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From the Uncanny to the Sublime: 9/11 and Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*

Przemot K. Nęgieł*

This paper examines Don DeLillo's novel *Falling Man*. It provides a framework for reading the novel, arguing that it simply treats it as a literary expression of trauma in contemporary space. The paper then discusses how the narrative is built on a variety of theoretical concepts, specifically Freud and later psychoanalysts, and cultural theories such as Richard Sallis on the uncanny, and Christine Barthelemy, Kimberly Segal, and others on the sublime. The paper argues that DeLillo's novel is a study of dematerialization, and in fact treats the events of 9/11 as uncanny, with its phantasmagorical and the central image of falling and insurance. Having established the uncanny's dematerialization as a metaphor for the events of 9/11, DeLillo, the paper argues in its second part, suggests a traumatic sublime. The traumatic sublime emerges in the novel from the conditions of a new perception of 9/11 through the presence of two components: repetition and incorporation of the foreign.

One of the first things that strike you in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) is the number of references to transience, obscurity, shadows, haze, visually, and insubstantiality. Every page of the novel has at least one image (usually more) of transience, poor visibility, fading, and the vague. DeLillo, this paper argues, heightens the sense of what happened on 9/11 by focusing on a particular set of tropes of transience and insubstantiality. Dematerialization, Linda Kaulfleiter (2008, 367) suggests, is the key trope of the novel, treating even Alzheimer's and its disintegration of language as a metaphor for 9/11. It seems apt, then, that a text dealing with the collapse of the twin towers deploys the trope of dematerialization. But DeLillo, as this paper demonstrates, has a larger agenda.

This paper argues that DeLillo's theme and key trope of dematerialization take recourse to the uncanny, whose features then enable him to fold, or shade, the uncanny into a sublime of the traumatic experience of 9/11. While both the uncanny and the sublime are about perceptions—the sense of the familiar/ unfamiliar in the case of the uncanny and the sense of awe/ wonder/ incomprehension in the case of the sublime—DeLillo's novel calls attention to the cultural and social factors of this perception.

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