

**NEW POLITICS OF CONFLICT:
WEST/EAST CULTURE CLASHES AND PARADOXICAL
AFFINITIES IN POSTMODERN ERA**

Key words: *Western individualism; Eastern mass consciousness; culture clash; terrorist spectacles; hyperreal war; guerilla war; “men in small rooms”*

Abstract: *The paper examines the new politics of conflict in a postmodern context, with a focus on the notion of West/East wars as spaces of hyperreality, as media-bound wars. Spectacles of war, guerrilla war, the mix of reality and fiction that accompanies the wars in postmodern era, West/East culture clashes and postmodernist erasure of distinctions, the plots concocted by the “men in small rooms”, the war strategies that the East has “learned” from the West, all this are illustrated in Don DeLillo’s novels Mao II (1991) and Falling Man (2007). Drawing on Mao II in particular, the paper also looks at new types of conflicts and unexpected affinities, in the media age, between a Western, traditionally individualistic culture like the U.S., and an Eastern culture of the masses. In this context, it examines various degrees of Western xenophobia and anxiety over an “Asian” mass identity, and the connection between masses, death, terror, war, and the corresponding tragic news images. Other related aspects involve conflicts and affinities between the terrorist and capitalist discourses, the symbiotic relationship between the Eastern terrorists and the Western media. In Falling Man (2007), leaving the news stories aside this time, DeLillo chronicles the September 11 attack from the perspective of the people who witnessed it and through the story of the terrorist hijacker. DeLillo’s post 9/11 novel attempts to find an ethical solution to the established us/them opposition, emphasizing the ‘union’ of the terrorist and the terrorized in a community of suffering.*

“This is a war universe. War all the time. That is its nature. There may be other universes based on all sorts of other principles, but ours seems to be based on war and games”, William Burroughs remarked in a 1991 interview (“War Universe” 95). Numerous terms have been used to re-label war since the end of War World II. Among the most interesting are: “permanent war”, “cold war”, “non-heroic war”, “postmodern war”, “technowar”, “cyberwar”, “infowar”, “hyperreal war”. What links them all is that technology (from military technology to computerization and electronic media) is central to their definition. Moreover, Paul Virilio argues, “there is no war without representation, no sophisticated weaponry without psychological mystification” (*War and Cinema* 6). On the other hand, in terms of actual combat, conventional war tends to concede primacy in the spectrum of warfare to the so-called “limited wars”, destabilizations, guerilla and

* University of Bucharest, Romania; corrinemary@yahoo.com

revolutionary struggles, terrorist plots, hijackings and hostage-takings (some of which, history has shown, can defeat the strategy of high technology).

In today's high-tech age, technological revolution inevitably shapes the major aspects of contemporary war, adversaries may be killed with very little personal contact, if any (and without empathy, for that matter) and the "new war" – as illustrated by the Persian Gulf War of 1991, for example – is rather a war of images and information, often packaged like a TV series.

My paper proposes to examine the new politics of conflict in a postmodern context, with a focus on the notion of West/East wars as spaces of hyperreality, as media-bound wars. Spectacles of war, the mix of reality and fiction that accompanies the wars in postmodern era will be illustrated in Don DeLillo's novels *Mao II* (1991) and *Falling Man* (2007). The paper looks at new types of conflicts and unexpected affinities, in the media age, between a Western, traditionally individualistic culture like the U.S., and an Eastern culture of the masses, be it represented by Christian cult, Chinese communism or Islamic fundamentalism; it examines, in this context, the connection between masses, death, terror, war, and the corresponding tragic news images.

Thus, in *Mao II*, DeLillo stages a battle, a "cold war" between the individualism of the West and the collective mind of the East, a conflict accompanied by various degrees of xenophobia and anxiety over "mass identity" – derived to some extent from the Western association of mass with totalitarianism and death, with Eastern genocide, with mass deaths, as illustrated by the tragic historical examples of Mao's and Stalin's Communist regimes. The Western anxiety over mass identity, over foreign languages and identities, had actually been present in DeLillo's work before *Mao II*. In *White Noise* (1985), DeLillo's middle-class white characters feel that their middle America is under siege; even at the holy site of the mall, "people spoke English, Hindi, Vietnamese, related tongues" (*White Noise* 82). Similarly, Karen of *Mao II* remarks that the yellow cabs in New York are driven by "fantastically named men from Haiti, Iran, Sri Lanka, the Yemen", while a police minicab is "like some Bombay cartoon" (DeLillo, *Mao* 148, 150) – other quite transparent (albeit often unconscious) expressions of xenophobia.

But in the Middle East, too – more precisely, in Beirut, the setting for the final section in *Mao II* – we find a hybrid space where "thousands of Arabic words" on building walls weave between "the letters and Roman numerals of the Coke II logo" (230), testimony of the contest and yet the hyperreal mix of these "overlapping" languages in the postmodern marketplace (230), and also evidence of the invasion of Western advertising into the Eastern, Arab space. Arrived in war-torn Beirut (during the long Lebanese Civil War lasting between 1975 and 1990) on assignment for a German magazine, journalist Brita Nilsson of *Mao II* encounters a crazy wild world of conflict, tension and anarchy; she drives past cars wrapped in posters of the ayatollah Khomeini, a street vendor's "little homemade city of Marlboro cartons" (228), checkpoint boys wearing Syrian, American, Lebanese, French and Israeli uniforms, ruins and mounds of uncollected garbage, posters of bare-chested men with oversized weapons and cities burning in the background (228-29).

According to go-between George Haddad – the spokesman for the Maoist group in Beirut who kidnapped a Swiss poet – the only one who stands outside, whom the culture “hasn’t figured out how to assimilate” (157), seems to be the terrorist hijacker, still capable of drawing simultaneous worldwide attention, of dominating “the rush of endless streaming images” (158). George Haddad seems fascinated by the terrorists’ so-called autonomy, by

The way they live in shadows, live willingly with death. [...] The coherence of their lives. The way they excite, they *excite* admiration. In societies reduced to blur and glut, terror is the only meaningful act. There is too much of everything, more things and messages and meanings than we can use in ten thousand lifetimes. [...] Who do we take seriously? Only the lethal believer, the person who kills and dies for faith. [...] Everything else is absorbed. [...] Only the terrorist stands outside. (157)

Protagonist Bill Gray, however, is well aware that the terrorists operate on behalf of authoritarian regimes and are not really romantic, solitary outlaws:

It’s pure myth, the terrorist as solitary outlaw. These groups are backed by repressive governments. They’re perfect little totalitarian states. They carry the old wild-eyed vision, total destruction and total order. (158)

Although George Haddad, an admirer of Mao, urges Bill to think like a Maoist and to accept the need for an absolute being, for purity of doctrine and for order which is “consistent with permanent revolution”, for Bill, the secluded American writer, “total politics, total authority, total being” is equivalent with mass murder, the death of the spirit, and certainly the end of the novel, which should be “a reply to power” (158-59, 200).

Indeed in *Mao II* what is stereotypically foreign – emblemized by Maoist dogma, Christian cult, terrorist causes and Islamic fundamentalism – merges the individual into mass identity (Hardack 378). Thus the pictures of Abu Rashid, the Maoist leader of the Beirut terrorists, are replicated and pinned on the shirts of his faceless boys who “are all the children of Abu Rashid. All men one man” (DeLillo, *Mao* 233). Rashid’s nation of faceless and speechless beings must obviously begin with such children who have no sense of history, whose thoughts are not already formed, and who can more easily be convinced to die for the ‘future’, the new future made possible by terror (235). Previously hopeless boys “taking drugs and drinking and stealing”, these children are taught “sense of purpose” (233) and turned into young boy terrorists with “slight murderous eyes” (237), posing with assault rifles: “The young have a cruelty and unyieldingness that’s fully formed. [...] The more heartless, the more visible” (158). As photographer Brita Nilsson remarks, the boys who work near Abu Rashid are taken away their faces and voices and given instead guns and bombs; they are trained to kill. They learn that Western presence is a “threat to self-respect, to identity” and that the answer is terror which “makes the new future possible” (235). Under the master’s spell, they will find it easy to excuse the violence necessary to execute

his plan, suggesting how short the distance between enthusiastic fundamentalism and the practice of terror can be (Scanlan 28).

Similar depictions of “Asian” mass identity involve Mao’s indoctrinated, “reformed” masses and the undifferentiated crowd of Korean Master Moon’s disciples, thousands of cult members participating in a mass wedding at Yankee Stadium. In fact, as DeLillo tells Vince Passaro, it is the death of the individual that has to be accomplished before the aims of the crowd, of the mass organization, of the totalitarian mass, of the terrorist group (all instances of a mass mind) can be realized. The same idea is expressed by critic Tom LeClair in a lecture on DeLillo and *Mao II* given in 1993 at Case West Reserve University in Cleveland:

Bodies gather together to become one powerful body reciting one powerful idea that will let them forget their uncertainty and their individual bodies. Millions of Maoists create a revolution. Thousands of Moonies chant the end of time. The Islamic revolution unites politics and religion. The crowds at Khomeini’s funeral mourn the passing of a body. The Iranians beat their own bodies to keep the body of their Master from leaving. (LeClair)

Crowds feature heavily in the book: crowds of thousands at the mass wedding at Yankee Stadium, crowds of homeless in Tompkins Square Park in New York City, crowds of football fans crushed against a fence at Hillsborough Stadium in Sheffield, England, crowds of protesters killed in Tiananmen Square, crowds following the portrait of Mao (a million people in the great square of Beijing), crowds of frenzied mourners, “estimated at three million” (DeLillo, *Mao* 188), in Teheran at the Ayatollah’s funeral, many of them trampled to death or injured in their hysterical attempts to touch the shrouded body and bring it back to life. Masses of deceased are buried in war-torn Beirut: “Coffins were stacked at cemetery entrances because there was no more room for the dead. Outside the city they were burying people in clusters, two or three bodies to a grave” (197).

Most crowds in *Mao II* are TV crowds, masses of people shown in news coverage of terrible events, images in which the individual has been “crushed by the primitive and lethal instincts of mob culture” (Passaro). In fact terrorism is inextricably bound with city crowds. Terror works by creating panic in congested urban spaces, be it down Manhattan, the market in Jerusalem, the London subway, or a Madrid train station. All these tragic events endlessly played and replayed on televisions associate images with large crowds, deaths and mass hysteria.

As DeLillo points out, the outside, foreign infiltrations of Eastern mass consciousness are not the only threats to the imagined autonomy of the Western individualist humanist voice. Individuality is under siege *within* America itself – in the process of duplication, mechanical repetition of Western art and commerce, mass reproduction, and consequent erasure of identity characteristic to a commodity culture. Writer Bill Gray inevitably becomes an object of commodification, disappearing behind the aura of literary celebrity (due to the success of his first two published volumes), then of his “missing writer” status, and finally, after thirty years, behind the aura of his

photographs. Eventually, in our postmodern, terror-centred, era, this enhanced aura turns the famous writer into an attractive and desirable subject for the political manipulations of terrorism. The image of the writer as celebrity becomes a valuable commodity on the marketplace of fundamentalism.

Bill accepts an invitation to give a reading on behalf of the Swiss poet held hostage by Abu Rashid's terrorist group in Beirut. Thus begins his journey East: from New York to London, and from there onward to Athens and Cyprus with Lebanon as final destination – where he should meet Abu Rashid. “We want to have a news conference”, his editor Charlie Everson informs him, “We talk about the captive writer. We talk about the group that has him. And then I announce that the hostage is being freed at that moment on live television in Beirut” (DeLillo, *Mao* 98, 100). This is evidence that, in the age of global media and instantaneous communication, ‘live’ announcements take precedence over the hostage's drama, which Charlie actually uses to advertise his own organization, his committee of academics and publishing people.

At the same time, because journalists need good stories and terrorists need publicity, terrorists have a symbiotic relationship with the Western media: reporters court terrorists, make them known, explain them, increase their notoriety (Weimann, Winn 52, 62) whereas terrorists play to the camera, make spectacular stories for the profits of TV networks, depending in turn on the cooperation of the news media to distribute their spectacles, thriving on the stories and images assembled and disseminated by photographers, producers, TV executives.

Terrorists therefore are not “outside” of capitalism (which their discourse pretends to oppose); their leaders are already “incorporated”, “co-opted” by the capitalist discourse. Haddad himself betrays this fact in announcing that he is in the ‘business’ of taking hostages (DeLillo, *Mao* 155): for him and the terrorist leaders he represents, hostages and their pictures are just commodities. We learn that Jean Claude, the hostage poet, was sold to a fundamentalist faction as “we have no foreign sponsors”, Rashid's interpreter explains to Brita. That is why, he continues:

Sometimes we do business the old way. You sell this, you trade that. Always there are deals in the works. So with hostages. Like drugs, like weapons, like jewelry, like a Rolex or a BMW. (235)

Once a hostage, Jean-Claude is stripped of his humanity and abandoned in his basement cell by his own captors (except for “the boy” who fed and tortured him) who are more interested in watching the Beirut civil war on a VCR:

The only meaningful sound he [the prisoner] heard was the VCR on the floor above. They [his captors] were looking at videos of the war in the streets. They wanted to see themselves in their scuffed khakis, the vivid streetwise troop, that's us, firing nervous bursts at the militia down the block [...] He had tumbled into the new culture, the system of world terror [...] He was a digital mosaic in the processing grid, lines of ghostly type on microfilm. [...] He was lost in the wavebands, one more code for the computer mesh, for the memory of crimes too pointless to be solved. (109, 112)

Jean-Claude's identity and story are remade in electronic bits ("a digital mosaic in the processing grid"), reassembled by reporters, photographers, cinematographers, TV anchormen, and turned into a media event within a global electronic narrative. This is another instance of the hyperreal quality of the hostage-taking plots and practices, and of the "negotiations", the live announcements and the whole spectacle surrounding them – which render the "object" of kidnapping, the fate of the prisoner himself as irrelevant.

And yet the hostage is very important for another reason (besides the economic aspect). As there is little information about the group that has him, as this group is practically unknown, "one element in a movement", "barely a movement actually", "just an underground current at this stage" (129), the hostage is "the only proof they exist" (98). Therefore, the terrorists' very existence depends on the media coverage of this hostage-taking "event". George Haddad, the spokesman for the terrorist group in Beirut, tells Bill that the hostage's life and release, too, depend completely on television, on media coverage: "His freedom is tied to the public announcement of his freedom. You can't have the first without the second. This is one of the many things Beirut has learned from the West." (129).

The hyperreal and hybrid character of contemporary war is also illustrated in *Mao II* by the mix and interchangeability of advertisements, political and religious leaders, guns and cameras, war and videos of the war, Western and Eastern symbols, communist and capitalist ideologies, terrorism and fashionable commodity images. The streets of war-torn Beirut – where Brita is assigned to photograph local terrorist leader Abu Rashid – run with images. Brita thinks of Beirut as a "millennial image mill" where local militias have taken to a new form of fighting, shooting up portraits of rival groups' leaders (the assassination of the image being obviously viewed as a prelude to "real" death); where pictures of martyrs and clerics lie next to movie posters and ads for Tahiti holidays, where walls are written with such slogans as (in the driver's translation) the "Blood Skulls of Hollywood U.S.A.", "Arafat Go There", or "Suicide Sam the Car Bomb Man" (227-29). Brita's own fantasy in response to advertisements for a Western soft drink, Coke II, "slapped on cement block walls" (230) is telling: "she has the crazy idea that these advertising placards herald the presence of the Maoist [terrorist] group. Because the lettering is so intensely red" (230).

The Oriental Other, hostage-taker Abu Rashid becomes the screen on which Bill seems to project his desire for autonomy and effective authorship. According to Ilka Saal, Bill needs to imagine a sort of romantic villain as the autonomous outsider that questions the Western consumer culture; this critique from the outside allows Bill Gray to justify his own growing alienation from the American consumer and media culture.¹ A significant function of Eastern terrorism in *Mao II* is, therefore, to highlight the West's complete immersion in commodity culture (Saal 260). In an interview with Anthony DeCurtis, DeLillo discusses the complex relation between the brightly colored future that American consumerism relentlessly promises everybody and the insidious plots concocted by terrorists in their "small rooms":

¹ See Saal, 252.

I see contemporary violence as a kind of sardonic response to the promise of consumer fulfillment in America. Again we come back to these men in small rooms who can't get out and who have to organize their desperation and their loneliness, who have to give it a destiny and who often end up doing this through violent means. I see this desperation against the backdrop of brightly colored packages and consumer happiness and every promise that American life makes day by day and minute by minute everywhere we go. (58)

Actually, DeLillo has been writing about terrorism ever since his 1977 novel *Players*, in which terrorists explain their rationale for attacking the New York Stock Exchange in disturbingly familiar, simple terms: "They have money. We have destruction." (107). Put in these terms, the culture clashes between Western capitalism and Islamic fundamentalism seem irreconcilable.

In his portrayal of Bill Gray, DeLillo uses the discourse of Orientalism whose main purpose is not to understand but to *invent* the East (Said 40). Consequently, the Western representations of the East are determined by specific ideological demands, most notably the need to define Western individualism against an allegedly totalitarian consciousness of the East – illustrated by references to Mao, or in DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), to the Soviets. On the other hand, modern Orientalism in many ways resumes the Cold War logic by replacing Eastern Communism with the Eastern terrorist (Saal 259), bearer of a new message of totality, of absolute authority (DeLillo, *Mao* 158) that accompanies the emergence of a new power politics of nationalisms and tribalisms, the rise of numerous anti-imperialist, non-state affiliated, politically radical groups at war with First World nations and global financial powers. However, the Cold War mindset seems utterly useless in combating global jihad, the "holy" war waged by lethal believers willing to kill and die for faith.

Critic John Michael argues that the imposition of empire often depends on reductions of identity into us/them oppositions: "As figments of the Western imagination, the Arab's romantic identity has been and continues to be terribly useful for the maintenance of power"² (qtd. in Saal 264). French film director Jean-Luc Godard criticizes the imaginative failure of the West to see and listen to the East: "Without doubt we don't know how to see or listen. Or the sound is too loud and drowns reality" (qtd. in Saal 264).

DeLillo's characters in *Mao II* inhabit a strikingly Baudrillardian³ universe, where "terrorism steals the show" (Wilcox), and the terrorist narrative directs the flow of

² See John Michael, "Beyond Us and Them: Identity and Terror from an Arab American's Perspective", *South Atlantic Quarterly* 102.4 (Fall 2003): 701-728.

³ Baudrillard's hyperreal universe refers to a world where the representations of things have come to replace the things being represented, where images are detached from their original referents. For example, during the Persian Gulf War of 1991, the televised spectacle took precedence over the reality of the war itself (with the deaths and traumas of those involved in the actual combat).

images and information in a media-saturated world. Writer Bill Gray complains that “we’re giving way to terror, to news of terror, to tape recorders and cameras, to radios, to bombs stashed in radios” (42). Terrorist spectacles – with their scripts, living characters, props, and interviews – resemble theatrical events (Weimann and Winn 52). For the terrorists of DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007), especially Mohamed Atta, known as Amir who “thought clearly, in straight lines, direct and systematic” (175), the 9/11 victims are disposable props, existing “only to the degree that they fill the role that we have designed for them. Those who will die have no claim to their lives outside the useful fact of their dying.” (176). George Haddad of DeLillo’s *Mao II* admits that killing the innocent is confusing but, he continues, this is “the language of being noticed, the only language the West understands” (157).

Another purpose of the terrorists was to induce a state of permanent fear. Indeed, everything has changed after 9/11 – the city, the people, their lives, their certainties, the world. If in the years of the Cold War there was the danger that an enormous cataclysm might take place, affecting virtually everyone on the planet, the danger is much more specific now. If the nuclear war did not happen and probably will not happen because, critic Mike Gane ironically remarks, “this would deprive us of spectacle” (Baudrillard 175), September 11 marked the beginning of the current period of terror; the world returned to a primal state of tangible threats. As DeLillo remarks, there is a new perception:

During the Cold War people thought about the fate of the Earth and about destruction so massive that it would mean the end of life on earth. Now what we think about is that they are going to kill us, you and me, and they are going to kill us in our trains, our planes and our office buildings. So it’s more immediate. It’s far less abstract. (qtd. in Bone, *The Times*)

In the age of media and technology, even dramatic historical moments are usually transformed into hyperreal spectacles by the mass media and culture industry, which blur the distinction between fact and fiction, between reality and perception. The Persian Gulf War of 1991 is an example of how reality disappears into the mediascape, an event that seemed to take place exclusively on a TV monitor, even to those who were there:

U.S. soldiers in their barracks in Saudi Arabia watched live TV coverage to follow the war, and, more astoundingly, Saddam Hussein’s major flow of information came from CNN. Even the fighter pilots fired virtual missiles on video screens without ever seeing the ‘real’ enemy. (Smith 127)

The spectacular shots of the missiles approaching their targets represented the kind of footage that turned the Gulf War into a high-tech spectacle. The TV-mediated

For a more detailed discussion of Baudrillard’s theoretical concepts and for his analysis of the Gulf War and the Vietnam War, see Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (University of Michigan Press, 1994) and Richard Lane, *Jean Baudrillard* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

character of this hyperreal war went hand in hand with ratings battles between TV networks, competitions that obliterated the reality of the conflict. During the Gulf War, the televised spectacle took precedence over the reality of the war; people “had trouble separating the war from coverage of the war [...] The rush of watching all that eerie green night-vision footage [...] had been so intense that it became hard to honor the fact that the war was still going on, untelevised” (DeLillo, “Ruins” 38).

September 11, on the other hand, was all too real to be considered a simple media event: “The raw event was one thing, the coverage another. The event dominated the medium” (38). The terrorists, using U.S. technology, struck at the heart of America, at the material and symbolic fabric of New York City. The spectacular nightmare of 9/11 – unimaginable, “beyond words” – was endlessly broadcast and amplified by the mass media. Nothing was left out, it was all there, on television and in thousands of photographs – the planes crashing into the towers, the flames, smoke and ash rolling down the streets, people running, shoes discarded in the street, handbags and laptops (DeLillo, *Falling Man* 3-4), astounded onlookers, dust covered survivors, heroic rescue workers. That is why it was all so real.

This is how DeLillo’s novel *Falling Man* (2007) actually opens, with a disturbing image of people running away from the hell-borne dust cloud, through rubble and mud, into the morning light. The novel chronicles this tragic, defining moment in American history, yet the news stories are left out. The event is seen through the eyes of the people who witnessed it or through the story of the terrorist Hammad.

As shown above, *Mao II* tends to emphasize the homogenous character of Eastern fundamentalism, to overlook the psyche of its Eastern protagonists and to present terrorists more like copies of each other; Abu Rashid himself is rather a copy of Mao, with no thoughts of his own, but with stereotypes and clichés mouthed by an interpreter. DeLillo’s novel *Falling Man* actually takes the reader in the mind of Hammad, a fictional member of the 9/11 plot and traces the latter’s experiences from a training camp in Afghanistan to the Hamburg cell of the plotters, to his arrival in Florida to seek pilot training, and finally in the plane that strikes the first tower.

Commenting on the terrorists’ “motives” for hating America, one of the novel’s characters, Martin Ridnour, a mysterious German art dealer, speaks about “lost lands, failed states, foreign intervention, money, empire, oil, the narcissistic heart of the West” (DeLillo, *Falling Man* 113). He suggests some of the presumed origins of fundamentalism: the growing gap between the rich and the poor, the U.S. strategies of assimilating the export of democracy and freedom with the expansion of American markets in the Middle East and the conquest of new economic frontiers in that part of the world – which in turn experiences, in Hammad’s words, “the all-enfolding will of capital markets and foreign policies” (80). Hammad also hated American hedonism and indifference, “these people jogging in the park, world domination. These old men who sit in beach chairs, veined white bodies and baseball caps, they control our world” (173).

Living in Germany at some point to pursue his technical education, Hammad joined a fundamentalist group led by Amir Atta; the group's meetings and discussions would take place in an apartment, a "small room", on Marienstrasse. Hammad was becoming one of them, learning to look like them ("they were all growing beards") and think like them ("This was inseparable from jihad"). Reminding of Abu Rashid's brainwashing rituals, the members of this group prayed together and "read the sword verses of the Koran. They were strong-willed determined to become one mind. [...] Become each other's running blood. [...] They were becoming total brothers" (83). They talked about struggle and about the evils of the West, which is led by the United States: "Everything here [in Germany] was twisted, hypocrite, the West corrupt of mind and body, determined to shiver Islam down to bread crumbs for birds" (79). That is why they committed to struggle "against the enemy, near enemy and far, Jews first, for all things unjust and hateful, and then the Americans" (80). They pledged to accept their duty, which was for each of them, "in blood trust, to kill Americans" (171).

Mohamed Atta, known as Amir by his followers, is the brain behind the 9/11 operation. He transfers his hatred to Hammad changing the latter's destiny from a successful engineer to a radical Muslim. With his powerful personality, Amir uses Hammad to fill the role he had designed for him, namely to execute the attack on WTC. Amir's "philosophy" comes to replace Hammad's thinking, while the training in the Afghanistan camp completes Hammad's instruction in "the highest jihad, which is to make blood flow, their blood and that of others" (173) until he is ready to end his life in order "to close the distance to God" (172). Amir's teachings and phrases occupy Hammad's mind and command his thoughts and actions during the operation:

Never have We destroyed a nation whose term of life was not ordained beforehand.
This is your long wish, to die with your brothers.
Recite the sacred words.
Fix your gaze.
Every sin of your life is forgiven in the second to come.
There is nothing between you and eternal life in the seconds to come.
You are wishing for death and now it is here in the seconds to come. (173, 238-39)

As DeLillo writes in his post 9/11 essay, "In the Ruins of the Future" (2001), the terrorists' edge is that they want to die as much as Americans want to live:

We are rich, privileged and strong, but they are willing to die. This is the edge they have, the fire of aggrieved belief. We live in a wide world, routinely filled with exchange of every sort, an open circuit of work, talk, family and expressible feeling. The terrorist, planted in a Florida town, pushing his supermarket trolley, nodding to his neighbor, lives in a far narrower format. This is his edge, his strength. Plots reduce the world. He builds a plot around his anger and our indifference. [...] At a certain point he and his brothers may begin to feel less motivated by politics and personal hatred than by brotherhood itself. (33)

In the terrorists' view, Americans "need to be ashamed of their attachment to life. [...] These people, what they hold so precious, we see as empty space" (DeLillo, *Falling Man* 177). Arrived in the U.S., Hammad wonders if "these Americans", these people who water lawns, walk dogs and eat fast food, ever think of the US domination of the world, or if they even see him standing here, now clean-shaven, wearing T-shirt and tennis sneakers like a real American (173).

This is precisely the terrorist's strategy: to go unnoticed. Most cunningly, Baudrillard writes in "The Spirit of Terrorism", they have used the banality of American everyday life to hide their real identity. They have lived among Americans, mixing with them, sleeping in their suburbs, "making the routine gestures of community and home, the credit card, the bank account, the post-office box" (DeLillo, "Ruins" 34), reading and studying within families, waiting, before waking up suddenly like delayed explosive devices. The perfect mastery of this secretiveness leading to the spectacular action of September 11 became, in its aftermath, the source of a very subtle psychological terrorism: the fear and the suspicion that any inoffensive individual, the neighbor across the road could turn out to be a terrorist. Thus Lianne, the New York freelance editor in *Falling Man*, grows frustrated with her neighbor Elena because she is playing loud middle-eastern sounding music. Although "the music is beautiful" (70) and although the "wailing music [of] lutes and tambourines and chanting voices sometimes" (67) may as well be Greek, North African, Bedouin or Sufi chanting, Lianne regards "this particular music at this highly sensitive time" (68) as a provocation, as a certain form of political and religious statement. To her, Elena symbolizes everything she despises about Muslims, the ones who think alike and talk alike, who say the same prayers and use the same phrases, rituals and movements, "day and night, following the arc of sun and moon" (68). This kind of attitudes, of fears and suspicions, amplified the dangerous us/them polarization induced in the American consciousness by the 9/11 events. The suspicion and resentment were directed at *all* Muslim Americans; indeed the new mood of racial and ethnic stereotyping, of assuming terrorism to whomever was from the Middle East severely threatened "the connections that keep this multiethnic society together" (Mihăilă, "Challenging" 108).

And yet, at Ground Zero, Christian and Muslim, believers and non-believers, recall "in prayer their fellowship with the dead" (DeLillo, "Ruins" 40). In their voices, manner, clothing and colour of skin, the mourners recapitulate the multicultural configurations, the mix reflected in the photocopied faces of the lost and missing (34); victims and survivors, young or old, devout or unbelieving, are a "union of souls" (40).

This ethical concern, this humanist stance, is also supported by DeLillo's portrayal of Hammad, who becomes unsure of his devotion to Islam and ambivalent about his mission of striking the WTC: "But does a man have to kill himself in order to accomplish something in the world? [...] to count for something, be someone, find the way?" (*Falling Man* 174-75). He is troubled by the prospect of killing so many innocent people: "But what about this, Hammad thought. Never mind the man who takes his own life in this situation. What about the lives of others he takes with him?" (176). Hammad's

doubts and small failings – though more or less credible at times – humanize him. His concerns are actually foreshadowed in DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) where Jack Gladney tells his students in Advanced Nazism that “we edge nearer death every time we plot. It is like a contract that all must sign, the plotters as well as those who are the targets of the plot” (26). Similarly, on September 11, “parts of our [American] world”, in its ruins “have crumbled into theirs”, turning the planet into a place of “danger and rage” (DeLillo, “Ruins” 33). The metaphor of “organic shrapnel” – pieces of the suicide bomber’s body embedded in his victims’ bodies (DeLillo, *Falling Man* 16) – further emphasizes the fact that there should be no ‘them’ and ‘us’, that the terrorist and the terrorized are united in a community of suffering. This ethical dimension of DeLillo’s writing is also reflected by the scene where Lianne is described as falling asleep under the same “arc of sun and moon” (70) as the prayer-saying and chanting Muslims; the message is that what unites people, West and East, is that they are “all bodies in rest or motion, in space, on a small planet” (Kauffman 141).

Consequently, in order to avoid the senseless nightmare of war and terror, the binary division “Us and Them” should be abandoned both by the West (“We are rich, privileged and strong, but they are willing to die”) and by the East (terrorist Hammad, too, sticks close to the us/them rhetoric: “these people jogging in the park [...] they control our world”). DeLillo’s novels also describe the discrepancy between America’s self-image and its image in the eyes of the world. This gap may be filled if America (and the West) learns how to listen – through all the media/consumer noise – to the East, how to see its own reality and the reality in the rest of the world. The disturbing yet perfect first sentence of *Falling Man* – “It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night” (3) – announces that, in the new conditions, when existence has suddenly become “provisional” (Kauffman 139) in an increasingly threatening world, everything must be rethought, reconsidered, both at geopolitical level and at personal level.

A writer who documents the all-pervasive power of the visual image, DeLillo still believes that books have the power to influence consciousness. In a world saturated by imagery that is circulated endlessly and repetitively, in the era of terror and its mass-market amplification, the outcome of the creative struggle may be redemptive, for the literary work is a “great secular transcendence” (DeLillo, *Mao* 72). At the same time, DeLillo counters the mass-mediated representations of 9/11 with a strikingly different set of images: the disturbing performances by Falling Man – a “falling angel” of “horrific” beauty (222), “Brave New chronicler of the Age of Terror” (220) – and with fresh art images, the beautiful still lifes of the Italian painter Giorgio Morandi, to which DeLillo refers throughout *Falling Man*. Tracing the aftermath of this global terror narrative in the intimate lives of ordinary Americans, the way that the 9/11 attacks reconfigured their memory and perception of the world, DeLillo’s essay “In the Ruins of the Future” (published in December 2001) and then his novel *Falling Man* (2007) represent DeLillo’s attempt at a *counter*-narrative. He counters the “massive spectacle” with a study of people’s personal stories and reactions to terror, leaving aside almost completely the media images and representations of the terrorist act.

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