbled buildings" is "the new tragic narrative" (DeLillo 157).

Although the novelist and the terrorist are opponents—competing for mass influence over a society—the two are linked. DeLillo uses their rage to connect the two. It is the novelist's "rage" that aligns him with the outsider of society—that makes him privy to "what the terrorist thinks and feels" (130). DeLillo notes that this "rage" is what links these two influencers of society. The only difference in this rage is how the two groups use it to attain their goals. The writer sits alone in rooms translating his or her vehemence to a page, while the terrorist uses weapons and violence to channel her or his rage. Yet, the novelist sympathizes with the terrorist. "Through history it's the novelist who has felt affinity for the violent man who lives in the dark" (130). Before this new tragic narrative, the violent man was crouched over his typewriter, pounding out his concepts and influence one stroke at a time, but the new violent man wields actual violence in the form of bombs and sees resolution in the chaos of crumbled buildings.

Before Gray embarks on his crusade to take the place of the Swiss poet-hostage, he must first leave the comfort of his voluntary seclusion. Bill Gray meets with his editor, Charlie Everson, who reminds Gray of how he used to view the role of the writer. The two also discuss their shared past. This reunion precedes Gray's meeting with the terrorist liaison, and this remembrance of things past prompts Bill to leave his reclusive existence,

which has grown to define him. Charlie reminds Gray of the “writer’s place in society”—that writers belong “at the far margin, doing dangerous things” that they need to carry guns in Central America, that this was always Bill’s “idea of the way it ought to be” (DeLillo 97). This meeting reminds Gray of his former importance, or at least, the importance of the role of the writer in a lost society. Gray’s “way it ought to be” is no longer a plausible reality. Instead, the influence of “millennial hysteria . . . a total implosion of the future” affects the society (DeLillo 80). In “Two’s a Crowd: Mao II and the Politics of Terror in Don DeLillo,” Richard Hardack interprets Gray’s aversion to this cultural shift as resulting from several different influences, but mainly through the foreignness of the Western vs. Eastern dichotomy where “American individualism depends on ‘mass identity’ or mass production” develops an aura that “replaces the soul of the unique original” (379). This redefined aura of American individualism “projects a cultural xenophobia about the decay of Western culture caused by the infiltrations of foreign languages and innovations” and shows “the imagined autonomy of the individual humanist voice” (Hardack 379). Hardack’s reading of the cultural shift abhorred by Bill Gray misses the point. Gray cares less about the influence of extra-cultural influences than he does his own importance in the culture, the importance of the writer. The writer opposes the implosion of the future for different reasons. Bill dislikes the elements that denigrate his influence and erase his position in society. Leonard Wilcox recognizes this opposition, because in the “new media society, terrorists have taken cent[er] stage, usurping the artist’s traditional role of transforming the crucial ‘inner life’ of culture” (2006 94). For Gray, terrorists and novelists are invariably connected; one is replacing the other. Gray’s words have less impact because of the increased influence of

replication, mass media and mass production in society. Gray is concerned with his own disappearing act in the cultural consciousness, and even though the writer has resigned his corporeal representation from the public, he still wishes for his literary clout to remain. Gray wants to be important and relevant.

The cultural shift sets up the contrast between novelists and terrorists that forms Bill Gray's struggle. This passing of the torch illustrates the waning care for novelists and artists in *Mao II* and society. Gray is at odds with his rival (the terrorist) and a society that rejects his ability to influence and inspire it.

Bill Gray's new tragedy reflects his fading glory. Once a formidable power in the publishing world (the former industry of influence and change) with two great novels, Gray has worked and reworked an unfinished novel for twenty-three years. However, Gray fears that the significance of his hiatus supercedes the potential of his novel-in-progress. Mark Osteen states that Bill's "isolation has allowed others to manufacture an aura for him grander than he will ever be" (2000: 197). However, Gray fights against his hiatus' overpowering of his literary prowess by allowing Brita, a professional photographer, to take his picture and break his excessive seclusion. In the photo session, Gray inflates his sense of self and his own power of agency, noting that his seclusion or the unavailability of his image is akin to God. Gray explains his self-importance to Brita when he says, "In a mosque, no images. In our world we sleep and eat the image and pray to it and wear it too. The writer who won't show his face is encroaching on holy turf. He's playing God's own trick" (DeLillo: 37). Bill Gray's inflated sense of himself sounds like an inferiority complex. He later states, "The narrower the boundaries of my life, the more I exaggerate myself" and this inflation of self is possibly the "only pleasure [he's]

allowed” (37). Gray is inflating himself in spite of his lessening influence in society. In DeLillo’s book, terrorists replace novelists in their role to inspire cultural change. Gray is battling this shift in cultural influence by presenting himself as God-like. As he falls out of favor with society, his only joy is to pretend that he still has significance, influence and power over a society that knows neither his face nor the command of his words.

Brita photographs Gray for a project in which she only shoots writers, but the project is not inspiring a massive following. “If there was any day in her recent working life that might be called special, this was it” (DeLillo 66). The insignificance of the project reflects the slipping influence of the novelist in society. Gray knows the denigration of his role in society, but Brita’s difficulty in sustaining her project shows the falling cultural importance of the novelist. Unable to receive a substantial grant to fund her work, she acknowledges that “she [has] no career” and that the “pictures of most of the writers would appear exactly nowhere” (66). Brita simply travels and records the images of writers for no one but herself.

“Bill has the idea that writers are being consumed by the emergence of news as an apocalyptic force. . . . Quoting Bill. We don’t even need catastrophes, necessarily. We only need the reports and predictions and warnings” (DeLillo 72). The active world is erasing the artist. No longer able to sit alone in dark rooms, expelling philosophies and theories of existence, the writer is locked up with his ideas while the world responds to immediate stimuli. Bill realizes his impending obscurity, and he blames the future and even the news. However, the news is only the reporting of events (biased or not), so Bill is not citing CNN for his dismissal from the sublime of cultural influence but culture itself for forgetting about the reclusive genius that invited obscurity but now fears its all-

encompassing obfuscation. Leonard Wilcox notes that Gray's understanding of terrorists and terrorism relates to his understanding of media and the "apocalyptic force" of news. Terrorism is precisely related to the media-saturated culture that Gray believes is consuming him (2006 91). This media-saturated culture lets "informational events" stand in for the real, for grand narratives no longer influence people because, as Leonard Wilcox suggests, they are "swept up in the *mise en abyme* of its staging, fascinated by the will to spectacle it represents" (2006 91). The representations of catastrophe are more important; they erase the need for people to interpret reality for their own individual knowledge. The culture of mass-produced image and simulation is partially at fault for neglecting the influence of the writer.

Brita is not the only expression of society's faltering interest in the role and influence of the novelist—Gray actively acknowledges the faltering authority of his role in society. DeLillo presents a writer who stands in opposition to a society that would rather accept the simulacrum of disaster. This idea builds on notions espoused in *White Noise*, but now DeLillo cites terrorists and their ability to alter the cultural dialogue

Through Bill Gray's character (and his eventual death), the reader recognizes the futility of the novelist's search for significance in the 1990s—a world where the influence of ideas and theories give way to the simplicity of action. The above illustrates how Gray's influence in the world is fading, but when compared to the actions of terrorists, the purveyor of ideas is wholly inconsequential.

The role of the writer in relation to the terrorist is quite ineffectual. Bill Gray imagines a correlation of compatibility between himself and terrorists, but his importance pales in comparison to the importance of the terrorist in society. The plot takes Bill Gray

out of his seclusion as he tries to take the place of the hostage. In Gray's transition, the reader sees the true relationship between novelists and terrorists. DeLillo provides a protagonist who is even more disconnected with reality once he leaves his seclusion from society. Whereas Gray inflated his persona to Brita, he displays how he actually believes his role as a writer elevates him to some ideological superiority to preside over the rest of society. Bill thinks that his literary fame is strong enough to override the terrorists' plans. When, in reality, no one outside the non-literary community cares about Bill Gray's ability to impart wisdom or quality into the world. Gray fails to see how terrorists (and a grossly uninterested society) are uninterested in his literary prowess. Gray also tries to designate intellectually significant meaning to events that have their own importance. These two shortcomings illustrate a larger trope reflected in *Mao II*. The issue at hand addresses more than how terrorists and novelists exist in a society. DeLillo presents a culture that is more influenced by actions than abstract thoughts and ideas or concepts.

The terrorist group that kidnapped the Swiss poet simply took a hostage. They did not know that he was an artist. The group only announced the poet's artistic sensibilities as leverage for publicity. The hostage's former role in society as an artist becomes an issue as an afterthought. When the group does not receive any major media attention because of the poet, it trades him, like human currency, to a religious fundamentalist group. Gray and his publisher cannot grasp that the hostage can exist as just an innocent person. The terrorist liaison explains this to Gray in simple terms, "That's why they took him. It's such a simple idea. Terrorize the innocent" (DeLillo 129). The terrorist does not differentiate the role of a writer from that of a banker when it comes to terrorizing. Gray's inflated sense of self illustrates that his intellectual circle is the only thing that

recognizes his fading importance. To the terrorist and to the public who must witness the terrorist's operations, the qualifier that matters above all others is innocence. The only people who would care to make a clear division of the hostage's profession are people like Gray, his publisher and the terrorist liaison who all recognize the artist's impetus to instill meaning in the world without violent actions or pipe bombs. Gray's publisher, Charlie Everson, is the "chairman of a high-minded committee on free expression," and the consortium is "mainly academics and publishing people" (DeLillo 98). The terrorists contacted this group once the hostage declared that he was a poet. Evidently, this high-minded committee is the only agency treating the kidnapping as a special incident, not the UN or the Swiss government. To the rest of the world, the hostage is simply an innocent victim. Everson's consortium is involved in the affair because the consortium may influence the media to publicize the kidnapping and this would help the terrorist movement. By signifying the hostage as a poet, the terrorists actually denigrate the social role of the artist to that of commodity or something to trade. This relationship between the terrorists and novelists reflects the terrorists' apathy for the social function of the artist.

To overcome the lack of influence in Bill's life he addresses the hostage situation and attempts to "bring him back, to return a meaning that had been lost to the world when [the terrorists] locked him in that room" by writing about the hostage through first-person narration (DeLillo 200). Gray's attempts to combat the power and actions of the terrorists are silly. Even though Gray is re-writing the reality of the hostage, the Swiss poet has his own reality (even though DeLillo does not include this in the text). However, Gray's decision to commandeer the hostage's story is altruistic—in the sense that any

reassurance of his power to influence or restore meaning is only a secondary reward. Gray's goal is to assist the society in what he cites as "[o]ne fiction taking the world narrowly into itself, the other fiction pushing out toward the social order, trying to unfold into it" (200). For Gray, the novelist must restore a larger significance into the world, to "increase the flow of meaning," for this is how one must "reply to power and beat back . fear" (200). Yet, the Swiss hostage remains a victim of terrorism. The truth is that Bill Gray cannot combat the terrorists with words and fiction. John Carlos Rowe notes that Gray's new interest in the hostage "betrays a certain futility" (30). Gray is at odds with the reality in which he tries to intervene. The "certain futility" that Rowe addresses is the fact that Gray can have no influence on the life of the hostage. Paltry scribbling will not liberate the Swiss poet from his chains.

Furthermore, Gray will die on a ferry to Beirut, and no one will ever know. Gray is out of his league, for he does not possess the tools to compete with the terrorists on any level. Adam Begley notes that Gray's "mute inglorious end" comes from the audacious actions of the novelist "who dares to play a part on the world stage, who makes a bid to share the terrorist's top billing" (9-10). The novelist is outgunned and ill-equipped to challenge the authority of terrorists in a society that is influenced more by action than by abstract assertions. Even as Bill Gray pursues the noble goal of reclaiming the meaning of the hostage's life by replicating his unheard narrative, Bill will ultimately fail because the hostage does have meaning, as well as an existing narrative; he is an innocent victim and a commodity for trade.

What Bill Gray wrestles with and ultimately dies for is his position in society. The place of the writer in society is no longer what it used to be. Gray's position as an

invisible titan of influence is gone. It is this “curious knot that binds novelists and terrorists” that leads to Bill Gray’s demise (DeLillo 41). Gray is caught in the novelist’s passing role in society. But these are not subconscious decisions or uninspired plans of action. Gray fully acknowledges how the terrorist has taken the place of the novelist in a speech to Brita, “Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness” (41). This encroachment on Bill’s territory of influence represents an important cultural shift of the 1990s. Gray worries about the inability of art to alter the inner life of a culture, but novel addresses the thematic notion of a culture affected by the repercussions of actions over ideas.

In the 1990s, America witnessed a shift in stimuli. American society in the 1990s no longer accepted ideas and theories. Instead, it only answered to actions. This is obvious when noting the rise of terrorism (both domestic and foreign) in America in the 1990s. DeLillo predicted this change, and although he addresses the waning power of the novelist, this paradigm shift dealt with more than the influence of art. In the final decade of the twentieth-century, terrorism became something tangible, something that could kill a large portion of the nation. Terrorism became ubiquitous. Images of destruction changed individual minds, not political discourse. And how could terrorism not be more influential than abstract thought? Brita clearly explains the dichotomy of power and authority as it relates to altering the inner life of a culture and potential victims when she tells Bill, “I’m the one they’re trying to kill. You’re sitting in a room making theories” (42). This simple statement outlines the shifting attitude of the decade. The importance of theoretical opinion pales in comparison to someone threatening to kill. In the 1990s, the

presence of terrorist movements is astounding. More so than any other decade in history, the 1990s ushered in an unprecedented influence of terror and threat to public life.

This cultural shift from the simple ignorance of terrorism in the 1980s and the innocuous perceptions of terrorism in the 1970s reflects a shift in the culture that is larger than a straightforward interpretation of terrorism. The shift reflects a culture more concerned with actions and the repercussions of those actions and less concerned with ideas or ideologies. Terrorism became an issue during the 1990s because of its ubiquity. The concept of terrorism existed in the two preceding decades, but it was easy to address abstractly. However, in the 1990s, terrorist acts and the repercussions of those deeds affected the cultural consciousness. DeLillo foresaw the changing influence of novelist and terrorist in 1991, with *Mao II*. DeLillo uses the notion of terrorism to reflect the cultural shift of America as a country that once harbored theories and philosophies as motivations for change to a country simply influenced by the irrefutable terror of “midair explosions and crumbled buildings” (DeLillo 157). DeLillo’s prior novels provide the background for this cultural change by showing how terror can reflect abstract, intellectual notions in a society through the mass ignorance of trepidation in *White Noise* and by showing the ineffectuality of terrorism and would-be terrorists in *Players*. DeLillo’s choice to ruminate on the existence of terrorism in society evokes a prescience of character that few other novelists hold. In fact, the 1990s witnessed more domestic terrorism than any other period in American history.

The World Trade Center bombing injured America’s sense of international invincibility, while the Oklahoma City Bombing (the nation’s then largest terrorist attack) exposed the internal instability of the country. From other, grass-roots eco-terror

campaigns to the mysterious Atlanta Olympic bombing and the reclusive Unabomber, the decade saw its fair share of terrorism. Even though these actions were inspired by ideological aims, they simply scared the American public instead of encouraging change (be it detrimental to the status quo or otherwise). The foreboding sense of animosity toward America spurred Jeffrey Simon to state, in *The Terrorist Trap*, “The rapidly changing world of the 1990s should bring with it another cycle of international terrorism” (356). Although Simon was right about approaching international terrorism, he failed to mention the potential for domestic terrorism to threaten American households nationwide. The decade of the 1990s does not reflect a definite shift in the evolving interpretation of terrorism in America; the decade illustrates a collective mentality toward terrorism that focuses on reaction over interpretation. The cultural consciousness did not digest events of terrorism and produce a defensive coping mechanism like ignorance (1980s) or derision (1970s). The culture simply reacted to acts of terrorism without formulating a massive interpretation because the constant barrage of terrorist violence plaguing society was too widespread.

In the 1990s, terrorism grew from an abstract term that affected foreign countries or American businesspersons in those countries. In fact, the basic definition of terrorism changed yet again in the 1990s because of terrorism’s prevalence in the cultural consciousness. Terrorism was no longer state-sponsored political adjustments carried out in faraway lands—as defined by Reagan-era politics. Instead, Philip Heymann offers a more apt working definition of terrorism.

Combining crime and armed combat, terrorism is an illegal form of clandestine warfare that is carried out by a sub-state group to change the

policies, personnel, structure, or ideology of a government, or to influence the actions of another part of the population—one with enough self-identity to respond to selective violence. (9)

The World Trade Center bombing was a significant bombing that influenced the minds of Americans. This single attack on a building adjusted the way Americans viewed their country as safe-haven. In her book on media/terror relations, *Terrorism and the Media*, Brigitte Nacos cites the bombing as a significant wake-up call to Americans regarding the nature of their country and the global community. Nacos states that the “explosion in the bowels of the World Trade Center’s twin towers dispelled forever the myth that terrorists are simply not able to stage their violent spectacles inside the United States” (2). This single spectacle of violence and destruction altered America’s aura of invincibility against terrorism that the American collective consciousness projected upon itself. Theories and philosophies from the high-minded individuals of the artistic or scholarly community did not deliver this message. Instead, it was a bomb and an explosion that offered this new interpretation of America’s place in the global community. In reference to Heymann’s definition of terrorism, the main conspirators behind the bombing—Ramzi Yousef and Abdul Yasin—took aim at the entirety of America as their target

After the World Trade Center bombing, every bomb threat was held as legitimate, whereas a week earlier, bomb threats were just reasons to leave the office early (Gruson 7). The World Trade Center bombing opened the door for legitimate terrorism in America. Terrorists no longer worked along the fringe of society; now the targets and terrorist organizations were at the center of America’s attention. The terrorists use violent actions, and, even if their ends are not met, they still celebrate the casualties of the

violence. However, these events serve a goal. The brutal actions are not just endeavors that define their own meaning through the outcome—violence for violence’s sake. “Terrorism is certainly more than a concept, especially if it is considered from the vantage point of a victim of political violence, be it directly or indirectly as a relative, friend or quite simply another human being. . . . It is human activity, context-bound and context-defined” (Gold-Biss 53). The global-political spectrum changed on February 26, 1993, or at least, America’s position therein. In “Suspected Terrorism Hits Home” from *The Charlotte Observer*, Claude Lewis declared in the opening line “Americans now must understand that their world has changed forever” (11A)

Terrorism alters American life and the political discourse with the undeniable presence of an invisible enemy. No one is absolutely safe from or immune to terrorist aggression. Anyone could be a target. In regards to the potential power and fury of the terrorist, Timothy McVeigh represents the threat of this invisible enemy. Tim McVeigh and his accomplice Terry Nichols detonated a fertilizer bomb at the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995, killing 168 people. The bombing action introduced America to a new level of terrorist aggression, an aggression produced within U.S. borders. Edward Linenthal’s evaluates the bombing as something more “than a crime, a tragic event, a terrorist event” but a catalyst that “sparked a crisis of American identity in which much was at stake” (27). The fact that Tim McVeigh was an aggressive American citizen who held anti-American sentiments is not a surprise when noting the presence of militias in the U.S.<sup>8</sup> These numerous groups are well armed and harbor anti-government sensibilities. Although no militia group openly claimed McVeigh, he did

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<sup>8</sup> See *The Militia Threat: Terrorists Among Us* by Robert Snow.

attend numerous militia meetings across the United States.<sup>9</sup> After the World Trade Center bombing opened up the reality of large-scale bombings to the rest of America, some theorists that the terrorist bombing could be “cyclical” and a “dynamic starts [that inspires] other incidents” (“Terrorism”) McVeigh’s bomb forced the society to consider that threats to public safety could come from inside the system they attempt to harm. In *Preventive Defense: A New Security Strategy for America* by Ashton Carter and William Perry, Perry—the former Secretary of State—recounts the issue of militias and their violent initiatives. “American ‘militias’ and other militant groups might also aspire to mass violence. Meanwhile, the tools of mass destruction have been falling into the hands of smaller and smaller groups that are harder and harder to monitor” (Carter and Perry 145). In the 1990s, the threat of terrorism came from every direction. The Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building bombing was the largest terrorist attack in America’s history. The cultural consciousness was thoroughly alerted by McVeigh’s bomb. Only two years apart, the Oklahoma City bombing and the World Trade Center bombing set the tone for ubiquitous acts of terrorism in America. The prevalence of terrorism spiked in the 1990s, offering little time for the populace to reflect on the spirit of terrorism or how to collectively respond to terrorist actions. Instead, in a decade full of terrorist aggression, the public could only react to terrorist aggression.

From abortion protestors to white supremacists, the 1990s witnessed a surge of violence against innocent civilians. Although many actions recognized as terrorism were not acknowledged as such twenty years prior, they all fall under the decade’s evolving

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<sup>9</sup> For a thorough study of Tim McVeigh and his militia-sympathetic, anti-government sentiments, see *One of Ours* by Richard A. Serrano.

notion of terrorism or symbolic violence as defined by Philip Heymann. Dallas Blanchard and Terry Prewitt, in their book *Religious Violence and Abortion*, assign the nomenclature of terrorism to violence against abortion clinics and their employees. An editorial in the Miami Herald claims that an “anonymous sniper who uses a high-powered rifle to shoot in the home of innocent people acts in the same milieu as other terrorists” (“Anti-Abortion”). The article merely acknowledges the sniper’s act, it fails to consider the symbolic violence that serves to intimidate others. Later in the editorial, the author suggests that “[a]ll Americans . . . must stand together against the abortion terrorists.” It is the *action* that defines a terrorist, not the motivation or the aim. Americans should stand against violence, not the despicable concept of terrorizing the innocent. Violence is detrimental to the immediate society; this is paramount. The harm to a future society that ignores the disease of terrorism and groups of people who could enact such terror is tantamount to the immediacy of danger and fear.

The 1990s experienced many examples of terrorism, yet the immediate repercussions of the events took precedence over the inspirations in media reports. In a society so overwhelmed by terrorist attacks, the public could not linger and discover the reasons behind terrorism, for another attack could be quickly approaching. The 1996 Centennial Olympic Park bombing in Atlanta, which killed one person and injured more than one hundred others, reflects the sentiment of accepting terrorism without question. News reports of the event tended to focus on the explosion alone, as it “showed once again that terrorist acts need not be grandiose” (“Unsettling Truth”). Furthermore, the true inspiration behind the Olympic bombing remained a mystery until the bomber, Eric

Robert Rudolph, was apprehended and questioned in 2003.<sup>10</sup> People reacted to the fear and alarm of the explosion, but no one knew the bomber's motivation for destruction. Without knowing the motivation for the attack, the public could not guard itself against similar attacks in the future. The bombing exists as an empty action or simple violence against innocent citizens, and this is how the public viewed the attack—a violent action unto itself.

The Unabomber, Theodore “Ted” Kaczynski, instilled fear and terror in the whole nation as his lethal letters and perilous packages maimed twenty-three people and killed three. However, instead of dealing with the presence of a reckless recluse preying upon innocent members of society, one who abhors a progressive society, the public only reacted to his bombs. Society could not evaluate the shocking occurrence of a misanthrope hell-bent on killing and terrorizing. The public could only brace itself against the isolated crimes against individuals and not the conceptual crimes against the culture. An editorial in the *Boston Globe* urges the reader to ignore the implications of an enemy with inspirations beyond violence and to adopt the opinion that Kaczynski is nothing more than a common criminal. The *Boston Globe* editorial states, “the Unabomber’s deeds need to be understood not as displays of devotion to a cause but as crimes that are all the more obscene for being gratuitous” (“Cowardly”). This refusal of Kaczynski’s cause and the belittlement of his manifesto became a common theme in the wake of Kaczynski’s capture. Even during Kaczynski’s sentencing trial, Michael Taylor, for *The San Francisco Chronicle*, focused on the pain and trauma experienced by victims

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<sup>10</sup> Rudolph claimed that his actions would force the world to see the atrocities of abortion, and that shame would force America to ban abortion. Rudolph also bombed two abortion clinics and a gay nightclub.

as they told their stories on the witness stand and ignored Kaczynski's attempts to promote himself as a "revolutionary" (A1). Clearly, the Unabomber is an enemy of the state and deserving of his four consecutive life-sentences, but the public reaction to his terrorist activities reflects the cultural stance of ignoring concepts and ideas in spite of actions. Ideologies could not alter or influence the cultural consciousness in the 1990s because the action in society took precedence.

The media has an influential role in presenting information about terrorists and terrorism. Although reporters and producers may alter the tone of the news or even the news itself, the public must form its own opinion about issues, and these perspectives mold the cultural consciousness. In her book, *Terrorism and the Media*, Brigitte Nacos elaborates on the necessity for publicly formed opinions about terrorism when she writes, "By paying attention to terrorist spectacles, the public learns something about the complexities of terrorism-related problems: consequently it may tend to form more dogmatic attitudes concerning abstract policy principles and more pragmatic attitudes concerning actual acts against innocent victims" (92). The news media relates the evidence of terrorism to a public that will form its own reactions. Inevitably, the public actively absorbs and assimilates the actions of terrorism. From this, individuals address the reality of the terrorist actions. Although Nacos' book reads like a defense against censorship, she notes that the American public cannot ignore issues of terrorism, for it is inevitable that the public will have to embrace the repercussions of terrorism eventually. Regardless of the ideology behind terrorism, the American consciousness in the 1990s concentrated on stories of destroyed buildings and the dread associated with widespread terrorism.

The potential threat of terrorism permeated American society in the 1990s. With so many groups rising up and using violence to relay their myriad messages, the public only interpreted the violence. This omnipresent, potential persecution underlines the cultural shift away from concepts and toward irrefutable, unmistakable actions. Throughout the decade, the inspirations of terrorists or their messages were disregarded for images of destruction. A conceptual understanding of terrorism or a methodology to protect oneself from terrorists failed to surface during the decade. In years prior, public figures offered ways to combat terrorism—methods that were as simple as changing the semantics of terrorism or making fun of it. However, in the 1990s, no one was safe from terrorism, and people decided to adhere to the violence and destruction of terrorism (while succumbing to the inevitable fear) seen in the media. This shift from perceiving actions over and instead of ideas or concepts defines the decade's relationship with terrorism. With bombings and anonymous assassinations frequently occurring in the public eye, the common citizen could only acknowledge the violence of terrorism and the destruction of terrorist acts.

Fear and destruction inspired change in the 1990s. Change came from the explosion or the silent shot in the night. Victims of terrorism do not know the meaning behind the action, and this form of intimidation without explanation reflects the public's willingness to accept the irrefutable effects of actions over ideology, or pipe bombs over pulpits, lacerations over lecterns.

The characters of *Mao II* reflect a shift away from a conceptualized existence by abandoning their ideological or artistic aims and adopting the corporeal actions of reality to construct their narratives. Bill Gray's assistant/part-time lover, Karen, abandons the

life of a Moonie in the Unification Church founded by Sun Myung Moon. Karen's family actually kidnaps her because she is "[p]rogrammed," "[b]rainwashed" and "[i]ndoctrinated" (DeLillo 80). Her family's endeavor to break Karen from her former ties to the cult-like group resembles the methodology of terrorism. The people who kidnapped Karen mentally terrorized her, which permanently left her "dull-eyed in the near terror of [the] approaching thing" (172). Karen drops her ideology of peace and spiritual salvation because she was kidnapped. The actions of terrorism broke her from her ideologically influenced, former existence.

Even Bill Gray abandons his quest to replace the Swiss poet-hostage because of his mortality. A car hits Gray, and he refuses to treat his lacerated liver, even though it would be a simple procedure. Gray succumbs to death for a silly reason, and his ignorance of the actual world—believing he could replace the hostage and steal back "meaning" from terrorists—illustrates the futility of an existence that only aspires to ideological aims. DeLillo offers a failed-hero narrative as a commentary on the reality of American culture's relationship with novelists and terrorists. The novelist in the 1990s cannot influence a public that is only inspired by actions. Gray's death is symbolic of this futility.

The final character to reflect the cultural shift of away from conceptual influence is Brita. At the beginning of the novel, Brita was absorbed into her project of photographing writers, but in the epilogue, she is in Beirut on a freelance assignment to photograph terrorist Abu Rashid—the same individual who originally captured the Swiss poet). Brita quit shooting writers because it "stopped making sense. She takes assignments now, does the interesting things" (DeLillo 229). In the end, the photographer

whose artistic work propelled her life now prefers “interesting things” Brita abandons her conceptual endeavors for the action of the real world. The public does not want ideas or concept-driven interpretations of reality; the public wants action and news of that action. Brita’s journey reflects this preference.

*Mao II* addresses the relationship between novelists and terrorists, but larger thematic issues are present. DeLillo’s main concern maybe the role of the novelist in society, but what he addresses lies far outside the vocations of scribes and artists. The novel reflects American culture and predicts the attitudes of a decade. In *Mao II*, one finds a world where ideas have lost their power and those who provided of those ideas are bitter at the loss. Even though DeLillo cites terrorists as the thieves of the novelist’s power, he implicates another perpetrator: American culture. DeLillo’s prescience is notable. The ubiquity of terrorism in the 1990s forced Americans to react instead of think. With explosions and peril around every corner, citizens could not address the concepts and ideas behind terrorism, much less develop their own attitudes toward terror. The decade of the 1990s saw a significant increase in terrorism, but there was still an event on the horizon that would forever change America’s relationship with terrorism. *Mao II* may challenge the disappearance of the novelist’s power in society, but the tragedy of 9-11 rewrites the history and future of terrorism in America. The 1990s reflected a society that could not avoid terrorism but could still avoid being thoroughly affected by fear and danger.

## CHAPTER 4

### *Falling Man*

Tragedy struck New York City at 8:46 a.m. and again at 9:03 a.m. on Monday, September 11, 2001. Two Boeing planes crashed into the World Trade Center and forever changed American perceptions of terror. The crashes were the workings of al Qaeda, an Islamic fundamentalist group. Many reactions to the event acknowledge it as nothing less than an attack on globalization. Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* takes a different approach to 9/11 by emphasizing the trauma the attacks inflicted on the individual. DeLillo's focus upon personal trauma varies from common interpretations of September 11 that pursue greater explanation and overall evaluation of the terrorist attacks. The novel's concentration on the trauma and pain of the individual after September 11 speaks to a larger audience, and that audience is the American public. After 9/11, America had to re-evaluate its role in the world of terrorism. The tragedy of September 11 overshadows the terrorist activities of the 1990s. The September 11 attacks re-wrote America's dialogue with the world and itself.

As this study attempts to address the issue of terrorism in the first decade of the twenty-first century, it will focus solely upon 9/11 as the event that supersedes all other terrorist concerns of the decade and defines America's evolving relationship with terror. This study is a departure from those that offer a more traditional analysis of terrorism in

America. Through the filter of DeLillo's *Falling Man*, this evaluation focuses on the characters of the novel as microcosmic representatives of American society. Keith and Lianne deal with the grief and trauma surrounding their survival of September 11 attacks. By following these fictional characters' adjustments to life after disaster and distress, DeLillo demonstrates the struggle against and confrontation with trauma that afflicted American citizens after 9/11.

The effects of 9/11 did not influence the citizens of the United States unanimously. However, the impact of the disaster was more powerful than the destruction of two buildings or the loss of nearly three thousand lives. Many theorists offer explanations as to why September 11 was more than a banal attack on innocent victims, whose deaths could be broken down into statistics of sex, occupation and age.<sup>11</sup> Aside from media coverage that replicated the horror of the toppling World Trade Center buildings, again and again, hundreds of times each day, the gravity of the event exists independently of the occurrence.

Commenting on the magnitude of the attack, Noam Chomsky states in *9/11*, that the "horrifying atrocities" of September 11 are things that Americans can reference in their "scale and character, but [not] in the target," for the September 11 attacks introduce the "first time since the War of 1812 that the national territory has been under attack, or even threatened" (11). Chomsky cites previous skirmishes in the frontier Southwest and the bombing of Pearl Harbor as attacks on *territories* (my italics). The national breakdown of perceived invincibility—validated by nearly two hundred years of

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<sup>11</sup> See <http://nymag.com/news/articles/wtc/1year/numbers.htm> for a statistical overview of the victims of 9/11 and the monetary loss accrued from the attack on the Twin Towers

domestic peace—resonates with the American public, and makes the 9/11 attack more significant to even those unrelated directly to the tumbling towers. Therefore, the attack is not aimed at those working in the Twin Towers or to the globalization of the Western world; it is an attack on America.

Whereas Noam Chomsky simply acknowledges the historical precedence of 9/11 as considerable, Jean Baudrillard takes a more philosophical approach to the significance of the attack. In *The Spirit of Terrorism*, Baudrillard develops a compound analysis to address 9/11's significance, especially as it relates to the cultural consciousness. Clearly, the September 11 attacks were symbolic in nature, but Baudrillard states that this “not ‘real’” attack is worse for its symbolic nature because “[v]iolence in itself may be perfectly banal and inoffensive,” but “symbolic violence is generative of singularity” (29). Baudrillard notes that the actual collapse of both towers is a “major symbolic event” that molds understanding of the event (43). Had the buildings stood or had only one collapsed, then “the effect would not have been the same at all” (Baudrillard 43). The dual strike reflects the terrorists’ double attack—the symbolic and the real. Both towers collapsed, and in *The Spirit of Terrorism* Baudrillard equates the collapse, “as if by implosion,” to the “fragility of global power” (43). The attacks on the Twin Towers were suicidal in nature. These attacks and the exchanges they brought—the destruction of a global image by one consolidated assault—is meaningful to Baudrillard. He writes that there is more to the event than destruction. “The stunning impact of the attack, the insolence of its success and, as a result, the loss of credibility, the collapse of image” is more noteworthy (Baudrillard 82). When the towers fell, the symbolic recognition of global dominance collapsed as well. For Americans, this loss is greater than both the

physical and monetary losses associated with the fallen World Trade Towers and the economy in which they were so ingrained. Following the symbolic destruction of the Twin Towers, America could not fully reference itself as a nation. Baudrillard notes that this loss of self-reference is highly influential to the cultural trauma when he writes, “For the system can function only if it can exchange itself for its own image . . . [and] find its equivalent in an ideal reference. It is this that makes it invulnerable—and it is the equivalence that has been smashed” (83). The terrorist attacks brought America to its knees on September 11, 2001, because America lost its ability to reference itself as it had in the past. Baudrillard’s assessment of terrorism and its effects on the American people satisfies an explanation of how four planes crashing in different locations could collectively alter the cultural consciousness of a whole nation. The impossibility of symbolic exchange in the destruction of the Twin Towers extends to the whole citizenship of America. Although Baudrillard’s explanation of the attack makes sense of the impact of the World Trade Towers’ destruction and the distress brought to Americans, the individual must make his or her own journey to heal and overcome the personal trauma inspired by this national crisis.

Regardless of their symbolic nature, the September 11 attacks dealt out death. The victims of the attack were not symbolic. The lives that ended that fateful morning in 2001 were not symbolic. Each victim is survived by someone who will remember him or her. Kirk Savage’s article, “Trauma, Healing, and the Therapeutic Monument,” addresses the challenges of memorializing those affected by tragedy in America. Even though he values other American monuments to tragedy (Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Oklahoma City National Memorial, Irish Hunger Memorial), he begins his essay with a question.

“Why erect a monument to the victims of 9/11?” (103). Savage’s response immediately acknowledges the necessity of a memorial to give recognition to “one of the most traumatic [events] in the nation’s history” (103). This recognition “would help Americans, especially those most directly affected by the tragedy, heal” (103). Savage clearly understands the magnitude of a 9/11 memorial. The monument would obviously serve to memorialize the victims of the tragedy who lost their lives, but also, to a more symbolic extent, the monument would serve to heal the trauma of all Americans affected by the attack on their homeland. The trauma of September 11 reached far beyond those who had to convert their homes into temporary infirmaries and daycares. The aftershock of the event coursed through America’s soil, moving far beyond Manhattan

The scale of the September 11 attacks is not the only problematic issue related to America’s difficulty assimilating the import of the attacks. Another complicated aspect of 9/11 is the public’s inability to understand the attacks. Many could not fathom that any one group could despise America so much. Bruce Hoffman offers insight to the inexplicability of the event. Hoffman—a terrorism scholar with over 25 years experience—addresses the increasing difficulty of approaching the subject of terrorism because it “is becoming even harder to categorize and pigeonhole, and consequently more difficult to understand” (35). Instead of a generic understanding of or attitude toward terrorism, people must analyze the meaning of terrorism according to their own lives. This is what Hoffman means when he evokes the notion of “post-modern terrorism” (35). Hoffman is not suggesting that the individual should revel in the unknowable aspects of terrorists’ impetuses, but instead that “terrorism is changing and therefore our understanding of terrorism is shifting” (Hoffman 35). After 9/11, America’s

relationship with terrorism is different from those of prior decades. If each terrorist act of the 1990s had been larger or more influential—to the extent that they truly affected people and forced them to address their victimization (collective or otherwise)—then 9/11 would have been a different event altogether. The various types of small-scale terrorism that occurred throughout the 1990s simply benumbed the American population. The spectacle of terrorism is important in the twenty-first century because the recourse of the event resonates in every individual, prompting various aspects of distress and trauma. The shock and grandeur of the 9/11 attacks break the dispassionate acceptance of terrorism seen in the previous decade. The attack on America actively extends to and affects the individuals who comprise the nation's collective consciousness.

In “The New Republic Spirit,” Bruce Schulman—while discussing September 11—indicates that the “implications of the current crisis are beginning to emerge” and suggests that trends “point toward a new vision of community: secular, public[ly] spirited, and oriented more toward social responsibility than individual rights” (158). The trends of a united, social responsibility may have emerged in 2002, the date of the article's initial publication, but soon after the collective shock of 9/11 wore off, many individuals sought to internalize their issues of trauma. Americans pulled together in the days, weeks and months after the September 11 attacks to support one another, but, given the difficulty of synthesizing what Hoffman calls post-modern terrorism, the individual had to internalize his or her own distress to arrive at a level of understanding and growth. Although Schulman offers optimistic promise for the society as a whole, one growing together, one healing together, the inevitable reality of that recovery focuses more on the individual and his or her ability to overcome trauma.

Dianna Taylor's article, "Responsibility and/in Crisis," investigates how 9/11 introduced the nation to a state of calamity in which the federal government and media "invoked prevailing ethical and political concepts and categories . . . that promote conformity with the status quo and inhibit the kind of critical reflection upon and engagement with the present that might facilitate a productive negotiation of the current crisis" (Taylor 48). Schulman notes the drive toward social responsibility. As a result, then, the individual is unable to embrace the crisis of meaning that Dianna Taylor envisions as a context in which a person's "ability to make sense of the world, and [his or her] existence within it, is greatly compromised" (51).

Michael Ignatieff argues an extension of Taylor's position in his book, *The Lesser Evil: Political Ethics in an Age of Terror*. Ignatieff states, "both terror and counterterror are political phenomena, driven by political goals and ideas," and that these goals and ideas lead to "many wars on terror that degenerate into a downward spiral of violence" (114). As an explanation for this tailspin of violence and disregard for ethics, Ignatieff cites the "psychology of nihilism," which he describes as a situation when both terrorists and counterterrorists abandon their high ideals or political objectives and succumb to a *modus operandi* in which "[c]oercive means cease to serve determinate political ends and become ends in themselves" (115). This collective psychology applies to political regimes, but the mentality can trickle down to the civilian population. Ignatieff goes on to analyze how letting "counterterror wars slip beyond political control" leads to "[t]errorist and counterterrorist alike [being] trapped in a downward spiral of mutually reinforcing

brutality” (114, 115)<sup>12</sup> This breach of political ethics not only affects the opponents fighting the ground war, but the civilian population that sustains the political body

Ignatieff’s stance aligns with Taylor’s approach to the external influence of conformity seen shortly after 9/11. If the political machine succumbs to this detrimental psychology of nihilism, then the population would be encouraged to abandon their personal crises for the sake of a popular political agenda. This repression of personal crises is detrimental to resolving the trauma felt by the individuals of the nation as the Twin Towers fell out of the sky and crashed against the New York asphalt, consuming thousands of lives in the fury of dust, plaster and despair.

Although Americans may feel pulled toward a united, social responsibility—and that unification could lead to the unethical treatment of persons—the way to avoid an improper response to terror is by addressing trauma. The attacks of September 11 affected the nation’s response to fear and terror. *In the Wake of 9/11 The Psychology of Terror* addresses the far-reaching effects of the terrorist attacks and the ways the attacks manipulated Americans’ assessment of their own mortality. By using the psychological approach of Terror Management Theory, the collective authors—Jeff Greenberg, Tom Pyszczynski and Sheldon Solomon—address terror as “a uniquely human response to the threat of annihilation” (8). Under this premise, the authors note that the terrorists instilled a larger psychological affect on the American population than the lamentation of thousands of deaths. They acknowledge that the terrorist attacks “disrupt our normal means of managing our natural terror and, in doing so, threaten to undermine the

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<sup>12</sup> The atrocity of Abu Ghraib prison is one such example of the excessive brutality associated with this downward spiral of violence and carnage of the psychology of nihilism.

psychological equanimity necessary for people to function effectively on a daily basis” (Greenberg, et al. 9). By illustrating that so many were affected by the attacks of 9/11, the authors reinforce the individual’s imperative need to embrace trauma and grow from it. This acceptance of altered fear and trepidation combats the blind capitulation to a government, media or culture that corrupts the importance of the individual’s crisis for the sake of the united, social responsibility. *In the Wake of 9/11* corresponds with Baudrillard’s interpretation of the symbolic essence of 9/11, for the authors note how American responses to the attacks “were proximal and distal defense reactions to the reminders of our mortality, heightened sense of vulnerability, and uncertainty about whether the American way of life can protect us” (110). Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon analyze how the attacks of 9/11 overhauled Americans’ perceptions of terror and their own mortality. The authors extend the trauma of 9/11 to all of America, for the destruction of the Twin Towers instilled more than fear, it rewrote the nature of death.

If the trauma of 9/11 is strong enough to alter an individual’s relationship with fear and mortality, then the effects of terrorism mark a strong contrast to those seen in society since the 1970s. The evolution of terrorism in American culture is quite significant. It is important to note how individuals reacting to trauma do not embrace the potential nihilism that Ignatieff outlines. Trauma also inhibits an apathetic reaction to terrorism, which was the cultural response to terrorism in the 1990s. The grand scale of 9/11 shocked the American public out of its benumbed apathy and forced society to acknowledge its trauma. Avoiding trauma inhibits the country’s ability to heal. The issue of embracing and reflecting upon individual and cultural trauma opposes the detrimental effects associated with the “psychology of nihilism” that Ignatieff discusses. The effects

of September 11 struck such a large collection of citizens that it shifted the cultural consciousness.

The cultural significance of 9/11 is immeasurable. To what extent the scars of the terrorist attacks resonate in America's future is unforeseeable. Only time will tell the long-lasting significance of 9/11, but one thing is certain—the consequences of the attack in the first decade of the twenty-first century are momentous. The attack forced a change in the nation. In the introduction to *9/11 in American Culture*, Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln note that the change from a society of relatively carefree, peaceful citizens to a society of potential victims, with foreign enemies abound “trapped [Americans] in a liminal space, somewhere between life before and life after 9/11” (xx1).

Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, published in 2007, addresses this sudden shift of realities. The novel follows the liminal thread of existence by dealing with the consequences of life in a post-9/11 world. DeLillo absorbs the cultural reflections of a society torn apart by terrorism and focuses on the trauma of individuals who attempt to make sense of an altered world. The novel is about a family—a father who escaped the north tower before it crumbled, his estranged wife and their son—but their story is an allegory for a country that must heal from distress. Those in the process of overcoming trauma have two choices—to fail or to succeed. The characters in *Falling Man* explore these options.

In *Death's Dream Kingdom: The American Psyche Since 9-11* by Walter Davis, Davis presents a methodology for achieving existential actualization through realization of self. This psychoanalytical interpretation of American culture elucidates how an individual can achieve an existentially ethical reality after trauma occurs. Davis also

suggests that individual healing involves breaking down systems of guarantees, and his notion of guarantees reflects any construct that allows one to avoid addressing the reality of a situation. The individual uses his or her system of guarantees as an excuse for avoiding reality. Davis lists several constructs that denote a system of guarantees: religion, philosophy, science, history, economy, psychology and emotion (49-51). Trauma results from an event that shows the individual that things are not working as she or he believed. For Davis, when trauma occurs, there are essentially two ways to handle it. one can either face the source of the trauma without falling back on guarantees (and in doing so refuse to compromise the self), or avoid both the trauma and introspection of the problem by pretending that everything is fine (107-09). Davis suggests that the former path is the way to achieve existential-ethical actualization. This concept of trauma provokes a unique way of examining literary texts as they relate to human themes. This method of analysis expands the study of psychological reactions to trauma that could serve to explain characters' motivations and actions.

In *Falling Man*, the distress of 9/11 unfolds as characters within the novel deal with their own reactions to the ordeal. The story follows Keith and his wife Lianne through the seconds, days, and years after the fall of the Twin Towers.<sup>13</sup> The novel opens amid dust and debris, with Keith surviving the attack, "walking north through rubble and mud and there were people running past holding towels to their faces or jackets over their

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<sup>13</sup> The novel also follows a third character, Hammad. This is interesting to note, because the narrative traces Hammad's involvement with the Taliban, from his first meetings with splinter cell leaders in Germany, to his training in Florida and culminates as his plane crashes into the north tower. Hammad's story is told through non-linear, narrative intrusions that serve as lyrical interludes between the action of the two main characters and follows, point-for-point, Davis' outline for fanatical evangelism.

heads” (DeLillo 3). The trauma is immediate. The verisimilitude of distress is honest. The trauma that both Keith and Lianne experience does not reside in the mass fear of living in a country where terrorists could attack, nor does their distress come from a loss of symbolic exchange. Their trauma resonates in the aftermath of survival. Keith and Lianne are estranged, but immediately after the terrorist attacks, Keith seeks out Lianne, without explanation or even full comprehension. Lianne takes Keith back into her life, and the remainder of the novel traces how the two cope with the abrupt changes in their lives. The intensity of the characters’ trauma is fictional, but the source of their fictional trauma is a real event. The novel addresses the repercussions of a tragedy that extends beyond immediate victims. Although the novel is about one specific family, one could easily expand the theme of recovery in the novel to reflect the collective convalescence of America after catastrophe of September 11.

After the “day of the planes” (the term used throughout the novel to describe September 11), Keith returns to his apartment to collect some of his belongings. However, while at his former home, he recognizes the stark contrasts between the two Keiths: the Keith before 9/11 and the Keith after 9/11. Keith’s discordant inner turmoil exemplifies the liminal trappings of a life caught between pre-9/11 and post-9/11—as previously expressed by Denzin and Lincoln. In the apartment, he feels lonely among his things, specifically the poker table that reminds him of an existence before the day of the planes. Keith clearly recognizes how trauma has changed him. He scans the contents of his refrigerator, as though “[m]aybe he was thinking of the man who used to live [t]here and he checked the bottles and cartons for a clue” (DeLillo 27). Keith is overwhelmed by a trauma that affects his perception of time and of himself. DeLillo writes

He began to think into the day, into the minute. It was being here, alone in time, that made this happen, being away from routine stimulus, all the streaming forms of office discourse . . . Only it wasn't so idle anymore. Nothing seemed familiar, being here, in a family again, and he felt strange to himself, or always had, but it was different now because he was watching. (65)

Keith cannot acknowledge why he feels strange because his adherence to a system of guarantees forces him to lament the system's absence. Keith's connection to his former identity is so strong that he cannot embrace his trauma and acknowledge why he feels like a stranger in his own skin.

Keith is disconnected from his former system of guarantees, yet he tries to hold on to them in an attempt to define his existence. Keith embraces an injury from the day of the planes, because "[h]is injury was slight but it wasn't the torn cartilage that was the subject of his effort. It was the chaos, the levitation of ceilings and floors, the voices choking in smoke" (DeLillo 40). Keith is unable to mentally divorce himself from the destruction. He relies on the chaos of 9/11 instead of focusing on his corporeal affliction.

Keith avoids dealing with his trauma again when he engages in an affair with Florence (another person who escaped from the Twin Tower destruction). To Florence, Keith is a savior. She admits that he is the reason she is alive. Florence says, "you saved my life. After what happened, so many gone, friends gone, people I worked with, I was nearly gone, nearly dead, in another way. I couldn't see people, talk to people, go from here to there without forcing myself off the chair. Then you walked in the door" (DeLillo 108). In the confusion of Keith's descent from his office, he picked up and returned

Florence's briefcase to her. Their relationship is built upon pure chance and commiseration. When the two are together, Florence retells the story of her trip down the flights of stairs of the tower, and Keith "listen[s] carefully, noting every detail, trying to find himself in the crowd" (59). Keith is prolonging his recovery from the tragedy by devoting himself to the guarantee of temporary history. Keith does not acknowledge that his relationship with Florence only serves as a surrogate for the lost friendship of his deceased friend, Rumsey, who Keith could not save from the tower's destruction. Instead of embracing his guilt for not saving his friend, (a scenario that DeLillo forces Keith to relive by giving the reader the full picture of what happened in the north tower when the narrative takes a nonlinear shift that precedes the beginning of the novel), Keith allows Florence to absorb his actions as heroic. The affair lets Keith be a hero when, in reality, his compunction and trauma result from his failure to save a friend. Keith's inability to embrace the reality of his trauma further inhibits his ability to heal and grow beyond the tragedy of 9/11.

However, at one point in the novel, Lianne asks if the couple can start anew. She asks if they can move past the "conflict," the "everyday friction," the "every-word every-breath schedule" (DeLillo 75). Keith's sardonic response fails to address Lianne's sincere desire to rekindle their relationship. "We're ready to sink into our little lives" (75). Here, Keith exhibits another separation from his reality. He cannot communicate with his wife, so he resorts to humor and insincerity.

Months after reuniting with Lianne, Keith takes up poker, the only reminder of his former life. He begins playing poker professionally, spending time away from his family and scraping by at the tables in Las Vegas. Before the day of the planes, poker had been a

type of ritual, laden with austere rules. However, in Vegas Keith is disconnected from any semblance of the ritualism of the old, friendly game. When Keith randomly meets the only other survivor of his former poker group, the two do not recognize each other. The liminal demarcations of life offset by 9/11 are so all-encompassing that the two characters do not resemble their former selves.

In the end, no matter how Keith tries to regain his former life, his systems of guarantees (those imagined or otherwise) restrict him. Keith cannot embrace his trauma and grow past it. He prefers to be at hazard in the world and not safe (DeLillo 216). The cause of trauma in Keith's life has split his personality into two separate entities—one before 9/11 and one after 9/11. Keith cannot embrace his trauma, nor can he let go of his guarantees to reconcile the two forms of himself. Even after some of his guarantees disappear, he still adheres to their influence by creating faulty facsimiles. Keith cannot divorce his psyche from guarantees, face his trauma and move on. Therefore, he is stuck in a cyclical existence and will never grow beyond this state. The end of the narrative suggests Keith's displacement in time, as it connects back to the opening of the novel by telling the story of what happened to Keith at the moment of impact at the World Trade Center. The novel ends where it begins. This narrative device reflects Keith's inability to break free from the trauma of September 11.

DeLillo's cyclical narrative illustrates the (possible) futility of growth beyond the horrors of terrorism. Davis' method of interpretation supports this. Keith cannot divorce himself from his past and live in the present (much less live for the future). Without his construct of guarantees, he must invent new ways to live in the past because he lacks the ability to forgo excuses and embrace his trauma.

Keith's counterpart in addressing the trauma of the September 11 is his wife Lianne. Even though both characters must respond to tragedy, Lianne has a very different reaction to the trauma and is able to achieve a sense of existential actualization. DeLillo offers the two-fold experience of loss and trauma by writing Lianne, who heals from the wounds of tragedy. In regards to Davis' evaluation of trauma and healing, Lianne is able to divorce herself from her guarantees and embrace a life beyond the distress of 9/11. In fact, by dropping her system of guarantees, Lianne grows beyond certain afflictions of loss that precede 9/11. Lianne's story of convalescence is different from Keith's because she initially experiences the tragedy of 9/11 through her husband's sorrow. Because of her relation to tragedy, she allegorically represents America's journey to reconcile the trauma of the terrorist attacks. Lianne did not have to escape the immediate carnage of Flights 11 and 77 to experience the trauma of the attacks. Her journey represents America's journey of recovery.

When Lianne opens the door to find her estranged husband covered in dust from the toppled Towers, she immediately celebrates the fact that Keith is alive. The immediate difference in Lianne's encounter with the distress of 9/11 and Keith's encounter is that she does not deny the reality of her tragedy. Even as Lianne attacks her daily chores, DeLillo communicates her desire to be a part of the situation, her "need to be equal to the situation" (DeLillo 23). Martin, her mother's lover, tells Lianne to "study the matter. Stand apart and think about the elements. Do not let it tear you down. See it, measure it" (42). This scrutiny of the situation aligns with Davis' approach to trauma. By looking at the event in terms of the real, Lianne can allow it to teach her something, and she is able to be an equal to tragedy (DeLillo 42). By involving herself in the elements of

destruction, she is able to overcome the magnitude of the event. Lianne is not consumed by the trauma and distress of 9/11 because she objectively approaches the issue. Lianne's approach to the tragedy actually serves to keep her significance of self when others inquire about Keith's state. Lianne is able to avoid the inundation of pity and despair that others experience. She can exist and keep her own initiatives because she can make the importance of her corporal existence equal to the loss and tragedy of the event. This gives her strength of character in spite of the trauma she experiences.

DeLillo further illustrates Lianne's attempts to be equal to the tragedy when he introduces her to the performance artist called Falling Man.<sup>14</sup> The artist suspends himself upside-down in populated areas in a pose that replicates the photo from which he takes his name. Lianne questions why she watches the performance artist and realizes that "she saw her husband somewhere near. She saw his friend" (DeLillo 170). Falling Man's



14

Image by Richard Drew, "Falling Man"

performance piece recalls the tragedy of people leaping from the Twin Towers to avoid a fiery death. Lianne absorbs the emotional shock of the act because she sees Keith and Rumsey in the performance. Lianne recognizes something more significant to her own existence in Falling Man's act. The tragic irony that his act replicates—jumping off a building to save a life—reminds Lianne of her father's suicide. Lianne's father, like the people who leapt to their death to avoid further suffering, chose to die by his own hand before his Alzheimer's completely erased him. Having embraced the emotional trauma of reliving her husband's escape from the destruction of the Twin Towers, Lianne is able to acknowledge the deep-seated, unresolved trauma of her father's suicide. Since Lianne addresses the distress of September 11 without relying on systems of guarantees, she displays strength and resolve to undertake her own issues of trauma from her past that are separate from the publicly shared suffering of 9/11. After experiencing the terror of 9/11 through the facsimile of Falling Man, Lianne begins to recognize her other issues and takes steps toward a state of healthy existence, one that reflects a life not defined by the terror and chaos of September 11.

Davis' outline of recovery from trauma and the establishment of existential actualization "begins with the traumatic experience" and leads to the abrogation of "any and all guarantees that would limit contingency" for the individual, thus bestowing total control to the individual (239, 242). But to achieve this life, to heal from the trauma at hand, one must erase all systems of guarantees that inhibit realization of self. Lianne eventually achieves her realization, but not until she rejects all of her guarantees that operated as support systems.

Lianne demonstrates her ability to dispose of guarantees as soon as she enters into the novel. Lianne welcomes her husband back into her life, despite their long separation, and she does not hold any grudges. Throughout the novel, Lianne accepts Keith, regardless of his condition. This acceptance goes beyond her sympathy for his loss. Lianne is open to the new incarnation of their marriage. Even though Keith is having an affair and, quite possibly, neglecting Lianne emotionally (his emotional outlet would be the woman he is having an affair with), she agrees to take Keith back without question. She is willing to accept the new state of their marriage. Lianne shows this level of acceptance when she asks Keith if they are through with the “conflict” and the “everyday friction” that tore them apart (DeLillo 75). When Lianne complies with their reunion, she abandons the marital guarantees of life before 9/11 and adopts a marriage that exists at face value. By accepting the shifting status of her relationship, Lianne proves that she has abandoned an important system of guarantees.

Throughout *Falling Man*, Lianne moves beyond the guarantees that inhibit her reconciliation of trauma. One issue of Lianne’s personal history that afflicts her life is her father’s suicide. Lianne’s father “did not want to submit to the long course of senile dementia” known as Alzheimer’s disease, so he took his own life (DeLillo 40). She volunteers with Alzheimer’s patients as a way to combat her apprehension concerning her own fate. Regardless of how much time Lianne spends with the elderly of New York, she still feels that she will inherit her father’s sickness. This preoccupies her consciousness, so much so that she constantly subjects herself to memory tests, but the results show “no lesions, hemorrhages or infarcts” and are otherwise “unremarkable” (206).

It is not until her mother dies that Lianne is able to erase the remaining guarantees that have obfuscated the full scope of her trauma. Once Lianne's mother dies, she can fully access the reality of her own life. Lianne makes further steps toward her existential actualization after accepting her life without guarantees. Lianne is able to gain the quality of life she had before 9/11, but because she successfully overcomes the trauma of September 11, she is better able to reconcile other traumas (namely the repressed issue of her father's suicide). Lianne realizes that her husband will leave her again, just as he had before 9/11. Having finally divorced herself of all the imagined or abstract systems of guarantees that inhibited her existence—filial responsibility, the fear of hereditary disease and the necessary obsequiousness of a life with a victim of national attack—Lianne is able to put her corporeal self first. And even though she has a history, her history is not the guiding factor in her life. "It was just her, the body through and through. It was the body and everything it carried, inside and out, identity and memory and human heat" (236). Devoid of all guarantees that predated the attacks in September, Lianne attains existential actualization. "She [is] ready to be alone, in reliable calm, she and the kid, the way they were before the planes appeared that day, silver crossing blue" (DeLillo 236).

In the last portion of the novel to focus on Lianne, DeLillo reemphasizes her freedom from the fears of Alzheimer's by stating, "She had normal morphology" (236). This reminder leads to the existential actualization outlined in the paragraph above. However, this metaphor is particularly rich. Lianne's admission that she will not forget the events and actions of September 11 aligns with her actualization of self. This interpretation of the after-effects of the terrorist attacks on the individual shows the possibility of recovering from the wounds of trauma. The considerable scope of 9/11

cannot prohibit individual growth in relation to trauma. In Lianne's case, she not only recovers from the trauma of 9/11 but also addresses and resolves anguish sustained before 9/11. DeLillo shows the reader methods for convalescence while retaining personal significance in light of omnipresent tragedy. Lianne does not have Alzheimer's, so she will not forget the magnitude of her fight against trauma.

Walter Davis' theory for evaluating trauma and recovery is useful when tracking the struggles of literary characters reacting to stimuli and distress. Lianne's disregard for her complex system of guarantees enables her to address the distress in her life brought on by the September 11 attacks. Lianne does not succumb to living in the tragedy of 9/11 like her husband. Her existential actualization comes at the end of her story and the remainder of the book follows the cyclical rehashing of the terror and chaos of the World Trade Center's destruction.

*Falling Man* maintains a humanistic focus on the terrorist attacks of 9/11 as the content revolves around human struggles with grief and trauma that result from catastrophe. DeLillo embraces the reality surrounding 9/11 by illustrating how some recover from their despair and others do not. The ability to recover from devastation is not specific to September 11, but the symbolism of the calamity extends to the culture. Lianne's potential to heal serves as an allegorical guide for others who were affected by 9/11. Lianne's pain is real; her recovery is real.

September 11, 2001, marks a historical date of national tragedy. The date holds a different significance to those directly affected by the terrorist attacks. However, the shock of 9/11 extended deep into the cultural consciousness of America. The trauma felt by the terrorist attacks reached more people than anyone could have imagined. The

reason for the significance of 9/11 revolves around the spectacle of the attack. The attacks had an element of symbolism that was absent from attacks in previous decades. The dual assault accounts for the widespread element of crisis inspired by the attack, one that not only affected the immediate victims of 9/11, but even those indirectly affected hundreds or thousands of miles away. *Falling Man* addresses the complex notions of fear and terrorism that lie in the wake of 9/11. Even though Keith and Lianne survived the attack, they were not free from the trauma and despair associated with calamity. However, DeLillo offers hope. Lianne refuses to allow tragedy to define her reality. Likewise, the event serves as a memorial to those lost, not as a definition of international hate. The two numbers—9/11—do not reflect animosity, but national strength and resilience. *Falling Man* embraces the difficult emotions of terror and the difficult struggle toward recovery. DeLillo's book is not an explanation or a synthesis of all the suffering of 9/11, but instead, the novel serves as a testament to the human spirit and the resilience of a nation that can face great tragedy and survive.

## CONCLUSION

The privilege of prosperity lies in knowledge of the past. One could easily argue that Don DeLillo's theme of terrorism culminates with the largest, most significant terrorist attack in American history. But DeLillo has many other books with many other themes. The prominence of terrorism as a theme in DeLillo's work seems momentous when merely focusing on it as a single aspect of the writer's fiction.

The curse of the present is an unforeseen future. Don DeLillo is still alive and writing. Having directly addressed the most prominent terrorist event in America, he may decide to abandon the theme altogether or continue to focus his craft on his complex interpretations of American culture. However, as the first decade of the twenty-first century is drawing to a close, DeLillo's next work will no doubt reflect the world in which we live and build upon the substantial body of literature he has constructed for readers.

Nearly eight years after 9/11, American culture has finally started to grow beyond the trauma and loss of that fateful day in September of 2001, and there are still two wars being fought over the terrorists' attacks of 9/11. Men and women are entering into these battles because of events that occurred when they were only children. The effects of terrorism in our society will not fade very soon. However, with writers like Don DeLillo, who constantly aim to dig to the bedrock of truth in our culture, there will be novels that

stand the test of time and serve as time capsules to relate the spirit and nature of American culture.

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