universität wien

DIPLOMARBEIT

Titel der Diplomarbeit

"All plots tend to move deathward." – Death and dying on the levels of character development, structure, language and major themes in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and *Falling Man*

Verfasserin

Michaela Koglbauer

angestrebter akademischer Grad

Magistra der Philosophie (Mag. phil.)

Wien, im November 2008

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt:	A 343 301
Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt:	Anglistik und Amerikanistik (Stzw) Publizistik- und Kommunikationswiss.
Betreuer:	Univ.- Prof. Dr. Waldemar Zacharasiewicz

Ich erkläre ehrenwörtlich, dass ich die vorliegende Arbeit selbständig und ohne fremde Hilfe verfasst, andere als die angegebenen Quellen nicht benutzt und die den Quellen wörtlich oder inhaltlich entnommenen Stellen als solche kenntlich gemacht habe. Die Arbeit wurde bisher in gleicher oder ähnlicher Form keiner anderen Prüfungsbehörde vorgelegt und auch noch nicht veröffentlicht. Die vorliegende Fassung entspricht der eingereichten elektronischen Version.

Wien, 1. November 2008

Acknowledgements

It is difficult to overstate my gratitude to my thesis supervisor, Univ.- Prof. Dr. Waldemar Zacharasiewicz, who provided encouragement, good advice, and endless patience, reminding at any given opportunity of the importance of finishing my academic venture.

I am indebted to my colleagues at the English Department for not letting me lose touch with the academic world in general, and literatures in English in particular.

I wish to thank my friends for helping me get through the difficult times, and for all the emotional support, understanding, entertainment, and caring they provided.

I am especially grateful to Elisabeth Damböck, Susanne Adamek, and Katharina Kessler.

Most importantly I wish to thank my entire family, above all my parents, Karoline Koglbauer and Franz F. Koglbauer. My sisters Maria and Elisabeth, their husbands, as well as my brothers, my sisters-in-law, and my nephews and nieces were particularly supportive. This is for you.

1 Introduction 1

2 Don DeLillo 2

2.1 His Life 2

2.2 His Art 5

3 Analysis 10

3.1 White Noise 10

3.1.1 Title 10

3.1.2 Summary 11

3.1.3 Narrative Technique and Structure 11

3.1.4 Setting: White Noise as Campus Novel? 15

3.1.5 Characters 18

3.1.5.1 Jack 19

3.1.5.2 Babette 26

3.1.5.3 Murray 29

3.1.6 Language versus White Noise 31

3.1.7 Death in White Noise 36

3.1.7.1 Death and Crowds 38

3.1.7.2 Death and Technology 41

3.1.7.3 Death and the Media 45

3.1.7.4 Death and Spirituality 50

3.1.7.5 Death and Consumerism 53

3.2 Falling Man 58

3.2.1 Title 58

3.2.2 Summary 59

3.2.3 Structure and Narrative Technique 60

3.2.4 DeLillo and 9/11 65

3.2.5 Setting 66

3.2.6 Characters 73

3.2.6.1 Keith 73

3.2.6.2 Lianne 83

3.2.6.3 Justin 88

3.2.6.4 Hammad 89

3.2.6.5 Falling Man: David Janiak 93

3.2.6.6 Absent characters 97

3.2.7 Language _____ 98

4 Conclusion: Death and Plot _____ 103

5 Bibliography _____ 108

6 Index _____ 2

1 Introduction

> All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots. Political plots, terrorist plots, lovers' plots, narrative plots, plots that are part of children's games. We edge nearer death every time we plot.
> (*White Noise*, 26)

All plots move deathward – this assumption is found twice in Don DeLillo's oeuvre: first in *White Noise*, later in *Libra*, DeLillo's best-selling novel on the Kennedy assassination. That is, it is explicitly mentioned twice, but death plays a prominent part in all of his novels and is therefore worth closer examination. The guiding questions of this thesis will thus be: In how far do the characters in the books treated move deathward? What are the parallels/differences? If the above quoted statement is true for *White Noise* and *Falling Man* – do Don DeLillo's plots move towards death only on a superficial story level, or is this movement mirrored in the structure and language of the books as well, and finally what is the impact of 9/11 on an author whose fiction is deeply rooted in his native city, New York?

After taking a brief look at DeLillo's life and work, there will be a discussion of how the protagonists of *White Noise* and *Falling Man* deal with death both on a personal level, i.e. in the shape of their fear of death and traumata, and in their surroundings in which the various facets of 'modern death' pose a central challenge. Furthermore, we will analyze the novels with regard to structure, narrative technique and language, elaborating on how content and composition correlate to form a homogenous whole.

2 Don DeLillo

2.1 His Life

Donald Richard DeLillo was born on November 20, 1936, in New York's Bronx to Italian immigrants. His parents came to the United States from the Italian region Abruzzo. DeLillo grew up with his father and mother, his sister, his aunt and uncle, and their three children, as well as his grandparents.[1] His father was an insurance-company representative. Don was the first-born boy who in Italian families according to DeLillo enjoys more freedom than his siblings."[2]

The stage for the author's childhood was the area around Arthur Avenue in the Fordham section of the Bronx, a neighborhood which was then the heart of the Bronx's 'Little Italy.' Don DeLillo went to Cardinal Hayes High School and later to Fordham University, majoring in a subject going by the name of 'communication arts.' After college, DeLillo moved to a small apartment in Murray Hill, "the sort of place where the refrigerator is in the bathroom."[3] He started his career as a copywriter with a big advertising company[4], a fact one ought to keep in mind, as consumerism plays an important part in one of the novels analyzed in this thesis. With his colleagues he went to the Museum of Modern Art, the Village Vanguard, as well as to see European movies. Around this time, DeLillo started work on what was to become his first novel, *Americana*.

In 1975 DeLillo married a young banker called Barbara Bennett, who later on became a landscape designer. The couple is still married and has no children.

---

[1] DeLillo quoted in Remnick, David, "Exile on Main Street: Don DeLillo's Undisclosed Underworld," in DePietro, 137.

[2] DeLillo, Don. "Ich kenne Amerika nicht mehr," *Die Zeit* (October 11, 2007). <http://www.zeit.de/2007/42/Don-DeLillo-Interview>. September 1, 2008.

[3] DeLillo quoted in Remnick, David, "Exile on Main Street: Don DeLillo's Undisclosed Underworld," in DePietro, 139.

[4] Ogilvy, Benson & Mather

These basic biographical pieces of information are relatively hard to come by with Don DeLillo, as he likes to direct the focus of interviews and journalistic as well as academic inquiry in general towards his work rather than his personal life. Furthermore, autobiographical details are few and far between in his oeuvre. Only in 1997, with the appearance of the highly acclaimed book *Underworld,* does his family background find its way into his writing. "His Bronx, Italian-American background, which he barely discusses in early interviews, figures largely in the urban landscapes of *Underworld*, as it does in his sense of language and character" (DePietro, ix).

Another reason for his still being perceived of as inaccessible by his audience may be attributed to the fact that DeLillo's "characters do not speak for him" (ibid.). On the contrary: Not only are they mostly hard to get a grip on, but when the reader has finally done his or her work well enough to gain access to their complexities, these characters usually refuse to let one make assumptions about their creator.

Even though DeLillo has become more easy-going in his dealings with the media, he can still be said to be more on the reclusive side: The author of fourteen novels does not teach, he gives readings sparingly only, and he keeps interviews to the necessary minimum. "When friends would ask his credo, DeLillo would say he lived by the words of Stephen Dedalus: 'Silence, exile, cunning – and so on.'"[5]

As mentioned before, however, Don DeLillo appears in public more often now[6] (even though he still refuses invitations to television shows), not quite unlike Bill Gray, the protagonist of *Mao II,* who, after a long period of hiding from the public gaze, agrees to have his picture taken.

---

[5] DeLillo quoted in Remnick, David, "Exile on Main Street: Don DeLillo's Undisclosed Underworld," in DePietro, 132.

[6] "When a literary critic planning to interview DeLillo tracked him down in Greece in 1979, DeLillo handed him a card that read, 'I don't want to talk about it.'" (Keesey, 1).

What we do know about Don DeLillo, however, is the importance of New York City for his work:

> "You know that Graham Greene book called *England Made Me?* New York made me." [...] "There's a sensibility, a sense of humor, an approach, a sort of dark approach to things that's part New York, and maybe part growing up Catholic, and that, as far as I'm concerned, is what shapes my work far more than anything I read."[7]

This leads us to a recurring theme, which features in several interviews with DeLillo: When asked about his literary background, the author often states that until relatively late in his life, books were marginal at the most. As a child he preferred listening to the radio.[8] "[I] didn't read as a kid, and certainly no one read to us. This was not part of our tradition. People spoke, and yelled, but there wasn't much reading."[9] He goes on to say:

> "That's entirely part of my own background, a background in which language was not terribly important. As I got older I began to realize that I really didn't know the names of things. Other people seemed to. Of course, there are many common things, everyday things that practically nobody knows the names of. That's the odd part of it."[10]

He did take to comic books, however, and later on read *Dracula* (when he was fourteen).[11] When he finally got drawn into literature, so to say, one of the authors who opened up a new dimension for him undoubtedly was James Joyce. DeLillo once said, that "it was through Joyce that I learned to see something in language that carried a radiance, something that made me feel

---

[7] DeLillo quoted in Remnick, David, "Exile on Main Street: Don DeLillo's Undisclosed Underworld," in DePietro, 138.

8 DeLillo in "Ich kenne Amerika nicht mehr," in Die Zeit (October 11, 2007). <http://www.zeit.de/2007/42/Don-DeLillo-Interview>. September 1, 2008.

9 DeLillo quoted in Remnick, David, "Exile on Main Street: Don DeLillo's Undisclosed Underworld," in DePietro, 138.

[10] DeLillo quoted in Echlin, Kim. "Baseball and the Cold War," in DePietro, 147.

[11] DeLillo quoted in Begley, Adam, "The Art of Fiction CXXXV: Don DeLillo," in DePietro, 87.

the beauty and fervor of words."[12] Other authors DeLillo frequently mentions as literary influences are William Faulkner, Vladimir Nabokov, Hermann Melville, Ernest Hemingway, Thomas Wolfe, Thomas Pynchon, William Gaddis, and more general, books "that demonstrate the possibilities of fiction", such as the "comic anarchy in the writing" of Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound.[13]

After the Americans, DeLillo turned to European authors as well, Camus above all. The novelist never fails to point out, however, that yet another more important influence on his writing stems from visual art:

> Probably the movies of Jean-Luc Godard had more immediate effect on my early work than anything I'd ever read. Movies in general may be the not-so-hidden influence on a lot of modern writing, although the attraction has waned, I think.[14]

The other art forms, which had a strong impact on the young writer, were music and expressionist painting. Asked about the development of his own distinct language, DeLillo notes:

> When I was 20, 25 years old I spent a lot of time listening to Jazz, going to museums, looking at abstract paintings, and watching movies. I think this had more effect – not on the way I write, but on the way I think, on my sensibility – than anything I read, although I was a very avid reader then. I don't know that other people's writing formed or had an impact on me.[15]

2.2 His Art

DeLillo is considered by many critics one of America's most distinguished contemporary writers. The author to date has written fifteen novels, eight plays, as well as countless essays, articles, blurbs, and pieces of short

---

[12] DeLillo quoted in Begley, Adam, "The Art of Fiction CXXXV: Don DeLillo," in DePietro, 88.

[13] DeLillo quoted in LeClair, Thomas, "An Interview with Don DeLillo," in DePietro, 10.

[14] Ibid., 9.

[15] DeLillo quoted in Moss, Maria, "'Writing as a Deeper Form of Concentration': An Interview with Don DeLillo," in DePietro, 167.

fiction.[16] His first novel, *Americana*, was published in 1971, when he was 30 years old. The book deals with a television executive who embarks on a road trip, planning to shoot an avant-garde movie.

Within ten years, DeLillo published six more novels, dealing with a wide variety of topics such as football (*End Zone,* 1972), rock music (*Great Jones Street*, 1973), mathematics and astronomy (*Ratner's Star*, 1976). *Players* (1977) finally takes up themes which DeLillo will elaborate on in novels such as *Mao II* (1991) and *Underworld* (1997), i.e. terrorism, consumerism and conspiracies. After spending two years in Greece on a Guggenheim Fellowship,[17] DeLillo publishes *The Names* (1982) which mirrors his experience in as far as it deals with Americans living abroad. *White Noise,* his 'breakthrough novel' is published in 1985.

He belongs to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, has won among other honors: the Award in Literature from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters (1984), the American Book Award for best novel (for *White Noise,* 1985), the Irish Times-Aer Lingus International Fiction Prize (for *Libra*, 1988), and the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction (for *Mao II*, 1991). Furthermore, Don DeLillo was the first American to win the Jerusalem Prize (for *Underworld*, in 1999). In 2000 DeLillo received the William Dean Howells Medal of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. In 2001 his twelfth novel, *The Body Artist*, is published, followed by *Cosmopolis* in 2003 and finally *Falling Man* in 2007.

Not surprisingly, DeLillo is not the kind of author who gloats over his success:

> When Don DeLillo was announced as the winner of the National Book Award for "White Noise" in 1985, he stood up at the New York Public Library ceremony and said: "I'm sorry I couldn't be here

[16] The following overview draws mostly from Keesey, Duvall, and the Curt Gardner's "Don DeLillo's Americana"-website. <http://perival.com/delillo/delillo.html>. October 31, 2008.

[17] Cf. Keesey, 7f.

> tonight." Everyone laughed and he sat down, spared the necessity of further remarks."[18]

Even less than the critical acclaim he has received, DeLillo trusts commercial success to be an indicator of any value:

> The writer is driven by his conviction that some truths aren't arrived at so easily, that life is still full of mystery, that it might be better for you, Dear Reader, if you went back to the Living section of your newspaper because this is the dying section and you don't really want to be here. This writer is working against the age and so he feels some satisfaction at not being widely read. He is diminished by an audience.[19]

It becomes clear from statements such as this, that Don DeLillo is a writer with a vision. However, calling him a purely political writer would be to narrow a definition. According to the author what serious fiction has to offer is an opposition to the prevailing forces of Western life. Accordingly, Don DeLillo calls for "the novelist who writes against power, who writes against the corporation or the state or the whole apparatus of assimilation", as we are "one beat away form becoming elevator music."[20] Ideally the author thus acts as a counter weight against "the endless cycle of consumption and instantaneous waste."[21]

What DeLillo demands of novelists in our time and place is best summed up by himself:

> Novelists don't follow, novelists lead. We don't react, at least we shouldn't, to movies or television or anything else. You asked what the role of the novelist is: it's our task to create a climate, to create

---

[18] Streitfeld, David. "DeLillo's 'Mao' Wins PEN Award; $7,500 Prize for Author's 10th Novel." *Washington Post* 1 Apr. 1992. Sec. C: 1, 4. As quoted by Curt Gardner on <http://perival.com/delillo/ddbiblio.html>. August 4, 2008.

[19] DeLillo quoted in LeClair, Thomas, "An Interview with Don DeLillo," in DePietro, 12f.

[20] DeLillo quoted in Begley, Adam, "The Art of Fiction CXXXV: Don DeLillo," in DePietro, 97.

[21] DeLillo quoted in Moss, Maria, "'Writing as a Deeper Form of Concentration': An Interview with Don DeLillo," in DePietro, 165.

> an environment, not to react to one. We as novelists have to see things before other people see them.[22]

In many instances Don DeLillo has clearly lived up to his own demands by offering a clear-sighted view of American society which, however, regularly crosses the border to the paranoid, dealing with conspiracy theories and bizarre power networks (*Libra, Underworld* above all). In an often quoted article in the *New York Review of Books*, the author has been aptly called the "chief shaman of the paranoid school of American fiction."[23]

Thus going beyond merely showing a mirror to our age and society, the novelist has anticipated in disturbingly accurate terms some of the most important events of our times in the choice of major themes and images.

With regard to his preferred topics DeLillo has been called the "last of the modernists, who takes for his critical object of aesthetic concern the postmodern situation" (Lentricchia 1991, 14).

Accordingly, in his writing, he is concerned not with the little intricacies of our daily-lives, but with American life on the grander scale, or in his own words: "Contemporary life has an edge that we didn't know in earlier centuries, and this edge is what defines my work, what shapes my work."[24]

His is not the "around-the-house-and-in-the-yard"[25] kind of fiction, which according to DeLillo is so gladly embraced by the broad audience, as it "adds a certain luster, a certain significance to their own lives."[26]

As shall be seen in the course of the present analysis, the author does accurately portray interpersonal relationships, but the stories of (mostly failed) human interaction can invariably be transferred to a higher level,

---

[22] DeLillo quoted in Moss, Maria, "'Writing as a Deeper Form of Concentration': An Interview with Don DeLillo," in DePietro, 158.

[23] Towers, Robert, "From the grassy knoll." *The New York Review of Books.* Volume 35, Number 13 (August 18, 1988). <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/article-preview?article_id=4350>. September 1, 2008.

[24] DeLillo quoted in Moss, Maria. "'Writing as a Deeper Form of Concentration': An Interview with Don DeLillo," in DePietro, 159.

[25] DeLillo quoted in Harris, Robert. "A Talk with Don DeLillo," in DePietro, 18.

[26] Ibid.

representing qualities, not so much of the individual, as of American society as such. Don DeLillo thus keeps aloof from conventional themes and forms of mainstream literature. Where others get entangled with domestic navel gazing, he reflects on terrorism, death, environmental disasters, dangers of modern technology, conspiracies, the Cold War, and other equally momentous topics.

DeLillo himself summarizes his oeuvre as dealing with "modern danger,"[27] which points to the overarching theme in his work: death.

> "I think there is a sense of last things in my work that probably comes from a Catholic childhood. For a Catholic, nothing is too important to discuss or think about, because he's raised with the idea that he will die any minute now and that if he doesn't live his life a certain way this death is simply an introduction to an eternity of pain."[28]

This "sense of last things" naturally is reflected in Don DeLillo's "against-the-grain style" (Lentricchia 1991b, 12). As we have seen earlier, this for DeLillo is yet another way of opposing the 'ready-to-digest'- mentality of modern day Western societies.

Yet all of this seems to develop on an unconscious level, as DeLillo has described himself as a rather intuitive writer, guided by language on a very basic level rather than by content:

> I think the scene comes first, an idea of a character in a place. It's visual, it's Technicolor – something I see in a vague way. Then sentence by sentence into the breach. No outlines – maybe a short list of items, chronological, that may represent the next twenty pages. But the basic work is built around the sentence. This is what I mean when I call myself a writer. I construct sentences.[29]

---

[27] DeLillo quoted in Goldstein, William. ""PW Interviews: Don DeLillo," in DePietro, 49.

[28] DeLillo quoted in Passaro, Vince. "Dangerous Don DeLillo," in DePietro, 81.
Cf. also Keesey, 2.

[29] DeLillo quoted in Begley, Adam. "The Art of Fiction CXXXV: Don DeLillo," in DePietro, 91.

How this constructing of sentences and scenes adds up to the meticulously arranged, complex compositions at hand, shall be the discussed in the following chapters, which will be dedicated to the analysis of structure, characters, language and major themes of *White Noise* and *Falling Man.*

3 Analysis

3.1 White Noise

3.1.1 Title

As will become evident in the following discussion "White Noise" is both explicitly mentioned in the novel of the same name as an acoustic phenomenon, but above all the term functions as a recurring metaphor for the all-pervasive currents produced by modern technology and consumer culture. Originally, Don DeLillo intended to name his novel "Panasonic". This, however, was forestalled by the Matsushita corporation which denied Viking permission to use the brand name.[30]

With regard to the genesis of the novel, David Cowart notes:

> DeLillo has confirmed that one of the influences on *White Noise* was *The Denial of Death*, the 1973 book whose author, Ernest Becker, not only discusses a culture-wide failure to come to terms with death (since we no longer have the spiritual wherewithal to keep it at bay) but also argues that our dread is the powerful motivating force within modern culture.[31] Thus one of the titles DeLillo considered for this novel was 'The American Book of the Dead.' (Cowart, 77f)

[30] On Febuary 6 2005, American-Statesman's Jeff Salamon published an annotation of the opening page of White Noise, with details drawn from various drafts of that page found in the author's papers. <http://www.perival.com/delillo/whitenoise.html>.September 1, 2008.

[31] Cowart referring to Tom LeClair's *In the Loop.* Cf. Cowart, 233.

3.1.2 Summary

White Noise tells the Story of Jack Gladney, inventor of "Hitler Studies" in North America and chairman of the first department entirely dedicated to this field of studies at the College-on-the-Hill in a town called Blacksmith. Gladney lives in that same town with his wife and four children from different marriages.[32] All seems to be going well for this postmodern patchwork family, when an "airborne toxic event" forces them to evacuate their home for over a week. In the course of their flight, Gladney is exposed to Nyodene D., a highly harmful chemical which causes a "nebulous mass" to develop in his body. This experience fuels the innermost conflict of the protagonist: his fear of death. He discovers that his wife, Babette, too suffers from what seems to be a pathological form of this fear. Furthermore, he is confronted with the fact that she has betrayed him in exchange for some ominous medication, Dylar, which supposedly counteracts the chemical processes responsible for fear of death in the human brain. When Jack's colleague at the College-on-the-Hill, Murray Siskind, philosophizes on how man might add to his "life credit" by killing somebody, Jack saunters off to kill the scientist his wife betrayed him with.

3.1.3 Narrative Technique and Structure

Jack Gladney, the protagonist of *White Noise,* is also the narrator of the book. In deciding to render the story through a first-person narrative DeLillo greatly abets irony which often results from Jack Gladney's limited ability to objectively evaluate situations and contextualize his own behavior as opposed to the reader's broader vision. Additional information mostly results from directly quoted characters. However, as these statements, too, are

[32] Steffie (age 9), from Jack's first marriage to Dana Breedlove, Heinrich (14), from Jack's marriage to Janet Savory (now Mother Devi), Babette's daughter Denise (11), and Wilder (about 2).

recounted by the first-person narrator, they are susceptible to error and manipulation.[33]

Early on in the book we get to know Jack as a narrator who seems to be quite honest and straight forward, giving away between the lines way more – through his naïve and somewhat short-sighted view of himself and his surroundings – about himself than originally intended.

The story is rich in dialogues and interspersed with extra-narrational sequences of words, mostly brand names, which critics have located both inside and outside Jack's consciousness:

> It was drizzling as we walked home, my arm around her waist. The streets were empty. Along Elm all the stores were dark, the two banks were dimly lit, the neon spectacles in the window of the optical shop cast a gimmicky light on the sidewalk.
> Dacron, Orion, Lycra Spandex.
> "I know I forget things," she said, "but I didn't know it was so obvious." (52)

According to Osteen these insertions render *White Noise* "a book of spells, a box of products, a literary TV set that channels the discourse of commodities" (Osteen, 167). Others see in these enumerations a reference to some sort of new consumerist spiritual expression:

> Whether these phrases emerge from a speaker somewhere or simply figure as the Brownian[34] motion of Jack's mind, the vitality of all the familiar, highly advertised trade names make all the more poignant the desuetude of that once-ultimate trinity, the three-personed God." (Cowart, 78)

As the story progresses, however, there are instances of insertions which can be traced back to one specific source:

---

[33] Narrative technique/terminology: Cf. F. Stanzel: *A Theory of Narrative.* 1987.

[34] Brownian motion (named after the botanist Robert Brown) is the random movement of particles suspended in a liquid or gas or the mathematical model used to describe such random movements, often called a particle theory.
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brownian_motion>. October 30, 2008.

> The radio said: "Excesses of salt, phosphorus, magnesium." (236)
>
> A woman passing on the street said, "A decongestant, an antihistamine, a cough suppressant, a pain reliever." (262)

In addition to these utterings which do not belong to the immediate context of the narration, there are constant references to messages emanating from the Gladney family's TV set, which never seems to be turned off:

> After dinner, on my way upstairs, I heard the TV say: "Let's sit half lotus and think about our spines." (18)
>
> Upstairs a British voice said: "There are forms of vertigo that do not include spinning." (56)
>
> The TV said: "This creature has developed a complicated stomach in keeping with its leafy diet." (95)

As the narrator never explicitly comments or reflects on these quotations, we can assume that Jack is not even aware of their presence both around him and in his mind. They are, it seems, part of the 'white noise' of media presence surrounding the protagonist.

In terms of narrated time the novel progresses linearly from the arrival of students in September at the beginning of the novel, through the climactic event of the "airborne toxic event" in January and through a second term at the College-on-the-Hill. It closes, coming almost full circle, in summer.
In terms of temporal setting, I agree with Ebbesen, who argues – with reference to "numerous products present in the late seventies and early eighties" (Ebbesen, 129) - that fictional time-frame and date of publication roughly coincide.

White Noise is divided into three parts: "Waves and Radiation", consisting of twenty rather short chapters, "The Airborne Toxic Event", consisting of one lengthy chapter only, and finally "Dylarama", consisting of eighteen chapters.

Part One is mostly dedicated to Jack Gladney's family. DeLillo also provides a satiric glimpse on some of the more absurd aspects of school routine at the College-on-the-Hill. The title of this part – "Waves and Radiation" – stems from some observations by Murray Jay Siskind, "visiting lecturer on living icons" (10) at the popular culture department. Even though waves and radiation are mentioned several times throughout the novel, both in a literary and a metaphorical sense, it is Murray who states that "[e]verything is concealed in symbolism, hidden by veils of mystery and layers of cultural material. But it is psychic data, absolutely. The large doors slide open, they close unbidden. Energy waves, incident radiation" (37f), and that "[w]e don't have to cling to life artificially, or to death for that matter. We simply walk toward the sliding doors. Waves and radiation" (38), talking about supermarkets and death respectively. Later on, when Jack sees his wife on TV he remembers this, conceding that "Murray might be on to something. Waves and radiation. Something leaked through the mesh" (104). And finally on the very last page of the novel the narrator returns to this expression, describing, once again, the supermarket: "The terminals are equipped with holographic scanners, which decode the binary secret of every item, infallibly. This is the language of waves and radiation, or how the dead speak to the living" (326).

Part Two – "The Airborne Toxic Event" – is self-explanatory with regards to its title, as it is fully dedicated to the toxic spill which necessitates an evacuation of the inhabitants of Blacksmith.

The same holds true for "Dylarama", the third part of the novel, which focuses on Jack's quest for some Dylar or any means for that matter to fight his paralyzing fear of death.

The novel ends, "[l]ike a great symphony […] with a triple coda: Wilder's tricycle ride[35], the contemplation of sunsets previously upgraded from "modern" to "postmodern" (61, 227), and – the true cadence – a last visit to the supermarket" (Cowart, 89f).

[35] Cf. chapter 3.1.6.

3.1.4 Setting: White Noise as Campus Novel?

In his introduction to Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin*[36], David Lodge writes about the very beginnings of the "campus novel":

> Mary McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe* (1952) has some claim to be the first in the field. […] Randall Jarrell's *Pictures from an Institution* (1954), which was, for those in the know, a riposte to McCarthy's book, gave a further impetus to the new genre.[37]

Judging from the setting of *White Noise*, the novel qualifies as a representative of this genre, especially its beginning, as the novel opens with a description of the return of students after the summer break:

> The station wagons arrived at noon, a long shining line that coursed through the west campus. In single file they eased around the orange I-beam sculpture and moved toward the dormitories. (3)

Even though the novel's main subject matter is not university life as such, we learn quite a few details about the College-on-the-Hill – not surprisingly one might argue as the narrator also functions as a department chair in the institution. Jack informs us that "[t]uition at the College-on-the-Hill is fourteen thousand dollars, Sunday brunch included" (41), thus providing us with a sense of the – presumably well-off – social setting of the students. And indeed, the narrator observes that there is "something about [the students' fathers] suggesting massive insurance coverage" (3).

The campus itself "occupies an ever serene edge of the townscape, semidetached, more or less scenic, suspended in political calm. Not a place

---

[36] An edited extract of which was published under the title "Exiles in a small world," in the May 8th, 2004 issue of *The Observer* as found on <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/may/08/classics.vladimirnabokov>. October 20, 2008.

[37] Lodge, "Exiles in a small world."

designed to aggravate suspicions" (85). The campus grounds are thus portrayed as a closed system, which the students do not need to leave: "The students tend to stick close to campus. There is nothing for them to do in Blacksmith proper, no natural haunt or attraction. They have their own food, movies, music, theater, sports, conversation and sex" (59). The novel thus provides the obligatory

> pastoral campus setting, a 'small world' removed from the hustle and bustle of modern urban life, in which social and political behaviour can be amusingly observed in the interaction of characters whose high intellectual pretensions are often let down by their very human frailties.[38]

White Noise is, of course, not entirely set on campus. The academic stage is reserved for the chapters dedicated to Jack's role as the chairman of the department of Hitler Studies, and his observations on his colleagues, especially those who belong to the "American Environments" department. It is interesting to note that we learn more about the staff of the popular culture department than about Gladney's immediate colleagues. Hitler Studies simply equals Jack Gladney, which is all we have to know. This of course, points to another characteristic of campus novels: "To begin, we can note that university mysteries, especially American, frequently portray learning institutions as places populated with "eccentrics" obsessed with their subject matter" (Ebbesen, 118).[39]

The ironies resulting from the discrepancy between Gladney's professional position and his naïve approach to his personal problems, are rendered unintentionally by the narrator. Foregrounding the absurd side of the "American Environments" department, on the other hand, seems quite consistent with a narrator who wants to stress the superiority of his own field of studies, thus reinforcing his own "academic aura".

Accordingly, Jack Gladney notes:

---

[38] Lodge, "Exiles in a small world."

[39] quoting John Kramer. "The American College Mystery." p.8. In: Bevan, David, ed. *University Fiction.* Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990.

> There is no Hitler building as such. We are quartered in Centenary Hall, a dark brick structure we share with the popular culture department, known officially as American environments. A curious group. The teaching staff is composed almost solely of New York émigrés, smart, thuggish, movie-mad, trivia-crazed. They are here to decipher the natural language of the culture, to make a formal method of the shiny pleasures they'd known in their Europe-shadowed childhoods – an Aristotelianism of bubble gum wrappers and detergent jingles.” (9)

This critical stance on his colleagues is helped by the evaluation of one from their midst, when Murray Jay Siskind observes: "I understand the music, I understand the movies, I even see how comic books can tell us things. But there are full professors in this place who read nothing but cereal boxes" (10). Jack Gladney’s laconic answer to this observation: "It's the only avant-garde we've got" (10).

Apart from these side blows directed at his colleagues, the protagonist of *White Noise* also takes the reader to the campus when he tries to learn more about the drug his wife is apparently taking, consulting Winnie Richards, a prodigy neurochemist working at the College-on-the-Hill. The ensuing scenes provide us with a better sense of the campus outlay as Winnie Richards is literally an evasive character who needs to be chased down in order to have a conversation with:

> That afternoon I saw Winnie Richards slip out a side door of the Observatory and go loping down a small lawn toward the new buildings. I hurried out of my office and went after her. […] She hurried around the back of Faculty House and I picked up the pace, fearing I was on the verge of losing her. It felt strange to be running. […] I caught up to her in the empty corridor of a one-story building that smelled of embalming fluids. (186f)

The third instance of action on campus are the walks Jack takes with Murray Siskind:

> Murray and I walked across campus in our European manner, a serenely reflective pace, heads lowered as we conversed.

> Sometimes one of us gripped the other near the elbow, a gesture of intimacy and physical support. (237)

The rest of the novel is also set in Blacksmith, however, not on the campus grounds but in the Gladneys' house and in the supermarket. Jack's life thus seems to oscillate mainly between these three locations: university, family, supermarket, all of which are located in Blacksmith.

Only when the action of the novel requires it, does Jack leave his familiar surroundings. First, when the airborne toxic event forces the family to evacuate to Iron City, and a second time towards the end of the novel, when Jack, again, travels to Iron City to kill Willie Mink.

Apart from these climactic digressions, the only way for Jack Gladney to connect with the rest of the world is by watching TV:

> But Blacksmith is nowhere near a large city. We don't feel threatened and aggrieved in quite the same way other towns do. We're not smack in the path of history and its contaminations. If our complaints have a focal point, it would have to be the TV set, where the outer torment lurks, causing fears and secret desires. (85)

The absurdity of this observation is, of course, heightened by the very use of a clearly defined campus/small-town setting, which provides the perfect stage to closely examine a character in his fight against his innermost fears, as well as the role of mass media. As Ebbesen remarks:

> *White Noise* gives readers the reassuring subject position offered by the college novel genre, but its stretching of the genre's boundaries and constraints disturbs such identification in order to conduct a larger ideological critique of the university and society. (Ebbesen, 115)

3.1.5 Characters

> "A character is part of the pleasure a writer wants to give his readers."[40]

[40] DeLillo quoted in Begley, Adam, "The Art of Fiction CXXXV: Don DeLillo," in DePietro, 99.

3.1.5.1 Jack

Jack Gladney, who functions both as narrator and protagonist of *White Noise,* is a 50-year-old academic who lives with his patchwork family in a small university town.

Jack introduces himself by stating “I am chairman of the department of Hitler studies at the College-on-the-Hill. I invented Hitler studies in North America in March of 1968“ (4). It seems as though the protagonist intentionally sums up his astounding career in one short humble sentence, letting the unnamed implications linger in the air. Only later do we learn more about the scope of Jack’s achievement, when Murray Jay Siskind tells Jack about his plans for creating something similar:

> “You've established a wonderful thing here with Hitler. You created it, you nurtured it, you made it your own. Nobody on the faculty of any college or university in this part of the country can so much as utter the word Hitler without a nod in your direction, literally or metaphorically. This is the center, the unquestioned source. He is now your Hitler, Gladney's Hitler. […] It's what I want to do with Elvis.” (11f)

By this last remark Gladney’s work of a lifetime is rendered somewhat less impressive than the narrator might have intended.

One of Jack’s most reliable character traits, however, as will become more obvious later, is his consistent inability to make connections such as this. Accordingly, even towards the end of the novel Jack still perceives of himself as the dignified academic heavyweight he never really was in the first place, referring to himself in third person even: “Other times we walked slightly apart, Murray's hands clasped behind his back, Gladney's folded monkishly at the abdomen, a somewhat worried touch” (237).

Being the naïve narrator he is, however, Jack still provides us with an alternative to his own observations by recounting how others see him. Murray, for example, admits to liking “simple men and complicated women” (11) – which is not very flattering for Jack who considers Murray a friend. Jack’s physical appearance too, might be less distinguished than he would

like to admit, as a man in the evacuation camp describes him thus: “Light hair, washed-out eyes, pinkish nose, nondescript mouth and chin, sweaty-type complexion, average jowls, slumped shoulders, big hands and feet” (163).

Yet, at first everything seems to be more or less in order, an impression enforced by Jack’s performance in front of his students, “secure in [his] professional aura of power, madness and death” (72). Here again, Jack is far from acknowledging his fears and weaknesses: ”Death was strictly a professional matter here. I was comfortable with it, I was on top of it” (74). Statements such as this naturally alert the reader to possible incongruities, and in due time the essential conflict of Jack’s life is revealed: his fear of death.

At first this topic surfaces when Jack – with reference to Babette – wonders, en passant, “who will die first” (15). As the novel progresses, however, the reader realizes to which extent this fear has already pervaded Jack’s character.

After being exposed to the deadly chemical Nyodene D., a new dimension, which is closer to reality, is added to this fear. "I'm tentatively scheduled to die. It won't happen tomorrow or the next day. But it is in the works[,]" (202) he tells his wife, the irony being that this sentence holds true for just about every living creature. So terrifying is this fear, that Jack won’t even be truthful to his doctor, the one person who might help him prolong his life: “In response to questions on the screen I tapped out the story of my life and death, little by little, each response eliciting further questions in an unforgiving progression of sets and subsets. I lied three times” (276).

What shakes Jack Gladney even more than the prospect of his own premature death is Babette’s confession that she too has suffered from fear of death for the longest time. This revelation leaves him absolutely helpless, despite his bigger than life academic persona, revealing in the same breath his boundless egocentrism: “That's what I can't forgive you for. Telling me you're not the woman I believed you were. I'm hurt, I'm devastated" (197).

The essence of the protagonist's fears and longings is portrayed most distinctly visible through Jack's conversations with Murray. "I'd like to lose interest in myself, [i]s there any chance of that happening?" he asks his colleague and friend at one point. As Murray cannot give him a satisfying answer – "None. Better men have tried" (152). – Jack has to keep on pretending that his strategy to align himself with the "larger than death" (287) figure of Hitler will protect him, while "[i]n the dark the mind runs on like a devouring machine, the only thing awake in the universe[,] […] the old defenseless feeling. Small, weak, deathbound, alone" (224).

Up until the point when Jack's fear of death gets out of control, however, his strategies to fend off death seem to work fairly well. This does not come as a big surprise given their elaborate nature.
Above all, ,we find the towering presence of Adolf Hitler.
As mentioned before, Jack's narrative is far too naïve to convince the reader of Gladney's authenticity. As early as in chapter four he gives away the fact that in truth he is the "false character that follows the name around" (17), referring to a little trick, so to say, the chancellor had advised him to:

> On one such night I got into bed next to Babette and told her how the chancellor had advised me, back in 1968, to do something about my name and appearance if I wanted to be taken seriously as a Hitler innovator. Jack Gladney would not do, he said, and asked me what other names I might have at my disposal. We finally agreed that I should invent an extra initial and call myself J. A. K. Gladney, a tag I wore like a borrowed suit.
> The chancellor warned against what he called my tendency to make a feeble presentation of self. He strongly suggested I gain weight. He wanted me to "grow out" into Hitler. (16f)

And this is what Gladney dedicates his life to: He starts wearing "glasses with thick black heavy frames and dark lenses" (17) (which cause him to see "gaily animated" (39) colored spots, but which he refuses to take off while on campus), he wears a black academic gown, and publishes articles in renowned journals. So strong is his faith in his fake character that Jack even imagines himself safe in the face of natural disaster:

> I'm not just a college professor. I'm the head of a department. I don't see myself fleeing an airborne toxic event. That's for people who live in mobile homes out in the scrubby parts of the county, where the fish hatcheries are. (117)

Murray Jay Siskind, on the other hand, sees these efforts for what they are:

> "Helpless and fearful people are drawn to magical figures, mythic figures, epic men who intimidate and darkly loom."
> "You're talking about Hitler, I take it."
> "[…] You thought he would protect you. I understand completely." (287)

This in turn is in accordance with the argument put forward by Osteen who states that "'Aura' refers to a quasi-divine radiance or halo that lends a patina of authenticity or mystery to material phenomena" (Osteen, 169).
Jack Gladney's dependency on Hitler is humorously illustrated when Babette's father comes for an unannounced visit. When Jack sees him in the dark garden, he mistakes him for a burglar, or possibly even the "Grim Reaper" (243) – and goes to confront him armed with a copy of *Mein Kampf* clutched to his stomach (244). Hitler's aura thus functions for Jack literally as an antidote to death. The one element in his carefully designed scheme which does not yet show the desired results is Jack's futile effort to learn German. With a big Hitler conference coming up, however, he undertakes another attempt, stating:

> Because I'd achieved high professional standing, because my lectures were well attended and my articles printed in the major journals, because I wore an academic gown and dark glasses day and night whenever I was on campus, because I carried two hundred and thirty pounds on a six-foot three-inch frame and had big hands and feet, I knew my German lessons would have to be secret."(31f)

This instance distinctly shows Jack's underlying uncertainty, which cannot be fully disguised by his physical appearance and his academic merits.

Another strategy which helps Jack – and Babette as will be discussed later – is his connection to some seemingly weak persons: his children. Watching them sleep gives Jack a sense of security and calm and after watching Steffie and Wilder for almost an hour he reports feeling “refreshed and expanded in unnameable ways” (182). Wilder, above all others, soothes his fear-ridden soul: “I liked being with Wilder. The world was a series of fleeting gratifications. He took what he could, then immediately forgot it in the rush of a subsequent pleasure. It was this forgetfulness I envied and admired” (170). When Jack, on the other hand, is unable to forget about his wants and fears, whenever something or somebody reminds him of his ordinariness and – even worse – of his mortality, Jack ventures to find new strategies to distract himself from the terrifying void. When he meets a colleague at the hardware store, the man notes that without his academic accessories Jack looks like “[a] big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy” (83). Jack assures his colleague that he does not take offence at this but what ensues can clearly be seen as an act of fighting something at the wrong end, trying to enlarge himself not by putting on his academic gown this time, but by indulging in a major shopping spree:

> The encounter put me in the mood to shop. […] When I could not decide between two shirts they encouraged me to buy both. […] My family gloried in the event. I was one of them, shopping, at last. […] I shopped with reckless abandon. I shopped for immediate needs and distant contingencies. […] I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I'd forgotten existed. Brightness settled around me. […] I traded money for goods. The more money I spent the less important it seemed. I was bigger than these sums. (83f)

Later on in the novel, after his exposure to Nyodene D., Jack changes tactics, starting to throw away things instead of accumulating them in order to enlarge his own insecure self. He starts by throwing out the obvious clatter which assembles in every house, attributing to the objects a personality it seems: “I was in a vengeful and near savage state. I bore a personal grudge against these things. Somehow they'd put me in this fix” (294). When there is

nothing left in terms of “candle stubs, laminated placemats, frayed pot holders” and ”padded clothes hangers,” Jack progresses to the core of the matter throwing out “diplomas, certificates, awards and citations” (294). On some unconscious level he seems to realize that neither material possessions nor academic rewards will help him when it comes down to it. However, being Jack Gladney, he does not stop to think or draw useful conclusions.

As a consequence, the more Jack tries to maneuver himself out of his predicament, the more his façade starts showing cracks.

At the Hitler conference Jack limits himself to words which are similar in German and English, resulting in “disjointed and odd” (274) sentences. Once more he tries to fake security, by using Hitler: “I spoke the name often, hoping it would overpower my insecure sentence structure” (274).

When Babette tells her husband about her experiments with Dylar, Jack fixes his mind on the drug, transferring his hopes for relief to the chemical. He even admits to his eleven-year-old daughter: “’In a very real sense it doesn't matter what is in those tablets. It could be sugar, it could be spice. I am eager to be humored, to be fooled,’" explaining that “’[t]his is what happens, Denise, to desperate people’" (251).

The story takes yet another twist, when Jack’s father-in-law gives him a gun. At first Jack is reluctant, but he soon realizes, or so he thinks, what a gun could do for him:

> The gun created a second reality for me to inhabit. The air was bright, swirling around my head. Nameless feelings pressed thrillingly on my chest. It was a reality I could control, secretly dominate.
> How stupid these people were, coming into my office unarmed. (297)

Observations such as the one just quoted clearly show how irrational Jack has become at this point. Even as Murray points out how contradictory his friend’s behavior has been all along, (“’On one level you wanted to conceal yourself in Hitler and his works. On another level you wanted to use him to

grow in significance and strength'" (287).) Jack cannot transcend this conflict by strengthening his ego.

Similarly, the protagonist is unable to feel compassion for his wife who has taken to desperate measures, paying with her own body for what she thinks is the last resort for her death-ridden psyche. His feeble attempts to help her are limited to offering her hot chocolate, which is doubtlessly one of the strongest moments in the book with regard to irony, as the renowned college professor stands helpless and offended in the face of his wife's agony. Jack even compares Babette to his former wives who worked for the CIA: "'I thought it was my former wives who practiced guile. Sweet deceivers. Tense, breathy, high-cheekboned, bilingual'" (192). Again, the more the protagonist's façade crumbles, the clearer the reader is able to see Jack's feeble, egocentric character.

When the plot culminates in his scheme to kill Willie Mink, the protagonist is also at the height of his misjudgment. Not only does he take Murray's theorizing at face value, but he is also under the illusion of seeing the 'bigger picture', lost, it seems, in a highly delusional state: As he takes out his gun to kill the scientist, he feels "[g]reat and nameless emotions" (312), thinking he suddenly knows who he is "in the network of meanings" (312). Jack thus obviously mistakes a surge of adrenaline for clairvoyance, and a gun in his hand for power over his own life. As a narrator, Jack unwittingly forestalls any notion of heroism, by giving this hilarious account (after shooting Mink):

> I decided to attempt mouth-to-mouth. I leaned over him, used my thumb and index finger to clothes-pin his nose and then tried to work my face down into his. The awkwardness and grim intimacy of the act made it seem all the more dignified under the circumstances. All the larger, more generous. I kept trying to reach his mouth in order to breathe powerful gusts of air into his lungs. (314)

This, certainly, is not the story of a hero. Olster's diagnosis in this case reads: "The problem is that Jack, still searching for modernist epiphany and underlying truth, does not recognize his own implication in the scene he describes" (Olster in Duvall, 90). Similarly Jack's reaction, in hospital, to the

nun's revelation that she and her sisters only pretend to believe, turns out like a child's obstinate insistence: "'You're a nun. Act like one'" (320). Again, he shows the exact same exasperation as when Babette tells him about her true feelings and fears. Disappointed at her weakness, he thus reveals the true meaning of what he stated right in the beginning, namely that "[Babette] said [he] made virtues of her flaws because it was [his] nature to shelter loved ones from the truth. Something lurked inside the truth, she said" (8). As it turns out, the only person Jack Gladney ever tried to protect, was Jack Gladney.

3.1.5.2 Babette

Jack introduces his wife by stating that she is "tall and fairly ample" (5), which is not the flattering, sensitive introduction Babette, or any woman for that matter, might wish for. In the beginning the reader can certainly still attribute this peculiar characterization to Jack's singular narrative style. As the novel progresses, however, it becomes clear that the description is an expression of a man's wish for security. One can therefore speculate that "tall and ample" might be seen by an insecure man as a promise of a certain motherliness and stamina.

These, admittedly speculative, observations point to the underlying issue of the difficulty which arises if one tries to characterize a protagonist who is presented by another – anything but objective – part of the cast, so to say. Even though Babette's own voice is heard throughout various dialogues, the stage is set by Jack and Murray, creating a certain image of Babette which is not likely to be fully rectified by the reader even if it is contradicted by Babette's actions in the course of the novel. Jack, for example, clearly does not think too highly of Babette's achievements and daily work:

> Not that she is a gift-bearer of great things as the world generally reckons them. She gathers and tends the children, teaches a course in an adult education program, belongs to a group of volunteers who read to the blind. Once a week she reads to an elderly man named Treadwell who lives on the edge of town. (5)

“Gathering and tending the children” sounds more like Jack’s romantic conception of something which in actuality is doubtlessly hard work. Murray too, is somewhat deceived by Babette’s looks when he speculates that she is probably “good with the children” and “great to have around in a family tragedy. She'd be the type to take control, show strength and affirmation" (19). Ironically, even though Jack corrects him by stating that "[a]ctually she falls apart. She fell apart when her mother died" (20), he relativizes this by adding "Who wouldn't?" (20), thus hinting at his own misconception of his wife being strong and earthy.

Not surprisingly then, when Babette tells him about her forgetfulness, which is obviously worrying her and which has already rung the alarm bell with her daughter, Denise[41], he tries to talk her out of her own feelings by telling her “We all forget” (52).

Babette then sums up her own life thus:

> "Either I'm taking something and I don't remember or I'm not taking something and I don't remember. My life is either/or. Either I chew regular gum or I chew sugarless gum. Either I chew gum or I smoke. Either I smoke or I gain weight. Either I gain weight or I run up the stadium steps."
> "Sounds like a boring life."
> "I hope it lasts forever," she said. (53)

Again, Jack, is neither taking his wife very seriously, nor is he of much help in her dilemma. This seems to hold true for the more practical aspects of life as well, as it is Babette who has to bring Wilder to the doctor because her husband is scared of health care professionals. In terms of character one of Babette’s eternal problems seems to be a certain lack of self-discipline, which causes her to resort to somewhat strange strategies during their evacuation:

---

[41] “Denise was eleven, a hard-nosed kid. She led a more or less daily protest against those of her mother's habits that struck her as wasteful or dangerous” (*White Noise,* 7).

> "I thought this would be a good time to cut down on fatty things," she said.
> "Why now especially?"
> "This is a time for discipline, mental toughness. We're practically at the edge."
> "I think it's interesting that you regard a possible disaster for yourself, your family and thousands of other people as an opportunity to cut down on fatty foods."
> "You take discipline where you can find it," she said. (132)

On the other hand, of course, one could also interpret this as simply a very efficient act, as pragmatism too, seems to be one of the traits which characterize Jack's wife. Even though her husband might not necessarily agree, the fact that Babette does not have academic training in her case by no means equals ignorance. On the contrary, when Jack excitedly tells her about Murray's theory that it is important for human beings to repress certain things, she observes: "'But repression is totally false and mechanical. Everybody knows that. We're not supposed to deny our nature'" (296).

What Jack and Babette can agree on, however, is that death is terrifying. Ironically, the issue seems to be that both of them do not want to outlive their partner, so the question of "Who will die first?" comes up time and again as a motif. When they discuss the matter it is almost like watching two children fight over some triviality:

> She claims my death would leave a bigger hole in her life than her death would leave in mine. This is the level of our discourse. The relative size of holes, abysses and gaps. We have serious arguments on this level. She says if her death is capable of leaving a large hole in my life, my death would leave an abyss in hers, a great yawning gulf. I counter with a profound depth or void. And so it goes into the night. These arguments never seem foolish at the time. Such is the dignifying power of our subject. (101)

The irony here lies in the fact that in reality both of them fear dying more than anything else. When Babette confesses this to Jack, after a period of what might be diagnosed as severe depression ("Babette wore her sweatsuit almost all the time. […] I thought about it for a while, decided there was

nothing excessively odd in this, nothing to worry about, no reason to believe she was sinking into apathy and despair" (263).), her husband again tries to convince her that she cannot be afraid of dying, because "'[t]his is the whole point of Babette. She's a joyous person. She doesn't succumb to gloom or self-pity'" (191). What finally drives her to such desperate measures as experimenting with a potentially lethal drug, is the fact that for once in her life Babette cannot deal with a problem the way she used to do:

> "You know how I am. I think everything is correctible. Given the right attitude and the proper effort, a person can change a harmful condition by reducing it to its simplest parts. You can make lists, invent categories, devise charts and graphs. […] How else do you understand the world, is my way of looking at it." (191f)

Therefore, after having tried everything else, i.e. making phone calls to technical writers and scientists, talking to a Sikh holy man in Iron City and studying the occult (cf. 192), Babette goes ahead testing a new drug called Dylar, even after the project management has decided not to let her go through with it, due to the possible severe side effects: "'I could walk sideways but not forward. I could not distinguish words from things, so that if someone said 'speeding bullet,' I would fall to the floor and take cover'" (193). In addition to the possible harm she even pays one of the scientist, Willie Mink, by rendering him sexual services. Tellingly, Jack regards this fact less of a betrayal than Babette's fear of death. When he puts his cards on the table as well, so to say, his wife discloses the two things she desires most, namely "'Jack not to die first. And Wilder to stay the way he is forever'" (236).

3.1.5.3 Murray

Murray Jay Siskind, or "delphic Murray" as David Cowart calls him (Cowart, 79), is one of the New York émigrés who constitute the popular culture department at the College-on-the-Hill. When he tells Jack about the boarders at his rooming house, pointing out that there is "'[a] man with no past,'" and "'[a] woman with a past'" (10), the following dialogue ensues:

> "Which one are you?" I said.
> "I'm the Jew. What else would I be?" (10)

Besides being a Jew from New York, currently lecturing on Elvis Presley at Jack's college, Murray is also a familiar character, as he was already featured in *Amazons*, a novel Don DeLillo published five years prior to *White Noise* under the pseudonym "Cleo Birdwell." Murray observes: "'When I was a sportswriter, […] I traveled constantly, lived in planes and hotels and stadium smoke, never got to feel at home in my own apartment. Now I have a place'" (49). Blacksmith thus proves to be perfect surroundings for the self-appointed scholar of "American magic and dread" (19).

At first Jack seems to be merely taking pity on Siskind, noting that

> [t]here was something touching about the fact that Murray was dressed almost totally in corduroy. I had the feeling that since the age of eleven in his crowded plot of concrete he'd associated this sturdy fabric with higher learning in some impossibly distant and tree-shaded place. (11)

In a generous gesture he appears at Murray's lecture on Elvis, helping his colleague with the ensuing "doppelconférence," by transferring on Siskind's subject matter some of the Gladney-esque authority. Jack underlines the grandness of his gesture by stating that, "[i]t was not a small matter. We all had an aura to maintain, and in sharing mine with a friend I was risking the very things that made me untouchable" (74).

As the novel progresses, however, the power relation between these two individuals slowly shifts. In his quest to rid himself of his fear of death, Jack becomes spellbound by Murray's knowledge and self-confidence. Ironically, Jack is the only person who misses the manipulative point about his new friend. Even when he recounts a conversation between Babette and Murray, he makes no connection to his own relationship with the man:

> "How do you know so much?" Babette said.
> "I'm from New York."

> "The more you talk, the sneakier you look, as if you're trying to put something over on us."
> "The best talk is seductive."
> (51)

Maybe it is Murray's stock phrase, "It's obvious," which tricks Jack into actually taking Siskind's observations without the necessary skepticism or even just a grain of salt.

In terms of plot development, Murray plays an essential role, introducing not only some of the major themes, such as the secret of the "most photographed barn in America" (12), or his observations on supermarkets, and the possible relevance of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* for modern American culture – but it is through him that Jack believes he has finally found the one true remedy against his fear of death, namely killing another person.

When Murray and Jack have this decisive discussion it is indeed as if Jack saw in his colleague the legendary Delphic oracle, reverently waiting for the conclusion Murray will make after having guided his disciple elegantly through the various stages of his self-devised theory on "American magic and dread." The problem in all this being the fact that Jack does not take to heart the Delphic saying "know thyself," but as has been pointed out can be said to be one of the most, if not the most ignorant character in the novel.

3.1.6 Language versus White Noise

Among other topics, some of which have already been discussed, language as a central issue figures prominently in *White Noise*. In this case, its importance is highlighted by contrasting language with the absence of it, or rather with its substitution through postmodern noise.

As Cowart argues, "DeLillo sees language as the great model of discrimination and difference – the embodiment of a complex system of communication that is unique to humans" (72). Accordingly DeLillo explores the topic in great depth, looking at it from various angles. To start with, the reader will take note of Gladney's struggle with the German tongue, which he

describes as “[f]leshy, warped, spit-spraying, purplish and cruel” (31). Jack’s ambition underlines the power which is attributed to language, on the one hand to exclude or include a group of (non)speakers, on the other, according to the narrator, there is an aura inherent to the German tongue – originating with its most dreaded user – which he wants to make his own: “I sensed the deathly power of the language. I wanted to speak it well, use it as a charm, a protective device” (31). When the annual Hitler conference takes place at the College-on-the-Hill, Jack’s estimation seems to be confirmed:

> The rest of the time I tried to avoid the Germans in the group. Even in my black gown and dark glasses, with my name in Nazi typeface over my heart, I felt feeble in their presence, death-prone, listening to them produce their guttural sounds, their words, their heavy metal. They told Hitler jokes and played pinochle. All I could do was mutter a random monosyllable, rock with empty laughter. (274)

This passage, above all others shows the intricate web linking language to death, as Jack explicitly mentions a feeling of being feeble and prone to death as a consequence of being excluded from the superior group of colleagues who speak German. What Jack does not seem to realize is that it is not only his exclusion from the assumed power of the German tongue, but simply a lack of self-esteem on his side. He seems to feel that Jack Gladney is not about being somebody but about being able to perform certain things, such as speaking a specific language. There is no doubt that this is indeed important given the nature of his subject. However, seen from a rational point of view it would not “kill him” if he had to admit to his inability to learn German. It might mean an end to his career, but not to him as a person. This, however, is exactly what he fears.

As a caring father, Jack has also tried to pass on some of the powerful aura of the German language to his son, by naming him Heinrich, and he goes on to explain to his stepdaughter: "’I thought it had an authority that might cling to him. I thought it was forceful and impressive and I still do. I wanted to shield him, make him unafraid. People were naming their children Kim, Kelly and Tracy’" (63).

Ironically, the best protection against death, as it is portrayed in the novel, seems to be silence, as the one member of the Gladney family who actually seems to have a guardian angel proves to be Wilder, who, as his parents worriedly observe, somehow stopped making advances in learning to speak. When he pedals his tricycle across a four-lane highway unharmed at the end of the novel, he is described as moving along “mystically charged“ (322). However, “[t]he exemption from mortal fear that Wilder displays comes at the expense of intellectual maturation. Being without language, simply put, means being autistic” (Olster in Duvall, 91).

The other character in the book, besides Jack, greatly concerned with language is Murray. His engagement, however, is set on a completely different level. Different from people from small towns such as Blacksmith, who are able to name “all those little tools and fixtures and devices that people in cities never know the names of, (33)” he analyzes language at a seemingly deeper level. At the supermarket he senses the presence of

> [e]nergy waves, incident radiation. All the letters and numbers are here, all the colors of the spectrum, all the voices and sounds, all the code words and ceremonial phrases. It is just a question of deciphering, rearranging, peeling off the layers of unspeakability. (37f)

Through Murray DeLillo thus opens up the concept of language to a broader notion, extending it to anything in our surroundings which carries a message which we are called to decipher.

Yet another aspect of language featured in the narration is the use of euphemisms, or put differently, the power of language to defuse delicate situations. Thus, a “plane crash” becomes a “crash landing” with astonishing consequences: “They saw how easy it was, by adding one word, to maintain a grip on the future, to extend it in consciousness if not in actual fact” (91).

Jack adds to this yet another twist using a euphemism he knows his wife hates after she has confessed to him her betrayal:

> “Then he entered you."
> "Don't use that term. You know how I feel about that usage.”
> "He effected what is called entry. In other words he inserted himself. One minute he was fully dressed, putting the car rental keys on the dresser. The next minute he was inside you."
> "No one was inside anyone. That is stupid usage." (194)

This dialogue also illustrates a certain awareness for language issues displayed by various characters in the novel.

The most prominent example of the essential process of naming is the “airborne toxic event” which actually occurs as “a heavy black mass hanging in the air beyond the river, more or less shapeless” (110), a “towering mass,” (111) as Jack describes the result of the chemical spillage. As soon as the radio picks up on the disastrous news the deadly cloud is officially termed, so to say, “a feathery plume" (111), even though Jack points out that it looks rather like ”a shapeless growing thing. A dark black breathing thing of smoke” (111). The official version is then changed into a "black billowing cloud” (113), and finally to "the airborne toxic event" (117).

The catastrophe is later mirrored by an event taking place in Jack’s very own body: "’What happens when someone has traces of this material in his or her blood?’" Jack asks his doctor. The answer is disquieting: "’They get a nebulous mass’"(280). Jack’s nebulous mass corresponds, it seems, directly to its source, the airborne toxic event. It is important to note here, that even though the medical technician claims that “’the imaging block takes the clearest pictures humanly possible’” (280) it is still called nebulous, pointing at the limits of technology. Even though the technician argues that this terminology is due to the fact that the mass in Jack’s body “’has no definite shape, form or limits’” (280) he still informs his patient that nebulous mass means “’a possible growth in the body’" (280) giving further proof that state of the art instruments are no guarantee for an exact diagnosis.

The helplessness Jack must experience in this situation is contrasted by his feeling of power when he shoots Mink in order to add to his own ‘life credit:’ “I fired the gun, the weapon, the pistol, the firearm, the automatic” (312), he states, savoring the various violence-laden words.

The other end of the spectrum, finally, is alluded to in the title of the novel. Carefully woven into the narrative are mentions of ‘white noise’ – differing in intensity and composition. There are “the toneless systems, the jangle and skid of carts, the loudspeaker and coffee-making machines, the cries of children,” which cause the supermarket to be “awash in noise,” (36) there is “the human buzz of some vivid and happy transaction” (84) during Jack’s shopping spree. Completely different in tone Jack experiences “aural torment” (241) upon entering the motel room in which Willie Mink resides. He literally hears, or so he imagines, the “love babble and buzzing flesh” (241) of his wife and Mink. He notes: “Then gloom moved in around the gray-sheeted bed, a circle slowly closing. Panasonic” (241).
Similar to the supermarket, though with completely different connotations, the motel room is full of noise: “Eventually he worked himself out of the deep fold, rising nicely, sharply outlined against the busy air. White noise everywhere” (310). The narrator lets two pages pass before he offers an explanation for this term: “The intensity of the noise in the room was the same at all frequencies. Sound all around” (312).
With the sound of the TV set turned off, Mink himself has started to act as a substitute for the TV loudspeaker, emanating advertisement slogans and talk show gibberish. About this special kind of noise Cowart observes:

> Though employed with considerable economy, this touch implies that the Gladneys and their fellow Americans are perpetually surrounded by a fatiguing glut of noise and advertising and information. This aural clutter threatens to shape the human mind in its own image. (Cowart, 85)

Finally, then, “[t]he state of linguistic entropy to which Mink’s meaningless babble attests brings to fruition the notion of death that Jack and Babette

have earlier articulated with respect to all the ambient sound that surrounds them" (Olster in Duvall, 90), namely, that death might be nothing but white noise.

3.1.7 Death in White Noise

> "There must be something else, an underlying problem."
> "What could be more underlying than death?" (197)

This quotation is taken from a conversation between Jack and Babette, in which Jack is trying to talk his wife out of her fear of death which adds to his own terror of dying.

As will be shown in the following chapters, death is omnipresent in *White Noise*. Interestingly, however, none of the protagonists actually dies. Actual death does occur, but only at the fringes of the story, so to say. The one force which really pervades the characters' lives is the fear of death and the schemes they devise to escape it.

Thus, there are two levels of death treated in the book: on the one hand there is the narrator's fear of death, resulting in a lot of theorizing on the topic, without making any connection to the manifestations of death around him. When Jack reads the obituaries in the paper he thinks about the age of the diseased, wondering how many more years he will have to live, failing to see death for what it is, the ultimate reality which no human being can escape. Instead, he pleads with his wife: "Let us both live forever, in sickness and health, feebleminded, doddering, toothless, liver-spotted, dim-sighted, hallucinating" (103).

One might think that the deaths of people from the small town Jack lives in, would touch him more than obituaries and articles about those outside his personal sphere. But far from it: When Jack recounts the stories of those who have died as a direct or indirect consequence of the airborne toxic event or of the contaminated school building he seems to mutate to an uninvolved third person narrator, merely stating his observations. Nevertheless he cannot escape his own encounter with death, and so theory and actual death, observation and involvement merge in the life of the protagonist. In this way,

the (pseudo) academic discussions between Jack and Murray are met with an actual almost-plane-crash and when Jack is exposed to Nyodene D., he is finally asked to face death as something he carries inside of himself rather than some ominous force “out there”. Towards the end of the book, finally, theory and reality literally bleed into each other when Jack shoots Mink.

The ideal condition as portrayed in the novel is an animal’s or a child’s ignorance of death. This is why both Jack and his wife, according to Murray, feel happy whenever they are around their youngest son, Wilder, who "’doesn't know he's going to die. He doesn't know death at all. […] How lucky he is. A cloud of unknowing, an omnipotent little person. The child is everything, the adult nothing’" (189f).
As Jack is not like his son, he is forced to live with the knowledge that he is going to die, which he does not take very well. As a matter of fact, everyone but the protagonist seems to be more reasonable when it comes to this ultimate matter. Thus, it is not Jack but his teenage son who explains that

> “[t]he real issue is the kind of radiation that surrounds us every day. Your radio, your TV, your microwave oven, your power lines just outside the door, your radar speed-trap on the highway. For years they told us these low doses weren't dangerous.” (174)

What sounds most disquieting is a very unspectacular fact for the children who have grown up with death on the news and all around them. Of course, the boy’s parents are surrounded by the same threats but they react to it quite differently. While Jack chooses to repress anything that could remind him of his own mortality, Babette acknowledges the bad news but belittles them:

> "Every day on the news there's another toxic spill. Cancerous solvents from storage tanks, arsenic from smokestacks, radioactive water from power plants. How serious can it be if it happens all the time? Isn't the definition of a serious event based on the fact that it's not an everyday occurrence?" (174)

Neither of them therefore is any help to their children, quite on the contrary, when the parents are seeking guidance they even look to their children for help.

What the book conveys is an atmosphere in which death is made even more real by modern technology. Even though this allows us to measure death, and explain it in many ways, it also poses a permanent threat, or as Murray puts it: “’This is the whole point of technology. It creates an appetite for immortality on the one hand. It threatens universal extinction on the other. Technology is lust removed from nature’" (285).

On the other hand, what the postmodern society as portrayed in the novel does not provide its characters with, are means to cope with modern death. Even though the protagonists seek to remedy their fear by trying to lose themselves in crowds or by inventing alternatives for a lost spirituality, they never manage to fill the void which seems to lie at their centers. The media are of no big help either, even though they do offer their consumers a superficial language to talk about the unspeakable. But when it comes down to it, the characters are forced to acknowledge that death simulations and endless repetitions of catastrophes and killings on TV are no help to them in the face of their own private death. Therefore, even though death permanently surrounds the protagonists of the book, they never really seem to find a strategy to embrace this fact, which is the same for all. Instead Babette and Jack wonder:

> "What if death is nothing but sound?"
> "Electrical noise."
> "You hear it forever. Sound all around. How awful."
> "Uniform, white." (198)

After these general observations I shall now proceed to discuss in more detail death in various spheres of life in *White Noise.*

3.1.7.1 Death and Crowds

Crowds feature in various contexts in *White Noise.* The first of these crowds is described in the opening of the novel, when Jack describes the return of the students in September:

> This assembly of station wagons, as much as anything they might do in the course of the year, more than formal liturgies or laws, tells the parents they are a collection of the like-minded and the spiritually akin, a people, a nation.“ (3f)

A reference to death is made when Babette declares that she has “trouble imagining death at that income level” (6) as a comment on Jack’s description of the students and their parents, who, he states, seem to have “’grown comfortable with their money,’” and Babette adds: “’This conviction gives them a kind of rude health. They glow a little’" (6). Jack answers her suggestion by speculating that “’maybe there is no death as we know it. Just documents changing hands’" (6), thus introducing an essential theme to the novel, namely the idea that death is not the same for everybody, or as Murray later on puts it, there are “killers and diers” (290).

The power of crowds with regard to death is illustrated most strongly by Jack’s guest lecture on the similarities between Elvis Presley and Adolf Hitler. Here, he first describes how crowds began to form around the Führer, and how “[c]rowds came to be hypnotized by the voice, the party anthems, the torchlight parades" (73). After a short pause, Jack goes on to delineate the decisive difference between ‘his’ crowd and a more ordinary assembling of masses, such as the ones attending Elvis Presley concerts: “’Let me whisper the terrible word, from the Old English, from the Old German, from the Old Norse. *Death*. Many of those crowds were assembled in the name of death’” (73). And what is more, these congregations of people gathered also to fend off their own deaths:

> Thus, what makes Hitler’s crowds different, for Jack, is the concentrated effort to avoid death; individuals fight off death by gathering into crowds composed of equally death fearing people, who individually disappear in the vast ceremonies and rituals of

> National Socialism, but most especially in the figure and speech of its fascist leader, Adolph [sic!] Hitler. (Ebbesen, 139)

As fear of death is the novel's central theme, it does not come as a surprise that Jack too, makes use of this mechanism. Not only does he seem to exploit Hitler's deadly aura in order to strengthen his own self and academic standing, but when he lectures about Hitler, he also becomes a man surrounded by a crowd, thus replicating the process he has just described to his students. Ironically, in this particular case it is the 'leader' more than the crowd who fears death.

In other situations described in the book Jack Gladney becomes a member of a crowd himself. When he and his family have to evacuate because of the toxic spill, it is the feeling of being part of a larger group of people which reassures him the most:

> The place was crowded, still quite cold, but the sight of nurses and volunteer workers made us feel the children were safe, and the presence of other stranded souls, young women with infants, old and infirm people, gave us a certain staunchness and will, a selfless bent that was pronounced enough to function as a common identity. (129)

In the weakness of his own character he cannot act as a strong father, holding together his family, but again it is the presence of other people, especially professionals such as nurses and volunteer workers, which enables him to function properly in this difficult situation.

The one crowd which all of the characters in *White Noise* belong to, is the crowd of consumers of media content and consumer goods. As opposed to the historical crowd described by Jack, however, today's crowds are different in that "the sense of union they instill no longer depends on physical proximity" (Olster in Duvall, 83). The hypnotization results not from one enigmatic figure but rather, from shiny advertisements and standardized commodities. "Instead of death, crowds *seem* to offer preservation, as buying expands being itself" (Ebbesen, 142). Jack best exemplifies this when he indulges in a shopping spree after being unmasked by a colleague who

observes that Jack is just a ‘normal guy.’ When the Gladneys are done with their tour of the local shopping mall, Jack feels better, having ‘expanded’ by spending money and acquiring a variety of consumer goods both for himself and his family, as pointed out above.
He seems to feel that by adding to his self by way of shopping, he can also add some life credit, just like the crowds who surrounded Hitler, who surrendered their individualities to a higher goal.

3.1.7.2 Death and Technology

Death in connection with technology can be seen as one of the central themes in *White Noise*. This fact is illustrated not least by the leitmotif of spectacular sunsets which allegedly have to do with chemicals released into the atmosphere.
In chapter six, as Jack muses on his son’s receding hairline – Heinrich is only fourteen – he wonders if maybe he has “raised him, unwittingly, in the vicinity of a chemical dump site, in the path of air currents that carry industrial wastes capable of producing scalp degeneration, glorious sunsets” (22). This is also the first time, the astounding quality of the Blacksmith sunsets is mentioned, followed by the observation that “[p]eople say the sunsets around here were not nearly so stunning thirty or forty years ago” (22). Paradoxically, the act of watching a sunset – a motif usually used in connection with an awareness of the beauty of nature – in this novel can never be read without a reference to deadly chemicals, or in more general terms, to technology. At times this connotation is merely implied, other passages include explicit references. When the family gathers “before the window in Steffie's small room, watching the spectacular sunset” (61) Heinrich does not join them, either because he simply does not like to partake in family activities such as this or, Jack speculates, “because he believed there was something ominous in the modern sunset” (61).

After the airborne toxic event, these sunsets become more intense still, “almost unbearably beautiful” (170). Still nobody is able to actually prove the connection between Nyodene Derivative (or other chemicals for that matter) and the “leap from already brilliant sunsets to broad towering ruddled visionary skyscapes, tinged with dread” (170). Whenever the phenomenon is mentioned it seems to be with curiosity rather than great anxiety as one might expect. Accordingly, Babette observes with slight concern only: "’We're not at the edge of the ocean or desert. We ought to have timid winter sunsets. But look at the blazing sky. It's so beautiful and dramatic. Sunsets used to last five minutes. Now they last an hour’" (170), stressing the beauty of the spectacle rather than the terror it might represent.

As the novel progresses, the sunsets move from being described as “modern” (61) to “postmodern” (227), the sun pictured as “going down like a ship in a burning sea” (227), only to defy description altogether in the very next sentence: “Why try to describe it? It's enough to say that everything in our field of vision seemed to exist in order to gather the light of this event” (227).

And so the inhabitants of Blacksmith, among them the Gladney family, gather regularly to watch these sunsets, constituting another one of the novel’s crowds, turning what used to be a symbol of man’s adoration of the beauty of nature into a mass event compared to watching a documentary channel (“like a heart pumping in a documentary on color TV” (227)). Whether or not this spectacle was caused by some deadly chemical, or, as Osteen put it, “the god of nature has been soiled by the devil of technology” (189), is secondary. Even though a certain unease is expressed by some people, most just seem to enjoy the beauty of it:

> We go to the overpass all the time. Babette, Wilder and I. We take a thermos of iced tea, park the car, watch the setting sun. […] We find little to say to each other. More cars arrive, parking in a line that extends down to the residential zone. […] The sky takes on content, feeling, an exalted narrative life. […] There are turreted skies, light storms, softly falling streamers. It is hard to know how we should feel about this. (324)

Easier to categorize obviously is another incident, this time definitely connected to chemicals. One day Jack, still fairly early in the novel, tells the reader about the evacuation of grade school, due to children experiencing “headaches and eye irritations, tasting metal in their mouths” and a “teacher roll[ing] on the floor and [speaking] foreign languages” (35). Disquieting as this may be, what is even more disconcerting is the fact that apparently nobody knows the exact reasons for the symptoms:

> Investigators said it could be the ventilating system, the paint or varnish, the foam insulation, the electrical insulation, the cafeteria food, the rays emitted by microcomputers, the asbestos fireproofing, the adhesive on shipping containers, the fumes from the chlorinated pool, or perhaps something deeper, finer-grained, more closely woven into the basic state of things. (35)

Strikingly, Jack thus gives yet another example of technology-related problems which, even though they must have been caused by human beings, nobody seems to be able to solve, or as Jack rightly observes: “Man's guilt in history and in the tides of his own blood has been complicated by technology, the daily seeping falsehearted death” (22).

It is interesting to note that most of the information we get about the chemical at the heart of the airborne toxic event stems from Heinrich. Through school, watching TV documentaries and self-conducted research he turns out to be the most knowledgeable person, not to say an expert on the topic at the evacuation camp, with a remarkable number of listeners gathering around him. His father, on the other hand, an academically trained man of high standing, has nothing to contribute, no security to give to his family or even just himself. When Winnie Richards reveals to him some basic facts about neurochemistry, Jack has to acknowledge: "’Heinrich's brain theories. They're all true. We're the sum of our chemical impulses. Don't tell me this. It's unbearable to think about’" (200). When Heinrich presents what could be termed a conspiracy theory to his parents, involving whole industries, Babette wonders: "’Is this what they teach in school today? […] What happened to

civics, how a bill becomes a law? The square of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the two sides'" (176).

What Jack doesn't know at this point is that some of the facts Heinrich shares with him about the physical half-life of Nyodene D., will come to bear a vital, or rather, deathly significance: "'After twenty years you'll probably have to seal yourself in the attic and just wait and see. I guess there's a lesson in all this. Get to know your chemicals'" (131). When Jack learns that his exposure to the chemical has further-reaching consequences than he had realized he is forced to learn more facts about modern death. Firstly, he suddenly finds himself reduced to data which he himself cannot interpret anymore, turning him into "a stranger in [his] own dying" (142). Thus, "[t]echnology is doubly alienating: not only does it give us lethal chemicals that lead to early death but it then takes death away by turning it into data" (Osteen, 178). So even though Gladney explains to Babette that this is no longer about "'fear and floating terror'" (202), but about hard facts, he cannot act accordingly as these facts are impossible to grasp for a layperson. He therefore helplessly has to hope for the best, namely that "[t]he best of third-world technicians, the latest procedures" (261) will be able to pinpoint his problem and outline the cure, that his doctor will "know the symbols" (281) he is unable to interpret. Objectively, Jack faces two sides of the same system. Once, when he checks his account balance using his ATM card, he notes that "[t]he system was invisible, which made it all the more impressive, all the more disquieting to deal with. But we were in accord, at least for now. The networks, the circuits, the streams, the harmonies" (46). The second time he is at the mercy of the same kind of system, this time, however, he is far from "in accord" with it, which causes him to feel helpless and afraid. The narrator observes: "'The greater the scientific advance, the more primitive the fear'" (161).

Unsure what Nyodene D. will do to his body, Jack's fear of death increases even more. Again, technology seems to provide the answer to the problem in the shape of a pill called Dylar, which "'specifically interacts with neurotransmitters in the brain that are related to the fear of death'" (200). On the one hand this prospect, again, is frightening rather than comforting as it

suggests that all emotions can be traced back to some chemical reaction, turning human behavior into nothing but a "'tangle of neurons'" (200). On the other hand the hoped for positive effects – "[t]he pill itself silently self-destructing in a tiny inward burst, a polymer implosion, discreet and precise and considerate. Technology with a human face" (211) - turn out to be yet another unfulfilled promise given by technology as both Babette and Willie Mink sadly illustrate.

This is what lies at the heart of *White Noise* – the realization that there is a new kind of death, remote from our experience, hard to grasp which "[complicates] our sadness, [bringing] us closer to the secret of our own eventual end" (241) without allowing us to actually get in touch with it. Maybe it is this dilemma which in the end makes it impossible for Jack to control his fears.

In this regard, it is true what DeLillo wrote in his essay "In the Ruins of the Future," namely that "[t]echnology is our fate, our truth, […] the systems and networks that change the way we live and think".[42]

3.1.7.3 Death and the Media

> "I'm counting on you to tell me, Jack."
> "Tell you what?"
> "You're the only person I know that's educated enough to give me the answer."
> "The answer to what?"
> "Were people this dumb before television?" (249)

White Noise does not answer the question posed above even though television certainly plays a key role in the novel. Taking the small family unit

[42] DeLillo, Don. "In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September," Harper's (December 2001). 33-40. Also published in The Guardian. (December 22, 2001) <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/dec/22/fiction.dondelillo>. September 2, 2008.

as a point of departure, DeLillo points out various implications of our TV-saturated day and age.

In Jack's family the television set is omnipresent, whether or not anybody is actually watching, it seems to be constantly on. Ever so often "a voice upstairs" will utter something which the narrator then passes on to the reader without even commenting on it. Interestingly, the TV set in the Gladneys' house moves from room to room – Jack never gives an explanation for this – almost like a monstrance or some other religious item which everybody follows around: "Three nights later I wandered into Heinrich's room, where the TV set was temporarily located" (222). Even though the TV set is not allotted to one specific room, it usually is the focal point of the family, at least for the children. The only other location with a similarly strong attraction is the kitchen, so that summing up we may say family life is portrayed as focusing mostly on food and TV. Olster, too, finds a religious connotation here: "Always on and hence omnipresent, television provides the one 'custom' and 'rule' that the Gladneys ritually observe on Friday evenings when they band together in front of the set" (Olster in Duvall, 86), referring to the fact that on Fridays the whole family gathers in front of the television. This, Jack explains, is aimed at making the act of watching TV less appealing for the children:

> Babette had made it a rule. She seemed to think that if kids watched television one night a week with parents or stepparents, the effect would be to de-glamorize the medium in their eyes, make it wholesome domestic sport. Its narcotic undertow and eerie diseased brain-sucking power would be gradually reduced. I felt vaguely slighted by this reasoning. The evening in fact was a subtle form of punishment for us all. (16)

The only time, Jack does not experience watching TV with his family as punishment is when the news coverage focuses one evening mostly on disasters: "There were floods, earthquakes, mud slides, erupting volcanoes. We'd never before been so attentive to our duty, our Friday assembly. [...] Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping" (64). As the Gladneys themselves will be victims of a disaster not long after this evening, the scene does not lack irony. Still the question

remains, why watching others fall prey to death and destruction is so fascinating to both young and old. One possible explanation stems from one of Jack's colleagues from the popular culture department who argues that "'[f]or most people there are only two places in the world. Where they live and their TV set. If a thing happens on television, we have every right to find it fascinating, whatever it is'" (66). This in turn links up nicely with an observation Jack makes about Blacksmith, a town which so far has managed to stay out of major disasters and problems typical of bigger cities: "If our complaints have a focal point, it would have to be the TV set, where the outer torment lurks, causing fears and secret desires" (85). The paradox, however, still remains: If television causes "fears and secret desires" why would be want to watch ever more catastrophe footage or reports about accidents and mass murderers?

Maybe the answer is as simple as it is disturbing: "It's better them than us," as Murray states at one point. Maybe watching the calamities of strangers indeed makes us feel better about our own lives. Whether fear of death, then, can be seen as a consequence of constantly watching others suffer, or whether it is soothed by doing so, is not conclusively elaborated on.

What the novel does underline beyond doubt, is the fact that we gather a disproportionately high percentage of our common knowledge from television. So when Babette sets out to learn more about her fear of death watching cable TV as one source of information stands right next to visiting libraries and bookstores and reading technical journals and magazines (cf. 192). TV, thus is considered without hesitation not only as a means of entertainment but of education as well.

Another approach to evaluating the meaning of television, again, comes from Murray, who takes the issue one step further by arguing that TV is not about its content at all, but about the underlying patterns:

> "Waves and radiation," he said. "I've come to understand that the medium is a primal force in the American home. Sealed-off, timeless, self-contained, self-referring. It's like a myth being born right there in our living room, like something we know in a dreamlike and preconscious way. I'm very enthused, Jack." (51)

This in turn, would underline a suspicion DeLillo himself uttered in an interview when he stated that “There seems to be no difference between substantial news and insubstantial news.”[43] Following this line of argumentation one might say that anything which provides a stronger stimulus than the repetitious pattern of commercials and TV shows is welcome to us, or as Osteen argues with reference to the airborne toxic event, “people are fascinated with it because only such catastrophic occurrences escape the mediation that turns everything else into tired formulas. The cloud seeps out of the frame within which advertising language tries to contain it” (177).

If, on the other hand, the ”primal force in the American home” is absent due to a lack of media, there simply is no event or, as Olster puts it, “reality becomes defined to the degree that it exists within the contours of a photographic frame” (Olster in Duvall, 84).

Both the near crash of a passenger plane and the indiscriminate shooting of innocent passers-by by Heinrich’s new pen friend do not qualify as real events due to the fact that “there is no media in Iron City” (45) where these things took place.

The victims of the airborne toxic event, on the other hand, are shocked to find out that their evacuation and consequent suffering did not make it to prime time TV:

> This is the most terrifying time of our lives. Everything we love and have worked for is under serious threat. But we look around and see no response from the official organs of the media. The airborne toxic event is a horrifying thing. Our fear is enormous. Even if there hasn't been great loss of life, don't we deserve some attention for our suffering, our human worry, our terror? Isn't fear news?" (162)

As Osteen rightly points out: “They can’t understand their own experience without electronic mediation, without the knowledge that they are being

[43] DeLillo quoted in Feeney, Mark, “Unmistakably DeLillo” in DePietro, 172.

observed. Stripped of the universal third person, they are trapped in a first person they no longer recognize" (181).

Absurdly, when the Gladneys see Babette on a local television program, they cannot deal with this either: "Confusion, fear, astonishment spilled from our faces. What did it mean? What was she doing there, in black and white, framed in formal borders? Was she dead, missing, disembodied?" (104). The point where personal their home (in the shape of Babette) and the public sphere (i.e. TV) meet seems to cause a short circuit, foregrounding the fact that the family's sense of reality is already starting to be impaired. They are at a loss, it seems, when it comes to attributing appropriate significance to media content. Either we see it as entirely disconnected from our own lives, unable to draw useful implications for our own lives or we start confusing it with reality, which, so the author seems to suggest, results in disquiet and fear.

This blurring of boundaries between the media and the lives of the protagonists of *White Noise* is nicely illustrated by the way media language, clichés and ideas about certain topics infiltrate the consciousness of our narrator.

When Heinrich tells his father about his pen-pal, a convicted murderer, Jack's line of questioning follows common media knowledge so to say:

> "Six people. Did he care for his weapons obsessively? Did he have an arsenal stashed in his shabby little room off a six-story concrete car park?"
> "Some handguns and a bolt-action rifle with a scope."
> "A telescopic sight. Did he fire from a highway overpass, a rented room? Did he walk into a bar, a washette, his former place of employment and start firing indiscriminately? People scattering, taking cover under tables. People out on the street thinking they heard firecrackers. 'I was just waiting for the bus when I heard this little popping noise like firecrackers going off.'" (44)

And so it goes on. Something similar happens again when Jack himself takes over the part of the murderer, rehearsing his plan to kill Willie Mink. As flat and ridiculously clichéd his plan may seem, the irony lies in the fact that it almost works out, just as all his guesses about Heinrich's pen friend turn out

to be true. This again, underlines the blurring of the boundary between media content and reality.

Summing up this chapter we may say that the protagonists of *White Noise* seem to be very accomplished at dealing with – so as not to say in devouring –death portrayed on television. This, however, does not improve their ability to deal with their own innermost fears. The constant bombardment with catastrophe footage and documentaries on diseases as well as countless TV shows and films featuring murder do not bring the protagonists any closer to an open-minded handling of their own inevitable end.

3.1.7.4 Death and Spirituality

> "How do you plan to spend your resurrection?" he said, as though asking about a long weekend coming up.
> (136)

As Osteen points out, one of the working titles of *White Noise* was “The American Book of the Dead” (165), which would definitely be a fitting title given the fact that “the characters of [the novel] try to counteract dread by mouthing chants and litanies, practicing pseudo-religious rituals, crafting narratives that deflect or purge their fear” (165). Indeed, a sense of spirituality gone awry pervades the entire book. Faith is found where one would not necessarily suspect it, while on the other hand, more time-honored practices are portrayed as being devoid of meaning, an expression of what Cowart calls an “age disarmed of virtually all spiritual weapons in the struggle with mortality” (77). At a point in time when traditional religious belief-systems in the US seem to have been reduced to just another commodity, it does not come as a surprise that the protagonist should be wary of religion. When Murray advises him to “’[r]ead up on reincarnation, transmigration, hyperspace, the resurrection of the dead and so on,’” pointing out that “’[s]ome gorgeous systems have evolved from these beliefs,’” (286) – Jack

quite understandably is not drawn to this possibility. Certainly, these systems have nothing to offer in terms of an effective counter-narrative to his fear of death. On the other hand, there is reference to other forms of religion and spirituality which go beyond the hollow formulas of, say, Catholicism.[44] Thus, when one of his ex-wives informs him that she would like their son, Heinrich, to visit her in an ashram, Jack even urges her not to involve his son "'in something personal and intense, like religion'" (273).

Nonetheless, the narrator does describe alternatives, which, while not portrayed as being terribly successful, still seem to offer some relief at least. One of Jack's spiritual strategies, so to say, consists of watching his children sleep, as this "makes [him] feel devout, part of a spiritual system. It is the closest [he] can come to God" (147). The undisputed climax of this spiritual exercise is portrayed as both hilariously absurd and astonishingly profound at the same time. Jack watches one of his daughters sleep, ready to receive some message from the great beyond:

> Ten minutes passed. She uttered two clearly audible words, familiar and elusive at the same time, words that seemed to have a ritual meaning, part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant.
> *Toyota Celica*.
> A long moment passed before I realized this was the name of an automobile. The truth only amazed me more. […] Whatever its source, the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence.
> I depend on my children for that. (155)

This scene shows two essential things: Firstly, it suggests that Jack has exchanged the names of gods and/or saints by brand names, hinting at the all-pervading power of consumerism. As Osteen poignantly puts it: "Television and other sites of consumption muffle, as well as amplify, the spiritual yearnings of consumers and audiences" (Osteen, 166). Secondly, it underlines once again Jack's insecurity and underdeveloped personality as

[44] Cf. the ever growing appeal of Pentecostal Churches and 'up-dated' versions of Hinduism and Buddhism which can be observed in the USA.

he depends on his offspring for spiritual stimulation – rather than acting as a role model and guide for the younger generation.

Religion, or a sense of spiritual fulfillment, can thus be found in a variety of places – the novel suggests that there are as many possibilities as there are seekers: “Though it offers nothing for *timor mortis*, the world offers an abundance of systems and structures that promise to confound mortality and deliver fulfilment” (Cowart, 78). Murray even interprets their visit to the most photographed barn in America as “’a kind of spiritual surrender,’” as they have “’agreed to be part of a collective perception’” (12).

Another surrogate church can be found in the shape of supermarkets and shopping malls. Instead of preachers, consumer society offers us TV commercials: “'Coke is it, Coke is it, Coke is it.' The medium practically overflows with sacred formulas if we can remember how to respond innocently and get past our irritation, weariness and disgust" (51), Murray observes. Others still find a kind of religion in the subject they teach, such as Alfonse Stompanato, head of the department of “American Environments”, and Jack Gladney himself, or engage with the ‘hard sciences’ such as Jack’s German teacher who has found security in meteorology.

Others still feel drawn to the promises published in tabloids, such as

> guaranteed access to dozens of documented cases of life after death, everlasting life, previous-life experiences, posthumous life in outer space, transmigration of souls, and personalized resurrection through stream-of-consciousness computer techniques. (144)

As Jack notes: “There it was, familiar and comforting in its own strange way, a set of statements no less real than our daily quota of observable household fact” (144f).

On the other hand, signifiers of traditional religious systems are portrayed as bereft of their original meaning.[45] Thus, the nuns who take care of Jack and

[45] Or, as Jean Baudrillard would argue, are mere “simulacra”. Cf. Baudrillard: *Simulacra and Simulation*.

Mink after their parodic showdown “exist to provide a teasing intimation of an ultimate, a transcendental signified that, on examination, dissolves into just another mirror trick” (Cowart, 86). And so Jack is shocked when he finds out that the nuns only pretend to believe as this would be exactly what people like Jack need: somebody to believe on their behalf. Without this comfort the world literally falls apart, in Jack’s case due to the fact that one of his last hopes of taming death, or at least providing it with some remote feeling of sense, is lost. After all, “[w]hether ‘genuine’ or not, such things sometimes provide comfort, authority, a sense of something larger. What’s more, they explain death and rob it of its sting” (Osteen, 190)

3.1.7.5 Death and Consumerism

Closely connected to DeLillo’s treatment of spirituality, *White Noise* deals with the promises of consumer culture. In our postmodern society, “that disconcerting economic and cultural condition of late capitalism” (Ebbesen, 114), consumerism is portrayed as both sharing man’s guilt of destroying time-honored spiritual belief systems and offering a remedy to the ensuing void. Thus, the microcosm portrayed in the novel seems the be the ideal matrix for people seeking "’[p]eace of mind in a profit-oriented context’" (87).
As has been pointed out above, the Gladneys live in a world in which, “[b]y mystifying the actual workings of the economy, brand names […] become prayers or spells” (Osteen, 173). The most poignant example for this being the product name triads, flashing up as brand name trinities mostly without context throughout the novel.
There is, however, a more concrete representation of the family’s rootedness in consumer culture in the novel. As a matter of fact, the Gladneys seem to be rather accomplished when it comes to shopping. On their kitchen table there are “foot-long supermarket receipts” (236), and after meeting them in the local supermarket Murray helps them wheel “one of [their] carts into the parking lot” (20), suggesting that they are anything but squeamish when it comes to indulging in the ritual of wandering the supermarket aisles.

One of the attractions of consumer culture seems to be the power to create an identity, to make an individual become part of a larger group, but the dynamics work in two directions. On the one hand, marketing specialists set out to define what their target groups look like in order to efficiently aim their advertisement at them, creating artificial group identities by describing an established situation. These classifications then seem to gather momentum, becoming attractive for new individuals who until then had not considered themselves part of any group. And so Jack downright warns his students: "'Once you're out of school, it is only a matter of time before you experience the vast loneliness and dissatisfaction of consumers who have lost their group identity'" (50). According to Jack, what followers of more alternative lifestyles actually aim at, i.e. escaping the pervasive allure of specifically targeted marketing, even seems to be something to aspire to. Yet, our naïve narrator provides example by example of the exact opposite, namely, people becoming estranged and isolated through indulging in consumerism. When the media communicate an unexpected onset of winter, people gather at the shops**, "**hurry[ing] out before someone questioned the extent of their purchases. Hoarders in a war. Greedy, guilty" (168). Likewise, when one evening the Gladneys decide to eat out they get into their car and go "out to the commercial strip in the no man's land beyond the town boundary" (231). As all they want to do is satisfy their needs, they decide to eat in the car:

> We didn't need light and space. We certainly didn't need to face each other across a table as we ate, building a subtle and complex cross-network of signals and codes. […] I chewed and ate, looking only inches past my hands. This is how hunger shrinks the world. (231f)

This excellently exemplifies Osteen's claim that "shopping becomes less a means of engaging in interpersonal exchanges than a way to enlarge the self through narcissistic satisfactions" (171).

In the discussion of consumption, DeLillo alerts the reader to the fact that our current way of life has turned not only an endless variety of tangible goods into commodities but has also affected more abstract spheres such as sexuality and religion. Thus, Babette describes her having sex with Mink as nothing but a ”capitalist transaction” (194), and when Jack doubts that it does not make a difference which belief system he considers in order to fight his fear of death, Murray assures him: “’Pick one you like’" (286), as if spiritual traditions were products on any odd supermarket shelf. Interestingly, regardless of the nature of the product, as Osteen points out, ”[w]hat postmodern consumption most of all mystifies are the social and economic exchanges involved in purchase; hence no exchanges of money are depicted in any of the shopping scenes in *White Noise*” (172).

The reification of expressions of emotions as well as of basic values, is but one of the downsides of the excessive consumerism as portrayed in the novel.

When Jack desperately goes through his family’s trash in search for some Dylar, what was once a league of shiny consumer products on some perfectly arranged supermarket shelf, becomes a nightmarish parody of the same:

> The full stench hit me with shocking force. Was this ours? Did it belong to us? Had we created it? […] I found a banana skin with a tampon inside. Was this the dark underside of consumer consciousness? I came across a horrible clotted mass of hair, soap, ear swabs, crushed roaches, flip-top rings, sterile pads smeared with pus and bacon fat, strands of frayed dental floss, fragments of ballpoint refills, toothpicks still displaying bits of impaled food. (258f)

With regard to mortality consumer culture seems to offer if not the remedy then at least some relief. As has been discussed earlier on, when Jack feels weak and insecure he indulges in a shopping spree, thus enlarging his insecure sense of self, or as Ebbesen puts it:

“Jack is larger, because Jack shops; but Jack is also gone in terms of self. He simply represents the whole consuming population” (154). As Jack reports:

> I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I'd forgotten existed. Brightness settled around me. […] I traded money for goods. […] These sums in fact came back to me in the form of existential credit. I felt expansive, inclined to be sweepingly generous, and told the kids to pick out their Christmas gifts here and now. (84)[46]

Jack is not the only one who recharges his existential batteries by shopping, at least this is what he conveys with his description of him and his wife shopping in the local supermarket: ”[T]he security and contentment these products brought to some snug home in our souls — it seemed we had achieved a fullness of being that is not known to people who need less, expect less, who plan their lives around lonely walks in the evening ” (20).

No matter how enthusiastic these descriptions, death is always just around the corner. Firstly, even though modern consumer culture seems to promise an expansion of the shopping self, and accumulation of ‘existential credit’, hence of eternal life, it does not hesitate to threatening with the very opposite either, as Babette seems to point out: “’The sunscreen, the marketing, the fear, the disease. You can't have one without the other’" (264).
Furthermore, while Jack quite desperately tries to fill his existential void through shopping, this strategy proves to be futile, as Ebbesen argues: “[W]hat dies in this process of consumption […] is exactly the self” (Ebbesen, 154). Ironically, if we follow this line of argumentation then, Jack does not add to his “existential credit” by shopping, but rather the opposite. On some deeper level, he seems to realize this:

[46] The “existential credit” Jack mentions in this passage, of course, already foreshadows the plot Jack will devise later to kill Willie Mink.

> If earlier in the novel Jack accumulated commodities to shield him from death, now he throws objects away as if demonically possessed. But the same motive lies behind each valence of this psychic economy: both accumulation and attrition are meant to clear his system, muffle his dread, anesthetize the pain. (Osteen, 183)

In the course of the novel it becomes evident that neither of these strategies yields the hoped-for success, the ultimate irony being that even Jack's announced death somehow seems to have lost its splendor, leaving him with less than nothing: "There's something artificial about my death. It's shallow, unfulfilling. I don't belong to the earth or sky. They ought to carve an aerosol can on my tombstone" (283).

On the surface, evidently, death is not present in the 'church of consumerism,' in the supermarket, a "place where all is surface, where substance remains endlessly deferred" (Cowart, 88), or as Jack observes:

> Some of the houses in town were showing signs of neglect. […] Signs of the times. But the supermarket did not change, except for the better. It was well-stocked, musical and bright. This was the key, it seemed to us. Everything was fine, would continue to be fine, would eventually get even better as long as the supermarket did not slip. (170)

But Jack is proven wrong again as even the one seemingly steady reference-point of the little shaken Blacksmith universe is turned upside-down when the supermarket shelves are rearranged: "It happened one day without warning. […] In the altered shelves, the ambient roar, in the plain and heartless fact of their decline, they try to work their way through confusion" (325f). Gladney's final description once again points at the connection between consumerism and some kind of strange spirituality. However, as the reader by this time has had enough occasions to assess the narrator's limited powers of observation, his musings at the end of the novel sound like wishful thinking:

> But in the end it doesn't matter what they see or think they see. The terminals are equipped with holographic scanners, which decode the binary secret of every item, infallibly. This is the language of waves and radiation, or how the dead speak to the living. (326)

As impressive as this may sound, realistically it must be seen as yet another of Jack Gladney's fruitless attempts at concealing his primal terror by engaging some grand but hollow theory, suggesting that the protagonist of *White Noise* has not really undergone any major character development.

3.2 Falling Man

3.2.1 Title

On September 11th, 2001, one Richard Drew took a series of pictures, one of which got referred to as 'Falling Man'. The photograph depicts a man rocketing down alongside the World Trade Center in a Yoga-like position, which in its seeming calmness contradicts everything going on at the scene of terror. As the conditions inside the building must have gotten unbearable in a way one can only try to imagine, a number of people (about two hundred as was disclosed later on that day) chose to jump to death rather than suffocating and/or burning alive inside the World Trade Center.

As it turned out, the photograph was one of a series of twelve – the others of which did show the panic and agony of that particular person. The picture that appeared in hundreds of newspapers, most prominently in "The Morning Call" of Allentown on September 12th, however, was different from the others in that it bears an eerie stillness, described by some as almost "Zen-like". Or, as Tom Junod put it: "He appears comfortable in the grip of unimaginable motion".[47]

Lianne, one of the protagonists in the novel describes the impact the picture had on her:

[47] Junod, Tom. "The Falling Man." *Esquire.* (August 2003). <http://www.esquire.com/features/ESQ0903-SEP_FALLINGMAN>.2 September, 2008.

> 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. (221f)

This photograph taken by Richard Drew set in motion a curious process of self-censorship. It was considered impious and exploitative as it showed a person seconds before his death. Most papers showed this picture once only. In our day and age – with "the world at our fingertips" – of course, it takes a mere 0,36 seconds to find the startling image on the internet. Yet "Nobody jumped. They were forced out, or blown out"[48] is the information Junod got upon enquiring at the New York Medical Examiner's Office. The journalist sums it up thus: "In the most photographed and videotaped day in the history of the world, the images of people jumping were the only images that became, by consensus, taboo – the only images from which Americans were proud to avert their eyes."[49] To the photographer himself this particular picture shows "a photographic record of someone living the last moments of his life." He goes on to say that "every time I look at it, I see him alive."[50]

3.2.2 Summary

The "falling man" in the novel of the same name, however, is a performance artist who re-stages the free fall of the best-known "jumper" all over town, by jumping off various buildings wearing a suit and harness.
The novel starts out in the rubble of the World Trade Center, right after the event that traumatized 21st century America.

---

[48] Junod, Tom. "The Falling Man." *Esquire.* (August 2003). <http://www.esquire.com/features/ESQ0903-SEP_FALLINGMAN>.2 September, 2008.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Drew, Richard. "The Horror of 9/11 That's All Too Familiar." Los Angeles Times (September 10, 2003). B-13.

The protagonist, Keith Neudecker, walks away from what used to be the World Trade Center, a briefcase in hand (which is not his), covered in blood, dust and glass. He moves as if remote-controlled, right to the apartment of his ex-wife, Lianne. She takes him in, hoping maybe that this extraordinary event might have had some redeeming effect on their lives. What follows is a story of estrangement. While Keith's and Lianne's son, Justin, waits at the window, looking for more planes, Keith takes up the life of a professional poker player. In between, we are also introduced to two of the terrorists. We first meet them in Hamburg, follow their training in Florida and are witness to the climax when flight 11 strikes the tower in which Keith Neudecker works.

3.2.3 Structure and Narrative Technique

Falling Man is divided into three parts, each of which is named after a character:
Bill Lawton
Ernst Hechinger
David Janiak

It is important to note, that these are the characters in the book, who bear a double identity so to say: "Bill Lawton" of course is nothing but a misheard 'Bin Laden.' The two names, however, are not completely interchangeable. Bin Laden is the terrorist who is too far away to be grasped by thoughts, much less physically. Bill Lawton, on the other hand, is a concoction of some children who know not only what this man looks like, but know about his qualities and powers. Ironically, this fantasy version of a real man frightens Lianne no less than the original. When she learns that Justin and his friends spend hours at the window, looking for Bill Lawton and more planes, she states: "'That scares the hell out of me. God, there's something so awful about that. Damn kids with their goddam twisted powers of imagination'" (72). As we learn later, however, this is a clear case of "like mother, like son", as Lianne imagines her son in pieces, blown up by a terrorist bomb.

The second part is named after Ernst Hechinger, Lianne's mother's long-term boyfriend, who now calls himself Martin Ridnour. Martin used to be a radical leftist activist in Germany. Even though we never get to know what exactly his part was, there are hints which suggest that he might have been a part of the Baader-Meinhof-Group, and thus a terrorist. This naturally raises the question whether or not there is a difference between, for example, the RAF and the Al-Qaeda.

The third man, finally, is David Janiak, known as "Falling Man," which Lianne thinks "could be the name of a trump card in a tarot deck, Falling Man, name in gothic type, the figure twisting down in a stormy night sky" (221).
The part of the book which bears his name is also the one in which most facts about the artist are revealed. The author thus finally bestows on him a third dimension.

After each of these three main parts, there is a short chapter dedicated to Hammad and Amir, two of the terrorists who will be onboard American Airlines Flight 11. The titles of these interludes are place names ("On Marienstrasse," "In Nokomis," and finally "In the Hudson Corridor."), setting the scene for a glimpse of the terrorists' training and finally their final minutes.

Two of the main differences between these "name chapters" and "place chapters" are their structure and their temporal direction.
Keith's story is told, it seems, according to DeLillo's statement that "there is no logic in apocalypse."[51] And as there is no logic there must not be a linear story development. As we follow Keith, Lianne and their family the narration jumps back and forth, depending on who is the focal character of a certain

[51] DeLillo, Don. "In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September," Harper's (December 2001). 33-40. Also published in The Guardian. (December 22, 2001) <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/dec/22/fiction.dondelillo>. September 2, 2008.

episode and which memory or anxiety happens to be triggered by some catalyst event. Content is rendered in short vignettes, rather than in one coherent narrative strand - a shattered kind of prose which mirrors the many lives which were disrupted by the events of 9/11.

Taken as a whole the novel follows the form of a Moebius strip, starting on 9/11, then moving backwards toward the same day again, a fact, which the narrator alerts us to in the very beginning of the novel: “The noise lay everywhere they ran, stratified sound collecting around them, and he walked away from it and into it at the same time” (4).

The first part is set days only after the attacks, part two is set some months after, and finally part three is set three years after the catastrophe. At the same time, through the terrorist chapters, we move towards 9/11 in a straight line, the two strands finally meeting in the third ‘place chapter.’ When the plane hits the north tower, the narrating consciousness is passed on from Hammad to Keith, their destinies merging in the fire of explosions:

> A bottle fell off the counter in the galley, on the other side of the aisle, and he watched it roll this way and that, a water bottle, empty, making an arc one way and rolling back the other, and he watched it spin more quickly and then skitter across the floor an instant before the aircraft struck the tower, heat, then fuel, then fire, and a blast wave passed through the structure that sent Keith Neudecker out of his chair and into a wall. He found himself walking into a wall. (239)

Note that the personal pronoun “he” binds the two characters and thus the story-lines even closer together, as it is used for Hammad in one sentence, and for Keith in the very next. Plot devices such as this are typical of an author who confesses: “Structure is something I take great pleasure in”.[52]

Finally, there is yet another layer, which is the subplot of Lianne’s story-line sessions with Alzheimer patients. One possible interpretation would be to see their psychological decline as a parallel to Keith’s dissolution into thin casino-air. As the novel progresses their stories become less and less coherent, a

[52] DeLillo quoted in Echlin, Kim. “Baseball and the Cold War,” in DePietro, 149.

mirror, one might argue, of their mental landscapes which are about to dissolve as well.

In terms of narrative technique, DeLillo uses figural narrative situation with Keith, Lianne, and Hammad as reflector characters. Thus, it is through their eyes and minds that we see the world after 9/11, or – in Hammad's case – get glimpses at the lives of some of the terrorists who devised the plot.
On the whole, both Lianne and Keith come across as rather absent-minded 'reflectors'[53], who are not so much consciously dealing with their feelings but rather perceiving them like somnambulists. Lianne's mind, for example, "drifted in and out of this, the early times, eight years ago, of the eventual extended grimness called their marriage" (7). As perspectives change back and forth a lot, it is sometimes hard to tell, whether it is Keith or Lianne who observes something, the characters bleeding into each other as it were. We thus get a picture of two characters which are not clearly defined, an effect maybe of their traumata which call into question their very personalities. This contrasts strongly with the terrorists as Hammad is certainly more focused in his 'narration', reflecting his growing determination and fanatism.

The author being Don DeLillo, the reader is not surprised to find some playfulness amidst a serious story. For instance, when Keith is on his way to meet his wife one day, he ponders on whether or not he should tell her about Florence Givens, another survivor with whom he has a short-lived affair, speculating on his wife's reaction. What ensues is a humorous passage which creates a feeling of "looking over the author's shoulder," at the same time stressing the sarcastic note in many of Keith's utterances:

> There was something else he thought concerning Lianne. He thought he would tell her about Florence. It was the right thing to do. It was the kind of perilous truth that would lead to an understanding of clean and even proportions, long-lasting, with a feeling of reciprocal love and

[53] Narrative technique/terminology: Cf. F. Stanzel: *A Theory of Narrative.* 1987.

> trust. He believed this. It was a way to stop being double in himself, trailing the taut shadow of what is unsaid.
> He would tell her about Florence. She would say she knew something was going on but in view of the completely uncommon nature of the involvement, with its point of origin in smoke and fire, this is not an unforgivable offense.
> He would tell her about Florence. She would say she could understand the intensity of the involvement, in the view of the completely uncommon nature of its origin, in smoke and fire, and this would cause her to suffer enormously.
> He would tell her about Florence. She would get a steak knife and kill him.
> He would tell her about Florence. She would enter a period of long and tortured withdrawal.
> He would tell her about […]. (161f)

Another device worth mentioning is the use of harsh contrasts throughout the novel. The fact that the terrorist attacks on the USA were far too horrible in order for them to be dealt with in the ordinary frame of reference is mirrored time and again in the course of the narration. Through the way in which words are aligned and combined, they are charged with new meaning, ordinary paper thus becoming "otherworldly" (3) right on the first page of the novel. Again, this is something DeLillo already contemplated in "In the Ruins of the Future:"

> The cellphones, the lost shoes, the handkerchiefs mashed in the faces of running men and women. The box cutters and credit cards. The paper that came streaming out of the towers and drifted across the river to Brooklyn backyards, status reports, résumés, insurance forms. Sheets of paper driven into concrete, according to witnesses. Paper slicing into truck tyres, fixed there.[54]

And he goes on to explain why it is exactly these things that are worth being observed and mentioned: "We need them, even the common tools of the terrorists, to set against the massive spectacle that continues to seem unmanageable, too powerful a thing to set into our frame of practised response."[55]

---

[54] Don DeLillo, "In the Ruins of the Future," *Harper's* (December 2001).

[55] Don DeLillo, "In the Ruins of the Future," *Harper's* (December 2001).

Thus, the use of seemingly unremarkable things and everyday routines become a structural device of the novel, as well as of life after 9/11.
Don DeLillo uses the same device, to cast a humorous light on his characters: Right before we are introduced to Martin, for example, there is a lengthy passage about Lianne's mother, Nina, and how her age is starting to show. We learn about a knee surgery she had to undergo and only a few sentences later, when the intercom buzzes, the narrator surprises us by announcing: "This would be Martin on the way up, her mother's lover" (13).

As the story progresses the author also alerts the reader to the fact that Keith and Lianne are far from omniscient, but deeply human. They are ordinary people, who sometimes lack the words to describe even their familiar surroundings: "She threw her things in the washer, fistfuls of darks, and put the filter pan back on the agitator or activator or whatever it was called" (150). Sentences such as this remind the observant reader of the fact that reflector characters, much like the first-person narrator in *White Noise*, naturally act as filters, curtailing the reader's insights by their own limitations. In the quoted example the seeming sloppiness with regard to vocabulary, can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it can be read as a symptom which is meant to alert the reader to the problem of mediacy. On the other it could even point at the intricate ways in which the unconscious influences Lianne's thoughts and choice of words, as 'agitator' was certainly a term often used in the news at the time.

3.2.4 DeLillo and 9/11

"Today, again, the world narrative belongs to terrorists."[56]

As a writer who throughout his career has focused on the darker side of America, with core topics such as conspiracies, fear of death, terrorism, and

[56] Don DeLillo, "In the Ruins of the Future," *Harper's* (December 2001).

the Cold War, Don DeLillo's response to 9/11 was much anticipated. The author's first public reaction came in the shape of the already quoted essay titled "In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September," published in *Harper's* in December 2001.

In it, DeLillo argues that terrorism must be seen as a sort of counter-narrative to the "global momentum". Whereas anti-globalization protesters try to slow down the future, "the terrorists of September 11 want to bring back the past."[57]

DeLillo states his fear that "[t]he event itself has no purchase on the mercies of analogy or simile. We have to take the shock and horror as it is. But," he hastens to add, "living language is not diminished."[58]

DeLillo makes allowance for this claim six years later with the publication of *Falling Man*. In this way, he has resisted the temptation to overhastily counter the shock with a novel on the events of 9/11, even though in his essay he stated "We seem pressed for time, all of us. Time is scarcer now."[59] The explanation follows but a few lines down: "[L]anguage is inseparable from the world that provokes it. The writer begins in the towers, trying to imagine the moment, desperately."[60] With *Falling Man*, the author has thus followed his own suggestion, starting in the ruins, making his way full circle back to the towers of the World Trade Center. Time and again, DeLillo has reflected in his novels on the power of language to express the unspeakable. As David Cowart notes: "DeLillo […] never doubts the ultimate ability of language to humanize (and survive) technology" (211).

3.2.5 Setting

Falling Man starts out right at the center of the event that would become the defining moment of early 21st century America: A man walks out of what used

[57] Ibid.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Ibid.

to be the World Trade Center. The south tower has already come down, the north tower will follow suite within minutes.

With a few stark sentences DeLillo manages to bestow on 9/11 the aura of an event which not only concerned the USA but the world as such:

"It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night" (3). At the ashen heart of this new world lies "'ground zero'", the epicenter of the defining moment of the novel's protagonists. The action then spreads out in concentric circles, taking with it what used to be a life of routines and the usual little failures.

For Don DeLillo to let the action of a novel come to life in clearly defined surroundings seems crucial:

> Fiction without a sense of real place is automatically a fiction of estrangement, and of course this is the point. As theory it has its attractions, but I can't write that way myself. I'm too interested in what real places look like and what names they have. Place is color and texture. It's tied up with memory and roots and pigments and rough surfaces and language, too.[61]

In this case, the place in question is the author's beloved city of New York which might account for some of the powerful imagery that lies at the heart of the first chapter in particular.

At the same time, with but a few words, the action is taken far beyond the shock of personal displacement through catastrophe: "This is the world now" (3) the 'reflector' declares. A statement both straight forward and deep. As we will learn later on, these hours on September 11th, 2001 will always stay part of the protagonist's memory and of his personality. They will always be, one might say, the world for him, a reference point from now on. Secondly, they hint at the fact that the attention of an entire nation, and of the world is suddenly focused on these few blocks in the financial district of Manhattan. Just a few blocks away, the city is suddenly somehow insignificant, almost invisible:

---

[61] DeLillo quoted in LeClair, Thomas. "An Interview with Don DeLillo," in DePietro, 15.

> He crossed Canal Street and began to see things, somehow, differently. Things did not seem charged in the usual ways, the cobbled street, the cast-iron buildings. There was something critically missing from the things around him. They were unfinished, whatever that means. They were unseen, whatever that means, shop windows, loading platforms, paint-sprayed walls. Maybe this is what things look like when there is no one here to see them. (5)

Note the loss of authority in the authorial voice: "whatever that means" – it is almost as if the air was charged with meaning beyond articulation, or possibly articulation beyond understanding. Ironically the place which featured a restaurant called "Windows of the World" suddenly finds itself on the other side of perception.

The third meaning possibly inherent in "This was the world now" has been hinted at above already: The terrorist attacks of September 11th had a deep impact not only on people directly involved, such as the protagonist Keith Neudecker. The shock waves of the event spread out through families, over the whole of NYC, across the country and finally all the way to Afghanistan, Iraq, Europe – one is tempted to say to the whole world. The focal mind of the protagonist realizes this – if not consciously – on the first page. Behind this, of course, stands the calculating author who stated in an interview that through language "[h]e writes himself into the larger world. He opens himself to the entire culture. He becomes, in short, an American – the writer equivalent of his immigrant parents and grandparents." [62]

Of course, not all of the characters are affected the same way: As we shall see later on, Keith's poker friend Terry Cheng, for example, who has always been a little different from the other members of the poker round, states that "'[p]eople talked about where they were, where they worked. I said midtown. The word sounded naked. It sounded neutral, like it was nowhere'" (205). This is an excellent illustration for DeLillo's use of language, which is often based on associations and sound rather than on purely rational considerations.

---

[62] DeLillo quoted in Howard, Gerald, "The American Strangeness: An Interview with Don DeLillo," in DePietro, p 126.

From ‘ground zero’ Keith goes straight to his ex-wife’s apartment located at the Upper East Side, “traditionally home to more affluent conservative commercial and business types.”[63]

As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that Keith’s world is becoming somehow smaller after 9/11. From one day to the next he relocates his focus to his old neighborhood (he had moved to the financial district after the separation from his wife Lianne). Again, setting can be seen as metaphor for a character’s life: The collapse of the WTC leaves Keith appalled to the bone. It seems only natural that he would retreat to familiar grounds both psychologically and physiologically.

However, after a while he starts seeing Florence, who lives on the other side of Central Park. Again, the geographical setup functions as a mirror image of a psychological process. It seems the only person Keith can really connect to is somebody who shared this traumatic event. So the only place for him to go beyond his familiar neighborhood (in which he functions correctly, picking up “the kid” – as he often refers to his son – playing with him, sleeping next to his wife) is across the park to see Florence.

Yet another location in this neighborhood is Nina’s apartment, “not far from Fifth Avenue, with art on the walls, painstakingly spaced, and small bronze pieces on tables and bookshelves” (8). Again, with one concise sentence the author manages to say ever so much about a character and her social background.

DeLillo employs this simple yet effective narrative strategy several times throughout the book. Several chapters into the novel we are introduced to Omar H., a member of Lianne’s Alzheimer’s group: “He was the only member of the group who lived out of the area, on the Lower East Side” (95). Omar is also the only person who is not so keen on writing about the terrorist attacks. What sets him apart, obviously, is his presumably Muslim background, an ‘otherness’ which is reflected in the neighborhood where he currently lives.

[63] See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Upper_East_Side. 2 September, 2008.

What is interesting to note is that Keith, even though it can be assumed that he has spent most of his adult life in New York City, is much like Omar – still an outsider. Martin – as the only European he seems predestined to observe these things – remarks that "[h]e'd talked to Keith a couple of times only. This was an American, not a New Yorker, not one of the Manhattan elect, a group maintained by controlled propagation" (44).

Through various focal characters we also learn a lot about New York City's altered appearance after '9/11.' Again, within one day, the city changes its face, in some places to something that eerily resembles a war zone. When Keith returns to his apartment the only time to pick up some items he describes the "frozen zone" (24):

> Everything was gray, it was limp and failed, storefronts behind corrugated steel shutters, a city somewhere else, under permanent siege, and a stink in the air that infiltrated the skin. (24f)

As Keith makes his way to 'ground zero' he takes us along to the core of destruction and horror:

> He stood at the National Rent-A-Fence barrier and looked into the haze, seeing the strands of bent filigree that were the last standing things, a skeletal remnant of the tower where he'd worked for ten years. The dead were everywhere, in the air, in the rubble, on rooftops nearby, in the breezes that carried from the river. They were settled in ash and drizzled on windows all along the streets, in his hair and on his clothes. (25)

The following description of people standing at 'ground zero', on the phone with friends and family, telling them where they are and what they see to make it more real, maybe, comes close to DeLillo's essay "In the Ruins of the Future".

On a different occasion we see the city through Lianne's eyes. Naturally, her perception is less drastic and disturbing (again the surroundings are mirroring what is going on inside the character) but still the city seems changed in

significant ways: “She hadn’t been here lately and was not accustomed to the sight of police and state troopers in tight clusters or guardsmen with dogs” (32). Lianne accommodates her feelings in a self-made haiku: “*Even in New York – I long for New York,”* (34)

When Lianne asks her mother why she has returned to New York when others are leaving for safer grounds, Nina simply replies:

“’Nobody’s leaving.[…] The ones who leave were never here.’” (34), making a strong statement about what real New Yorkers are all about. Lianne basically feels the same way as she reflects on her mother’s (and other people’s) attitude: “They said, Leave the city? For what? To go where? It was the locally honed cosmocentric idiom of New York, loud and blunt, but she felt it in her heart no less than they did” (69).

Keith, on the other hand, originally from Pennsylvania, seems less concerned with the city or his surroundings in general. As the story progresses, he seems more and more withdrawn. At some point he stops his walks across the park even. In the third part of the novel, finally, three years after the attacks we find him a professional poker player who seems to have exchanged the real for the artificial world of Las Vegas. Just as Keith is a man without context, the casinos where he spends most of his days now seem not so much real places but “un-places” arbitrary and exchangeable: “The waterfall was blue now, or possibly always was, or this was another waterfall or another hotel” (229). Much like Keith himself the inhabitants of this particular habitat seem like Zombies: “Sometimes a hotel guest wheeling a suitcase wandered through, looking lost in Swaziland” (225). Keith appreciates just this about his new living space:

> There was no rule of correspondence here. This was not balanced by that. There was no element that might be seen in the light of another element. It was all one thing, whatever the venue, the city, the prize money. Keith saw the point of this. He preferred this to private games with easy banter and wives arranging flowers, a format that appealed to Terry’s vanity, he thought, but could not match the crucial anonymity of these days and weeks, the mingling of countless lives that had no stories attached.” (204)

With this, Keith has found the perfect setting for his new unattached self. Only once does he take a trip out of Las Vegas, with an astonishing effect: “It took him a moment to understand what he was looking at, many miles ahead, the city floating in the night, a feverish sprawl of light so quick and inexplicable it seemed a kind of delirium” (226). For all his detachment this new angle, looking down on the city of Las Vegas, gives Keith an unaccustomed view not only of the city but also of himself:

> [H]e hadn’t known until now, looking at the vast band of trembling desert neon, how strange a life he was living. But only from here, out away from it. In the thing itself, down close, in the tight eyes around the table, there was nothing that was not normal. (227)

Yet at the same time this experience does not change his attitude. If anything it reinforces it: “He wondered why he’s never thought of himself in the middle of such a thing, living there more or less. He lived in rooms, that’s why. […] He moved only marginally, room to room” (226f). And with that the protagonist returns to his hotel, to the casino, leaving behind his newly gained insights, along with his old self.

His former poker partner, Terry Cheng, seems even more at home in these unreal surroundings: “Terry Cheng wore the hotel slippers, no socks, and ignored the cigarette that burned in his ashtray” (202). Yet, ironically, as this life style seems so natural to Terry Cheng, who, as mentioned earlier on, has always been somewhat of an outsider, he seems to be at home: “For all his looseness of manner, the clothing that didn’t fit, the tendency to get lost in the hotel’s deeper reaches and outlying promenades, Terry was set inflexibly in this life” (204). Keith, on the other hand, seems a stranger here as well as back with his family.

With the three chapters from the point of view of one of the terrorists we are taken to different places entirely.

The first of these “terrorist interludes” is set in Hamburg. However, right at the beginning the story of a member of Hammad’s prayer group takes us even

farther away, to the war between Iran and Iraq. The chapter is titled “Marienstraße” but we only learn that this street is in Hamburg after we have returned from the battlefields at the Shatt al Arab.
Contrary to Keith, Hammad, is about to move not into a small room (or rather a non-room like the casino) but out of it, following Amir’s words:

> 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 to get out. Even if the room is a place of prayer, he can’t stay there all his life. (79)

The contrast between Keith’s experience (“This was the world now.”) and the terrorists’ is most striking. To Hammad and his brothers, the only valid reference point is Islam: “Islam is the world outside the prayer room as well as the *sūrahs* in the Koran” (79f).
Throughout the motif of “small rooms” returns several times. The event that will devastate New York City and shock the world starts out in such small rooms: “Everything happened in crowded segments of place and time. His dreams seemed compressed, small rooms, nearly bare, quickly dreamt” (81).
The second chapter featuring the terrorists Hammad and Amir is set in Florida, where they train in flight simulators. In the very last chapter, the two plots finally meet. To the terrorists this means the fulfillment of their lives’ work, the end of the journey which started out in small rooms and ended at the heart of the hated capitalist west. To Keith, on the other hand, this becomes the starting point of his estrangement and retreat, first to his family surroundings, then to a place that’s nothing but a simulation, reflecting his state of mind, which will be the subject of discussion in the next chapter.

3.2.6 Characters

3.2.6.1 Keith

When the protagonist of *Falling Man* is introduced, his name is not yet mentioned, the reader is merely informed that “he wore a suit and carried a

briefcase" (3), which enables us to quickly identify him as some sort of business man. DeLillo clearly works with association, as he most certainly knows that this short description of a man carrying a briefcase, walking away from 'ground zero' with "glass in his hair and face" (3), will most likely bring back to memory the famous cover of *Fortune Magazine,* published on October 8, 2001*,* titled "Up from the ashes". Ironically what is to follow in terms of character development is quite the opposite of a man rising from the ashes.

Facts about Keith Neudecker (his full name is used but twice in the novel) are mostly presented from the point of view of other people. Hence, Keith remains an obscure character, disclosing very little about his true emotional landscape. What we do know about him is that he is not originally from New York but from Pennsylvania, that he is 39 years old, working as a lawyer in the north tower of the World Trade Center when the terrorist attacks take place. However, Keith's job never comes across as very important to the protagonist. He does not appear as a 'career person,' quite the contrary: His job seemed to be important mostly in that it provided him with a structured life and social contacts. From the conversation he has with Florence, we learn that after high school Keith enrolled in acting school, simply because he does not know what else to do. He states, "'I played two sports in college. That was over'" (88). When acting school proves to be the wrong choice Keith goes to law school – again, only because in his mind there is nowhere else to go. This aimlessness comes through time and again in novel. At some point after the attacks, we learn that

> Keith used to want more of the world than there 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. (128)

It does not come as a big surprise then that the reader never really learns what this man wants from life as he obviously has never known himself in the first place. As shall be discussed later, the trauma of 9/11 in this way might

have reinforced a tendency which was inherent in Keith's character right from the beginning.

We do learn, however, how others feel about and perceive him, and in many instances this is far from flattering. Lianne's mother, above all, has never approved of her son-in-law, warning her daughter even:

> "There's a certain man, an archetype, he's a model of dependability for his male friends, all the things a friend should be, an ally and confidant, lends money, gives advice, loyal and so on, but sheer hell on women. Living breathing hell. The closer a woman gets, the clearer it becomes to him that she is not one of his male friends. And the more awful it becomes for her. This is Keith. This is the man you're going to marry." (59)

Obviously, in his/her judgment the reader depends on the focal character, Nina in this case, so we never really know if assessments such as the one quoted above, say more about the character described or about the person who utters these observations. Other people who have tried to learn more about Keith apparently were no more lucky. Martin, Nina's long time lover, sums by saying:

> He tried to gain a sense of the younger man's feelings about politics and religion, the voice and manner of the heartland. All he learned was that Keith had once owned a pit bull. This, at least, seemed to mean something, a dog that was all skull and jaws, an American breed, developed originally to fight and kill. (44)

Here again, the reader has to be careful not to confuse content and truth, keeping in mind that this statement comes from a European who is likely to have some preconceived opinion when it comes to "Americans from the heartland".

The closest maybe the readers can get to truly learning something about the protagonist is through Lianne's observations. Yet even with her one can never be sure in how far the degree of estrangement between husband and wife – both before and after 9/11 – distorts her view. Before they broke up Keith often came home with glassy eyes (he seemed to have an alcohol problem) and Lianne already expects him to say that "sentence fragment,

that was all, and it would end everything between them, all discourse, every form of stated arrangement, whatever drifts of love still lingered" (103). The narrator goes on even to say that she regards his smile as "boyish and horrible" (103). Thus, as will be discussed later in more depth, we are unable to detect feelings of intimacy and closeness, but instead encounter only alienation and even fear.

The only person who is mentioned to succeed in "stirring a warm feeling in him, a rare tinge of affinity" (123), is Rumsey, his colleague and friend who, as we learn in the end of the novel, dies in his arms on September 11th, 2001:

> 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.
> (243)

After this traumatizing moment, Keith's life changes in many ways. On that fateful Tuesday morning, Keith Neudecker walks away from what used to be the World Trade Center seemingly without aim. After a while he realizes where he has been going all along: As if remote-controlled he has made his way back to his family – Lianne, from whom he has separated, and his son Justin.

DeLillo never names Keith's condition directly, but he gives enough hints to allow for a rough assessment, be it dissociative amnesia and/or posttraumatic stress disorder. He turns inward even more, avoiding everything and everybody which/who might ask him confront his trauma. When Keith and Lianne talk about their son and his wild fantasies of a man called "Bill Lawton", Keith immediately puts himself out of reach through humor, comically sticking to the 'facts' he has learned from his son about the ominous mastermind behind the attacks. Justin does not accept the fact that both towers of the WTC have fallen. When Lianne remarks that maybe this is

what parents get for trying to put some distance between children and the mass media the following dialogue ensues:

> “Except we didn’t put a distance, not really,” he said.
> “Between children and mass murderers.”
> “The other thing he does, Bill Lawton, is go everywhere in his bare feet.”
> “They killed your best friend. They’re fucking outright murderers. Two friends, two friends.” (74)

It seems that Lianne here voices the anger we would expect from Keith, on his behalf, so to say. This is also the first explicit mentioning of the fact that Keith lost two colleagues, one of which was his best friend, in the attacks. It is interesting to note that the reader learns about this fact through some side remark Keith’s wife makes.

This loss is what sets in motion the slow but steady process of detachment Keith undergoes. At first, his reactions seem natural in the face of trauma. When the protagonist is treated at the hospital he seems apathetic and indifferent to his ex-wife: “Lianne was there to help. Then she wasn’t anymore” (15). The doctors give him information he cannot seem to process, “about a ligament or cartilage, a tear or sprain” (15). This sets the mood right from the start, for how Keith is perceived, i.e. indifferent to a fair degree to his surroundings.

A sense of remoteness is not the only invisible scar Keith retains from his experiences on 9/11. When he first goes to see the rightful owner of the briefcase, for example he still climbs the stairs, afraid to use the elevator. This, it seems, is the protagonist’s new ordinariness – a fact that is stressed by the circumstance that the reflector character does not even bother to comment on his behavior. In the third and final part of the novel, which is set three years after the terrorist attacks, Keith still bears the stamp of trauma. The protagonist is mostly indifferent to the people around him in the various casinos and hotels in which he spends most of his time by then. “[B]ut every time he boarded a flight he glanced at faces on both sides of the aisle, trying to spot the man or men who might be a danger to them all” (198). The cruel

irony therefore lies in the fact that even though Keith has survived, he will never quite return to the 'realm of the living.' When we learn about the minutes and hours right after the plane hits the tower, the reader is informed that "[t]hey walked down, thousands, and he was in there with them. He walked in a long sleep, one step and then the next" (243).
The narrator, or rather Keith's focal mind, does not disclose this piece of information until the very last chapter. Up to this point our protagonist remembers things through Florence only, unable to make a connection to that man back there in the north tower. With the last chapter the reader is finally able to connect the dots, so to speak, from the beginning of the novel when Keith "tried to tell himself he was alive but the idea was too obscure to take hold" (6), detouring via the protagonist's zombie-esque casino routine three years after the attacks, coming full circle to the horrific moments in the north tower.

Right away, others too notice the change in Keith: The narrator (through Lianne's eyes) observes: "He was not quite returned to his body yet. Even the program of exercises he did for his postsurgical wrist seemed a little detached" (59). Intuitively, Lianne even washes Keith's clothes in a separate load. "She had no idea why she did this. It was like he was dead" (104). And when she watches her returned husband and their son play baseball she thinks that "she saw a man she's never known before" (59). On the surface, the effects of these changes are not only negative. Keith somehow turns into the 'homemaker,' picking up Justin from school, cooking meals and so forth. On a deeper level, however, this too can be seen as a strategy of evasion as these things are what Keith does instead of returning to his social routines. Lianne is not exactly proactive either, retreating from her friends as well, arguing in her mind that her husband would not feel at ease with other people and that they in turn would not know how to approach him "on the simplest social level. They think they will bounce off. They will hit the wall and bounce" (190). One might add: As she herself does.

The occasional self-reflective observation by the protagonist foregrounds the fact that this absolute retreat from the world around him, is not an entirely new character trait: “He used to want to fly out of self-awareness, day and night, a body in raw motion” (66). Keith’s narrative consciousness gives away very little about his motivations and (family) background, but even so we still do encounter his father from time to time, mostly when the protagonist contrasts himself to his progenitor:

> In one hundred days or so, he would be forty years old. This was his father’s age. His father was forty, his uncles. They would always be forty, looking aslant at him. How is it possible that he was about to become someone of clear and distinct definition, husband and father, finally, occupying a room in three dimensions in the manner of his parents? (157)

Observations such as this hint at the fact that Keith possibly had these problems of ‘not quite being there’ before 9/11 already.

Whenever the main character reflects on his situation, this by no means translates into action. Quite on the contrary, his assessments seem superficial, resulting at best in more fatalism even. Little by little Keith Neudecker becomes a perfectly passive character who knows, for example, that “[t]his is what he’d always lacked, that edge of unexpected learning” (231), yet who does nothing whatsoever to change in any way. Keith seems more and more like a man who is just drifting along, and he discloses nothing he is passionate about. When Keith is offered a new job drafting contracts for a Brazilian real-estate company, he listens to some Portuguese lessons on tapes, but then even this new project peters out somewhere along the way.

Interestingly, the experience of 9/11, especially of losing his best friend, brings Keith closer – if only on the surface – to another woman, Florence Givens, yet the thread of a life lived passively is not discontinued by this development. Keith’s walk across the park becomes another one of his routines:

“There was the park, every kind of weather, and there was the woman who lived across the park. But that was another matter, the walk across the park”

(66). It seems as if he is keeping something from himself, or at least does not intend to give his affair deeper consideration. It is just there, for now. There is no need to either name the woman or to go deeper into why he goes to see her time and again. As the days of our protagonist have lost their focus and rhythm, Keith simply exchanges old routines for new ones.

Even in his relationship with Florence, Keith immediately takes over the passive role, mostly listening and watching as Florence goes through her 9/11 experience again and again. On the one hand, this can certainly be attributed to Keith's dissociation from that day: He needs her to provide him with the memories he himself has repressed so well. But even as he listens to her accounts, he cannot quite reconnect to that day.

Florence, on the other hand, finds healing through these sessions. She tells Keith: "'I can't explain it but no, you saved my life. After what happened, so many gone, friends gone, people I worked with, I was nearly gone, nearly dead, in another way'" (108).

Thus, when they start their affair, they are in a similar situation, but whereas Florence seemingly is able to move on (she takes on a new job in New Jersey, for instance), Keith remains stuck in his trauma, unable to return to his body and three dimensional life.

The one activity that seems closest to redemption is playing poker. Here again, Keith, adopts regulations and routines without ever having reflected on them: "He drank hard liquor sparingly, nearly not at all, and allowed himself five hours' sleep, barely aware of setting limits and restrictions" (198).

The poker table is the one place where Keith feels he has some power over his own life. In the original poker round – before the terrorist attacks left two members dead and one badly wounded – it was the friendship and sweet routine of those poker evenings which appealed to Keith. After 9/11, he turns into a professional poker player, creating a space where he still has some power over his surroundings. On September 11th, 2001, on the other hand, Keith had no control over things, when he had to leave back his best friend in One World Trade Center, after having witnessed the light fade from his eyes.

He was at the mercy of luck alone and happened to survive. The situation at the poker table as Keith sees it, is quite different: “It was finally who he was that counted, not luck or naked skill” (227). The dual set of choices bestows on Keith a certain sense of power and belonging:

> Call or raise, call or fold, the little binary pulse located behind the eyes, the choice that reminds you who you are. It belonged to him, this yes or no, not to a horse running in the mud somewhere in New Jersey. (212)

Within the realm of gambling, the protagonist deals with a somewhat calculable risk, whereas in the real world planes fall out of the sky, hitting towers and killing thousands of people.

The casino thus becomes Keith’s small frame of reference, a system in which the variables at least are known: “the turn card, the river card, the blinking woman. Days fade, nights drag on, check-and-raise, wake-and-sleep” (226).

It goes without saying that apart from providing a feeling of safety, Keith’s compulsive gambling abets his strategy of evading his responsibility towards himself and his family: “He wasn’t making enough money to justify his life on a practical basis. But there was no such need. There should have been but wasn’t and that was the point” (230). In his unconscious, on the other hand, Keith still feels destitute:

> These were the days after and now the years, a thousand heaving dreams, the trapped man, the fixed limbs, the dream of paralysis, the gasping man, the dream, of asphyxiation, the dream of helplessness. (230)

If spending his days under artificial light, playing poker is meant to be a strategy to deal with his trauma, it is not an effective one. At best, Keith, gets to play out some of his revenge fantasies on a very small scale when he tells himself to “[m]ake them spill their precious losers’ blood” (230).

Slowly but surely this new life-style takes its toll and Keith starts losing his sense of time and place. At first he still reflects on questions such as when details like time and day of the week “would begin to feel disposable” (189).

Later on the only time units that are of any significance to him are the tournament schedules.

Woven into all these aspects of a professional gambler's life, are the unmistakable traits of addiction. Keith does not play for the money, even if he has finally started to actually earn fair amounts of money. Still "[t]he value of each chip had only hazy meaning. It was the disk itself that mattered, the color itself. […] The game mattered, the stacking of chips, the eye count, the play and dance of hand and eye" (228). At this point the protagonist spends most of his time in casinos, "going home periodically, three or four days, love, sex, fatherhood, home-cooked food, but was lost at times for something to say. […] Soon he felt the need to be back there" (197).

The last stage of this development is presented as a complete dissolving of Keith's character into the surrounding casino world:

> He feels he is "identical with these things" (228). "He was fitting into something that was made to his shape. He was never more himself than in these rooms, with a dealer crying out a vacancy at table seventeen" (225). "He was becoming the air he breathed" (230).[64]

In an absoluteness which reminds the reader of earlier passages about Islam, the game becomes the world to Keith with "nothing outside the game but faded space" (189).

The only people he feels close to are the ones training in a fitness center: "These were the people he knew, if he knew anyone. Here, together, these were the ones he could stand with in the days after. Maybe that's what he was feeling, a spirit, a kinship of trust" (143). The fact that he cannot

---

[64] Note here the eerie similarity to how Hammad experiences the last minutes of his life onboard American Airlines Flight 11:

"There was no window he might look through without getting out of the seat and he felt no need to do that. […] Everything was still. There was no sensation of flight. He heard noise but felt no motion and the noise was the kind that overtakes everything and seems completely natural, all the engines and systems that become air itself." (237f)

experience these feelings with his family further underlines the odd distortion which has taken place in the protagonist's traumatized mind.

3.2.6.2 Lianne

Lianne's character, as we shall see in the following analysis, goes in the opposite direction: Even though 9/11, especially with its result of a returning ex-husband, undoubtedly deeply affects her, the emotional constant of her inner life is the looming figure of her dead father. If Keith runs from a dead man, Lianne can be said to be constantly looking for one.

When Keith appears on Lianne's doorstep that day in September of 2001, the woman is 38, living with their son on New York's Upper East Side. She is a freelance book editor, "working usually at home or in the library" (20). She lives near her mother, Nina, a first hint at their strong connection. Others too notice this: "'You will always be a daughter, I think. First, and always, this is what you are'" (193), observes Martin, Nina's long-term lover.

Lianne Glenn goes by her father's last name which, as we shall see, can be seen as an indicator of the strong connection she still holds to a man who died 16 years ago. Even before his self-induced death, Lianne's father, Jack, is reported to visit the family sparingly only, still his strong presence leaves a never-fading impression on Lianne's mind. Thinking back to his visits she states: "This was ever Jack, hugging and shaking her, looking so deeply into her eyes it seemed at times he was trying to place her in proper context" (129).

Jack is diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and when the first signs of his mental decline start to show, he takes his fate in his own hands and kills himself with a shotgun. Lianne "was twenty-two when this happened and did not ask the local police for details. What detail might there be that was not unbearable?" (40f). Even though this might suggest that Lianne blocks out this traumatic event, this is far from true. As a matter of fact every event in her life seems to take shape through the prism of this experience. If she

doesn't deal with this fact consciously, she still takes action which then proves to be therapy: The story-line sessions with a group of Alzheimer patients is the best proof for this. At one point the supervising doctor even voices his concern, urging her not to let her selfish motivation get in the way of the group, as it has become obvious that Lianne chaperons the group at least partly for her own psychological benefit.

The insights we gain into Lianne's upbringing (as opposed to Keith, about whose younger years we learn practically nothing), shows a teenager who spends "long nights with her head in philosophical texts, Kierkegaard above all" (118), while her roommate writes "punk lyrics for an imaginary band called Piss in My Mouth and Lianne envied her creative desperation" (118). Still, Kierkegaard holds a greater appeal for her, as his expressions of angst mirror her own feelings: "He made her feel that her thrust into the world was not the slender melodrama she sometimes thought it was" (118). Fear remains a central feeling throughout Lianne's life: fear of sickness, fear of madmen harming her son. When Keith openly suspects some hidden agenda behind this - "He'd told her many times and told her again that she was devising ways to be afraid" – she defends herself, saying that "[t]his wasn't fear […] but only skepticism" (206).

One trait which surfaces several times in various passages is Lianne's strong desire to identify with other people. seeing herself in terms of other people, people on TV even becomes a leitmotif: When she fumbles with Keith in a taxi, she repeats "It's a movie" (104) several times, experiencing the situation through templates of awareness taken from other people or, as in this case, the media. Another instance of this tendency is presented when Lianne encounters 'Falling Man' one day on her way home. Unable to just walk away or address the man who stands close to her on the rail of a maintenance platform, ready to jump, she watches out "for someone, just to exchange a glance [to] see what she herself was feeling" (163). Again, she is longing, if

not to be somebody else, at least to learn about her own feelings by looking at another person, as she is not entirely in touch with her own emotions.

The nights immediately after 9/11, when Lianne lies sleepless, pondering over her father, her childhood and her life in general, reveal a lot about her character:

> When she was a girl, she wanted to be her mother, her father, certain of her schoolmates, one or two, who seemed to move with particular ease, to say things that didn't matter except in the way they were said, on an easy breeze, like birdflight. (68)

Lianne does not lose this naïve longing, as she grows up. Her wish merely changes appearance, turning into an exaggerated desire for intimacy with her husband, for example. And here the dilemma of their relationship might have its very root as

> [t]his was the man who would not submit to her need for probing intimacy, overintimacy, the urge to ask, examine, delve, draw things out, trade secrets, tell everything. It was a need that had the body in it, hands, feet, genitals, scummy odors, clotted dirt, even if it was all talk or sleepy murmur. She wanted to absorb everything, childlike, the dust of stray sensation, whatever she could breathe in from other people's pores. She used to think she was other people. Other people have truer lives. (105)

Not only does Keith not share this need for intimacy with Lianne, but his life certainly is not 'truer' than hers.

There are other instances which underscore the difference of these two people. As opposed to Keith, who, as was mentioned earlier, lacks the gift of "unexpected learning" as quoted before, Lianne is described as possessing "an eagerness that could be startling to others, a readiness to encounter an occasion or idea" (129).

Lianne, however, takes a long time to realize this. Rather, she starts out like her son Justin, adapting her view of the world to what she wants to see, instead of seeing what is really there, devising her own narrative. From the passages of the book in which Keith functions as the reflector character we

know that Keith used to have affairs. In Addition to this, various observations Lianne makes, suggest that alcohol must have been a problem for her husband. However, Lianne refuses to see this as the problem, rather accepting what her mother observes – that this is just who Keith is, and that Lianne will always be drawn to men like him.

Even though the defining moment in Lianne's life is her father's suicide, the events around 9/11 doubtlessly mean a big incision in her life as well. She finds her husband at her doorstep, not questioning at first his motivation. As time goes by, again, it becomes obvious that she doesn't inquire not so much out of consideration for Keith but because she prefers to believe in her own version of events, i.e. her husband having undergone a major change of mind, wanting to be with his family in a moment such as this. Hence Keith appears like a man risen from the dead, once because he survived the terrorist attacks and a second time because he undoes their separation.

The events of 9/11, however, do take a toll with Lianne as well: From that day until at least three years after the attacks she will refuse to take the subway, afraid of the dangers which might await her there. Furthermore, she begins to suffer from severe insomnia, waking up at some point every night with her mind racing, not able to stop or go back to sleep.

Using Keith's state of mind as a pretext, she isolates herself more and more. Now that she finally has him back, it seems, she does not intend to share her 'own survivor.' At the same time she states that "[s]he missed the comical midlife monologues of the clinically self-absorbed" (190).

Even though Lianne at one point is described as somebody who wanted to "disbelieve", we find her, three years after the attacks, in church:

> Others were reading the Koran, she was going to church. […]She followed others when they stood and knelt and she watched the priest celebrate mass, bread and wine, body and blood. She didn't believe this, the transubstantiation, but believed something, half fearing it would take her over. (233)

What she hopes to find there, or actually finds, we can only guess. On the one hand it seems this is how Lianne compensates for having lost touch with her friends and having lost her mother, who is dead by the time the last part of the novel is reached. Keith adds to this feeling of loss as he spends most of his time in casinos by then so that she once again has to fill in for him with regard to the upbringing of their son.

On the other hand, or in addition to the observations made above, her vague sense of belief and her regular visits to the local church can also be interpreted as an indicator if not a catalyst of a process of self-discovery in Lianne. Towards the end of the book she seems to reach a state of serenity and strength which did not exhibit before:

> She was content in the small guarded scheme she'd lately constructed, arranging the days, working the details, staying down, keeping out. Cut free from rage and foreboding. Cut free from nights that sprawl through endless waking chains of self-hell. (182)

At a point, when Keith loses himself more and more, practically becoming identical with the gambling den, Lianne suddenly perceives herself as she never has before:

> Then one late night, undressing, she yanked a clean green T-shirt over her head and it wasn't sweat she smelled or maybe just a faint trace but not the sour reek of the morning run. It was just her, the body through and through. It was the body and everything it carried, inside and out, identity and memory and human heat. It wasn't even something she smelled so much as knew. It was something she'd always known. The child was in it, the girl who wanted to be other people, and obscure things she could not name. It was a small moment, already passing, the kind of moment that is always only seconds from forgetting.
>
> She was ready to be alone, in reliable calm, she and the kid, the way they were before the planes appeared that day, silver crossing blue. (236)

So right before the novel reaches its climax with the moments right before American Airlines Flight 11 hits the north tower of the World trade Center, and the moments right after, when Keith's best friend dies in his arms, the

narration takes a remarkable turn, with an ending before the ending, so to speak, Lianne's personal conclusion which has her and her son as reference points only.

3.2.6.3 Justin

In order to complete the discussion of the Neudecker/Glenn family, let us take a brief look at Keith's and Lianne's son. Even though he can hardly be seen as a major character of the novel, the manner in which he is portrayed, or rather the striking lack of any substantial portrayal certainly is of interest to this character analysis.

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks Justin and his friends (simply called "the Siblings" by his mother) start spending hours at windows, watching out for more planes. Even though their parents apparently try to protect them from the horror and gloom which has swept across the city, they still have their strong imagination. This, paired with bits and pieces of information picked up from the media and conversations, suffices for them to create their very own version of who is behind the attacks. According to the children, the mastermind behind planes dropping down from the sky is a certain 'Bill Lawton.'

Even though this is of some concern to the boy, he does not seem to be particularly unsettled. As he never serves as a focal character, we know very little about how his psyche reacts to his suddenly returned father.

Maybe it must be contributed to the precarious state of mind of both his parents that Justin is paid relatively little attention. He does get mentioned but Keith in particular does not really seem emotionally involved. Up until chapter three, Justin is referred to merely as "the kid". Keith does pick him up from school and plays with him in the park, certainly a new stage in their relationship. Still, watching through Keith's mind as a focus, we learn nothing about feelings of affection or worry.

One of the very few instances when Keith seems to actually notice his son occurs when they throw a baseball, the prototypical father-and-son scene in

a North American context. The way in which Keith's observations are formulated is telling:

> He was like a pitching machine with hair and teeth, register set to peak velocity. Keith was amused, then impressed, then puzzled. He told the kid to calm down, ease up. He told him to follow through. There was the windup, the release, the follow-through. (213)

It seems as if there was no familiarity between father and son. Keith registers – maybe for the first time – that this is not just about throwing back and forth a ball, but about his son trying to express something that goes beyond playfulness. It would not be surprising to see the boy angry after his father is about to disappear yet again, this time to play some stupid card game, yet Justin's father fails to act on his observations. The moment passes and Justin returns to his place at the periphery of Keith's perception.

The scarce information we are provided with mostly stems from Lianne's reflections: "He had pale hair, his father's, and a certain somberness of body, a restraint, his own, that gave him an uncanny discipline in games, in physical play" (39). The boy is portrayed as being very stubborn, at least this is how his mother sees him.

Similar to his father he retreats to his own world, a world he usually shares with the Siblings only. It is a world with strict rules and a coded language – again, not so different from his father's.

3.2.6.4 Hammad

In three short chapters we are introduced to two terrorists who will be onboard American Airlines Flight 11 – the aircraft which will hit the north tower of the World Trade Center on September 11th.

One of them, Hammad, functions as a reflector character the other one, Amir (Mohamed Mohamed el-Amir el-Sayed Atta), is presented through Hammad's eyes mostly.

By giving a voice and face to some of the terrorists, DeLillo lets the rest of the novel appear in a slightly different light. In one of their story-telling sessions,

one of the Alzheimer patients complains that her anger is futile mostly because the attackers are so far away, completely out of reach even to our imagination. Already in the following chapter, Don DeLillo proves her wrong, conjuring up not only the minutes right before the plane hits the tower, but giving us a glimpse also of Hammad's and Amir's time in Hamburg and Florida.

The first time we meet Hammad in Hamburg, he is only just getting involved with the group around Amir. He listens to an old man who tells them about a battle he fought as a rifleman for Saddam Hussein against the Iranian army which sent boy soldiers to fight on their behalf. ("He was a soldier in Saddam's army and they were the martyrs of the Ayatollah, here to fall and die" (77).) Hammad observes:

> Hammad barely knew this man, a baker, here in Hamburg maybe ten years. They prayed in the same mosque, this is what he knew, on the second floor of this shabby building with graffiti smeared on the outer walls and a setting of local strolling whores. (77f)

The narrator here draws our attention to the stark contrasts in Hammad's surroundings: a baker here – a soldier there, prayer here – whores and graffiti there. This depiction sets the mood for the whole chapter, mirroring the collision of two worlds or in other words: holiness in the midst of Western decadence.

At first Hammad still reflects on what the other men are discussing. When some of them blame the Jews for building walls that are too thin and toilets that are too close to the floor, he still wonders "whether this was funny, true or stupid. He listened to everything they said, intently. He was a bulky man, clumsy, and thought all his life that some unnamed energy was sealed in his body, too tight to be released" (79).

At this point, it seems, Hammad has not yet become a fanatic. He is, however, looking for some deeper meaning to his life, some mission the success of which needs the yet "unnamed energy" he feels.

The other person we are soon introduced to is Amir, ”who led discussions, this was Amir and he was intense, a small thin wiry man who spoke to Hammad in his face” (79). Amir seems to be the opposite of Hammad, physically but also in terms of character.

Furthermore, Hammad soon proves to be a perfect follower – when some of his brothers go out to beat up another man, Hammad tags along as if it were the most natural thing in the world. What is worth noting here is the fact, that Hammad knows neither the man’s name nor the exact reason for his punishment. He “wasn’t sure what it was all about, the guy paying an Albanian whore for sex or the guy not growing a beard” (81f). Hammad himself at this point is involved in worldly pleasure himself, dating a woman “who was German, Syrian, what else, a little Turkish” (81). Soon, enough Amir confronts him asking for more self-discipline and commitment:

> Hammad in a certain way thought this was unfair. But the closer he examined himself, the truer the words. He had to fight against the need to be normal. He had to struggle against himself, first, and then against the injustice that haunted their lives. (83)

This can be seen as a watershed experience for Hammad, who soon after breaks up with his girlfriend, dedicating himself fully to their mission.

The next time we meet the two of them, they are in Florida, training on flight simulators. We learn that they have been to a training camp in Afghanistan in the meantime,

> where Hammad had begun to understand that death is stronger than life. This is where the landscape consumed him, waterfalls frozen in space, a sky that never ended. It was all Islam, the rivers and streams. Pick up a stone and hold it in your fist, Islam. […] He wore a bomb vest and knew he was a man now, finally, ready to close the distance to God. (172)

Immediately we can sense the difference between Hammad in Hamburg and his fiercely religious new self. There is a huge difference to the descriptions quoted above, when he still had at least vague plans to found a family and

was not yet sure if he was actually doing what he really wanted. All this doubt seems gone now. Another indicator of this development can be seen in the omission of quotation marks when Hammad repeats what Amir, and possibly other teachers, have said to him. Their beliefs, this seems to underscore, are identical with his now. In this manner, Hammad has finally found the purpose he had been looking for:

> He prays and sleeps, prays and eats. These are dumb junk meals often taken in silence. The plot shapes every breath he takes. This is the truth he has always looked for without knowing how to name it or where to search. (176)

Again, DeLillo proves that, indeed, all plots must lead towards death.

Amir too has changed, it seems, in that he radiates even more strength and determination: “Only Amir burned now. Amir was electric, dripping fire from the eyes” (172).
When Hammad inquires about the people who will die if their plan works out, Amir replies that “there are not others,” at statement which calls back to memory Don DeLillo’s observation on the figure of the terrorist in his essay “In the Ruins of the Future:" “He knows who we are and what we mean in the world – an idea, a righteous fever in the brain. But there is no defenseless human at the end of his gaze.”

The third “terrorist chapter” recounts the last minutes in Hammad’s life. DeLillo succeeds in creating an atmosphere of both fear and hopeful anticipation even if the latter seems a bit forced, still not completely identical to what Hammad really feels. When he realizes that he has been cut, “he welcome[s] the blood but not the pain, which [is] becoming hard to bear” (238). Behind this observation we can still sense a man not quite as tough and determined as Amir, his brother in death. In order to chase away thoughts of fear, Hammad keeps reciting some teachings:

> Forget the world. Be unmindful of the thing called the world.

> All of life's lost time is over now.
> This is your long wish, to die with your brothers.
> […]
> Recite the sacred words.
> Pull your clothes tightly about you.
> Fix your gaze.
> Carry your soul in your hand.
> (238)

This sounds like a mantra, to be repeated again and again until there is no difference between these words and Hammad's own thoughts. That this has not quite happened yet, is hinted at by the author by a little indention before the quotes, setting apart Hammad's genuine thoughts from the layer of imposed ideas. Just a few lines down from this we find the possible reason why these dogmata might have taken hold on a man like Hammad: "How could any death be better? […] Every sin of your life is forgiven in the seconds to come" (239).

3.2.6.5 Falling Man: David Janiak

Naturally, 'Falling Man' bears a double meaning in the novel of the same name. The first, obviously, is that of men and women plunging from the WTC, opting to jump rather than burn to death. We meet them right in the beginning of the novel when the narrator observes: "The world was this as well, figures in windows a thousand feet up, dropping into free space" (4). Keith as a focal character does not further reflect on this, he merely registers the very fact. Only much later, when the story comes full circle and we watch Keith as he tries to pull his friend Rumsey out of the debris, do we realize that this is when Keith first saw people falling down alongside the tower:

> Then something outside, going past the window. 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, holding Rumsey under the arms.
> He could not stop seeing it, twenty feet away, an instant of something sideways, going past the window, white shirt, hand up, falling before he saw it. (242)

These horrific images are sure to leave a mark on Keith's psyche, along with his best friend's death.
In a stark contrast to this, Keith – at the beginning of the novel – witnesses members of a tai chi group as he walks away from the burning towers, "standing with hands extended at roughly chest level, elbows bent, as if all of this, themselves included, might be placed in a state of abeyance" (4).
This somehow subtly anticipates the later appearance of the performance artist called 'Falling Man' and in a wider sense it might even be interpreted as alluding to the famous picture mentioned in the introduction – of a falling man oddly peaceful in the midst of disaster.

The performance artist who appears in New York City some time after the terrorist attacks seems to somehow belong to Lianne as we see him through her eyes only. She first comes across him ten days after the attacks near Grand Central Station on a steel structure above Pershing Square: "A man was dangling there, above the street, upside down. He wore a business suit, one leg bent up, arms at his sides" (33). Inevitably, this image is reminiscent of the aforementioned, much debated photograph by Richard Drew. As Falling Man remains without a voice throughout the novel, we can only guess what his motive is for doing what he does. Maybe he too, like Tom Junod, aims at preventing this disturbing image to disappear from the public mind. The reaction of the onlookers in any case doesn't seem so different from people's reaction to Drew's pictures: "There were people shouting up at him, outraged at the spectacle, the puppetry of human desperation, a body's last fleet breath and what it held. It held the gaze of the world, she thought" (33).
What we do know about 'Falling Man' mostly stems from Lianne's second encounter with him. This time, it is more intimate, as the woman stands alone on a street above which he is getting ready to jump. There are some children in a nearby school yard and a woman looking out a window but Lianne does not succeed in establishing any sort of communication with any of them. It is interesting to note how the state of emergency seems to have affected

Lianne's way of thinking and rhetoric. When she describes him, she uses expressions like "white male, […] white shirt, dark jacket" (159) as if she is unconsciously getting ready to report him to the police. This of course, goes well with her avoiding of the subway and her fear of harm coming to her son in the shape of bombs.

Returning to 'Falling Man', it is important to note that he is "known to appear among crowds or at sites where crowds might quickly form" (163f). The attention of the press is secondary to him, "[t]he performance pieces were not designed to be recorded by a photographer" (220). Also, when the reader comes across him for the second time, he jumps in an area which is rather quiet. Except for some school kids and the one or other tenant at the window, there is no one in sight. Falling Man performs for the passengers of a passing train, for "an audience in motion" (164), so by the time any journalists might arrive he is likely to have disappeared again.

As close as he seems to Lianne in these few moments near the Greater Highway Deliverance Temple, Falling Man seems unaware of his surroundings, fully concentrated on what he is about to do. Again, the author does not fail to remind us of the obvious association Falling Man triggers. Yet Lianne seems to contradict or at least suggest that the artist's motivation lies within himself:

> The man stared into the brickwork of the corner building but did not see it. There was a blankness in his face, but deep, a kind of lost gaze. Because what was he doing finally? Because did he finally know? She thought the bare space he stared into must be his own, not some grim vision of others falling. (167)

Whatever the man's motives, the result is clearly illustrated by Lianne, who immediately thinks of her husband. "She saw his friend, the one she'd met, or the other, maybe, or made him up and saw him, in a high window with smoke flowing out" (167).

In part three finally, the part of the novel, which is named after Falling Man's original name, David Janiak, some riddles about this ominous character are revealed after Lianne comes across the performing artist's obituary in the

newspaper. At first she doesn't recognize the name, but when reads that this was "the performance artist known as Falling Man" (219), she seems to be oddly touched by his death. As the obituary is rather short, she goes on to do some internet research, looking up pictures and older newspaper articles. We learn that Janiak had studied "acting and dramaturgy at the Institute for Advanced Theatre Training in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His training included a three-month residency at the Moscow Art Theatre School" (220). The man died, we are informed, "apparently of natural causes" (220), at the age of 39. It seems his performances have taken a high toll on his body as he is reported to have suffered from "chronic depression due to a spinal condition" (222).

At this point the narration subtly tilts, displaying an ironic tone which is typical of DeLillo's style. He cannot refrain from dealing some side-swipes in the direction of the academia and art scene – areas obviously familiar to the author. As can be expected both fields are quick to try and incorporate the artist and his performances:

> She clicked forward to the transcript of a panel discussion at the New School. Falling Man as Heartless Exhibitionist or Brave New Chronicler of the Age of Terror. (220)
> […]
> He turned down an invitation to fall from the upper reaches of the Guggenheim Museum at scheduled intervals over a three-week period. He turned down invitations to speak at the Japan Society, the New York Public Library and cultural organizations in Europe. (222)

As Lianne finds out on the course of her research, "plans for a final fall, according to [Janiak's brother], did not include a safety harness" (221).

Even though Lianne manages to find quite some information about Falling Man, his underlying motives stay in the dark, mostly because "[he] had no comments to make to the media on any subject" (222). When the photograph is brought up in an interview, he refuses to say whether or not it "was an element of his performance" (222), and he also remains mute when asked if somebody close to him died in the attacks.

3.2.6.6 Absent characters

From a silent character, let us now move to the ones that are not physically present in the narration.

As mentioned in an earlier section, Jack Glenn, Lianne's father, can be felt as a strong force throughout the book. "He made a couple of phone calls from his cabin in northern New Hampshire and then used an old sporting rifle to kill himself" (40), the narrator tells us matter-of-factly. Significantly, we know more about him than we know about Justin, for example. As discussed in the chapter dedicated to Lianne's character, Jack's death is a major landmark in her emotional landscape still, or rather the black hole towards which much of her emotions gravitate. By presenting a character only through the thoughts of another, DeLillo also prepares the stage for Rumsey, second dead man who plays an important part in *Falling Man* is Rumsey (we never learn his second name), Keith's best friend who is killed in the attacks:

> He was ordinary in many ways, Rumsey, a broad and squarish body, an even temperament, but he took his ordinariness to the deep end at times. He was forty-one, in a suit and tie, walking through promenades, in waves of beating heat, looking for women in open-toed sandals. (121)

Thinking back to their friendship, to the poker games they both were part of and their office life, Keith discloses some facts about Rumsey. All the information we get is closely linked to Keith, and here too as well as with Lianne and her father, in many instances we learn more about the person who remembers than about the person who is remembered. When Keith observes for example that "[b]aldness in Rumsey, as it progressed, was a gentle melancholy, the pensive regret of a failed boy" (123), we are shown a gentle side of Keith, which he has failed to evince so far.

In this respect we might say, these characters are important not only to our protagonists, affecting their lives beyond their own deaths, but also in terms

of narration, as they reveal aspects of other characters which otherwise would remain hidden.

Finally, there is “Bill Lawton,” who is referred to merely as “this man” (17) at first. His name, it seems, must not be uttered, so as not to conjure up his evil energies. At the same time the real foe is deprived of some of his evil charisma as Justin and his friends invent an entirely new character which is easier to grasp than the real Bin Laden and therefore also less terrifying.

All three characters – Jack, Rumsey and Bill Lawton – are important mainly, because they add insights into the lives of the people who are most preoccupied with them. Whereas Jack and Rumsey have left huge gaps which Lianne and Keith are unable to fill, Bill Lawton represents a welcome space for projection, helping the children deal with their fears after 9/11.

3.2.7 Language

It does not come as a surprise that an author who states that “[b]efore history and before politics there’s language, and this is what I mean when I call myself a writer”,[65] would give language a prominent position in a novel such as *Falling Man* which among other things must be seen as an attempt to speak about the unspeakable.

What is more, much of what is waiting to be discovered will be found somewhere beyond storyline and characters, at the molecular level of language. Cowart says of DeLillo’s short story “Baader Meinhof”: “The story, like the paintings, compels attention. It refuses to signify at a single reading.” (212) – *Falling Man* too refuses to do that, maybe even beyond the second and third reading. It is, after all, a portrayal of an absence, an attempt to put into words that gaping hole terror has left us with.

[65] DeLillo quoted in Moss, Maria, “’Writing as a Deeper Form of Concentration’: An Interview with Don DeLillo,“ in DePietro, 164.

Already in 1993 Don DeLillo said in an interview that “we need to invent beauty, search out some restoring force. A writer may describe the ugliness and pain in graphic terms but he can also try to find dignity and significance in ruined parts of the city, and the people he sees there”.[66] Naturally, this was never truer than in writing about 9/11. At the same time, we are confronted with the question whether a traumatic event such as the terrorist attacks can be put into words at all?

Let us take a second look at the narrator’s rendering of the immediate aftermath of the attacks:

> 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)

This initial description is doubtlessly one of the strongest passages in the novel, only to be matched by the final sentences of the book, again at the scene of the catastrophe: “The only light was vestigial now, the light of what comes after, carried in the residue of smashed matter, in the ash ruins of what was various and human, hovering in the air above” (246).

As the protagonist walks away from the scene, it seems that his observations are still raw, unfiltered by consciousness which at this point gives way to the very basic instincts and perceptive functions. As the surroundings must be beyond anything the reflector character has ever experienced, sensory perceptions seem to blur into each other: “The noise lay everywhere they ran, stratified sound collecting around them, and he walked away from it and into it at the same time” (4).

---

[66] DeLillo quoted in Begley, Adam, “The Art of Fiction CXXXV: Don DeLillo,“ in DePietro, 94.

The destruction around him is artfully mirrored in the people Keith meets, when he sees some women walking backwards from the sight, he notices "[…] faces in collapse" (4). When the second tower comes down the narrator employs a similar device, this time equating himself with the building even: "That was him coming down, the north tower" (5). This is quite understandable as with the tower down go his working place, his best friend and a yet to be defined part of himself, not to be recovered anytime soon.

By impressing on the reader's mind these very stark images, DeLillo prepares his audience for echoes of these graphic descriptions which can be found throughout the novel. When Lianne meets her neighbor in the laundry room, for example, she observes that "[t]he filter pan held the lint rubble of the other woman's wash"(150). The composite 'lint rubble' immediately brings back to mind the descriptions of 'ground zero'. On the other hand, the choice of words here shows that Lianne's subconscious is presumably still occupied by the events of 9/11.

The only other character we encounter – if only indirectly – who shares a similarly violent experience as Keith is a Muslim baker in Hamburg who tells his brothers about the time he served in the Iraqi army. He remembers that he "was flanked by machine-gun positions and the firing grew so intense he began to think he was breathing white-hot steel" (77).

Besides using language as a means to render descriptions of death and decay, DeLillo explicitly makes language a topic. It is only natural, that the character best suited for this would be the freelance book editor, Lianne Glenn. One recurring motif in this respect is her father's suicide, which has preoccupied her for almost 20 years: "He'd hefted the weapon and said to her, 'The shorter the barrel, the stronger, the muzzle blast.'
The force of that term, *muzzle blast*, carried through the years" (41).
The other expression she carries with her like a heirloom is what the police report said about her father's death:

> Died by his own hand.
> For nineteen years, since he fired the shot that killed him, she'd said these words to herself periodically, in memoriam, beautiful words that had an archaic grain, Middle English, Old Norse. She imagined the words engraved on an old slant tombstone in a neglected churchyard somewhere in New England. (218)

On various occasions these words almost seem to impose themselves on Lianne: "She was running level with the trains now and then above them, running uphill into a ribbed sky with taller bundled clouds bleeding down into the low array.
She thought, Died by his own hand" (169).
This points to the fact that most experiences can be explained and interpreted only in the context of previous experience. The vocabulary we use to describe the world around us is never objective but carries its share of personal baggage.

Other instances of Lianne's preoccupation with words are the name of a philosopher (whom she used to love "right down to the spelling of his name. The hard Scandian *k*'s and lovely double *a*." (118)), diagnostic findings ("She told him that the findings were unremarkable. There was no sign of impairment. She kept using the word *unremarkable*. She loved the word. The word expressed enormous relief" (206)), the hoped for message on her answering machine ("Call me soonest. It was something promised, that last urgent word, an indication of auspicious circumstance" (155)), or her musings about the still lifes in her mother's apartment:

> *Natura Morta*. The Italian term for still life seemed stronger than it had to be, somewhat ominous, even, but these were matters she hadn't talked about with her mother. Let the latent meanings turn and bend in the wind, free from authoritative comment. (12)

This last remark says a lot about Lianne's relationship to her mother, who comes across as a very dominant woman who often comments on Lianne's private life. The retired art professor seems to be an authority not only when it comes to art, but also when it comes to marriages and even world politics. On the other hand, Lianne's meditation suggests a certain degree of emancipation.
"Let the latent meanings turn and bend in the wind, free from authoritative comment" could finally be seen as a plea not only by Lianne but by the author himself, not to be satisfied with easy interpretations of what happened on September 11, 2001.

Besides explicitly reflecting on the finer aspects of language, Lianne also shows a sophisticated use of words, for example, by employing verbs in an unexpected context: "She had a quick cup of coffee with the mother, Isabel, and then peeled her son off the computer screen and muscled him into his jacket" (152). When she goes to the laundry room, she describes it as being "like a monk's cell with a pair of giant prayer wheels beating out a litany" (151), using this simile from the realm of religion to link an ordinary laundry room to something endlessly more distinguished.

'Like mother like son', Justin too has a very special relationship to language, which is one of the few facts the reader is able to gather about this character. At one point, he starts talking in monosyllables only, originally as an exercise for school – "a serious game designed to teach the children something about the structure of words and the discipline required to frame clear thoughts" (66). The experiment, however, soon turns into an expression of his defiance of his parents. Whereas Keith deals with this in his typical ironic manner, Lianne seems to find her son's behavior slightly disconcerting, when she states "half seriously, that it sounded totalitarian" (66). Next to limiting himself to monosyllabic answers to his parents' inquiries and attempts at conversation, Justin and the siblings use a made-up language, whispering in "semi-gibberish" (17) so as to exclude the adults.

Language as a means to exclude others also plays an essential part when it comes to the story-line sessions of Alzheimer patients which Lianne supervises.

In this case, through the decline of memory, it is the patients themselves who are excluded from leading their lives the way they used to.

This is most impressively illustrated by the case of Rosellen S., who one day finds herself walking down a street, without remembering were she lives. Lianne later reflects on the last session Rosellen was able to attend:

> how she developed extended versions of a single word, all the inflections and connectives, a kind of protection perhaps, a gathering against the last bare state, where even the deepest moan may not be grief but only moan.
> *Do we say goodbye, yes, going, am going, will be going, the last time go, will go.*
> This is what she was able to recall from the limp script of Rosellen's last pages. (156)

However, as long as the verbal facilities are still intact, language serves as a means to confront that which lies ahead of these men and women: "All the words for what is inevitable seemed to crowd the room " (141).

4 Conclusion: Death and Plot

As the analysis of *White Noise* and *Falling Man* has shown, death in these novels plays an essential role on a number of levels.

In terms of plot, death in both instances acts as the major driving force. In *White Noise,* the protagonists are portrayed as being ready to do whatever it may take to avoid the final truth of their lives. Whereas "The Airborne Toxic Event" shows the Gladney family leaving their home so as to avoid a real threat to their health, "Dylarama" depicts Jack Gladney in his futile attempt to run away from death on a psychological level, ironically culminating in a

shooting, instigated by the protagonist himself. Therefore, while the characters of the novel do everything in their power to avoid death, they unwittingly accelerate their unavoidable journey towards their 'final destination.' The narrator hints at this development as early as in chapter five, demanding: "Let's enjoy these aimless days while we can, I told myself, I fearing some kind of deft acceleration" (18).

Falling Man, on the other hand, starts out with a 'fait accompli', one tower of the World Trade Center has already fallen, the second one will follow soon, claiming thousands of lives. As we are confronted with these haunting images a second time at the end of the book, the story is moving from and towards death at the same time. A different way of seeing this would be to say that the story of Keith Neudecker and his family is parenthesized by about 3000 deaths.

The terrorist subplot, on the other hand, shows a clearly linear development towards the devastating attacks on September 11, 2008.

Turning to character development, the protagonists of the two novels exhibit both similarities and significant differences. Jack and Babette, as well as Keith and Lianne are paralyzed by death. More precisely, in *White Noise* it is the *fear of death* which makes it impossible for Jack and his wife to lead the untroubled life they both long for. Therefore, they resort to irrational, even dangerous, means in their attempt to eliminate their fear. On a psychological level, however, neither one of them makes any noteworthy progress, as they do not openly deal with their anxieties. Similarly, Keith in *Falling Man* exhibits a refusal to deal with his trauma. The difference lies in the fact that whereas Jack acts on his fears by trying to buy back some 'life credit' through shooting Willie Mink, Keith prefers to evade his pain by retreating to an artificial world of gambling. Thus, the process which is set in motion when the plane impacts the north tower of the World Trade Center, culminating in Rumsey's death, peters out at the poker table. Whether or not by this time, Keith is still to be counted among the living, is up to the reader. Depending on our definition of death, we might even argue that three years after the attacks Keith is no

more alive than Rumsey who dies right away. He is, at least, dead to his son and wife who continue to carry on with their lives the way they did before Keith walked away from the ashes of what used to be the World Trade Center.

Lianne, unlike her husband, is shown to be more proactive by dealing, if only indirectly, with her irredeemable loss – her father's suicide – through the story-line sessions with Alzheimer patients. Yet when it comes to 'reclaiming' her husband she stands helpless, letting him drift away again rather than confronting him with her needs.

Death is also the dominant thematic consideration in both novels.
On the one hand, *White Noise* shows the many facets in which 'modern death' appears in virtually all areas of our lives: from technology, to media, to spirituality, it is portrayed as an all-pervasive phenomenon.
In *Falling Man,* yet another aspect is added by raising the question in how far death is dealt with differently by people from various cultural backgrounds.
Don DeLillo drew attention to this issue in his essay "In the Ruins of the Future" already: "We are rich, privileged and strong, but they are willing to die. This is the edge they have, the fire of aggrieved belief."[67] Depending on our perspective death can therefore be a cul-de-sac bare of any meaning, or a means towards the end of fulfilling a divine plan. When Hammad asks Amir about the others who will die if they succeed in carrying out their plan, he is told that there simply are not others.

> The others exist only to the degree that they fill the role we have designed for them. This is their function as others. Those who will die have no claim to their lives outside the useful fact of their dying.
> Hammad was impressed by this. It sounded like philosophy. (176)

Yet we are confronted with the shockwaves of death pervading every aspect of the novel's protagonists, which contradicts Amir's claim, as novels such as *Falling Man* could not even exist, if there were no others. Another passage

[67] Don DeLillo, "In the Ruins of the Future," *Harper's* (December 2001).

which illustrates these antipodal views is the description of children soldiers in the Iranian army. The man who witnesses their – by Western standards – futile dying states that he “was twice regretful, first to see the boys die, sent out to explode land mines and to run under tanks and into walls of gunfire, and then to think they were winning, these children, defeating us in the manner of their dying” (78).

In *White Noise too,* death is charged with meaning, but here it is a single man’s fear of death, along with the skilful rhetoric of his friend, Murray, which causes Jack to believe that killing somebody is inevitable. When the protagonist mentions in his lecture that “[a]ll plots tend to move deathward,” he is not yet convinced of his own assumption: “Is this true? Why did I say it? What does it mean?” (26).

By the time, Murray puts forward the same idea in a different context, however, Jack is ready to embrace the idea.

> "I believe, Jack, there are two kinds of people in the world. Killers and diers. Most of us are diers. We don't have the disposition, the rage or whatever it takes to be a killer. We let death happen. We lie down and die. But think what it's like to be a killer. Think how exciting it is, in theory, to kill a person in direct confrontation. If he dies, you cannot.” (290)

When Jack objects, following his own theory, that “every plot is a murder in effect. To plot is to die, whether we know it or not," Murray counters by stating that “[t]o plot is to live" (291).

In a final deathly reaction, Siskind’s theory mingles with Jack’s new status as a gun owner: “It was a secret, it was a second life, a second self, a dream, a spell, a plot, a delirium” (254), suggesting that given the ‘right’ circumstances, anybody may become a killer.

Returning to the question which stood at the beginning of this thesis, namely, ‘Do all plots move deathward?’, with reference to the two novels discussed, the answers is clearly, ‘Yes.’ The ways in which this happens are rarely straight forward, and in the end the characters involved may not actually die. However, on a deeper level, both Jack and Keith are closer to death than to

life: Jack is only an imitation of a perceived ideal, an empty character who desperately tries to cover up the dreadful void at the center of his being. Keith, as was already stated, retreats completely from his former life, leaving another gap, adding to the thousands who died on September 11, 2001.

5 Bibliography

Primary Literature

Novels

DeLillo, Don. *Falling Man*. New York: Scribner, 2007.

DeLillo, Don. *White Noise.* New York: Penguin,1998 (1985).

Articles

DeLillo, Don. “In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September,” *Harper’s* (December 2001). 33-40. Also published in *The Guardian*. (December 22 2001). 2 September, 2008. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/dec/22/fiction.dondelillo>.

DeLillo, Don. “Ich kenne Amerika nicht mehr,” *Die* Zeit (October 11, 2007). September 1, 2008. <http://www.zeit.de/2007/42/Don-DeLillo-Interview>.

Secondary Literature

Books

Baker, Stephen. *The Fiction of Postmodernity*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000.

Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2007.

Baudrillard, Jean. *The Spirit of Terrorism.* London: Verso, 2003.

Bilton, Alan. *An introduction to contemporary American fiction.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd., 2002.

Boxall, Peter. *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction*. London: Routledge, 2006.

Bronfen, Elisabeth. *Over her dead body. Death, femininity and the aesthetic*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996.

Cohn, Dorrit. *Transparent Minds. Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.

Cowart, David. *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language, Athens: University of Georgia Press,* 2nd revised edition 2003.

DePietro, Thomas, ed. *Conversations with Don DeLillo.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005.

Dewey, Joseph. *Beyond Grief and Nothing: A Reading of Don DeLillo.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006.

Duvall, John N., ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Ebbesen, Jeffrey. *Postmodernism And Its Others. The Fiction of Ishmael Reed, Kathy Acker, and Don DeLillo.* New York: Routledge, 2006.

James, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.* Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.

Keesey, Douglas. *Don DeLillo.* New York; Twayne, 1993.

Lentricchia, Frank, ed. *Introducing Don DeLillo.* Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.
--*, ed. New Essays on "White Noise."* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991b.

Merrin, William. *Baudrillard and the Media. A Critical Introduction.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005.

Osteen, Mark. *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000.

Ruppersburg, Hugh, and Tim Engles, ed. *Critical Essays on Don DeLillo. New York: G.K. Hall, 2000.*

Stanzel, F.K.. *A Theory of Narrative.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1987.

Articles and Reviews

Abel; Marco. "Don DeLillo's 'In the Ruins of the Future': Literature, Images, and the Rhetoric of Seeing 9/11." *PMLA.* 118.5 (Oct. 2003). 1236-50.

Begley, Adam. „The Art of Fiction CXXXV: Don DeLillo." Originally published in *The Paris Review* 128 (Fall 1993), pp. 274-306. Reprinted in Conversations with Don DeLillo. Ed. Thomas DePietro. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005. 86-108.

Drew, Richard. "The Horror of 9/11 That's All Too Familiar." *Los Angeles Times* (September 10, 2003). B-13.

Echlin, Kim. “Baseball and the Cold War.” Originally published in The Ottawa Citizen. Dec. 28, 1997, E5. Reprinted in Conversations with Don DeLillo. Ed. Thomas DePietro. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005. 145-151.

Goldstein, William. ”PW Interviews: Don DeLillo.” Originally published in *Publishers Weekly* (August 19, 1988), pp. 55-56. Reprinted in Conversations with Don DeLillo. Ed. Thomas DePietro. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005. 47-51.

Hantke, Steffen. "'God save us from bourgeois adventure': The Figure of the Terrorist in Contemporary American Conspiracy Fiction." Studies in the Novel 38 (Summer 1996). 219-43.

Harris, Robert. “A Talk with Don DeLillo.” Originally published in *The New York Times Book Review* (October 10, 1982), p. 26. Reprinted in Conversations with Don DeLillo. Ed. Thomas DePietro. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005. 16-19.

Howard, Gerald. “The American Strangeness: An Interview with Don DeLillo.” Originally published in *The Hungry Mind Review* 47 (1997), pp. 13-16. Reprinted in Conversations with Don DeLillo. Ed. Thomas DePietro. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005. 16-19.

LeClair, Thomas. „An Interview with Don DeLillo.“ Originally published in *Contemporary Literature* 23, no. 1, pp. 19-31. Reprinted in Conversations with Don DeLillo. Ed. Thomas DePietro. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005. 3-15.

Moss, Maria. “’Writing as a Deeper Form of Concentration’: An Interview with Don DeLillo.“ Originally published in *Sources*, Spring 1999, pp.85-97. Reprinted in Conversations with Don DeLillo. Ed. Thomas DePietro. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005. 155-168.

Osteen, Mark. “DeLillo’s Dedalian artists.” In: John Duvall, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 137-150.

Passaro, Vince. „Dangerous Don DeLillo.“ Originally published in *The New York Times Magazine.* (May 19, 1991), pp. 34-36, 38, 76-77. Reprinted in Conversations with Don DeLillo. Ed. Thomas DePietro. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005. 75-85.

Remnick, David, “Exile on Main Street: Don DeLillo’s Undisclosed Underworld.“ Originally published in The New Yorker, Sept. 15, 1997, 42-48. Reprinted in *Conversations with Don DeLillo.* Ed. Thomas DePietro. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005. 131-144.

Thurschwell, Adam. "Writing and Terror: Don DeLillo on the Task of Literature After 9/11." *Law & Literature* 19.2 (Summer 2007). 277-302.

Electronic Sources:

Websites

Don DeLillo’s America. Ed. Curt Gardner. www.perival.com
The Don DeLillo Society. Ed. Philip Nel.
www.k-state.edu/english/nelp/delillo/

Interviews

Amend, Christoph and Georg Diez. “Ich kenne Amerika nicht mehr” *Die Zeit* 42 (October 11, 2007). 2 September, 2008.
http://www.zeit.de/2007/42/Don-DeLillo-Interview

Articles

Junod, Tom. “The Falling Man.” *Esquire* (August 2003). 2 September, 2008. http://www.esquire.com/features/ESQ0903-SEP_FALLINGMAN

Lodge, David. “Exiles in a small world.” *The Guardian* (Saturday May 8, 2004).2 September, 2008). http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/may/08/classics.vladimirnabokov

6 Index

9

9/11 iv, 1, 62, 63, 65, 66, 67, 68, 70, 71, 76, 77, 79, 80, 81, 82, 84, 87, 88, 90, 100, 101, 112, 114

A

Airborne Toxic Event 11, 13, 14, 18, 22, 34, 35, 37, 42, 44, 48, 49, 106
Airlines Flight 11 62, 84, 89, 91
Alzheimer 63, 70, 85, 92, 105, 107
Amazons 30
American Book Award 6
Americana 2, 6
Arthur Avenue 2

B

Becker, Ernest 10
Begley, Adam 4, 7, 9, 19, 101, 112
Bennett, Barbara 2
Bronx 2, 3

C

Camus, Albert 5
Cardinal Hayes High School 2
Catholicism 4, 9
Central Park 70
conspiracy 6, 9, 66
consumer culture See consumerism
consumerism iv, 2, 6, 52, 54, 55, 56, 58
Cosmopolis 6
Cowart, David 10, 12, 15, 30, 32, 36, 51, 52, 53, 58, 67, 101, 111
Crowds iv, 39

Index

D

DePietro, Thomas 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 19, 48, 63, 68, 69, 100, 101, 111, 112, 113, 114
Drew, Richard 59, 60, 96, 112
Duvall, John N. 6, 26, 33, 36, 41, 47, 49, 111, 114
Dylar 11, 14, 24, 29, 45, 56

E

Ebbesen, Jeffrey 13, 17, 19, 40, 41, 54, 56, 57, 111
Echlin, Kim 4, 63, 113
End Zone 6

F

Falling Man i, iv, 1, 6, 10, 59, 61, 62, 67, 75, 86, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 106, 107, 108, 110, 115
Faulkner, William 5
Florida 61, 74, 92, 93
Fordham University 2
Fortune Magazine 75

G

Gardner, Curt 6, 7, 114
Godard, Jean-Luc 5
Great Jones Street 6
Greene, Graham 4
'ground zero' 68, 70, 71, 75

H

Hamburg 61, 74, 92, 94, 102
Harper's 46, 62, 65, 66, 67, 107, 110
Harris, Robert 8, 113
Hemingway, Ernest 5
Hitler 11, 16, 17, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 32, 40, 41
Hitler Studies 11, 16
Howard, Gerald 69, 113

I

In the Ruins of the Future 46, 62, 65, 66, 67, 71, 94, 107, 110, 112
irony 11, 21, 25, 29, 47, 50, 57, 79

Index

J

Jerusalem Prize 6
Joyce, James 4

K

Keesey, Douglas 3, 6, 9, 111

L

Language 105
LeClair, Thomas 5, 7, 68, 113
Lentricchia, Frank 8, 9, 112
Libra 1, 6, 8
Lodge, David 15

M

Manhattan 68, 71
Mao II 3, 6
McCarthy, Mary 15
media iv, 46, 112
Mein Kampf See Hitler
Melville, Hermann 5
Moss, Maria 5, 7, 8, 100, 113
Museum of Modern Art 2

N

Nabokov, Vladimir 5, 15
narrative technique 1, 63
National Book Award 6
New York 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 17, 30, 31, 60, 68, 71, 72, 74, 75, 85, 96, 98, 110, 111, 112, 113
NYC See New York
Nyodene D. 21, 24, 37, 44, 45

O

Olster, Stacey 26, 33, 36, 41, 46, 47, 49
Osteen, Mark 12, 22, 43, 44, 48, 49, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 57, 112, 114

Index

P

Panasonic 10, 35
Players 6
plot i, 74, 94, 108, 109
Pound, Ezra 5
Presley, Elvis 19, 30, 31, 40
Pynchon, Thomas 5

R

Ratner's Star 6
Remnick, David 2, 3, 4, 114

S

Salamon, Jeff 10
September 11th See 9/11
shopping See consumerism
spirituality iv, 38, 51, 54, 58, 107
Stanzel, Franz 12, 64, 112
Stein, Gertrude 5
Streitfeld, David 7

T

technology iv, 9, 10, 35, 38, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 67, 107
television 3, 6, 7, 14, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50
terrorism 1, 6, 9, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 69, 70, 73, 74, 75, 79, 82, 88, 90, 91, 92, 94, 96, 101, 106
The Body Artist 6
The Names 6
Tibetan Book of the Dead 31
Towers, Robert 8
TV See television

U

Underworld 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 114

V

Village Vanguard 2

W

White Noise i, iv, 1, 6, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 30, 32, 36, 39, 41, 45, 46, 50, 51, 54, 55, 58, 66, 106, 107, 108, 110, 112

William Gaddis 5

Wolfe, Thomas 5

World Trade Center 59, 60, 67, 75, 77, 82, 91, 106, 107

Appendix

A B S T R A C T

Die vorliegende Arbeit untersucht zwei Romane (*White Noise*, veröffentlicht 1985 und *Falling Man*, veröffentlicht 2007) des Autors Don DeLillo hinsichtlich der Verwendung des Todesmotivs. Die in *White Noise* getätigte Aussage, „All plots tend to move deathward." („Alle Verschwörungen tendieren dazu, zum Tode zu führen."[68]) soll auf Ihre Anwendbarkeit über die zitierte Stelle hinaus geprüft werden. Die Fragen, welche diese Analyse leiten, lauten: Inwiefern bewegen sich die in den Romanen porträtierten Charaktere auf ihren Tod zu? Wenn es stimmt, dass jegliche Verschwörung, bzw. – etwas weiter gefasst – jeder Handlungskern zum Tode hin tendiert, ist dies lediglich auf einer oberflächlichen Handlungsebene beobachtbar, oder aber erfährt diese Bewegung eine Widerspiegelung in den Bereichen des strukturellen Aufbaus, der verwendeten Sprache, sowie der Entwicklung der Charaktere und der Erzähltechnik? Hinsichtlich des Romans *Falling Man* stellt sich die Frage, inwieweit 9/11 das Werk eines Künstlers beeinflusst, der für seine innige Verbindung mit seiner Heimatstadt, New York, bekannt ist.

Nach einem kurzen Überblick über das Leben und Schaffen des Autors am Beginn der Arbeit, folgt eine Analyse der Protagonisten der Romane. Hier soll vor allem der Frage nachgegangen werden, inwiefern sich der allgegenwärtige Schatten des Todes auf die Charakterentwicklung und die Handlung auswirkt. Des weiteren beleuchtet die Abhandlung die Darstellung des Phänomens des „modernen Todes" in den verschiedenen thematischen Sphären der beiden Werken und arbeitet die diesbezüglichen Gemeinsamkeiten und Unterschiede in den Romanen heraus.

[68] Aus der Übersetzung von Helga Pfetsch. München: Goldmann Verlag, 2006.

Appendix

C U R R I C U L U M V I T A E

M I C H A E L A K O G L B A U E R

- PERSÖNLICHE INFORMATION
- Staatsangehörigkeit: Österreich
- Geburtsdatum: 2. Mai 1979
- Geburtsort: 2620 Neunkirchen
- AUSBILDUNG
- Studium
    - Okt. 1999 – Nov. 2008
      Anglistik u. Amerikanistik (Hauptfach)
      Publizistik- und Kommunikationswissenschaft (Nebenfach)
    - (Auslandssemester in Ottawa, Kanada Jänner 2004 – Mai 2004)
    - Juli 1999 - Okt. 1998
      Orientierungskurse in den Fächern Ernährungswissenschaften, Russisch
- Schulausbildung
    - 1992 – 1997
      Gymnasium Sachsenbrunn, Kirchberg/We.
      (mit Auszeichnung abgeschlossen im Juni 1997)
    - 1989 – 1992
      Sportgymnasium Zehnergasse, Wr. Neustadt
    - 1985 – 1989
      Volksschule Aspang/We.
- BERUFSERFAHRUNG
- zur Zeit: Beschäftigung bei der ORF Enterprise
- 2005: Beschäftigung bei IMAGNO *Brandstätter Images*
- Herbst 2004: Erstellung des Manuskriptes für die Publikation *Canadian Interculturality and the Transatlantic Heritage/Interculturalité canadienne et héritage transatlantique*, WUV Verlag
- Juli, August 2003: Forschungsarbeit am Institut für Amerikanistik/Zentrum für Kanadastudien im Rahmen eines laufenden Forschungsprojektes des FWF, sowie eines vereinbarten Beitrags zu einer Literaturgeschichte Kanadas (Bereiche: Bibliographie, Beschaffung und Analyse von ausgewählten literarischen Texten)
- Oktober 2000 – Jänner 2001: Tutorin am Institut für Publizistik (begleitend zur Vorlesung „Geschichte der Publizistik- und Kommunikationswissenschafen“ von Univ.-Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Duchkowitsch)
- AUSZEICHNUNGEN
- April 2003: Auszeichnung für die im Rahmen der Lehrveranstaltung „William Faulkner: The Art of the Modernist Regionalist“ (Leitung: Univ. Prof. Dr. Waldemar Zacharasiewicz) erbrachte außergewöhnliche akademische Leistung