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Landscapes of Duality: Perception and Identity

in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*.

Introduction (Slides Two & Three)

The opening paragraphs of Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, are set simultaneously in a "time and space of falling ash and near night," and "in the morning pall" (3), creating a framework for the text in which duality of all things is built. There are two realities, "live-action or replay" (211). Characters' identities are often split or divided between the perceptions of others and the perceptions of self. The definitive events of September 11 in New York City act as a catalyst for individual awareness of such divisions; the moment that ash fell concealing the city is also the moment the characters in the story begin to recognise their duality. DeLillo floods the text with depictions of things or people "half-seen... [or] half believed" (103), thus incomplete with "faces misplaced in the desert" (117), and he uses even the contradictions of simple objects like "kitchen objects... removed from the kitchen" (49). The ash simultaneously conceals and reveals, which aligns with the contrast between one's self-identity and how others perceive that individual. Liane, in particular is highly aware of this post-plane phenomenon after her "ex-husband who was never technically ex" (35) returned to live with her. Landscapes—of the city—and of identity are equally disturbed by the dualism and division highlighted by the events and the resulting atmosphere in the city after that autumn day.

## Part One (Slides Four & Five)

According to Billes et al, an atmosphere “is a concept and experience of the in-betweenness of subject and object in which the emotional and sensory experience are central” (32), thus experiencing such a severe event as 9/11, the natural atmosphere of daily existence will undoubtedly be disrupted. The atmosphere of the ordinary somehow remains in some ways (DeLillo 67), but for Liane, the effects of the event create “small panics...[and] frantic ramblings” (67); the tension created by environmental contrast and contradiction between the known and unknown allows Liane to reflect upon—and perhaps notice for the first time—both her inner and perceived identities. An atmosphere is a phenomenon or a condition that transgresses boundaries, such as subject and object. However, by transgressing boundaries it also connects people, places and things. Accordingly, atmospheres are bound up in temporal dynamics, which again make them difficult to pin down, because they are socially and historically contingent, and bound up in the incessant metamorphosis of the sensory world, not to underestimate their inherent temporal nature. (Billes 32)

Baptist notes that even memorials of the event carry a certain duality or transposed atmosphere. She indicates that the museum at ground zero “acts as an inverse memory crypt” and quotes Greenwald who notes that it is a “museum quite literally housed within an artifact” (5). Instead of the artifact inside the museum, the artifact itself becomes the institutional proprietor of its own memory.

The theme of mistaken identities carries across many characters. Liane and Keith’s son, Justin and his friends are looking for a man named Bill Lawton (37) because

they have mistaken the name of Bin Laden. Keith's friend Rumsey—who died in the attacks—is labeled a “defined state” (150), and he would have been a different, more successful person entirely if “he'd been born a Ramsey” (150). The sense and power—or mood—of one letter upon society can impact a person's entire being. Bille suggests that humans “are always characterised by having some sort of mood, but that this mood is influenced by the way things stand out from themselves” (32) as an atmosphere, and that atmospheres “belong to the reality of the world” (32). Perhaps Rumsey is truly himself, with “his slouchings, his very size and shape, the slowness and thickness that pour off him” (DeLillo 150), but with a different identifier, he would be something else entirely. Such an observation suggests that the duality existed before the 9/11 events, thus not creating them, but simply shining a specific light upon them.

In his poem, *September 11*, Campbell McGrath writes:

the faces of the terrorists as the airplane strikes the tower  
the faces of the firemen ascending the stairwell,  
the faces of Stephen Biko's torturers at the amnesty hearing  
(154-6).

Indicating no difference between the faces of terrorists, firemen, and the police torturers of Steve Biko suggests duality for all: “God's name [is] on the tongues of killers and victims both” (DeLillo 134). If police, who are a symbol of protecting society can effect the opposite—as in Biko's death on September 12, 1977—what of the distinctions between the dualities of the terrorists and the firefighters as well? The line between perpetrator and victim is essentially non-existent in reality, but chosen to be seen when it works in one's favour. There is very little mention or presence of any authority in

DeLillo's text; the characters appear to be very much on their own, which contrasts heavily with news reports of the time when all information was coming from some sort of police or government authority. The internal landscape is devoid of authority, yet the external landscape is wholly created by it.

Christopher Tilley argues that landscapes are

places of terror, exile, slavery and of the contemplative sublime. They get actively re-worked, interpreted and understood in relation to differing social and political agendas, forms of social memory, and biographically become sensuously embodied in a multitude of ways (8).

The context for which a landscape—physical, geographical, or of identity—changes is based on context, situation, and perception.

## Part Two (Slides Six & Seven)

As the two main characters, Liane and Keith experience duality in the most extreme ways. However, the prominence of Liane's reflection upon how the phenomenon affects both of them, permeates the text. While DeLillo depicts Keith as aware of an existential shift, it is Liane who witnesses his fragmentation. DeLillo writes that Keith is "a figure floating in reflected light, Keith in pieces, in small strokes" (127), suggesting he is a divided or segmented form of his previous self. Before the attack, "he was something else somewhere else" (70), but after, he began to grow into his role as a husband and father. The "symmetry" (29) of their separation—that Keith split off to join a poker group, and Liane to her writing workshop—suggests a certain equal division of the marriage identity. Interestingly, Keith joins a group that is dependent upon bluffing,

duplicity, and the uncertainty of gambling, and Liane joins one in which the primary tellers of stories and histories are those who have lost their memories. However, as Nina suggests about concepts of self: “What you see is not what we see. What you see is distracted by memory, by being who you are, all this time, for all these years” (115), which perhaps allows the stories told by Alzheimer’s patients to be more real, if such a thing exists.

Agnes Heller questions whether events such as 9/11 can truly be understood. She states: “Even if one could enumerate the sufficient causes of a historical event, which is impossible, the event would still remain contingent and entirely un-understood” (55). By accepting that fundamentalism is a modern phenomenon, and a

reaction to the process of enlightenment, to the destruction/deconstruction of traditional social arrangements, to the idea of progress, to belief in rationalism, to the loss of natural communities, identities, security, and certainty—a reaction to contingency and to the burdens of an abstract freedom the individual can use for better or worse (57)

she accepts the duality of meaning for any such event as abstract and subjective.

### Part Three

DeLillo’s development of Mohamed Atta and Hammad are nonetheless subject to dualism as the other characters. They are followed briefly through the text, but are depicted as participating in the mundane, such as grocery shopping (171) or playing crude word games with roommates (81). Yet, Atta admits, “everything happened in crowded segments of place and time” (81), indicating perhaps a loss of flow, or “the

feeling of a lost history” (80); for Atta and Hammad, this segmentation occurs before the events of September 11, whereas, for Keith, it occurs after. That both men grow beards during their time—Atta whilst planning the attacks (79), and Keith whilst recovering (67)—perhaps creates a human, yet divisive parallel between them.

Further, Atta and Hammad’s entire existences are planned for death; they live to die. They are both alive and dead at the same time. Hammad translates from English to Arabic (173), converts kilos to pounds (171), metres to feet (172), and considers the ease at which he might shift from his own car—representing his path to the highest jihad (173)—to a car filled with American college students (172). His dualism is complete. He is invisible in a culture of illusion (173), however perhaps unbeknownst to him, his very acts precipitate a general loss of invisibility for Muslims in America and create instead a hyper-awareness that causes upset to even hear music associated with the culture (38). In “Landscape, Identity, and War,” Svend Erik Larsen suggests that different forms of media play on the landscapes and

in a certain restricted sense they also create reality—not the material landscapes and places, but the focus that makes these real. As we know, wars without a face are precisely wars that have no media visibility, irrespective of the actual bloodshed, suppression, and suffering (470).

For DeLillo’s characters, the events of 9/11 become that visible moment that the war against the Western way of life existed. Such a war already existed for Atta and Hammad, but not so much for the New Yorkers in the text; the war at once existed and failed to exist.

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