Language as Technology in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*

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Over the course of Don DeLillo's long and ongoing career as a leading voice of American letters, a unique thematic fingerprint has emerged in his writing. His characters inhabit the idiosyncratic yet uncannily recognizable space at the intersection of the author's many spheres of interest, which include technology, death, terrorism, language and history. It could be argued that his novels dramatize the cultural and psychological shifts produced at the points of inflection within each of these spheres, or at the moment of transition between them. Thus, DeLillo's fictional worlds are places where word regularly becomes flesh and flesh becomes word, and where the known recedes into mystery at the threshold of death. Lone men in small rooms think history into the world, while the geopolitical colonizes the most intimate domestic spheres.

  Among these thematic concerns, two in particular seem to undergird all of the others. On the one hand DeLillo obsessively explores language's special status as a symbolic system, language which has been since his earliest writing a "subject as well as instrument"[1]. On the other hand his fictional worlds – and characters – are steeped in the technological environment of the post-World War II period. Both spheres – the technological and the symbolic – are present and indeed overlapping in most if not all of DeLillo's novelistic works, and both are presented as avatars of a generalized crisis of representation.

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1. Thomas LeClair, "An Interview with Don DeLillo", in *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, Thomas DePietro (ed.), Jackson, University of Mississippi, 2005, p. 5.

Of course, technology in DeLillo's works is always explored in its symbolic dimension, whether it is in the form of the unknowable "Airborne Toxic Event" of *White Noise*, the camera as weapon of mass consciousness in *Mao II*, or the hermetically sealed white limousine from *Cosmopolis,* which functions as a time capsule from the post-referential future. On the most superficial level, DeLillo seems to be involved in a project of fleshing out the second-order significance of the building blocks of everyday "American Environments"[2], thereby rescuing them from the sort of conceptual invisibility that awaits all technological developments. Such a project is reminiscent of the semiotic study of popular culture found in Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (1957) or of Marshall MacLuhan's philosophical reading of modern technology in *Understanding Media* (1964)

DeLillo's approach to language is however more ambiguous and perhaps even contradictory, insofar as the languages of his novelistic worlds tends simultaneously towards two varieties of abstraction and loss of reference, one which associated with death and violence (as for example the nuclear jargon of *End Zone*), and another which is redemptive and filled with numinous potential (as in Tap's creative misspellings in *The Names*).

The natural temptation is to put the two themes into a relation of causality, with environmental considerations producing effects on the symbolic realm. I would argue on the contrary that in the works of DeLillo the relation between the two is much more direct and symbiotic.

In *Art and Technics*, Lewis Mumford argues that despite the intuitive dichotomy between the technical and the expressive, the technological and the linguistic are not two related concerns, but in fact limit cases of one and the same phenomenon; both are in effect capacities of creative externalizations of subjective states. According to Mumford, though there is a permanent and natural ebb and flow in the dominant function, cultures can nevertheless become "neurotically" unbalanced when one of the two complementary functions dominates too fully for too long. However, since the two functions are limit points on a continuum,

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2. Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, New York, Viking Penguin, 1985, p. 9.

neither can be fully evicted from any given techno-symbolic phenomenon. In Mumford's view, rebalancing is therefore always possible – and even inevitable – though the rebalancing is often disruptive of the power distribution inside and between societies[3]. Don DeLillo's 2007 novel *Falling Man* in particular dramatizes the inflection point where this shift and rebalancing along the techno-symbolic axis plays out, where the cultural dominant on this axis inverses from the utilitarian to the symbolic and vice versa.

Technology as Language: Symbolic Drift and Symbolic Shift

Examples of the chronic drift of the technical towards the symbolic are legion in DeLillo's works, and have been well-explored. Thus for example, the nuclear threat in *End Zone* (1972) which exists primarily as a hypothesis, creates nevertheless a much more chronic crisis of abstraction that permeates the campus and team life of Logos College. *Americana*'s (1971) David Bell is adrift in a sea of empty ritualized abstractions in his New York television offices, but no specific inciting event triggers his pilgrimage west to shoot an experimental auto-biographical film.

White Noise presents of course the most thoroughly-studied case of the symbolic drift of technology. The world of Blacksmith and the College on the Hill has clearly entered a state of cultural neurosis. All of the novel's characters, consciously or not, are struggling with their own private hermeneutic crises, brought about by the "waves and radiation"[4], and the surfeit of "codes and messages"[5] bathing the town of Blacksmith. The novel in its entirety could be thought of as an extended meditation on the psychic effects of the chronic symbolic drift of technology I have been describing. All of the novel's forms of technology from the most functional (architecture, as in the "Most Photographed Barn

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3. See Lewis Mumford, *Art and Technics*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1952, and *The Myth of the Machine: Technics and Human Development*, London, Secker and Warburg, 1967.
4. Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 51.
5. Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 50.

in America") to the most symbol-rich (television) exists solely on the plane of their semiotic characteristics. In true DeLillo fashion, the drift at work in the external world is also active in the linguistic domain, which finds itself placed into a second-order semiotic system of the type described by Barthes in *Mythologies*, where the mythical status of a phenomena arises when the sign in its entirety is transferred to the role of simple signifier in a larger, more abstract symbolic order. Hence even the simplest utterances elicit Jack Gladney's mantra "What did it mean?" which is present in some form dozens of times in the novel. The increasing levels of remove from the referential seems to be the root cause of the Gladney couple's debilitating death anxiety, for the physical world's move ever further into the symbolic realm is itself a form a rehearsal for death, defined by Murray Siskind as "an end of the attachment to things"[6].

In many of DeLillo's later novels, the generalized breakdown of utility is punctuated by acute crises where the protagonist's general malaise is given concrete, and always technological, form. In the case of *White Noise*, the creeping abstraction threatening Blacksmith takes dramatic physical form when a toxic chemical spill forces the Gladney family to flee their homes[7].

These acute crises often involve violence and literal or metaphorical mutilation of the body. Another acute shift of the dominant takes place in *Libra* (1988). Perhaps nowhere else in DeLillo's body of work has the shift been so explicit, and explicitly commented upon by the author himself. The precise moment of the shift in the instant of JFK's death, the "six point nine seconds

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6. Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 38.
7. Much has been written about Jack Gladney's possible contamination by the chemical Nyodene D, but for our purposes I would like to point out that like the bomb in *Underworld*, the physical, functional effects on Jack's health remain absent from the narrative. Jack carefully avoids finding out the true effects on his organism, and DeLillo carefully avoids telling the reader. What remains in the narrative is the chemical's symbolic residue, disincarnated flashing asterisks on a computer screen. The entirety of a major personal and environmental disaster has been reduced to the role of signifier in a symbolic system of which the referent is an abstraction: death.

of heat and light"[8] that "broke the back of the American century"[9], the moment where the functional spheres of the sniper's bullet and that of the Zapruder film intersect. The bullet's utilitarian effect is of course the death of a human being, but tellingly, DeLillo once again deliberately excludes from the narrative an up-close, first hand subjective representation of the victim's experience, say from the point of view of Jackie or Kennedy himself. Oswald's experience of the shooting is intensely symbolic. The president's grievous head wound is immediately grasped not for its primary functional significance but its secondary symbolic import: it is the moment of Oswald's recognition that the historical forces he wishes to merge with are in fact far beyond his control and mastery. From Oswald's point of view, the president's mangled head is no longer a head but like the Zapruder film itself, "a major emblem of uncertainty and chaos"[10].

In *Underworld*, the atomic bomb serves as a telling example of the symbolic drift of technology I have been describing. The novel's action takes place in the shadow if Mutually Assured Destruction, in the unique cold terror of total apocalypse that is rapidly fading from collective memory. The bomb's actual, functional and external destruction is however excluded from the narrative by the novel's temporal bracketing and focalizations. Only a few tangible traces of the weapon's functional power remain, including, significantly, an exhibit of deformed fetuses in the "Museum of Misshapens" in Kazakstan[11]. The victims are symbolically present, framed in "display cases"[12], and subject to the processes of selection and condensation which are the hallmarks of artistic production. Even this most concrete and "knowable" of realities – the mutilation of the human body – is here subject to symbolic slippage.

Similarly, on the two occasions which the bomb's explosion is itself directly narrated, the primary effect on the characters is perceptual rather than physical. In the first example, Louis

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8.   Don DeLillo, *Libra*, New York, Viking Penguin, 1988, p. 15.
9.   Don DeLillo, *Libra*, p. 181.
10. Don DeLillo, *Libra*, p. 441.
11. Don DeLillo, *Underworld,* New York, Scribner, 1997 p. 799.
12. Don DeLillo, *Underworld*, p. 799.

Bakey describes his experience as a B-52 crewman overflying a test detonation of a 50-kiloton nuclear bomb. The flash is visible to him "like the touch of God"[13] through the fuselage of the plane, through the protective pillow covering his face, and even through his own eyelids, outlining the bones of his own hands and a test x-ray plate deep in the digestive tract of a crew mate. Unlike a medical X-Ray, the vision of "whole skeletons dancing in the flash"[14] is detached from any diagnostic process just as the test explosion is conceived to avoid the destruction and loss of life the bomb was designed to create. The event is primarily symbolic in its import, reframing the bomb's significance in terms of the psychological effects produced by its all-seeing eye. As Louis remarks upon seeing the "talking" mushroom cloud, "my eyes went big and stayed that way and ain't never really closed"[15].

The nuclear detonation of waste in Kazakstan at the end of the novel is also witnessed as spectacle, or more precisely as performance art. Nick Shay is invited to witness an underground explosion designed to vaporize waste, an event which has all the atmosphere trappings of a private gallery show, complete with caviar. The explosion itself is muffled and anticlimactic, felt as nothing more than "a rumble underfoot […] a far-off shift"[16]. More than a destructive blast, the detonation is an ironic comment on the Cold War going out with a whimper, as the technological *id* goes reluctantly – and temporarily – back underground.

In *Falling Man*, the chronic form of this classic neurotic drift into the symbolic is most visibly at work in the mind of character Hammad, a fictionalized version of one of the most reluctant 9-11 hijackers. In wearing down Hammad's qualms about the plot, cell leader Amir's main line of argument is to minimize the scale of the first-order tangible effects of the planned attacks. In the chapter "On Marienstrasse", the first of three in which Hammad is the focalizer, a veteran of the Iran-Iraq war describes to the members of the Hamburg cell the suicidal charge of boy soldiers into Iraqi lines. Though the deaths themselves disgust the man

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13. Don DeLillo, *Underworld*, p. 613.
14. Don DeLillo, *Underworld*, p. 613.
15. Don DeLillo, *Underworld*, p. 614.
16. Don DeLillo, *Underworld*, p. 798.

into dropping his weapon, he concedes that the final effect of the suicidal charge is not in the tactical advantage obtained or lost, but in the psychological and symbolic potency of the gesture, with the children "defeating [the Iraqi soldiers] in the manner of their dying"[17]. Like the Iraqi veteran, Hammad is haunted by the tale but the other members of the cell "stare him down" when he tries to bring up the unambiguous reality of the boys' deaths again later in the chapter. They tell him that it "was not worth the time to be sorry for a single one"[18].

In the second Hammad-focalized chapter, a similar argument is deployed to deflect Hammad's lingering concern for the civilian victims of their developing plot. "Amir said simply there are no 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"[19]. Despite the use of the words "function" and "use" here, the utility being described is narratological in nature. The physical integrity of both plotters and the victims has been conceptually subordinated to their symbolic role in the larger narrative of the "Revolt of Islam"[20].

Long before the morning of September 11 2001, Hammad's time in Nokomis, Florida is presented and experienced as a progressive dematerialization which is another form of the shift away from the practical: "He was *invisible* […] they were becoming *invisible* to him"[21]. His interactions with a checkout girl at the supermarket take on an ethereal, disincarnated tone. She smiles, but "did not see him. The idea is to go *unseen*"[22]. The physical world in which the plotters move has become "total, forever, illusion"[23] and

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17. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, New York, Scribner, 2007, p. 78.
18. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 80.
19. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 176.
20. We may recall that Lianne receives a postcard, sent before the attacks but delivered after, bearing the title of the 1817 poem by Percy Bysshe Shelley which is a romantic narrative of revolution against a tyrant. The poem's title serves as a shorthand in the novel for the (delusional) heroic narrative promoted by Amir.
21. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 171 (my italics).
22. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 172 (my italics).
23. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 173.

Hammad slowly dissociates from his own image in the mirror ("He was not here, it was not him"[24]) begins to see himself from the third-person point of view of airport security cameras. Even his own bodily functions and processes are denied; he neglects to change or wash his clothes despite the "forceful comments" of his co-conspirators[25]. He remarks "what these people hold so precious we see as empty space"[26]. Like Jack Gladney in *White Noise*, the group is approaching the final but voluntary "end of attachment to things" that is death.

In addition to again chronicling the symptomatic symbolic drift of the millennial period, *Falling Man* of course narrates a moment of acute crisis, another moment like the assassination of JFK that in DeLillo's words "broke the back" of a century. The geopolitical, cultural import of the attacks themselves was of course immediately grasped by all. DeLillo's treatment of the event is unique in that the symbolic dimension of the attacks is foregrounded even within the subjective experiences of the victims and perpetrators themselves. Like the bomb in *Underworld*, the quantifiable tactical effects of the 9-11 attacks are massive, producing thousands of deaths and the destruction of economic infrastructure and command structures, to say nothing of the geopolitical shifts that occurred and continue to play out. But unlike *Underworld*, *Falling Man*'s focalization puts the reader inside the subjectivities of those closest to the event. Despite the very real and "knowable" effects of the attacks (in particular the mutilation of the human body) from both Keith Neudecker's point of view and that of Hammad, the moment of the attacks are paradoxically a locus of the subordination of the physical to the symbolic.

As Hammad's hijacked plane approaches the north tower of the World Trade Center, all trace of the physical world dissipates. He feels "no sensation of flight", "no motion", and hears no sound but a naturalized white noise that has "become the air itself"[27]. Strikingly, the plane also appears to have become invisible: "there

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24. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 175.
25. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 175.
26. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 177.
27. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 238.

was a scene of clear imagining out the back of [Hammad's] head
[…] he believed he could see straight into the towers even though
his back was to them […] he believed he could see straight out
the back of his head and through the steel and aluminum of the
aircraft"[28]. In the seconds before impact, the only exceptions are
a "thin, wincing pain"[29] in his shoulder from a wound incurred
during the struggle for control of the plane, and a buzzing,
vibrating sensation which the careful reader may identify as
his cell phone, (mentioned a few pages earlier as being "set to
vibrate"[30]), but which Hammad understands to be the vibrations
of his own body[31].

 At the moment of impact, Keith Neudecker experiences a mirror-
image process of acute symbolic shift as the building becomes
plastic under the stresses of the blast. The very environment of the
office literally loses its stability and functional integrity. The floor
begins to "slide beneath [Keith]" causing him to walk "into a wall".
The ceiling begins to "ripple, lift and ripple". The movement of
the tower becomes all-encompassing and essential, "a shift in the
basic arrangement of parts and elements" that is "all around him",
"forever and impossible"[32]. As a testament to the magnitude of
the qualitative shift taking place, there is a significant lag between
the physical shift, when the floor no longer serves its purpose as a
floor, and Keith's first interpretive effort a full four pages later. He
wonders "what was happening here" only after his friend Rumsey
dies in his arms[33].

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28. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 238.
29. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 237.
30. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 237.
31. This loss of bodily sensation recalls Marshall MacLuhan's argument, following
Plato's *Phaedrus*, about the numbing effects of technology. Technology, as an
"extension" in scale or speed of a human capacity, operates through delegation.
The delegated capacity is of course enhanced and intensified in terms of
efficacy, but the corresponding organic capacity is numbed in proportion.
Therefore the automobile, as an extension of human legs, represents also
a delegation of the legs' function as mechanism for locomotion. Since this
non-technological capacity is no longer being exploited directly, it naturally
atrophies. See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, Chapter 4.
32. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 240.
33. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 243.

During the evacuation, Keith and the other workers in the World Trade Center suffer from an epidemic of absurd and inappropriate reactions and gestures which are indicative of an outmoded attachment to the practical, in a world which has suddenly left that realm. Keith grabs his jacket before fleeing his office, "forgetting to feel stupid about it"[34]. Rumsey, gravely wounded and semi-conscious, still holds the ring of a shattered coffee mug on his finger, which Keith gingerly removes as the building collapses around them. He even returns Rumsey's dead body to his office chair[35], staging the body for rescuers who will never come. He dumbly accepts and carries Florence Givens' briefcase, full of items rendered useless and frivolous by the attacks. In all of these cases, the impact of the airplane – doubly "hijacked" both physically and functionally – causes the mug, the chair, and the trappings of office life to be interpreted by the other evacuees and the reader as newly forged emblems of "uncertainty and chaos" like the Zapruder film in *Libra*.

Here we come to the crux of what I would argue is the root cause for DeLillo's longstanding preoccupation with terrorism. Terrorism itself could be defined as a violent action whose psychological and symbolic effect overshadows its tactical and practical effects. As such it is by design intended to produce in the witnesses and larger culture an acute shift of the technological dominant from the utilitarian to the symbolic. Terrorism in DeLillo's work is the privileged site where the technological and the symbolic are revealed to be one and the same.

In the case of the mug, the chair, the jacket, for example, the sudden shift of dominant has weakened what Jakobson calls the referential function, that is to say the link between these objects and their linguistic or conceptual context[36]. This weakening allows other latent functions to surface. In this case, deprived of their contextual roles, the functionally "broken" objects become not only useless but also more visible. Their existence stands out more clearly in the narrative as they emerge from invisibility of

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34. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 240.
35. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 245.
36. See Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics", in *Style In Language*, Thomas A. Sebeok (ed.), Cambridge Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1960, p. 350-377.

utility. Keith and Florence Given's first-hand narratives of the evacuation are both highly repetitive, restating and reformulating the same details over and over. Keith describes being thrown into the wall of his office no less than three times in rapid succession:

> 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*. He didn't drop the telephone until he *hit the wall*[37].

Similarly, the rippling of the ceiling is described two or perhaps three times, the sway of the tower twice in quick succession, the collapse of another ceiling twice. Keith's gesture of grabbing his jacket is narrated twice in sequence.

These repetitions have the effect of pulling these objects (become symbols) out of their obscurity and anonymity in Keith's eyes and those of the reader. In Jakobson's vocabulary, this could be seen as a foregrounding of the poetic function, that is to say where tangible dimensions of the sign itself overwhelms its informational or emotive charge. By describing these objects in a repetitious, iterative manner, the narrative is in effect rendering the symbolic potential actual.

The Aphasic World

Though the technologies of the DeLillo universe (synthetic chemicals, handguns, the bomb, airplanes) have undergone a drift or shift into the symbolic extreme of the practical-symbolic axis, these newly-minted symbols are not nevertheless fully-formed and coherent members of a larger rule-based system.

In the case of *Falling Man*, the overall sensation of disorientation felt by the different characters is not due to surfeit, the usual suspect in post-modern anxiety. As Mumford has argued forcefully in *The Myth of the Machine* and elsewhere, mankind, as the symbol-making species, has no difficulty navigating the symbolic realm. The characters' anxiety is rather due to the failure of these rampant symbols to enter into codified, shared

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37. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 239 (our italics).

and therefore intelligible relationships, in other words, a narrative. It is this decontextualization that provokes the familiar DeLillo refrain "what does it mean?" which is also repeated on multiple occasions in *Falling Man*[38].

The first-order meaning of a Keith's new beard, for example, being a dominance display of testosterone, is intelligible, on a nearly biological level. What is unsettling to Lianne is the fact that this sign no longer fits into a larger coherent – and shared – narrative. The attacks, as intended, have overlaid a competing code onto events, the narrative of millennial extremism. And this code is just one of many. As can be seen in the ongoing discussion about the "reason" for the attacks between Martin Ridnour, Lianne and Nina, neither Martin's neo-Marxist/Baudrillardian reading, nor Nina's "terrorist as nihilist" reading seems very convincing, especially to Lianne, the focalizing character. In any case, DeLillo does not settle the issue by allowing either of them to have the last word. The discussion sputters out. If we include the terrorist narrative of "The Revolt of Islam" in the discussion, then three distinct and incompatible interpretive grids are held up by DeLillo and discarded, none of which allows meaning to emerge for the characters from the jumble of symbols that result from the acute crisis of the 9-11 attacks. In this sense, the post 9-11 world has become aphasic, suffering from what Jakobson would call a "disorder of continuity"[39]. The environment is in

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38. Lianne remarks that Keith "stopped shaving for a time, *whatever that means*" (67). Florence Givens, a fellow WTC survivor, says that Keith "hold[s] a space [like an actor]. I'm not sure *what that means* […] *what does it mean?*" (88). Keith sees a horseback rider on the city streets and wonders "*what has happened to the meaning of things*, to tree street, stone, wind" (103). Lianne remembers that her downstairs neighbor has a dog named "Marko […] with a *k, whatever that might signify*" (119) (our italics in all examples).

39. In "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances" (1956) Jakobson has formulated a useful basic theoretical taxonomy of aphasias. The first type are caused by a degradation of the speaker's ability to select words from the lexicon. Though speech appears fluid, it is filled with generics, oblique approximations, or simply repetitions of words pronounced by other speakers in the exchange. The second type, called disorders of combination, produces agrammatical gibberish due to a breakdown in the speaker's ability to combine elements from the lexical into meaningful regular relationships.

effect babbling, able to spew forth signs but in a disordered, a-grammatical manner.

Language as Technology

If a chronic or acute shift of technology along the symbolic-technical axis has occurred in the DeLillo universe, the same could be said of the other primary node in DeLillo's thematic cluster: language itself. As an externalization of subjective states through the manipulation of the environment (which for Mumford includes the body), language and other symbolic systems fall along the same axis as other forms of technology. In literature, the utilitarian dimension of all linguistic utterances tends to be bracketed off, and rightly so, because the dominant in literary language is so clearly symbolic. DeLillo's thematization of language is however anything but conventional.

In the context of DeLillo's fictional universe, the neurotic drift of the utilitarian into the symbolic realm whether the result of acute or chronic causes, is paralleled by a countervailing and largely intentional displacement of language and symbolic systems into the utilitarian realm.

One of the most enigmatic recurring motifs throughout DeLillo's work is his use of aphasic or deformed language. These phenomena take on a range of forms, including babbling or glossolalia (*The Names*, *Great Jones Street*), incantation (*White Noise*) onomastic language (*Underworld*, *The Names*, *Players*) or other language which is syntactically or lexically impoverished.

In one of the most prominent examples in *Falling Man*, Keith and Lianne's son Justin engages with his playmates in a protracted exercise in speaking in monosyllables. The game is at first assumed to be part of a school project, but is revealed in stages to have deeper roots, being part of a sort of alternate history of the 9-11 attacks spontaneously concocted by the children in secret. In the children's imaginary universe Ossama bin Laden (anglicized as "Bill Lawton") is stalking the globe in long robes and bare feet, speaking in monosyllables, and the Twin Towers are still standing

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Both lead to a breakdown in communication because both functions are inherently active in any utterance.

but under imminent threat from more planes. This sort of coping strategy does not however appear to be compulsive. The children, in particular precocious Justin, appear cognizant of the fact that their version of events does not jibe with that of official history. Their "storyline sessions" (to borrow Lianne's term for her work with Alzheimer's patients) represent a mostly conscious or semi-conscious re-working of the symbolic residue of the attacks.

Despite this self-consciousness, the "game" is hardly a game at all. There are high stakes, and the code of secrecy and silence between the children is proportional and analogous to that of the terrorist cell itself. Like Hammad and the other co-conspirators, the children are drawn by "the magnetic effect of plot"[40] and are convinced that their undertaking has an import that outstrips the concrete parameters of their actions.

Significantly, the essential site of their project, at least as it is dramatized in the novel, is the linguistic realm. It is "Bill Lawton's" mode of speech that is emulated, rather than his dress, politics, or belief system. They deliberately perpetuate the misunderstanding of his name. The essential activities of their game are watching the skies and whispering, communicating in "code"[41] with the man himself, learning of his plans for the destruction of the (already destroyed) towers.

This all points to what may be a prototype of many of the language games present in DeLillo's novels, which we may call "voluntary" aphasias. Like the illusory pre-lapsarian speech provoked by drugs in *White Noise* and *Great Jones Street* or enacted by the onomastic cult in *The Names*, Justin's speech is a radical reduction of linguistic complexity through the breakdown of what Jakobson calls the axes of selection or combination, corresponding roughly to the lexical and syntactic dimensions of language.

In Justin's case, it is principally the axis of selection which is voluntarily degraded, which prevents him from accessing the full lexical offering for a given concept, as in this humorous exchange between Justin and his father:

> "I do not think I would like to eat whale meat."

40. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 174.
41. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 17.

"It's not meat, it's blubber."
"This is the same as fat."
"Say blubber."
"This is the same as fat. It is fat. Whale fat"[42].

Taken to its extreme, this aphasia leads to phrases that are a-grammatical ("We go home now"[43]) which are reminiscent of grammatically defective speech from an adult language learner. Indeed, when Lianne sees the performance artist David Janiak preparing to jump from a rail platform, echoes of this aphasic language percolate through to her consciousness when another witness calls out in distress. A woman says "what you doing?", "I call nine one one"[44], and "you don't be here"[45], giving voice to Lianne in her stunned silence.

Language which is impaired in this manner of course can lose its efficacy as a symbolic system and is generally speaking maladaptive. Keith and especially Lianne are for example unnerved by Justin's game and resort to mockery[46] and even physical intimidation[47] when negotiation fails.

For Justin, however, this proto-language serves two very important functions. On one hand, it allows communication to continue with the radical "other" despite the isolating context of post 9-11 paranoia. The lexically impoverished language is, after all, chosen by the children because it constitutes a shared code with Bin Laden himself, the prime architect of the apparently "incomprehensible" narrative of apparently random violence. Theirs is a sort of pidgin language which allows access to the hidden narrative of the terror attacks, the latent narrative co-created by the United States government, the media, and Bin Laden himself: that of a larger-than-life terrorist mastermind in a world in which the worst is yet to come.

The second function of this language, which is perhaps more important than the first, is the fact that, in Justin's own words,

42. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 161.
43. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 66.
44. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 163.
45. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 164.
46. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 160.
47. Lianne, on page 152.

"it helps me go slow when I think"[48]. Justin uses this language instrumentally with the deliberate purpose of modeling his cognitive and conceptual capacities. Unlike pathological aphasias, where psychiatric or physical causes provoke a conceptual change which manifests in language, here the linguistic deformation is used explicitly to effect a cognitive shift. In this sense, Justin's use of language is reminiscent of Jakobson's "conative" function of language, in which the utterance's primary effect is to directly influence the receiver's world view or behavior, as in commands or "hard-sell" advertising language[49]. Contrary to the conative function, however, in Justin's language the speaker himself is not only the incidental but also the primary *receiver* of his own utterance. In much the same way as in mantra meditation, for example, a message or code is deliberately selected not for its referential, poetic, or expressive power but rather for the conceptual shift it produces in the speaker him/herself. This could be termed the auto-conative function.

We are therefore here in the presence of language whose symbolic import has been subordinated to its practical or technical value, precisely at the moment when the material, technical world has been forced towards the symbolic pole of the spectrum. I would suggest that this moment of acute reversal of the dominant in the symbolic and technological realms characterizes the DeLilloesque event.

A similar "instrumentalist" approach to language can be found in Florence Givens' and Keith's own "storyline sessions" about their experience inside the towers. Both characters remark repeatedly that their memories of events are created by the language they use to represent them. Florence goes through her story "slowly, remembering as she spoke"[50]. She has "a memory of a woman with burnt hair, hair burnt and smoking, but now she wasn't sure she's seen this or heard someone say it"[51]. Later she remarks "now that

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48. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 66.
49. See Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statements: Linguistics and Poetics", in *Style In Language*, Thomas A. Sebeok (ed.), Cambridge Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1960, p. 350-377.
50. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 55.
51. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 55.

I'm talking, it's coming back a little bit"[52]. When she mentions a man carrying a crow bar up the stairwell, Keith remembers – perhaps – seeing the same man. He is surprised at his own lost memory and notes that there was "no reason to remember it if she hadn't mentioned it"[53]. It is left unresolved if this memory is real or a "recovered" false memory, and from the point of view of the novel, the question is irrelevant. In all these cases, the linguistic construction conceptually *precedes* the associated cognitive state – *even for the speaker.* Furthermore, this is an ongoing process that is not accomplished or closed off through a simple mechanistic message-passing. Once Florence's narrative is complete, "she [goes] through it again and [Keith] was ready to listen again […] trying to find himself in the crowd"[54]. Later the same narrative is repeated yet again[55] and again listened to with rapt attention by Keith.

This instrumentalist approach of language is reminiscent of DeLillo's own repeated comments on the writing process, which he describes as a "concentrated form of thinking"[56] where thought and memory are not at the origin of an utterance but its result. In DeLillo's works in general, this use of language as a conceptual "crowbar" to pry loose memory and thought takes on many non-linguistic forms. The most prominent example in *Falling Man* is Keith's weekly poker game, which are interrupted by the 9-11 attacks and the death or mortal wounding of three of the players. In a fascinating passage, a particular game is recounted in which the players spontaneously begin to impose ever harsher rules and restrictions on the game and its context. They progressively ban foods and certain drinks, before reducing the variants of the game to three then finally to one, all the while imposing stricter and stricter parameters for speech until the only utterance allowed is the ritualistic incantation of the name of the only remaining

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52. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 55.
53. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 55.
54. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 59.
55. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 90.
56. Adam Begley, "The Art of Fiction CXXV: Don DeLillo", in *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, Thomas DePietro (ed.), University of Mississippi, 2005, p. 87.

game: "five card stud". Significantly, with each new restriction, "there was a corresponding elevation of stakes"[57]. This formalistic pseudo-asceticism mirrors that of the terrorist cell members, who progressively but imperfectly try to construct regimented lives in order to "close the distance with god" (172)[58]. Other characters are also engaged in different ritualistic uses of symbols, which many times appear compulsive and take on a character of self-soothing. Rumsey, for example counts and memorizes random things from his environment, including particularly the toes of women's sandaled feet. Lianne ritualistically counts down from one hundred by intervals of seven in her head, a test for early diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease.

The crucial difference is in the nature of the "game" being played. Although the context of the poker games approach the solemnity and gravitas of spiritual practice, the game itself never aspires to exclude the individual. Like language itself, poker is in effect a discrete combinatorial system: a closed "lexicon" (52 cards) and a closed "grammar" (the rules of combination of cards into winning or losing hands) which taken together nevertheless allow for an infinite or near-infinite variety of combinations[59]. Crucially, as Keith remarks, every hand explicitly calls on the player's individual "memory", "judgement" and "choice of yes or no, call or raise, call or fold" which is for Keith "the choice that reminds you who you are"[60]. Despite the ever-narrowing of the *range* of choice, or rather because of it, the individual, subjective element is preserved and even amplified.

"Speech Beyond Silence"

In all of the above cases, symbolic systems are serving primarily

57. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 97
58. The parallel is made explicit by Keith's poker buddy Terry Cheng when the two meet again late in the novel. Terry tells Keith of rumors of a high-stakes private poker circuit that is "like a forbidden religion springing up again (202), "like early Christians in hiding" (203).
59. The actual number of unique possible hands in 5-card stud poker is 2,598,960. The number of game outcomes, factoring in the number of players the human decision to draw, hold or fold, is theoretically infinite.
60. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 211-12.

technological and practical purposes unrelated to referential or expressive imperatives. Language has sloughed off much of its symbolic role and has become in a sense, a technology for self-modification. And in most cases in *Falling Man*, this modification is one of reduction and simplification of the conceptual capacity.

While the exact mode of transformation or deformation of symbols varies, all of the above examples could be considered as what Sontag might call "strategies of silence". Sontag theorizes in her seminal essay "The Aesthetics of Silence" (1967) that art has become terminally entangled in its own crisis of representation. It is locked in a "frustrating conflict"[61] with its own materiality, which is itself a permanent reminder of art's inevitable failure to be in adequate relationship with consciousness, which is by definition immaterial. For an artist therefore (and DeLillo's characters are almost all artists in a certain sense), the "truly serious attitude is one that regards art as a 'means' to something that can perhaps only be achieved by abandoning art"[62]. Art has become "an exercise in asceticism"[63], and language an "event […] which points to the before and what comes after the utterance"[64]. Expression is a reductive parentheses opened in the flow of experience, and art's project must be to "mount a full-scale attack on language itself, by means of language and its surrogates, on behalf of the standard of silence"[65].

The multiple strategies of *Falling Man*'s characters are just such retreats into silence, conceived as the only "serious" mode of full experience. Justin's monosyllable game, like Keith's poker games or Liane's storyline sessions, have gone far beyond the status of game, becoming a "practice[s]" infused with a "solemn obstinacy"[66]. What follows, jokes Keith, will be a language of syllables and isolated morphemes, on the way to "the next

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61. Susan Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence", in *A Susan Sontag Reader*, Vintage, 1983, p. 182.
62. Susan Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence", p. 183.
63. Susan Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence", p. 183.
64. Susan Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence", p. 196.
65. Susan Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence", p. 196.
66. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 160.

stage" of "spiritual development […] total silence […] utter and unbreakable silence"[67].

Interestingly, Keith himself barely speaks in the novel beyond some routine DeLilloesque banter and his role as a sort of therapist for other characters, including Florence, Lianne and Terry Cheng, who have all on the contrary become very chatty since the attacks. Keith appears, at first reading, to be another of DeLillo's defeated spirits in the vein of *Americana*'s David Bell, *End Zone*'s Gary Harkness, or *Underworld*'s Nick Shay. To Lianne, Keith's endless poker playing in the desert is worrisome and depressing, a form of "tedium" and anesthesia"[68], a "demoralizing" and "psychotic folly" that is like a "séance in hell"[69]. There is ample evidence that Keith's aloofness predates the attacks[70], but his silence takes on a new character in the following weeks and years.

Despite Keith's nightmarish visions and apparent nihilism, his selective mutism is more a pregnant silence than a neurotic retreat, though it may be easy to overlook. He insists that "he was not lost or bored or crazy"[71] by the endless day-night of the casinos, and claims that "he was never more himself than in [those] rooms"[72]. For Keith, there are hints that the codified world of the casino is a place teeming with activity and stimuli, and most importantly for Keith, with a stable and intact shared code. The physical world is slowly emerging as a site not of dangerous abstraction, but as a place rich with sensory experiences. Keith sits in attentive and meditative silence, watching the screens "purely for their effect on the senses"[73], and learning to listen again, "to hear what is always there"[74] but what is normally below the threshold of attention, in particular, the sound of the poker chips "rubbing, sliding, clicking"[75]. The money he wins or loses is secondary to

67. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 100-101.
68. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 117.
69. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 216.
70. See for example Lianne's recollections of Keith's hostility and barely contained violence p. 103-104.
71. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 230.
72. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 225.
73. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 211.
74. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 211.
75. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 225.

the tactile reality of the chips, the true stakes of the games. Unlike *Cosmopolis*' Eric Packer, who lives in a "touch-free" context, for whom the riches feel as light as air, Keith "was playing for the chips. The value of each chip had only hazy meaning. It was the disk itself that mattered, the color itself. […] he wanted to rake in chips and stack them"[76].

Other characters, including Lianne and Justin, are engaged in a similar fetishism of the object that belies a potential return to discourse, but on newly negotiated terms. The most telling example is in the characters' inarticulate pre-occupation for writing instruments. Early in the novel, we learn that Justin has a collection of luxury pencils, which Lianne sees as melancholy and absurd. Justin sharpens them almost compulsively in a "ritual."

> He had red and blue combination pencils, Cedar Pointe pencils, Dixon Trimlines, vintage Eberhard Fabers. He had pencils from hotels in Zurich and Hong Kong. There were pencils fashioned from tree bark, rough and knotted. There were pencils from the museum design store of the Museum of Modern Art. He had Mirado Black Warriors. He had pencils from a SoHo shop that were inscribed along the shaft with cryptic sayings from Tibet[77].

The symbolic dimension of the writing instruments takes on a new significance as we follow Lianne in her "storyline sessions" with a group of Alzheimer's patients. As Justin's monosyllabic language is used to mold his own consciousness, the patients' writing sessions have a concrete utilitarian dimension that parallels and perhaps outstrips the expressive function of journaling; the sessions are a tool to slow the progression of the disease, to preserve the narrative of the self in the face of oblivion. To paraphrase fictional novelist Bill Gray from *Mao II*, writing is an existential necessity, for out of writing emerges the self[78].

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76. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 228.
77. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 38.
78. "I've always seen myself in sentences. I begin to recognize myself, word by word, as I work through a sentence. The language of my books has shaped me as a man" (Don DeLillo, *Mao II*, p. 48).

After verbally revealing her own private story of the September 11 attacks to the patients, Lianne begins showing an intense and unexplained interest in writing instruments, in particular for one silver pen which has gone missing. Lianne's concern for the whereabouts of this particular pen seems unjustified until we consider her repeated affirmations of its "seriousness." Justin claims that his father took it, perhaps unknowingly[79], and adds perceptively that "He needs to write things. Just like anybody"[80]. Thus the fetishism for writing instruments, in the absence of any actual *writing* within the confines of the novel, represents a common thread that unites the three members of the Neudecker family.

These examples betray a paradoxical need for expression and a countervailing suspicion of discourse that is reminiscent of the type of artistic silence described by Sontag, a silence which is partial and temporary, preceding – at least in theory – new and more adequate forms of expression:

> Behind the appeals for silence lies the wish for a perceptual and cultural clean slate […] Silence is a strategy for the transvaluation of art, art itself being the herald of an anticipated radical transformation of human values […] As language points to its own transcendence in silence, silence points to its own transcendence – to a speech beyond silence[81].

The novel offers of course a model for such "speech beyond silence" in title character and performance artist David Janiak. If many characters have instrumentalized language to create a sort of "perceptual clean slate", Janiak has moved beyond this silence into a form of non-discursive speech that builds a new shared code for the witnesses of his performances. By repeatedly re-creating the suppressed image of an anonymous WTC "jumper", and more importantly by avoiding commentary and artistic "framing" of his performances[82], he forces his audience to confront the brute

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79. The fate of the pen is never resolved, though the earnestness of Justin's explanation seems to indicate that Keith has indeed taken the pen.
80. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man* p. 201.
81. Susan Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence", p. 192.
82. His jumps are often designed, as the one witnessed by Lianne in Chapter 9,

perceptions and feelings of the morning of September 11. After his death and the revelation of his identity, he is of course co-opted by discourse and market forces, as we see in Chapter 13 when Lianne reads his obituary and follows the links to reams of commentary. DeLillo characteristically refuses to allow readers the comfort that Janiak has achieved something outside the reach of the culture's all-devouring appetite. But by maintaining the integrity of his art to the death – he dies of internal injuries brought on by his jumps – DeLillo provides a heroic-tragic ethical model for his characters and for the reader.

In conclusion, this process of simplification, the voluntary aphasia enacted by the different characters, has the paradoxical effect of opening a space in which there is an increase in the salience of the surface qualities of the signifiers, whether they be poker chips, images or words. This foregrounding of the signifier itself, in the context of the shared code of poker games, word and number games, or the repeated jumps of the performance artist "*Falling Man*", represents a re-blossoming of the poetic potential of the world itself, of experience outside discourse. The process of healing occurs through a countervailing instrumentalization and reduction of symbolic systems that in turn modifies the conceptual apparatus of the speaker and opens a space for a silence and for non-discursive art that is proportional to – and of the same high stakes as – consciousness and experience itself.

Bɪʙʟɪᴏɢʀᴀᴘʜɪᴇ

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