Chapter 3

Aesthetics and the Terrorized Mindscape in *Falling Man*

The terror attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Center on the 11th of September, 2001 shook up the entire world, particularly America. People were mourning their lost ones but simultaneously trying to figure out why and what had exactly happened. While they struggled with the problem of how to respond to the most tragic event they had ever seen and experienced, the artists, writers, and filmmakers took the responsibility of portraying the violent event upon themselves through their works. Don DeLillo is one of the authors who attempted to make sense of this jigsaw puzzle thrown by the attacks right in the face of American civilization. DeLillo’s essay, “In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September” written for *Harper’s Magazine* in December 2001 and his fourteenth novel, *Falling Man*, written in 2007, are his responses towards the event of 9/11. Before writing *Falling Man*, DeLillo wrote “In the Ruins” as a “counter narrative” making it his first literary response towards the attacks in which he asserts that the world narrative belongs to the terrorists. DeLillo, in the essay, interrogates the role of literature in puncturing the metanarratives and, therefore, providing the alternative viewpoint. He writes:

Terror’s response is a narrative that has been developing over years, only now becoming inescapable. It is our lives and minds that are occupied now. This catastrophic event changes the way we think and act, moment to moment, week to week, for unknown weeks and months to come, and steely years. Our world, parts of our world, have crumbled into theirs, which means we are living in a place of danger and rage. (33)

DeLillo believes that the space once occupied by the novelists has been usurped by the terrorists. The terrorists have created an environment in which a writer has lost his/her power. His significant works express his opinion that terrorism holds the power to shape popular beliefs in the current age of terror in the same manner as novelists like Kafka, Beckett, or Mailer once did. Similarly, in one of his trenchant novels, *Mao II*, published in 1991, DeLillo articulates his own apprehension about the
powerless condition of the writers in the face of terrorism, thus, “They (the terrorists) make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated (41)”. He solemnly believes that writers, in the contemporary age of terrorism, have lost their power of altering the inner life of America to terrorists. As such, DeLillo sets up the task for serious writers to snatch the control of narrativity back from them since literary representation has the power to challenge the inclinations of grandnarrative.

Even prior to the first futile terrorist attack on World Trade Center on February 26, 1993, when a group of terrorists planted a bomb in a truck below the North Tower, he has been incorporating the haunting presence of the twin towers in his novels. In his fifth novel, *Players*, published in 1977, there are various dialogues uttered by the fictional characters that hint at the impending doom looming over the towers. One of the characters, Pammy Wynant, who works in the North Tower, feels that “the towers didn’t seem permanent” (84) to which her friend responds, “That plane looks like it’s going to hit” (84). The intense literary acumen and the politico-historical sensitivity of DeLillo have established him as a clairvoyant and prophetic writer. His novels like *Mao II* (1991), *Underworld* (1997) also deal with impending event of 9/11, directly or indirectly. Chris Cumming in “Falling Men: On Don DeLillo and Terror” (2011) indicates that:

DeLillo seemed prescient not because he predicted the future, but because he focused on history that has all but disappeared from American cultural memory: the terrorism of the 1970s, the red armies and brigades and the various liberation fronts that bombed planes and hotels and gunned down terrorists in America and across Europe, the Baader-Meinhof gang attacking embassies, the Irish Republican Army shooting cops, abductions and assassinations by Marxists splinter groups. DeLillo’s work preserved the atmosphere of that time, and so seemed to foreshadow a later period of pervasive menace. . . . (web)

The novel develops themes advanced in his short story, “Baader-Meinhof,” published in April, 2002 in the *Harper’s Magazine* which has been elaborated upon in the later part of this chapter. Before being published as a novel on May 15, 2007, the excerpt from the novel appeared as a short story, titled as “Still Life” in *The New York
*Times* on April 09, 2007. It covers the part of the novel in which Keith Neudecker, the protagonist, comes back home to his estranged wife, right after he survives the attack, in a discombobulated state. In the story 9/11, as an event, is camouflaged by the struggle of the family to cope up with the impact of the event.

The novel, *Falling Man*, is narrated by an omniscient narrator in the third person. DeLillo, as a contemporary avant-garde, observes that the real is now unreal or too real to be portrayed by the conventional straightforward realist narrative. Hence, the narrative of the novel jumps back and forth unmethodically, introducing unnamed characters, which makes it hard for the readers to recognize as to who is speaking, being spoken to or talked about. The conversations between the characters in the novel are abstract and oblique, sometimes repetitive which reflect the atmosphere of shock, confusion, and frustration, post 9/11. Short and broken sentences in the novel manifest the atmosphere of chaos and loss of understanding.

The novel is divided into three parts: “Bill Lawton,” Ernst Hechinger,” and “David Janiak.” In each section of the novel the reader’s knowledge about the identities of the characters is deferred. Joseph M. Conte associates this deferment of recognition with the inability of Americans to comprehend the sequence of cause and effect of 9/11. First, develops the shock of the attack “during which we ask what is happening to us,” then “there is the revelation of a plot that has been devised by perpetrators unknown to us and whom we are only now, and only too late, coming to identify” (569). Each part ends with a short narrative from the perspective of one of the fictional hijackers, called Hammad. He starts his early days in Germany under the leadership of real terrorist, Mohammad Atta, and later in Florida with other fellow terrorists, and spends his final moments aboard the plane that crashes in the North Tower. The novel also traverses through the lives of the members of a dysfunctional family; Keith Neudecker, his wife Lianne, and their only son, Justin, and their close associations right from the fall of the towers, through the harrowing aftermath of 9/11, to the first Iraq war protest of 2004. Their journey is presented to the readers in a non-linear manner with fragmented plot that represents the chaos of the days, post- 9/11. The plot of the novel and its repeated visual turns obliges a slowed-down reading process as assessed by Marie-Christine Leps. She says, “Reading *Falling Man* (2007) is a halting process: it begins and ends in the midst of destruction and chaos, with someone walking “away from it and into it at the same time” (4)” (184). Since the
closing moments of the novel are synchronous with its opening lines, in the end the reader finds himself/herself taken back to the time when the planes were hijacked and then crashed into the towers. Thus, the author, in the novel, documents the impact of 9/11 in various flashbacks and digressions in the form of narratives of memory that outline the story of the novel. By doing so, DeLillo designs a method whereby he “can re-examine the motives of the terrorists and the experience of the terrorists” (Conte 566). The heading back of the end to its beginning mimics the incessant repetition of the fall of the towers telecast on television.

Falling Man begins with the survivor, Keith Neudecker walking in a condition of near-noctambulism through “rubble and mud” (3), covered in blood and ash, among “people running past holding towels to their faces or jackets over their heads” (3) and handkerchief to their mouths. DeLillo presents the visuals of human suffering against the backdrop of twisted metal of the collapsing structures of the World Trade Center. The chaos around Keith prevents him from understanding and responding to the event that instant. He is shown walking slowly while other survivors are running frantically, covering their faces. By this incongruent and surrealist juxtaposition of his slow walking with the running and falling of other survivors the writer depicts the utter shock of Americans because of 9/11. The narrator of the novel paints quite a poignant and disturbing picture of that moment stating:

It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night. He was walking north through rubble and mud and there were people running past holding towels to their faces or jackets over their heads. They had handkerchiefs pressed to their mouths. They had shoes in their hands, a woman with a shoe in each hand, running past him. They ran and fell, some of them, confused and ungainly, with debris coming down around them, and there were people taking shelter under cars. The roar was still in the air, the buckling rumble of the fall. This was the world now. (3)

Here the urban setting is New York which is radically changed after the collapse of the mighty, seemingly indestructible towers. It is in this precise moment that the space is shared simultaneously by the victims, the survivors and the terrorists at once. The closing of the novel is as harrowing and provoking as the beginning. In the closing
chapters the writer portrays a moving picture of the attack—from the terrorists’ sitting in the plane with their apprehension to the havoc the attack would cause. As soon as the plane hits the North Tower Keith jolts out of his chair and rams straight into the wall. The floor on which he has been standing begins to shake and slide making him lose his balance. Crawling along the floor he sees the ceiling beginning to roar and ripple. He covers his head with his arms. The novel reads:

The tower began a long sway left and he raised his head. He took his head out of his knees to listen. He tried to be absolutely still and tried to breathe and tried to listen. . . . In time he felt the tower stop leaning. The lean felt forever and impossible and he sat and listened and after a while the tower began to roll slowly back. . . . When the tower swung finally back to the vertical he pushed himself off the floor and moved to the doorway. The ceiling at the far end of the hall moaned and opened. The stress was audible and then it opened, objects coming down, panels and wall-board. . . . He felt things come and go. (240)

The construction of the Twin Towers was completed in 1973 which according to Joseph M. Conte, was an “era of the prefix “super”—from the supermarket to the supersonic, they served as a manifestation of America’s ambitions as a superpower” (562). The construction of the twin towers marked the beginning of supremacy and power of American capitalism over the entire world. The buildings symbolized for the promises and global economic hegemony based on free market capitalism. Similarly the terrorist attack lodged on the twin towers came as a symbol of threat. Jurgen Habermas in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* calls 9/11 as the first historic world event. While viewing the attack as an assault upon the future, he writes:

The attackers did not just physically cause the highest buildings in Manhattan to collapse; they also destroyed an icon in the household imagery of the American nation. Only in the surge of patriotism that followed did one begin to recognize the central importance the towers held in the popular imagination, with their irreplaceable imprint on the Manhattan skyline and their powerful embodiment of economic strength and projection toward the future. (28)
The twin towers were not just the tallest buildings in the USA, but represented the invincibility of American nation and left an indelible imprint on the American cultural landscape and mindscape. Examining the cultural narrative of terrorism apropos of the concept of the place as “reinforcing personal and cultural identity” (191), in the face of dissolving beliefs, Bruce Janz perceived that the narrative of a place is meant to establish home as constitutive of the self, as a place of dwelling in a Heideggerian sense” (192). He claimed that 9/11 was an attempt to disintegrate the place of identity of Americans as the world’s cosmopolis (192). As noted by George Lakoff, the fall of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center were closely tied up with their “identities and with a vast amount of what we took for granted about our everyday life . . . it became a symbol of America” (52). In the absence of the towers, which Americans revered, they felt a deep void. The void created by the destruction of the towers was recorded on an individual level for the Americans which Neil Leach perceived as a sign of damage to the self. He writes, “Human beings can equate themselves with buildings and identify with them. And once a sense of identity has been forged against a backdrop of a certain architectural environment, any damage to that environment will be read as damage to the self” (web).

The unexpected and sudden attack on the World Trade Center shook the very bedrock on which the identity of the Americans rested and instead induced paranoia and collective trauma into them. The author depicts how the event of 9/11 has a colossal and decimating effect on the fictional characters. Keith’s close call with his death suddenly neutralizes and ossifies his individual self and he becomes fused with the surrounding. A spacio-temporal warp sets in when things cease to be things and human human:

In time he heard the sound of the second fall. He crossed the Canal Street and began to see things, somehow, differently. Things did not seem to charge in the usual ways, the cobbled street, the iron cast buildings. There was something critically missing from the things around him. . . . He heard the sound of the second fall, or felt it in the trembling air, the north tower coming down, a soft awe of voices in distance. It was him coming down, the north tower. (5)
The obscurity shrouding the nature of the novel’s narrative is intricated by the introduction of a second “him” (5) as the protagonist recognizes the fall of the North Tower, through his bewildered stream of consciousness. It hints at two different subjects—the protagonist and the personified North Tower. In the context of overlapping subjectivities, in the narrative of Falling Man, Kristy A. Hemsworth in “Empathetic Encounters: Negotiating Identity in 9/11 Fiction and Translation” writes:

This pronoun could first indicate the personification of the tower itself as the humanized individual, or could equally refer to the protagonist’s disorienting sense of temporal dislocation, whereby his physical escape from the towers does not secure an equivalent, psychological break from their traumatic effects. (9)

The introduction of the pronoun “him” not only suggests the indeterminacy shrouding the subject, but also destabilizes its narration. Identity of “him” (5) remains vague that refers to the ambiguity that the novel carries at large. Such vagueness of the pronouns like ‘he’ or ‘she’ without announcing the name of characters is a regular feature in the novel, something that hints at the fluidity and redundancy of human subject in the contemporary post-human world. Besides, such an aesthetic acumen jolts the very foundation of the text on which it rests and commensurates with the paranoia which DeLillo undertakes to capture.

Since the event was captured and telecast all over the world on TV in an incessant loop, every American felt to be a part of the event. Anne Whitehead in her book, Memory, maintains that “the collective memory of city dwellers”, and the referents to which these individuals associate their universal sense of identity, “is affected far more by a disturbance in their physical surroundings…than by the most violent national upheavals that leave the building intact” (137). The same chaos, paranoia, and the dissolution of the identities of Americans get adequately projected through DeLillo’s fictional characters. He depicts the harrowing effect of the 9/11 on the disconnected lives of the dysfunctional family. This is something that Bob Batchelor in “Literary Lions Tackle 9/11: Updike and DeLillo Depicting History through Novel” opines:

DeLillo creates characters that stand in for the wash of emotion the nation felt following the terrorist attacks. Keith, the survivor, represents victimization. He
copes but is out of sync with those around him, basically falling into monotonous trance. The routine he develops gives a mechanism to survive, but he is too emotionally wired to manage. Lianne symbolizes the fear that gripped the nation. She sees terror all around her and searches for answers in the deaths and destruction, but she cannot look away, even as 9/11 tightens its hold on her. (180)

Following his escape from the collapsing Twin Towers, Keith Neudecker arrives at his old home, to his wife, Lianne, and their only son, Justin, after living separately from them for a year and a half. This act of Keith’s comes as a great surprise to both Lianne and her mother, Nina Bartos, since he had left home at his own will due to his compatibility issues with his wife and his supposed affair with a girl, unnamed in the novel. During their separation, he had been living at an apartment close by the towers in which he worked as a corporate lawyer. While he enjoyed a carefree life like that of a bachelor, playing poker with his six friends every weekend from evening till the dawn, Lianne too started seeing another man, a T.V executive. Thus, it seems that they both had been living a life where there was no room for each other. The attack of 9/11 gives them a chance to restart their old family life. The close proximity of Keith and Lianne with the event itself, however, is differently responded to by each one of them.

Having a narrow escape from the attacks of 9/11 Keith’s suffers from trauma which Kristiaan Versluys calls as “Freudian melancholia” (20) and is different from mourning. Sigmund Freud, in “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through” elaborated on the distinction between melancholia and mourning. Freud studies melancholia as a process in which the traumatized self compulsively identifies itself with the lost subject and involves itself in certain repetitive actions (150). Freud infers that the melancholic “patient does not remember anything of what is forgotten or repressed, but acts it out. He reproduces it not as a memory, but as an action; he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it” (150, original italics). A traumatized person, thus, always has a relation to the past by reproducing the traumatized part of his/her past through his/her repetitive actions. The traumatic past is carried by him/her even in the present as it cannot be represented in and processed by memory. Though Keith escapes the attacks of 9/11 with no major injuries, having witnessed so many deaths, especially his own friend, Rumsey’s he becomes
traumatized. On his visit to the hospital to get surgery for his torn cartilage, Keith is injected with a sedative which he feels is not working on him as he keeps visualizing Rumsey, the friend he has lost to 9/11:

The doctor, the anesthetist, injected him with a heavy sedative or other agent, a substance containing a memory suppressant, or maybe there were two shots, but there was Rumsey in his chair by the window, which meant the memory was not suppressed or the substance hadn’t taken effect yet, a dream, a waking image, whatever it was, Rumsey in the smoke, things coming down. (22)

After being operated upon, the doctor advises him to do wrist exercises. He performs these exercises religiously four times a day which he finds reviving and restorative. The regular drills that he performs act as a countermeasure to the mental damage that he had suffered in the towers. Thus the narrator observes that: “It was not the MRI and not the surgery that brought him closer to well-being. It was the modest home program, the counting seconds, the counting repetitions, the times of day he reserved for the exercises, the ice he applied following each set of exercises” (40). And as Freud in his study deduces that the traumatized patient gets trapped in compulsive repetition, Keith too gets engaged in the repeated rituals that represent his melancholic acting out—doing wrist exercises. The latent effect of trauma keeps resurfacing in Keith because the damage he has suffered is not physical but mental one, which compels him to repeat the exercise even after three years of 9/11:

There was no problem with the wrist. The wrist was fine. But he sat in his hotel room, facing the window, hand curled into a gentle fist, thumb up in certain setups. . . .

He sat in deep concentration. He recalled the setup, everyone, and the number of seconds for each, and the number of repetitions. . . .

Mornings without fail, every night when he returned. He looked into the dusty glass, reciting fragments from the instruction sheet. Hold to a count of five. Repeat ten times. . . . He counted the seconds, he counted the repetitions. (235-36)
DeLillo depicts Keith’s life no different from rest of the regular American crowd: a 39 year old American, working as a corporate lawyer in one of the hi-tech offices of the World Trade Center. The dominance of cybercapitalism, wave of multinational companies, and incomprehensible speed of the internet fashioned the global consciousness, particularly America’s in the beginning of the twenty-first century. The influence of these significant changes in the American society has prompted a life for Americans that is spent predominantly in the “glow of cybercapitalism” (In the Ruins 1). However, witnessing the momentous damage by 9/11 so closely, Keith now recognizes that the “glow of cybercapitalism” is not the zenith of human existence. He never resumes his professional life and instead joins World Poker Tournament, taking huge risks. This suggests that his job and carrier was never important to him and he had only been trying to fit within the frame of social structures. It is from the conversation between him and another survivor, Florence Givens, whom he eventually starts seeing, the reader learns about his enrollment in an acting school before he joins law school, simply because he has nothing to do. Only in the aftermath of 9/11 he realizes what he has always wanted. His ignorance is replaced by a new reawakening about himself:

Keith used to want more of the world than here was time and means to acquire. He didn’t want this anymore, whatever it was he’d wanted, in real terms, real things, because he’d never truly known.

Now he wondered whether he was born to be old, meant to be old and alone, content in lonely old age, and whether all the rest of it, all the glares and rants he had bounced off these walls, were simply meant to get him to that point.

This was his father seeping through, sitting home in western Pennsylvania, reading the morning paper, taking the walk in the afternoon, a man braided into sweet routine, a widower, eating the evening meal, unconfused, alive in his true skin. (128)

The trauma of 9/11 fortifies a tendency which has always been there in Keith right from the beginning, though latently. His decision to return to his wife and son, soon after the attacks indicates his skepticism towards cybercapitalism. 9/11 seems to have wrought him into a new person as he tries to be a better husband and good father.
When he listens to his wife talk about serious and traumatic issues like 9/11 or her father’s suicide, when they discuss about the neighbour who disturbs Lianne with her Middle Eastern music, or about the siblings who talk about “Bill Lawton” or when he picks and drops Justin to school, helps him in his homework and plays with him in the park, Lianne claims that “she saw a man she’d never known before” (59). There, however, is an entrenched traumatic experience which he is dealing with simultaneously and which consequently brings him closer to Florence Givens, another survivor, who worked in a corporation in the North Tower. In reviewing Keith’s involvement with Florence Givens, his decision of taking reckless bets at the poker games in Las Vegas, and his ultimate failure to form a steady bond with his family, many critics, comments Conte, have displayed their annoyance; since, according to them, DeLillo doesn’t transform Keith’s sufferings into his redemption (Conte 577). Conte observes that such acts of Keith manifest his irrevocable traumatic suffering:

In the three years that the novel follows Neudecker, he does not demonstrably become a more sympathetic or more ethical man than before his tragedy. He lacks a tragic hero’s catharsis. Neudecker’s failed recovery measures the depth of his traumatism, and though he recuperates from his physical wounds, he does not find satisfactory amends for his psychological loss. Irrevocably touched by 9/11, he cannot be made whole—and in that he is like most other survivors, the families of victims, and witnesses to the event. (576)

From a man who has always lived his life on the edge, he transforms into a man who now thinks persistently. He recapitulates memories of his childhood and his father. He feels the age catching up on him and enjoys it. Keith, it appears, desires to retrieve something that really never existed—a close relationship with Lianne and his son, for instance, and to fill the void in his self by recovering sensations and emotions which, in fact, were never part of his being in the first place:

It was Keith as well who was going slow, easing inward. He used to want to fly out of self-awareness, day and night, a body in raw motion. Now he finds himself drifting into spells of reflection, thinking not in dear units, hard and linked, but only absorbing what comes, drawing
things out of time and memory and into some dim space that bears his collected experience. (66)

Keith’s search for therapeutic relief comes to him by indulging in two activities—his communication with Florence Givens and playing poker. Since both of them, Keith and Florence, share same post-traumatic wavelength, it creates affinity and a short time affair between them. But, as soon as he feels emotionally involved in the relationship he turns his back on Florence. As the novel proceeds towards its end the reader learns that Keith has even witnessed the death of his very close friend, Rumsey, which has left an indelible mark on Keith’s otherwise callous personality. The account of how Keith witnesses the death of his friend, amid the rumble and chaos of the unannounced tragedy, is quite agonizing and distressing. Keith somehow reaches Rumsey’s office and sees him pathetically hurt in his chair. He sees his face pressed into his shoulder. He cannot recognize him, but starts talking to him. The narrator recounts:

He wanted to raise him onto his shoulder, using his left forearm to help guide the upper body while he grabbed the belt with his right hand and tried to snatch and lift.

He began to lift, his face warm with the blood on Rumsey’s shirt, blood and dust. The man jumped in his grip. There was a noise in his throat, abrupt, a half second, half gasp and then blood from somewhere, floating, and Keith turned away, hand still clutching the man’s belt. . . . He looked at Rumsey, who’d fallen away from him, upper body lax, face barely belonging. The whole business of being Rumsey was in shambles now. Keith held tight to the belt buckle. He stood and looked at him and the man opened his eyes and died. (242-43)

Given the proximity of Keith with the event, he cannot be expected to become “whole” (Conte 256) by the touch of catharsis in the face of 9/11. The traumatic loss that causes mourning eventually brings about healing, but in this case traumatic loss leads to apathy and consequently to the impossibility of redemption (Versluys 20). Later, in the novel, Keith’s tendency of taking risks retreats him back to poker. He leaves his home again and joins a game of poker on a popular television show, World
Poker Tour in Las Vegas. Keith’s final choice of settling down with poker over any settled career reveals the ennui and satiety that American wealth has produced in the people. Gambling provides him with Nietzschean sense of living dangerously, even if it is brought about by the risk of losing huge amount of money.

Jean Baudrillard in *America* proposes:

> Gambling itself is a form, inhuman, uncultured. . . . But it too has a strict limit and stops abruptly; its boundaries are exact. . . . Neither the desert nor gambling are open areas; their spaces are finite and concretic . . . a privilege, immemorial space, where the extreme rarity of traces of what signals to us there leads men to seek the instantaneity of wealth. (128)

Baudrillard’s identifying America with an “inhuman landscape,” implies that it is a desert where the regular concepts of time and a space suffer change. This can be compared to the tragic day of 9/11 where the street was not “a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night” (3). Keith’s decision to disappear into “immemorial space” resonates well with the concepts of Baudrillard about emptiness and inhuman landscape. “The money mattered but not so much. The game mattered…. He wasn’t playing for the money. He was playing for the chips.”(228).

Lianne, though, does not suffer in the attacks directly, yet she is the one who comes close to breaking down. She is a freelance editor and counsellor to a group of Alzheimer patients. Suffering primarily because of her father’s suicide, a broken marriage, and her husband’s near death, she gets affected deeply. She struggles to construct a meaning out of her disturbing life. The agonizing and anxious narratives of the Alzheimer’s patients act as an antidote to her traumatic past. After 9/11, she wishes to increase the frequency of the meetings to twice a week which Dr Apter, who treats the patients, categorically declines by saying, “You don’t want them to feel there’s an urgency to write everything, say everything before it’s too late. You want them to look forward to this, not feel pressed or threatened. The writing is sweet music up to a point. Then other things will take over… It’s theirs, he said. Don’t make it yours” (60). She needs to recreate things, events, and memories in order to feel sane and normal. Her obsession is recognized by the doctor. He has to remind her that the
session is therapeutic for her patients and not for her. After having lived separately from her husband for year and a half, his presence seems strange to her. Aware of his aberrant behaviour, she cannot bring herself to the fact that he will stay in the family for long, though she is clueless about his blooming love affair with Florence Givens. DeLillo contrasts their marriage with the fate of the Twin Towers since both of them, the marriage and the Twin Towers, share the same time span of existence and then meet the same fate. The first but failed terrorist attack on World Trade Center was attempted on the 26th of February, 1993, that is eight years before the successful attack of 9/11. During these eight years their relationship goes through many rough patches and finally hits the rock bottom when Keith leaves his home, wife and their only son and starts living close to the tower. It is only after the colossal attack of 9/11 that brings in disorientation in the American mindscape. Linda Kauffmann notes, “In *Falling Man* after the terrorist attacks, life takes a dimension of unreality—disoriented in time and space. The characters feel puny and insignificant” (371). The ground they are standing on is wobbly, their world is broken and reality fragmented. All these harrowing experiences enmesh them in the universe of utter chaos and paranoia.

As a freelance editor Lianne gets a chance to edit a book on ancient alphabets written by a Bulgarian writer. Her work on this book provides her an opportunity to search for a link between her beliefs and those of other cultures and traditions. The written words communicate to her ways in which she can channelize her trauma and control her grief and frustration because of 9/11. She deems herself as a woman with a rational and liberal mindset because of her encounter with philosophy of Kierkegaard during her school days. The narrator states:

> There were the scholars and philosophers she’d studied in school, books she’d read as thrilling dispatches, personal, making her shake at times, and there was the sacred art she’d always loved. Doubters created this work, and ardent believers, and those who’d doubted and then believed, and she was free to think and doubt and believe simultaneously. (65)

However, her rationality and liberal mindset proves to be only a façade when her neighbour, Elena’s Middle Eastern music, that she frequently plays, starts to irk her. She confronts her with much loath to which Elena calmly replies “It’s music. You
want to take it personally, what can tell you?. . . . It gives me peace‖ (119). Lianne cannot stand her calm and indifferent attitude towards her complaint and assaults her physically. Only in the face of personal suffering her rationality vanishes. It seems that words and images are too analytic for her and thus appeal her mind while music touches her emotionally. That’s why all her anger and frustration at the other comes rushing in every time she hears the music with Arabic reverberations: “hand drums and stringed instruments and massed voices in the walls, but soft, but seemingly far off, on the other side of a valley, it seemed, men in chanted prayer, voices in chorus praise of God. Allah-uu Allah-uu Allah-uu” (38). Lianne’s rational relationship with words and figures as well as her emotional connections with music hints at the primordial dichotomy between heart and head.

Soon after this incident, her friend and a publisher, Carol Shoup, informs her about a book on hijacking, written by a retired aeronautical engineer, which no one is ready to edit and she doesn’t even want Lianne to work on as she believes can prove to be too demanding for her because of Keith’s narrow escape from the event itself. Lianne, however, doesn’t care “how dense, raveled and intimidating the material might be or how finally unprophetic. This is what she wanted” (139-40). In this context, Silvia Caporale Bizzini in “Grieving and Memory in Don DeLillo’s Falling Man” writes:

While words and images are there as subtexts that allow Lianne both to recuperate and interrogate tradition rationally, the exoticism of the music powerfully touches her on a more intimate, transcendent, and unconscious level and presents a challenge to her rationalizing response to suffering. Lianne can face reading a table full of numbers on hijacking or decode ancient writings but she cannot deal with the other’s emotional roots when her own emotions of trauma and suffering are being liberated from the cage of rational understanding imposed on her from without. (45)

Through Lianne’s character the novelist questions the limitedness of the ‘logos’ on which the whole of western civilization rests. The rational understanding imposed upon Lianne from without has failed miserably to negotiate the quantum of shock and loss in the face of 9/11. On the contrary, the pent up emotional response to the tragedy
gets significantly expressed/exploded by the agency of music, something which is out
of the realm of logic, reason, language and images. It is the music that has
transcendental impact on human beings where as the language has a limiting impact.
Like any other conscious post-structuralist novelist, DeLillo also questions the
limitedness of words and language to contain and express the otherwise inexpressible
human experiences.

DeLillo, as an aesthetically accomplished novelist has used maximum of
techniques available in his arsenal to capture the post-traumatic mindscape of New
Yorker be it Keith, Lianne or Florence. Similarly, in order to bring to the surface, the
effect of the attacks on the survivors as well as the perspective of the terrorists
involved in 9/11, the novel is forged forward by an omniscient narrator in the third
person. Such a narration, in which the narrator himself or herself does not take part in
the plot, is called as heterodiegetic narration. Nonetheless, the presence of omniscient
narrator in a novel bears the possibility of adopting an authoritarian tone. This
possibility, however, is dissolved by DeLillo by making sure that the control shifts
from the narrator to the character. With the use of free indirect speech or sometimes
interior monologue, the narrator effortlessly shifts attention to and from various
characters. This allows the inclusion of multiple perspectives and spaces thus
breaking the scope of totalizing or homogenizing narratives. Geoffrey Leech and
Mick Shot in Style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose
(2007) analyze speech and thought process at work in a fiction like Falling Man.
They present a cline or continuum for speech and thought in which both the narrator
and the character are in control on either side of the extremes. In the novel, as noted
by Stephenie Morgan,

[W]here thought is concerned movement away from narratorial control
allows the reader to experience the mind-set of the character involved,
thus creating empathy. When considering speech, a category of
particular importance in Hammad’s story, movement towards the
narrator’s grasp has a distancing effect, generating ideological
estrangement. (35)

The same can be illustrated by considering Keith, as a victim of 9/11, who is
traumatized and his mental agony is manifested through his quotidian activities. His
thoughts regarding the trauma caused due to 9/11 reach the readers through the narrator. The narrator often enters Keith’s head and highlights his peculiarities, generating empathy for him. When he checks his mail, he feels the need to correct the spellings of his name which is misspelled, but “he wasn’t sure when he’d started doing this and didn’t know why he did it. There was no reason why. Because it wasn’t him, with the name misspelled, that’s why” (31). The narrator hints at Keith’s disorientation resulting in his inability to make sense of his own emotions and actions. Because of this the author feels the need to express this turmoil by describing Keith’s thoughts through the narrator. The narrator does so by employing free indirect thought. A free indirect thought gives space to both the narrator and the character. The narrator easily slips in and out of the character’s consciousness. This enables DeLillo to provide a clearer representation of thoughts of his characters. Stephan Morgan reads the shift between the narrator and the thoughts of the character thus:

“This (clearer representation of thoughts) is essential in fully comprehending Keith’s conscious state as it removes the feeling of psychological isolation associated with the reporting clause. In response to the comment ‘he didn’t know why he did it’ (31), comes the retort ‘there was no reason why’ (31). Although this could be arguably classed as straight forward narration, there is a strong sense that Keith’s exact thoughts are permeating this utterance. This primarily arises from the contradiction between ‘there was no reason why’ and ‘because it wasn’t him’. The initial determination and the subsequent paradoxical belief accentuate Keith’s incapacity to grasp his sentiments, and thus come from inside Keith’s head. (35)

Through the free indirect thought, DeLillo also explores Hammad’s mindset and juxtaposes it with the speech of the fictional terrorists revealing his insight. The narrator probes deep into Hammad’s mindscape and highlights his major flaw of being too passive and helpless before his fierce friends. He is depicted to have regular human desires to get married and have children. As a reader, one observes a transformation in his mind whereby he eventually finds it necessary to shake the West into shambles, as for him “the West corrupt of mind and body (is) determined to shiver Islam down to bread crumbs for birds” (79, parenthesis mine). Yet even towards the end one finds him not indoctrinated to the extreme to ponder whether a
man should “have to kill himself in order to accomplish something in the world” (174). He is shown to have his doubts about what the rest of his fellow terrorists believed in through his indirect speeches: “The man who held discussions, this was Amir and he was intense, a small thin wiry man who spoke to Hammad in his face. He was very genius, others said, and he told them that a man can stay forever in a room, doing blueprints, eating and sleeping, even praying, even plotting, but at a certain point he has got to get out” (79). The deictic “this” suggests free indirect thought which sets in a conversational tone. Here, DeLillo shifts the control over to Hammad which enables the reader to get acquainted with the thoughts of other terrorists and also enables him to analyze their speech. By doing this DeLillo reveals Hammad’s distance from the beliefs that other terrorists harbor and share. The reporting clause—“others said” or “he told them” suggest his uncertainty, at least by that time, about Amir’s genius and his mindset. Hammad has his doubts about jihad and what jihad demands. He questions, “But does a man have to kill himself in order to count for something, be someone, find a way?” (175). But by the end of the novel his innate resistance is broken by Amir’s perpetual powerful rhetoric which borders on religious war, key to paradise, and America’s blatant interference in their culture.

When DeLillo puts forward the significance and role of language in the novel, he indulges in metalinguistic mode of creation. DeLillo demonstrates his knowledge of language in the novels as such:

It was in the language, the inverted letters, the lost word at the end of a struggling sentence. It was in the handwriting that might melt into runoff. But there were a thousand high times the members experienced, given a chance to encounter the crossing points of insight and memory that the act of writing allows . . . narratives that rolled and tumbled. . . .

(30)

American literary scholar and professor Arnold Weinstein, notes that language is “the cornerstone of DeLillo's work” (289). DeLillo’s work is recognized for treating language as crucial to society and culture. He also places importance on the power of language that helps him to keep the inclusion of mainstream culture in his work at bay. In the narrative of Falling Man, DeLillo categorically avoids to reproduce mass media’s representation of 9/11. Instead, he reshapes and represents these images so as
to give them a novel and subjective hue. DeLillo reconstructs the three icons of the
eponymous “falling man”—the renegade falling acts of a performance artist, David
Janiak, an unidentified man who jumps from the burning tower, and Keith Neudecker,
in retrograde and recuperation, and—to exhibit his artistic response to the event of
9/11 and as leitmotif, in order to bind the broken form of the narrative.

The title of the novel alludes to the provocative photograph taken by a
photographer, Richard Drew, named “Falling Man”—a body falling against the
structural backdrop of smoldering World Trade Center. It had invited a lot of
controversy and was, consequently, removed from the mass media. The man was
identified, five years after the attack, as Jonathan Briley, a 43 year old, who used to
work at one of the offices in the towers. The historical significance of the photograph
imparts an iconic value to DeLillo’s novel. Drew’s controversial photo, invites
reaction from Sonia Baelo-Allue in “9/11 the Psychic Trauma Novel: DeLillo’s
Falling Man” where she notes, “The fact that the man is frozen into free fall is like a
traumatic memory frozen in the brain which cannot be integrated into memory: it
lacks a frame of reference or narrative” (73). As already mentioned, DeLillo chooses
to treat his “falling man” differently. This fictional falling man is a performance artist,
David Janiak, who dramatizes his spectacular falls from random New York buildings.
His performance art is deemed as atrocious and upsetting by the viewers in the novel
and stir up a debate whether he is a “Heartless Exhibitionist or Brave New
Chronicler” (220). The ‘motif’ of titular ‘falling man’ becomes the major ploy in the
hands of DeLillo to grant an organic as well as thematic unity to the novel. The use of
such an image of an amateur falling man to knit the narrative together as well as
making it a figurative device of thematic concentration makes DeLillo a
contemporary avant-garde. But for Lianne the image of his fall acquires an aesthetic
appeal which is paradoxically aesthetic:

It hit her hard when she first saw it, the day after, in the newspaper. . . .
The man with blood on his shirt, she thought, or burn marks, and the
effect of the columns behind him, the composition, she thought, darker
stripes for the nearer tower, the north, lighter for the other, and the
mass, the immensity of it, and the man set almost precisely between
the rows of darker and lighter stripes. Headlong, free fall, she thought,
and this picture burned a hole in her mind and heart, dear God, he was
a falling angel and his beauty was horrific. (221-22)

The motive behind “falling man’s” performance is purposely left unclear by the
writer. Since he performs unannounced, his aim, it seems, is to stimulate the
memories of 9/11 by recreating the experience of falling bodies on the gloomy day of
9/11. His image can be considered as a continuous reminder and a stimulus to the
mindscape of ordinary Americans.

However, the falling man—the victim of the narrative, who chooses to fall
from the collapsing towers and who keeps haunting Keith while he is stuck in the
tower, is introduced only in the closing lines of the novel, while Keith escapes the
collapsing towers. Catching the glimpse of his fall, this image haunts him till he
doesn’t escape Ground Zero. As he is in shock, he perceives the falling body as a
white shirt, which:

[C]ame down out of the high smoke, a shirt lifted and drifting in the
scant light and then falling again, down toward the river. . . .
Something went past the window, then he saw it. First it went and was
gone and then he saw it and had to stand a moment staring out at
nothing. . . . That's where everything was, all around him, falling
away, street signs, people, things he could not name. Then he saw a
shirt come down out of the sky. He walked and saw it fall, arms
waving like nothing in his life” (4, 242, 246).

This is Keith’s first spell of traumatic visual; before and after he witnesses his friend,
Rumsey’s death and the towers collapsing. When he reaches his home, blood-soaked
and disoriented, all he said about what he has gone through is that “there was a shirt
coming down” (88). The empty floating shirt is transformed into a signifier for all
those who were compelled to jump from the burning buildings on the morning of

The fabrication of “Bill Lawton myth” is another example where DeLillo
exhibits his proficiency of reshaping the familiar mediated images and concepts
related to the terrorist bin Laden to give a new and unusual perspective on his image.
Bin Laden, a vital person behind the event of 9/11, is introduced in the novel as a
mysterious and nameless, “this man” (17) by Lianne’s neighbour, later called as “Bill Lawton” (37) by their children. Lianne’s child, Justin and his two other friends have been searching the sky through Justin’s binoculars. And when asked by his father as to what they are looking for, the son informs him that they are looking for the planes which are going to hit the towers by the man named, Bill Lawton. It is disclosed later that he is bin Laden who is mispronounced as Bill Lawton, because this is how the name might have sounded to the kid when bin Laden was being mentioned, either on television or at the school. The introduction of anonymous “this man” (17) constructs an image of him in the mind of the reader and by the time the connection between Bill Lawton and bin Laden is clear, his identity has already been formed which is different from the historical person and thus exaggerated or distorted. The reader forms two identities of the same person; one fictional and one historical. The concurrence of the fictional figure and the historical one forms a new blended figure, suggesting that the identities are often confused in the novel. As a result, a world is created in the mind of the reader in which the character is disintegrated into a mere semiotic subject. Niva Kaspi in “Bill Lawton by Any Other Name: Language Games and Terror in Falling Man” observes:

Keith’s obsession with correcting the spelling of his surname, Neudecker, “because it wasn’t him, with the name misspelled” (DeLillo, Falling 31), Lianne’s fondness of the philosopher Kierkegaard, “right down to the spelling of his name. The hard Scandinavian k’s and lovely double a” (118), her consideration of “Marko […] with a k, whatever that might signify” (119), and Rumsey, who is told that “everything in his life would be different” (149), are a few examples of the text’s semiotic emphasis. (web)

Bill Lawton, which also titles the first part of the novel, is also an instance of misnomer (Conte, 569). As the kids mishear the name of bin Laden and thus mispronounce him as Bill Lawton, Lianne ponders if “some important meaning might be located in the surroundings of the boy’s small error” (73-74). The identity of the perpetrator has no doubt been established but since the name has gone through metanomasia, by westernizing an Arab name, it acquires the tendency of shifting from one frame of ideology to another. In this regard Conte says:
Anglicized as Bill Lawton, the identity of this mass murderer could be mistaken for a white American stockbroker, Chevrolet dealer, or middle-class businessman. In fact Osama bin Laden was well known to the CIA from his days as a mujahedeen fighting the Soviet army in Afghanistan. What is alien, what is beyond recognition to the western ear, is the ideology of holy war… but we also refuse to comprehend that to the non-western ear there is the perception that the American Bill Lawton, and those who toll in his name, have likewise visited death and destruction on the third world cultures with impunity. (569-70)

In the process of metonomasia the swapping of a third world name with an American name enables DeLillo expose harshness of pervasive American culture on the third world as well as extreme bitterness of the Middle East which prompted them to execute a colossal event like 9/11.

Through *Falling Man* DeLillo also explores the relationship among images, words, and politics that arose in the post 9/11 America. DeLillo analyses the impact of visual representation of the arts on the individual as well as culture by employing the literary devise of ekphrasis. Derived from the Greek word, ekphrasis (where “ek” means for the sake of and “phradzin” means, speaks or points out) is the verbal description of a fictional or real work of art produced as a rhetorical device. As a rhetorical devise, it expresses one medium of art through another by exploring its characteristics and form. Critic, Peter Schneck, analyses DeLillo’s visual poetics in the novel acquire a central rhetorical function that remains in all of his novels invariably. Schneck, in “To See Things before Other People See Them: Don DeLillo’s Visual Poetics” postulates that through the debate among the fictional characters about the effects of images and “images that speak for themselves” (105), DeLillo’s novels “challenge the readers”—often unconscious—knowledge of a more general and universal system of visual signification or, more precisely, a cultural iconography” (105). The reading of the novel as an apparatus of the strategies of ekphrasis tends to explore the manipulation of physical body and visual arts as a means of artistic expression and as a form of communication. The devise of ekphrasis offers the reading of the novel where the visual representations through the medium of Giorgio Morandi’s *Natura morta*, the Italian term for still life paintings, and the
performances of David Janiak is set against the gamut of authentic mediatized images of 9/11 and responses attached to it. The ekphrastic nature of the novel is condensed in a dialogue between Lianne and her mother’s lover, Martin aka, Ernest Hechinger thus:

“People read poems. People I know, they read poetry to ease the shock and pain, give them a kind of space, something beautiful in language,” she said, “to bring comfort or composure. I don’t read poems. I read newspapers. I put my head in the pages and get angry and crazy.”

“There’s another approach, which is to study the matter. Stand apart and think about the elements,” he said. “Coldly, clearly if you’re able to. Do not let it tear you down. See it, measure it.” (42)

The fictional characters try to find a source to vent out the effect of the shock brought about by 9/11. DeLillo, through the device of ekphrasis, shows the fictional characters going through a therapeutic process. When Lianne witnesses the performance of the falling man she revisions the event of 9/11 differently as what was shown on the television. The performance of DeLillo’s falling man renders Lianne’s body limp. She felt something awful in his frozen pose and during one of the performances, she was so near to him that: “She could have spoken to him but that was another plane of being, beyond reach” (168). When Lianne learns about his untimely death from natural causes, she looks up the artist on the internet where she finds his pictures—dangling from the balcony of an apartment, suspended from the roof of a loft building, sometimes dangling from the flies at a hall during a concert, from a bridge over a river, and from the bell tower. DeLillo renders his falling man execute the same performances, thus blatantly redeeming what was banned for being insensitive. With reference to this, Setha Lowe in “The Memorialization of September 11: Dominant and Local Discourses on the Rebuilding of the World Trade Center Site” comments that performances by DeLillo’s falling man are not as much the fictionalization of Drew’s photograph and its controversy as much a method to induce a series of visual representation of bodies that grew to be stimulating in the post 9/11 memorial debate (332). DeLillo’s falling man seems to transmogrify the fragility of human body into a performance in a public sphere. Through the device of ekphrasis, the fictional performance of Janiak stands boldly in contrast to Drew’s photograph. Devin P. Zuber
DeLillo’s Janiak is set up as resistant to the photographic image and the whole market apparatus of medaization that allows a single performance, a fall, to become a visual commodity bought and sold on the art market. Janiak is described as a romantic, an artist who believes in a kind of aesthetic autonomy of his work that stands apart from the hubris of politics. (209)

Janiak is a reclusive artist who refuses to speak about his performances. Every time Lianne sees his performances she observes the absence of photographers to cover such an astonishing sight and the presence of an unexpected crowd, perplexed by his sudden spectacular fall. The impact of this encounter is so indelible on her that for years she remembers it. DeLillo depicts Lianne’s reaction on finding David Janiak’s picture on the internet after three years of her last encounter with him thus:

She clicked forward. She tried to connect this man to the moment when she’d stood beneath the elevated tracks, nearly three years ago, watching someone prepare to fall from a maintenance platform as the train went past. There were no photographers of that fall. She was the photograph, the photosensitive surface. That nameless body coming down, this was hers to record and absorb. (223)

Her encounter with the performance of Janiak has generated a transcendental awe in her, as compared to looking at the pictures, images, photographs of 9/11 on the television, or in the newspapers or magazines that would make her “get angry and crazy” (42). If Janiak’s performances stand as a forceful interposition into the discourse of 9/11, “DeLillo’s recurrent use of semi-obscure Italian post-Impressionist seems initially oblique” (210). On first reading of the conversation between Martin and Lianne, where both of them think that they can see the towers in the still life paintings of Morandi, the connection between the still life paintings and the psychological effect of 9/11 seems illogical.

They looked together.
Two of the taller items were dark and somber, with smoky marks and smudges, and one of them pretty concealed by a long-necked bottle. The bottle was a bottle, white. The two dark objects, too obscure to name, were the things that Martin was referring to.

“What do you see?” he said.

She saw what he saw. She saw the towers. (49)

Critics like Cathy Caruth and Kristiaan Versluys study the passage as having psychological import. They, particularly, note that the passage tends to reveal the aftermaths of trauma. Martin and Lianne, by connecting the event with aesthetic painting of Morandi, attempt to impart unity and a memory to the implicit and inert effects of the trauma. However, it can be safely established that a writer like DeLillo holds the mettle to employ the still life artfully, to achieve an esoteric purpose. If the still life paintings are appraised vis-à-vis post 9/11 discourse, the effect of Morandi paintings on Martin and Lianne can be seen more than just a psychological study. Art historian Norman Bryson explains, “Still life is the world minus its narrative, or better, the world minus its capacity for generating narrative interest” (60). Thus the broken narrative chronology of the novel aligns with the narrative form of still life paintings. Morandi’s creativity to convert quotidian objects into an architectural monumentality is described by Piero Pacini in “Morandi Giorgio” as:

…the most ordinary shapes, such as pots, bottles, and boxes, come to take on a further meaning here. They become impressive either because of their potential monumentality, which gave them the mysterious and elusive aura of a cathedral, or because their allusions took the viewer by surprise or gradually became apparent. Sometimes reality was as if spellbound, and the objects conveyed a sense of timelessness. (web)

The reference of Morandi paintings throughout the novel makes a different statement when removed from the frame of time. Thus what Martin and Lianne see in the still life is not just a projected effect of trauma and mediated images they keep seeing in the media but visceral response to the subject matter of Morandi’s paintings themselves.
Besides being an illustrative work of aesthetic acumen, the novel also deals with the issue of terrorism as in many of his novels. As noted by various critics, DeLillo seems to recommend that these acts of terrorism are a way of resistance against the pervasive cultural and political influence of the west over rest of the world, the Middle East, particularly. Joseph M. Conte in “Don DeLillo’s Falling Man and the Age of Terror” notes, “DeLillo repeatedly invoked the World Trade Center as representative of the gigantism and hubris of global capitalism, a force that he stridently resisted from the start of his carrier in Americana, in which the television executive David Bell, abandons his unfulfilling job in New York City” (562). Falling Man exposes DeLillo’s transnational political investigation through its fictional characters who often get into discussions and debates on the raison d’être of the event throughout the novel. DeLillo points out that at the dawn of the millennium the world narrative belonged to American culture that held the power to penetrate every wall of every home and every mind of every life. This was certainly made possible on account of western technology and cyber-capitalism. The attack of 9/11 was an act of resistance to the cultural imperialism through western media, technology, and capitalism. When Martin, Nina Bartos’ lover comes to America after the event, they both start debating over the reason of the attack. While Nina feels that religion is the basic cause that prompts the terrorist attacks, Martin believes that the American society provokes the jihadis. It is the invincibility of America and blatant interference of the American culture into their culture that spites them (46). The blow of 9/11, as maintained by Martin, was a “blow to this country’s dominance. They achieve this, to show how a great power can be vulnerable. A power that interferes, that occupies” (46). Martin and Nina keep challenging each other’s standpoints in the following conversations:

Forget God. These are the matters of history. This is politics and economics. All these things that shape lives, millions of people, disposed, their lives, their consciousness.

It’s not the history of Western interference that pulls them down these societies. It’s their own history, their mentality. They live in a closed world, of choice, of necessity. They haven’t advanced because they haven’t wanted to or tried to.
They use the language of religion, okay, but this is not what drives them.

Panic, this is what drives them. (47)

The debate explores ideological reasons behind the attack that range from capitalist exploitation by America in the era of globalization to the burgeoning religious panic of the Middle East. DeLillo’s political insinuations become even more conspicuous with the unraveling of the perspective of the fictional terrorist, Hammad. Through the character of Hammad and his leader Amir, DeLillo implies that the terrorists see the West as twisted and hypocrite nation, “determined to shiver Islam down to bread crumbs for birds” (79). They feel that America controls their world and it deserves to be destroyed. No wonder that Conte views the Twin Towers as egregious symbols of American capitalism and market economy and maintains that they have always been indifferent to humanity (563). As an answer to this indifference, there has been a latent longing, America’s libidinal fantasy of destruction which Slavoj Žižek in “Passions of the Real, Passions of Semblence” contends is libidinally constructed by America’s cultural imagery. He claims:

Not only were the media bombarding us all the time with talk about the terrorist threat; this threat was also obviously libidinally invested – just remember the series of movies from *Escape from New York* to *Independence Day*. That is the rationale of the often-mentioned association of the attacks with Hollywood disaster movies: the unthinkable which happened was the object of fantasy, so that, in a way, America got what it fantasized about, and that was the biggest surprise. (15-16)

The fantasy of the fall of the towers, as mentioned by Žižek, as the cultural imagery existed as a safe displacement for fears, lusts, and taboos present in the American society. The actual fall of the towers is an instance of what Lyotard calls as a “the unpresentable” while defining postmodernism. Jean Baudrillard in the essay “The Spirit of the Terrorism” (2001) also iterates Žižek’s postulation and continues to make even more controversial claim that the terrorists answered a fantasy upheld by the attacked system of capitalism. The towers were the incarnations of the American capitalist system which was the primary target of the terrorists. Žižek’s argument
regarding libidinal fantasy and Baudrillard’s provocative suggestion is recapitulated by Martin Ridnour:

Weren’t the towers built as fantasies of wealth and power that would one day become fantasies of destruction? You build a thing like that so you can see it come down. The provocation is obvious. What other reason would there be to go so high and then double it do it twice. It’s a fantasy, so why not do it twice. You are saying, Here it is, bring it down. (116)

Similar view is presented in the essay, “In the Ruins of the Future” written right after 9/11, DeLillo enunciates the troubling probe that every American undertakes regarding the crime America did to incite such catastrophe. He enlists America’s culture and modernity, technology, secularism, democracy etc that gave rise to incongruity between the Americans and rest of the world. Giovanna Borradori, in the introduction to her edited set of dialogues with Habermas and Derrida, puts across the view which places the current age of terrorism against the technologically oriented future anticipated by the West. She affirms that the ideology of the terrorists responsible for the attacks of 9/11 rejects the projects of modernity and secularization. Borradori records:

While for Habermas terrorism is the effect of the trauma of modernization, which has spread around the world at a pathological speed, Derrida sees terrorism as a symptom of a traumatic element intrinsic to modern experience, whose focus is always on the future, somewhat pathologically understood as promise, hope, and self-affirmation. Both are somber reflections on the legacy of the Enlightenment: the relentless search for a critical perspective that must start with self-examination. (22)

In the western world, the project of Enlightenment paved way to Modernism which centred its focus on the power of reason, and other ideals like liberty, progress, tolerance, democracy, and secularization. It consolidated the dominance of the Western Society over the rest of the world. However, this thought and theory did not come without some of its impediments. The modernization of the western world gave rise to industrialization, urbanization, democratization, and secularization which led to
breaking up of community, the erosion of religious values in the Western society along with its continuous drift towards alienation and anomie that eventually gave rise to mass society. All these principle changes in the western society expanded the gap between it and the rest of the world. DeLillo critiques all the investment America has done till now on social, political, and economic level, especially. Viewing 9/11 as symptomatic of resistance, he clubs the perpetrators with:

The protestors of Genoa, Prague, Seattle and other cities want to decelerate the global momentum that seemed to be driving unmindfully toward a landscape of consumer-robots and social instability, with the chance of self-determination probably diminishing for most people in most countries. Whatever acts of violence marked the protests, most of the men and women involved tend to be moderating influence, trying to slow things down, even things out, hold off the white-hot future. (Ruins 33)

As an acute observer of life at its elemental level, the novelist expresses a deep desire of an apparently future obsessed American society to slow down. There is an emphasis on an objective and distanced measurement of life as well as its events, something which is possible only when it moves at a comprehensibly slow speed. It is in this context DeLillo writes that “the terrorists of September 11 want to bring back the past” (34). While DeLillo believes that the event “has no purchase on the mercies of analogy and simile” (39) as 9/11 cannot be compared to any historical event, he is cautious not to represent the violence of 9/11 with misinterpreted reality. He doesn’t want his literary response to 9/11 fall into any ideological framework. In the novel, Martin asks Lianne to examine 9/11 by studying it. “Stand apart and think about the elements,” he said. “Coldly, clearly if you’re able to. Do not let it tear you down. See it, measure it” (42). DeLillo seems to recognize the dilemma of an American fiction writer to respond critically to such a catastrophe while maintaining an unbiased and objective approach. He believes that a writer has a moral responsibility while understanding such an event. This is why, after the attacks DeLillo claims to have taken a long pause from writing. Slavoj Žižek, in Violence: Six Sideways Reflections examines that while analyzing any sort of violence one needs to step back from the “fascinating lure” (1) of the violence: “A step back enables us to identify a violence
that sustains our very efforts to fight violence and promote tolerance” (1). One should rather understand the conditions that generated the violence:

There are reasons for looking at the problem of violence awry…the overpowering horror of violent acts and empathy with the victims inexorably function as a lure which prevents us from thinking. A dispassionate conceptual development of the typology of violence must by definition ignore its traumatic impact. (4)

He outlines the potential latent risk in writing about violence, because any direct association with violence may inhibit critical analysis. He provides twofold warning against the excessive as well as too little empathy: a study that is too passionate directs to passionate involvement with the victims, obstructing neutral understanding whereas a study that is too detached discounts the horrific power of the violent event and agony of victims.

In “Writing Back to Don DeLillo’s Falling Man” authors, Hossein Piranajmuddin and Abbasali Borhan, collectively formulate that DeLillo’s Falling Man presents a narrative that is biased against Muslims. For them DeLillo believes that the group of Muslims conducted 9/11 as an attempt to take revenge on the West for its unrestrained growth in the course of modernity. The writers have expressed DeLillo’s oriental representation of fictional Muslim characters in his novel, “And as such, it has a/n (New-) Orientalist propensity to identify the signifier terrorism with the orient, or more precisely saying, with Islam as the signified” (120). They contend that DeLillo has presented Islam as incompatible with the Western modernity and were in America to violate the American life style.

[T]he omniscient narrator, for instance, says “they were in this country to pursue technical educations but in these rooms they spoke about the struggle” (79). The “rooms” generally refers to the prayer rooms in which Muslims gather to say their prayers and often share their memories and experiences. “The mosque” (77, 80, 81, 82, 176), “the portable prayer room at the university” (80), “the apartment on Marienstrasse” (79), and “dar al-ansar” (83) are some examples the narratorcatalogues for such spaces. (119-20)
According to the critics, the narrator of the novel suggests that living in America these young Muslims had made their secret personal spaces where they discussed about their struggle against America. They lived a secret life in these spaces losing their individuality to collectivism of Islam. However, the criticism leveled against DeLillo seems a bit harsh and unfair if other Muslim characters in the novel are considered. To offer balance DeLillo acquaints his readers with an old Muslim, who has experienced how the institution of religion is used to manipulate young men. He is a veteran soldier from Iraq who had in his hay days served in Saddam Hussein’s army. He narrates to Hammad his experience in the army when he was “a rifleman in the Shatt al Arab” (77), fighting against Iran. The old man tells Hammad about the young boys, “the martyrs of Ayatollah, here to fall and die,” (77) who were driven by an ideology that this war would win them a place in paradise. The old man, who used to offer prayers with Hammad now, tells him that:

The boys kept coming and the machine guns cut them down. After a time the man understood there was no point shooting anymore, not for him. Even if they were the enemy, Iranians, Shiites, heretics, this was not for him, watching them vault the smoking bodies of their brothers, carrying their souls in their hands. The other thing he understood is that this was a military tactic, ten thousand boys enacting the glory of self-sacrifice to divert Iraqi troops and equipment from the real army massing behind front lines. (78)

Aboard the plane, Hammad recalls old man’s words but not in old man’s lamented tone of regret but something that encouraged him towards higher purpose “with plastic keys underneath, to open the door to paradise. Recite the sacred words . . . carry your soul in your hand” (238). Linda Kaufmann compares the apocalyptic belief of the jihadis with what, the character of Reverend Moon in Mao II is obsessed with—“the Last Judgment thinking of the bloodstorm to come” (Mao II 7), just as al Qaeda pledges “submission to God and meditates on the blood to come (“Ruins” 34)” (354).

In the “Ruins”DeLillo asserts that “in order to understand what has befallen us, we must abandon the binary division between “us and them”’ (34) tries to re-examine the motive of the terrorists by perusing what Kenneth Bruke describes as
“the rhetoric of motive” (76). The rhetoric of persuasion or interrogation of motives, says Brukes, is only attained by means of one’s identification with the other and his/her motives. DeLillo, through the rhetoric of motives, engages his characters in a discourse that focuses on the effects of global capitalism on the third world. The debate between Nina Bartos and Martin, who is also an ex-terrorist, is of particular importance in this regard:

“They want their place in the world, their own global union, not ours. It’s an old dead war, you say. But it’s everywhere and it’s rational.

“Fooled me.”

“Don’t be fooled. Don’t think people will die only for God,” he said.

This is how DeLillo shows Martin finding identification with the antagonists of America. DeLillo believes that such an approach is significant in erasing the difference between the Americans and non-Americans. Martin had been a radical activist in Germany and as the novel unfolds Nina suggests the possibility of his being associated with terrorist groups which forced him to even change his mane from Ernst Hechinger. When Lianne learns about this, she still considers him as “one of ours . . . godless, Western white” (195).

Contemporary American society’s overreliance on “the utopian glow of cyber-capital” (“Ruins” 33) ushered a desire for living “permanently in the future” (33), which is bereft of all memories, a desire that dominated the western world was shattered with fall of the twin towers on 9/11. As a counternarrative to the terrorist act of 9/11 which aimed to fling America back to the past, the author weaves the narrative of *Falling Man* through the working of memories with an aim to wake America from the post-human slumber. Elucidating Derrida’s outlook on memory, Borradori remarks, “After all, Derrida points out, the movement of memory is not necessarily tied to the past. Memory is not only about preserving and conserving the past, it is always already turned toward, “toward the promise, toward what is coming, what is arriving, what is happening tomorrow” (172). The novel effectively deals with memory in a way that encapsulates both past and future. The changes that took place in the wake of 9/11 have compelled for a need of counter-narrative to terrorism that places much importance on memory. Linda Kaufman notes the significance of such
events stating that we must “commit them to memory. This is a moral and political responsibility to rescue the dead from the abstraction and oblivion—including the dead terrorists” (367). DeLillo attempts to take up the responsibility by depicting how the concepts of space, time, and memory are intertwined and by latently forming a critique on aesthetic approaches to events like 9/11.

The performance of the artist “falling man,” in this novel acts like objective correlative that accentuates the importance of the memories of 9/11. The performances of the “falling man” bring back the traumatic experiences of the “burning towers when people fell or were forced to jump” (33). His performances, which the reader learns about through Lianne, highlight a fresh cultural importance of memory:

[T]he puppetry of human desperation, a body’s last fleet breath and what it held. It held the gaze of the world she thought. There was the awful openness of it, something we’d not seen, the single falling that trails a collective dread, body come down among us all. And now, she thought, this little theater piece, disturbing enough to send her back into the terminal. (33)

His performances prevent the event of 9/11 from becoming a mere event among many others lost in the making of the American nation. Also, the engagement of the performances with the event allows the witnesses to “commit them to memory” (Wake of Terror 367) and work through the traumatic past, simultaneously moving forward in future.

DeLillo assigns a significant place to religion in the fictional matrix of Falling Man. His characters exhibit well-defined differences from each other regarding their beliefs on religion culture, politics, and history. They, however, have one thing in common—a deep and crucial need to understand and find what they think they have lost and apparently it is the supposed centered and controlled environment of religion. For the group of “jihadis”, the war against the West is on the grounds of religion precisely because they feel that

[T]he West corrupt of mind and body, determined to shiver Islam down to bread crumbs for birds. . . . There was the feeling of lost
history. They were too long in isolation. This is what they talked about, being crowded out by other cultures, other futures, the all-enfolding will of capital markets and foreign policies. (79-80)

In the wake of the event, there was a rupture in the narrative of American Exceptionalism and Americans began to search for answers. After John Fitzgerald Kennedy’s assassination, when the faith of Americans was completely shaken, paranoia struck Americans collectively. It is after this assassination, a Conspiracy theory emerged that claimed to seek order amidst utter chaos. At the threshold of millennia, the tragedy of 9/11, Conspiracy Theory was replaced by religion, just as the old times because the questions were too profound to be answered by Conspiracy Theory. In Falling Man, the need of the fictional characters to find a centre is too prominent. The Alzheimer’s patients want to believe that the victims of 9/11 have their hands held with each other during the attack. They need hope to get back again. The answers that American once sought in Conspiracy Theories, is now looked for in religion. In the aftermath of 9/11, almost all of DeLillo’s characters experience some form of religious longing. Though they don’t follow any institutionalized religious practice, they struggle to seek religious refuge. The most significant example is the discussion on God by the Alzheimer’s patients. Their inquiry, “How could God let this happen? Where was God when this happened?” (60), shows the possible loss of faith but at the same time suggests the latent faith in God in that wake of 9/11. For a few patients, 9/11 did not shake their belief in God, on the contrary consolidated it, as one of them says “I am closer to God than ever” (61). But for some the event was enough proof of their belief that God has disappeared from their world.

The quest for hope and stability is not easy for a sensitive, vulnerable and thoughtful woman like Lianne Glenn at all. Right from her teens, she has had a disturbing life. That her father commits suicide when Lianne is 22 years old leaves an indelible impression on her. She has a strained relationship with her mother, Nina Bartos, who keeps lecturing her about God and His ways. All these incidents in her life make her quite vulnerable and decentred. Moreover, a broken marriage further extracts her remaining beliefs. 9/11 is just another nail in the coffin of her belief system. She is shown fighting with herself to relive to Catholicism on account of the beliefs induced by her mother’s skeptic stance on religion, her rendezvous with Kierkegaard during her college days, and her meeting with the writing group of the Alzheimer’s patients,
and her memories of her father as a catholic in the backdrop of 9/11 shape her quest for spirituality. DeLillo’s fiction, through these characters, exposes the America’s quest of America’s of spirituality and other supportive moorings morality in post-9/11 America.

This chapter can be safely concluded by saying that DeLillo has made a nearly successful aesthetic attempt of capturing the psychological and spiritual jolt that Americans suffered in the wake of 9/11. He owns the writers’ responsibility to come to the center stage and design the narrative of life and politics, something that the terrorists have almost completely usurped. DeLillo uses the motif of “falling man” to send across the message, loud and clear, that art is the only square response to the events of the magnitude like 9/11. Telling the ‘event’ as well as its ramifications from multiple narrative perspectives, the novelist has appropriated the responses of common Americans in the face of 9/11 and transformed them into seemingly first-hand experience. The centre have been viewed a a severe attack on America’s global economic hegemony, American Exceptionalism, the country as a super power and her supposed unique place in the world. DeLillo also succeeds, in the character of Keith, in pointing out the ennui that the American materialistic pursuits have created in the lives of her people. The “glow of cyber-capitalism” has severed the human’s touch with the conscious living and consequently shattered the familial ties. However, DeLillo’s didacticism can be read in suggesting that America should wake up from the slumber of being the ‘invulnerable.’ She must shun her obsession with futurism, revisit the past and reconsider its socio-economic as well as global position, in order to avoid such events like 9/11. The phenomenon of globalization must be viewed as a level playing field for all the stake holders, and dissolve the boundaries between the East and the West.

Be the narrative perspective of Americans like Keith and Lianne or that of the hijacker, Hammad, DeLillo has laid bare the very elemental human characteristics and established that the differences are created by politics, wrong religious indoctrinations and division between first, second and third world. It is DeLillo’s creative acumen that gets reflected in the narrative experimentation that he conducts in the novel. He wields the tool of language with such ingenuity that enables him to uncover the terrorized mindscape of the victims of 9/11 and weave it with the global political and economic issues.
As a veritable contemporary avant-garde, DeLillo employs various technical and literary devices to give comprehensible shape to the experience that was 9/11. Ekphrasis is one such aesthetic device that is used in which one medium of art is expressed through the other. It is also known as visual poetics that takes into account the effect of images or the individual mind. This mode of writing which Devin P. Zuber calls ekphrastic fiction makes DeLillo’s work aesthetically autonomous, a work that stands apart from the excess of politics. What accentuates the writer’s artistic representation is the use of language, something that has been amply illustrated in this chapter.