

Ethics of Counter Narrative in DeLillo's Falling Man

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Qingji He,

"Ethics of Counter-Narrative in DeLillo's *Falling Man*"

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Abstract: In his article "Ethics of Counter-Narrative in DeLillo's *Falling Man*" Qingji He analyzes Don DeLillo's counter-narrative in his post-9/11 novel *Falling Man*. He's objective is to show how ethical dimensions function fundamentally in formulating an appropriate counter-narrative and why DeLillo's counter-narrative echoes views expressed in his "In the Ruins of the Future." He argues that DeLillo's counter-narrative entails the necessity of ethical consciousness and responsibility. It is Giorgio Morandi's still life paintings instead of media representation that become pivotal in Lianne's transformative and redemptive process after the terrorist attack. Similarly, David Janiak's performance art and Richard Drew's picture of "The Falling Man" help her stand ethically apart from what happens and to disbelieve, acts which both Keith and the terrorist Hammad are incapable of.

Qingji HE

Ethics of Counter-Narrative in DeLillo's *Falling Man*

In his 2001 essay "In the Ruins of the Future," Don DeLillo expresses his concern of and appeal for a counter-narrative about the September 11 terrorist attack, one that would change the way we think and act. What is implicated in this appeal is at once aesthetical and ethical: it registers the idea that the recounting of the event "cannot operate exclusively on the level of the event's content (the representational what) without attending to the rhetorical mode of presentation, the ethical how" (Harack 320). With this essay and his already well established reputation following his novels *Mao II* and *Underworld*, DeLillo has built up in readers and critics an expectation for his 2007 *Falling Man*. As Jonathan Yardley writes, "DeLillo simply had to write about Sept. 11" yet, the long awaited *Falling Man*, published seven years later, turns out to be a "simplistic, reductive" narrative, or a narrative of domesticity, centering around the family life of Keith, survivor of the attack (<<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/05/11/AR2007051100018.html>>; see also Conte). Indeed, *Falling Man* is a novel of absences: absence of heroes and heroic deeds, of the complexity his previous novels had displayed, absences of new ways of thinking, seeing, and representing as expressed in his "Ruins" essay, and absence even of key words like "Ground Zero," "Twin Towers," "World Trade Center," or "9/11."

No wonder some scholars and critics should consider it a failure, ethically and/or aesthetically. To Yardley, *Falling Man* fails pathetically in that "there's nothing to be learned from *Falling Man* about September 2001 -- about anything else -- that you don't already know ... Sept. 11 seems to have paralyzed him stylistically" as if DeLillo himself were traumatized by the event (<<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/05/11/AR2007051100018.html>>). Richard Gray echoes Yardley partially in the criticism of lacking novelty saying that *Falling Man* "adds next to nothing to our understanding of the trauma" (*After* 28). However, Gray focuses on aesthetic nothing-newness as obvious indication of DeLillo's and most other 9/11 novelists' inadequacy to find new narrative forms, and a new "fictional measure of the new world view" ("Open" 132). In response to Yardley's criticism, Sonia Baelo-Allué contends that the misjudgment originates from reviewers' misuse of standards and hence expecting "from the novel what they would expect from a piece of journalism" (68). This defense is reiterated by Carroll's view that the novel's central focus is "not the events of the September 11 *per se* but their representation" (108). Charles Summer argues against Gray by using his theory in a reverse way, to the effect that the absence of new narrative forms actually means "that the attacks did not generate 'new forms of consciousness'" (1). I accept Carroll's and Summer's view, but adopt an ethical perspective in decoding this novel arguing that DeLillo's counter-narrative entails the necessity of ethical consciousness and responsibility. DeLillo's use and "misuse" of Richard Drew's photograph "The Falling Man" points not only to his writing about and against narratives of terrorism and media representation of the event, but to the indispensability of an ethical dimension of art and ethical responsibility of artists. This necessity is illustrated in the novel by protagonists Keith and his wife Lianne who have different reactions towards trauma. While Lianne recovers from a trauma that had started much earlier than the terror attack, Keith fails to heal and remains a person without adhering to the principle of ethics.

"It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night" (*Falling* 3). This is the first sentence from the first chapter of *Falling Man*, consisting of a fragmental description of a world seen by the protagonist Keith Neudecker, a lawyer and victim of the attack who just came out of the tower where he worked. The world he sees is one of falling, falling things, people, and towers: "The roar was still in the air, the buckling rumble of the fall. This was the world now ... The world was this as well, figures in windows a thousand feet up, dropping into free space ... and he walked away from it and into it at the same time"(3-4). The "it" which Keith walks away from and into at once refers literally to "the noise" and "stratified sound" (4) and by extension to the world both before and after the attack where Keith is trapped. Readers are denied to learn about what has happened inside the tower before its fall before Keith walked away from it until the end of the novel. Yet we do know right after the fall, after the beginning of the novel, that Keith has walked into a world haunted with images of falling. Similarly haunted and suspended are the towers which fall, yet have not yet fallen entirely: Keith "heard the sound of the second fall ... That was him coming down, the north tower" (5). With this understanding, it seems that the novel begins with and is haunted with images of falling. Yet, we would have to go back to a time before this beginning, back to the title of the novel which refers to something that is absent from the novel, yet haunts it, something that is both outside the text and inescapably inside it.

In contrast to Jonathan Safran Foer in his post-9/11 novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, DeLillo does not reprint Drew's photograph: he suppresses it too, but only visually and partially and for different reasons. According to Zhenzhao Nie, beauty or aesthetics alone is not the essential attribute of literary work and of art in general, but those aesthetic elements are only a "medium to realize a literary work's function" (Nie, Ethical 8). That is, the aesthetic element is meaningful only

when combined with an ethical dimension. Drew's photograph tells lies and bypasses not only reality, but also ethics and is "reduced to a mere aesthetic object" (Duvall 165). As such, it renders itself invalid as representation and ineffective as cure for trauma as it fails to elicit appropriate affective and ethical responses. While a simple reprint of Drew's photograph in the front page of the novel might well be misleading in terms of DeLillo's aesthetic and ethical posture, its deletion points to the lack of an ethical dimension, a point that is made clear in the novel by way of transforming the visual into performance art, but the absence of a visual representation of the scene, the missing photograph itself, says much more than its presence would have said. In their collapse the towers resemble Heidegger's notion of the broken hammer which as a nonfunctional tool is phenomenologically neither fully intelligible nor unintelligible. By repeating Drew's title in his own novel, DeLillo sets in motion a chain of referentiality and intertextuality in that it helps generate in readers' images of falling and its representation, as well as concepts of media and official narratives in general. That is, the title of *Falling Man* foregrounds not only Drew's photograph, but also its suppression and media representation. Drew's photograph is at once paradoxically outside and inside the novel. In other words, DeLillo's strategic use of Drew's photo makes it not only background and subtext but parallel text at the same time against which he writes his counter-narrative. In addition, the omission of the definite article "the" let the title refer to all incidents of falling. This falling includes everything from those falling things Keith witnessed at the beginning to the end of the novel when Keith who is spiritually and ethically falling and failing collides with Hammad the terrorist, which in turn refers back to the beginning of the novel. The double nature of Drew's photo, that it is both absent and present in the novel, finds its parallel the novel's narrative structure and the identity of its protagonists. This "doubling" coupled with a sense of ambiguity and suspense tells the reader much about Keith as a typical US-American male and 9/11 survivor, a person who cannot pin down his ethical identity neither before nor after the terrorist attack.

The novel consists of three parts with the names of three protagonists: "Bill Lawton," "Ernst Hechinger", and "David Janiak." The main storyline is simple: instead of going back to the apartment Keith rents after escaping from the collapsing World Trade Center where he works Keith wanders blindly back to and unites temporarily with his estranged wife and son, has an aimless short-lived affair with another survivor Florence Givens, and then drifts away from home again to become a professional poker player in Las Vegas. The end of the novel describes what had happened to Keith inside the tower at the time of terrorist attack. The circular narration structurally implicates that there is no escaping for Keith. Yet, structurally *Falling Man* is even more complicated. While DeLillo narrates the story of Keith and his family in fourteen numbered and untitled chapters, he adds one chapter with heading of geographical name at the end of each part ("On Marienstrasse," "In Kokomis," and "In the Hudson Corridor" respectively) to develop the storyline of Hammad the terrorist. The terrorist narrative is separated from Keith's narrative through the distinctive chapter headings, its marginalized position, and apparently trivialized volume. Yet at the same time the terrorist plot line is integrated into the whole narration by constituting a parallel and double narrative to Keith's. At the end of the novel, the two narratives are "united." In the last chapter ("In the Hudson Corridor"), we read how Hammad "fastened his seatbelt" (239), and gets ready to steer the aircraft heading into the tower. He watches a bottle "skitter across the floor an instant before the aircraft struck the tower, heat, then fuel, then fire, and a blast wave passed through the structure that sent Keith Neudecker out of his chair and into a wall" (239). Thus Keith and Hammad collide, and their separate, parallel narratives merge into one. This parallelism and merging suggest a comparison and parallel reading of the two narratives with the ethical implication that both are doomed to fail; or to use Baudrillard's term, both are immoral: "Terrorism is immoral. The World Trade Center event, this symbolic defiance, is immoral and responds to a globalization that is itself, also immoral" (Baudrillard qtd. in Banita 45).

The titles of the three main parts with DeLillo's play of names hints at another kind of suspense and undecidability, that of identity. Bill Lawton is actually bin Laden who never appears in the novel, so misnamed because Keith's son mishears it that way. Ernst Hechinger is the real name of Martin Ridnour, the German lover of Lianne's mother and terrorist in the 1960s. David Janiak is the performance artist generally referred to as "Falling Man" (but not identical with the man on Drew's photograph), whose name and identity is deferred until the end of the novel. As scholars have mentioned earlier, DeLillo's "play with names and pseudonyms is indicative of a slippery sense of identity" (Versluys 61) and "identity is loosened from its customary anchors" (Polatinsky and Scherzinger 131). This slippery sense of identity is built into the structure and the language of the novel since all three parts have misnamed titles, even though readers can only know this in retrospect. Keith is radically different from all these title-giving characters in the sense that he is not marginalized and possesses a definable identity as white, US-American (and Western), atheist male. He is Keith Neudecker throughout the novel except that in some cases when he gets mail with his name misspelled at which time he makes corrections. This act of correction is significant and starts much earlier than the attack. Correcting his name seems normal and reasonable and the episode depicting this act seems trivial as it has no direct connection with either the terrorist attack or its traumatic effect. I argue that it is pivotal

to our understanding of Keith as the character who is most troubled with issues of identity and the most traumatized, both before and after the attack.

The act itself certainly demonstrates Keith's clear sense of and desire for definable identity, as is shown in his thought that "it wasn't him, with the name misspelled" (31). Indeed, one's name with its distinctiveness can help one secure a sense of identity or to use Paul Ricoeur's words "the privilege accorded the proper names assigned to humans has to do with their subsequent role in confirming their identity and their selfhood" (29). Keith certainly also knows something is wrong with his identity in the present-day world when he chooses to make corrections: he disregards commercial junk mail on the basis that it "was created for just this reason, to presort the world's identities into one" (32). Ironically, his repeated correction is by itself ineffective: instead of complaining and making corrections to the sender, he simply corrects them on the envelopes, which means nothing if he really intends to get a grip on his identity or as he perceives this. In this sense, Keith is a present-day Sisyphus. And Keith knows it: he knows he cannot correct things even if this is important enough to him to make it "an act he was careful to conceal" (32). This betrays his anxiety for and diffidence in his selfhood.

The fact that Keith cannot make a "real" change to the misspelled name is only one aspect of his impotence and his inability to make any changes and he appears to be in sharp contrast to what he is presumed to be, namely the embodiment of "the trope of the man's man" (Parish 187), because he is too trapped in the mainstream masculine discourse as white, American, and male. Keith is the falling man "who has lost his moorings" and will do so in the future, in the same way he did the correction "and then kept doing it," "and would keep doing it down the years and into the decades" (Kauffman 31-32). For Keith, nothing can change him and his state of falling and unmooring, not even so radical an event as 9/11 with the official narrative and mainstream ideology remaining the same. Of course, there are changes everywhere, as Lianne says that "everything now is measured by after" (138). In certain respects, Keith changes too; he abandons his own apartment and stays with his family. He can now take the responsibility of taking care of and playing with his son, and realizes that life is "meant to be lived seriously and responsibly" (137). After escaping from the tower, Keith starts to see things differently: "He began to think into the day, into the minute ... He began to see what he was doing. He noticed things, all the small lost strokes of a day or a minute" (65). For Keith, the whole world and himself seem de-familiarized: "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). The defamiliarization and Keith's changes may well be interpreted as symptoms of trauma, trauma understood as "a mindblowing experience that destroys a conventional mind-set and compels (or makes possible) a new worldview" (Gray, *After* 27). Despite these symptoms, Lianne hopes for Keith's redemption not only from the trauma of the terrorist attack, but also from what he was before 9/11 "Everything seemed to mean something. Their lives were in transition and she looked for signs" (67). While one's ethical identity entails that "one needs to assume due duty and responsibility" (Nie, Introduction 263), it seems that Keith has now started a transformation and assume his ethical responsibility as husband, father, and male.

Unfortunately, Keith's redemptive changes and Lianne's hope are both temporary. Two years before the attack, Keith had left home, rented an apartment near the World Trade Center and taken up poker playing as pastime with four other males, a pastime that "has long been considered the paradigmatic man's game" (Parish 187). Three years after the attack, Keith has left home again, adrift in Las Vegas as a professional poker player. Also symptomatic of trauma is Keith's appeal to violence when he meets Florence at a department store. Suspecting two men are talking about Florence, he walks over and fights with them, which is masculine enough: "He was angry now. The contact set him off and he wanted to keep going ... if anyone said a harsh word to Florence or raised a hand to Florence, or insulted her in any way, Keith was ready to kill him" (133). Yet, as Lianne recalls, Keith already has a strong impulse for violence and aggression shortly before their separation: "He walked through the apartment, bent slightly to one side, a twisted guilt in his smile, ready to break up a table and burn it so he could take out his dick and piss on the flames" (103-104). Which is to say, already before the attack Keith had been traumatized. Trapped in a masculine discourse, Keith is doomed to fail in his transformative and redemptive process, to keep going as a drifter both physically, and in terms of his ethical identity as a typical US-American male he is impotent to make any essential changes, and as husband and father he disavows any ethical responsibility.

Ironically, while Keith resists redemption, Lianne as indirect victim recovers from her pre-9/11 trauma of her father's suicide, working through the attack's aftermath by way of mediation through art, counterpart of masculinity and media, and with her desire and ability to disbelieve and believe, something both Keith and Hammad are incapable of. If Keith and Hammad are bound to "die," Lianne is haunted by death. Not wanting to submit to the long course of senile dementia, Lianne's father killed himself years before 9/11 with an old sporting rifle with which he once used to teach Lianne how to shoot: "He'd hefted the weapon and said to her, 'The shorter the barrel, the stronger the muzzle blast'" (41). Lianne cannot understand and recover from her father's suicide, which haunts her ever since together with two lingering words, "muzzle blast": "The force of that term, muzzle blast, carried

through the years. The news of his death seemed to ride on the arc of those two words" (41). Thus, while Keith has already fallen before 9/11, Lianne is also already traumatized. Lianne works as a volunteer to lead a writing workshop for Alzheimer's patients to help them keep their memories both before and after the terrorist attack. Lianne knows that she needs these patients more than they need her—she needs them so as to better understand her father's suicide and heal from her unresolved grief: "She needed these people. It was possible that the group meant more to her than it did to the members. There was something precious here, something that seeps and bleeds. These people were the living breath of the thing that killed her father" (61-62). With Lianne's pre-9/11 experience, it is natural to assume that her unresolved grief will take a back seat due to the 9/11 terrorist attack, with all those deaths and grieves, and especially with her husband as directly traumatized survival. Yet the fact is just the contrary: for Lianne, 9/11 becomes a catalytic event in her transformative and redemptive process.

Like most other US-Americans, Lianne can only experience the event through the media. She reads newspapers avidly for information and fact, by reading profiles of the dead: "She read newspaper profiles of the dead, every one that was printed. Not to read them, every one, was an offense, a violation of responsibility and trust. But she also read them because she had to, out of some need she did not try to interpret" (106). She watches videotaped footage repeatedly, to the effect that the footage with the planes and attack has almost become part of herself: "this was the footage that entered the body, that seemed to run beneath her skin" (134) or as Lewis Gleich suggests, "For Lianne, 9/11 is what Jean Baudrillard calls 'an image-event,' an event intended for and consumed by the 'instantaneous worldwide transmission of images'" (163). Yet mere facts, information, and images, although important, will not help people understand the event. DeLillo makes this point clear in his 2001 essay when he states: "The event dominated the medium. It was bright and totalizing and some of us said it was unreal. When we say a thing is unreal, we mean it is too real, a phenomenon so unaccountable and yet so bound to the power of objective fact that we can't tilt it to the slant of our perceptions" ("In the Ruins" 35). Lianne knows the problem with "mere facts" when she tells Martin Ridnour that "'to bring comfort or composure. I don't read poems. I read newspapers. I put my head in the pages and get angry and crazy,'" to which Martin responds that she should try something different, namely "to study the matter. Stand apart and think about the elements" (*Falling* 42).

What Martin means by "stand apart" is that Lianne has to distance herself from the immediacy of the event and media's direct representation of it because "the trouble with immediacy is precisely that it lacks mediation ... That is, to recover from her trauma, whose determining feature is that "it is unsayable" (Gray, "Open" 132-36), Lianne must find other means and mediators to translate her pain. Despite her reliance on media, it is Morandi's still life paintings and Janiak's performance art that finally help her stand apart. The novel mentions Morandi's paintings, especially two still life paintings in the apartment of Lianne's mother, Nina, several times. In the second chapter, the narrator describes Lianne's view of the pictures in this way: "These were groupings of bottles, jugs, biscuit tins, that was all, but there was something in the brushstrokes that held a mystery she could not name" (12). What is of central concern is how the "mystery" is resolved when Martin tells Lianne he keeps "seeing the towers in this still life," at which Lianne looks together with him, and "saw what he saw"(49). Nina, an art historian and Morandi expert, refutes their interpretation arguing that the still life comes "out of another time entirely, another century" and therefore "rejects that kind of extension or projection" because "These shapes are not translatable to modern towers, twin towers" (112). To analyze whose way of seeing is correct will be pointless. What matters is that Martin and Lianne's interpretation implicates the ethical power of Morandi's still life with its abstraction and non-referentiality to the real world. Thus the painting allows "for psychological introspection on the part of the viewer ... for interpretation by distancing them from the real-world objects they might represent" (Carroll 124-25). Martin makes it clear in his response to Nina that he will look and find (112). The ethical power of the painting stands in contrast to the overwhelming power of media representation of the 9/11 attacks and of Drew's image of "The Falling Man" with their real world referentiality, a power that consumes the beholder and leaves no other reaction than to put one's "head in the pages and get angry and crazy" (42). Janiak's performance art functions similarly for Lianne, in that it helps her stand apart and muse; but in depicting Janiak as an outsider DeLillo advocates the ethical imperative of staying outside, in one way or another. Lianne's first encounter with Janiak's performance is transient, only vaguely reminding her of his similarity to the falling man in Drew's image: "A man was dangling there, above the street, upside down. He wore a business suit, one leg bent up, arms at his sides" (33). The second encounter is recorded in detail, in which Lianne closely and fully witnesses Janiak fall upside down with a safety harness barely visible from the platform in front of a passing train. For Lianne and others, Janiak's full performance "is not a representation of the horror of 9/11, it is the horror of 9/11 itself" (Duvall 162), exposing the deceptive nature of Drew's picture and its ethical value of compelling Lianne "to contemplate her ethical responsibility" (Gleich 166). Janiak becomes an outsider in that he chooses to marginalize himself by using performance art, a mode of expression outside the mainstream representation of media and images. And he stays doubly outside

when he refuses any prearranged, media represented, or commercialized performance, separating himself from other performance artist.

Lianne is an outsider too, in the sense that she has a strong impulse and desire to disbelieve. Not long after the attack, Lianne has already "wanted to disbelieve. Disbelief was the line of travel that led to clarity of thought and purpose" (64-65). Three years later near the end of the novel, Lianne again and still "wanted to disbelieve" (232). This impulse and desire entails her ethical imperative to live authentically and committedly despite the haunting of Kierkegaard's words, "the whole of existence frightens me" (118). It is exactly her capability to disbelieve, to question, and to stay outside that enables her to believe and stand apart, to become "an exemplary Kierkegaardian" in the leap of faith (Gaiimo 174), and thus finally to succeed in her transformative and redemptive act. After Keith fails to respond to Lianne's words that "You were stronger than me. You helped me get here" by saying that "I can't talk about strength. What strength" (215), Lianne "was ready to be alone, in reliable calm, she and the kid, the way they were before the planes appeared that day, silver crossing blue"(236). Lianne's redemption is immediately followed by the final chapter "In the Hudson Corridor," where Keith and Hammad, both resistant to redemption, "collide" and "merge," when we notice the circular and parallel structure of the novel. Yet at this point of our analysis it is not difficult to see that the parallelism has reached beyond its structural signification and partakes in the reconstruction of meaning. Keith and Hammad, in their apparent polar opposition, are both incapable of redemption, both bound to "die" and both are incapable of disbelieving, of standing apart and staying outside—the one is trapped in a white, Western, masculine narrative, while the other is brainwashed into a dehumanized terrorist weapon. It is precisely because of this capability to stand apart and stay outside that Lianne justifiably, and to her surprise, acknowledges Martin as a terrorist, but one who "was one of ours" (195).

DeLillo repeatedly uses the analogy between writer and terrorist, exemplified in an interview years before 9/11: "There is a deep narrative structure to terrorist acts, and they infiltrate and alter consciousness in ways that writers used to aspire to" (DeLillo qtd. in Schneck 81). What DeLillo appeals for is the ethical responsibility of writers and artists, to "stay unabsorbed," as he says, and "stand apart" (DeLillo qtd. in Jones 185), and to be among "the nationless, the outcast and the hunted and be regarded as socially dangerous" (Schneck 4). Thus, when he writes in "In the Ruins of the Future" that "it is left to us to create the counter-narrative" (33) he is taking his ethical responsibility to marginalize himself. In writing *Falling Man*, DeLillo becomes Janiak and/or Martin himself in standing apart and staying outside to write his counter-narrative against media and official narrative, and against "the prevailing nationalistic interpretations" (Versluys 23). By presenting the redemptive process of Lianne in contrast to Keith's and Hammad's death-oriented actions, DeLillo advocates the ethical imperative of individuals as citizens and artists' and writers' ethical responsibility to realize the ethical value of art and literature since art and literature are "in essence ethical" (Nie, Introduction 277).

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