
KIERKEGAARD'S REFLECTION IN DON DELILLO'S NOVEL 'FALLING MAN'

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Abstract

This paper analyses Don DeLillo's novel 'Falling Man', which is concerned with the symbolic nature of terrorist violence portrayed and interpreted through the mass media that are able to create a specific simulacrum of reality. DeLillo's narrative examines the possibilities of reinventing one's individual identity and the tendency of individuals to construct their own identities through a group mentality as well. The paper also deals with the influence of the Danish thinker Soren Kierkegaard on the novel 'Falling Man'.

Keywords: subjectivity, terrorism, despair, anxiety, hedonism

1. Introduction

Don DeLillo (1936) is a very significant American writer, playwright and essayist. He currently belongs among the most phenomenal and important novelists of modern American literary era. Literary critic Harold Bloom "named him as one of the four major American novelists of his time, along with Thomas Pynchon, Philip Roth, and Cormac McCarthy" [1]. He is considered to be a representative of postmodern literature. Don DeLillo himself stresses that he has been profoundly influenced by "abstract expressionism, European movies and jazz" [2]. His unique literary work reflects the concept of man and modern society being impacted by the advances of Science and technology. His novels intertwine modern appliances, scientific technology, mass media, nuclear wars, sport, various forms of art, cultural performances, cultural objects, cold war, digital age, economy, conspiracy theories and global terrorism. "DeLillo's early fictions employ cinematic allusions and techniques to reveal the harmful effects of cinematic representation of subjectivity. The early stories preview both the concerns of his later fiction and the frightening late twentieth-century world that those works depict." [3] Equally important is the issue of status of the individual in society facing the feelings of despair, dread, anxiety, awareness of one's own mortality and the threat of a looming apocalypse, unbridled consumerism, modern intellectualism, disintegration and the subsequent reunification of family. The dominant feature of his work is subjectivity. "For over thirty years

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Don DeLillo has been one of a select group of American novelists that have assumed the task of examining America's relationship with itself and with the world at large." [4] More than any other author, Don DeLillo emphasizes the way in which the contemporary consciousness of the American society was formed. It was through information, military and consumer technologies.

In Don DeLillo's novels, technological devices, television sets, cinematography, automobiles, airplanes, telephones, computers and nuclear bombs are not just ordinary objects. They become physical phenomena that enable humans to act, influencing their perception and being integrated into the structure of each individual's memory. His novels illustrate the mutual symbiosis of the main fictional characters and cultural objects. The interaction between human beings and the various conveniences of modern technology is present in every literary work of Don DeLillo. Fictional characters face religious, psychological and existential motifs, in which "typical DeLillian character is suspended between dread and awe, between randomness and conspiracy, between science and religion. But all of these outbreaks are symptoms of the fundamental, viral interfusion of self and circuitry." [5] Each character intensively experiences events in the surrounding environment. In some novels, Don DeLillo describes permanent increase in the acts of terrorism. DeLillo's novels *Underground*, *White Noise* and *Falling Man* reflect recurring dominant role of mass media and their role in forming simulacra, resulting in the removal of the event from its context and the consequent draining of its original meaning. Don DeLillo can masterfully handle the theme of crowd psychology, capitulation of individuals to group identity, the loss of self-identity and despair in his novels. He has influenced American culture and profoundly inspired many English authors. Don DeLillo has written seventeen novels: *Americana* (1971), *End Zone* (1972), *Great Jones Street* (1973), *Ratner's Star* (1976), *Players* (1977), *Running Dog* (1978), *Amazons* (1980) the novels was written under pseudonym Cleo Birdwell, *The Names* (1982), *White Noise* (1985), *Libra* (1988) Mao II (1991), *Underworld* (1997), *The Body Artist* (2001), *Cosmopolis* (2003), *Falling Man* (2007), *Point Omega* (2010) and his last novel is *Zero K* (2016). His plays *Engineer of Moonlight* (1979), *The Day Room* (1986), *Valparaiso* (1999), *Love-Lies-Bleeding* (first production 2005), *The Word for Snow* (2007) reflect meditation on death and the individual's quest for one's own identity.

2. September 11, 2001 – a trauma for the society

The influence of the Danish thinker Søren Kierkegaard is most evident in DeLillo's novel *Falling Man*. This outstanding novel was a reflection on the tragic event of the terrorist attacks in New York in September 2001. "Falling man dramatizes time as traveling along individual and communal currents and countercurrents. It does not represent historical time but rather rival and turbulent perceptions of it, those perceptions that the novel correctly claims to belong to the flow of aesthetic experience (as opposed to those of mediated commercial time or that of rationalized, historical time)." [6]

The novel captures a variety of often contradictory aspects of modern reality. Especially pervasive is a sense of paranoia and of an irreconcilable conflict between the individual and modern technology. The author has an excellent ability to capture the subjective survival figures and subsequently provide a fascinating description of the individuals and their inner world. Don DeLillo commented on himself: "I am not a full-fledged Kierkegaardian...I read his work decades back and still have an old Anchor paperback and a Kierkegaard anthology, second hand, falling apart, and as described in the novel, with the original owner's underlinings." [7]

Don DeLillo has also emphasized that the concepts of "fear, trembling, sickness, death" that Kierkegaard analysed in his writings are "equal to eternal themes" [7, p. 81] and have since become inseparable part of mankind. The topics reflected in DeLillo's novels clearly indicate that he has been influenced by Kierkegaard's aesthetic, ethical and religious stages and by Kierkegaard's choice either - or. DeLillo's novels display the world full of dread, uncertainty and conflicts between different cultures, or between individuals and society. *Falling Man* is written in "terms of Kierkegaard's fundamental interest in what happens to people who struggle traumatically with the experience of something at the limits of understanding, who struggle to make it a part of their experience, what they know" [7, p. 82]. The attack on the World Trade Center is a reflection of human helplessness, a tragic awareness of ignorance and weakness, the mortality of man and the associated obligation of finite human existence. It can be said that Don DeLillo's novels reflect a world full of fear, uncertainty and conflicts. The title of the novel was inspired by a real photograph taken on September 11, 2001, by AP photographer Richard Drew. The photo shows unknown man falling from the high floors of the World Trade Center, during the series of terrorist attacks in the US. The picture was published the following day and "it caused a hue and cry from newspaper readers on the grounds that this image was immoral, a voyeuristic invasion of the privacy of a man just moments before his death" [8].

The photograph became the symbol of September 11, 2001, the symbol of sorrow of all families, who lost their family members during the fall of WTC, the symbol of despair and suffering. The victims' families had to face immense sadness and many of them fell into a state of deep despair and experienced a sudden and unwanted solitude. As Hajko wrote, Kierkegaard „confirms and demonstrates anxiety, fear and sadness that emanate from the loneliness of the individual, he seeks to recognize the depth of despair, pain and grief resulting from unrealized being" [9].

3. Subjectivity

The story line of the novel *Falling Man* is derived from three different points of view and personal interpretations of each literary character. One of the main protagonists is the lawyer Keith, another protagonist is his wife Lianne. Both live aesthetic and consumer lifestyle. The third of the main protagonists is

a young terrorist and a hijacker Arab Hammad. He is one of the storytellers. Through his narrative, the reader learns about the whole horror of the apocalypse, from a subjective terrorist's point of view.

In *Falling Man*, Don DeLillo describes the apocalyptic event that happened in New York in September 2001 and “comes to the conclusion that one's perception of such an event cannot be based only on what has happened (i.e. on the object of representation) but also on how it can be reported (rhetorical and ethical level of thinking) - the meaning of these events is, according to DeLillo, always affected by how it appears to us.” [10]

This approach is basically fundamentally subjective. It is up to each individual how they will choose to interpret the event. DeLillo's novel *Falling Man* presents subjective perception of events. Mohammed Atta is one of the main hijackers. He puts himself in the position of an instrument of God's will, justifying thereby the mass death that will be caused by a crash into the towers. Atta explains: “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.” [11]

To justify his terrorist act, the hijacker creates his own philosophy of death, promoting thus the mission of the individual over the death of the masses defined as ‘the others’. He believes, that ‘the others’ are crowd or mass. He considers them to be untruth, having no right to life. Kierkegaard, too, highlights that “the existing subjective thinker is always as negative as he is positive, has just as much of the comic as he essentially has of pathos” [12]. Atta was driven by passion. Jan Ligus points out: „It is generally known, that passion in the sense of constant enthusiasm and passion for a cause is very beneficial for scientific knowledge. But passion as a life-destructive tendency that man cannot control, becomes devastating to human life.” [13] Mohammed Ata believes to be able to reach immortality on account of his religious deed in the name of God.

According to Kierkegaard, “immortality is subjectivity's most passionate interest, the proof lies precisely in the interest” [12, p. 174]. The hijackers know they will die, but in their finiteness and attitude to the death they see fundamental difference. “We are willing to die, they are not. This is our strength, to love death, to feel the claim of armed martyrdom.” [11, p. 178]

Lianne, remembers the moment captured on the photograph of destruction: “It hit her hard when she first saw it, the day after, in the newspaper. The man headlong, the towers behind him. The enormous soaring lines, the vertical column stripes. The man with blood on his shirt, or burn marks, and the effect of the columns behind him, the composition, she thought darker stripes for the nearer tower, the north, the 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.” [11, p. 221-222] By watching the image, Lianne comes to her own conclusions about the tragic event and is able to perceive the artistic composition of the

photograph. "Having separated herself as an individual from the event, she can now study, measure, and comment on its artistic composition and horrific beauty." [14] Lianne's husband Keith is a pathological poker player. Being on the way from his work, he witnessed a horrific scene, after the planes had crashed into one of the WTC Towers. Keith represents an emotionally arid man. The surrounding terror and horror of the apocalyptic moment only escalated feelings of emptiness and despair: "He went past a line of fire trucks and they stood empty now, headlights flashing. He could not find himself in the things he saw and heard. Two men ran by with a stretcher, someone face-down, smoke seeping out of his hair and clothes. He watched them move into the stunned distance. That's where everything was, all around him, falling away, street signs, people, things he could not name. Then he saw a shirt come down out of the sky. He walked and saw it fall arms waving like nothing in this life." [11, p. 246] Like Kierkegaard before him, Don De Lillo criticizes the society and critically observes that the World Trade Center towers were destined to fall: "But that's why you built the towers, isn't it? Weren't the towers built as fantasies of wealth and power that would one day become fantasies of destruction? You build a thing like that so you can see it come down. The provocation is obvious. What other reason would there be to go so high and then to double it, do it twice? It's a fantasy, so why not do it twice? You are saying, Here it is, bring it down." [11, p. 116] This tragic event had a profound impact on the whole world. The spectators could watch on TV as the towers collapsed one after another. The images were uncensored and surreal.

4. Moral authenticity

Don DeLillo's novels are looking for a way out of the pervasive dread that modern man must confront. Consumerism produces a society of people who actually have no interest in their neighbour. DeLillo's characters seek solitude in various purification rituals, looking for their own moral authenticity, because consumerism could not satisfy them. Despair is the reaction of people who struggle in inhuman conditions. They fear that they would lose human dignity. Desperate and anxious Lianne finds satisfaction in studying Kierkegaard, who used to be her favourite philosopher during her college times. For her, Kierkegaard was the way to her self-discovery and expression of personal preferences, moral authority and faith. He helped her to achieve the transcendental and religious level of her own existence. The proximity of death made her feel anxious and brought the presence of mortality to her consciousness.

"Dread, anxiety, despair, hope, compassion and sorrow are associated with emotions that evoke in man consciousness of death and mortality. Dealing with any crisis can lead to the resignation to the meaning of life or to complete absence of motivation in life. Hope is the starting point, the driving force, a kind of longing for a sense that we associate with faith. Hope may take various forms - a myth, doctrine, religious or secular ritual, social conventions." [15]

Kierkegaard's expression of dismay at the whole existence becomes an expression of her own attitude towards life after the series of terrorist attacks. "The whole of existence frightens me, he wrote. She saw herself in this sentence." [11, p. 118] Kierkegaard becomes an objective equivalent of her mind and his work *The Sickness Unto Death* becomes a suitable definition of the modern age society. His thinking helped her to find the meaning of life and made her sure, that her life "was not the slender melodrama she sometimes thought it was" [11, p. 118]. Lianne, in her aesthetic stage of life, has to face despair and anxiety. She longs to experience the spiritual dimension of her existence. Don DeLillo describes Lianne's interest in Kierkegaard: "She loved Kierkegaard in his antiqueness, in the glaring drama of the translation she owned, an old anthology of brittle pages with ruled underlinings in red ink, passed down by someone in her mother's family. This is what she read and re-read into deep night in her dorm room, a drifting mass of papers, clothing, books and tennis gear that she linked to think of as the objective correlative of an overflowing mind. What is an objective correlative? What is cognitive dissonance? She used to know the answers to everything then, it seemed to her now, and she used to love Kierkegaard right down to the spelling of his name....She read her Kierkegaard with a feverish expectancy, straight into the Protestant badlands of sickness unto death." [11, p. 118]

Don DeLillo associates Kierkegaard with faith and that is why Lianne's mind made "a leap to Kierkegaard". He transforms Kierkegaard's term *a leap of faith* to "a leap to Kierkegaard" [11, p. 117].

According to Kierkegaard's philosophy, "the leap of faith is an act of belief regardless of the consequences. Basing his theology on the story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac, the Danish absurdist argued that a faith beyond reason was superior to the precisely correct and all-encompassing rationalism of Plato." [16] Leap of faith allows man to experience the religious dimension of human existence [17]. Lianne decides to overcome consumerism in her life and wants to transform herself into the ethical stage, choosing her own moral authenticity through Kierkegaard.

After a traumatic event in New York, Lianne's husband Keith cannot integrate himself into common social life. He keeps on playing poker and starts to lose control over his own life: "And this is what is sad when one contemplates human life, that so many live out their lives in quiet lostness; they outlive themselves, not in the sense that life's content successively unfolds and is now possessed in this unfolding, but they live, as it were, away from themselves and vanish like shadows. Their immortal souls are blown away, and they are not disquieted by the question of its immortality, because they are already disintegrated before they die. They do not live esthetically, but neither has the ethical become manifest to them in its whole ness; nor have they actually rejected it, and therefore they are not sinning either, except insofar as it is a sin to be neither one thing nor the other." [18]

Keith and Lianne face an existential choice: either they choose moral dimension of their existence, or they will continue in consumer and hedonistic lifestyle. Kierkegaard argues: "My Either/Or designates the choice by which one chooses good and evil or rules them out. Here the question is under what qualifications one will view all existence and personally live." [18, p. 169] Lianne chooses the moral authenticity but her husband Keith chooses playing poker and hedonism. His aesthetic way of life consequently puts him into despair.

Kierkegaard raises some interesting questions about the nature of human despair: "everyone who lives esthetically is in despair, whether he knows it or not. But when one knows this, and you certainly do know it, then a higher form of existence is an imperative requirement." [18, p. 192] In the novel *End Zone*, DeLillo highlights that if one wants to achieve moral perfection, one must necessarily learn humility, purify his mind and determine the correct meaning of life. Aloneness is not a stage of life to cause despair. In solitude there is a force that helps humans reach their moral authenticity. "We need more self-sacrifice, more discipline...We need to renounce everything that turns us from the knowledge of ourselves...Loneliness is strength...Nothing makes more sense than self-denial. It's the only way to attain moral perfection...Purify the will. Learn humility. Restrict the sense of life." [19]

5. Conclusions

Don DeLillo perceives Kierkegaard as more than a mere moral authority, a spiritual brink. He is convinced that Kierkegaard's philosophy can give man hope even in the most difficult moments of life. At the time of one's personal apocalypse, experienced within the frame of reference of contemporary society that is permeated by modern technology, mass media and the omnipresent consumerism, which can but briefly satisfy the hedonistic needs and desires of the individual, Kierkegaard's philosophy can provide an impetus for a new life. DeLillo values Kierkegaard's thought, for it leads the reader into and through an existential crisis. It requires and, in some cases, induces *a leap of faith*, thus having the potential to become an inspiration or even an 'existential path' for everyone seeking a way out of the hedonistic and aesthetic stages of life in order to achieve the ethical or even the religious dimension of one's life. Although Don DeLillo never quoted Kierkegaard directly, we find some attributes of Kierkegaard's concepts of being in his works [20]. Kierkegaard was primarily a subjective thinker who emphasized the subjective and inner perception on the side of each individual [21, 22]. Subjectivity is a dominant element in all DeLillo's works, too.

The very title of Kierkegaard's writing *The Sickness unto Death* became a suitable definition not only of the American society but of all mankind that suffers from this sickness [23]. DeLillo implemented this concept into his literary work, giving it fresh existential relevance and moral power. Through his literary masterpieces we are reminded, with an unyielding sense of urgency, that

our common sickness unto death casts its shadow on every human striving and passion, revealing the dreadful potential of passionate fanaticism (e.g. Mohammed Ata's conviction that he was acting in the name of God) on one hand, as well as that of the obsession of self-righteousness, glory and arrogance – so typical for the prosperous Western societies. Hence the acute need for a potent pharmakon! DeLillo does not believe it is going to come from the mass media. They present us with mere simulacra of reality, veiling our minds with superficial images and offering objective explanations to phenomena that need to be analysed subjectively. DeLillo's narratives, including his masterfully composed inner dialogues of his characters, examine the possibilities of reinventing one's individual identity to encompass a new existential perspective. DeLillo thus invites his readers to a Kierkegaardian *leap of faith* – a leap out of one's personal apocalyptic crisis into a new state of being; out of one's dread and despair into a new ethical or possibly even spiritual dimension.

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