The Power of Horror: Abject Art and Terrorism in Don DeLillo’s 
Falling Man

Kelsie Donnelly
Queen’s University of Belfast, kdonnelly28@qub.ac.uk

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics

Part of the Aesthetics Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics/vol0/iss7/5
An international, interdisciplinary, peer- and blind-reviewed open-access online journal of contemporary theory, research, and application in aesthetics.

The Power of Horror: Abject Art and Terrorism in Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*

Kelsie Donnelly

**Abstract**

This paper argues that Don DeLillo’s 2007 novel, *Falling Man*, engages with abject art to disrupt the pre-existing systems of signification and dualistic rhetoric that characterized state and media responses to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The novel engages with one of the most controversial areas of 9/11 discourse: claims that the attacks were an artistic spectacle. *Falling Man* posits that if art is to continue to grapple with the meanings of 9/11, it must depart from familiar discourses of tragedy and triumph and embrace radical artistic responses. The novel fulfills this through its engagement with abject art, which poses necessary questions pertaining to the aesthetic, ethical, and political. Such an art form inspires terror and requires a particular aesthetic. Through its assessment of abject art and terrorism, *Falling Man* destabilizes conventional interpretive frameworks to provide a new artistic and ethical response to 9/11.

**Key Words**

9/11; abject; aesthetics; DeLillo; Falling Man; terror

1. **Radical responses**

This paper argues that Don DeLillo’s 2007 novel, *Falling Man*, engages with abject art to disrupt the pre-existing systems of signification and dualistic rhetoric that characterized state and media responses to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The Bush Administration disseminated a carefully constructed, narrative interpretation positing that 9/11 was an act of unprovoked aggression and an epochal trauma that could only
be responded to with military force. In his State of the Union Address, President Bush stated that “in a single instant, we realized that this will be a decisive decade in the history of liberty; that we have been called to a unique role in human events.”[1] Bush extricated the attacks from the larger geopolitical and historical frameworks in which they were entangled and instead framed them as an exceptional American trauma. The elision of history diminished any sense of American agency or responsibility for the attacks and, subsequently, narrative memory proceeded from the perspective of victimhood.[2] The significance or purported meaning of the attacks was constructed from simplistic frameworks that rendered geopolitical reality a battle of good versus evil and us against them. This Manichean rhetoric was clearly articulated in the false logic of Bush’s infamous assertion: “Either you’re with us or you’re with the terrorists.”[3] Bush’s discourse sought to affirm the moral and political superiority of America and its allies over their terrorist counterparts. The widespread circulation and acceptance of this narrative left little opportunity for sustained reflection on the visual artistry of the attacks. This path, however, is one on which Falling Man dares to tread.

DeLillo argues that if artists are to continue to grapple with the meanings of 9/11, they must depart from conventional discourses of tragedy and triumph. Radical responses should be embraced, instead, and the aesthetic power of the events considered. Falling Man fulfills this purpose through its engagement with abject art. The Tate Museum defines abject art as an art that covers “all the bodily functions, or aspects of the body, that are deemed impure or inappropriate for public display or discussion.”[4] DeLillo theorizes a specific form of abject art that inspires terror in several ways. By exposing a body that has been banned from public view, the abject artist transgresses the boundaries of embodied subjectivity and forces the audience to confront the evisceration of the human condition. His art might be considered morally impure but that does not mean that it is unethical. Differentiating between morality and ethics, Emmanouil Aretoulakis contends that analyses of 9/11 that explore “artistic preoccupations with the humanely impossible as well as the morally inconceivable” offer “a morally free and thus more ethical explication” as they “permit the symbiotic operation of many different faculties – politics, aesthetics, ethics, realism – without any of them ruling over any other.”[5] The “Falling Man” artist and the novel as a whole provide such an analysis. Through its reflection on abject art, Falling Man poses necessary and pertinent questions regarding possible aesthetic, ethical, and political responses to 9/11.
In her seminal text, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Julia Kristeva defines the abject as “the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite,” that “does not respect borders, positions, rules.”[6] DeLillo’s eponymous Falling Man refuses to conform to social rules and prohibitions as he stages falls from elevated structures in New York City. The jolt of his jump is followed by a sudden moment of suspension, during which he dangles in mid-air with nothing but a safety harness to secure him. Suspended in a liminal space between life and death, he is abject: a life bordering on death. His performances are particularly disturbing because they recreate the last moments of those who jumped from the burning Twin Towers on September 11. We need to be reminded here that images of falling bodies on 9/11 were quickly removed from all media outlets in the U.S. This was due in part to their transgression of cultural values and myths of American invulnerability. In the aftermath of the attacks, the Bush administration sought to conceal the nation’s vulnerability by exerting military might in the Middle East. Furthermore, the prevalence of Christian discourse was emphasized after 9/11, as Bush declared it his mission to defend America’s “God-given values” of freedom, morality, and liberty from barbarous forces of evil.[7] This moralistic viewpoint could neither explain nor comprehend the 9/11 victims’ decision to jump to death under duress. Images of falling bodies were images of abject objects or, in Kristevean terms, “jettisoned objects,” quickly replaced with images of firefighters that trumpeted the strength of the American spirit in the face of adversity.[8]

DeLillo’s *Falling Man* establishes the dialectical relationship between abject art and terrorism. The aesthetic power of Falling Man’s performance art does not rely on logic and reason but on sheer visual impact. Through a compelling combination of shock and suspension, he figuratively assaults the sensorium of his unsuspecting audience members. His abject art is disengaged from what DeLillo calls “disarticulations:” the linguistic codification and reification of “us” and “them,” or “good” and “evil,” that induce a “righteous fever in the brain.”[9] Falling Man intensifies “brain fever” by stimulating a rush of awe, fascination, and repulsion. This ineffable feeling clashes with the censure and moral condemnation of terrorism and falling bodies. His art is thus transgressive not only because it tears the veil that obscures the reality of the 9/11 jumpers, but also because it induces forbidden or socially unacceptable feelings.

Following its examination of the abject features of Falling Man’s performances, this essay will turn its attention to the ways in which the abject artist creates a counter-narrative to the assumed exceptionality of 9/11 “trauma.” Traditional trauma theory contends that a trauma victim is an agentless being that
unwillingly experiences the return of the repressed. DeLillo, however, asserts that America suffers not necessarily from trauma but from willful amnesia, through its deliberate exclusion of the 9/11 jumpers from cultural memory. The motif of memory loss is explored further through the story of Lianne, the novel’s narrative focus, who lost her father Jack to suicide. Several years prior to the attacks, Jack chose to shoot himself following his diagnosis with Alzheimer’s disease. He metaphorically jumped to death rather than endure a slow inevitable decline or “fall.” Therefore, Falling Man is not only an uncanny cipher for the falling bodies of 9/11 but also for Jack. *Falling Man*, the novel, explores the fragility of human existence and the artistry of terror, in order to provide a counter-narrative to the official responses to 9/11.

The novel engages with one of the most controversial areas of 9/11 discourse: the hypothesis that the attacks were an artistic spectacle. This provocative and morally questionable view was articulated by several artists and cultural critics in the aftermath of the attacks. Karlheinz Stockhausen described the attacks as “the greatest work of art ever,” in the sense that artists “try to go beyond the limits of what is feasible and conceivable” (cited by Schechner).[10] In the same vein, Damien Hirst was heavily criticized for his assertion that the “thing about 9/11 is that it’s kind of an artwork in its own right. It was wicked, but it was devised in this way for this kind of impact. It was devised visually.”[11]

For Hirst and Stockhausen, the visual artistry of 9/11 lies in its leap from security and the mundane. Although Falling Man’s performances do not match the scale or notoriety of the 9/11 attacks, they are disengaged from pre-conceived patterns of thought and trigger a pre-lingual, subjective response. Martin Randall alludes to author Jonathan Franzen’s contention that he felt an “admiration for an attack so brilliantly conceived and so flawlessly executed or, worst of all, an awed appreciation of the visual spectacle it produced.”[12] Franzen refers to the 9/11 terrorists as “death artists,” who were “rejoicing over the terrible beauty of the towers’ collapse.”[13] The phrase “terrible beauty” refers both to the cataclysmic violence and the gripping spectacle of the attack, which is “beautiful,” according to Franzen, in spite of its vicious intent. For Hirst and Franzen, the inherent “wickedness” of 9/11 is central to its “terrible beauty.” Immanuel Kant conceptualized beauty in terms of the pleasure it elicited, stating that “the only reason why an object is called beautiful is that its representation immediately produces a peculiar pleasure in the subject.”[14] The abject performance art of DeLillo’s Falling Man induces a similar feeling of uncanny pleasure. As the abject theoretically precedes the development of language and conceptual meaning, it moves beyond
representation. Falling Man’s abject art is thus capable of eliciting an unmediated feeling of horrific beauty, a feeling that comes in conflict with the cultural reproach and aversion to images of falling bodies.

2. The limitations of trauma theory

Falling Man has been read predominantly through the lens of trauma theory, with several critics focusing on DeLillo’s portrayal of Keith, a 9/11 survivor, as a study in trauma. This essay critiques and moves beyond the extant readings of Falling Man, which are limited by their over-reliance on trauma theory. Cathy Caruth states that a traumatic event defies understanding at the moment of its occurrence but it returns belatedly. She explains that trauma is “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.”[15] Michelle Balaev asserts that,

Caruth pioneered a psychoanalytic poststructural approach that suggests

trauma is an unsolvable problem of the unconscious that illuminates the inherent contradictions of experience and language. This Lacanian approach crafts a concept of trauma as a recurring sense of absence that sunders knowledge of the extreme experience, thus preventing linguistic value other than a referential expression.[16]

The project of writing trauma, as Balaev insinuates, is somehow problematic, insofar as traumatic experience theoretically exceeds linguistic and verbal expression. In Falling Man, abject performance art enacts man’s primal fear of falling, providing an affective and sensory basis for challenging Caruth’s poststructuralist (and postmodernist) conceptualization of trauma.

Although I argue that Falling Man moves beyond trauma theory, it is Caruth’s Lacanian model that has dominated the field of post-9/11 literary scholarship and fiction. However, critics have recently registered the necessity to re-evaluate its dominance. Alan Gibbs argues that scholarship has tended to overstate the subversive qualities of what has now become a codified method of representing trauma in fiction. The trauma aesthetic uses formulaic postmodernist literary techniques, such as non-linear chronologies, repetition, and shifts in narrative voice. Gibbs further argues that “trauma theory sets an ideal foundation for tendencies which, in these circumstances, enabled a sense of victimhood and false innocence to take root and deflect attention from America’s complicity in actions both before and after 9/11.”[17] The dehistoricizing logic of trauma theory
inadvertently supported the politically advantageous agenda of positioning 9/11 as an unprecedented trauma inflicted upon an essentially innocent nation.

Critical assessments of *Falling Man* reveal some of the limitations and troubling assumptions of trauma theory. Critics, such as Richard Gray and Kristiaan Versluys, focus on the limits of representation in relation to the text’s portrayal of trauma and whether, or to what extent, the novel departs from or returns to a paradigmatic trauma aesthetic. Following Caruth’s assertion that traumatic memory must be integrated into pre-existent narrative schemes to facilitate closure, Versluys criticizes *Falling Man* for its failure to “restore the broken link,” to repair traumatic ruptures induced by 9/11.[18] Still, in this essay I contend that DeLillo does not seek to restore, but rather to break away from pre-determined (political) meanings of or messages connected with 9/11.

Richard Gray includes *Falling Man* in his prognosis that the early 9/11 novel “simply assimilate[s] the unfamiliar into familiar structures.”[19] Arguing against Gray and trauma theorists, I support the view that DeLillo’s novel resists, both aesthetically and thematically, such a kind of assimilation. Catherine Morley argues that *Falling Marts* portrayal of domestic relationships does not represent a “failure of the imagination,” as Gray alleges, but instead represents “one of the joys of fiction” to “go well beyond the narrowly political.”[20] She aptly notes that Gray, among other critics who argue similarly, are only “highlighting one of the enduring and inevitable aspects of all literary fiction.”[21] David Brauner, in turn, thinks that *Falling Man* illustrates how post-9/11 life is both different from and similar to its pre-9/11 structure. He asserts that the novel offers a “double vision,” that is, a “doubling of perception as a response to trauma.”[22] The novel’s double vision, as theorized by Brauner, focuses on the reparation of a ruptured domestic sphere. However, as I argue, DeLillo eschews the narrative resolution and closure that is symptomatic of working through trauma. The novel instead foregrounds an art form that metaphorically terrorizes its audience by breaking with convention and forwarding a particularly radical aesthetic.

3. The abject

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva defines the abject as a “jettisoned object” that is “radically excluded” from the symbolic order, the social network of linguistic communication.[23] As the abject is detached from the symbolic order from which linguistic meaning is constructed, it “draws [the subject] toward the place where meaning collapses.”[24] The meaning of 9/11, propagated by the Bush administration, was determined by pre-existing interpretive frameworks of good and evil. The artist Falling Man,
on the other hand, compels his audience to encounter, or temporarily inhabit, the space at the limits of understanding. Suspended in mid-air, he occupies the liminal space of the “not yet:” he is not yet dead even though he has seemingly jumped to a certain death. His performance makes visible the moment of imminent death, the experience of which usually occurs only once and cannot be recorded. Falling Man performs the experience of near-death, making the ostensibly unimaginable imaginable. Kristeva asserts that the abject confronts the individual with the insistent materiality of death. She makes a clear distinction between knowledge of death, or the meaning of death, both of which can emerge from the symbolic order, and the aesthetic experience of confrontation with the materiality of death. She writes:

The corpse (or cadaver: cadere, to fall), that which has irretrievably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance. . . . No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. . . . There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being.[25]

Falling Man “violently” upsets his unsuspecting audience because he proves that art is presence rather than mere representation: he is not an image, but the physical embodiment of a thing that has “irretrievably come a cropper.” More importantly, his performance art brings back into public focus a body that has been banned from official and media responses to 9/11. Whilst Kristeva asserts that the abject must be thrust aside in order for us to live, DeLillo suggests that engagement with the abject is integral to life. Falling Man compels his audience to engage with uncanniness, “the form of something strange and unfamiliar unexpectedly arising in a familiar context.”[26] To experience something uncanny is to engage with something unfamiliar which is, at the same time, familiar. Falling Man is an uncanny double of the 9/11 “jumpers,” who is also confronting his audience with another familiar yet unfamiliar feeling: the terror of the inevitable yet unknowable experience of death. Although death is a fact of life, the embodied experience of death is unfamiliar to the living subject. Even though Falling Man presents his audience with the inevitability of their own deaths, he also reminds them that such a fate has not yet befallen them. Thus, to engage with the abject body and to discard it simultaneously is to recognize not only the inevitability of one’s own death, but also the fact that one is still very much alive and to live more fully as a result.

Surviving a perilously close encounter with death elicits an exhilarating mix of fear and “awe,” stimulating Lianne's
“extremely strange” desire for sexual “contact” with her estranged husband.”[27] For Kristeva, the subject responds to the abject not only with “spasms and vomiting” and “repugnance” but also with “joy.”[28] This ambiguous feeling is symptomatic of jouissance, a feeling that explains why “victims of the abject are its fascinated victims—if not its submissive and willing ones.”[29] This somewhat paradoxical statement implies that the subject is repeatedly drawn to the abject in spite of the revulsion it elicits. If the unsuspecting audience members are “victims,” Falling Man is a terrorizer of sorts. The binary between terrorist and victim is not clearly defined, however, as the “victims” are the “terrorist’s” fascinated captives. The audience negates neither his abject art nor its terrorizing effects but implicitly appreciates its aesthetic power. The abject artist does not obliterate the boundaries between life and death or victim and terrorist, but refigures them instead through the affective response that his art elicits.

In his exploration of trauma and the abject, Hal Foster reads abject art in relation to a shift in conceptualizations of the Real during the 1980s and 1990s: “from the Real understood as an effect of representation to the Real understood as an event of trauma.”[30] For Jacques Lacan, the Real is “impossible” as it “resists symbolization absolutely.”[31] The Lacanian Real precedes the subject’s separation from the maternal body and its entrance into the symbolic order. The abject is associated with the eruption of the Real as it dismantles the border between self and other that secures the subject’s entry into the symbolic. For Foster, the abject artist compels his audience to experience the Real not as an effect but as “an event of trauma.” Although they are related, trauma and the abject are not synonymous. Rather, trauma is one of many possible responses to abject material; it is symptomatic of the subject’s confrontation with the abject, including abject art. While a traumatic experience is a “missed encounter with the Real,” an encounter with the abject makes present the otherwise absent presence of the Real.[32]

Abject artists do not represent the Real but rather they compel their audiences to sense the presence of the Real, which is often a traumatic experience. Caruth suggests that trauma is an unassimilable “history that literally has no place, neither in the past, in which it was not fully experienced, nor in the present.”[33] Although Falling Man’s performance is not represented in photographs, films, or language, it does have a place: It exists as a living, embodied memory “absorbed” and “recorded” within the flesh of his audience. Recalling his performance, Lianne muses: “there were no photographs of that fall. She was the photograph, the photosensitive surface. That nameless body coming down, this was hers to record and
She feels his art cut deep beneath the permeable “photosensitive surface” of her skin, reopening old wounds of trauma and rousing her pervasive fear of human’s ephemerality. His performance, that is, invokes the Real as its affective power pierces her skin, violating the boundary that distinguishes between self and other. Without this differentiating border, Lianne is faced with the threat of a return to the Real, where autonomous subjectivity is annihilated. Falling Man thus bears the hallmark of what DeLillo calls a “true terrorist,” someone who “infiltrates and alters consciousness,” as his abject art leaves an indelible mark on Lianne’s embodied consciousness.

Falling Man’s performance demonstrates the need for a particular aesthetic that reflects on the artistry of terror. For DeLillo, “before politics, before history and religion, there is the primal terror. People falling from the towers hand in hand.” Falling Man perpetrates an act of aesthetic terrorism as he performs the “primal terror” of falling to death, forcing his audience to have an aesthetic and also terrifying experience of mortality. There is an underlying politics of resistance in DeLillo’s literary practice. In 1993, he stated that “we need the writer in opposition, the novelist who writes against power, who writes against the corporation or the state or the whole apparatus of assimilation.” DeLillo’s position anticipated his later response to the official discourses of 9/11. The abject artist that was urgently needed in 1993, when literature was “too ready to be neutralized, to be incorporated into the ambient noise,” is also needed in the post-9/11 era, a historical scene also replete with crisis. Foster describes America’s post-9/11 reactionary jingoism as “a new order of totalitarian kitsch” that has come to “pervade this society.” This pervasion is furthered through a complacent acquiescence to the deliberate censorship of taboo subjects, images, and totalizing categories of identity.

DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, in contradistinction to that acquiescence, embraces the abject in order to disturb the official responses to 9/11 and social frames of reference. Waging a global war on terror, the Bush administration attempted to protect its sovereign position post-9/11 by denying its constitutive fragility. The desire to restore the nation’s lost (imagined) invulnerability partly explains why Richard Drew’s “Falling Man” photograph was banned from public view. DeLillo’s Falling Man as abject artist, however, resists the US government’s political imperative to conceal national vulnerability. As his “fall” is not captured on camera, it resists the market apparatus that would transform his performance into a visual commodity to be bought and sold. The artist exerts, to greater or lesser extents, the power of horror that I argue is a counter-hegemonic force. His abject art resists assimilation into the symbolic order as it shatters the
symbolic “reality” of post-9/11 America constructed by the Bush administration and mainstream media. In addition, he resists cherished ideals of American invincibility and moral superiority, making the nation’s precariousness palpably Real.

4. Abject artists and terrorism

The relationship between art and terrorism is one that DeLillo has explored throughout his oeuvre. In an interview published in *The Guardian*, Robert McCrum reports that DeLillo used to keep one file on his writing table labeled, “Art,” and another labeled, “Terror.”[40] In DeLillo’s novel, *Mao II* (1991), protagonist Bill Gray asserts that “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] *Falling Man* theorizes an abject art that functions as a form of terrorism: an art that resists integration into symbolic reality with the capacity to “alter” and resist the *modus operandi* that regulates the symbolic order. Kristeva asserts that “suicidal crime flaunts its disrespect for the law” and, as such, part of the abject nature of the 9/11 attacks pertains to their flagrant violation of legal, psychological, and corporeal boundaries.[42] The attacks obliterated, in a spectacular fashion, the view of America as an indestructible nation. As cultural theorist Susan Buck-Morss claims, “[w]hat disappeared on September 11 was the apparent invulnerability, not only of U.S. territory, but of U.S., and, indeed, Western hegemony.”[43] Although *Falling Man* does not focus on the geopolitical implications of 9/11 but rather on the vulnerability, at the individual level, of embodied subjectivity, it does counter dominant narratives and political imperatives that try to heal the wound of trauma, shield the nation from its precariousness, and return to an illusory state of invincibility. *Falling Man’s* Martin Ridnour, an art dealer and former member of a German terrorist group, claims that 9/11 was a “blow to this country’s dominance.”[44] Like the 9/11 terrorists, Falling Man reveals in a striking fashion “how a great power can be vulnerable.”[45] The power of his performances resides in the unmitigated shock of a raw confrontation with the fact of death, “without makeup or masks.”[46] Arrested in mid-air, he is positioned on “the border of life and death” where “death infect[s] life,” appearing to await his impending demise.[47] He is thus an abject artist/terrorist who commits an act of “primal terror,” unabashedly exposing the deep-seated precariousness and vulnerability of the American state.

In one ekphrastic passage, DeLillo describes how “the jolting end of the fall left [Falling Man] upside-down” with his “arms at his sides, one leg bent at the knee.”[48] The author’s iconographic art builds a three-dimensional model of the Falling Man
photograph taken by Associated Press photographer Richard Drew on September 11. Drew's notorious photograph, which was soon censored in U.S. media, captures a man arrested in mid-air, with one leg bent up, arms at his sides, falling headfirst in a perfectly vertical position. The image is visually striking as the man appears to slice through both towers, the North tower to the left and the South tower to the right. This photograph and other images of falling bodies were, according to Thomas Junod, “‘taboo’– the only images from which Americans were proud to avert their eyes.”[49] The publication of the image was considered a morally questionable act and a voyeuristic intrusion upon one man's personal, private decision to choose death by suicide rather than by asphyxiation. Ironically, the desire to negate Drew's image implies a desire to negate the deaths of the 9/11 jumpers.

DeLillo's Falling Man exploits Drew's image for positive and, arguably, ethical ends by rescuing the memory of the “fallen” from oblivion. Operating in high visibility areas, he refigures public space by reinserting Drew's censored image into public consciousness. Performing, out in the open, one man's private decision to die, Falling Man flouts the border between public and private spaces, or the extraordinary and the ordinary. The striking visual impact of his performance is a feat of human ingenuity but is created from the most ordinary of materials, namely, a rope and a safety harness. Although he is known to operate in New York City, there is a level of suspicion around him. As his headfirst falls are neither “announced in advance” nor “designed to be recorded by a photographer,” they are especially shocking.[50] Furthermore, the precise locations and times of his performances are unknown. He strikes without warning. It is thus not a question of whether he will appear or attack, it is a question of when. When he does appear, he figuratively holds his unwitting audience captive. Spectators are forcibly implicated in a living diorama wherein they must witness “those stark moments in the burning towers when people fell or were forced to jump.”[51] His performance emulates the forcefulness of a sudden traumatic occurrence, but this jolt quickly turns into a moment of stillness during which he is suspended between life and death.

Lianne recalls the “blankness” of his face, a “kind of lost gaze.”[52] Gazing aimlessly into the abyss, he is, in Kristevean terms, “at the border of [his] condition as a living being.”[53] His abject body, in turn, pushes to the limits Lianne’s existence as an autonomous embodied subject. Witnessing his performance, she undergoes a figurative blood transfusion with him: “He remained motionless, with the train still running in a blur in her mind and the echoing deluge of sound falling about him, blood rushing to his head, away from hers.”[54] This process conveys
the extent to which Falling Man’s art pierces Lianne and transgresses the boundaries that safeguard her from the horror he presents. The abject blood motif recurs later in the novel, when the fictional mastermind of the 9/11 attacks instructs his jihadist followers to “[b]ecome each other’s running blood.”[55] Whilst the 9/11 hijackers are represented as blood brothers, Lianne and Falling Man temporarily “become each other’s running blood.” The abject artist is thus positioned as a figure of terror drawing blood from his audience. Through the affective power of his artistic assault, he and his “victims” become one.

The intimacy Lianne shares with Falling Man implies that she partakes somewhat of his project of terror. Although she senses the “awful,”[in the literal sense, openness of his performance, she “[does] not think of turning and leaving” but continues to observe, feeling “compelled” and “helpless.”[56] She is captivated by Falling Man and the jouissance his performance elicits. Feeling a fascination with, and even a glimmer of appreciation for, a living recreation of a forbidden image signals the emergence of an aesthetic that is not tethered to preconceived notions of reason and morality. At the same time, Falling Man makes no attempt to explain his rationale, if there is any, and has “no comments to make to the media on any subject.”[57] This is because the power of his performance derives from its excitation of sensation, subjective response, and imagination rather than symbolic forms of communication. Reflecting later on his performance, Lianne realizes that it is connected to Drew’s image. She describes the man pictured in the Falling Man photograph as “a falling angel,” a transcendent being, descended from an elevated plane of existence.[58] Although his hellish “fall” “burns a hole in her heart and mind,” she recalls that his “beauty was horric.”[59] This phrase recalls Hirst’s appreciation of the “terrible beauty” of the 9/11 attacks and the Kantian idea that something could be seen as beautiful as long as it “immediately produces a peculiar pleasure in the subject.”[60] The immediacy of the pleasure that emerges from an encounter with the “beautiful” is free from pre-determined notions of morality and logic. The “horric” and “terrible” beauty that Falling Man and the 9/11 terrorists evoke is due to the abject nature of their “artworks,” which are sheer unmediated experiences of terror.

It is significant that the phrase ‘falling angel’ is evocative of Satan, a fallen angel. According to the Judaeo-Christian story of the fall of man, Satan was cast down from Heaven into the fires of Hell because he successfully tempted God’s human creation to taste the forbidden fruit. Expelled from Heaven, Satan is perhaps one of the oldest and most infamous figures of abjection. The implicit connection between Satan and Falling Man is apt, as the performance artist tempts his audience to feel
the illicit exhilaration of witnessing a banned image come to life. The satanic artist/terrorist flouts social propriety and standards of “acceptable” behavior. Lianne learns that he has been arrested for “obstructing vehicular traffic and creating a hazardous or physically offensive condition.”[61] During his college years he assaulted another actor, “seemingly trying to rip the man’s tongue out of his mouth during what was supposed to be a structured improvisation.”[62] Following his performances in New York, he was demonized by the mainstream media, which labeled him a “heartless exhibitionist.”[63] Without doubt, DeLillo paints a portrait of an artist who is possessed by an anarchist or Satanic spirit. Lianne, however, does not exorcize this spirit but secretly revels in the horrific beauty of his destructive creation. Falling Man’s “fall,” therefore, marks a metaphorical loss of innocence as it demonstrates that art and its reception are not obliged to be morally pure. Simultaneously, his abject art problematizes the dominant narrative of 9/11 that insists on American innocence.

The anarchist spirit of Falling Man’s meticulously planned visual spectacle, and the illicit pleasure it elicits, strengthen the bond between abject art and terrorism. As the living embodiment of Drew’s horrifically beautiful image, he is the intrusion of the Real into social reality. Drawing on Lacan, Slavoj Žižek theorizes the Real as unknowable; what we experience as reality is constructed from symbols, imagery and language. Žižek claimed that America “got what it fantasized about on 9/11” as the Real erupted and “shattered our reality.”[64] In his view, the 9/11 terrorists fulfilled America’s desire to witness a cinematic catastrophe in real life. DeLillo’s Falling Man shatters the “reality” of America as an invincible nation, publicly performing in the flesh the “fall” captured in Drew’s censored photograph. In the same vein as Žižek, Jean Baudrillard affirms that nobody “could help but dream of the destruction of so powerful a Hegemon, this fact is unacceptable to the moral conscience of the West. . . . In the end, it was they who did it, but we who wished it.”[65]

Baudrillard’s assertion is echoed by Falling Man’s Martin Ridnour, who provocatively states, “that’s why you built the towers, isn’t it? Weren’t the towers built as fantasies of wealth and power that would one day become fantasies of destruction?”[66] Baudrillard and Martin argue that America silently rejoiced in 9/11 as the terrorists fulfilled the nation’s secret libidinal wish for the fall of the Twin Towers, the architectural symbols of America’s capitalist power. Experiencing exhilaration in response to America’s humiliation is, by Western standards, morally wrong. The immediate repress of American vulnerability and the swift moral condemnation of terrorism, however, are not necessarily ethical acts. As the War
on Terror has shown, the human cost of America’s desire to preserve the illusion of its invulnerability has been immense and the damage profound. On the other hand, although the “fall” of Falling Man elicits awe and unacknowledged, secret pleasure, it seems more ethical as an act of artistic and political transgression insofar as to be compelled by the unmitigated shock of a raw exposure to death is to recognize the vulnerability of humankind.

5. Falling men

Kristeva asserts that the abject is accompanied by a “massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness.”[67] She defines the uncanniness associated with the abject as “‘something’ that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me.”[68] Although the experience of uncanniness has been theorized as a symptom of trauma, Lianne’s uncanny experience of Falling Man’s abject art is indicative of its revelatory power. She feels that his performance reveals “something we’d not seen, the single falling figure that trails a collective dread, body come down among us all.”[69] His jump is transformed into a descent from a higher realm or, what Lianne calls, “another plane of being.”[70] Her description of Falling Man as a falling angel has a dual function: It not only implies the anarchist spirit of the abject artist but also, and quite paradoxically, shows that his abject art is akin to a religious or transcendent experience. His performance is transcendent in the sense that it makes manifest a material reality that exceeds surface appearances and camera frames. Thus, the artist reveals something more than the “horrid beauty” of Drew’s censored image; he reveals the terrifying decision to jump or fall made by those really trapped in the Twin Towers, and by Lianne’s father, Jack, in DeLillo’s novel.

When Lianne was younger, her father was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease. Preferring not to slide into advanced memory loss, he took his own life. While Lianne flees Falling Man’s performance, the memory of her father’s suicide resurfaces in the form of the textual trace: “died by his own hand.”[71] The experiential connection Lianne intuits between David Janiak, the real name of the performance artist called “Falling Man,” and Jack stems from her father’s decision to ruin the rampant stride of the future and to halt his slow submission to death at the hands of Alzheimer’s disease. In one of her many reflections on Falling Man’s fall or jump, she muses: “Jumps or falls. He keels forward, body rigid, and falls full length, head first, drawing a rustle of awe from the school yard.”[72] Although she watches spellbound, she eventually flees the scene. As she does so, her bag, containing a binder of narratives written by
Alzheimer’s patients, “[keeps] time, knocking against her hip, giving her a tempo, a rhythm to maintain.”[73] The textual fragment, “died by his own hand,” resurfaces while she runs.[74] This sequential memory ties together Jack’s decision to kill himself and Lianne’s fixation with Falling Man’s agency, implying that she has subconsciously cognized Janiak as an uncanny embodied cipher for Jack as well as the 9/11 jumpers.

Three years after the 9/11 attacks, Lianne learns of the death of Falling Man. The cause of his death is mysterious: although some news outlets claim that he died of a chronic heart ailment, others claim that his “plans for a final fall . . . did not include a safety harness,”[75] effectively making it a “suicide mission.”[76] If so, both Falling Man and Jack abruptly arrest time and motion to preclude a prolonged experience of gradual decline or “falling” into abjection due to degenerative illnesses. DeLillo develops the dialectical relationship between abject artist and terrorist through his suicide motif, drawing together Jack, Janiak, and the hijackers. The knot entwining Jack and the hijackers is tightened by DeLillo’s characterization of Jack as an architect, a profession shared by the lead 9/11 hijacker, Mohammad Atta. It is also telling that Jack’s artistic creations, a cluster of “white stucco dwellings” that were built “for an artists’ retreat,” recall the “stucco house” wherein the 9/11 terrorists designed their attack.[77] These subtle connections intimate that abject artist, architect, and terrorist are driven by an innate death wish.

Cultural theorist Claire Kahane claims that “falling evokes not just memory but fantasy, contaminating both memory and desire with perverse wishes that push us past our limits, urge us toward risk, even toward death itself.”[78] DeLillo’s abject artists/terrorists practice this form of falling and push their fascinated victims “toward death itself,” forcing them to face the interminable “falling” of man. Due to the haphazard repetition of his “falls,” Falling Man’s audiences are repeatedly exposed to the feeling of apparent sudden death. Through her own repeated exposure to Falling Man, Lianne absorbs the shock of death, coming to terms with the fact of its inescapability. She no longer experiences the presence of the (living) dead as a threat, but as a “comfort.”[79] At the end of the novel, she sits in a church and “feels their presence, the dead she’d loved and all the faceless others who’d filled a thousand churches.”[80] Like Falling Man, Lianne is suspended between the past and the present, and the living and the dead. Inhabiting this suspended state, however, enables her to feel a sense of communion with the dead, signaling her awareness of the limits of autonomous subjectivity and the possibility of a transcendent plane of being. Falling Man’s abject art and the imaginative response it provokes facilitate the emergence of an elevated comprehension of human existence. His art assaults consciousness in order to
inspire new modes of sensation and thought that, in a paradoxical way, provide “comfort” and the possibility of healing. *Falling Man* is, in the final analysis, a death-driven story that stimulates the reader’s imagination and expands perceptions of post-9/11 reality. Like the Falling Man artist, the novel provides an antidote to the memory loss suffered by an amnesiac post-9/11 America that erased the jumpers from cultural memory. Dismantling conventional interpretive structures and exploring taboo subjects, *Falling Man* ultimately (un)builds official stories to alter the reader’s consciousness, providing a new artistic, aesthetic, and ethical response to 9/11.

Kelsie Donnelly  
kdonnelly28@qub.ac.uk

Kelsie Donnelly is a third-year PhD candidate in Queen’s University Belfast, Northern Ireland. Her thesis is funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council, and examines the aesthetic, socio-political and ethical implications of grief and abjection in twenty-first-century literature. Her work has been published in the *Irish Journal of American Studies* and *C21: Journal of Twenty-First Century Writings*.

Published on October 31, 2019.


**Endnotes**


[13] Ibid.


[18] Ibid., p. 4.


[21] Ibid., p. 721.

[22] David Brauner, “‘The days after’ and ‘the ordinary run of hours’: Counternarratives and Double Vision in Don DeLillo’s Falling Man,” Review of International American Studies, 3, 3-4 (2009), 72-81; ref. on p. 75.


[34] DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 223.


[47] Ibid., p. 4.


[51] Ibid., p. 33.

[52] Ibid., p. 167.


[55] Ibid., p. 83.

[56] Ibid., p. 164.

[57] Ibid., p. 222.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Ibid.


[62] Ibid.

[63] Ibid., p. 220.


[67] Ibid., p. 2.


[70] Ibid., p. 168.

[71] Ibid., p. 169.

[72] Ibid., p. 168.

[73] Ibid.

[74] Ibid.

[75] Ibid., p. 121.

[77] DeLillo, Falling Man, p. 130; p. 171.


[80] Ibid.

Acknowledgements

I wish to express sincere gratitude to the guest editor of this Special Volume, Dr. Emmanouil Aretoulakis, whose attentive readings, insightful comments, exceptional patience and enthusiasm throughout the publication process have been invaluable. I am especially grateful to the editor of Contemporary Aesthetics, Professor Yuriko Saito, for reading the paper and offering some final suggestions.