

**STRONG WORDS, WEAK SUBJECTS: A CRITICAL  
EXAMINATION AND THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL  
CONTEXTUALISATION OF THE NOVELS OF DON DELILLO**

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This study is dedicated to my parents, brother and Nina.

# Abstract

This thesis is a theory focused critical contextualisation of the novels of Don DeLillo that situates the author at the forefront of contemporary literatures of resistance. Through a detailed examination of a number of his works, and a generic discussion of all, it makes the argument that, by foregrounding a number of radical aesthetic methodologies such as controlled monologism and what Fredric Jameson terms ‘the transcoding of perceptual terminologies’ – or the emplacement of multiple theoretical positions within the totality of the novel – DeLillo attempts to compel his reader into coming to terms with their linguistically circumscribed personal ontology.

The first, introductory chapter, an analysis of the writer’s depictions of the social environment of contemporary America and his metatheoretical solutions to what cultural commentator Jean Baudrillard calls ‘hyperreality’ – the hegemonic prevalence of serial signs and simulations that self-reproduce and separate humanity from the ‘real’ world - sets up the proposition that DeLillo’s ambivalent attitude to language, his representations of subjects struggling to find their own voice and name, is connected to a politically motivated aesthetic that provides the reader with a kind of ‘cognitive mapping,’ enabling them to contextualise themselves within the confusing spatial and temporal dimensions of the late-capitalist postmodern world. The propositions introduced in chapter one are then built upon in three wholly original close-readings of some of DeLillo’s best known works.

Chapter two examines DeLillo’s controversial metafictional historiography *Libra* through the critical lens of the sublime and Jean-Francois Lyotard’s binary of the discursive and figural – discussing how DeLillo’s Oswald is constructed within the text in order to connect with Lyotard’s ideas on postmodern representation. This is followed in chapter three by a Bakhtinian reading of DeLillo’s early work *Ratner’s Star* that clarifies the process of cognitive mapping, and an ecocritical analysis of *Underworld* in chapter four that consolidates and expands the drive of the thesis. The thesis will conclude by offering a final chapter that summarises DeLillo’s methodology and opens the argument out to include parallels between DeLillo’s practice and that of comparable European metatheorists.

## Introduction

“I’ve never attempted to embark on a systematic exploration of American experience.” (Don DeLillo)<sup>1</sup>

For most critics, DeLillo is a cut and dried postmodernist: a novelist at one time working in the margins, who has now entered the mainstream, writing within the limits of a form accepted and admired in all the right academic circles. His public reputation, prior to the publication of *Underworld* (1997), was built upon his ninth novel, *Libra* (1988), and this was probably due to his compelling realisation of a national obsession in the first instance rather than the innate quality of the writing. Since then he has been variously labelled in the media as: ‘America’s high priest of paranoia’<sup>2</sup>; ‘The chief shaman of the paranoid school of American Fiction’<sup>3</sup>; and, ‘a student of American derangement’<sup>4</sup> and his early works have garnered deserved retrospective praise. To the initiate, he seems to have embarked upon a methodical dissection of prototypically American experience – film, rock music, sport. Indeed, it is easy to compartmentalise DeLillo’s novels, to provide sweeping and, it has to be said, justifiable conclusions on the nature of what seems to be an ongoing project: a fictive anatomy of the ‘real’ America. One can certainly discern a method in the “good company and madness” he portrays, a writer’s wish to delve beneath the cultural systems that locate the American citizen and provide them with their sense of national identity. However, as the above quotation affirms, DeLillo abjures any claim to an intentional mapping of formative influences. His work is less a systematic wade through the associative signifiers of ‘Americana’ than a seeking out of what he sees as underlying truths that lend “secret patterns”<sup>5</sup> to American lives. In fact, much of DeLillo’s work eludes classification. Novels will appear to fit conventional genres, such as ‘autobiography’, ‘science-fiction’ and ‘the spy novel’ but he uses these popular forms only to show “how readers are unconsciously trapped within reductive ideologies and cultural models of behaviour.”<sup>6</sup> Not everyone however is impressed with or even understands what he is attempting to achieve.

DeLillo's supporters argue that the aspects of his work most criticized, such as its schematism, lack of humanity and concentration on ideology rather than personal conflict, reflect the society he is trying to anatomize. In Douglas Keeseey's words: "DeLillo's fiction is about the media's flattening of character, the way representations of reality disturb our connection with the world, impoverish our experience, and reduce our dimensionality."<sup>7</sup> Certainly, his ideal protagonist is Marcuse's one-dimensional man, ensconced in a small room and undergoing a process of self-actualization that may lead to extreme behaviour, and DeLillo would be the first to argue that social-realism, in its purest sense, is not his thing. Yes, there are moments when he achieves a kind of mimesis of the street, a near-perfect rendering of language and environment shorn of the abstractions and tangential embellishments characteristic of most of his work, but these are few and far between. His voice is not that of the distanced empiricist, no latter-day Frazer delineating the myths of urban tribalism. Rich in wry observation and dark humour, yet punctuated by phrases of poetic concision, his writing shuffles anxiously between the twin poles of contemporary American fiction - domestic realism (Carver, Tyler) and avant-garde postmodernism (Pynchon, Gaddis) - incorporating elements of both. Importantly, it is writing of ambiguity and ambivalence rather than the tendentiousness of the paranoid left as some of his detractors have suggested. For instance, he is fascinated by both the individual and the crowd, language and that which cannot be articulated, and consumerism and terrorism, while occupying the middle ground between such categories. Employing a range of literary systems in the telling of a story that find correlation in the worlds of social science and mathematics, DeLillo engages the reader by allowing them to trace the paths of his connections, parallels and narrative loops while, through his acute insights and philosophical enquiry, maintaining the sense that he too can be puzzled and awestruck on occasions. Above all, he is a writer who shows us what he is thinking about what he is showing. One reviewer in *The New York Times*, as if defending the intellectual demands DeLillo makes of his readers, described his work as possessing a "vernacular lyricism that is never inaccessible,"<sup>8</sup> but one cannot escape the fact that the superabundance of his theories, and his refusal to submit to writing small-scale domestic dramas, causes much consternation in some circles, as if challenging the reader in any

overt socio-analytical sense might be a bad thing. Ironically, when he does attempt to gain a grip on the actuality of the social and convey the kind of domestic realism critics are hankering after, he is roundly censured.

Clearly DeLillo is at his best when writing about the counterpastoral, what Philip Roth calls the “indigenous American berserk”<sup>9</sup> – the flip side of an idealised America where guns are not symbols of freedom but rather the tools of terror. Arguably, there is no greater symbol of American terror than Lee Harvey Oswald. The assassination of Kennedy had always informed DeLillo’s work and thus a novel on the subject represented a logical culmination and a return to the material that inspired him. Even so, borrowing from history and giving in to “the nearly palpable lure”<sup>10</sup> of large, real events was unacceptable for some critics. Attacking *Libra*, George Will accused DeLillo of “literary vandalism” and “bad citizenship” for suggesting that there was an underlying social dimension to Oswald’s crime, that somehow American society might be to blame for Kennedy’s death. Others, such as Jonathan Yardley of the *Washington Post*, argued that in ascribing a structural or institutional basis to Oswald’s actions, DeLillo was pedalling “ideological fiction” – cynically appropriating the assassination for political ends or to appeal to the mass-market thus popularising his novels. In answer to the first point, DeLillo has never been one to focus on the personal at the expense of the public: in the unification of the crowd and the individual, the public and the private and the power of media representation, Oswald’s story was perfect DeLillo material. In answer to the second, DeLillo’s words in an interview with LeClair suggest he has never aimed to write a bestseller:

“This writer is working against the age and so he feels some satisfaction at not being widely read. He is diminished by an audience.”<sup>11</sup>

So how does one contextualise a writer so misunderstood, caught up in oppositions on every level, a man who believes that at its root level “fiction is a kind of religious fanaticism, with elements of obsession, superstition and awe”<sup>12</sup> – a powerful vehicle for looking beyond the boundaries of mediation and representation – but also senses its paradoxical assimilation or incorporation into the system: in other words the way it can

merely consolidate the divide between humanity and the world? Arguably, the answer may be to look at his attitude to, and relationship with, language and communication systems – that which more than anything else defines his work.

The title of this thesis, *Strong Words, Weak Subjects*, is a reference to the overriding sense in DeLillo's work that both he and his characters are always to some degree subordinate to language. In other words, when faced with powerful signifiers, or strong words, these human subjects seem weak and dirigible. Where the author is concerned, clearly DeLillo is a technical writer and goes to great pains to get the structure just right, careful with the cadence of a sentence, the formation of a paragraph and, in his words, "willing to let language press meaning [upon] him."<sup>13</sup> However, there is also a strong sense that his characters must also be seen as secondary to the words used to convey their existence, the ideas through which their identities are formed. As discussed, DeLillo has been criticised at times for producing one dimensional figures, mouthpieces for his philosophical enquiries, players in a monologic but dialectical game. But on occasions, as with *Ratner's Star* (1976), it is clear that he actually foregrounds monologism as an intentional representational tool (a position taken by this thesis). Most of the time, however, DeLillo's characters are simply portrayed grappling with the inherently limited but necessary codes of communication systems and modes of expression they have adopted but remain outside of their control. In order to do this DeLillo avoids restricting his examination of language to recognisable conversational discourse. Alongside the words and phrases of 'ordinary' talk - pragmatic American if you will - from novel to novel DeLillo provides his reader with the argot of particular social groups and the technicalities of non-conventional language forms simply in order to deconstruct and expose the system that holds them together. From Nobel prize winning mathematicians to the Italian Americans of the Bronx circa 1950, military jargon to the visual codes contained in the packaging of consumables ranked in supermarkets, and childhood babbling to glossolalia, DeLillo discusses and dissects language in its myriad forms.

While acknowledging the work of critics such as Tom LeClair (*In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel*), this study recognises that a limited approach, such as LeClair's



employment of systems theory as a hermeneutic tool, doesn't go far enough when reading a writer as diverse as DeLillo. As Charles Molesworth argues, this single interpretative strategy, "...Doesn't give us that strong a purchase on the phenomenological world of the novels, nor does it always look back 'out' to the social and historical particulars upon which DeLillo draws."<sup>14</sup> However, putting exclusively text based criticism aside, if we are to assess the phenomenological linguistic aspect of the novels - the experience of the reader, DeLillo himself, and to some degree the experiences of his characters – we must aim to understand the writer's motivations, what leads him to, in his words, "restructure reality," and this poses something of a problem. DeLillo is famously averse to such self-analysis. In an interview with Tom LeClair, undertaken in Greece at the time when DeLillo was working on his seventh novel, *The Names* (1982), the author explains to LeClair why he is so reluctant to discuss the ideas that underpin his novels:

"It's my nature to keep quiet about most things. Even the ideas in my work. When you try to unravel something you've written, you belittle it in a way."<sup>15</sup>

And so the critic has to draw largely on his/her own resources in order to obtain an understanding of the influences and drives that led DeLillo to construct his often abstruse examinations of contemporary life. Such a point of entry is of course unnecessary. One can respect the autonomy of the text and explore merely what is given. With DeLillo's novels however, one is invited to make connections, to close the circles and to appreciate the sources of his many implicit propositions. The study will therefore approach DeLillo's work from a number of different angles. The primary focus will be on DeLillo's exploration of human communication mechanisms in the postmodern age and their effect upon the languages and attitude of the individual but in order to do this it will draw on some influential and varied theoretical accounts of postmodernism to contextualise DeLillo's particular representation of contemporary society.

The study is structured around five distinct chapters. The first, a theoretical contextualisation gives an advanced introduction to DeLillo's work. The ideas in the first chapter are then subsequently developed by three detailed single novel focused examinations and a concluding chapter that draws together the central arguments of the

thesis. Rather than opting for a chronological examination of the novels, a form successfully employed by LeClair and Douglas Keeseey, the chapters will focus on thematic, critical or contextual aspects of his work. The aim of the study is to open up new channels of interpretation and to explore ideas other critics have broached yet not followed through. In short, the thesis will consist of close reading and commentary upon most of DeLillo's eleven novels, debate with other critical readings of DeLillo, and a discussion and interpretation of theory complemented by an analysis of statements the author has made in interviews about his craft.

## **Chapter 1: 'An Assimilation of Perspectives': DeLillo in Theory**

From *Americana* (1971) to *Underworld* (1997), it is clear that Don DeLillo has maintained a tacit dialogue with the critical, cultural and social theory of the time. Interviews with DeLillo show that he has thought deeply about both the theory and practice of fiction and current trends in philosophy while writing his novels, and clearly his intellectual engagement informs the writing itself. This first chapter of the thesis will thus take the form of an analysis of perceived links between DeLillo's narrative strategies and the work of theorists such as Jean Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson and Walter Benjamin, whose ideas seem most akin to those imbued in DeLillo's fiction. The links made here will be developed, and receive more detailed treatment, in the rest of the thesis.

For instance, it is fruitful to use Baudrillard's notion of 'hyperreality' as a theoretical starting point when interpreting what Douglas Keeseey recognises as the way DeLillo's novels "engage in the intensive study of media representations of reality that threaten to distance us from nature and ourselves."<sup>16</sup> Throughout the novels, DeLillo examines human reactions to film, television and the written media - how they shape our notions of place, time and being. These 'behavioural studies,' while not consistently negative about such mediating structures, do seem to make obvious the ever increasing divide between, on the one hand, the individual and the machine, and on the other, the individual and the 'real' or 'natural' world. Implicit in DeLillo's work is the suggestion that humanity, in holding the middle ground between high technology and the natural world, is itself a form of "mediating structure," conscious of the possibility that either pole (through natural

disaster, cybernetic advance, or genetic redundancy) may render it obsolete. However, until the publication of *Underworld*, DeLillo provides the reader with few suggestions for how things could change for the better or how we can live with this uncertain new world order subordinate to our own 'life enhancing' creations, as DeLillo might say, 'eerily separated' from ourselves. For DeLillo's characters, life is the struggle to cope with a multitude of hidden forces and the certainty of death although, ironically, time and again it is the media event and its promise of immortality that provides some relief.

Broken into three connected parts – a logical progression from first world environmental pressures to linguistic solutions, culminating in an examination of DeLillo's perception of the role of the writer – the chapter will assess whether the fictional solutions offered by DeLillo to the problems associated with a hyperreal society are analogous to, question, or transcend, current theory.

### **Postmodern (Hyper)Realism: Survival in a Baudrillardian Environment**

Jean Baudrillard argues that a defining feature of postmodernity is the displacement of the real by what he calls 'simulacra,' models derived from pre-existing cultural narratives, particularly the recurrent narratives of cinema and television drama and advertising. In his words:

"Reality no longer has the time to take on the appearance of reality. It no longer even surpasses fiction: it captures every dream even before it takes on the appearance of a dream. Schizophrenic vertigo of these serial signs, for which no counterfeit, no sublimation is possible, immanent in their repetition – who could say what the reality is that these signs simulate?"<sup>17</sup>

His vision of an imploded America defined by its saturation with simulacra resembles the society in which most of DeLillo's novels are set. Indeed, it is clear that DeLillo's characters inhabit what can be termed 'Baudrillardian environments' – spatial representations of a depthless, information over-loaded society characterized by the proliferation of floating signifiers and 'spectacular' images. Aside from those who have clearly given in to their assimilation, DeLillo's characters are usually depicted struggling for survival in these environments, choosing a number of ways to stay on top of their own

sanity: seeking the 'authentic' ('auratic' experiences that fall outside of the processes of mediation and reduplication, a romantic return to a pre-information age world); taking refuge in 'small rooms'; or developing a kind of 'secular faith' – discovering the sacred in the quotidian. Implicit in this section of the chapter, introducing the next, will be the subject of whether DeLillo believes it is possible to reverse a perceived movement from "first person consciousness to third person,"<sup>18</sup> thus reinstituting the unitary subject. For Baudrillard the only way to do this – to counter the hyperreal system - is to engage it in symbolic exchange. After the contextualisation provided by this first section, the chapter will examine elements of such an exchange in DeLillo's work.

### **"Bang, You're Dead" - Language, Violence and the Return of the Real**

At times DeLillo examines language's power to transcend hurtful events and heal the psychological ruptures they have caused. However, he counterpoints this by presenting an antithetical view - materialising the signifier, transmogrifying the symbolic into the real, changing words into weapons. Taking its title from a campus game in *End Zone* (1972), this section of the chapter examines the connection between words, violence and 'the real' in DeLillo's novels, focusing on three novels that seem to provide a (somewhat schematic) development of the same idea – *The Names* (1982), *White Noise* (1985), and *Great Jones Street* (1973). Particular emphasis will be placed on the role played by the murderous language cult in *The Names*, who choose their victims through a connection of proper nouns that seems to mirror the arbitrariness of the linguistic process - the coupling of signifier and referent. Expanding on the ideas of Baudrillard discussed in the first part of the chapter, this section will question whether DeLillo here may be playing with the notion of symbolic exchange. One interpretation could be that the victims have been sacrificed to the logos in order to disrupt and undermine the language system from within. Another, as argued by Keeseey, is that the cultists "fear disorder" and through alphabetical symmetry, murder "by system, by machine intellect,"<sup>19</sup> reassert stasis, linguistic perfection and the simple connectivity of the world. Following this theoretically informed assessment of *The Names*, complementary analyses will be made of two seemingly diametrically opposed set pieces in *White Noise* and *Great Jones Street* – both involving fictitious wonder drugs that affect the human response to language. The section will argue

that alongside other linguistic explorations in his novels, these three works provide the reader with an insight into the way DeLillo chooses to explore every angle of a hypothesis, deconstructing theory itself, in an effort to discover solutions to the apparent insolubility of hyperreality.

### **The Battle over Human Consciousness: The Writer and the Terrorist**

Having looked at hyperreal environments and how words can be used as weapons as a means of countering the 'system', this final section of the chapter will examine the praxis of dissident writing in relation to both. Primarily, it will interpret DeLillo's views on the role of the novelist, through an assessment of statements in interviews and a detailed reading of *Mao II* (1991). With increasing incidence in the late 1980s, DeLillo publicly voiced his perception that the writer's ability to influence his/her reader has been eroded over time by incorporation and a lack of daring. In his view it is now terrorists - those who use their weapons in place of words - who possess the 'language and vision' to "infiltrate and alter consciousness."<sup>20</sup> Indeed, it was this feeling, and the *fatwa* placed on Salman Rushdie, that inspired him to write *Mao II* - the story of a reclusive novelist who re-enters the world in an attempt to free a hostage from a group of Beirut terrorists. The protagonist Bill Gray once believed that "it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture," but, like his author DeLillo, recognises that "bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory."<sup>21</sup> That Gray sacrifices his privacy and, in a way, his life itself in order to reverse this process is a reinforcement of DeLillo's provocative views and an indictment of his profession. This section of the chapter will examine the implications of Gray's re-emergence into the world, connecting it once more with Baudrillardian theory. If the writing of 'conventional' narrative is no way to reach the reader, what stance should today's dissident writers take? Must Barthes famous notion of the 'death of the author' take a literal form in order for a writer to avoid absorption "into breakfast food or canned laughter?"<sup>22</sup>

## **Chapter 2: Ghostwritten into the Historical Sublime: *Libra* and the Textual Manipulation of an Assassin**

In all of DeLillo's work, the act of naming and the pronunciation of things - the labelling process or assigning of signifier to referent - is foregrounded to such a large extent in both narrative and dialogue that its recurrence from text to text becomes obvious to the observant reader. Indeed, it seems as if Don DeLillo is consistently focused on an attempt to identify a 'magic of names' in 20<sup>th</sup> century society. So suffused in his writing is this opposition of the named and the nameless that one must feel it is central to his work. Whether trapped in the jargon filled logic games of academia or simply expressing themselves in the argot of the street, DeLillo's characters are presented as *de facto* users of the reality defining system of language - human beings, like the rest of us, engaging in talk. However, they are often subjected to sensations and experiences lying outside of the range of this system - the imaginary or the sublime. Often these 'nameless' events invoke feelings of fear and dread. Consequently, knowledge of an assigned name often grants them a sense of comfort and a belief in order and stability as well as performing a determinative/denotative function, suggesting identity by fixing the individual with a recognisable title: an immutable signifier-referent bond. DeLillo often counterpoints the wonder/discomfiture of 'unnameable' events with the symbolic logic of hyperreality to emphasise the inadequacies of the latter. However, with his depiction of Lee Harvey Oswald - a dyslexic, aspirant writer, textually manipulated into history - things become a little more complicated.

This chapter will examine DeLillo's preoccupation with names in direct relation to his controversial novel *Libra* (1988) and will expand upon the theoretical parallels drawn in the first chapter of the thesis. Rather than tackle one aspect of 'naming,' the chapter will assess how DeLillo's depiction of the 'inner life' of Lee Harvey Oswald seems to draw upon Jacques Lacan's ideas on the role of the paternal signifier and Jean Francois-

Lyotard's notion of the 'hysterical sublime' – a postmodern reworking of Burke and Kant's definition of the concept. Well known for his recognition of the epistemological shift from modernism to postmodernism, characterised by society's growing 'incredulity towards 'metanarratives,' Lyotard's other work has been overlooked in relation to literary criticism. However, his view that science and other forms of formal discourse are now best understood, after Wittgenstein, as 'language games,' excluding players whose discourse is "at variance with the dominant rules of argumentation and validation"<sup>23</sup> seems well suited to a discussion of DeLillo's fiction. The name Lyotard gives to this 'silencing' is the *differend* and his own connection between the *differend* and the Kantian sublime ("the sublime feeling does not come from the object...but is an index of a unique state of mind which recognises its incapacity to find an object adequate to the sublime feeling")<sup>24</sup> will be used to inform a discussion on DeLillo's fascination with the 'nameless.'

As an expansion of these ideas, the chapter will conclude with a complementary study of the complex relationship between the word and the image in *Libra*: a blurred dichotomy DeLillo borrows from the two informational sources traditionally used to 'get a grip' on the reality of the assassination – The Zapruder Film and The Warren Commission Report. Tellingly, Kennedy's assassination is an event referred to by DeLillo in the novel as an "aberration in the heartland of the real."<sup>25</sup> But the important thing about the Kennedy 'aberration' for DeLillo is not the reverberating gravity of the event, but how our understanding of what went on that day is informed by texts - written and filmic. In *Libra* DeLillo consistently alludes to film titles, often providing the reader with brief, carefully placed precis of the films themselves that seem to provide cinematic correlations with episodes depicted in the novel – visual allegories of the unfolding conspiracy. The films, ranging from seminal Hollywood pictures to the works of Kurosawa, are all couched in the language of the imagination – reliant upon a suspension of reality. During the closing stages of *Libra* however, film is recontextualised by DeLillo. It becomes the medium of reality capture, a source of documentary footage, as he informs his account of the assassination of Kennedy by enclosing a written version of the infamous Zapruder home movie that so vividly depicted the events in Dealey Plaza. *Libra* is as much an

examination of the spectacle of Kennedy's assassination as a putative assessment of the part played by any conspiracy group. Indeed, determined to show how the image can infiltrate, even at the point of death, DeLillo provides us with the imagined filmic consciousness of an Oswald who constructs a third person perception of his own reaction to Ruby's bullet entering his body.

"Through the pain, through the losing of sensation except where it hurt, Lee watched himself react to the auguring heat of the bullet."<sup>26</sup>

DeLillo persuades us that Oswald is aware of the immersing nature of the moving image, his third person reaction to being shot by Jack Ruby a symptom of his recognition of being part of history. In short, he steps out of the image to become part of the audience, one of the open-mouthed masses.

Throughout the novel DeLillo points out to us, through a constant reference to films of the period, and a variety of written texts - novels, newspapers, manuals handbooks and most notably the Warren Report "...the megaton novel James Joyce would have written if he'd moved to Iowa City and lived to be a hundred"<sup>27</sup> - the part played by image and word in making the assassination probably the most spectacular and powerful event of the twentieth century. Drawing once more on the work of Jean-Francois Lyotard, (this time his doctoral thesis - *discours, figure*), a close-analysis of text and image in relation to character and authorial intent will be made, and obvious parallels drawn between Lyotard's discursive/figural opposition and the dichotomy of the named and the sublime assessed in the rest of the chapter.

### **Chapter 3: "Language is the mirror of the world." *Ratner's Star*: Reflections of the Inexpressible**

DeLillo has said that writing "means...trying to make interesting, clear, beautiful language,"<sup>28</sup> and that he is more than willing to let language 'press meaning' upon him. However, time and again in his work we can see that he is attempting to pick apart the structures and systems controlling human communication in the late twentieth century through the use of thesis-like dialogue between characters and formalist games. Often



DeLillo has been criticised for foregrounding ideas at the expense of character, of merely viewing characters as mouthpieces for his often abstract understanding of American life. Anyone who has read *White Noise* or *Underworld*, and followed the fictional lives of Jack Gladney and Nick Shay, will know that, when the mood takes him, he is more than capable of rendering identity with subtlety and compassion. With *Ratner's Star* though, it is clear that, for a multitude of reasons, a subordination of characterization to ideas does take place. Indeed, this chapter puts forward the argument that DeLillo's 'monologism' is wholly intentional, part of a radical fictional strategy of systemic deconstruction and human reorientation. In order to discuss the twofold nature of DeLillo's design, the chapter is consequently divided into two sections – each a substantive examination in its own right.

### **Controlled Monologism and Collapsed Oppositions**

With its emphasis on space and time, and the false impression of a multiplicity of voices, *Ratner's Star* lends itself to a Bakhtinian analysis, where concepts such as the 'chronotope' and 'dialogism' neatly fit the design and purpose of the novel.

Dialogism refers to the plenitude of meanings inherent in some works of literature – the detachment of character from author creating a multi-levelled and open text, anti-authoritarian and reflective of society at large with its competing egos and class divides. Bakhtin privileges this 'polyphonic' form over the monologic text as it liberates the voices of those who might otherwise go unheard. To elaborate:

“A word, discourse, language or culture undergoes “dialogization” when it becomes relativized, de-privileged, aware of competing definitions for the same things. Undialogized language is authoritative or absolute.”<sup>29</sup>

In *Ratner's Star* scientists vie for attention - their specific fields of interest are thrust upon Billy Twillig as he meets them, himself an exponent of monologism, working in a field only he really understands – and the novel develops as if it were a series of academic abstracts for competing theses. As Tom LeClair observes: “The specialization of [the scientists'] knowledge and its formulation in frequently non-natural languages make the

content inexpressible in the traditional and intimate form of reciprocal dialogue.”<sup>30</sup> For the reader too, the characters’ specialised discourses seem to fall under the all-encompassing umbrella of science rather than being recognisably divergent in any human sense – as we might find with the equally cerebral yet noticeably more ‘rounded’ Murray J. Siskind in *White Noise*. Thus scientific discourse is offered as authoritative and absolute in the novel, despite its internal relativism, paradigm shifts and contradictions. However, as the novel progresses, the reader, in spite of his/her ignorance of the underpinning theories, realises that this authority is under threat from a message from space that eludes understanding. Remaining undeciphered until the end of the novel, the mathematical code causes the Nobel prize winners so much anxiety that they decide to “submit mathematics...to a searching self-examination.”<sup>31</sup> Logicon Project Minus-One, an attempt to find a metalanguage with which to undertake this examination, ultimately fails and the message turns out to be the time prediction of an eclipse, not a message in any linguistic form.

Brian McHale in *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) draws upon Bakhtin’s metaphor of “worlds” to describe differing points of view or, “socio-ideological conceptual system[s] of real social groups and their embodied representatives,” within texts. Postmodernist fiction, he argues, “by heightening the polyphonic structure and sharpening the dialogue in various ways, foregrounds the ontological dimension of the confrontation among discourses, thus achieving a polyphony of *worlds*.”<sup>32</sup> The irony at the conclusion of *Ratner’s Star* is of course that the message had been sent from Earth, from ourselves, and not from another world. This, and the conscious flattening of characterization, limiting characters to ‘identity through specialised scientific discourse’ suggests that DeLillo himself intended some sort of message for his reader to decipher – one on the nature of inter-subjective communication.

Existing critical examinations of *Ratner’s Star* have focused on the systemic or allusive aspects of the novel, ignoring any close analysis of his satirical attack on the scientific community. One could widen the above argument to say that this attack is bound up in a formal structure that can be construed as a comment on not only inter-subjective communication but poststructural notions of the nature of language itself that can be

related to the 'epistemological shift' from essentialism to relativism. The narrative drive of the novel may be read as the need to obtain a glimpse at the transcendental, that which will always be beyond the structure and therefore always elusive. However, nothing escapes the logic of the sign and therefore, reality, for DeLillo's characters, is communicative inadequacy, word games, fear of the unknown/nameless. The scientists' inability to escape the system is best expressed by their futile search for a metalanguage that would give them a 'transcendental perspective.' This first section of this chapter will therefore suggest that DeLillo *opts* to present a 'monologic' novel in order to foreground a sense of linguistic imprisonment. Characters are mocked by reflections of the inexpressible and the 'floating' signifiers of their distant past leading them both literally and metaphorically to dig themselves into a hole in the ground.

### **Cognitive Mapping and the Chronotopic Genre of *Ratner's Star***

Literally meaning "time space", Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope refers to a unit of literary analysis which focuses upon the "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature."<sup>33</sup> Loosely based on Einstein's Theory of Relativity, the chronotope, for Bakhtin, "defines genre and generic distinctions" – an assertion he supports with an examination of the 'Greek Romance', 'The Chivalric Romance' and 'The Rabelaisian Novel'.

From a "vast geometric structure" that causes "perspectives to disappear", to a message from space that connects the past and present, defying pre-relativity ideas of time and subverting the idea of scientific advancement, *Ratner's Star* is saturated with references to time and space that on a surface level seem to fit the concerns of contemporaneous works of science-fiction, but actually go someway beyond their scope. In Douglas Keesey's words, *Ratner's Star* seems "to cross and recross so many generic boundaries as to leave the reader hopelessly confused about its place in literary history."<sup>34</sup> Respecting DeLillo's intention to work outside of conventional ideas of genre with this novel, this section of the chapter will feature a secondary Bakhtinian interpretation of DeLillo's most difficult work and an attempt will be made to place it in a 'chronotopic genre'. Time and space in a

Baudrillardian context was covered in the first chapter, and some of the ideas raised there will be extended. More importantly however, this chapter will primarily consider in detail the proposal that DeLillo engages in a chronotopic narrative strategy of, what Fredric Jameson terms, 'cognitive mapping' – a way of settling human confusions arising from the special dimensions of postmodern hyperspace. It will discuss whether DeLillo's work is a radical means of contextualising the reader in a postmodern world where the work of art must accommodate content that by definition "radically resist[s] and escape[s] artistic figuration."<sup>35</sup>

In other novels we have seen that for DeLillo, the individual is powerfully shaped by consumption of television, film and many forms of commodification and simulation. Continually picking apart contemporary mores, and satirising many of the domestic rituals shared by most of 'middle class' America, DeLillo seems to question the pervasive and insidious role played by new technology and the way in which language in its myriad forms has evolved as a consequence. In *White Noise* (1984) for instance, Jack Gladney's children recite product advertising in their sleep, the names having seeped into their unconscious from the television; while their father feels an "eerie separation" between his medical condition and himself, the illness being reduced to "bracketed numbers and pulsing stars" on a computer screen.<sup>36</sup> In a 1994 radio interview with Ray Suarez, DeLillo articulates his concern:

"...There's something beneath the domestic veneer of our lives that is carried somewhat perniciously by the force of technology. And it causes an odd sort of almost unrealizable dread."<sup>37</sup>

For Fredric Jameson the unrealizable dread DeLillo talks of relates to postmodern hyperspace and its ability to elicit strange new feelings: a new anxiety deriving from the "absence of inside and outside, the bewilderment and loss of spatial orientation...[and] the messiness of an environment in which things and people no longer find their 'place.'"<sup>38</sup> Cognitive mapping allows the individual human body to reorientate or relocate itself and organise perceptually its immediate surroundings. Developing this argument the chapter concludes with the radical notion that *Ratner's Star* is so bound up in its cybernetic

origins, structure and system that it can be read as a soft-machine, producing a kind of cyberspace. We, as readers, in entering the novel experience the dislocation of the protagonist and this identification of the human in the machine produces a recognition or mapping of the changing dimensions of our own ontology.

#### **Chapter 4: Mystical Twins: Waste and Warfare in *Underworld***

Having assessed DeLillo's position on communication systems and the temporal-spatial dimensions of contemporary existence, the penultimate chapter constitutes a diversion from experience, passivity and subjection (being acted upon) towards material practice - human culpability for environmental disaster. In DeLillo's view, waste and weapons have a curious mystical connection that spans history. Using historical and fictional scraps to build the narrative, *Underworld*, itself a form of *objet trouve*, examines this connection alongside an intelligent analysis of rampant consumerism (the desire for the object) and environmentalism.

In his study of *White Noise*, Richard Kerridge suggests that DeLillo uses environmental crisis in the novel as a way of interrogating postmodernism's indeterminacy and pluralism, self-consciousness and irony. Ecological catastrophe takes the form of the 'airborne toxic event' constituting a "dangerous invasion of paradise by the excluded and repressed"<sup>39</sup> - the lost totality of nature. However, and this is where the critique of postmodernism comes in, both the characters and the reader are in some sense disengaged by parodic narratives of mediation that fail to emotionally stabilize the crisis. In resorting to pre-existing cultural models as a means of processing the disaster, the novel's protagonist absorbs the 'reality' in his own intuitive understanding of sign-exchange. Thus the 'airborne toxic event' is ultimately dismissed as 'disaster narrative.' For Cynthia Deitering, toxic waste functions in contemporary fiction "both as a cultural metaphor for a society's most general fears about its collective future and as an expression of an ontological rupture in its perception of the Real."<sup>40</sup> For Kerridge, *White Noise* "dramatizes...the impasse between environmental consciousness and the inability of a culture to change."<sup>41</sup>

With *Underworld* however, what DeLillo terms “toxic consciousness” is taken one stage further as DeLillo examines how, in the late nineties, the developed world has to an extent bridged the gap between environmental consciousness and practice and made a move towards material change. For example, as its main character Nick Shay recognises, environmental policy has become foregrounded to the extent where, “people look at their garbage differently now, seeing every bottle and crushed carton in a planetary context.”<sup>42</sup> Nick takes his granddaughter to a recycling plant near his home to watch a reversal of the alimentary process - the waste product reborn as commodity “alight with a kind of brave aging”<sup>43</sup> - and seems spiritually enriched by the operation. However, as DeLillo is at pains to suggest, environmental consciousness and its emblematic material incarnation - recycling - has yet to transcend national boundaries: a form of First World Nimbyism prevails in the wake of the Cold War. Graphic descriptions of deformed victims of radiation - “downwinders” - litter the pages, and America's military ‘containment policy’ is given an ironic twist as container ships circle the globe looking for impoverished nations to accept a deadly cargo of toxic waste:

“A country will take a fee amounting to four times its gross national product to accept a shipment of toxic waste. What happens after that? We don’t want to know.”<sup>44</sup>

Former ‘Garbage Guerrilla’ Jesse Detwiler, *Underworld*’s equivalent of *White Noise*’s Murray J. Siskind, outspoken, insightful and you feel merely a conduit for DeLillo’s own philosophical observations, sees civilisation as a necessary corollary of waste - a “control system” built to deal with the problem of garbage. In his view garbage, “...Forced us to develop the logic and rigor that would lead to systematic investigations of reality, to science, art, music, mathematics.”<sup>45</sup> Following his train of thought, the development of cyberspace could therefore be read as the sequential end point in the argument, the place where society can flourish beyond the boundaries of waste. Knowing DeLillo’s negative attitude towards technology, one might assume that he would disagree with this hypothesis, choosing to forecast its dystopian implications. Surprisingly, the conclusion of the novel – an optimistic conceit suggesting technology’s potential for human self-liberation or transcendence – seems to suggest that DeLillo may have undergone an

attitudinal sea-change. Moreover, alongside the positive ontological dimensions of cyberspace, *Underworld*'s argument seems to be that by re-evaluating, appropriating and applying technology against itself, in the form of the internet, nuclear conflict may be contained by the techno-rational system that aided its cold-war escalation. Beginning with a close reading of how waste and warfare features in the novel, and expanding into an ecocritically informed discussion of authorial intention, particularly where technoscience is concerned, the aim is to profile the advances and failings of DeLillo's radical answer to a global problem and analyse the methodology behind his green aesthetic. It will discuss how DeLillo answers his own implicit questions and calls for a re-awakening of sustained environmentalism by placing the individual in a global context, emphasising collective accountability as well as national difference.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusions - DeLillo in Context**

There is a longstanding tradition of fictions of resistance, works that question the validity of legitimating codes of morality or technological progress, attacking modes of thought that run counter to the common good. Resistance can exist in many guises - open satire, parody, the fable, the tendentious political novel and the comic, absurd or carnivalesque. DeLillo has experimented to some degree with all of these forms, sometimes as part of a direct assault on those institutions and structures he sees as penetrating and commodifying the life of the individual subject, and sometimes as thinly veiled didacticism - filtering essential data for us from an explosion of information. For Eric Mottram, DeLillo is working "where utopia and dystopia are indistinguishable,"<sup>46</sup> careful to offset control and domination with an articulation of consumer desire and the illusions of freedom. In this he is not alone. The final chapter of the thesis will draw together the observations and assertions of the previous chapters and place DeLillo's work in its literary-historical context as part of a postmodern avant-garde. For instance, in recognition of his new-found worldwide exposure, the first world universality of his social-critique and parallels of theme and style, his work will be compared to that of contemporary European 'metatheorists' such as Umberto Eco and Milan Kundera.

Secondary to this literary-historical contextualisation the final chapter will also provide cohesion to the ideas of Fredric Jameson mentioned earlier in the thesis - whether tacit or overt the proposal is made that DeLillo has embarked upon what Jameson terms “an aesthetic of cognitive mapping” in seeking “to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system.”<sup>47</sup> The conclusion will propose that DeLillo facilitates ‘cognitive mapping’ by utilising a methodology Jameson has envisioned for pure theory: the transcoding of conceptual terminologies. Through a reading of DeLillo’s latest publication, *The Body Artist* (2001), the complex criteria behind this methodology will be summarised.



## Chapter One

# An ‘Assimilation of Perspectives’: DeLillo in Theory

“I am not sure whether I could or would like to give a theoretical abstract of my work.” (Don DeLillo)<sup>1</sup>

For Frank Lentricchia, a prolific critic of American literature, Don DeLillo’s work seamlessly unites the classically opposed impulses of aestheticism and cultural criticism, taking for its “critical object of aesthetic concern the postmodern situation.”<sup>2</sup> In a way the purpose of this study is to unpick what Lentricchia has called DeLillo’s ‘perfect weave’ in order to free the strands of theory and cultural criticism from the narrative and, in the process, understand a little more about the ideas underpinning his stylistically singular depictions of contemporary society. Over the past few years, with increasing concentration, much has been made of perceived links between Don DeLillo’s novels and the works of contemporary cultural, sociological and critical theorists. Arguably, this acceleration to a position of widespread academic acknowledgement began with the first major critical study of DeLillo’s oeuvre, Tom LeClair’s *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (1987), a reading of the novels focusing on DeLillo’s strategy of narrative looping and its connection with the work of ‘system’ theorists such as Ludwig von Bertalanffy and R.D. Laing. Rather than attempting to replicate LeClair’s scientific approach, later interpretative studies have been influenced by current, and academically fashionable, strands of French ‘language’ philosophy, poststructuralism and the thoughts of ‘postmodern’ commentators. Indeed, one cannot now read *White Noise* without thinking of multitudinous references to Jean Baudrillard’s hyperbolic assessment of an information-imploded, simulation-rich America. However, it is fair to say that DeLillo’s writing invites these connections, rather than pointing tendentiously to the work of any one critic. Moreover, his own stance on given issues is usually unclear, locked in the rhizomic horizontality of novelistic relativism, rather than moving through the linear rationality of the dialectic. Themes are revised and reassessed from novel to novel while

characters are consistently portrayed seeking refuge in systems or solace in the metanarratives of language, maths, science, and religion in an effort to hide from the unknown, the nameless and the contingent or accidental.

This chapter will attempt to place DeLillo's work in a theoretical context that will be drawn upon subsequently in three single novel focused chapters. Brief studies of existing criticism will be incorporated in a logical progression that begins with an overview of DeLillo's depictions of the relationship his characters have with the postmodern environment in which they live, and ends, by way of an analysis of language and terror, with the role DeLillo perceives for the novelist in such a society. Much recent criticism, for obvious reasons, is centred on *Underworld* (1997), by far the largest of his eleven novels. Many argue that all of the dichotomous themes he has touched upon in his other works are crystallised here: the relationship between 'advanced technology and contemporary fear', the individual and the masses, the visual and the textual, waste and warfare and the named and the nameless. In an effort to read DeLillo's manifest intentions alongside interpretations of the novels, this chapter will consequently also examine interviews conducted with the author, in which he discusses the background to his writing and re-evaluates his motivations.

Due to the range of subjects, interrelated and substantive, that will be covered in the chapter, it was thought best to break the material down into manageable sections. Some of the sections will highlight the work of specific theorists such as Walter Benjamin, connecting their work with DeLillo's, while other sections will approach broader areas of interest, for instance DeLillo's views on the role of the writer as cultural terrorist.

Throughout this chapter, many references will be made to postmodern terminologies. For the sake of brevity, and a wish to avoid covering well trodden ground, it is best to assume that the ideas underpinning these terms are familiar. However, where it is thought that confusions may arise, a full explanation will be made.

## Postmodern (Hyper)Realism: Survival in a Baudrillardian Environment

“We were becoming a nation devoted to human xerography.” (*End Zone*)<sup>3</sup>

For DeLillo, reacting against what he perceives to be a need in modern(ist) writing to place characters in thinly drawn or theoretical landscapes or to subordinate a book's environment to ‘deeper’ concerns or motivations, the setting of a novel is as important as character or plot. DeLillo's characters are usually intimately connected with the place they inhabit or happen to be visiting in a novel. Regardless of whether the place is a small room, or a seemingly unending expanse of desert, their environment seems to provide a concrete correlative to the character's own ‘cognitive mapping’ (a term borrowed from psychological disciplines by cultural theorist Frederic Jameson relating to the systemic mental apprehension of space that will be defined in some detail in a chapter on *Ratner's Star*). In DeLillo's words:

“So much modern fiction is located precisely nowhere. This is Beckett and Kafka insinuating themselves onto the page. Their work is so woven into the material of modern life that it's not surprising so many writers choose to live there, or choose to have their characters live there. 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.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite his eschewal of any theoretical basis for his construction of place, one could argue that the environments DeLillo writes about in his novels, and not just those he has experienced first-hand such as the Bronx of his childhood (as depicted in *Underworld*), can generally be connected to a number of constantly ‘revisited sites’ that serve to complement his ideas on the shaping of the individual. Indeed, it could be argued that his view of ‘human space’ is a connected dynamic, moving on a continuum through his novels from the transAmerican odyssey of David Bell in *Americana*, with its dissection of essentially American experience, to the fractured global view of *Underworld* with its concluding journey into cyberspace. This section of the chapter will examine these environments, ask why they feature so often in his work, and relate DeLillo's motivations to theory.

Social geographer and cultural commentator David Harvey, in his study *The Condition of Postmodernity*, argues that, "...Time and space (or language for that matter) cannot be understood independently of social action"<sup>5</sup> and draws upon Henri Lefebvre's three dimensions of space, as outlined in *The Production of Space* (1974), to reinforce his examination of 'spatial practices' in the postmodern world. In brief, Lefebvre, in his quest to engender a "science of space", relates actual space to symbolic inventions of space, including the arts, and to phenomenological or cognitive parallels, respectively, the *experienced*, the *perceived*, and the *imagined*. In other words, we have the lived world, the read or understood world, and the created world. Harvey's understanding of Lefebvre's three dimensions of space is as follows:

**1 Material Spatial Practices** - This refers to the physical and material flows, transfers and interactions that occur in and across space in such a way as to assure production and social reproduction.

**2 Representations Of Space** - This encompasses all of the signs and significations, codes and knowledge, that allow such material practices to be talked about and understood, no matter whether in terms of everyday common-sense or through the sometimes arcane jargon of the academic disciplines that deal with spatial practices.

**3 Spaces Of Representation** - These are mental inventions (codes, signs, 'spatial discourses,' utopian plans, imaginary landscapes, and even material constructs such as symbolic spaces, particular built environments, paintings, museums, and the like) that imagine new meanings or possibilities for spatial practices.

(Harvey 1990, after Lefebvre, COP, 218/219)

With this in mind, one might argue that any writer aiming to either depict or satirise the spirit of an epoch with any degree of 'accuracy' would hope to communicate, explicitly or implicitly, its notions of experienced and perceived space, and often by way of the imagined. Beckett and Kafka chose to communicate their experiences and perceptions of the world in allegorical studies that deliberately obfuscated the landmarks of the lived world, replacing them with symbolic spaces of unknown identity. They and others adopted 'modernist' uses of metaphor to capture a perceived sense of collective human

paranoia and meaninglessness in the face of global technocracies, fascism and increasing secularisation. As such, the alienation of their characters *is* a form of ‘cognitive mapping’. As DeLillo says, their fiction is located “precisely nowhere,” and this is because, cognitively, for these writers aiming to convey a representative emotion, this is where they thought many people were situated, estranged from the world.

DeLillo’s statement that he has rejected ‘theoretically landscaped’ fiction may ring falsely with those who have read *Ratner’s Star*, a novel set in a fantastic structure somewhere in the Chinese Desert and occupied by a host of theory spouting Nobel Laureates, all of whom sound, as many critics have suggested, like mere mouthpieces for DeLillo’s own ideas. In general though, the spaces in DeLillo’s fiction, if not the places, are based on his perceptions of the ‘real’ world and its material spatial practices. In his words:

“I’ve always had a grounding in the real world, whatever esoteric flights I might indulge in from time to time.”<sup>6</sup>

But how real is the ‘real’ world DeLillo aims to delineate? If we are to believe the pronouncements of many contemporary theorists, the America of DeLillo’s fiction is by definition postmodern, subject to the insidious control of global capitalism and the (re)production of simulacra - a depthless, information-overloaded, repetitious society that ‘fragments’ rather than alienates the human subject. Indeed, most apparent in *White Noise*, but finding treatment in varying degrees in all of DeLillo’s novels, is what can be termed the ‘Baudrillardian Environment’: DeLillo’s hyperbolic representation of an image-obsessed techno-culture, characterised by the proliferation of simulacra (hyperreality) and a blurred division of the imaginary, symbolic and real, that finds socio-philosophical parallels in the work of Jean Baudrillard, the enigmatic enfant terrible of current theory. According to Baudrillard, the hyperreal can be defined as “...the meticulous reduplication of the real, preferably through another reproductive medium such as advertising or photography.”<sup>7</sup> Drawing on the work of Jean-Francois Lyotard, Baudrillard argues that “The hyperreal is beyond representation only because it is entirely within simulation” (SED, 73), and that ‘reality’ has become a “schizophrenic vertigo of serial signs that have no counterfeit, no possible sublimation, and are immanent to their own repetition” (SED,

75). In *The Condition Of Postmodernity*, David Harvey quotes from a 1987 *New York Times* essay by Charles Newman that usefully connects the American novel with such a society:

“...A sense of diminishing control, loss of individual autonomy and generalized helplessness has never been so instantaneously recognizable in our literature - the flattest possible characters in the flattest possible landscapes rendered in the flattest possible diction. The presumption seems to be that American is a vast fibrous desert in which a few laconic weeds nevertheless manage to sprout in the cracks.” (COP, 58)

However, aside from the one-dimensional characters in *Ratner's Star* who, it can be argued, were drawn this way for a reason, depthlessness is not a word one could apply to DeLillo's work, that often looks for meaning beyond the manifest - seeking out the transcendent in zones of consumerism and banality, searching for authentic experiences in a world of repetition. Take for instance the following interpretation of a supermarket in *White Noise* by the character Murray Jay Siskind, a ‘lecturer on living icons’ described by Tom LeClair as a “peripatetic Socrates,” who offers the reader incisive insights into the world, “especially the meaning of its communications systems”<sup>8</sup>:

“This place recharges us spiritually, it prepares us, it's a gateway or pathway. Look how bright. It's full of psychic data...Everything is concealed in symbolism, hidden by veils of mystery and layers of cultural material...The large doors slide open, they close unbidden. Energy waves, incident radiation. All the letters and numbers are here, all the colors of the spectrum, all the code words and ceremonial phrases. It is just a question of deciphering, rearranging, peeling off the layers of unspeakability.”<sup>9</sup>

Many have argued that the assertions put forward by this hyperbolic tutor of the arcane, his ways of decoding the consumer environment to discover a world of magic and mystery, are coterminous with his creator, DeLillo, whose novels function through a similar ‘deciphering, rearranging and peeling’ process. Indeed, LeClair feels that DeLillo “means the reader to take seriously Siskind's analysis of essentially religious experience in secular forms” (ITL, 228). Other critics however, such as Bradley Butterfield, posit that Murray is in fact “postmodern technology's sinister and seductive stand-in for Baudrillard”<sup>10</sup> himself, and thus should be rejected as the provider of unsatisfactory critiques and theory that is in itself hyperreal – floating and detached from the real.

Whatever the case, there is no doubt that from novel to novel DeLillo homes in on the actualities of society in an effort to deconstruct that which has assimilated us: to search within the hyperreal system for the micro-systems or secular rituals underpinning our daily lives, and to assess whatever 'psychic data' comes his way. Sometimes, as with Siskind, we feel compelled to listen to his characters, but more often than not, we form our own interpretations of the 'letters and numbers, code words and ceremonial phrases' with which DeLillo forms his own unique and multilayered picture of life in the late twentieth century. In looking, he is showing us how to look; in representing his characters' struggle for survival and sanity, he allows us to connect, to empathise and to understand. The question is, if DeLillo's characters are inextricably connected on a cognitive level with their environment, and this environment is hyperreal in nature, what form does their struggle for survival and sanity take?

### **Seeking the Authentic**

In DeLillo's first novel, *Americana*, television executive David Bell ventures from his New York office into middle America searching for authentic experiences, ironically documenting them through the medium of film, to assuage the feeling that he might, with an accidental push of a button, "...be erased forever."<sup>11</sup> At the beginning of the book David outlines the feeling of repetition in his life when describing his job at the network:

"Our words and actions seemed to have a disturbingly elapsed quality. We had said and done all these things before and they had been frozen for a time, rolled up in little laboratory trays to await broadcast and rebroadcast when the proper time-slots became available...We seemed to be no more than electronic signals and we moved through time and space with the stutter and shadowed insanity of a TV commercial. " (A, 23)

David's search to find himself, and react against the excessive visual rationality of conventional media representation, culminates in his creation of a movie that "functions best as a sort of ultimate schizogram, an exercise in diametrics which attempts to unmake meaning" (A, 347). His mind, having been bombarded since childhood with a constant flow of televisual information, receives non-televisual information in the same way and consequently his 'psychical programming' requires him to express himself in the medium he knows best. For Tom LeClair, this form of

socialisation is a “feeding [of] false images of the world and consumer ideology into the brain before the child can experience the world” (ITL, 47). LeClair’s assessment of the novel is that it is “a book that perceptively analyzes the psychology of an American family within the technologies of mass communications, showing how consciousness is furrowed and grooved by precisely those devices that should set it free” (ITL, 33). David Bell is aware of the fact that as an individual subject to short bursts of information he has in a sense become transient, electronically processed and unreal himself - part of a process of cultural implosion - and therefore tries to recover his sense of experiential reality through his visual interpretation and apprehension of the past. Moreover, his film serves not only a cathartic and actualising function for an individual wrestling with the ‘furrows and grooves’ of personal history and searching for answers, but also represents a confirmation of one man’s compulsion to express himself in the language of the age. David is a self-perceived victim, and producer, of what Guy Debord terms as the *spectacle*, but his loyalties to visual representation prevent a renunciation of a medium that is embedded in his consciousness. Whatever he does, Bell cannot escape the formative visual power of advertising:

“...The institutional messages, the psalms and placards, the pictures, the words. Better living through chemistry. The Sears, Roebuck catalog. Aunt Jemima. All the impulses of all the media were fed into the circuitry of my dreams. One thinks of echoes. One thinks of an image made in the image and likeness of images. It was that complex.” (A, 130)

At the end of the novel however, David successfully manages to escape the technology that had conditioned him as he embarks upon the writing of a book: the power of the ‘cinematic’ doesn’t quite allow him the sense of release that he craves. In a radio interview, conducted a quarter of a century after *Americana* was published, DeLillo outlines his fears about how technology ultimately fails to provide a solution to inherently human difficulties - the mechanistic, systematic and consequently repetitive predictability of the machine cannot connect with the chaos and irrationality of the psychological:

Every generation has a new sense of the sophistication of the technology being developed and how it will solve...certain problems of perception, how it will be superior to what we’ve had before. But sometimes it just doesn’t. There are some difficulties, there are human anxieties, that can’t be satisfied by the most sophisticated technology.”<sup>12</sup>



Finding the authentic, what Jeremy Green calls “a state beyond ambiguity and mediation”<sup>13</sup> suggested by a particularly American ‘culturally constructed promise’ of a return to voluntaristic individualism, connotes a stripping away of the mass self, the forces of reproducibility and psychologically dissatisfying technology. Although, as Green suggests, the promise may ultimately be empty, that doesn’t stop DeLillo’s characters from isolating themselves in an attempt to achieve it.

### **Retreat into Small Rooms**

“I think that (my characters) see freedom and possibility as being too remote from what they perceive existence to mean. They feel instinctively that there’s a certain struggle, a solitude they have to confront. The landscape is silent, whether it’s a desert, a small room, a hole in the ground.” (ACH, 83)

Survival in a ‘Baudrillardian environment’ can take the form of a retreat to a location away from technology and mass-market capitalism. Often small rooms with a disarming ordinariness about them, these locations, a motif of subject/spatial configuration, allow characters to indulge in political or philosophical extremism, simple asceticism or fear-driven paranoia. In *Great Jones Street* for example, one time rock star Bucky Wunderlick engineers his own disappearance from the “tropics of fame”<sup>14</sup> to ensconce himself in a “small crooked room, cold as a penny, looking out on warehouses, trucks and rubble” (GJS, 5). Situated between Ed Fenig, a writer who paces the boards in the apartment above him seeking inspiration for novels that will allow him access to an “untapped field in literature” (GJS, 49) and “the Micklewhite kid” in the apartment below, an unnamed, deformed boy who cannot speak, Bucky is literally between words and silence - a clear environmental parallel with his own mental state.

Providing the backdrop to two of his novels, *End Zone* and *White Noise*, and, in the form of an academic think-tank, a third, *Ratner’s Star*, ‘the campus’ represents a wonderful target for DeLillo’s satirical examinations of intellectual life. Logos College, the setting for *End Zone*, is described by the widow of its late founder as being “built out of nothing” by “a man of reason” - a deaf mute who could only grunt, make “disgusting sounds” and develop spittle “at the corners of his mouth” (EZ, 7). College football star Taft Robinson chooses to attend this little known institution in West Texas, and subsequently room alone, as it allows him to practise self-denial.

Drawn to the “pain and sacrifice” offered by coach Emmett Creed, Robinson is also attracted by the thought of living in isolation:

“Before I came here, I told Creed there was one condition. I room alone. I had to have that, I told him. I guess everybody thought they kept me separated in the name of racial sensitivity. But that wasn’t it at all. It was my idea from the beginning. It was the only demand I ever made of Creed. I room alone.” (EZ, 238)

Moreover, as he tells the novel’s narrator Gary Harkness, everything in his room is there for a reason and assumes massive importance, from a small tape mark on the wall - a “static form of beauty” - to the provision of two clocks - “They correct each other. Between them, a balance is arrived at, a notion of how much space has to be reconstructed. Space meaning difference between disagreeing hands” (EZ, 238/239) Robinson’s cell is a material testament to his personal philosophy - a quest to reduce his existence and concentrate on “small things” (EZ, 233) which finally leads him to giving up one big thing - football.

The existence of philosophical or theoretical ideas behind the placement of objects in a room is a subject also covered in *Ratner’s Star* - its recognition leading to Billy Twillig’s solution of a seemingly insoluble mathematical problem. Billy, who himself rooms in a “canister” within a huge building housing “Field Experiment Number One”, the decipherment of a message from space, is told by scientist Endor, who lives in a hole in the ground, that he should visit his room in the complex:

“Visit my room at Field Experiment Number One...I designed it myself. Had things shipped in special...It’s a room that may comfort you in the time of your inevitable terror...It’s a room in and of time. Nice place to sit and think.”<sup>15</sup>

Upon sitting in Endor’s room for some time, and recognising that the “relative placement” of objects have an element of design, Billy begins constructing an interpretation of Endor’s rationale, focusing on a wall clock in particular. As with Taft Robinson’s room, the clock’s existence is no accident. Endor’s Coca-Cola wall clock is frozen at a time that coincides exactly with the numbers in the message from space, prompting Billy to draw an inevitable connection: in DeLillo’s words “Digital clocks took the “space” out of time” (RS, 384) - but for Billy this analogue model puts the time into space.

DeLillo's most effective depiction of a 'man in a small room' however is his brilliant construction of the struggle for self and psychological turmoil of Lee Harvey Oswald. According to DeLillo, the assassination of JFK may have 'invented' him as a writer, such was the impact on his and, in his view, all of our lives. His novel *Libra*, a fictional account of the background to Oswald's shooting of the president, is in part a retrospective recognition of this impact on his previous novels: one could put forward a strong argument that most of his work can be directly connected to that fateful day in Dealey Plaza. Certainly, if we are looking for a source for his consistent thematic use of men in small rooms plotting or pursuing politically extreme courses of action, the 'Kennedy Conspiracy Group' and the private life of Oswald himself are obvious candidates. Interestingly, while researching the book DeLillo discovered that Oswald had grown up in the same neighbourhood in the Bronx, sparking a realisation that things could have gone either way for both men - the role of the writer and the actions of an 'outsider' such as Oswald are not that distinct (a proposition covered in detail in the final section of this chapter.) The following passage, DeLillo's introduction to a BBC documentary on his work, elucidates this thought:

"Isolation, solitude, secret plotting. A novel is a secret a writer may keep for years before he lets it out of his room...Let's change the room slightly and imagine another kind of apartness. The outsider who builds a plot around his desperation. A self-watcher, a lonely young man, living in a fiction he hasn't bothered to put down on paper. But this doesn't mean he is unorganized, he organizes everything. This is how he keeps from disappearing. His head is filled with dangerous secrets, and he may finally devise a way to come out of his room. He invents a false name, orders a gun through the mail, then looks around for someone famous he can shoot."<sup>16</sup>

However, despite his fixation with retreat and rebirth, as we shall see with *White Noise* DeLillo also explores the idea that through the television or in the very air that we breathe, systemic hyperreality can infiltrate the bower of the thinking man and pre-empt any re-entrance into the world he may have conceived for himself. This seems to leave only one option.

### **Living with the Enemy**

*White Noise's* parallels with *Americana*, particularly the penetration of dreams by advertising and the media, are obvious. In his paper 'Beyond Baudrillard's Simulacral World: *White Noise*', part of the online journal *Undercurrent's* 'special' issue on

DeLillo's work, Haida Eid suggests that "...If realism was a representation of reality, modernism was a problematization of representation; and if postmodernism is a problematization of reality itself ..., one can argue, then, that *White Noise* is a realistic (post)modern text."<sup>17</sup> Throughout *White Noise* the status of the real is problematised on a number of different levels to the degree that differences between the 'real' and the 'imaginary' are often indistinguishable. The story of a college professor's struggle with his fear of death and exposure to chemical and televisual pollution, *White Noise* provides a mordantly humorous close-up of family life in a typically postmodern environment. DeLillo's acutely observed vignettes, rich in hyperbolic description that at times seems to echo Baudrillard's own writing style, offer the reader an exaggerated examination of a 'mall-driven' society beset by all manner of interior (psychological) and exterior (man-made disaster) pitfalls. However, in this novel, DeLillo also attempts to discover a degree of beauty and magic behind the postmodern superficiality he so often implicitly attacks. One episode that highlights this subtle change is when the protagonist's wife, Babette Gladney, talks to her husband of how America "lead(s) the world in stimuli" (WN, 189) after an incident when one of their children utters the words 'Toyota Celica' in their sleep, words that seem deeply imbued with "ritual meaning" (WN 155). Immediately following the incident, rather than being shocked by this subconscious repetition of a brand name, the father is struck by its beauty and mystery as if experiencing a moment of "splendid transcendence" (WN, 155) a sense of awe that is echoed at the end of the novel when the family sit and watch the artificial sunsets of a polluted sky, marvelling, in the face of contamination, at their beauty. It would seem from this excerpt, taken from an interview with DeLillo, that the author shares this fascination:

"There's something nearly mystical about certain words and phrases that float through our lives. It's computer mysticism. Words that are computer generated to be used on products that might be sold anywhere from Japan to Denmark - words devised to be pronounceable in a hundred languages. And when you detach one of these words from the product it was designed to serve, the word acquires a chantlike quality."<sup>18</sup>

For Jack Gladney, and arguably DeLillo himself in this novel, it is not the *language* of hyperreality or the accidental results of human interference in nature that is the problem - floating signifiers may assume ritualistic dimensions, conveying through the phonics of the utterance a certain degree of magic or power, and unexpected beauty

can result from disaster. Indeed, Gladney is a man who survives by constructing a persona using the very systems of sign appropriation that characterise the age: to add to the gravitas of his role the chancellor at his college feels he should put on weight, to “grow out” into Hitler, he invents an extra initial to provide himself with the presidential series J.A.K., and wears his thick-framed glasses and academic gown like a suit of armour. In Gladney’s words, “I am the false character that follows the name around” (WN, 17). The problem for Jack lies with technology and the connecting *systems* of signification and simulation that both (re)generate and conceal the ‘real’ in the novel (underpinned by what Baudrillard terms the ‘code.’) For instance, having been exposed to an “airborne toxic event” Gladney is presented with a data profile on the state of his health, a series of “bracketed numbers with pulsing stars” (WN, 140) on a computer, that makes him feel like he is a ‘stranger in his own dying,’ unable to identify with the “network of symbols...an entire awesome technology wrested from the gods” (WN, 142).

Environmental crisis is an obvious concomitant of global capitalism, waste representing the ‘other’ of excessive consumption, the by-product of desire. At one point in the novel Gladney examines the contents of his family refuse finding “a banana skin with a tampon inside” - “Was this the dark side of consumer consciousness?” (WN, 259) he asks. However it is the ‘airborne toxic event’, perhaps more than any other episode in a DeLillo novel, that exemplifies the struggle for survival in a ‘Baudrillardian Environment’. A combination of shifting euphemistic signifiers labelling the poisonous cloud, constantly changing symptoms associated with exposure, and a confusion of simulation and reality in the evacuation process, masks the actuality of the chemical pollutant Nyodene D (itself a ‘derivative’). Described as “state of the art”, a “whole new generation of toxic waste” (WN, 138), Nyodene D’s principal effect on humans is to induce feelings of *deja vu*. One could argue that DeLillo wrote in this ‘condition’ - a seemingly exact replication of a previous experience - as an obvious medical/ontological link to the postmodern environment, the phenomenon resulting from simulation overload, a clear correlative with the constant bombardment of multiple realities. Products and their advertisements, recorded events and their reruns, all promote a feeling of *deja vu* - they have all been seen before. Contemporary America, in this sense, would be a

Nietzschean world of eternal return, consumer signs appearing “again and again, times without number.”<sup>19</sup> Additionally, déjà vu can also be seen as a symptom of, in Freudian terms, the concept of repetition compulsion and can be linked to the death drive, the desire to return to ‘things in themselves’. In Baudrillard’s words:

“The compulsion to repeat..., or the ‘tendency to reproduce and revive even those past events that involve no satisfaction whatsoever’, is primarily, for every living being, the tendency to reproduce the non-event of a prior inorganic state of things, that is to say death.” (SED, 149)

Murray Jay Siskind, taking his ideas on the world ‘beyond’ the waves and radiation of supermarkets one stage further, connects the condition, death and eternal return in an attempt to comfort Gladney following his alarming visit with the SIMUVAC medical officer:

“...Death is in the air...It is liberating material. It is getting us closer to things we haven’t learned about ourselves. Most of us have probably seen our own death but haven’t known how to make the material surface. Maybe when we die, the first thing we’ll say is, ‘I know this feeling. I was here before.’” (WN, 151)

Murray’s assertion that feelings of déjà vu may be a result of precognitive material that cannot fit into the human mental apparatus as it is currently structured seems to fit nicely with the purpose of the novel. One can argue that like many other works of postmodern fiction that produce a form of ‘cognitive mapping’, allowing the reader to understand the physical and mental environment in which they exist, *White Noise* promulgates through its characters identity problems that reflect or simulate the identity problems actually occurring in hyperreal society that in their ubiquity somehow fail to register as concerns - in effect he too is making ‘the material surface’. Survival for Gladney is about learning to live with the ‘condition of postmodernity’, seeking beauty in the simulated and the polluted and discovering how to decipher the waves and radiation that serve as a constant reminder of a world beyond the visible. In other words, the possession of a kind of secular faith.

### **Secular Faith: The Fifteen Minute Maid**

*Underworld* concludes with an awe inspiring connection between the dead and the living in the image of a recently deceased young girl on a billboard: a ghostly form that makes concrete Murray J Siskind’s theory of death and the consumer object,

represented as a 'miracle' that stops traffic. Esmeralda Lopez, a twelve year old girl living rough as part of a ghetto community in the South Bronx, is raped and then thrown from a roof to her death. Her friends on the street spray an angel wearing Nike Air Jordan's on a memorial wall to acknowledge her passing: (a scene that for, Tim Waltonen, exemplifies DeLillo's way of exploring 'liminal urban settings' in order to perceive, after Walter Benjamin, a kind of "profane illumination" – a tag Benjamin attached to surrealists such as Andre Breton and Louis Aragon suggesting their "illumination of the ineffable in its urban context.")<sup>20</sup> However, this fusion of the sacred and the secular is overshadowed in the novel by an ambiguous image on a Minute Maid Orange Juice advertisement, "an animating spirit"<sup>21</sup> that draws hundreds of people, including nun Sister Edgar, to stand in the expressway and stare:

"The billboard is unevenly lighted, dim in spots, several bulbs blown and unreplaced, but the central elements are clear, a vast cascade of orange juice pouring diagonally from top right into a goblet that is handheld at lower left—the perfectly formed hand of a female caucasian of the middle suburbs...What a lavishment of effort and technique, no refinement spared—the equivalent, Edgar thinks, of medieval church architecture. And the six-ounce cans of Minute maid arrayed across the bottom of the board, a hundred identical cans so familiar in design and color and typeface that they have personality, the convivial cuteness of little orange-and-black people...Then she sees it, an ordinary commuter train, silver and blue, ungraffiti'd, moving smoothly toward the drawbridge. The headlights sweep the billboard and she hears a sound from the crowd, a gasp that shoots into sobs and moans and the cry of some unnameable painful elation...Because when the train lights hit the dimmest part of the billboard a face appears above the misty lake and it belongs to the murdered girl. A dozen women clutch their heads, they whoop and sob, a spirit, a godsbreath passing through the crowd." (UW, 820/821)

Described as "an event that violates natural forces, something holy that throbs on the hot horizon" (UW, 824) this transubstantiation of the spiritual into the visual can be read as a symbolic reference to the subordination of man to floating signifier, a postmodern frieze that, in juxtaposing an image of capitalism with religious iconography, foregrounds the conflicts of the age: humanism vs market-led economics and secularism vs faith. The apparition, surfacing from just one of the 'underworlds' examined in the novel when illuminated, combines many of DeLillo's favourite themes: the power of the image, advertising, the magical in the mundane and the disruption of the secular by the spiritual. Esmeralda was destroyed by her environment. It is fitting then that she becomes, in her death, part of a new landscape

of hope. Indeed, DeLillo arguably offers his reader this scene as a way of indicating an alternative to searching, retreat or submission in the face of hyperreality – a kind of *secular faith* that synthesises the dialectic conveyed by the billboard. In keeping with the theoretical metaphor however, this hope is short-lived as, sure enough, the image on the billboard is soon replaced by two signifiers of obvious secondary significance, floating in the vacated space, reaffirming the predominance of the ineluctable system:

“The next evening the sign is blank. What a hole it makes in space. People come and don’t know what to say or think, where to look or what to believe. The sign is a white sheet with two lonely words, *Space Available*, followed by a phone number in tasteful type.” (UW, 824)

For the briefest of moments the dead girl had become a “disembodied fact in liquid form, pouring into the crowd” - a bizarre form of pop art fusing the product and the person, uniting the individual and the masses. Esmeralda achieved her fifteen minutes of fame in death if not in life. Like other evanescent figures, whether she will be remembered or not is another matter:

“Is the memory thin and bitter and does it shame you with its fundamental untruth - all nuance and wishful silhouette? Or does the power of transcendence linger...the vision you crave because you need a sign to stand against your doubt.” (UW, 824)

DeLillo soon answers his own questions. As if marking the inability of postmodern man to gain a secure hold on any belief system based on the spectacular and imaginal, Esmeralda, like a second rate ‘fantastic’ television programme, is forgotten as swiftly as she appeared. Fascinating as it is, this momentary iconographic phenomena, a revival of the human spirit following a preventable environmental tragedy, is topped in the novel by an ‘impossible’ trip beyond death itself into the consciousness of a woman whose soul becomes subsumed by cyberspace: a form of transcendence enacted within hyperreality.

### **DeLillo and Cyberspace**

“Is cyberspace a thing in the world or is it the other way around? Which contains the other, and how can you tell for sure ?” (UW, 826)

“Against our dream of losing and forgetting everything, we set up an opposing great wall of relations, connections and information, a dense and inextricable artificial memory, and we bury ourselves alive in the fossilised hope of one



day being rediscovered...Computers are the transistorised death to which we submit in the hope of survival.” (Jean Baudrillard - SED, 185)

We have seen that DeLillo’s fictional environments, based on ‘real’ spaces, can often be seen as ‘zones’ in which ontological shifts or crisis resolutions occur. However, in the denouement of *Underworld*, a massive leap into artificial or ‘cyber’ space takes place that subverts all that has passed before it, allowing DeLillo to experiment with (techno)utopian solutions. For Lefebvre, cyberspace is viewed as a created technological space that marks the beginning of thoroughly postmodern modes of production and communication. Working in tandem with ‘conventional’ material spatial practices, the everywhere and nowhere world existing in the memory banks of computer systems enables the rapid transferral and exposure of information and may be read as a *tabula rasa* for mental inventions of space constructed around the possibilities thrown up by virtual reality and the worldwide web. William Gibson, in his seminal ‘cyberpunk’ novel *Neuromancer* (1984), provides probably the best literary definition of cyberspace represented in the form of a kid’s show voiceover that happens to be accompanied by a “discontinuous flood of images”:

“A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts...A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding...”<sup>22</sup>

At the conclusion of *Underworld*, a book constructed around connections, DeLillo hyperlinks two of his principal characters, “fellow celibate[s] and kindred spirit[s]” J. Edgar Hoover and Sister Edgar, on the internet following the latter’s death. However, this connection is not just a linguistic one, Sister Edgar is portrayed as cognisant of her place in cyberspace, conscious of a visit to a home page and “exposed to every connection you can make on the world wide web” (UW, 824). Sister Edgar’s afterlife (DeLillo is careful to say it is “not heaven”) allows her to feel, to perceive, and to judge what is going on in her new constructed reality. Like Jack Gladney, she “feels the grip of systems” and senses a presence - “a thing implied, something vast and bright” (UW, 825). However, where Gladney was bemusedly examining the system from without, DeLillo ontologically transports the holy sister to Siskind’s world beyond the waves and radiation, in Lefebvre’s terminology, a new fictional ‘space of

representation'. Her techno-reincarnation, a *deus ex machina* that allows the writer to examine the place such new technology occupies in our lives, also draws together some of the novel's conflicts, as "difference itself" is eliminated with a keystroke.

The poetic culmination of the novel, although idealistic and pataphysical with its call to "imagine the word (peace) on the screen becoming a thing in the world", a fanciful solution to the myriad problems of waste and warfare depicted in the book, represents a radical departure for DeLillo and possibly a further alignment with the 'vision' of Baudrillard. In his book *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* (1993) Scott Bukatman argues that Jean Baudrillard must be seen as "the producer of a particular language that shares everything with the hypertechnologized languages of the science fictional paraspace", and his theory is to be read as "a computer game" within which he aims to "construct a new space for philosophy."<sup>23</sup> Taken from his essay 'The Year 2000 Has Already Happened', the following quote, used by Bukatman to support his assertions, emphasises Baudrillard's desire to drag theory into particularly postmodern dimensions and thus become "an event in the universe it describes":

"I am no longer in a state to 'reflect' on something, I can only push hypotheses to their limits, snatch them from their critical zones of reference, take them beyond a point of no return. I also take theory into the hyper-space of simulation - in which it loses all objective validity, but perhaps it gains in coherence, that is, in a real affinity with the system which surrounds us."<sup>24</sup>

In effect DeLillo has followed a similar strategy, taking 'serious' wordly fiction into the realms of the fantastic or magical and thus carrying the reader beyond material space. But there is a trade off - as Sister Edgar is transmuted into her cyberspace existence he asks us to make a 'symbolic exchange,' to imagine in turn that the word 'peace' on a computer screen can make the same journey, only in reverse, to the unwebbed offscreen world:

"...You try to imagine the word on the screen becoming a thing in the world, taking all its meanings, its sense of serenities and contentments out into the streets somehow..." (UW, 827)

However, similar to his swift replacement of the transcendent image of Esmeralda on the billboard, DeLillo quickly destroys the flow of a compelling thought with the stark reminder of 'how it is,' his musing being merely fanciful idealism:

“...But it’s only a sequence of pulses on a dullish screen and all it can do is make you pensive.” (UW, 827)

One could argue that the conclusion of *Underworld* is DeLillo returning to thesis fiction once more, a charge levelled at *Ratner’s Star* and recognised in the following review by David Walsh:

“...First and foremost the novel lacks the element of a genuinely spontaneous response to reality. In fact, there is something about the work that almost suggests fear of and opposition to such a response. To put it most harshly, one might say that *Underworld* almost always remains a schematic work, brilliantly so perhaps, a work that takes schematism to its limits, but schematic all the same. It has the self-conscious feel of a thesis being fleshed out.”<sup>25</sup>

Self-conscious it might be, and in this, along with other key themes, it has all of the metafictional trademarks of the quintessential postmodern novel - a focus on the notion of historical truth; an exploration of mediated reality; cultural, political and technological connectivity and a predomination of the spectacular and consumer driven. But such self-consciousness must be read as deliberate - DeLillo’s own exercise in ‘cognitive mapping.’

In his book *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), Brian McHale alludes to the work of the Polish phenomenologist Roman Ingarden, with particular reference to fiction’s ‘ontological complexity’. According to Ingarden, works of fiction can be structurally divided into four ontological strata - i) word sounds ii) meaning-units iii) presented objects/worlds and iv) schematised aspects. From this perspective novels are essentially polyphonic and heteronomous, dependent on the relationship between each strata and the “constitutive acts of consciousness of a reader.”<sup>26</sup> In the following passage, an examination of the foregrounding of style in postmodernist fiction, McHale examines potential fissures in novels caused by a displacement of these strata, one that may help our interpretation of *Underworld’s* conclusion:

“To call attention to the lowest strata at the expense of the highest is to drive a wedge into the ontological structure of the literary work, splitting it into “words” and “world.” The differing ontological statuses of words and world are brought into sharp focus, the words being made to appear more “real,” more present than the world they project. In a sense, this is only a kind of optical illusion, for words, no less than projected worlds, are intentional objects of the reader’s consciousness, and as such are no more real or present than the

higher strata of the literary work. But it is a potent illusion, and one that blocks and reverses our normal habit of effacing the level of words as we reconstruct the world of the text.” (PF, 148)

Certainly on the level of narrative there is a sense of ontological confusion at the end of *Underworld*, as the reader is presented with a second person reference to him/herself, a unifying call to recognise the universal in the particular. But DeLillo is also referring to himself in his ‘address to the people.’ The conclusion of *Underworld*, reflexive and pensive, gives us DeLillo’s view of himself surveying the domestic littoral of his life, his personal landscape - a rotting apple core and yellow pencils on his desk. It is also a writer taking his reader on a journey into the landscape of his imagination, far from the cancer inducing plains of Kazakhstan that shocked earlier in the novel, and disconnected from the tale of Nick Shay and his search for an elusive baseball. An example of metafictional “frame-breaking” (PF, 197), recognised as a fundamental topos of postmodern fiction by McHale, DeLillo’s message to himself, shot through with realism, but hopeful nonetheless, is that language can have a demonstrably positive effect on our material existence, can be used in the world in a form other than selling something or sealing a financial contract. The real ontological disruption of course is the transfiguration of signifier into referent - the word ‘peace’ becoming a thing in the world and thus providing a paradoxical nullification and metafictional realisation of McHale’s ‘ontological wedge’.

In *White Noise* DeLillo makes a sideways reference to C.S. Pierce’s notion of words having material use, as Jack Gladney lets loose a fusillade of verbal bullets at Mr Gray. The end of *Underworld* as thesis is an adaptation of a similar idea as he asks us to test the meaning of a new weapon for good - “a word that spreads a longing through the raw sprawl of the city and out across the dreaming bourns and orchards to the solitary hills” (UW, 827). Unlike conventional weaponry however the test ground for the signifier ‘peace’ is our imagination, and loss of hope is the limit of the fallout.

### **The ‘Nautiloid Allegory’ and Systemic Reversal**

“Could reality be phonetic, a matter of gutturals and dentals?” (*The Names*)<sup>27</sup>

“The image becomes a rune in the sphere of allegorical intuition. When touched by the light of theology, its symbolic beauty is gone. The false appearance of totality vanishes. The image dies; the parable no longer holds true; the world it once contained disappears.” (Walter Benjamin)<sup>28</sup>

The struggle for survival in a 'Baudrillardian Environment' is clearly a key theme running through DeLillo's work. Characters are placed in 'spaces of representation' that exist as hyperbolic reflections of society at large, characterised by the saturation of images, the predominance and precession of simulacra and a technology-induced alienation/paranoia. Often DeLillo presents them examining their predicament, thinking through their personal ontology - a process of 'cognitive mapping': (moreover, there is usually a character of hermeneutic utility, existing in the narrative simply as an interpretative tool, a mouthpiece for the theory DeLillo wants us to consider when reading the novel.) But more often than not we are guided beyond the ambiguous/ironic poetics of postmodern hypothesis to the story itself, as we recognise elements of our own lives in the behaviour and travails of the protagonists. Sometimes however, a passage of allegorical importance may be overlooked by both critics and reader alike, a passage that could easily be dismissed upon first reading as being simply part of the intellectual texture of a 'novel of ideas' - a second order 'space of representation.'

Taken from *End Zone*, the passage in question is the synopsis of a book by Mongolian author Tudev Nemkhu (an invention of DeLillo) as described by Myna Corbett, a friend of footballer Gary Harkness. In brief, Nemkhu's novel tells of a race of "half-mollusk creatures called nautiloids" that "inhabit a tiny planet in a galaxy not too far from here." They live in the planet's one ocean, beneath a protective layer of "thick hard foam that encases the planet about fifty miles above the surface," until the day when their "intricate ESP" form of numerical communication is disturbed. At this point, many of them leave the ocean in a state of panic until "one of them goes into a fantastic spasm and breaks out of its shell", an event coinciding with the foam crust breaking. This single nautiloid is subsequently illuminated by a "form of electromagnetic radiation" that has poured in through the break in the crust until its form begins to change - it becomes a "creature that has been formed of the landscape itself through the power of this black light...almost an abstract being...And its brain is slowly evolving into phases of light and nonlight." Soon however, everything for the creature begins to double:

“Within the thing’s brain mechanism there are now two landscapes perceived by two mechanisms. The thing sees itself seeing what is outside it being seen by itself...this duplication results in the making of words. Each likeness is a word rather than a thing. When the word is imprinted on the thing’s original mechanism, the likeness that was the word’s picture instantaneously disappears. The thing’s brain keeps on producing likenesses and then delivering words into its own circuitry. The thing perceives everything into itself. It duplicates perceptions and then reduplicates the results. The author finally gives the thing a name. The thing becomes monadom - the things that’s everything. It keeps making likenesses to make words. The words have no meaning. They’re just fragments of cosmic language. So everything is existing inside this complex brain apparatus...And this duplication goes on and on for what we would call millennia until suddenly without warning one of the words erases itself. The brain didn’t order this and doesn’t comprehend it. The word just erased itself. It no longer exists. There is no record of it.” (EZ, 169/170)

Within the context of a novel that, in Tom LeClair’s words, is characterised by DeLillo’s “wide-ranging, abstract, and yet emotionally affecting set of analogies” (ITL, 61) one could be excused for overlooking this seemingly whimsical tale, but its veiled references to human language acquisition and contemporary theory’s understanding of the process of signification are plain. For the evolved Nautiloid, when a word is associated with its referent the referent disappears, rendering the signifier - a “fragment of cosmic language” - as meaningless. Kurt Vonnegut adopted a similar fictional strategy of embedded parable with the inclusion of synopses of the works of Kilgore Trout in many of his novels, most memorably in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Here, the technique is used to emphasise a central argument in DeLillo’s work - the notion that language comes between us and the world, and is an inadequate form of ontological interpretation - our existence becoming defined by floating signifiers and simulacra, arbitrary and relative only to one another and not the ‘essential’.

We have seen how DeLillo overtly and, through allegory and complicated ontological disruption, presents his readers with the fictional lives of human beings attempting to cope with the multitudinous problems connected with life in contemporary first-world environments: their survival or demise often dictated by their place in a overarching ‘thesis’ that runs through that particular novel. The next section of this chapter will focus upon DeLillo’s theoretical examination of one of the primary *causes* of ‘the problem’ - language, that, alongside the ‘code’ of capitalist political-economy, distances subjects from underlying truths. As a novelist for whom writing is an act of

making 'beautiful language', DeLillo does well to divorce the content of his work from the form in which his ideas are expressed, and this comes across in the way that at times he examines language's power to transcend hurtful events and heal the psychological ruptures they have caused. The positive dimension to what could be considered a 'language dialectic' is certainly not ignored. However, in an effort to explore radical solutions to its negative aspects, DeLillo's characters are often portrayed (usually unwittingly) inverting their *de facto* human submission to language, as their words become weapons, acquiring physicality and turning 'the system' against itself.

## **“Bang, You’re Dead” - Language, Violence and the Return of the Real**

“[Mankind’s] self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.” (Walter Benjamin)<sup>29</sup>

“One day in early September we started playing a game called Bang You’re Dead. It’s an extremely simple-minded game. Almost every child has played it in one form or another. Your hand assumes the shape of a gun and you fire at anyone who passes. You try to reproduce, in your own way, the sound of a gun being fired. Or you simply shout these words: *Bang, you’re dead*. The other person clutches a vital area of his body and then falls, simulating death.” (EZ, 31)

‘Bang You’re Dead’, a seemingly innocent campus game played by Gary Harkness and friends at Logos College in DeLillo’s second novel *End Zone*, is the first in a series of references that DeLillo makes to the materiality of the signifier. Linking the imaginary and symbolic realms, in Harkness’ view the game has a “fragmentary beauty”, enabling its players “to pretend that death could be a tender experience” (EZ, 34). Students ‘die’ filmic deaths, stylised and self-conscious, revelling in the aesthetics of their own demise. Indeed, owing to his ability to ‘die well’, Harkness himself is “killed quite often”. Five novels later and in *The Names* the connection between words and violence has taken a more sinister turn as DeLillo presents the operations of a language cult who murder when a subject’s initials coincide with the initials of the environment he/she has entered. The weapon, like the death, has now entered the ‘real’ world. This ‘mirroring’ of letters - the most tenuous of connections between a human and their environment - is ‘symbolic’ on a number of different levels. Built into a detailed analysis of DeLillo’s theoretically informed exploration of language in the novel, each level of the symbolism of the language murders will be examined in this section.

Following this assessment of *The Names* the section will then compare the theoretical implications of the language cult with the actions of the protagonist in DeLillo’s next novel, *White Noise*, where the subject of ‘word violence’ is given a further twist as the ramifications of a fictitious drug that removes the fear of death but in doing so causes the user to confuse words and things are explored. In many ways the deleterious linguistic side-effect of Dylar, employed as a weapon in a verbal attack in *White Noise*



by Jack Gladney, is DeLillo's way of logically extending the conclusion of his third novel, *Great Jones Street*, in which Bucky Wunderlick, a rock star in self-imposed exile, is impelled to take the 'product' – a drug developed by the US Government that causes loss of speech and an inability to recognise words. For instance, having been injected with the 'product' and thus been stripped of the signifiers that contextualise the referents around him Wunderlick walks more slowly around his room "as though in fear of objects, all things with names unknown," (GJS, 264) while in *White Noise*, Dylar's pedlar – Mr Gray or Willie Mink – "if someone said 'speeding bullet...would fall to the floor and take cover" (WN, 193). Inversions such as this, prevalent in DeLillo's work, have led critics such as Tom LeClair to argue that his novels must be viewed as 'polarfictions' – a label LeClair connects with Derrida's views on the structure of language in *Of Grammatology* (ITL, 62). The conclusion of each section will draw together the critical theory underpinning DeLillo's polarised narrative scenes of language and violence and suggest how it relates to his ongoing project of social criticism.

### **Characters on the Rock**

Death, "the huge nameless thing" that drives Hitler Scholar Jack Gladney to such extreme measures in *White Noise*, is one of the main themes in *The Names*, the bizarre story of an American abroad who becomes enmeshed in a series of cult murders. In some ways a companion piece to the mathematical *Ratner's Star*, *The Names* focuses on the world of language, touching on everything from epigraphy to glossolalia while maintaining its study of what it is to be an American citizen living in a foreign country where identity is formed, in part, by verbal exchange.

James Axton, freelance writer, risk analyst and unwitting operative for the CIA, lives and works in Greece having followed his estranged archaeologist wife Kathryn and precociously literate son, Thomas or Tap, who is busy, at the age of nine, writing a novel. But while James lives in a well-appointed apartment in Athens, the unpaid Kathryn and Tap live on the obscure island of Kouros, "In a small white house with geraniums in olive oil cans on the roof edge and no hot water" (N, 7/8). Ironically however, it is the risk-assessor who feels his position is most precarious:

“I’d have a steady job, an office, a secretary, a schedule and clear-cut responsibilities while my wife worked in a trench and my son wrote a novel. A happy pair. They were the freelancers now but I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was the one taking the major risk. There was nothing to come back to if I failed, no place in particular I belonged.” (N, 49)

From the moment “we enter narrative time” (N, 4) as Axton, the first person narrator of the story informs us, laying bare the medium, we are drawn into an environment, both physical and verbal, rich with references to letters, words, texts and language. Much of the plot is communicated in the form of verbal accounts made by friends, associates or Axton himself, but unlike previous novels such as *Ratner’s Star*, *Players* and *Running Dog*, that in Tom LeClair’s words “Seemed manufactured out of textual rather than experiential materials,” (ITL, 176) DeLillo’s control of the dialogue here seems grounded in reality, in the rhythms of actual speech. LeClair makes the point that, “Residing and travelling abroad renewed [DeLillo’s] passion for life outside the text; it also gave him a centre of experience around which old and newer concerns could cohere and find vital expression.” (ITL, 176) However, as with his other novels, DeLillo’s intent, in this case the study of writing and speech, at times seems a bit overdetermined, a little overworked in places. In *Ratner’s Star* he foregrounds a symmetry of design that strengthens thematic opposition - adventures and reflections, discrete and continuous. In *The Names*, writing and speech, as well as being opposed with one another, are often offset by their diametric opposites: silence, deeds/gestures and nameless or uncategorisable events/ phenomena. Importantly, it is conversation, a mixture of both words and gestures, that drives the novel. The following description of an Athens street scene illustrates this synthesis:

“People everywhere are absorbed in conversation. Seated under trees, under striped canopies in the squares, they bend together over food and drink, their voices raveled in Oriental laments that flow from radios and basements and back kitchens. Conversation is life, language is the deepest being. We see the patterns repeat, the gestures drive the words. It is the sound and picture of humans communicating. It is talk as a definition of itself. Talk./.../Every conversation is a shared narrative, a thing that surges forward, too dense to allow space for the unspoken, the sterile.” (N, 52)

The novel begins with a word and gesture of a different sort. James and some friends, driving back to Athens after a “loud dinner in Piraeus,” find themselves lost in a “featureless zone,” a prevalent motif in DeLillo’s novels, and James turns the wrong way into a one way street. After a moment of contemplation where the group are

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transfixed by a view of the Parthenon, hanging “like a star lamp” in the distance, their reverie is broken by the horn, gesture and shout of a Greek coming towards them. By James’ own admission, his Greek is “terrible.” He “leaves the country for three days” and forgets everything except the numbers. (N, 12) Unsure of what the man said, James asks Ann Maitland to translate:

“Masturbator. It’s standard. A Greek will never say anything he hasn’t already said a thousand times.” (N, 4)

Ann’s husband, Charles, chastises James for not recognising the profanity. In his view it is a “...mark of one’s respect for other cultures to know the local terms of abuse and the words for sex acts and natural wastes.” (N, 4) And so, with an oversight, begins James Axton’s immersion into the nuances of transcultural linguistics: the communicative triumphs and tribulations of an American abroad.

A little later in the novel James makes a trip to Kouros to meet with his wife and son. Dispensing with the pleasantries of greeting James launches into an assessment of the novel Tap has sent him to read:

“I liked the pages you sent. But your concentration fell off once or twice. Your hero went out in a blizzard wearing his rubbery Ingersoll.” (N, 9)

Having made the semantic distinction between an Ingersoll, a pair of Wellingtons and a Mackintosh, James observes that Tap stores “these names and the objects they belonged to, for safekeeping.” (N, 10) We are reminded here of the Jesuit teaching a young Nick Shay the names of shoe parts in *Underworld*, and Nick’s later adoption of the same method with his own children:

“I used to say to the kids. I used to hold up an object and say, The little ridged section at the bottom of the toothpaste tube. This is called the crimp.” (UW, 105)

However, it seems as if James’ place as father, mentor and fount of information has been taken by Owen Brademas, the leader of the dig his wife is working on. “Can I tell you what Owen says about character?” Tap asks, recognising the distance between them in his need to apply for his father’s attention. The following passage, Tap’s recounting of Owen’s etymological explanation, fuses objects and ideas that are to feature strongly in the rest of the story when we learn of the alphabet cult. It is here

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that we are first asked to associate the word and the thing, the letter and the weapon, the character and his/her fate:

““Owen says that ‘character’ comes from a Greek word. It means ‘to brand or sharpen.’ Or ‘pointed stake’ if it’s a noun.”

“An engraving instrument or branding instrument.”

“That’s right,” he said.

“This is probably because ‘character’ in English not only means someone in a story but a mark or symbol.”

“Like a letter of the alphabet.” (N, 10)

Tom LeClair suggests that, “In *The Names* [DeLillo] considers terror in all its manifestations, finds the homologies between family life and cultural exchange, studies man’s tools from ancient hammers to contemporary computers, and then constructs reciprocal relations among those disparate subjects.” (ITL, 176/177) If this is so, then this ‘exchange’ between James Axton and his son is the scene that first demonstrates the connectivity. Writing connects with epigraphy which in turn connects with archaeology - excavation marks in the rock - and finally, through implements/tools, murder: in this case deaths that are in some sense *written* by fate/contingency, the chance connection of initials.

Still learning the differences in meaning on which the structure of his own language is based, Tap often communicates in Ob, a coded form of speech he had picked up from his mother who had used it as a child. James feels that, unlike Kathryn, Tap uses this strange verbal form as a reaction to the Greek language and not as a game - a “counter-Greek.” Although Ob provides Tap with an opportunity to master a ‘foreign language’ with a strict set of simple rules, his need to experiment with words is most satisfied in his approach to writing his novel. Described by Kathryn as a “prairie epic,” (N, 14) the work is filled with “real people instead of heroes and adventurers” (N, 32). This departure from fantasy and invention that characterises most children’s writing seems unusual to James - “Why is Tap writing about rural life in the Depression?” he asks, later learning that most of the episodes in the novel are rooted in reality, primarily events in Owen Brademas’ childhood. Like DeLillo with *Libra*, and, to some degree *Underworld*, Tap is writing faction - a mixture of fact and fiction.

Owen Brademas is a familiar DeLillo type. Like any number of characters in *Ratner’s Star* he is a mouthpiece for historical and philosophical ramblings on the nature of

language. He has an “unreasoning passion” (N, 36) for epigraphy, once feeling that deciphering the engravings allowed him to maintain a conversation with ancient people. However, recognising that the conversation was largely based around bookkeeping and accounts - the basis for the origination of writing in his opinion - he now sees “a mysterious importance in the letters” (N, 35) themselves. Where James Axton traces the geography of terror in his risk analysis, it is Owen’s aim to trace “the geography of language” (N, 35) through his self-confessed “infatuation” for ancient inscriptions. Indeed, it is his obsession for letters that leads him to strike up a relationship with a bizarre band of sinister cave dwellers with interests similar to his own – the alphabet cult.

### **The ‘Language Cult’**

We first learn of the alphabet cult through an Owen Brademas commentary. Searching for an elusive monastery attached to a “huge rock column” and shrouded by thick shrubbery, Brademas encounters two men, “haggard..., intense, fugitive” standing at the entrance to a cave above him. He asks them directions in the indigenous language, a pragmatic and expected form of greeting, one might say. However, intuition tells him they’re not locals and their reply - “*How many languages do you speak?*” - an odd assessment of linguistic competence in halting Greek, seems to reinforce the fact. In his words:

“The fact that we’d spoken to each other in a language not our own deepened the sense of formal procedure or ceremony.” (N, 28)

The formalities over, Brademas joins the two men, and two others in their cave. Covered in dirt the group seem anachronistic, the only clue to their being of the twentieth century the possession of sleeping bags and knapsacks. Suspicious at first, the group converse with Brademas in a mixture of older and demotic Greek. However, on learning of Brademas’ involvement with epigraphic studies, and in particular the inspection of a clay tablet “that contained the entire thirty-letter alphabet of the Canaanite people” from three thousand years ago, their interest in the scholar is piqued. This chance meeting heralds the beginning of a collective fascination shared by the cult, Brademas, Axton and later another recognisable DeLillo character - the enigmatic Frank Volterra, underground filmmaker gone mainstream who, having

recently walked off a number of sets, has arrived in Greece to track down the alphabet cult and use their 'story' as the basis for a film that will revive his own cult status - which sets in motion the plot dynamic of the novel.

In his essay *Alphabetic Pleasures*, Dennis Foster suggests that Brademas "sees the cult as a demystifying parody of civilized systems" replicating "our institutions' motivations, revealing civilization's "systems against terror" to be systems, like the cult, for producing terror, and ecstasy, and death." (IDD, 172) It is true that while James Axton is trying to understand the organizational structure of the cult, how decisions are reached, the chain of command, he is unaware of his own place in the grand scheme of things. Without his knowledge or approval he is working as an intelligence operative for the CIA – duped and, like his surname suggests, operating as a simple tool. However, this thesis would go one stage further than Foster. The system that the cult are parodying is not the military/industrial complex, rather it is the overarching system we are all in some sense subject to - language. Essentially, the murdered are victims of an arbitrary connection that mirrors the arbitrariness of the linguistic process - the coupling of signifier and referent. The system of language has been directed against itself - a form of symbolic equivalence. The victims have been sacrificed to the logos in order to disrupt and undermine the system from within. If this is the case, what is the motivation of these 'language terrorists'?

### **Renaming the World**

"The symbolic is neither a concept, an agency, a category, nor a 'structure', but an act of exchange and *a social relation which puts an end to the real*, which resolves the real, and, at the same time, puts an end to the opposition between the real and the imaginary." (SED, 133)

The above extract is taken from one of Jean Baudrillard's early works, a text in which the writer examines the possibility of a [re]emergence of a "radical utopia" (SED, 1) using the innate reversibility of society's systems. According to Baudrillard:

"Every system that approaches perfect operativity simultaneously approaches its downfall. When the system says 'A is A', or 'two times two equals four', it approaches absolute power and total absurdity; that is immediate and probable subversion." (SED, 4)

In these terms language could be considered such a system, if we are to believe that the signifier/referent bond is fixed. Indeed, Baudrillard ends his study with the chapter 'The Extermination of the Name of God,' an assessment of the reversibility of language using Ferdinand De Saussure's notion of the anagram, the poetic "deconstruction of the sign and representation."

A very limited hypothesis, *Anagrams* is the study of Vedic, Germanic and Saturnine poetry where the proper name of a god or hero is anagrammatically disseminated through the poem - the phonemes, or phonemic groups acting as echoes "'beneath' the 'manifest' text." Baudrillard sees this dissemination - 'The Law of the Theme-word' - as disruptive and agrees with Saussure that the process "shatters 'the fundamental laws of the human word.'"

"In fact, the theme-word is *diffracted* throughout the text. In a way, it is 'analysed' by the verse or the poem, reduced to its simple elements, decomposed like the light spectrum, whose diffracted rays then seep across the text. In other words then, the original corpus is dispersed into 'partial objects'. It is therefore a matter not of another manner of being the Same, or reiteration or paraphrase, of a clandestine avatar of the original name of God, but rather of an explosion, a dispersion, a dismembering where this name is annihilated." (SED, 199)

In *The Names* 'annihilation' occurs when a human subject unwittingly wanders into a place that matches the initials of his/her proper name. Hamir Mazmudar, "goatless, hungry, muttering" enters the village of Hawa Mandir to be stoned to death. The fate of the victim is determined by the simplest of connections. But there is more to it than that. It's as if the cult are working within the three unities of Greek drama - time, place and action: however in this case the triumvirate is subject (the victim), object (the weapon) and place (the murder site). With categories such as these grammar and syntax come to mind. When a sentence has filled the obligations of its premise it is complete. Aided by contingency, bringing the elements together, the subject literally writes his/her own death sentence. Indeed, taking this idea to its logical conclusion, one could argue that the deaths are a form of liberation or self-empowerment when considering the fact that the victims are all already suffering in some way. James Axton feels otherwise:

““These killings mock us. They mock our need to structure and classify, to build a system against the terror in our souls. They make the system equal to the terror. The means to contend with death has become death.”” (N, 308)

The passage could have been written by Baudrillard himself. Described as “a talking machine” (N, 294), Singh, one of the cult members, is more illuminating on their motivations however. His bleak vision of a limiting, ‘self-referring world’ from which there is no escape leads us to connections with the language system - the structural ‘reality’ that supports our conception of the world. Do the cult try and provide the means for a willed escape using the system that binds and encloses?

““The world has become self-referring. You know this. This thing has seeped into the texture of the world. The world for thousands of years was our escape, was our refuge. Men hid from themselves in the world. We hid from God or death. The world was where we lived, the self was where we went mad and died. But now the world has made a self of its own. Why, how, never mind. What happens to us now that the world has a self? How do we say the simplest thing without falling into a trap? Where do we go, how do we live, who do we believe? This is my vision, a self-referring world, a world in which there is no escape.”” (N, 297)

A self-referring, self-generating world, all pervasive and inescapable, seems very like Baudrillard’s hegemony of the hyperreal - simulacra and floating signifiers as an absolute excess of visual and linguistic information. The thing is that one cannot imagine that the victims of the cult would have been subject to a surplus of visual and linguistic information, indeed Hamir Mazmudar, the final victim is described as “an empty body,” a “receptacle for [his] own waste” (N, 302) wandering from place to place, his memory erased. A walking *tabula rasa*, or blank slate, Mazmudar has been granted, though without his approval of course, the means by which he may write his way out of existence. In the words of Singh, the killing of Mazmudar “follows logically upon the premise.” (N, 302) The question is, what is this premise?

One could argue that the murder or self-generated escape of the chosen fulfils a multi-levelled symbolic function. The ritual death is an act of exchange, a sacrifice qua gift symbolising rebirth, much the same as the glossolalia Owen experiences as a boy - “Seal the old language and loose the new.” (N, 306) James Axton senses the validity of the exercise, though can’t understand *why* it’s valid. His view that the cult have made the system of language equal to the terror inherent in the unknown or nameless is a



direct inversion of the cult's intentions. For them it is the system that is by its very nature terrifying and Axton is merely operating through a repression of lived experience, communicating through the "hard-edged and aggressive" (N, 47) language of business - a cross argoted 'game' that makes him unable to sense the community in the human utterance or cry and fear the unknown: languages or experiences that fall outside of the controlled remit of his own ludic systemic structure. Jacques Lacan's views on the kind of position Axton is in are illuminating:

"Birth into language and the utilization of the symbol produce a disjunction between the lived experience and the sign which replaces it. This disjunction will become greater over the years, language being above all the organ of communication and of reflection upon a lived experience which it is often not able to go beyond. Always seeking to 'rationalize', to 'repress' the lived experience, reflection will eventually become profoundly divergent from that lived experience. In this sense, we can say...that the appearance of language is simultaneous with the primal repression which constitutes the unconscious."<sup>30</sup>

The cult's intentions are to breach the system that separates people from lived experience. It is not that they wish to return to a pre-verbal level but rather revivify and respiritualise the act of verbal communication: fix the arbitrary connection between word and thing that began with the rational and orderly elementary transition from things to pictographs, a connection bound up with animism and, later, monotheism, and in doing so return power to the word. Words in themselves are not the problem - it is the fact that they have become floating signifiers, self-referring, disconnected from the real and thus lacking spiritual as well as semantic significance. In other words, the word no longer is god.

Of course, their nostalgic longing for all languages to achieve the kind of verbal power that Singh recognises in India, a nostalgia shared by Owen Brademas whose desire is "to become part of the chanting wave of men...the vortex in the courtyard of the Grand Mosque," (N, 296) seems to be in direct confrontation with Baudrillard's policy of destroying the system entirely. Both advocate change through symbolic exchange, but where Baudrillard's radical intention is to exterminate logocentrism, the cult pursue a more achievable goal through a simple material action that celebrates design and order and possesses a kind of metaphysical rightness - a matching of 'beautiful names' that concretises Walter Benjamin's famous line on an alienated mankind's

aesthetic appreciation of its own demise. Importantly for the implications of the novel however, DeLillo makes it clear that the language cult and their extreme cerebral 'demystifying parody of systems' fail to have the same effect on James Axton and Owen Brademas as the experiences and words of a child.

### **The 'Prairie Epic'**

Tap's 'Prairie Epic,' constituting the final chapter of the novel, is in some ways a project echoing Baudrillard's anagrammatic dismembering. A recounting of Owen's memories of childhood, concluding with one particular haunting occasion when he is asked to speak in tongues during a church service, Tap's story is a novel within a novel, that in its subject matter and non-standard orthography, seems to say more about man's relationship to words and the language system than any of the alphabet cult's theoretical disquisitions or symbolically equivalent murders that will have little effect on the hyperreal political economy. Having been dragged to see a preacher by his parents, a terrified Brademas (Orville Benton in Tap's narrative) is told to yield to a torrent of words – to give motion to his still pool (old language) and let loose the spirit of the new as others are doing around him: a form of linguistic baptism. However, for a boy whose life up until that point had consisted of "roaming the prairie and learning its ways," giving freedom to his tongue is beyond him and he runs out of the building, dismayed by the fact that "the gift was not his, the whole language of the spirit which was greater than Latin or French was not to be seized in his pityfull mouth" (N, 338). Corrupted by what he has heard, Owen is consequently stripped of the relationship he had built up with the natural world:

"He looked in vane for familiar signs and safe places. No where did he see what he expected. Why couldn't he understand and speak?...This was worse than a retched nightmare. It was the nightmare of real things, the fallen wonder of the world." (N, 339)

For proud father James Axton, Tap's 'Prairie Epic,' full of "spirited misspellings" and "mangled words" is exhilarating in its ability to make language new again, highlighting in its self-expressive solecisms how words "were ancient things, secret, reshapable" (N, 313). Whether exuding the kind of 'spoken poetry' of a term such as 'burch cruch,' or the "freedom-seeking" of wilder 'misrenderings,' his story seems to bring to the fore connotations that restore original, and subsequently lost, connections

with the real world. For the reader the irony is clear. The man who had drummed into his son the parts of things and elementary semantics is getting a reciprocal lesson that goes beyond the superficiality of his own. This aside, one might argue that the real success of Tap's story however, coming back to an earlier point, is that it is a discourse that through the recounting of adult memory, and the transparent story telling of a child, fuses the real, symbolic and imaginary realms – foregrounding Lacan's disjunction between lived experience and the signs that have replaced it - and is thus a process that truly meets Baudrillard's criteria of a utopian act of symbolic exchange: "a social relation which...resolves the real, and, at the same time, puts an end to the opposition between the real and the imaginary" (SED, 133).

Critic Douglas Keeseey, not really knowing how to label Owen and Tap's narrative, calls it a "strange unity, a union of surpassing strangeness" and suggests that phrases such as 'burch cruch' employed in the 'Epic' represent an asymmetrical symmetry or uncertain balance that is far in advance of the complete matching of the language cult, accepting the reality of lapses and spelling hope of a spiritual union.<sup>31</sup> Opening out this idea of asymmetrical symmetry beyond the two word phrase, this thesis would argue that a kind of uncertain balance between poles or extremes is prevalent in some form or another in all of DeLillo's novels, signifying not a reluctance to commit but rather an acceptance of, and resignation towards, the mutual pull of opposing forces, and mimicking the hyperreal system it in a way deconstructs. Mixing the theoretically signposted actions of a murderous cult with an idealised form of collective social discourse in *The Names* is perhaps an ambitious form of intentional equivocation – an oscillation that can seem to work from both angles – and in this can seem confusing. Michael Moses, reflecting on Murray Siskind's line in *White Noise* that "In theory, violence is a form of rebirth," (WN, 290) believes that DeLillo's refusal to identify with a political or social agenda, an example of which marks the beginning of this chapter, "should be understood as the prudence of a theoretically sophisticated novelist who recognizes the terrible dangers that theory may pose when it offers to become practice."<sup>32</sup> Although no other DeLillo novel tackles the 'terribly dangerous' relationship between violence, language and material practice with anything like the level of intellectual commitment found in *The Names*, *White Noise* does seem to take the argument down a different route.

## Dylar M for Murder

“If someone said ‘speeding bullet,’ I would fall to the floor and take cover.”  
(WN, 193)

In the first section of this chapter we looked at how Jack Gladney, the protagonist of *White Noise*, is depicted battling against, then to some extent accepting, the hyperreal ‘condition of postmodernity.’ As we have discussed, the novel in many ways attempts to offer a metaphysics of consumerism – examining the mystical value in chantlike brand-names and spiritual content in supermarket goods. Overlooked by most critics however is DeLillo’s attempt to once more build in a set piece that covers the combinable subjects of language and violence. There are two fictitious man-made substances in the novel that have an effect on communication and the perception of ‘reality.’ The first, Nyodene Derivative, with its side effect of déjà vu and relationship to repetition compulsion and hyperreality, we have discussed. The second, Dylar, an experimental drug that removes the fear of death but as a result places its users in a kind of verbal firing line, will be examined here.

In constructing the narrative of *White Noise* DeLillo cleverly balances his illustration of a complacently consumerist secular society, dividing it into those who take risks with their lives in order to vivify the periods between shopping or force themselves into history (Jack’s son Heinrich’s best friend Orest Mercator training to break the world endurance record for sitting in a cage full of deadly snakes) and those so protected by mall-purchased material possessions and intellectual affluence that they have become preoccupied with the only thing that can upset their security - their own demise. Jack’s wife Babette, consumed by an extra sensitivity to the terror of death, is one of the latter. In order to understand her condition “by reducing it to its parts” she embarks upon exhaustive research, relying upon the explosion of informational words and images around her to provide her with the knowledge to control her fear – “I went to libraries, and bookstores, read magazines and technical journals, watched cable TV, made lists and diagrams, made coloured charts, made phone calls to technical writers and scientists, talked to a Sikh holy man in Iron City and even studied the occult” (WN, 192). However, not one of these established sources provides her with an acceptable metanarrative of death to which she can yield – all are relative truths, unreliable and unable to penetrate that which lies at the system’s end. Frustrated by

this impasse, Babette answers an advertisement in *The National Examiner* placed by a psychobiological research firm looking for volunteers to become “test subjects in the development of a super experimental and top-secret drug, code-named Dylar” (WN, 193). Desperate to cure her condition she consciously chooses to risk the “many grim specters” possibly concomitant with Dylar’s use – epiphenomenons of the drug’s chemical interactions with the neurotransmitters that convey the fear of death – and begs and sleeps her way into a private arrangement with the firm via its ‘composite’ director Mr Gray that circumvents legal test procedures. It is one of these ‘grim specters,’ the inability to distinguish words from things, that marks the transition in the novel from nameless dread to the dread of names.

Understandably upset that his wife is sleeping with Mr Gray aka Willie Mink, Jack Gladney embarks on a journey to find him, with the intention of shooting him “three times in the viscera for maximum pain” (WN, 304). Discovering Mink sitting in a motel room high on his own supply of Dylar, watching TV without the sound and babbling a mixture of commercial slogan speak and random facts (in this echoing the ‘Scream Lady’ in *Ratner’s Star*) Gladney is warned, during a moment of lucidity, that he must abide by the laws of room behaviour:

“No one should enter a room not knowing the point. There is an unwritten agreement between the person who enters a room and the person whose room had been entered, as opposed to open-air theaters, outdoor pools. The purpose of a room derives from the special nature of a room.” (WN, 306)

For Frank Lentricchia, Willie Mink is “what the precariously centered Jack might become, postmodern man’s essence, and our culture’s re-formation of the meaning of madness...the promised end of a journey that began on the Mayflower, the shocking telos of the third person ideal, the “I” converted to bits and pieces of language not his own.”<sup>33</sup> One might argue that Gladney recognises this in his projected victim. Drawn to the way that Mink’s eyes are fixed to the flickering screen – “Waves, rays, coherent beams” – Gladney adapts his original plan to the ‘special nature’ of a room filled with the noise of a dead television and decides to begin his revenge by mounting a virtual attack that has all the making of one of the disasters his children rush to watch at home, using words as weapons and targetting the side effects of Dylar:

“I recalled Babette’s remarks about the side effects of the medication. I said as a test, “Falling plane.” He looked at me, gripping the arms of the chair, the first signs of panic building in his eyes. “Plunging aircraft,” I said, pronouncing the words crisply, authoritatively. He kicked off his sandals, folded himself over into the recommended crash position, head well forward, hands clasped behind his knees. He performed the maneuver automatically, with a double-jointed collapsible dexterity, throwing himself into it, like a child or a mime. Interesting. The drug not only caused the user to confuse words with the things they referred to; it made him act in a somewhat stylized way.” (WN, 309/310)

However, something strange happens to Jack. Despite the virtual nature of the attack, the emotions he experiences are far from simulated and go beyond the simple pleasure of exacted vengeance. Caught up in the exhilaration of the event, he ironically connects, for the first time in the novel, and we are led to believe his life, with his essential self. Empowered by the ‘richness and smashing intensity’ of using the system as a weapon against itself, Jack knows who he is “in the network of meanings” (WN, 312) and transcends his own fear of death. In his words “I saw things new” (WN, 312) – an allusion to his friend Murray’s view that “violence is a form of rebirth” (WN, 290). For critic Bradley Butterfield, this scene, concluding with a replacement of words with real bullets as Gladney shoots Mink in the midsection, revelling in the aesthetics of blood flow, and Mink returns a shot, catching Gladney in the wrist, is a perfect example of DeLillo’s application of the Baudrillardian theory we have used to assess *The Names* – symbolic exchange. The white noise in Mink’s room he argues represents the sound of the information age or the hyperreal system collapsing in on itself as a response to this process. But as Butterfield recognises, this collapse does not last long. Shaken from the position of Nietzschean *ubermensch* back to his old self of compassion and mercy by the counter gift of Mink’s bullet, Jack “recognizes the weight of his symbolic obligation to his victim, and seeks to repay him with his forgiveness and help.”<sup>34</sup> Personifying the ubiquity of the system, the group of nuns Jack takes him to simulate belief in order to make the nonbelief of others possible. Nothing has changed.

As a narrative window that allows an experimental exchange to question hyperreality, this scene works well. Indeed, DeLillo enhances its power by contrasting the terror of ordinary discourse with the inverted proposition, expounded earlier in the novel, that names one would normally associate with terror, such as Adolf Hitler, may be neutralised by the system. Pushing diametrics to its logical extreme, these terrible

figures are shown to be either loosed from their historical reference or actuality - floating signifiers that can be borrowed for Warholian aesthetic reconfiguration - or conversely, providing a stable, reliable and fixed reference to real events that makes them strangely comforting: as Gladney says of Hitler - "Fine, solid dependable." (WN, 89). DeLillo's shocking inversion of words and things, of signifiers and referents, is of course a wildly exaggerated manifestation of the topsy-turvy logic of hyperreality, but it brings to mind a reference to Rilke he made in an early interview - that we have to rename the world in order to recapture the innocence of our childhood and develop new connections between people and their environment (ACH, 84). By way of another drug - the 'product' - this is exactly what he does in *Great Jones Street*.

### **Wandering in Aporetic Judgement: *Great Jones Street***

Although predating *The Names* and *White Noise*, *Great Jones Street* offers the reader perhaps the most beguiling depiction of a 'returning real,' one that, although dressed in implausibility and schematism like the other novels, draws on the link between violence, words and the final concerns of this chapter: the material practice of the novelist himself - another kind of return to the real.

At the beginning of *Great Jones Street* we are presented with the thoughts of the leader of a rock band that has stretched culture and politically motivated musical protestation to its limit - "a point of severe tension" (GJS, 2) - due to its policy of producing 'gibberish' music that incites the audience to violent acts in order to make them "acknowledge their own complicity in America's violence" (DD, 49). However, where Bucky Wunderlick was once able to impart "an erotic terror to the dreams of the republic," strengthening his true fame by absorbing himself in this feedback loop of 'total madness' - "hysteria in limousines, knife fights in the audience, bizarre litigation, treachery, pandemonium and drugs" (GJS, 1) - he now recognises that he and the band have reached a position where their music and performances alone have lost their ability to affect human consciousness in any positive way. Indeed, his dialogue with the audience - an unspoken commitment to revolutionary extremism - has stopped. Divorced of its original underlying philosophy - "You have to crush people's heads. That's the only way to make those fuckers listen" (GJS, 104) - their music simply begets the violence they intended to eradicate, culminating in an

unspoken demand for Bucky to commit suicide. In an interview undertaken at the height of his powers, presented in the middle of the novel, Wunderlick states that he believes the more he makes people move, the closer he gets “to personal inertness” (GJS, 105). The reflective Bucky who greets us as we enter the novel realises that his crowd now desire “more than music” and that in some way he is being pushed towards the ultimate form of personal inertness in the form of a self-willed and ‘authentic’ death. And so, hoping that for the rest of the band the options are clear - “Either I’d return with a new language for them to speak or they’d seek a divine silence attendant to my own” (GJS, 3) - Bucky retreats to an apartment in Great Jones Street in order to take stock and “to learn beyond certain personal limits, in endland, far from the tropics of fame” (GJS, 4).

The problem is that although ensconced in what appears to be a capacious ‘secret address,’ Bucky cannot find the time and space he craves, due in part to the fact that he is unable to escape from his own commodification. Indeed, quickly tracked down by an agent of Transparanoia (his record company and ironically the landlords of the building he is hiding in) looking for some tapes Bucky recorded, as well as a reporter and members of the ‘Happy Valley Farm Commune’ – a mysterious group who “want to return the idea of privacy to American life” (GJS, 16) through the distribution of the ‘product,’ a massive strength US Government drug – Bucky is initially unable to achieve the kind of ascetic withdrawal from society, or more pointedly, as critic Douglas Keeseey recognises, “the seemingly pervasive influence of the media,” (DD, 48) he was hoping would lead to personal enlightenment. Interestingly, between the pesterings of outsiders, Bucky also becomes involved in the lives of his neighbours. Above him lives Ed Fenig, a writer of little repute, who is constantly searching for a generic niche, or as he calls it, an ‘untapped field,’ in the market to target with his work. In Fenig’s words:

“Nobody knows me from shit...But I’m a two-time Laszlo Piatakoff Murder Mystery Award nominee. My one-acters get produced without exception at a very hip agricultural college in Arkansas...I know the writer’s market like few people know it. The market is a strange thing, almost a living organism. It changes, it palpitates, it grows, it excretes. It sucks things in and spews them up...It loves and kills.” (GJS, 27)

Below this self-confessed ‘man of numbers’ (GJS, 51) live the Micklewhites, a widow



and her deformed and retarded son who “can’t talk or dress himself or anything” (GJS, 27) but dreams in a way that expresses “the beauty and horror of wordless things” (GJS, 52). Possessing a ‘pliable head’ and limited to primitive, vegetative actions, ‘The Micklewhite Kid’ seems to be the personification of Fenig’s organic market and, in his inability to form words, is in direct contrast with the verbally prolific Fenig himself. Of course, this placement of characters in Wunderlick’s building neatly situates the rock star between the very two poles that through his period of isolation he aimed to deconstruct - language and silence.

In this correlation of the material world with theory, a hyperbolic, overdetermination of ideas or concretisation of a dialectic, *Great Jones Street* is in many ways the testing ground for DeLillo’s next novel – *Ratner’s Star*. Moreover, as with *Ratner’s Star* and its ‘System interbreak,’ there is a case to suggest that the schematisation and thoroughly unbelievable set pieces that fill the majority of the narrative in *Great Jones Street* exist in part to draw the conclusion of the novel – a drug enhanced journey through the ‘actual’ world – into stark relief: a juxtaposition that brings to the fore the ‘return of the real,’ concentrating the inequity and depravities of society into a few Odyssean pages. Arguably, the final scenes of *Great Jones Street*, featuring Bucky Wunderlick wandering tongue tied by the effects of the ‘product’ through streets of ‘plague and usury,’ also herald the first part of DeLillo’s triumviral examination of the relationship between language and fear, continued with *The Names* and concluded in *White Noise* – a relationship that, as one can see in its graphical expression, ironically loops back to echo the placement of tenants in Bucky’s building:

<b>Ed Fenig (Writer)</b>	-	<b>Televisual Logorrhoea/Word Fear – <i>White Noise</i></b>
<b>Bucky (Singer – Words and Actions)</b>	-	<b>Reified Symbolic Equivalency – <i>The Names</i></b>
<b>‘The Micklewhite Kid’ (Silence)</b>	-	<b>Silence and a Fear of Objects – <i>Great Jones Street</i></b>

Both Willie Mink in *White Noise* and Bucky Wunderlick are subject to drugs that reorientate them in relation to the human language system. However, the effects of each drug seem diametrically opposed. Where a Dylar overdose transforms Mink into a word-fearing conduit for television soundbites, for Wunderlick, a one time ‘Dionysian’ rock star who retreats to a simple room in the Bowery in Manhattan to pursue what Tom LeClair suggests is a form of Nietzschean asceticism – self-

preservation in the face of a 'tragic vision' – the 'product' he is given provides him with "several weeks of immense serenity," a kind of divine state where "all sound is silken and nothing erodes in the mad weather of language" (GJS, 265). Dylar had been developed to stave off the fear of death and in the process collapsed the hiatus between signifiers and their referents and rendered their arbitrary connection as concrete, fixed and indistinguishable: the 'product' on the other hand removes signifiers altogether, stripping back the system to allow an unfettered engagement with the world. For LeClair, the 'product's' "presumed appeal and use depend not upon psychological need and conditioning...but on the more deterministic laws of physiological dependency and effect – on force – and the profits that can be made from force" (ITL, 97). However, for those who take it, as we can see with Wunderlick, the results of the drug serve to bring the forces and systems that have allowed the creation of, and hankering after, such a drug into stark relief. The 'product' allows an unmediated conscious relationship between the subject and his/her environment that is childlike, addictive and, importantly for Bucky Wunderlick, enlightening or self-revelatory. For instance, having hidden his iconic self behind layers of old sweaters to "absorb the major impact" (GJS, 117) of any stressful encounters, the 'superdrugged up' Bucky, wandering through peripheral streets, is able to see, unencumbered by the twin burdens of language and his fame, both the effects that hyperreal systemic capitalism has on ordinary people and their response to these forces. In other words, the faceless, dirigible crowd, his potential audience, through the critical lens provided by the 'product' become individualised, the praxis of their vocations or methods of survival – from a toothless man selling apples to pimps, newsdealers and a woman feeding birds from her wheelchair – understood through non-linguistic sensory experience. Ironically for the writer of the nonsense song "Pee-pee-maw-maw" – incidentally his last words before his injection – life on the 'product' is a kind of lyrical gibberish but one that is rich with meaning. The following passage is a cut-up selection of his journey through New York City:

"This one day of late rain I saw a toothless man circle a cart banked with glowing produce. He bellowed into the wind, one of nature's raw warriors, flapping around in unbuckled galoshes. A few people huddled nearby. One would now and then extend a hand toward the cart, finger-pricing, as the man wailed to the blank windows above him. It was a religious cry he produced, evocative of mosques and quaking sunsets.

RED YAPPLES GREEN YAPPLES GOLDEN YAPPLES MAKE A YAPPLE  
PIE MAKE ALSO A YAPPLE STRUDEL YAPPLES YAPPLES YAPPLES  
BIG JUICY YAPPLES FROM THE HEART OF THE YAPPLE  
COUNTRY...

A rag man at the edge of the park retched into his scarf, working himself up to a moment of vast rhetoric. His seemed the type of accusation aimed at those too constricted in spirit to see the earth as a place for gods to grow, a theater of furious encounters between prophets of calamity and simple pedestrians trying to make the light...

I was unreasonably happy, subsisting in blessed circumstance, thinking of myself as a living chant.” (GJS, 259, 261, 262, 264)

For Tom LeClair, although Wunderlick remains quiet in this chapter, a receptacle for sounds and images, his mind “does more than receive” – “He judges, and his judgements show a new understanding of commercial and governmental power and a new compassion that DeLillo signifies with his frequent use of religious language” (ITL, 106). But Bucky’s wandering is a judgement of self as well as a judgement of the system that made him. Having been given the opportunity to have an aporetic Olympian view of city life outside of the prison-house of language, as an intelligent man with the temporary benefit of the oceanic perspective of a child he is able to renew or literally, *rejuvenate*, his response to the world, seeing for the first time in manifest detail how he fits into the grand scheme of things. Indeed, although we learn in the final paragraph of the novel that Bucky feels that he has suffered a ‘double defeat’ of wasted opportunity as the effects of the ‘product’ wear off, having failed to exploit his new knowledge of the forces of language and silence, we are sure that stepping outside of the system for a moment has in many ways rehumanised him. Realising that a sea change in attitude for Wunderlick, in the form of a complete rejection of fame and spectacle, would be a little too pat for the reader, DeLillo intentionally balances his protagonist between a return to making or faking ‘authentic’ sounds – recommodifying himself – and living out one of the beguiling rumours accumulating around his disappearance, performing charitable acts for beggars and syphilitics: a “patron saint of all those men who hear the river-whistles sing the mysteries and who return to sleep in wine by the south wheel of the city” (GJS, 265). In this equivocation DeLillo signposts this most fascinating of characters as a personification of the kind of aporetic position he perceives the novelist should hold – unassimilated, reflective and detached but not afraid of using violent words to effect changes from within the system itself. However, as we shall see in the final section of

this chapter, there is every indication that DeLillo feels that, in the face of more radical parties, this position is all but untenable.

## **The Battle Over Human Consciousness: The Writer and the Terrorist**

“The more books they publish, the weaker we become. The secret force that drives the industry is the compulsion to make writers harmless.” (*Mao II*)<sup>35</sup>

Having examined how and why DeLillo often portrays his characters' using words as weapons, making language dangerous, this final section of the chapter will look at how the author views his own socio-political role, with particular regard to what he perceives to be a general decline in the power the writer now has over his/her readership - an inability to make a difference or inspire change. Over the last decade or so DeLillo has repeatedly stated that in his opinion terrorists now occupy the place in society once held by novelists, using their weapons as replacements for words. In these 'branded' times, they are the men who influence and shape human consciousness, where many of DeLillo's writer contemporaries are "too ready to be neutralized, to be incorporated into the ambient noise."<sup>36</sup> For DeLillo, good 'dissident' writing has an element of danger. In his opinion today's novelist should, from the margins of society, resist the "apparatus of assimilation,"<sup>37</sup> call into question repressive institutional systems and objectively analyse and reflect upon the role of the individual in increasingly mass-orientated, mediated societal structures. The problem, as DeLillo recognises, is that it is hard to have the same kind of impact in words as the 'lonely murderers, terrorists and maniacs' have in deeds, despite a seemingly mutual relationship "between violence and popular culture."<sup>38</sup> In other words, an astute public, intelligent enough to make distinctions between art and life (no matter how interconnected the two often seem) perceive that there is a clear difference between a purely aesthetic act and one of direct action where life itself is compromised (although this of course, through reproduction – televisual documentation for instance – in turn becomes aestheticised.) Obviously, writing from an American perspective does not help the 'dangerous' writer's cause - a 'free' society of Baudrillardian simulation where popular culture, with its constant barrage of images, words and sounds, is such a dominant and pervasive force does not lend itself to what DeLillo might call vivid, unassimilated dissidence. Indeed, democratic stability simply allows the 'state machine' to hide a multitude of sins, the freedom to speak encouraging an absolute relativism aided by over-publication where individuals with insight are drowned out by the cacophony of others exercising their own right to express themselves. Excess

without impact breeds indifference, and only incisive shocks – acts of terror – argues DeLillo, can shake such a society to its senses:

“In a repressive society, a writer can be deeply influential, but in a society that’s filled with glut and repetition and endless consumption, the act of terror may be the only meaningful act. People who are in power make their arrangements in secret, largely as a way of maintaining and furthering that power. People who are powerless make an open theater of violence. True terror is a language and a vision. There is a deep narrative structure to terrorist acts, and they infiltrate and alter consciousness in ways that writers used to aspire to.”<sup>39</sup>

Critics such as John McClure see DeLillo’s fascination with conspiracy and the ‘paranoic style’ as a means of representing rather than romanticising the ‘new intricacies’ of espionage and corruption that he is alluding to in the above interview – people in power maintaining and furthering their power through the covert manipulation of information and events. Hyperbolic metaphors for the unseen exercise of influence, DeLillo’s recurrent depictions of esoteric military-industrial groups with the wherewithal to shape the world to their specifications are necessarily exaggerated in novels such as *Ratner’s Star*, *Running Dog* and *The Names* to make clear his dichotomy of the powerful and powerless. However, one does get the impression at times that the “global political and economic circuitry” DeLillo is so fond of writing about relates to his own fear of a master code, an organised structure working to a distinctly capitalistic grand narrative of world domination that he *believes* exists. Therefore, although not condoning terroristic gestures of defiance - ‘open theaters of violence’ that restore some sort of meaning to the world – there is a real sense in his work that he welcomes the fact that there is some force out there to counter the status quo. *Mao II*, published in 1991, a clarification, for the reader, and it seems himself, of his connection of novelists and terrorists, appears, at first glance, to support this hypothesis.

*Mao II* is a novel that can be considered as the final piece in a seemingly unrelated triptych (*Americana*, *White Noise*, *Mao II*) that shares neither character nor plot but simply an acute and accurate observation of an image-rich society controlled by technology. Bill Gray, the reclusive novelist whose ‘coming out of hiding’ forms the backbone of the narrative drive of the novel, has spent years concealing himself from the world. A great believer in the novel as a “democratic shout” (M, 159), a form that

“some nameless drudge” might adopt and “luck out” with a masterpiece, Gray is unable to finish a novel he has spent years drafting and redrafting, fearing a public death before the democracy that made him: any loss of talent “wide open to the world, the shitpile of hopeless prose” (M, 159). The novel focuses on the last stages of this retreat when he allows a photographer, Brita Nilsson, to capture his image and thus send him back out into society as a ‘consumer event’: an act that is intended to break down the “monolith” of “constant religious observance” Gray has built to protect himself from “the serious trackers” he imagines “moving in with their mobile phones and zoom lenses” (M, 44). Ultimately, however, we feel that this process will only serve to strengthen the aura and ‘brand’ name he finds it increasingly hard to measure up to. With possible authorial reference to Bucky Wunderlick’s neighbour, the ‘Micklewhite kid’ - the dribbling mute in the basement in *Great Jones Street* - Bill sees the book he has been struggling to complete as a “neutered near-human dragging through the house, humpbacked, hydrocephalic, with puckered lips and soft skin, dribbling brain fluid from its mouth” (M, 55). One of the other reasons why Bill is so reluctant to release his ‘new material’ is that he senses the act may be futile, feeling that the space once occupied by the novelist in society has been usurped by terrorists - “They make raids on human consciousness” where novelists simply become “famous effigies” like himself (M, 41). Ironically, it is this thesis that leads him to detach himself from the gravitational pull of his own “massive stillness” (M, 45) and follow his image out into the ‘real’ world to take part in an attempted hostage release in Beirut - the rescue of another writer, a Swiss poet incarcerated in a ‘small room.’

Like Jack Gladney (*White Noise*) and David Bell (*Americana*), Bill Gray is a man all too cognisant of the power of the media. However, unlike the other two protagonists who in some way are dependent upon this power, Bill has sequestered himself from the world in which “we sleep and eat the image and pray to it and wear it too” (M, 37). As a diametric opposite to *White Noise*’s “most photographed barn in America” (WN, 12), in hiding himself from the world for thirty years Bill Gray has, as mentioned, created an ‘aura’ for himself parallel to that assigned to the barn, although his ‘aura’ has developed through disappearance not open display. In his own words:

“When a writer doesn’t show his face, he becomes a local symptom of God’s famous reluctance to appear...He’s playing God’s own trick.” (M, 36/37)

Interestingly, Ryan Simmons, in a recent critique of *Mao II*, draws a parallel between Gray and possibly America's most famous contemporary 'reluctant apparition' - Theodore Kaczynski, the man convicted of being the Unabomber a few years after the novel's publication. Although Simmons exaggerates when he asserts that, in terms of the correspondence of ideas, the connection between DeLillo's tale of a fictional novelist and the actions of a real-life terrorist is "remarkable," there does seem to be, as he suggests, a link in their mutual "frustrated pursuit of a receptive readership."<sup>40</sup> Although both men are ultimately after the same thing - an audience for their ideas - the means by which they attempt to acquire this audience differs greatly however: where Gray initially believes that a cultural voice may be achieved through the "democratic shout" of the novel, Kaczynski, as he outlines in his own literary tract, "Industrial Society and Its Future", believes, like DeLillo, that too many voices leads to indifference on the part of a 'receiver' who has become inured to the excesses of the postmodern sublime. Used by Simmons to illustrate his point, the following quote from Kaczynski's 'manifesto' is a less articulate DeLillo taken to the extreme:

"Anyone who has a little money can have something printed, or can distribute it on the Internet or in some such way, but what he has to say will be swamped by the vast volume of material put out by the media, hence it will have no practical effect. To make an impression on society with words is therefore almost impossible for most individuals and small groups. [...] In order to get our message before the public with some chance of making a lasting impression, we've had to kill people."<sup>41</sup>

Of course, what Kaczynski seems to be hankering after is the societal conditions suitable for the promulgation of a metanarrative, a nostalgic wish to return to an age when thinkers such as Marx and Freud were able to impose their views on a receptive world. The difficulty, as Jean-Francois Lyotard argues in his seminal text *The Postmodern Condition*, is that the thinking public have, over time, become incredulous to overarching theory, preferring instead to construct their own ideas from a relativistic myriad of contrasting opinions. Kaczynski's violent methodology for gaining the public's attention and overcoming this problem echoes that of Mao, the totalitarian Chairman of China tangentially featured in DeLillo's novel through Warhol's fragmented pop portrait and repeated references to his extreme philosophy, whose own manifesto, famously outlined in his Little Red Book of Quotations, was forced upon



the Chinese people. Both men recognised and manipulated the fact that the words alone are not enough, that there should be some kind of socio-historical context, some grounding in the 'real world', no matter how forced and terrifying, that coerces the mass public to engage with what has been written. And, in a way, with the help of an image hungry media, both succeed in what DeLillo critic Mark Osteen calls "spectacular authorship" – "The power to use photographic or televised images to manufacture, as if by magic, spectacular events that profoundly shape public consciousness"<sup>42</sup>: Kaczynski 'authoring' death and destruction while withholding his own image, Mao using his own image to reinforce his power over a populace who feared his actions should they dissent.

Arguably, it is the collusion of the media and the 'author' (whether that means writer or terrorist), a necessarily symbiotic relationship, that forms the central theoretical pivot for *Mao II* and facilitates, as Osteen proposes, the number of different kinds of spectacular authorship DeLillo presents in the novel. As mentioned, this is not the first time DeLillo has covered this territory. There does seem to be an expansion and clarification of the convoluted philosophy of earlier works. Indeed, through the experiences and thoughts of the anchoritic Bill Gray, in his Joycean adoption of a policy of "silence, exile and cunning" (in this, possibly the character closest to DeLillo himself in any of his novels), DeLillo merely turns inward his long held concerns to give a fresh, more personal perspective on the previously charted terrain of media death, simulation and isolation, and image power. One may go as far as to say that for DeLillo there is a recognition, consolidation and resolution of an argument in the triptych of *Americana*, *White Noise* and *Mao II* - *Americana* delineates a hyperreal America without offering an obvious way out; *White Noise* concentrates its depicted effects; and *Mao II* offers some hope of escape. But at first glance DeLillo's conclusions in this 'final instalment' are pessimistic to say the least - "The future belongs to crowds" (M, 16) - "the nonachiever, the nonaggressor, the trudger, the nonindividual" (M, 70), and in such a future, terror becomes "the only meaningful act" (M, 157). Jack Gladney, in a lecture on Hitler he delivers to his friend Murray Jay Siskind in *White Noise*, tells him that "To become a crowd is to keep out death. To break off from the crowd is to risk dying as an individual, to face dying alone" (WN, 73). What is clear is that, in a more defined and concrete form than any other of

DeLillo's novels, *Mao II* illustrates the difficulties faced by subjects attempting to synthesise just such a dialectic.

For Jean Baudrillard, the 'crowding of the public' before the spectacle of the media, to which DeLillo makes constant reference in *Mao II*, rather than keeping out death as Jack Gladney suggests, actually creates an environment that enables terrorism, or politically motivated killing, to take place. For him, "gone is the constellation of alienation,"<sup>43</sup> where individualism and dissent lend society a fragmented and hierarchical nature. Indeed, in the face of the surge of the crowd, writing in the margins, as DeLillo proposes, would be seen as a somewhat pointless revolutionary pursuit. Through general egalitarianism in the face of the hyperreal system, Baudrillard argues that "We are all hostages, and we are all terrorists" (FS, 39): a circuit replacing "masters and slaves." "Dominating and the dominated, the exploiters and the exploited," for Baudrillard are atavistic concepts, like the metanarratives that defined them. In the age of global information exchange, a climate of what he calls 'universal responsibility' has arisen, which "carries to its extreme consequences the essential proposition of liberal and Christian humanism: all men are in solidarity with and responsible for the wretched poverty of the pariah of Calcutta" (FS, 36). Localised or foreign social problems, thanks to the media, are now the responsibility of the "inert and fascinated masses" whose very attention is held hostage by acts of terrorism that provide the terrorist[s] with a platform to communicate: unless, of course, the potential 'viewer' finds him/herself sitting on a hijacked plane with a gun at their head as the cameras roll on the runway. This insoluble relationship between the media and terrorist acts is explained to Bill Gray in *Mao II* by George Haddad, the articulate spokesperson for the Beirut terrorists:

"Maybe there's an organization that objects in principle to the release of any hostage, even a hostage they themselves are not holding. Certainly they understand that this man's release depends completely on the coverage. His freedom is tied to the public announcement of his freedom. You can't have the first without the second. This is one of many things Beirut has learned from the West... A few years ago a neo-Nazi group in Germany devised the slogan 'The Worse the Better.' This is also the slogan of the Western media. You are nonpersons for the moment, victims without an audience. Get killed and maybe they will notice you." (M, 129/130)

Echoing the philosophy of Jack Gladney's daughter in *White Noise* who, after learning

that the media were not at the airport when her plane landed, indignantly feels she, and her fellow passengers, went through a near air disaster for “nothing,” Haddad’s words strike a chord with Gray, a man who gained celebrity by publishing and then doing nothing, getting “bigger as his distance from the scene deepens” (M, 52). Gray is well aware of the fact that desperation has led people away from the ‘great secular transcendence’ of the novel towards the emotional experience of “reports, predictions and warnings” (M, 72) in the news - media events that, in a true Baudrillardian sense, require no real catastrophes behind them. The problem for Gray is that he is torn between allowing the distance between himself and his public to widen, reinforcing his aura and popularity but preventing his release of new material (not to mention risking dying as an individual in his mountain retreat), and rejoining the crowd to “keep out death” and experience emotions for himself. As critic Ryan Simmons recognises, whatever way Gray turns his authorial power is reduced:

“Paradoxically, Bill’s continued exile intensifies the diminishment of his authorial power, but by emerging into the public arena once again, he would only accomplish a further diminishment, as readers became aware that his words could no longer live up to the image they have held.”<sup>44</sup>

As many have been quick to point out, although in interviews DeLillo is careful to separate himself from his characters, the parallels between his life and that of Bill Gray are clear. For a time the kind of writer who would meet reporters with a business card announcing ‘I don’t want to talk about it,’ DeLillo ended his years of Salingeresque self-imposed exile with a gradual re-emergence into the public arena around the time he was writing *Mao II*. From this point on he took it upon himself to champion the causes of writers who have symbolised the fight for freedom of expression and suffered as a consequence. For instance, since the novel’s publication in 1991, DeLillo has headed up awareness campaigns, through defence pamphlets and readings, for Salman Rushdie and Wei Jingsheng – a little known state-opposed Chinese writer. And, like it or not, DeLillo’s personal sea-change appears to echo a transition in his fiction from David Bell/Bucky Wunderlick characters, ‘authors’ (in film and music) seeking some sort of escape from the world, to Gray, a figure who lives out DeLillo’s own current view that a writer cannot “allow himself the luxury of separating himself from the crowd” and that it is “indispensable to be fully involved in contemporary life, to be part of the crowd, the clash of voices.”<sup>45</sup> The question is, from what DeLillo has

told us in interviews and our interpretation of the diegesis of his novels, can we gauge from his changing and often antinomic positions how he feels about his own deconstruction of the role of the author, that has at its heart an unresolvable conflict: the need to maintain a dialogical position in society while at the same time stepping out to provide an Olympian criticism? Perhaps a detailed examination of the denouement of *Mao II* can offer us an answer.

### **God's Own Trick: 'Theological' Anti-Narrative, Image Commodification and the 'Real' 'Death of the Author'**

"Neither dead nor alive, the hostage is suspended by an incalculable outcome. It is not his destiny that awaits for him, nor his own death, but anonymous chance, which can only seem to him something absolutely arbitrary. There are no longer even any rules for the game of his life or death...He is in a state of radical emergency, of virtual extermination." (Jean Baudrillard. FS, 35)

Persuaded to travel to New York to meet his editor, Charlie Everson, a close friend and "chairman of a high-minded committee on free expression" (M, 98) who has 'kept the faith' by refusing to reveal Bill's whereabouts for twenty five years, Gray is asked to take part in a reading of the captive Swiss poet's work in London. Initially, he is under the impression that he is taking part in a constructed media event in which all parties 'receive press':

"Your new group gets press, their new group gets press, the young man is sprung from his basement room, the journalists get a story, so what's the harm." (M, 98)

Informing Gray that "There's an excitement that attaches to your name and it will help us put a mark on this event," Everson senses he has clinched the deal by appealing to Gray's sense of order and balance, the rightness of "one missing writer [reading] the work of another" (M, 99). However, the novel seems to suggest that Gray has already been won over to the idea by an earlier statement, in which Everson offers an extrapolated rationale for Gray's decision to isolate himself all those years ago:

"“You have a twisted sense of the writer's place in society. You think the writer belongs at the far margin, doing dangerous things. In Central America, writers carry guns. They have to. And this has always been your idea of the way it ought to be. The state should want to kill all writers. Every government, every group that holds power or aspires to hold power should feel so threatened by writers that they hunt them down, everywhere.”" (M, 97)

The problem for Gray is that he feels, as Everson puts it, he has “lived out the vision” of the dissident writer, “become a hunted man”, but apart from the writing process itself - “There’s a danger in a sentence when it comes out right, a sense that these words almost did not make it to the page” (M, 167) - he has not performed one truly dangerous act. As he puts it himself, his life is “a kind of simulation” (M, 97). Indeed, there are times in the novel when Gray’s self-imposed marginalisation is identified by others as an adopted role, a once open resistance to appropriation and fetishistic consumerism that over the years has developed into caricature. For instance, while being driven to Gray’s hideaway, photographer Brita Nilsson remarks that she feels as if she is “...Being taken to see some terrorist chief at his secret retreat in the mountains.” “Tell Bill. He’ll love that,” replies Gray’s acolyte, Scott (M, 27). By agreeing to connect his iconic self with Jean-Claude Julien, a victim of terrorism, Gray presents himself with the opportunity to bring a little authenticity to his role, a level of danger befitting his ‘place in society.’ In essence he wants to justify the aura that has built up around him and write himself into a ‘real’ dangerous scenario. The fact that his resolution to help is unshaken by the news that the Beirut group may want to exchange him for Jean-Claude, because the Swiss poet is too obscure to have any impact in the media, strengthens this argument. Of course, although luring Gray eastward into a hostage situation is fantastic, as Charlie Everson acknowledges, if anyone can understand the terrorists’ calculating manipulation of the media and construction of reality it’s Gray:

“It doesn’t break any laws of logic or nature. It’s unbelievable only in the shallowest sense...You and I know better. We understand how reality is invented. A person sits in a room and thinks a thought and it bleeds out into the world. Every thought is permitted. And there’s no longer a moral or spatial distinction between thinking and acting.” (M, 132)

DeLillo’s quandary in writing *Mao II*, as critic Mark Osteen suggests, is that, along with novelists, the *terrorists* spectacular authoring of reality depends upon their “symbiotic relationship with the media,” (SA, 659) undermining his recurrent romantic references, in the novel, through ‘mouthpiece’ characters, and interviews, to isolated acts of violence planned by men in small rooms. If DeLillo himself agrees with this, the novel takes on a whole new ironic dimension, becoming a wry fictional deflation of the roles of both novelist *and* terrorist, and brings to mind Baudrillard’s

identification of the media's "insoluble dilemma" – "if you want no more terrorism, then you must renounce information itself" (FS, 47). However, aside from Osteen's plausible though limited proposal that we will look at in more detail later, that DeLillo manages to demonstrate in *Mao II*, through his depiction of Brita Nilsson and her 'dialogic photography,' "...how authors may incorporate spectacle without being entirely incorporated by it" – a signalling of "an acceptance of the ubiquity of spectacle and commodification," and a suggestion of "how novels may push out toward the social order, not to become part of the crowd, but to engage the crowd in remaking that order" (SA, 668) – if we go on to examine Gray's motivations for knowingly accepting his swap for the obscure poet, other conclusions as to DeLillo's intentions come to mind.

In *Mao II* virtually every experience is one step removed from 'unmediated' reality. Even Jean-Claude, incarcerated in a Beirut room, senses, that he has developed a second self, his name if not his body in circulation - a "digital mosaic in the processing grid", put together, his data stored "in starfish satellites" (M, 112). In recognising that no matter which way he turns the system will translate him into a 'consumer event', Bill Gray works to the rule that "Everything around us tends to channel our lives toward some final reality in print or on film" (M, 43). We feel that he is aware that only by ridding himself of his second self – "...The self-important fool that keeps the writer going" (M, 37) – will he defeat the "force that's independent of [his] conscious choices." (M, 45). Importantly for our interpretation of the novel's conclusion, upon first meeting Gray we learn that he has "...always seen [himself] in sentences" and that "Every sentence has a truth waiting at the end of it and the writer learns how to know it when he finally gets there" (M, 48). In his words, not only is the book he is sitting on 'dead' and seeming to belong to someone else, but so is he, ordered around by his draconian factotum Scott and missing the "code of being that pushed [him] on and made [him] trust the world" (M, 48). Allowing Nilsson to capture his image was the first step to rediscovering self-determination. Despite the possibility that it would probably reinforce his 'aura', it was a decision he made himself to enter the world as the 'author' of his own future. In putting his life in the hands of a band of terrorists, he employs a "courage and perseverance" lacking in his book and through a process of 'symbolic exchange' actively opposes the system that has bound him for so long.

‘Symbolic exchange’, as we have seen in reference to DeLillo’s earlier novels, *The Names* and *White Noise*, is Jean Baudrillard’s methodology for ‘unbinding the energies’ of hyperreality. A complicated, post-Marxist argument that sees contemporary world problems as the result of a self-replicating ‘code’ underpinning a nebulous ‘system’ rather than direct human agency, ‘symbolic exchange’ involves defying ‘the system’ “with a gift to which it cannot respond save by its own collapse and death” (SED, 37). Acts of terrorism, particularly the taking of hostages, play a key sacrificial role in this hypothetical wresting or negation of power, causing systemic suicide recognisable in ‘disarray and defeat’: “a symbolic response, but a death which wears it out” (SED, 38). Although at times strangled by its own hyperbole, the central argument of Baudrillard’s thesis, founded on the equivalence and exchange of the ‘gift’, is that the system has to respond to any challenge that is thrown to it, and that as it “cannot compute the death-challenge... all the institutions and mobilised violence of power whether individually or massed together, can do nothing against this lowly but symbolic death.” (SED, 37/38).

For thirty years, Bill Gray was an unbound hostage of the system, in particular its most defined reified form, the media. His decision to remove himself from American society thinking that “it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture” was, by his own admission, a mistake. By coming out of hiding and offering himself to the Beirut terrorists as a gift that cannot be reciprocated, he sees a way of rectifying this mistake and restoring another ‘thimble of meaning’ “that had been lost to the world” (M, 200) when the Swiss hostage was taken. Sitting in a hotel in Cyprus, waiting for a boat to take him to Junieh, a Lebanese port, Gray puts together in his mind, for the benefit of an absent Haddad, a vindication of his actions:

“When you inflict punishment on someone who is not guilty, when you fill rooms with innocent victims, you begin to empty the world of meaning and erect a separate mental state, the mind consuming what’s outside itself, replacing real things with plots and fictions. One fiction taking the world narrowly into itself, the other fiction pushing out toward the social order, trying to unfold into it.” (M, 200)

Confirming Mark Osteen’s suggestion that DeLillo, in spite of his grand social prognostications, realises that “control of the public mind (always fleeting and partial) really belongs to the media corporations who authorize the images that terrorists

produce" (SA, 660) Gray disagrees with Haddad's proposal that "The culture hasn't figured out how to assimilate [the terrorist]" (M, 157). Terrorists are merely extreme exponents of the 'code' – thinking they are manipulating but ultimately manipulated by the system. Gray's insurrection against the system, to be achieved through personal sacrifice, is far more radical - (the high probability that he will be either killed or exchanged for the other hostage is implied in Chapter Eleven). By exchanging his own mythical and 'auratic' self for a hostage whose release depends on the media, he saves the life of the other man, upsets the simulated nature of the hostage's incarceration, and, through announcing the 'return of the disappeared', restores a sense of reality and meaning to the world. Of course, as a gift that cannot be returned, this symbolic act also cannot be countered by the 'system'. Indeed, should his 'gift' reach the ultimate level of personal sacrifice, his death would be doubly powerful. 'Bill Gray' had become a fictional figure over the years - for many he was thought already dead. To return in order to expire would be a statement that would unsettle the foundations of all he is opposed to. The problem is that Gray's radical plan, for a number of reasons, is blocked before it can be realised. In what must be seen as the great ironic triumph of the novel, despite Gray's politically astute intentions for himself, an act of chance comes between him and his dream: a road accident that lacerates his liver, creating an internal swelling or haematoma that, days later, leads to his death aboard the ferry taking him on the final leg of his journey. Seeming to announce a victory for the system, although, bodily, Gray could not make it to Beirut, all forms of his identification, including his passport, complete with photograph, name and number, are pilfered from his corpse to be sold on "to some militia" at the same destination: the "millennial image mill" (M, 229), where locals, mentally unable to part the real and the representation, "are firing at portraits of each other's leader" (M, 227).

DeLillo's decision to arbitrarily interpose between Gray and the manifest destiny of his narrative, invoking 'anonymous chance' as the final arbiter in Gray's life, appears to be both brave and dangerous. Killing off the protagonist in what is, for the purposes of a novel dealing in meaningful acts, such a meaningless manner, is, borrowing DeLillo's words a "small, incisive shock" that reminds us that the author, contrary to Barthes' often quoted axiom, can be very much alive in his work, a quasi-theological presence that can operate outside of intertextual imitative gestures. Indeed, one could



read DeLillo's killing of his character as infinitely more radical than the plan that Gray fails to complete in the story. In killing off Gray in such a manner, at such a time, DeLillo restores meaning to his own practice and fulfils the expectations of the novel, set up in the first few chapters, in the 'real world'. In effect he has replaced plots and fictions with contingent real things and released both writer and reader from the age old conventions and expectations of novelistic structure to which they have been held hostage. However, if this is indeed the case – if we are to believe that DeLillo curtailed his protagonist's narrative in order to re-establish the power of the author - what must we make of Brita Nilsson's coincidental photographic assignment in Beirut at the novel's conclusion, neither bang nor whimper, which replaces Gray's presence in our expected ending?

### **'An Exorbitant Mirror': Metafictional Reflections of Theory**

“...Taking hostages and other similar acts rekindle some fascination: they are at once an exorbitant mirror for the system of its own repressive violence, and the model of a symbolic violence which is always forbidden it, the only violence it cannot exert: its own death.” (SED 38)

For Mark Osteen, the final section of the novel 'In Beirut,' in which we learn that Brita has abandoned her writers' project to photograph “Barely watched wars, children running in the dust” (M, 229) and now, it would seem, terrorist leaders, although appearing to “confirm the death of the old authorship and [a] resigned acceptance of a future given over to crowds or people and images” (SA, 664/665) actually heralds a new kind of authorship, one that incorporates participation in Guy Debord's 'society of the spectacle' while remaining wholly conscious of its insidiously inimical forces.

Sent by a German magazine to document the daily life of local terrorist chief Abu Rashid, Nilsson soon realises that Beirut is a perverse adaptation of a Western city – the streets “run with images” such as graffiti art, movie posters and advertisements which exist as a terrible veneer, a reminder, in Rashid's words, of the way that the Middle East “tried to mimic the West” (M, 235). However, having learnt that despite his contempt for the West and adoption of Maoist policies of totalitarian domination over an eminently dirigible band of followers, Rashid enjoys a drink of diet cola with his lunch and had long ago sold off his hostage, Jean-Claude, like any other kind of commodity to fundamentalists, Nilsson recognises that Rashid is still subject to the

global system and thus needs her more than she needs him. Her decision to impose her “subversive authority” on the shoot before leaving Rashid’s hideaway by removing the hood of a young boy, isolating his individuality and questioning Rashid’s policy of erasing difference in the push for power and greatness, shows that she has confidence in the fact that it is she who has the ability to control the future and not the terrorist before her – real power lying in images and not weapons. For Osteen, the spontaneity, subjectivity and overriding authority of Nilsson’s photographic methodology, coupled with the inherent complex relationship between the author, subject and viewer of photographs in general, lends her work a dialogic, oppositional quality that meets the criteria DeLillo himself has set for dissident authorship. Indeed, in Osteen’s opinion, by introducing each of the novel’s sections with a poignant photograph that prefaces any written articulation of the image’s particular subject, DeLillo, like Nilsson, practices “a modified form of spectacular authorship, at once retaining creative control and relinquishing some of it to the audience”, working “from inside of the discourse of images to engage in a critical dialogue with it” (SA, 667).

While concurring with Osteen’s view that through *Mao II* DeLillo has engaged in a critical dialogue with spectacular culture and commodification, accepting its ubiquity in order to suggest “how novels may push out toward the social order”, this thesis argues that Osteen’s failure to comment on how, as with his other novels, DeLillo also engages in a critical dialogue *with criticism itself* is a serious omission from his study - overlooking a key strategy of DeLillo’s work. We know from what DeLillo has said in interviews that he has a good knowledge of critical/cultural theoretical issues. For instance, in an interview with Brigitte Desalm for a German paper he cites Benjamin’s essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ as an influence on his thoughts on the ‘consumption of reality’ – our inability to “grasp something unmediated.”<sup>46</sup> Moreover, some level of intersection of both the milieu and inherent argument of his novels with the theory of Baudrillard, as the sheer quantity of academic papers on the subject suggests, is incontestable. Of course, while theory is indubitably present from *Americana* onwards, this does not mean to say that DeLillo necessarily *agrees* with the theory he dissects or that literary critics, truth be told, including the author of this thesis, may not have chosen to use the work of Baudrillard et al as convenient hermeneutic tools that, in focusing on first world dilemmas, by

definition have to coincide with the worlds DeLillo depicts. Indeed, many critics for instance have recognised the way that in a sense DeLillo *inverts* Benjamin's ideas of aura and reproduction – suggesting, contrary to Benjamin, that 'aura' can actually be enhanced by reproduction on a massive scale, if only because of the fetishisation of the object or the human subject him/herself as commodity. Nevertheless, this ability to take ideas, examine them and if necessary twist them to fit a fictional ontology that reflects the 'real' world is perhaps the real success of DeLillo's work: not that his novels provide the reader with a readily 'consumable' mixture of complicated theory made easy incorporated in conventional narrative, but that, taking the lead of the author himself, they actively encourage dialogue with and dissent against, what is written. This 'metatheoretical' approach is the key strength of *Mao II* and connects nicely with DeLillo's own view of the writer's role – that he/she should be necessarily dangerous through attempting to extend "the pitch of consciousness and human possibility."<sup>47</sup>

*Mao II* is arguably DeLillo's most ambitious attempt to tackle the problem of hyperreality. But it is a novel that only raises more questions through excluding possible answers. Using Bill Gray to explore a real scenario in the secure environment of the novel DeLillo offers us a fictional, yet believably socially embedded, example of Baudrillard's own solution to hyperreality but, rather than suggesting that it is a workable solution to a proliferating system, explodes its claims to efficacy. In its place he could conceivably have provided a synthetic solution to the dialectic of words as weapons vs weapons as words outlined over the course of this chapter, but it is not until the conclusion of *Underworld*, as we will see in chapter four of the thesis, that he attempts such a feat. That is not to say that *Mao II*'s conclusion represents a hopeless vacuum of ideas. Maybe taking a 'critical realist' view the solution is the novel itself. It may be, as Georg Lukacs postulated, through a "dynamic reflection of reality" that change will come about. Baudrillard is a great proponent of the power of 'reflection': for him terrorism is 'an exorbitant mirror' of the repressive system. Don DeLillo too, in *Americana*, *White Noise*, and *Mao II*, provides mirror representations of a society of corroded identity in the hope that this will trigger 'the system's' destruction. As outlined in *Americana*, the people of America have moved from "first person consciousness to third person" (A, 270): and DeLillo feels this trend will have to be

reversed in order to restore both a sense of reality and individuality to their lives. If neither terrorism nor television can do this, then maybe the novel can. By ending *Mao II* with the staccato flash of a camera and not the muzzle flare of a machine gun he places the theories of Baudrillard, Benjamin, Debord et al in a context that the reader can identify with, showing us that not only can the novel succeed as a valuable mirror of cultural and critical theory but that it can also operate beyond the limitations of these fields, offering insights such formal disciplines would find impossible to contain.

Robert Scholes defines metafiction, the ‘borderline territory between fiction and criticism,’ as an assimilation of “...all the perspectives of criticism into the fictional process itself,”<sup>48</sup> making a link between four aspects of fiction (and the ontology it presents) – forms, ideas, existence and essence - and four aspects of critical perspectives on fiction – formal, structural, behavioural and philosophical. As we have seen in this chapter, at his best, as Frank Lentricchia observes, DeLillo is able to assimilate the two fields, achieving a “perfect weave of novelistic imagination and cultural criticism” – threading the ideas of theorists such as Baudrillard and Benjamin seamlessly into the weft of a story while at the same time questioning their validity. At his worst however the ideas and theories abounding in his novels can seem a little too dominant in relation to the narrative, getting in the way of the story or reducing characters to simulacral facsimiles of their creator. On this basis, the following three chapters of the thesis, substantive examinations of an early, middle and late DeLillo in relation to which this chapter was a contextual preface, carefully weigh up the strengths and faults of his novels as metafiction, as well outlining their undoubted differences in outlook, style and social concern.

## Chapter Two

# Ghostwritten into the Historical Sublime: *Libra* and the Textual Manipulation of an Assassin

“Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return of terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name.” (Jean Francois Lyotard – *The Postmodern Condition*)<sup>1</sup>

“... They wanted a name, a face, a bodily frame they might use to extend their fiction into the world.” (*Libra*)<sup>2</sup>

Immediately prior to the publication of *Libra*, DeLillo admitted in an interview with Anthony DeCurtis that the murder of President John F. Kennedy had a formative impact on his fiction, the first eight novels a coalescence of tendencies “collecting around the dark center of the assassination.”<sup>3</sup> Up until that point, for the reader, there had always been an omnipresent unspoken connection - connotations, subtext and eerie parallels - but no real treatment of the event itself. The link seems obvious with hindsight: a propensity for representing the machinations of secretive organisations, men plotting in small rooms, and the power of the media, particularly in reference to the shaping of personal and national history. It was as if DeLillo had been working up the confidence, arranging his thoughts and processing the event through series of fictional set pieces, before attempting to tackle the “Six point nine seconds of heat and light” (L, 15) that “broke the back of the American Century” (L, 181). In so many different ways, *Libra* is an inevitable novel.

Much has been made already in this thesis of the subjugation of DeLillo’s characters to language, a kind of distancing from the real where the roundedness and ontological fidelity of characters is rejected by the author in favour of theoretically limned cutouts – one dimensional men weakened by words, constructed like texts. DeLillo’s Lee Harvey Oswald is a continuation and in many ways a development of this approach. A directionless young man, a tabula rasa who allows himself to be borne by the currents

of political manoeuvring, ideology and simple coincidence, Oswald is portrayed as a “zero in the system” (L, 151) whose destiny is to merge with his binary twin: the “figure of the gunman in the window...inextricable from the victim and his history” (L, 435). Emphasising Oswald’s inherent ‘textuality’ DeLillo foregrounds the suggestion that he is an aspirant writer of “short stories on contemporary American life” (L, 160) thwarted by dyslexia: in Lacanian terms, a figure frustrated by his inability to enter the ‘conventional symbolic’ who compensates by allowing himself and his ‘imaginary’ existence’ into the realm of the real as somebody else’s ‘project’ - a ‘patsy’ not only to a cabal of sinister organisations but also to the dark forces of some deeper mystery. In effect, DeLillo’s Lee Harvey Oswald is a fiction who is written into collective history and subsequently ‘erased’ or taken “off the calendar” (L, 432) by Jack Ruby, himself a ‘miscast’ dupe who in killing the assassin hopes to “close the book” (L, 430).

For DeLillo, the circumstances surrounding Oswald’s assassination of Kennedy from a number of perspectives carried a kind of self-referential quality or aura of reflectivity, particularly where the historically conscious assassin himself is concerned. A “self-watcher, a man who lives in random space” (L, 147/148), Oswald is shown musing on his coincidental connections with JFK, and stepping outside of himself to witness, along with the masses, his own reaction to Jack Ruby’s bullet, implicating the crowd by making them “part of his dying” (L, 447). Such self-referentiality is associated with a systemic existence – a recognition of similarity, difference and the relationship between the part and the whole. Primarily it is a form of self-reflection born of the information age and late-capitalism; in Oswald’s case proletariat self-actualisation ultimately stripped of its Marxist inspiration and subsumed by a deeper desire – that of insertion in film, radio and popular magazines. Initially, Oswald’s methodology for ‘getting a grip on things’ involves learning about the ‘struggle’ of life from communist metanarratives: later in the novel however he pictures himself sitting “...in the reception room at Life or Look magazine,” his own narrative – “the tale of an ex-marine who has penetrated the heart of the Soviet Union” - in a Moroccan “leather folder in his lap” (L, 206). Where Soviet programming fails, the draw of a totalising media succeeds.

However, *Libra* is also about that which cannot be contained by the system, cannot be articulated, and exceeds any human capacity to represent it – the sublime. DeLillo, in what seems to be an address to the reader through the viewpoint of Nicholas Branch – “a retired senior analyst of the central intelligence agency, hired on contract to write the secret history of the assassination” – informs us that the strangeness of not just the event, but the trajectories of the lives of its ‘players’, the facts and theories built up around the killing, lends a holiness to the moment. In Branch’s view the assassination constitutes “an aberration in the heartland of the real” and it is his aim, like Oswald, to regain his, and by implication our, “grip on things” (L, 15). This chapter will assess how DeLillo, with *Libra*, tackles totality and the sublime, comparing his fictional aesthetic to the theories and philosophy of Kant, Burke and in particular Jean-François Lyotard, whose reassessment of the sublime has affected contemporary artistic practice. For instance, does DeLillo stay true to his wish that the novel offers us a way out of what he calls in his Author’s Note “a chronicle of unknowing,” or, as could be argued, does he concede to terror and awe, give in to a conventionally postmodern depiction of what Fredric Jameson terms the “hysterical sublime?” Skip Willman, in a recent convincing examination of *Libra*, applies the ideas of Adorno and Žižek to an understanding of the formal role played by astrology in the novel as an “aesthetic consolation” that in ‘rebuking’ both the conspiracy and contingency theories of the assassination, “preserves the “sacred inexplicability” of this traumatic event.”<sup>4</sup> In Willman’s view undecideability is built into *Libra* as a way of acknowledging, in Žižek’s words, “the constitutive limits...within thought itself” (DP, 636): the “unreconciled contradictions of the real world” are illuminated by a form not subject to the rationalisation of other ‘information sorting’ systems. Developing the argument that DeLillo is aiming to reflect the lived experience of late capitalism with all of its confusions, and building on the idea that, in the words of Stephen Melville and Bill Readings, “The postmodern sublime can...be understood as the *active consequence* of foregrounding the simultaneous incommensurability and intimacy of the visual and the textual,”<sup>5</sup> a secondary assessment will be made of DeLillo’s dichotomy of the word and the image in the novel and how, in different ways, they both contribute to social indeterminism. Indeed, some may argue that the shooting of Kennedy, historically informed by the frames of the Zapruder film and the words of the Warren Commission Report (one notoriously ambiguous series of images and a text described

by DeLillo as “the megaton novel James Joyce would have written if he’d moved to Iowa City and lived to be a hundred” (L, 181)) was perhaps the first postmodern ‘spectacular event’. The chapter will discuss Lyotard’s binary of the figural and the linguistic and evaluate how the desire induced by the image can be tempered by the repressive nature of the word, a connection being made between this opposition, *Libra*’s dichotomy of the named and the sublime, and an overarching rejection of totality.

### **The ‘Sublime’, *Libra* and Information Entropy**

“It is impossible to stop assembling data. The stuff keeps coming.” (L, 59)

For Brian McHale, a leading commentator on the form of the contemporary novel, in postmodernist historical fiction, or ‘faction’ as it is also known, the line between history and fiction is blurred to the point where the two seem to exchange places, a kind of ontological violation through which “the real world becomes lost in the process.”<sup>6</sup> At first glance *Libra* seems to fit this model. Operating within the constraints of real-world objects or “realemes” and the margins of existing accounts of the assassination, DeLillo exploits the dark areas of the event – “times and places where real-world and purely fictional characters interact”<sup>7</sup> – in order to extrapolate and improvise around the subject, but provides his reader with a reality that always seems to elude the novel’s characters, something hankered after but seldom found. Often, a character’s inability to ‘get a grip on things’ is caused by a sense of being outside of history, separate and isolated. Sometimes the opposite occurs, characters’ becoming overwhelmed by their submersion in a world of excess information, a feeling of stupefaction in the face of what CIA operative Nicholas Branch calls the “incredible haul of human utterance...mind-spatter” (L, 181). Both positions can be linked to the concept of the sublime.

In the introduction to his monograph on the ‘Kantian Sublime’, Paul Crowther explains that the concept of the sublime is one of “ancient lineage” that, outside of current reappropriations of the term, has traditionally operated within a broad, descriptive and evaluative framework:

“On the one hand, it is used *descriptively* to denote vast or powerful objects and artefacts, or ones which induce extreme states of emotion in us; on the



other hand, it is used *evaluatively* in relation to artworks of extraordinarily high quality.”<sup>8</sup>

From Joseph Addison, who claimed that in the presence of the sublime object we experience “an exhilarating feeling of *self-transcendence*” (KS, 7), to Edmund Burke, who argued that such a feeling was caused by a modulation between pain, terror and pleasure thus suggesting *self-preservation* (KS, 8), the sublime has usually been examined more as an influence on the subject than a quality of the object or ‘other’, which has generally been nature and/or the divine. Analysis therefore centered on reception rather than projection. Kant however took a different, more aesthetic approach, an angle that has led, as Crowther argues, to the term’s current fashionability in the cultural and critical theory of today. Fredric Jameson, one of those contemporary theorists who have discerned a relevance in the concept to current thought, introduces his articulation of the postmodern or ‘hysterical’ sublime in *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* by providing a lucid background to the original definition of the concept and Kant’s changes, placing both in their appropriate philosophical context:

“The sublime was for Burke an experience bordering on terror, the fitful glimpse, in astonishment, stupor, and awe, of what was so enormous as to crush human life altogether: a description then refined by Kant to include the question of representation itself, so that the object of the sublime becomes not only a matter of sheer power and of the physical incommensurability of the human organism with Nature but also of the limits of figuration and the incapacity of the human mind to give representation to such enormous forces.”<sup>9</sup>

Jean-Francois Lyotard, expanding on the limits of Kant’s definition and echoing Jameson, suggests that the Kantian sublime implies “...The incommensurability of reality to concept” (PC, 79) - the emphasis is placed on the inability of an object to present or ‘make visible’ “absolute greatness or power” (PC, 78) and not the phenomenology of the spectator: the deficiency lying with the world itself and not the mind that comprehends it. Whether or not we apply the original or reformulated definition there is a consensual recognition that, whether object or subject induced, the human experience of the sublime is both a pleasurable and painful one. Indeed, it is this contradictory sensation that leads Jameson to apply the term to his reading of life in late capitalist society, a world that, in his words, “momentarily loses its depth and threatens to become a glossy skin, a stereoscopic illusion, a rush of filmic images

without density” (CLLC, 34). For Jameson, Nature, the traditional object of the sublime, has been radically eclipsed by what he terms the onset of the technology of the “Third Machine Age”, a shift characterised by the reproduction of simulacra rather than production – a “decentered global network” of information systems. While “enormous and threatening”, such technology, he admits, can also be both “mesmerizing and fascinating” and makes “very different demands on our capacity for aesthetic representation than did the relatively mimetic idolatory of the older machinery” (CLLC, 37). And yet, as Lyotard argues, it is through a recognition of the sublime and its subsequent employment as a form of aesthetic that such a society may be presented, a concept through which “modern art (including literature) finds its impetus and the logic of avant-gardes finds its axioms” (PC, 77). Postmodern art, in Lyotard’s opinion, in part exists to reflect the one-dimensionality of the hyperreal, to “present the fact that the unrepresentable exists” (PC, 78) – its task being “not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented” (PC, 81). Later in the thesis we will see how DeLillo attempts, in his early novel *Ratner’s Star*, to undertake such a strategy in his quest to satirise academic disciplines, to represent phenomena that elude scientific theory: the book offering the reader a symbol-reliant world that reflects but fails to grasp what is inherently inexpressible. With *Libra* however the sublime takes a different form as DeLillo replaces the entropic convolutions of nature depicted in *Ratner’s Star*, its ability to remain in excess of human language-based forms of interpretation, with the words and images that have built up around one ‘electrifying event’ – the assassination. Interestingly, both novels take as their centre a few seconds of conjunction, a fusion of heat and light that changes the world – *Ratner’s Star* focusing on an eclipse, with the novel’s laughing protagonist bathed in the illuminations between its sweeping shadow bands, and *Libra*, with its own “Chaplinesque figure, skating along the edges of vast and dangerous events” (L, 194), outlining a murder based as much, in DeLillo’s view, on chance and contingency as conspiratorial forethought. Chaos, fusion, chaos – both novels attest to an absolute power that departs as swiftly as it arrives, its ramifications felt long after it has gone. Ironically, where it is the stars that cause confusion in *Ratner’s Star*, in *Libra*, as Willman suggests, astrology is used as a metaphor that “gestures toward a vision of the complex workings of the social totality that transcends the parameters of contingency and conspiracy” (DP, 635): a way of understanding Oswald’s actions.

Drawing on the work of Adorno, Willman even suggests that the astral metaphor has a pataphysical value in representing “an “imaginary solution” to the social contradiction between the “opaqueness and inscrutability” of the “total order of our life” (DP, 633). Possibly the most pertinent connection between the two novels however is their constant focus on the discrete and the continuous, the individual and the crowd. As we shall see, bearing in mind the inherent tension between pleasure and pain that is at the heart of the sublime experience, such a dichotomy says much about DeLillo’s view of a psychological conflict of seduction and suppression that, he argues, affects particularly Americans, in one way or another: in Frank Lentricchia’s words, the radical realignment of all social agents as “first-person agents of desire seeking self-annihilation and fulfillment in the magical third.”<sup>10</sup> It is perhaps best therefore to begin a detailed view of *Libra* with an examination of the mind of its protagonist. Using both the pre-modern and postmodern models of the sublime, thus discussing the concept with reference to the subject, the object *and* representation, it will become clear how DeLillo intends to show that Oswald was more a victim of the sublime and language than an architect of his own and Kennedy’s fate.

### **Oswald as Floating Signifier**

“He wants to sense a structure that includes him, a definition clear enough to specify where he belongs. But the system floats right through him, through everything...” (L, 357)

“...I wouldn’t be completely honest if I said I could pin him down, pin him right to the spot...He may be an actor in real life.” (L, 56)

If we are to accept the secondary implication of the Kantian view of the sublime, that it is an ‘experience of difference’, in a way a discovery of autonomy, of separation or freedom from a world that is beyond understanding, we must therefore posit that the pain and pleasure that this brings could lead to two courses of action – acceptance or rejection of the position: a desire to belong and enter the world, or a celebration of freedom. DeLillo’s representation of Oswald’s internal conflict, of his vacillation between joining the ‘social’ – becoming a ‘zero in the system’, entering the stream of things - and standing outside, critical, disembodied and above all individual, is a way of showing us how one man grapples with such a pull of opposing forces. In Frank Lentricchia’s words, Oswald is the “negative libran” whose character is defined by the

“nonidentity of sheer possibility” – a man who cannot be pinned down, who is torn between becoming part of the totality of history and standing separate, distanced from the masses. For Lentricchia, “*Libra* is the story of the context and setting of the action, not the story of an autonomous lone gunman operating in a social vacuum” (IDD, 199): Oswald is more than anything the product of a cultural environment rich with texts and images and it is clear that he both engages with, and is repelled by, this communicative system. There are a number of occasions in the novel where this interposition of the cultural in the social is illustrated. For instance, as a marine in Japan undertaking his first sexual experience Oswald feels a stillness and sense of awe “looking at his first naked-girl, grown-up, outside a magazine” (L, 84) and becomes serious when thinking about he was now “part of something streaming through the world.” And yet he remains strangely distant from the experience, “partly outside the scene” monitoring what was happening while “waiting for the pleasure to grip him” (L, 84/85) rather than engaging with reality. His fantasy has become real, but the “land of *nudo*” Mitsuko draws him into is one that appears to him like a film, characterised by “rain-slick streets..., movie shadows and dark-coated men” (L, 86). Conversely, when he spots John Wayne in the officer’s mess Oswald is startled by “the screen laugh repeated in life” and wants to get close to the actor to say something “authentic.” In Oswald’s view “the man is doubly real” and he “wonders if he will show up in the background” (L, 93) of a photograph someone takes of the icon, bathing in his aura. The most poignant example of culturally blurred personal ontology however is at the moment of Oswald’s shooting by Jack Ruby where he watches himself “react to the auguring heat of the bullet” – a flash of time in which Addison’s self-transcendence and Burke’s self-preservation are fused by the approach of a totality Oswald cannot escape from – his own death. Through the pain he views himself dying on television with the rest of the nation, stuck in a feedback loop of representational mimicry (being familiar with filmic depictions of ‘men in pain’) and real discomfort, only the agony of the bullet finally removing his ability to contextualise his plight (L, 440):

“Everything was leaving him, all sensation at the edges breaking up in space... He was in pain. He knew what it meant to be in pain. All you had to do was see TV. Arm over his chest, mouth in a knowing oh. The pain obliterated words, then thought. There was nothing left to him but the pathway of the bullet.” (L, 439/440)

The implication of DeLillo's description of Oswald's demise is that the assassin becomes in a sense liberated by his own death. Irrevocably disembodied and floating freely as part of the waves of televisual radiation that surround us, he represents a final conjunction of the discrete and the continuous in which the human transcends bodily form to enter both history and the collective consciousness. With fitting symbolic visual cadence, as the heartbeat stops DeLillo leaves us with a final image of Oswald as a "stranger, in a mask, falling" through aerospace.

As discussed, Oswald's occupation of the gap between heaven and earth is not the only time in *Libra* that he is depicted between totalities however. Indeed, the ending is lent further resonance on the political dimension by his implicit rejection of two social systems earlier in the novel: first-world capitalism, offering Oswald only the "dark night of the isolated self" (L, 101), and communism, absorbing the self in collective struggle, a ceding to anonymity. As Skip Willman recognises:

"...Oswald's defection to the Soviet Union fails to fulfill him because he encounters the same lack of integration between the individual and social totality he encountered in the United States, or conversely, the total integration of the individual into the social totality which robs him of his identity." (DP, 628)

The irony DeLillo presents his reader with of course is that in death Oswald is as marginalised as in life, having been accepted by the public as occupying the space between a perpetrator of a national tragedy and a victim of poor socialization and chance. For Willman, tackling the novel from a Marxist perspective, Oswald's alienation was the result of an "inability to recognize his role within the social totality" (DP, 628) and "DeLillo's sympathetic depiction of [his] encounter with the "traumatic limit" of social antagonism and his subsequent rejection of both the American and Soviet social systems restores the social co-ordinates of Oswald's "hostility" that are absent from *The Warren Commission Report* (DP, 629). This chapter will go one step further to suggest that DeLillo situates Oswald's trauma not in the social dimension but at the roots of communication that underpin the social – linguistics. For instance, there is a good case for arguing that DeLillo believes Oswald's alienation largely results from his word-blindness or dyslexia – "a secret he'd never tell" (L, 83). Many references are made in the novel to Oswald's desire to see his thoughts, and, importantly, his name, in print as well-formed letters on a page. But although he aims

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to write short stories on American life – one idea being a story about “one of the people at the library for the blind” (L, 37) - and outline his struggle in an Historic Diary, he cannot “find order in the field of little symbols” (L, 211): the writing process, the “chaos of composition” (L, 211) causing him pain and terror, a different kind of struggle:

“He could not clearly see the picture that is called a word. A word is also a picture of a word. He saw spaces, incomplete features, and tried to guess at the rest. He made wild tries at phonetic spelling. But the language tricked him with its inconsistencies. He watched sentences deteriorate, powerless to make them right. The nature of things was to be elusive. Things slipped through his perceptions. He could not get a grip on the runaway world. Limits everywhere. In every direction he come up against his own incompleteness.” (L, 211)

It is no wonder that the totalities Oswald is presented with, whether they be social or textual, become all the more perplexing to him considering the fact that he cannot obtain entrance into the realm of the symbolic. It is also not surprising that, as a consequence of being unable to escape the Lacanian ‘imaginary’, he lives in a fantasy world. Such a limitation of the self would point to Oswald’s emphasis on the pictorial, on the image rather than the word: reliance on the visual, or in Lyotard’s terms the ‘figural’, becoming a compensation for discursive inadequacies. To Oswald his own text is merely a poor portrait of himself. The following passage illustrates the point well:

“Even as he printed the words, he imagined people reading them, people moved by his loneliness and disappointment, even by his wretched spelling, the childish mess of composition. Let them see the struggle and humiliation, the effort he had to exert to write a simple sentence. The pages were crowded, smudged, urgent, a true picture of his state of mind, of his rage and frustration, knowing a thing but not able to record it properly.” (L, 211)

And this is not the only occasion in the novel where an inability to use words causes Oswald distress. At school he is ‘roughed up’ by some boys because they think he ‘talks funny’ – the “trace of Northern squawk in Lee’s voice” a result of his ‘mixed history’ (L, 32/33). Later, in the Marines, Oswald tells his friend Bobby Dupard, (who asks Oswald to “regulate” his voice), the story of how he received a court martial for the charge of “wrongful use of provoking words to a staff noncommissioned officer” (L, 97). All of which compounded, DeLillo seems to suggest, give Oswald a certain vulnerability when it comes to dealing with people who are articulate and skillful with

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language. Indeed, DeLillo makes it clear that Oswald's place in the conspiracy – a fiction of someone else's construction – rests upon his manipulation by men who are looking for just such a cipher, a man who cannot write his own history, a "nondescript life" (L, 78) to play the silhouette in the window with the smoking gun. These men, "who know each other by secret signs, who work in the shadows to control our lives" (L, 283), are the 'ghostwriters' of Oswald's biography. A biography, it has to be said, that Oswald wants to be written. As Larry Parmenter, one of the conspirators, tells another: "...we'll help him select a fantasy" (L, 75). Prior to Oswald, the "peak experience" of Parmenter's career is a "textbook operation" in Guatemala, radio broadcasts of misinformation described as a "class project in the structure of reality" – "Rumors, false battle reports, meaningless codes, inflammatory speeches, orders to non-existent rebels" (L, 125). Parmenter's credentials for 'scripting a gunman', making Oswald's unstructured vision a reality, are therefore impeccable.

Win Everett, another of the 'ghostwriters' who mould Oswald into the man who shoots the president, tells his colleagues in the early stages of planning the hit that they need to "script a person or persons out of ordinary pocket litter" (L, 28): "His gunman would emerge and vanish in a maze of false names" (L, 145). After Oswald approaches Guy Banister Associates, applying to be an undercover agent, telling Banister's secretary he already possesses a "verified alias" (L, 130), Banister starts a file on the man he believes has the potential to satisfy the group's criteria. This file provides what the conspirators refer to as their 'subject' a social/historical context that can be traced in the aftermath of the crime, when the story of the assassination comes to its logical conclusion and the 'object' – 'Lancer' or JFK - is acted upon. In Banister's words "...it's just a matter of time before the material comes pouring in. Notes, lists, photos, rumors. Every bit and piece and whisper in the world that doesn't have a life until someone comes along to collect it" (L, 143). However, although the file, a traceable background, and the 'plot' of their tale are in place, they still have to persuade Oswald to trust them in order that he goes through with the hit and allows the final act to be written. This relationship of trust is ultimately built upon an attitude to language Oswald shares with conspirator David Ferrie.

Oswald, who following his 'roughing up' by boys at school, wanted access to "books more advanced than the school texts, books that put him at a distance" from the other

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pupils in order to close “the world around him”, is drawn to Ferrie, a “walking sandwich board for cancer” (L, 67), as he too was an outsider in his youth who learned to overcome his alienation by shutting himself away with difficult texts – in his case Latin:

“I stayed indoors and learned a dead language, for fear of being *noticed* out there, made to pay for being who I was.” (L, 45)

Described later in the novel as a “David Ferrie project” (L, 142), while at the Atsugi airforce base Oswald keeps to himself and simulates Ferrie’s behaviour, going on movie binges and spending “serious time at the base library, learning Russian verbs” (L, 112) in anticipation of his imminent defection. Processing Oswald’s application for Russian citizenship, Alek, a Soviet interrogator (incidentally one of the ‘ideal selves’ whose name Oswald later borrows) muses on Oswald’s intentions, speculating that as one of those people who “live in corners inside themselves” Oswald is after “a second and safer identity”, his aspiration being to “...Become a genuine Marxist and contented worker, go to lectures and mass gymnastics, fit in, find his place in history, or geography, or whatever he is looking for. A true-blue Oswaldovich” (L, 166/167). But simply being absorbed by the crowd is not good enough for Oswald: ‘fitting in’ takes a poor second place to Ferrian superiority. Indeed, Oswald’s Marxist inculcations and Ferrie’s inspirational effect on him lead him to confidently assert that he could be a teacher and not a follower, providing Francis Gary Powers, the pilot of a grounded U-2 spy plane, with a lecture “on the virtues of life in the Soviet Union. Making radios for the masses” (L, 197). Moreover, rather than accept the “dull and regimented” life offered by working at an industrial plant – “Always go to meetings, always read the propaganda” – Oswald, like his hero Ferrie who “studied geopolitics at Baldwin-Wallace before it was called geopolitics”, expresses a wish to attend the Patrice Lumumba Friendship University in Moscow. The problem is, as discussed, Oswald’s poor control of language makes such a desire unrealistic.

At this point in the novel, Oswald’s attempts to gain mastery over texts, to see the bigger picture through language, lead to him feeling subordinated and not empowered by words. Stripped of false class consciousness by a Marxist metanarrative he knows by heart, the novel suggests that, ironically, Oswald initially fails to spot how he, as an individual subject, fits into the chain of events that will eventually lead to personal and

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national tragedy. Used by others to further their own ends, Oswald is, in essence, a signifier that cannot find its place in the language system, an aporia floating free of semantic ties. As his mother, whose only education, in contrast to Oswald, is “her heart”, puts it in the denouement of the book, her son is “lonesome to read” (L, 455). However, as we shall see, there is a strong case for arguing that it is DeLillo’s intention with *Libra* to show that Oswald discovers there is one form of textual manipulation that can fulfill his Libran pull of opposing desires - allowing him both a place in history, in the stream of things, and the kind of individuality he craves – the taking of a name.

### **Glass Consciousness – Reflections on the Naming of Oswald**

“I think you’ve had it backwards all this time. You wanted to enter history. Wrong approach, Leon. What you really want is out. Get out. Jump out. Find your place and your name on another level.” (L, 384)

As we have discussed, Oswald’s desire to gain a vision of himself as complete or whole is on one level a wish to see how he fits into the social order. On another level however his desire signals the lack of a self-identifiable personal ontology or subjective individuality – he is perplexed about who he is and responds by turning to texts and a multiplicity of ‘others’ in an attempt to counteract his instability and gauge a self-image. Most of his confusion stems, as we have seen, from his inability to effectively enter the Lacanian ‘symbolic’ due to an inadequacy with words. He attempts to imitate a model or ‘ideal ego’ – David Ferrie – but Oswald’s ‘imaginary identification’ with this ‘ideal’, clarified by Slavoj Žižek as “identification...with the image representing ‘what we would like to be,’”<sup>11</sup> is merely a surface connection with a visual model fit for imitation. ‘Symbolic identification’ or, as Žižek puts it, “identification with the very place *from where* we are being observed, *from where* we look at ourselves” (SOI, 105) - the ‘ego-ideal’ - takes place in the novel only when Oswald has taken ownership of his name and viewed himself in the third person as a media figure. To understand how Oswald makes this transition in the novel it is necessary to look at the text in conjunction with Lacan’s theory of naming and Žižek’s reformulation of the same.

For Lacan, access to the symbolic order in childhood is intimately connected with the onset of Oedipal conflicts, entrance a condition of accepting what he terms as ‘The

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Name-of-the-Father' – paternal law reinforced by “the signifier of the paternal function or installation of the father in the place of the Other, the symbolic order.”<sup>12</sup> This acceptance of 'The Name-of-the-Father grants the initiate certain privileges that come with being part of a socialised mass and defines the 'self'. In the words of Anika Lemaire:

“The resolution of the Oedipus liberates the subject by giving him, with his Name, a place in the family constellation, an original signifier of self and subjectivity. It promotes him in his realization of self through participation in the world of culture, language and civilization.” (JL, 83)

Moreover, this recognition of the paternal 'law' is there to be internalised, the child taking the father as a 'model' for imitation. One of the results of this momentous change – a movement from the imaginary to symbolic order – is that a “dialectic of identifications” takes place in which “the Ego constitutes itself and in which the ideal of the self takes shape” (JL, 87). This is the period when the division between a subject's conscious and unconscious being is demarcated and for this reason alone the passage into the 'symbolic' is vitally important for the healthy development of an individual. Indeed, if this process is disrupted in any way, or fails to proceed as expected, the subject's entrance into society and language may be adversely affected, with problems experienced in that subject's later life. Such a disruption, for DeLillo, may be the root cause of Oswald's alienation.

For instance, at the beginning of the novel, adopting the voice of Oswald's mother Marguerite in a court room scenario where she defends the upbringing Lee received, DeLillo describes how Oswald relied wholly on her in the absence of his father, sleeping in her bed “out of lack of space until he was nearly eleven” (L, 11). Furthermore, compounding the effects such unnatural sleeping arrangements may have had on a child (particularly in view of Oedipal processes), Oswald's socialisation, other than that provided by a mother bitter towards an adulterous husband, comes from a television set – his early models for male behaviour are all movie icons. However, by far the most compelling evidence of all in the case for arguing that Oswald's passage into the symbolic is disrupted by an unconventional childhood, if we are to take on board Lacanian theory, is that Oswald's surname, what should be 'The Name-of-the-Father', is his mother's maiden name that she has 'taken back'. The implicit

difficulties raised by the above are given resonance in the novel when DeLillo, entering the mind of Lee, attempts to capture the teenager's feelings upon receiving a letter from his brother Robert – another 'model' for Oswald's future behaviour and the source of his christian name:

“He got a letter from his brother Robert, his full brother, who was still in the marines. He took a page out of his spiral notebook and replied at once, mainly answering questions. He liked his brother but was certain Robert didn't know who he was. It was the age-old family mystery. You don't know who I am. Robert was named for their father, Robert E. Lee Oswald.” (L, 37)

Indeed, Oswald's estrangement from the process of 'naming for the father', an overt concrete statement of a familial blood relationship, leads to complications at the birth of his own daughter June Lee. Although the experience has “a sense of tradition and generation, like his own father standing in a dimly lit hallway waiting for word of a son” (L, 210), as Oswald reflects, the son in question was his brother Robert and not him, referring to himself in the third person as the 'second son' who “would not be born until the father was two months dead” (L, 210). In the end it is the 'bureaucrats' and not Oswald who insist “that the baby's middle name must be the same as the father's first” (L, 210).

Following these revelations, DeLillo's depiction of Oswald as a man fascinated, excited and at times obsessed by names, seems to make sense. The novel is filled with occasions when Oswald is portrayed consciously processing the etymology, phonetics or possible semantic value of a name. For example, on a visit to the Bronx Zoo Oswald is diverted from looking into a vulture's cage through thinking about the terms of reference others used for his friend:

“Nicky Black was standing next to him. The name was always used in full, never just Nicky or Black.” (L, 8)

Later, immersing himself in political tracts in an attempt to gain the knowledge that would set him apart from his peers, Oswald discovers that the names used by Marxist leaders often held secret meanings and differed from given birth names, passing on his findings to anyone who would listen:

““If you look at the name Trotsky in Russian, it looks totally different,” he said to Robert Sproul’s sister. “Plus here’s something nobody knows. Stalin’s name was Dzhugashvili. Stalin means man of iron.” (L, 40)

Oswald’s appreciation of the secondary meaning of names, or the benefits to be had in adopting an alias, initially lead him to believe that possessing a secret name might be of some value to him in his quest for a political persona: one in a number of elements that might make up his ideal self. A secret name might also allow him to engage in the kind of covert political movements that, through DeLillo’s representation of Oswald’s vision, we are persuaded to believe could only have been inspired by television or movies such as *The Third Man*:

“Trotsky’s secret name was Bronstein. He would need a secret name. He would join a cell located in the old buildings near the docks. They would talk theory into the night. But they could act as well. Organize and agitate. He would move through the city in the rain, wearing dark clothes.” (L, 41)

Again, it is useful to emphasise that at this point Oswald is still searching for his ideal ego, a model on which to base his life. Symbolization, or an assimilation into the symbolic realm, whereby Oswald is conscious of his structural position and able to objectively analyse how he might manipulate it for his own ends, comes much later and is sparked by a number of events – most involving the media. Certainly, in the initial stages, Oswald seems content to be cognizant of the mere fact that he has adopted an alias and thus has connected himself in an imitative way with his heroes. For instance, one of Oswald’s first aliases, ‘Hidell’, is borrowed from a marine, Heindel, whom Oswald serves with in Japan. Unlike ‘Stalin’ however, Oswald chooses his name not as an allusion to a personal attribute but simply because it is a coded reference to the secrecy he wishes to maintain: a name that connotes the very fact that it is an alias. Extrapolating the rationale for Oswald’s ‘real-life’ choice, DeLillo offers his reader the following musical mnemonic:

“Take the double-*e* from Lee  
Hide the double-*l* in Hidell  
Hidell means hide the L.  
Don’t tell.” (L, 90)

However, despite Oswald’s secret naming of himself, he has no control over the nicknames he is provided with by others. For example, “the guys in his quonset hut” at

a radar unit in California call him 'Oswaldovich' for subscribing to a Russian newspaper while, as a marine in Atsugi, he is simply known as "Ozzie the Rabbit" because of his "pursed lips and dimples and for his swiftness of foot" (L, 82). Using Stalin as one of his examples, Slavoj Žižek coincidentally examines the use function of nicknames in American and Soviet culture in order to exemplify the difference between the ideal ego and the ego-ideal. Although the tripartite moniker 'Lee Harvey Oswald,' that DeLillo seems to assert that Oswald, by choosing a mediated existence, opts for in the end, is no nickname, the following passage, in a roundabout way, illuminates the difference between those who have been named by others and those who name themselves, focusing on the observation point of the individual concerned:

"Let us take two individuals, each of whom represents the supreme achievement of these two cultures: Charles 'Lucky' Luciano and Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili 'Stalin'... In the first case the nickname alludes to some extraordinary event which has marked the individual (Charles Luciano was 'lucky' to have survived the savage torture of his gangster enemies) - it alludes, that is, to a positive, descriptive feature which fascinates us; it marks something that sticks out on the individual, something that offers itself to our gaze, something seen, not the point from which we observe the individual. However, in the case of Iosif Vissarionovich, it would be entirely erroneous to conclude in a homologous way that 'Stalin' (Russian for '[made] of steel') alludes to some steely, inexorable characteristic of Stalin himself: what is really inexorable and steely are the laws of the historical progress, the iron necessity of the disintegration of capitalism and of the passage to socialism in the name of which Stalin, this empirical individual, is acting - the perspective from which he is observing himself and judging his activity. We could say, then, that 'Stalin' is the ideal point from which 'Iosif Vissarionovich', this empirical individual, this person of flesh and blood, is observing himself so that he appears likeable." (SOI, 107/108)

Nicholas Branch, DeLillo's fictional writer of the secret history of the assassination, recognises that Oswald uses and discards about a dozen aliases prior to killing Kennedy - names and identities "including the backward running O. H. Lee and the peculiar D. F. Drictal" - each possessing a coded, anagrammatic connection to the original name or a "strained merging of written and living characters" (L, 301). DeLillo suggests, through the character of T.J. Mackey, that this transparency proves "Oswald wanted his path to be tracked and his name to be known," that he was engaged in "some kind of mirror game with Ferrie" (L, 303). But based on the evidence DeLillo provides us with of Oswald's self-image one could argue that his name taking, aside from a wish for secrecy, not only signifies a desire for

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identification with the 'ideal other' but also the erasure of an inadequate self – leaving a trace of the original only that his “dizzying history” might be tracked when he is gone. Unlike Stalin, although Oswald’s names are self-created they are reflections of others - a mirror held to models or people he would like to be - and not, in Žižek’s terms, ‘ideal points’ from which an empirical individual observes himself. Indeed, without a self-directed gaze, Oswald’s textual manipulation only serves to heighten his alienation, the separation from his past so effective that, upon hearing his name on the radios and TVs after his arrest, he is so detached from the ‘original’ that it sounds “odd and dumb and made up”, as though people were “talking about somebody else” (L, 416).

However, as was mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, despite this distancing effect, there is also evidence in *Libra* to suggest that (facilitated by the media) in the final stages of his life after killing Kennedy, Oswald proceeds through an ironic reversal of the ‘mirror stage’ back to what *he considers* his authentic self. There is a strong indication that by the end of the novel he is divested of his multiple aliases, returned from his dispersal into a fragmented third person, and in a sense reborn as an autonomous subject (no matter how mediated he ultimately becomes). The cause of this radical transformation is what Eugene Goodheart calls “The most potent mirror our culture provides”<sup>13</sup> – the movie or television screen. The following scene, a representation of a stroll Oswald takes with his new family down a Texas street, although intended to outline his wife Marina’s first recognition of American visual culture is nevertheless a telling preface to Oswald’s own later ‘visualisation of self’:

“One evening they walked past a department store...and Marina looked at a television set in the window and saw the most remarkable thing...It was the world gone inside out. They were gaping back at themselves from the TV screen. She was on television. Lee was on television, standing next to her, holding Junie in his arms. Marina looked at them in life, then looked at the screen. She saw Lee hoist the baby on his shoulder, with people passing in the background. She turned and looked at the people, checking to see if they were the same ones in the window. They had to be the same but she was compelled to look. She didn’t know anything like this could ever happen. She walked out of the picture and then came back. She looked at Lee and June in the window, then turned to see them on the sidewalk. She kept looking from the window to the sidewalk. She kept walking out of the picture and coming back. She was amazed every time she saw herself return.” (L, 227)

For DeLillo critic Frank Lentricchia, Marina's epiphanic moment of recognition is one of many scenes that dramatise "the experience of every day life...lived totally inside the representations generated in the print and visual media" (IDD, 206). This chapter would agree with Lentricchia's assertion, but add that it more pointedly locates the moment when an individual's self-reflections, aided by critical distance, lead to consciousness of identity in a postmodern world that is rich in texts and textuality and yet suffused with images of the imaginary. Arguably, Marina is aware of her mediated self precisely because she has come from a culture where the visual is not so pervasive. Having passed through the conventional symbolic, her amazement at the reflections provided by the television are understandable. For her husband, socialised by a television set and continuing to live in an imaginary world informed by such images, the breakthrough to self-consciousness is a little more difficult. It is a complication that DeLillo, recognising also that the reader would not fall for a simple and convenient portrayal of a man affected by his reflections of a mediated personal history, accepts with relish, providing his protagonist with a drip-feed of minor moments of enlightenment. The occasion when Oswald realises that, following his 'crime', everyone called Francis Gary Powers by his full name, is one of these moments:

"...The Soviet press, local TV, the BBC, the Voice of America, the interrogators, etc. Once you did something notorious, they tagged you with an extra name, a middle name that was ordinarily never used. You were officially marked, a chapter in the imagination of the state." (L, 198)

And so, after many passages such as this, DeLillo finally leads the reader to the critical point in the novel when it is clear to Oswald that an absolute breakthrough to self has taken place. Depicted lying awake in his cell in Dallas after the assassination, piecing together the fragmented personality that shot a president, Oswald is shown to be aware that his future would be forever focused on "...a single clear subject...called Lee Harvey Oswald". He is strengthened by the fact that "Everyone knew who he was now" and prepares himself for "self-analysis and reconstruction" (L, 435). From this point on, the reader is convinced that Oswald realises he now has no need for secret names, models to imitate, movie stars to worship: he is his own 'whole' man and has at last accepted ownership of his birth name. Employing Slavoj Žižek's 'modelling' and 'observation' based distinction between the imaginary and symbolic once more,

we can read Oswald's reaction to learning he now occupies "a certain place in the intersubjective symbolic network" (SOI, 110) as atypical. However, his acceptance of his fate – quickly rejecting a position of hysterical resistance to his 'interpellation' as assassin (the usual response to interpellation, argues Žizek) – does support Lentricchia's reading of the novel wherein he suggests that all along "Oswald's desire is implicitly utopian, its object a place where he and Kennedy – who both had brothers named Robert – could themselves become brothers" (IDD, 198). Having learned of the power that certain names possess, Oswald recognises that this personal signifier he once rejected would be forever linked with that of his 'partner' John F Kennedy – "The figure of the gunman in the window...inextricable from the victim and his history" (L, 435) – and when the initial shock has dissipated their names would float together, free of the context that connects them. An inspirational world leader may have died, a country may be in mourning, but, in killing Kennedy, Oswald has exorcised himself of the ghosts of the past and, thanks to the media, given his life a "true beginning" (L, 434).

### **The Hyperreal Cinemesis of History**

"The feeling of strangeness that overcomes the actor before the camera...is basically of the same kind as the estrangement felt before one's own image in the mirror. But now the reflected image has become separable, transportable. And where is it transported? Before the public." (Walter Benjamin)<sup>14</sup>

"Only a fool rejects the need to see beyond the screen." (L, 321)

The implication of Oswald's 'new beginning' is that it marks the end of his arduous transition from subjugated dyslexic to media self: a movement from searching for, or attempting to 'reproduce', a model original (the ideal ego) to becoming an original that may in turn be copied or imitated by others (the ego-ideal). One could argue that the key preemptive marker in the novel to Oswald's change of status, to becoming an original, is the emphasis in the closing stages of the plot on the parallel circulation of multiple 'copies' of both the victim *and* the assassin. Radio DJ Weird Beard, in a broadcast presented to the reader by DeLillo to add discursive texture to the novel, tells his public the rumour that Kennedy "Travels with a dozen lookalikes when he goes into no man's land? Just to disorient the enemy. So maybe we're getting Jack Seven or Jack Ten." (L, 382). Conversely, unsure of Oswald's whereabouts just prior



to the events in Dallas, T. J. Mackey tells Raymo, one of his men, that their constructed trail, or reproduced imprints of a killer – “We create our own Oswald. A second, a third, a fourth... Oswalds all over Texas” (L, 354) - must temporarily stand in for the real thing: “For the time being we have our own model Oswald...Eventually we’ll have to pinpoint the original” (L, 365). Nicholas Branch, who with hindsight feels “Lee H. Oswald” was more a “technical diagram” than a living breathing individual, describes Mackey’s ‘crude’ operation:

“Someone looking like Oswald walks into an auto showroom, says his name is Lee Oswald, says he will soon be coming into money, test-drives a Comet at high speeds and makes a remark about going back to Russia. Someone who says his name is Oswald goes to a gunsmith and has a telescopic sight mounted on his rifle. Someone looking like Oswald goes to a rifle range half a dozen times in a thirteen-day period and makes a point at shooting at other people’s targets. All of these incidents took place at times when the real Oswald was known to be elsewhere.” (L, 377)

Reading the novel through the critical lens of the work of Walter Benjamin, this transformation from reproduction back to original would suggest that in assassinating Kennedy, Oswald, as an intertextual work of art, becomes cleansed of any political dimension he once had, taking on the historical glow of the auratic figure instead. As Benjamin asserts, “The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity”<sup>15</sup> and the sense that media figures possess the reified aura of the original or authentic is present throughout *Libra*, prefiguring Oswald’s own transfiguration. For instance, Guy Banister discusses the “glowing picture” the public are getting of Kennedy, the fact that “He actually glows in most of his photographs” (L, 67/68), while Oswald himself is irradiated upon meeting John Wayne – “When John Wayne laughs, Ozzie smiles, he lights up, he practically disappears in his own glow” (L, 93). One may be excused for thinking DeLillo’s treatment of ‘celebrity’ is too obvious at times, that his ‘illuminating’ passages merely strengthen our preconceptions. However, as he has in other novels, DeLillo is quick to offer his reader the comic dislocating effect of how time and again it is the representations of media figures that prove the fidelity of the real and not the other way around: the public, driven by what Benjamin terms the ‘spell of the personality’, ironically drawing upon photographs or films – second order likenesses - to reinforce the aura or glow of authenticity:

“A sound, an awe worked through the crowd, a recognition, ringing in the air... After the handshakes and salutes, Jack Kennedy walked away from his security... and went to the fence. He reached a hand into the ranks and they surged forward, looking at each other to match reactions. He moved along the fence, handsome and tanned, smiling famously into the wall of open mouths. He looked like himself, like photographs, a helmsman squinting in the seaglare, white teeth shining.” (L, 392)

Indeed, from DeLillo’s description of the president one is to assume that, as Murray Siskind proposes of the ‘most photographed barn in America’ (a tourist attraction inspiring mass public pilgrimage in *White Noise*) the crowd at Love Field Airport “can’t get outside the aura” (WN, 13) of ‘John F. Kennedy’, are trapped in “a kind of spiritual surrender”, and thus maintaining, rather than capturing, an image.

Many critics have analysed the ‘cinematic experiences’ of DeLillo’s characters – Oswald included. Eugene Goodheart, for instance, believes DeLillo’s aim is to show us how the “The real and the cinematic have become indistinguishable” (CR, 120) in our lives, an ongoing comment on how “our society of TV watchers... imagine the world, conceive their fantasies, shape their conduct by the coded messages and images of the medium” (CR, 130). Others, such as Sam McColl, have concentrated on the “complex relationship between historical reality (the events of the past as they occurred) and filmed reality (that historical reality mediated through film)” – a relationship he calls *cinemesis*: films representing “a mixture of internal cultural movement (*cine-*) and external cultural imitation (*mimesis*).”<sup>16</sup> Clearly, both approaches can help us understand how and why DeLillo constructed *Libra* as an expose of the collective visual memories of American society (the Zapruder Film, John Wayne movies) and the reverberating impact that these memories have on future behaviour. For instance, DeLillo obviously intends us to make our own connection between conspirator T.J. Mackey, a man who was involved in the famous movie house finish to the Dillinger case, a figure whose “memory was a series of still images, a film broken down to components” (L, 72) and Oswald’s decision to take refuge in a cinema after killing the president. “Whenever there’s a famous finish in the vicinity of a movie house” Mackey opines “It behooves you to know what’s playing... This is history with a fucking flourish.” (L, 140). Likewise, we are also to connect the several references made in the novel to Kurasowa’s *Seven Samurai*, a film that depicts a group of “warriors without masters, willing to band together to save a village from marauders,

to win back a country, only to see themselves betrayed in the end,” (L, 145) and the cadre of conspirators whose machinations are engendered by being sold out by their president in the process of attempting to fulfill patriotic roles in Soviet occupied Cuba.

The problem is that in looping the past and present, confusing reality and film, and suggesting that Oswald was ‘acting’ from a filmic unconscious – the prevailing symptoms of televisual socialisation - rather than any individual political motivation, DeLillo seems to implicate a nation and a way of life in Kennedy’s death. “We’re a *model* for the country” (L, 382) Weird Beard tells the citizens of Dallas preparing for Kennedy’s arrival. One suspects that George Will, in accusing DeLillo of ‘bad citizenship’ for penning *Libra*, not only attacks the novelist’s renunciation of the ‘lone gunman’ theory but also his temerity in suggesting that others might attempt to reproduce Oswald’s ‘real and historical’ actions, feeling as “connected to the events on the screen” of the Zapruder film as Oswald was watching a double bill of assassination movies and identifying with the killers - Frank Sinatra in *Suddenly* and John Garfield in *We Were Strangers* (L, 370). However, patriotically well intended as it is, Will’s claim that the novel represents “yet another exercise in blaming America for Oswald’s act of derangement”<sup>17</sup> misses the point that DeLillo is trying to make. A country cannot be blamed for the particular ‘psychopathologies of everyday life’ that result from interaction with[in] communicational structures and systems that have developed without political intervention. America did not rubber stamp hyperreality. What the novel does do very well (although it seems to have failed with George Will) is to allow the reader to dissociate him/herself from the political ramifications of the assassination and focus on how, under certain circumstances, reality can be so mediated, absorbed in the imaginary, as to seem to have disappeared altogether. To examine in any detail the technicalities of how DeLillo draws the reader in to *Libra*, performing, in Lentricchia’s words “virtuoso changes of point of view that function as disconcerting repetitions of his characters’ obsessive shifts from first-person to third” (L, 210) would be a chapter in itself. Suffice to say that the novel, as Lentricchia argues, presents an “unsettling view of normalcy...Oswald is ourselves painted large, in scary tones, but ourselves.” (IDD, 204/205) and therein lies its power.

It is clear how DeLillo magnifies the shock effect of Oswald’s actions, reflecting the gaze of the reader back on him/herself, by describing the assassin as representative, a

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man who "...Looks like everybody" (L, 300), the implication being that "Whether born under the sign or not...you are a libran because you are an American" (IDD, 210) but what is also apparent is that he compounds the point by offering Oswald's nemesis Jack Ruby - "A floater" all of his life who, in killing Oswald has chance to "put [his] fist around something solid" and "make a name" (L, 432) for himself - as a man suffering from the same primal condition. As Lentricchia recognises, although, through the ethnic dialogue of Jack Ruby, "DeLillo appears to have opened an escape hatch" from his depiction of a nation of subjects finely balanced between autonomous selfhood and third person desire, offering his reader a route back to "the earth of the robust ethnic life," (IDD, 212) Ruby's ethnic self is 'unserved' by the same forces that affected Oswald: a fascination with names, a filmic unconscious and the remembrance that as a child he felt he was "a nothing" (L, 445) or zero in the system. One can obviously read DeLillo's treatment of Ruby as an example of how he has been careful to avoid setting up the novel as a juxtaposition of good versus evil – eschewing the traditional structure that many would use to dictate the narration of a tragedy and deciding instead to depict characters not as inherently inclined to either pole but borne by conflicting forces, balanced precariously on the edge of decisions that could tip the scales either way. The interesting point that DeLillo makes with Ruby however is that, unlike Oswald, the Dallas nightclub owner does not benefit from lifting himself out of obscurity. The man whose intention was to "close the book on loose talk" (L, 430) and bring about a "rebirth" (L, 433), subject to the identical entrance into the 'intersubjective symbolic network' that gave Oswald heart (fixing his 'floating signifier' forever with Kennedy's), after killing Oswald realises that the system has worked against him. Far from being lionized as a hero, he has begun to merge with the assassin and become fused to the original crime. Indeed, set up by DeLillo as a wonderfully ironic inversion of the transformation that Oswald had taken, through attempting to 'erase' Oswald, or, as one character puts it, turn a successfully symbolised individual "into a crowd" (L, 432), Ruby's own self deteriorates to the point where he believes that he is merely acting a role and that "people are distorting his words as he speaks to them":

"He is miscast, or cast as someone else, as Oswald. They are part of the same crime now. They are in it together and forever and together...He begins to merge with Oswald. he can't tell the difference between them. All he knows is

there is a missing element here, a word they have cancelled completely. Jack Ruby has stopped being the man who killed the President's assassin. He is the man who killed the president." (L, 445)

DeLillo's treatment, through characters such as Oswald, Kennedy and Ruby, of the subjects of 'aura', 'authenticity', the 'original' and the 'copy' can be interpreted as an obvious example of the postmodern avant-garde: his persistent allusions to the complete effacement of the boundaries between life and art suggesting that the novel is a reinforcement of the zeitgeist. However, reading Oswald's 'new beginning' in his cell as Emersonian – like the woods, an "ideal space of solitude" (IDD, 215) or escape from a mediascaped world – Lentricchia senses that *Libra* represents a negative critique of "the charismatic environment of the image" (L, 198): that maybe what Oswald intended in the end, unlike Ruby whose mistake was to attempt to court the public, was to return to the margins having learned to recognise how the system operates. From this perspective, in presenting Oswald as a man who achieves self-actualisation by understanding himself as a sublime, intertextual totality, the book would seem to suggest that there is little to choose between an assassin and a novelist realising the futility of attempting to understand a world that consistently evades stable representation but writing his novel anyway. The proposal is certainly not unfounded. In an interview, DeLillo tells us he found Oswald's statement of authorial aspirations in a college application to be "a striking remark coming from someone like him." (OS, 52) And the theory that there is only a fine line between writing stories on American life and writing yourself into history through violence is one of the principal themes of his later novel, *Mao II*. If we are to believe this, then DeLillo's final representation of an Oswald possessing the aura of 'authenticity', and a self-transcendent ability to return the gaze that underpins the medium used to depict his death, takes on an added poignancy, appearing to depict not a terminated gunman but a novelist as omniscient narrator instead:

"There was something in Oswald's face, glance at the camera before he was shot... a way of telling us that he knows who we are and how we feel, that he has brought our perceptions and interpretations into his sense of the crime. Something in the look, some sly intelligence, exceedingly brief but far-reaching, a connection all but bleached away by glare, tells us that he is outside the moment..." (L, 447)

Fittingly, following this concluding vision of a figure who not only wrote his own history but, through his vacillations and personal ambiguities, has allowed others to construct their own history of his life, the novel ends by neatly segueing into the first interpretation of the ‘Oswald Story’ – his mother’s tale. Based on her belief that “TV gave the cue and Lee was shot” (L, 450) Marguerite’s digressive speech, a condensed oral history and a way, in itself, of conveying the story *she* so desperately wants to write, seems in marked contrast to the rest of the book. As a convoluted narrative mixture of defensive remarks about her parenting of Lee and the recounting of recent events, such as how in a car with FBI agents she is kept from the radio news of her son’s death and is placed, with Oswald’s wife, behind a television set showing the shooting – “Marina and I were not shown the sequence. They made us sit behind the television and the agents all crowded around in front and watched” (L, 450) – ‘Marguerite’s story’ serves only to highlight the detachment she feels from a system she desperately wants to enter to clear her son’s name. Making the transition from nobody to media figure is no easy journey as her son has shown. Her wish to use “books and appearances” as a platform for her ‘truth’, coupled with Marina’s decision to hire a ghostwriter, suggest that they are both learning quickly however. Whatever the outcome of their travails, bearing in mind, as the last lines of the novel assert, that the name of Lee Harvey Oswald not only belongs to the Oswald family but to history, we seem confident that over time many interested parties, including DeLillo, will have had their say in a still unfolding story.

### **Conclusions: Between Word and Image/Ego and Id – Oswald as Lyotardian Conundrum**

“We live forever in history, outside ego and id. He wasn’t sure he knew exactly what the id was but he knew it lay hidden in Hidell.” (L, 101)

“...In any differential system, it is the assertion of the space *between* the entities that matters.” (Paul de Man)<sup>18</sup>

Jean-Francois Lyotard’s first publication *Discours, figure*, an adaptation of his doctoral thesis, is an examination of the ‘unspeakable other’ in discourse: in simple terms a study of the relationship between words/text and ‘seeing’ that juxtaposes Saussurean structuralism with Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of vision. In the words of Bill Readings:

“Lyotard displaces Saussure’s account of language in terms of signification by insisting upon its inability to deal with vision and with reference, which function figurally at both its limit and its centre. Saussurean linguistics, as the rule of the textual over the visible, effects a suppression of seeing by reading. Lyotard reintroduces the visible to structural linguistics, not as an alternative, but as a necessary yet heterogeneous complement to the textual.”<sup>19</sup>

For the purposes of our summing up of *Libra*, *Discours*, *figure* is an important work because it presents us with theory that illuminates the textual/visual divide of the novel – particularly DeLillo’s representation of Oswald. In focusing on the singularities or differences “which cannot be rationalized or subsumed within the rule of representation” (IL, 4), it also connects us with Lyotard’s later ideas on the postmodern sublime discussed at the beginning of the chapter.

For Lyotard, Saussure, in his radical overhaul of linguistics, overlooked the way that, in imposing a spatial arrangement or “virtual grid of oppositions” upon textual objects, discourse is undermined by the forces of the ‘other’ its arrangement echoes: figuration or the pictorial. Conversely, this unavoidable subjection of textuality to its ‘other’, argues Lyotard, is reversed in figuration or the visual arts, where images are qualified by an absent text. In other words the ‘object’ of representation – whether that representation is textual or visual – always remains in excess of the medium that is chosen to describe it: both the discursive and ‘the visible’ approaches falling short of encompassing the totality or singularity of that object’s quiddity. In Bill Readings’ words:

“The object resists being reduced to the state of mere equivalence to its meaning within a system of signification, and the figural marks this resistance, the sense that we cannot ‘say’ everything about an object, that an object always in some sense remains ‘other’ to any discourse we may maintain about it, has a singularity in excess of any meanings we may assign to it. The figural arises as the co-existence of incommensurable or heterogenous spaces.” (IL, 4)

It is important to emphasise that the key to the heterogeneity Lyotard talks of is that oppositional difference (the basis for meaning in both fields) cannot be transferred between text and image (a concept he expands upon in later works such as *The Differend* where conflicting but, to each speaker, equally legitimate ‘regimes of phrases’ are the topic of discussion). Oppositions between words that uphold the

structure of texts are incompatible with visual/spatial binaries that provide the balance of images and this fundamental difference between the two fields is always present, no matter which representational system is chosen: "...The discursive is always necessarily interwoven with the figural and vice versa, despite the fact that the discursive claim to accurate representation or full understanding rests upon the repression of figurality" (IL, 5).

Lyotard's reappraisal of representation therefore provides us with a way in to the idea that Oswald was subconsciously torn between two fields: fascinated by names and manipulated by texts but drawn to images that not only disrupted the totality of the discursive but also often openly conveyed the *resistance* of the individual to such manipulation (revolutionary films and photographs). Indeed, the two are so interdependent that, as we have discussed, his life seemed to be one long vacillation - a constant struggle to maintain a stable position between the desire for a pleasing picture of the self and the repressive exclusivity of logocentrism. The image chosen to grace the cover of the book, Oswald's staged pose with a rifle and two left-wing journals (what DeLillo calls "an idea of the performing self" (OS, 56) exemplifies this struggle.

Interestingly, in rejecting the sovereign rule of either image or text in *Discours, figure*, Lyotard offers a conservatively Freudian correlation of the connivance of desire with the figural hold on the unconscious that in many ways subverts Lacan's notion of the textualisation of the id. For Lyotard, the unconscious - based on images of disruption and distortion - is the 'unspeakable' and 'unrepresentable' 'other' to the ego or consciousness, where rational and conceptual workings are centred around words. Of course the same thing operates in reverse. 'The Dream is not a discourse'<sup>20</sup> asserts Lyotard, rather "Reverie, dream, fantasy are mixtures to be *both read and seen*."<sup>21</sup> DeLillo's depiction of Oswald's life is Lyotard's theory made manifest.

In Lyotard's later work, like *The Differend* and *The Postmodern Condition*, he borrows the idea of discursive representation being disrupted by an 'unspeakable other' that he introduces in *Discours, figure*, applying it to other areas of social analysis that can also be used as ways in to *Libra*: for instance, his insistence that history - regarded in modernist thought as a discursive representation of a moment in time - should avoid totalising narratives and become responsible to the 'singularity' of the event. Historical



writing, he argues, should “testify to history as a site of dispute, of differends,” (IL, 61) rather than attempting to provide an elusive objective truth. In order to do this, suggests Lyotard, history should deconstruct the binary oppositions “between voice and silence, history and the unhistorical, remembering and forgetting,” directing its attentions instead to “the immemorial, to that which cannot be either remembered (represented) or forgotten (obliterated)” (IL, 62):

“...A history which evokes the figures that haunt the claims of historical representation, haunt in the sense that they are neither present to them nor absent from them.” (IL, 62)

Though not a historical text in the true sense, *Libra* offers Lee Harvey Oswald as just such a figure. Despite latently present plausible sociological and psychological explanations, he always somehow eludes interpretative closure: an ‘open book’ that paradoxically befuddles its reader – the subtext being that perhaps it is for this reason alone that Oswald remains a sublime ghost in the American machine.

On this basis, this chapter therefore argues that the real strength of DeLillo’s novel lies in the way that, following some kind of Lyotardian policy of refiguring the politics of representation, he manages to prise apart the incommensurable totalities of text and vision previously offered as ‘truths’, to provide his reader with a place of refuge that lies between the figural (the Zapruder film) and discursive (the Warren Report) mediums: both, by Lyotard’s definition, only capable of generating either half-facts or overwhelming possibilities. As DeLillo says in his Author’s Note, *Libra* “makes no claim to literal truth” – like his protagonist, the book is, in the end, “only itself, apart and complete”, a way of stepping outside of the system in order to present the fact that some events are unrepresentable.

“Who arranged the life of Lee Harvey Oswald?” (L, 455) asks Marguerite Oswald at the end of the novel. If we look at the indisputable facts of the case – for instance Oswald’s retrospectively ironic choice of the Texas Book Depository and a cinema as the principal buildings of the shooting and its aftermath, his dyslexia and desire to chronicle American life – the question should rather be, adapting a question Anthony DeCurtis asked in an interview with DeLillo, “Is it possible that DeLillo could have

invented Oswald if the *real* Oswald had never existed?" In so many ways Oswald is the personification of most of DeLillo's concerns and the central figure in an event that has become the pivot point and exemplar for the postmodern sublime. In a passage that is easily overlooked in *Libra*'s frantic build up to the assassination, Larry Parmenter muses to his wife on the metaphysics behind his inability to find a paint scraper – "There's something about a paint scraper. You know it's there. You're looking right at it. But you can't quite pick it out of the background. Let's face it, the background is vast and confusing" (L, 361). The real Oswald existed, occupied space in the world, but it is hard to get an accurate picture against the white noise of an ever present and self-generating background of texts and pictures. Nevertheless, *Libra* shows us that although we will never truly understand how he was constructed, some aspects of his life can be rescued from the gloom or chronicle of unknowing. Before embarking upon our own interpretations however, we must ask ourselves if *we* are strong enough to resist the seductive power of his name. After all, blinded by the glare, there is every chance that we too will merely serve to reinforce his aura. Unlike the novel's detractors, have we the strength to resist a spiritual surrender and join DeLillo, and *his* Oswald by stepping outside of the system?

## Chapter Three

# **“Language is the mirror of the world.”**

## ***Ratner's Star*: Reflections of the Inexpressible**

Using the novel like some form of literary particle accelerator, Don DeLillo with *Ratner's Star* tries to identify the elementary building blocks of contemporary life through colliding the binary oppositions within philosophy, culture, history and language in an attempt to discover what will remain or disappear, what will be destroyed and what will become fused. A bizarre equation of a book, DeLillo's fourth novel can best be described as a piece of formal experimentation where the history of mathematics is genealogically intertwined with the development of the book's structure and plot. Narrated in the third person, the novel focuses on a 'radical accelerate', fourteen year old Nobel Prize winner Billy Twillig, and his place in an 'experiment' - Field Experiment Number One - the multi-disciplined study of a message from space received in the form of a series of numbers. The novel follows his adventures and reflections as he tries to extract meaning from the puzzling interstellar correspondence.

With its focus on the search for intelligent life in outer space and the heady and abstruse world of 'Nobel Prize level' mathematics, logic and science one could be excused for interpreting the novel as fulfilling the credentials of a work of science-fiction. Indeed, Douglas Keeseey proposes that although *Ratner's Star* eludes any specific generic classification, if any were to be made it would be this. However, beneath the book's complex interweaving of theoretical analyses and verbal trickery lies a work of satire - an attack on the major intellectual disciplines. This attack can be interpreted as specifically directed at the ways knowledge and information are communicated, the taxonomy of phenomena and the concept of the 'experiment'. Nobel laureates are portrayed with 'their heads in the sand' - rooting around in holes in the earth, escaping the pressure of trying to apply universal laws to a world where chaos and coincidence abound.

Critical examinations of DeLillo's work, such as Tom LeClair's 'systems theory' based approach or Douglas Keesey's thematic overview, focusing on the systemic or allusive aspects of *Ratner's Star*, provide the DeLillo scholar with incisive, detailed readings of the novel. However, little *close* analysis has been conducted on arguably the most interesting subject tackled by DeLillo in *Ratner's Star*, and one that recurs in many of his other works - the link between human communication processes and a perceived contemporary crisis of meaning and subjectivity. Tom LeClair recognises that with *Ratner's Star*, DeLillo "critiques mechanistic notions of scientific mastery, [and] optimistically corrects the "runaway" system it represents."<sup>1</sup> However he makes little attempt to connect the form and literary strategies of the text with the critique and satirical 'correction.' Drawing on the work of literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, this chapter will examine two literary strategies DeLillo employs to support his satirical attack on the limitations of science - 'controlled monologism' and the collapsing of binary terms. For instance, one could argue that the characters in *Ratner's Star* are deliberately one-dimensional, allowing scientific discursive practices to be subjected to ridicule, while the oppositional formal structure can be construed as a comment on poststructural notions of the nature of language and can be related to the 'epistemological shift' from essentialism to relativism: a differential system is presented, mocked, and in the conclusion, destroyed through the fusing of opposites.

Complementing an assessment of the literary strategies underpinning *Ratner's Star* will be a discussion of how the interconnected dimensions of 'time and space' play such an important role in the novel, in terms of the experience of the characters, the vicarious 'diegetic journey' taken by the reader, and their ubiquity throughout the text as motifs. The chapter will propose that the novel generates a highly sophisticated form of cognitive mapping, anticipating and moving beyond the cybernetic fictions of later texts that *represent* the implications technology has for personal ontology but fail to experientially mimic. For Donna Haraway, "The cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self."<sup>2</sup>: could Billy Twillig be understood in these terms? Drawing once more on the work of Bakhtin, and in particular his groundbreaking study of the 'chronotope' through the ages, an attempt will be made to place *Ratner's Star* in a 'chronotopic genre,' connecting it with similar texts.

## Controlled Monologism and Collapsed Oppositions

The conscious appreciation of structural foundations, the concept of *differance* and the interchangeability of signifiers are apparent in all of DeLillo's work. One could go further and argue that the overarching commonality of his novels, as he himself outlines - "...The individual faced with a vast structure, even a landscape; one person adrift, faced with a monumental superstructure that he can't make headway against"<sup>3</sup> - can be related to DeLillo's own relationship with the source of the materials with which he works. For instance, it is clear that he is ambivalent towards the structure of language and its individual manifestations - the word. Indeed, in an interview in 1993, DeLillo refers to the submissive role he plays at times in the creation process, acknowledging how his methodology often involves willingly allowing words to dictate the minor drives of his novels:

"There's always another word that means nearly the same thing, and if it doesn't then I'll consider altering the meaning of a sentence to keep the rhythm, the syllable beat. I'm completely willing to let language press meaning upon me."<sup>4</sup>

In a way *Ratner's Star* is an exploration of the control mechanisms of not only the structures and systems of language but also the mind. To this end, by his own admission, the novel not only contains a multitude of debates and disquisitions on the topic but is itself all structure and system. Throughout the book mathematical concepts such as reflection, circularity, opposition and symmetry are both formally and thematically prevalent, as is the philosophical notion of the dialectic. For instance, the story is presented as a dichotomy, dividing material practice 'adventures' and pure logic 'reflections', a structural format DeLillo borrowed, along with a number of images and themes, from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*. Moreover, as with fractal theory, when we telescope from the macro, the structure, to the micro we can still see the oppositional 'code' in play in a multitude of thematic conflicts: phenomena and noumena, madness and sanity, youth and old age, past and present, natural and artificial, chaos and order, underground and overground. Many of the characters too have opposites or pairs, representing dyadic figures from mathematical history – Leibniz and Newton, Sylvester and Cayley. In the words of the author:-

"It seems to me that *Ratner's Star* is a book which is almost all structure. The structure of the book is the book...I was trying to build a novel which was not only about mathematics to some extent but which itself would become a piece of mathematics."<sup>5</sup>

Everything seems bound up in opposition, even the milieu. Set outside a specific place and time, (although vaguely situated in the Chinese desert), it can be interpreted as a contrast of the 'ideational', represented by the nebulous, heady world of pure and often abstract thought communicated by DeLillo's characters, and the 'concrete' in terms of the magnificently sketched environment in which they interact: a giant cycloidal structure housing Field Experiment Number One. This can also be seen in the obvious contrast between the desert ('nature' represented by absence) and the cycloid ('artifice' as a self-conscious extreme). However, despite the surface play of oppositions and dialectics in the novel, this chapter will argue that with *Ratner's Star* DeLillo embarks upon a systematic process of binary negation – the collapsing of diametric terms – and a single-minded rejection of a working dialogism. So why and how does DeLillo do this?

To begin with, DeLillo's intention all along was to "reduce the importance of people" in the novel: in his words, if *Ratner's Star* was to be a piece of mathematics then "people had to play a subservient role to pattern, form and so on"<sup>6</sup>. Keesey, drawing on the genre based work of Betty Rosenberg, argues that the novel is a clear example of 'thesis fiction' – an allegorical novel of ideas – and the subordination of people to situations and solutions, as Rosenberg puts it, is therefore expected. However, attempting to counter DeLillo detractors, such as a reviewer in the *New Yorker* who felt the dialogue in *Ratner's Star* had been "freely translated from the Upper Transylvanian", Keesey seems to defend the novel as a conventional work, suggesting that perhaps any limitations the novel might have lie with the reader and arguing that "many of the allegorical characters...have dimension and undergo development" while the "strangely difficult...dialogue is often a sign of complex characterisation rather than of its opposite, the caricature"<sup>7</sup>. He can't have it both ways. DeLillo admits that "the characters are intentionally flattened and cartoonlike" and believed at the time that he was "doing something new" and "willing to take the risk" (ACH, 86): we must therefore judge it as such and not qualify the experimental in conventional terms. But

does the novel break new boundaries or simply retread old ground ? For George Stade, writing for The New York Times when the novel was first published, *Ratner's Star* is quite simply an example of Menippean satire, an ancient form later adopted by writers such as Jonathan Swift and Lewis Carroll and Americanised by Herman Melville, Ralph Ellison and Nathanael West. Stade asserts:

“It [Menippean satire] is the right form...for fiction writers who have little interest in fitting together rounded characters, social relations and sequential plots – or who sees little evidence of them in experience. It is the right form when experience seems to consist of discontinuous selves, collapsing institutions and arrested developments, which is how it seems to seem right now to our best fiction writers. In Menippean satires characters are reduced to the attitudes or theories for which they stand. Vice and folly are situated not in human nature or in social relations, but in distempers of intellect. Occupational bias and fantastic learning take the place of manners and morals. Plots are dislocated by juggernaut structures of ideas. Reality, social or other is swallowed by mind.”<sup>8</sup>

In *Epic and the Novel* Bakhtin discusses Menippean satire's relationship to the Socratic dialogue and other 'serio-comical genres' and alludes to the way in which, as part of an intention to 'crudely degrade' world views, “the heroes of the absolute past...and living contemporaries jostle one another in a most familiar way, to talk, even to brawl”<sup>9</sup> – a methodology clearly adopted by DeLillo in *Ratner's Star*, as mathematicians from throughout history, thinly disguised only by a change of name, appear as characters defending their ideas. For Bakhtin, “Menippean satire is dialogic, full of parodies and travesties, multi-styled, and does not fear elements of bilingualism” (DI, 26). However, unlike the example from classic Greek literature Bakhtin chooses to prove his point, there is no sense that *Ratner's Star* is a “realistic reflection of the socially varied and heteroglot world of contemporary life” (DI, 27) – the dialogue is contained *within* a privileged discourse and its speakers stranded in the middle of the desert or, in the case of one character, submerged beneath the waves. Moreover, if we open it out to suggest there might be a dialogue between science/mathematics and an 'other', the other would be the non-linguistic, the nameless and the inexpressible. In one way this makes sense: Menippean satire's ability to subvert and undermine institutions and their respective shibboleths could be understood as resting upon a rejection of human difference and a promotion of ideology – characters are representative of theories and not their own individuality

which is suppressed by the author. DeLillo is merely taking the hypothesis to its logical conclusion – absolute polyglossia under the monologic banner of ‘science’. The novel’s effect, although ultimately similar in *outcome* to what Bakhtin would term a ‘carnival text’, where the voices of the marginalised are liberated in a competing dialogue that questions a prevailing authority, in *application* is its diametric opposite. The authority is undermined from within, not as a result of outside voices of dissent. Dialogue implies at least a reciprocal understanding between subject positions, and on this basis Field Experiment Number One is more Babel than democratic forum and held up to ridicule. The clear differences in the specific fields of interest the scientists pursue in *Ratner’s Star* (the novel at times seems to take the form of a series of academic abstracts) are, within the ‘voice of science’, a collection of competing theses but the problem is that the ‘voice of science’ itself is not presented as fixed and immutable in the novel. As David Cowart argues, it fails as an “overarching system [which] integrates the various technologies of knowing”<sup>10</sup>, despite the scientists’ search for a complete definition (incomplete at “some five hundred pages” long). And as a result, aside from mysticism and the supernatural, two categories the scientists ultimately attempt to subsume in their definition, there is also little or no dialogue *between science and any other metanarrative*.

In his introduction to Bakhtin’s *The Dialogic Imagination*, Michael Holquist suggests that Bakhtin’s “highly distinctive concept of language...has as its *a priori* an almost Manichean sense of opposition and struggle at the heart of existence, a ceaseless battle between centrifugal forces that seek to keep things apart, and centripetal forces that strive to make things cohere” (DI, xviii). This could be a fitting blurb for the dustjacket of *Ratner’s Star*, particularly where DeLillo’s own concept of language is concerned, except that one could argue that he is clearly more fascinated by the centrifugal forces that work against logocentrism, emptying language of meaning, than those that support it. For instance, where Bakhtin sees the stratification of language into a diverse multitude of socio-ideological forms as healthy, DeLillo takes it to the extreme, connecting specialisation with unintelligibility. Dialogism becomes absolute monologism, as no-one can understand what the other is saying. As Tom LeClair suggests:



“The specialization of [the scientists’] knowledge and its formulation in frequently non-natural languages make the content inexpressible in the traditional and intimate form of reciprocal dialogue.” (ITL, 135)

For Bakhtin a process of ‘dialogization’ de-privileges authoritative discourses by providing legitimate alternative discourses. The problem is that, alongside his disruption of content based semantics, DeLillo subverts the underlying structure of natural language itself, inverting or collapsing binary terms, invoking the inexpressible, the wordless and the sublime in the resulting vacuum and thus precludes any language based alternative to the ‘voice of science’. The potential having been removed, there is no other discourse that can fill its place.

In order to put the wider issue of controlled monologism into context we must therefore investigate how ‘words and numbers’ are undermined in the novel despite the obviously ironic claim that they provide a kind of ‘power over the world.’ We will begin with DeLillo’s critique of the most universal of languages. As we shall see, even mathematics becomes incomprehensible in the novel when taken to the nth degree.

### **Mathematics and Metalanguages**

Being its principal theme, the discipline of mathematics is consistently referred to in *Ratner’s Star* in terms of its historical development, its use value, and, importantly, its role as a form of communication. For Billy Twillig, mathematics is a privileged language, his work on ‘Zorgs,’ understood by only a handful of others, providing him with a sense of intellectual status and an elite following of like-minded theorists. As we can see from Billy’s interior monologue below, inspired by the physical laws inherent in nature, mathematics also provides a comfort zone of rationality, something that could be relied upon in a world of decay and decomposition and yet allow him the intellectual development of which he is eminently capable:-

“...Its precision as a language; its claim to necessary conclusions; its pursuit of connective patterns and significant form; the manifold freedom it offers in the very strictures it persistently upholds. Mathematics made sense.”<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, it is the inherent rationality of mathematics – its ability to make sense - that leads the scientists in the novel to believe that it is the ‘Universal Language.’ After all

the Ratnerians communicated with it, and as Thorkild, a scientist bathing in Billy's 'canister' points out:

“A civilisation initiating contact would surely attempt to establish an identifying link through the grammar of mathematics, which is a higher grammar than all others and the only conceivable bond between creatures who differ in every other respect.” (RS, 163)

Mathematical dialogue here has interstellar possibilities for being a unifying force. It should be wholly objective, beyond interpretation and not fixed in any historical context. In the terms that Noam Chomsky applied to his study of linguistics, the scientists are therefore banking on the 'competence' of the Ratnerians - their inbuilt cognitive ability to use mathematical systems of language, to 'perform'. The problem is that the scientists themselves attempt to translate the Ratnerians' mathematical code into an extra-mathematical message – desiring the words behind the numbers – a different kind of sense.

Ironically, it is through the use of simple mathematical deduction that the message from space is decoded, and one could argue that mathematics as an applied discipline or mystical union with nameless forces is celebrated by DeLillo. Numbers of course feature strongly in DeLillo's later novels. In *Underworld*, for example, portentous numerical coincidences involving the number thirteen abound, leading the reader to draw his/her own conclusions as to the nature of causality, intention and supernatural agency. In *Ratner's Star* however, in its multitudinous theoretical guises, the use value of mathematics is severely questioned. Although some progress is made on the development of Logicon, it is clear by the end of the book that the merging of mathematical logic and symbolic notation to create a truly universal language has been a fruitless “pure act of the intellect” (RS, 409).

At first the Logicon Project is an attempt to produce “a formal language, void of content” (RS, 340) with which meaningful communication with extraterrestrial intelligence could be made, specifically, the Ratnerians or 'artificial radio source extants' as they are later known. Robert Hopper Softly's definition of the language is that it should be composed of “Pure and perfect mathematical logic” and be a “means of speaking to the universe” (RS, 274). However, it soon becomes clear that without

meaningful sounds for the notation it is “inherently unspeakable” (RS, 374). The logicians need to find a “second form of discourse, less stark, less empty than Logicon itself and therefore able to provide a basis for analysis and description” (RS, 340) and combine it with phonemes. What they require is a metalanguage, and therein lies the problem. Lester Bolin defines the difficulties faced by the team:

“The machine won’t be able to render Logicon or speak Logicon until I figure out how to separate the language as a system of meaningless signs from the language about the language.” (RS, 339)

The search for a metalanguage in *Ratner’s Star* is the quest to step outside the structure, to have the transcendental or Olympian perspective, a search that proves fruitless. Even a trip to the ninety-two year old Chester Greylag Dent a self-appointed “supreme abstract commander” (RS, 345) whom Softly tracks down to his “custom-made nuclear-powered submarine, endlessly circling the globe” (RS, 340) sheds little light on the matter. The concept of a “Universal logical structure able to speak about itself in metalogical terms” Dent finds “‘Extremely mirth-provoking.’” (RS, 349) Perhaps that is why Softly too finds himself in a hole ‘clawing at the hard earth’ at the narrative’s conclusion. Interestingly, Billy discusses ‘use value’ when making the distinction between numbers and words as he stands at the edge of Endor’s hole. Fearful that the scientist would lure him into the ground with logic he prioritises numbers over words for their dual nature:

“Numbers had two natures; they existed as themselves, abstractly, and as units for measuring distances and counting objects. Words could not be separated from their use.” (RS, 86)

Billy feels that the human understanding of mathematical order, far more than language, is part of our primordial past, inextricably bound up with the limbic system, the ancient recesses of the collective consciousness - in essence it is more natural and instinctual:-

“The intuition of mathematical order occupied the deeper reaches of cognitive possibility, too old and indistinct for tracing, predating even the analytical scraping of logic and language.” (RS, 238)

Of course an intuition of elementary mathematics is not the only vestigial product of ancient cognition: fear too has its roots in the limbic system. Perhaps this is why on

various occasions in the novel certain words seem to pose a threat to Billy and other characters on an instinctive level: a typical DeLillo concern.

### **The Fear of Words**

Often placed in ironic counterpoint to the absence of signifiers – the nameless - the threat posed by words and speech in the novel lies on a number of different levels ranging from the phonetic to the semantic. For instance, in the first chapter Billy reflects upon the danger of simplistic sounds, a danger connected to that which lies beyond the structure, a reference to death and simple material substances:

“Cunctation. Something about that word implied a threat. It wasn’t like a foreign word as much as an extraterrestrial linguistic unit or a vibratory disturbance just over the line that ends this life. Some words frightened him slightly in their imitations of compressed menace. “Gout.” “Ohm.” “Ergot.” “Pulp.” These seemed organic sounds having little to do with language, meaning or the ordered contours of simple letters of the alphabet.” (RS, 7)

As with the ‘nameless wastes’ produced by the body - “Mulch, glunk, wört and urg” (RS, 291) - Billy fears words possessing a seemingly primordial prelinguistic simplicity. He is much more comfortable with the technical, the complex and the abstract, the Latinate and the Greek:

“Other words had a soothing effect. Long after he’d acquainted himself with curves of the seventh degree he came across a dictionary definition of the word “cosine,” discovering there a beauty no less formal than he’d found in the garment-folds of graphed equations...” (RS, 7)

Billy’s fear of the organic and simplistic disappears over time as he begins to realise the fundamental make up of the world. He learns to embrace matter and become a little more comfortable with his own bodily functions and sexuality. However, it is at this point that the language of rationality itself starts to worry him. Ironically, his colleague Endor, in possessing sharply tuned reasoning skills, is the source of some disquiet for Billy. Standing on the edge of Endor’s ‘hole’ for the first time, Billy fears he may be coaxed in to join the scientist through the use of words and logic:

“Endor might not physically force him to eat baby insects but could possibly make the eating of these things seem an invigorating pastime. He had the ability and experience to set a language trap, using scientific persuasiveness

and his knowledge of large words and the spaces between such words.” (RS, 86)

Even more surprising, as one of the laureates waiting to meet Ratner at a ceremony in the Great Hole beneath the cycloid, Billy senses a threat “too deep to be defined” as he anticipates the announcement of his name:

“He began to doubt that he’d be able to respond when his name was finally called. It made no sense. There was nothing to fear. It was just his name being spoken aloud as part of a series of names...Maybe he would not occur...The calling of his name might pre-empt him. The name itself might assimilate his specific presence.” (RS, 229)

This fear of names is given another twist in the novel as we enter the thoughts of Jean Sweet Venables, a character chronicling the Logicon Project, who once wrote a book entitled *Eminent Stammerers*. Part of Venables’ book is made up of a commentary on “the phenomenon of being alienated by one’s own voice; on word-fear as a threat to sanity” and she therefore posits that stammering “to some extent represented the “curse” of verbal communication” (RS, 397). This leads her to reflect upon the terror of the “simplest question” – asking a child its name. For Venables “stuttering (interruption of word-flow) is like glossolalia (extended word-flow)” (RS, 397) and this episode thus forms another of DeLillo’s references to the dichotomy of the discrete and continuous.

It should soon be obvious to a reader of *Ratner’s Star* that names are given inordinate importance in the novel, in terms of their derivations, connotations and pronunciations. Many of the characters allude to the secret power invested in the act of assigning a name to something. For instance, Billy’s full name is deconstructed by Siba Isten-Esru, the result providing a useful insight into the destiny of the character and the intentions of the author:

“There are two distinct parts to your name and they comprise the essence of my analysis. Twi-two. Lig- to bind, as in ‘ligate’ and ‘ligature.’ Is it your destiny then to bind together two distinct entities? To join the unjoinable? We all await your answer.” (RS, 155)

Many passages also relate to sacred names or the existence of a transcendental signifier. For instance, Mutuka (taken from Motor Car), an expert on space and time

who lives with a nomadic family which “has no name even in its own language” (RS, 103) outlines his ‘people’s’ bizarre deferential attitude towards a returning boomerang:

“What we call a boomerang has no name in their dialect except on its return trip to the person who hurled it. Stuck in the dust it is nameless. Returning, however, it acquires a name - a name so sacred that even if I knew what it was I could not speak it here.” (RS, 103)

Possibly the most absorbing application of name theory by a character however is provided by Ratner, who unifies the transcendental signifier and signified in a glorious declamation on the secrets of the universe:

““...The universe is the name of G-dash-D. All of us. Everything. Here, there and everywhere. Time and space. The whole universe. It all adds up to the true name of G-dash-d.”” (RS, 230)

Enclosed in a life supporting bubble and insulated from the outside world, Ratner, unlike Softly and those searching for an elusive form of logical metalanguage (a way of stepping outside of the structure to some degree), believes in logocentrism, the primacy of the word. Ratner understands that the secret power of names is that they define what we know as real. Without them our world makes little sense. Of course, as DeLillo is at pains to point out throughout the novel, naming has inherent limitations and context confusion can occur. Take for instance Billy’s anxiety about his own body when thinking about the simple associated homonym ‘arm’:

“He was fairly sure nothing would happen to him if his arms touched the arms of the chair but what worried him slightly was the fact that the arms of the chair were called “arms” and that his arms were also called “arms” and it was barely possible that this business of self-touching applied not only to parts of the body but to parts of the body and parts of other objects that happened to have the same names. Arms of chairs, legs of tables, hands of clocks, eyes of needles.” (RS, 58/59)

As you might expect, being engaged in a project of binary negation and excess DeLillo at times takes the idea of naming to its ultimate conclusion and loops the symbolic back to the material world reifying words, turning them into things, collapsing the opposition of signifier and referent. On occasions Billy invests a certain material presence in his words, which are more than arbitrary signifiers, and seem to have weight and substance. Their power is distributed in their sounds, ability to evoke and ambiguity of meaning.

The other extreme, the diametric opposite of the absolute fusion of signifier and object, is the highlighting of absolute disassociation – a foregrounding of arbitrariness in the connection of signifier and referent. This is tackled by DeLillo in the novel in the form of ‘quotation’ and inexactness of definition. As we shall see, these categories also evoke terror.

### **‘Quotation’, Quining and Definition**

‘Quotation’, or the wrapping of words, can be interpreted as a distinctly postmodern technique, used to highlight the singularity of an expression. When signification is viewed as a process of endless deferral - of a closed structure of arbitrary signs engendering meaning only in relation to the other parts of the system - then emphasising a word and making it strange both defamiliarizes the word/concept and in some senses draws it out of the chain. Frederic Jameson, in his seminal study of postmodernism, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, cites an architectural example of wrapping with the Frank Gehry house in Santa Monica California - an old house surrounded by the living space of a new glass structure. In the words of Jameson, “...it is a present reality that has been transformed into a simulacrum by the process of wrapping, or quotation.”<sup>12</sup> One can also see the technique at work with the art of Christo, who defamiliarizes structures such as the Reichstag in Berlin by wrapping them in huge quantities of material. Robert Hopper Softly in *Ratner’s Star* however uses quotation in a different way. A character wrapped up in the complexities of logical notation, Softly has adopted a way of enunciating words, of verbally highlighting them, so that a potential recipient, such as the driver in the passage below, may interpret them, not with a thought to the original semantic content, but in a way that makes no sense:

“Deciding to address the driver he opened his mouth slowly, half expecting to see a bubble emerge.”

‘We’ ‘are’ ‘here.’

“Repeat,” the driver said.”

‘It’ ‘is’ ‘time’ ‘for’ ‘me’ ‘to’ ‘get’ ‘out.’”

“I don’t think my ears are hearing.”

“‘Stop’ ‘the’ ‘car.’”” (RS, 436-437)

Softly’s attempts to communicate in such a way are unsuccessful, the material nature of this use of quotation giving him the sense of being a cartoon character. Billy

Twillig, unsettled by this technique, muses upon his concern in the aptly named chapter ROB TALKS IN QUOTES:

“When he put quotes around words for commonplace objects, the effect was unsettling. He wasn’t simply isolating an object from its name; he seemed to be trying to empty an entire system of meaning.” (RS, 333-334)

Softly therefore uses quotation to subvert the system - to draw attention to the word as an arbitrary signifier, not to defamiliarize in a positive way but to render it useless, prising apart Saussure's arbitrary unit. For David Cowart, having realised the impossible goal of the Logicon Project Softly has been reduced to “a kind of deconstructive extreme”, transforming what was once “an exercise in irony” into a practice that embraces the “opposing ideological position” of Logicon – “an admission of the infinite gap between reality and the sign systems by which human beings attempt to represent it” (MF, 615/616). In Derridean terms he is placing terms under erasure, or *sous rature*, a methodology applied when words are incapable of expressing the signified they have been unified with. This can also be related to the idea of wrapping. Drawing attention to the word as signifier, reifying the phrase through stripping it of its normal contexts, highlights, as Cowart argues, the “immutable slippage between the phenomenal world and its symbols” and suggests a “terrible...estrangement from the real” or an “exile in a Symbolic Order that mathematics, however pure, can never circumvent” (MF, 616). This estrangement is founded on *differance*: the innate detachment and circular self-referentiality of the language system.

Douglas Hofstadter, in his celebrated examination of the human mind interestingly written in “the spirit of Lewis Carroll” - *Godel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* - touches upon the connection of ‘quotation’ and the self-referential in a Socratic dialogue featuring the philosophy of Willard Quine. For Hofstadter, ‘quotation’ subtracts meaning and connotation from a word and focuses purely on the word itself: a USE-MENTION distinction – “nothing about the word matters, other than its typographical aspects”<sup>13</sup>. This emptying of meaning Hofstadter relates to Quine’s eponymous operation ‘Quining’ where words are preceded by their own quotation leading to looping or self-referentiality, for example: “IS A SENTENCE FRAGMENT” IS A SENTENCE FRAGMENT. As an expert in transitional logic,



Cyril Kyriakos plays an important role in Field Experiment Number One heading up a “committee formed to define the word “Science”” (RS, 30). In “addition to his work on the substance of the definition” he chairs a “subcommittee devoted solely to phrasing” (RS, 30). One of the members of the group is J. Graham Hummer, an expert on phrasing who instigated the “MIT language riots” by “trying to assert that what there is in common between a particular fact and the sentence that asserts this fact can itself be put into a sentence” (RS, 33). In Hummer’s words:

“Phrasing is the element that makes or breaks the definition... The phrasing is the definition. An analysis of how we say what we are saying is itself a statement of the precise meaning of the word we are defining.” (RS, 36)

This assertion leads Kyriakos to concede that “No definition of science is complete without a reference to terror” (RS, 36). ‘Science’ for the subcommittee becomes bound up in metalinguistics rather than any real reference to universal laws of material truth. It is presented as a concept so large and terrifying that it subsumes a multitude of subdivisions, esoterica and arcane principles and therefore, ultimately avoids clear objective interpretation other than through the grammatical structure that contains it. DeLillo’s characters here clearly illustrate an allegiance with the thought of Jean-Francois Lyotard: Science is a language game with ‘regimes of phrases’ rather than universal totalities. What is important is the rules of the game and a subject’s relative position inside or outside of the structure, based on his/her competence in a given field. The need for definition or closure is the need for truth and totality, something ultimately out of reach. The subject of science’s dependence on language and its consequent limitations is touched upon by Orang Mohole “acknowledged kingpin of alternate physics” (RS, 178) as he realises the difficulty of explaining to Billy the locus of his theoretical field - the ‘mohole totality’ or ‘value-dark dimension’:

“All the key words in this explanation, by the way, are totally misleading due to the everyday quirks of language... What I’ve just said indicates, more than anything else, the inadequacies of human language in the face of the mohole phenomenon” (RS, 181).

The problem for Mohole is that language is inherently spatial and temporal and therefore the exact opposite of the concept he attempts to describe: “‘Wherever there are moholes’ implies that a mohole occupies space, which it doesn’t” (RS, 181). That said he proceeds to employ a mixture of rhetoric – “We’re not so scientific that we

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can't have a little make-believe, right?" (RS, 182) and what Jurgen Habermas might recognise as a little "communicative rationality" in order to persuade Billy that his theory is plausible. However, Habermas' theories on 'intersubjective communication', where the use of a 'universal pragmatics' espouses the need to enforce the validity of utterances, suggest that one cannot get away from hermeneutics - the interpretative relation between speaker and hearer. There are simple phrases but one cannot rely on simple phrases alone. Indeed, the linguistic comfort zone and 'use-value' of the universal phrase is questioned by another of DeLillo's 'mouthpiece' characters, Rahda Hamadryad, an expert on animalia:

"'Well done.' Bad luck.' 'Get cracking.' To this day I find it difficult to imagine a situation that couldn't be fully resolved with one of these phrases. Of course times have changed and so have words. People expect more these days. It's not enough to utter the suitable phrase." (RS, 55)

Even these concrete phrases for Rahda Hamadryad, with little scope for hermeneutic disagreement, lack the ability to perform in her world. This lack of performativity of course echoes that of scientific discourse in the novel. As a language game, science requires that the sender and not the receiver is competent – controlled monologism – and therefore uncertainty is actually increased and not decreased with knowledge. The performativity that systems theorists argue is the basis on which the social system maintains itself thus becomes a way of perpetuating unpredictability and chaos. The problem is, as Lyotard argues, there is no way any other discourse can oppose science and its 'cognitive phrases' – the rules of the system won't allow it. The only alternative, one might say, is to celebrate that which science *cannot* comprehend and thus verbalise. This is represented in *Ratner's Star* by the nameless or sublime.

### **Invoking the sublime: System Interbreak and the Reader**

As discussed, much of the novel plays on the tension between the named – what Cowart terms as "forms of systematic irrationalism with which humanity has always sought to negotiate the unseen" (MF, 601) - and the nameless. We have seen how the former is undermined, how the symbolic is drained of meaning until what was once logical is shown to be wholly arbitrary, ludic and at times terrifying. Indeed, the sense of 'terror' that DeLillo connects with language may be seen as an allusion to Baudrillard's theory that terrorism is inherent in the logic of the sign - specifically its

‘control’ over reality (the referent being merely the reflection of the sign). But does DeLillo offer the ‘nameless’, phenomena outside of/beyond the signification process, as a source of psychological refreshment, reawakening a lost union with the world and all of its mystery, or is such ‘wordless experience’ also a target for his deconstructive strategy – a negation of both binary pairs?

From the start of the novel it is clear that Billy has a real and enduring fear of *and* fascination for the nameless and mysterious, things outside of scientific definition, that which cannot be expressed. This pre-existing fear and fascination is compounded on Billy’s first visit to Endor’s ‘hole.’ Summoned to visit the former champion of science, now celebrant of the non-verbal, the teenager is warned to watch out for ‘nameless danger.’ This danger, as Endor stresses, is not to be found in an outside force, something beyond science, it is the scientific world view he should beware of:

“There’s a dark side to Field Experiment Number One. Now listen. If you’ve ever heeded anything, heed this. This is it. An outright warning. There is a dark side to it. The importance of the message from Ratner’s Star, regardless of content, is that it will tell us something important about ourselves.” (RS, 91)

Endor admits that in his former guise he “popularized the secrets of the brotherhood all too obligingly” (RS, 92) but, in seeing his fellow scientists in a new light as ‘mongers’ – peddlers of ideas - he recognises that Billy may be at risk from the discipline that defines him.

Although far from explicit, the dark side of the eclipse the message predicts would seem to be the dangers associated with playing god - of thinking that nature will offer up its secrets and mystery to scientific study, that everything can be explained and that, through knowledge, man can circumscribe the universe. ‘Nameless’ in the sense that it can only be described as an anomaly by the scientists, something outside their ken, the eclipse at the novel’s end represents a collapsing of the oppositions of the book, a system interbreak that provides a space in which DeLillo can speculate on actuality – “the real world” (RS, 431), “the empirical source” and “human experience” (RS, 433) – *and* draw closer to the reader, allowing the full impact of the novel’s message to be absorbed. As the sun and moon fuse for a moment, the ostensible ‘light’ of knowledge occluded by the seat of lunacy, DeLillo offers the interbreak as a remarkable aside

similar to the journey into cyberspace taken by Sister Edgar at the conclusion of *Underworld*. Leading the reader through the “upland slush of rice fields” to an ashram in Madhya Pradesh, India, DeLillo interrupts the system of the novel by switching from the conventional confines of third person narration into direct address (a second person ‘you’ aimed at the reader and hypothetical ARS extants situated outside of time). The idea seeming to be that as DeLillo steps out of the novel the reader can make an equivalent effort and connect in the same intervening space. The problem is that not every reader can make this journey.

One of the main criticisms levelled at *Ratner's Star* is that it excludes the ordinary reader, leaves them strewn along the margins, while only whizkids can engage with what DeLillo is trying to achieve. For those who stick with it and follow DeLillo down the rabbit hole his suggestion that to be outside, like the ARS extants, is “to know an environment infinitely less complex”, and warning that by continuing to apply the scientific method “we implicate ourselves in endless uncertainty” (RS, 232), seems to imply we should pursue another kind of unobtainable – a divine perspective based on continuity with the universe, a rejection of symbolic knowledge, and a regression to an oceanic state where babbling prevails. But is there a third way?

### **The Novel as ‘Chinese Killer’**

“In handball there’s a thing called a Chinese killer. That’s an active thing I do, hit Chinese killers. It’s when the ball hits right where the wall meets the ground so that there’s no bounce. It’s impossible to return a Chinese killer” (RS, 34).

“At the contact line of nature and mathematical thought is where things make sense, things accede to our view of them, things return to us a propagating wave of reason” (RS, 431).

For the less daring reader, taking into account DeLillo’s at times all consuming dialogue with, and questioning of, contemporary modes of thought, the narrative and satirical drive of *Ratner's Star* will simply be read as a representation of the need to obtain a glimpse at the transcendental, that which will always be beyond the structure and therefore always elusive. Nothing, DeLillo seems to say, escapes the logic of the sign. And that is why reality for DeLillo’s scientists is represented as communicative inadequacy, word games and fear of the unknown or nameless. Their theorising is shown to be nothing more than intellectual onanism without a climax, where meaning

is avoided because it is ultimately elusive: better an obvious withdrawal from prompting understanding than a futile attempt to provide it. Structure circumscribes the scientists' world and there will always be a distance between human interpretations of reality and the thing itself - no amount of digging in the dirt will reveal the truth of existence. In essence, the majority of the characters in *Ratner's Star* are stymied by their need to find words to express what is inherently inexpressible due to the sign's inadequacy. Everything, therefore, is rendered 'nameless'. To drag Plato's metaphor of the cave into the postmodern age and draw a parallel with the architecture of the cycloid housing Field Experiment Number One, with its surfaces that seem to "deflect natural light, causing perspectives to disappear" (RS, 16) - it is as if the scientists occupy a room with a panoramic view of the world outside, but all they can see is the reflected light of their own knowledge and that of the structure that contains them in the glass. The real world, for DeLillo's laureates, is always obscured by the opacity of their own reflections.

The Billy Twillig we find at the novel's conclusion is different however. Pedalling in the "white area between the shadow bands that precede total solar eclipse" (RS, 438) he has moved beyond the opposites of the world and coincidentally represents DeLillo's idea of where a writer should be: working at the margins of two systems - language and nature - both fearing and hoping for a glimpse of the transcendental or sublime. One could argue that by the end Billy stands between the scientists' language games, between materialism and idealism, concrete and abstract, a highly intelligent but naïve mediator personifying the struggle of the postmodern intellectual and layperson alike, yearning for active dialogue but more often than not faced with a battery of empty speeches. On the one hand we identify with Billy as we identify with all lone heroes, by comparing our knowledge of ourselves with the character's own sense of self. A successful strategy of controlled monologism and collapsed oppositions helps us to do this, allowing us to recognise our world in his. But as we shall see, these are not the limits of the novel's effects. There are other dimensions to consider.

## Cognitive Mapping and the Chronotopic Genre of *Ratner's Star*

"In the Euclidean space of history, the fastest route from one point to another is a straight line, the one of Progress and Democracy. This however only pertains to the linear space of the Enlightenment. In our non-Euclidean space of the end of the century, a malevolent curvature invincibly reroutes all trajectories."  
(Jean Baudrillard – *Reversion of History*)

"There might be a cyborg Alice taking account of these new dimensions"  
(Donna Haraway – *A Cyborg Manifesto*)

In comparison to his connected notions of 'dialogism' and the 'carnival,' increasingly influential indicators of generic distinctions within contemporary literary criticism, Bakhtin's paradigmatic thoughts on time and space in the novel and the "formally constitutive category of literature" (DI, 84) he devises for its study - the chronotope - have received relatively little attention. Borrowed from Einstein's Theory of Relativity, and literally meaning "time space", Bakhtin's notion of the 'chronotope' refers to a unit of literary analysis which focuses upon the "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (DI, 84). For Bakhtin, the chronotope "defines genre and generic distinctions" and his lengthy monograph, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,' sets the standard by painstakingly delineating three chronotopic genres - 'Greek Romance', 'The Chivalric Romance' and 'The Rabelaisian Novel'. In the conclusion of the essay he questions "whether the approach taken...will prove fundamental and productive" (DI, 258) One could argue that any analytical methodology that can measure the extent to which the 'dimensionality' of an aesthetic practice relates to the world it represents, particularly if one of the drives of that practice is a form of 'cognitive mapping,' is by definition productive. In Bakhtin's words:

"Out of the actual chronotopes of our world (which serve as the source of representation) emerge the reflected and *created* chronotopes of the world represented in the work (in the text)." (DI, 253)

With most novels the chronotope is uniform throughout the work, reflecting the 'actual chronotope' of the world the author inhabits or projecting a world he has created. But what do you do if the novel defies both conventional and chronotopic generic identification? For Douglas Keeseey, *Ratner's Star* seems "to cross and recross so many generic boundaries as to leave the reader hopelessly confused about its place in

literary history” (DD, 65). This section of the chapter will discuss DeLillo's crossing of both 'conventional' and chronotopic generic boundaries in *Ratner's Star* and ask why he does this.

As discussed earlier in the chapter, the novel is divided into two sections: 'Adventures' and 'Reflections.' Although, as the title of the second section suggests, more emphasis is placed on thoughts and consciousness later in the novel, there is a strong case for arguing that, aside from minor tangential departures, the whole novel conforms, in parodic simplicity, to the 'adventure-time' of Greek romances as delineated by Bakhtin. *Ratner's Star* is essentially a novel of 'ordeal' utilising the chronotope of 'the road' where the 'hero' is subjected to a series of tests upon accidentally stumbling upon characters who would ordinarily be separated by academic (replacing Bakhtin's 'social') and spatial distance. Meeting and recognition/non-recognition are important motifs in 'adventure-time' and, as Bakhtin points out, an adventure requires an "abstract expanse of space" (DI, 99) in order to develop:

“A depiction of one's own world - no matter where or what it is - could never achieve that degree of abstractness necessary for Greek adventure time. Therefore, the world of the Greek romance is an *alien* world: everything in it is indefinite, unknown, foreign. Its heroes are there for the first time; they have no organic ties or relationships with it; the laws governing the sociopolitical and everyday life of this world are foreign to them, they do not know them; in this world, therefore, they can experience only random contingency.” (DI, 101)

To find a contemporary reworking of such a structure is of course in no way unusual and indeed DeLillo's inspiration for the novel's form came from a far more recent text: as LeClair recognises, there are “numerous structural and thematic links” (ITL, 117) between 'Adventures' and Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and DeLillo has acknowledged the connection in interviews. Like Alice, Billy encounters cartoon-like characters, “idea types” or abstractions running counter to his own “concrete substance of realism” (ITL, 118) and it is up to him to negotiate possible danger and reflect upon what they have to say. At one point in the novel he is worried that there is a predetermined pattern to his experiences, that he is undergoing a trial of “experimental terror” with a central motif: “People liked to arrange encounters for him with holes, tunnels, sightless eyes, artificial limbs, models of computerized maw” (RS, 86). The antithesis of contingency is of course conspiracy – the secret manipulation of

events - and one of DeLillo's favourite topics. Chance connections they may be but the reader is *always* conscious of the controlling hand of a higher power – the author.

For Bakhtin the Greek romance typically ended with a restoration of the equilibrium destroyed by chance. The reader will recall that although Billy Twillig has successfully negotiated the rites of passage of a teenager, solved the mystery of the code from space, and avoided the twin dangers of commodification and decomposition, the novel loops back to the beginning in a number of ways: the reversal of an expanded mathematical history; a bandage on Billy's cut finger that features at the start of the novel; and a journey to an unknown destination. Indeed, a detailed reading of time and space in *Ratner's Star* will begin with this journey.

### **Pockets of Technology**

As with *Libra* (a subway train), *Players* (an aircraft), *Great Jones Street* (a taxi ride through a tunnel), *Running Dog* (a car passing through derelict streets), and *The Names* (in a car, lost in Athens in "some featureless zone") the opening of *Ratner's Star* depicts its protagonist, Billy Twillig, sealed within a mode of transport, a "pocket of technology and encased light" (RS, 4) - a Sony 747 passing through an unfamiliar and disquieting space. From car, to helicopter, to a room described as a 'canister,' this idea of enclosure, and a concomitant sense of claustrophobia, is sustained through the novel right up to the 'liberating' denouement.

As discussed elsewhere in the thesis, the actions of 'men in small rooms' has a multi-layered significance for DeLillo and can be traced to the role of the writer, the terrorist and the assassination of JFK. His concentration on 'the enclosed' in *Ratner's Star* largely relates to feelings of fear, the need for reflection or the process of packaging and commodification, for instance placing the human subject in a travelling 'can' to arrive as the product of the journey. For Charles Molesworth, the plane is "an agency of transferal that becomes an instrument of exposure, even entrapment" (IDD, 144). Billy is, as fellow air-traveller Eberhard Fearing recognises, a valuable 'commodity' possessing "intellectual know-how" (RS, 12). Described by the scientist-administrator Byron Dyne as a "radical accelerate" having "unique dimensions" (RS, 20) and, a 'legend in his own time,' child prodigy Billy is also, in a way, the personification of



another theme running throughout the book - the subversion of the conventional view of absolute linear chronology and progress - a conflation of the past (legend), present (incumbent Nobel laureate) and future (his premature adult wisdom). For Billy, and the reader, the plane ride heralds the commencement of a lengthy and convoluted process of spatial and chronological disruption.

Anticipating the interior nature of cyberspace - the reduction of real dimensions and the expansion of those digitally created - DeLillo describes the interior of Billy's Sony 747, as if it were a fantastic virtual construction. It features a rock garden complete with hammocks, a dark lounge where Billy finds "two men sat at a table playing an Egyptian board game" (RS, 10) and a "sort of old quarter" "behind equipment racks and anticrash icons" featuring "real plastic...as opposed to the synthetic updated variations in the forward areas" (RS, 12). DeLillo's commercial aircraft has taken on a cross-cultural and cross-historical identity all of its own. He inverts the view that modes of transport are 'featureless zones,' existing only to ferry passengers from place to place, by bringing the outside in, replacing uniformity and functionality with heterogeneity. The plane has become a 'place' in stark contrast to Billy's destination - the desert. However, Billy's 'experience' with one of the aircraft's toilets indicates that he is not convinced by the pretence of exteriority epitomised by the rock garden (in the non-vacuum packed place), indeed feels physically threatened by the "manufactured air" that surrounds him "drawing out needed chemicals and replacing them with evil solvents made in New Jersey" (RS, 7). Torn between the needs of the body (breathing/waste disposal) and its negative aspects (waste products and the inevitable decay connected with the ageing process) Billy is both afraid of "old people's shitpiss" and the "systolic throb of the aircraft" - a body in itself - its elaborate artificial modes of 'breathing' a source of anxiety. For Billy the toilet is a paradox of the public and private, the organic and the inorganic, and an anxiety inducing reminder of human obsolescence, not a comforting refuge.

Interestingly, Billy's father "was a third-rail inspector in the New York subway system" (RS, 4) and we are told of the time when a "tripping device failed to work" (RS, 5) and Billy found himself on the floor of a train involved in a major shunt. This is Billy's "first time in the air" (RS, 6) and the memory of the subway accident obviously precludes any enjoyment of the experience. In order to limit his discomfort,

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he attempts to think in Sumerian *gesh*-time, “to convince himself this would make the journey seem one fourth as long as it really was” (RS, 5) - a ploy that leads to later temporal confusion when he forgets which ‘motion’ he is using to “stroke through time” (RS, 12).

The confusion between space and place, interior and exterior, organic and inorganic and past and present can be related to Fredric Jameson's delineation of postmodern hyperspace, the features of which are defined by Jameson as being:- “...The strange new feeling of an absence of inside and outside, the bewilderment and loss of spatial orientation...[and] the messiness of an environment in which things and people no longer find their ‘place’” (CLLC, 117-118). For Jameson, postmodern hyperspace has “...Succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world” (CLLC, 44).

Billy's sense of spatial bewilderment continues as he reaches his ultimate destination - a huge cycloidal structure, situated in the Chinese desert, designed to house ‘Field Experiment Number One’ - the multi-disciplined study of a message from space of which he will form the intellectual locus. Upon first sight, from a distance, the structure seems to Billy more of a geometric abstraction than a ‘concrete’ three dimensional ‘useful’ building:-

“Rising over the land and extending far across its breadth was a vast geometric structure, not at first recognizable as something designed to house or contain or harbor, simply a formulation, an expression in systematic terms of a fifty-story machine or educational toy or two-dimensional object” (RS, 15).

Like many late twentieth century constructions, the huge cycloid (being “about sixteen hundred feet wide, six hundred feet high”) was built from a number of disparate materials – “Welded steel. Reinforced concrete. Translucent polyethylene. Aluminium, glass, mylar, sunstone” - and its form suggests it has drawn on an eclectic architectural heritage: i) Its focal point, “a slowly rotating series of intersecting rings” that are “wedged inside the figure by a massive V-form steel support” (RS, 16) suggests medieval astronomy; ii) The armillary sphere in the main structure was, “Used a lot in the Moslem renaissance” (RS, 23) and; iii) In its ability to measure “the coordinates of

a star” (RS, 23) the whole building echoes the sidereal mapping of the pyramids in ancient Egypt or Mexico. However, although the cycloid displays these elements of postmodernism - the visual subordination of function, its material disparities and allusion to the past - one could argue that the simplicity and impersonal, imposing unity of the form is modernist. That or its shape is an allusion to the world-market money curve so frequently mentioned in the book (RS, 425): a concrete metaphor of economic fluctuation - growth and decline.

As with his experiences on the Sony 747, Billy is confused by the building's dualities, but this time it is not a case of the organic and inorganic or the natural and artificial (at least from the outside - see section on the Space Brain Complex) - it stems from his being outside rather than contained. Indeed he cannot see the container. He is bewildered, in the Jameson sense, by the visual/spatial trickery by which some of the surfaces on the building remove his sense of perspective through the deflection of natural light. He has to “look away from time to time” as if the building is a combinatory product of his imagination, the terrain and the heavens - a “solar mirage.” Something so huge yet with the feeling of non-existence - a paradox of solidity and dimensional concealment. Billy's wonderment at the building's use as a ‘container’ of people adds to the feeling that it possesses a mysterious dual quality - that of seeming to be both abstract and concrete - function betrayed by form (the cycloid) and matter (the deflective surfaces):- “Point line surface solid. Feeling of solar mirage. And still a building. A thing full of people” (RS, 16).

Upon entering the cycloid Billy is taken to his quarters on an elevator that has been engineered to eliminate any evidence of its motive function. The paradox of stationary motion disconcerts Billy: “He might have been at rest or going sideways or diagonally...He wanted to know he was moving and in which direction” (RS, 16). This disorientation is then compounded by the fact that, like a lab animal, he has to negotiate a maze or labyrinth before entering his room (an allusion supported by the later discovery that his room was meant for ‘Tree Man II’, a “chimp whose phonetic structure they’ve rebuilt” (RS, 263). Days later, after panicking because he has become lost, Billy learns that the ‘play maze’, as it’s called, changes daily, encouraging the

scientists to indulge in 'serious play'. "This must be what they do instead of naps," he muses, "To enter an area in order to find your way out" (RS, 115).

Referred to as a 'canister' Billy's room is "largely devoid of vertical and horizontal reference points" (RS, 17), soundproof and without windows. The walls are concave and "paneled in a shimmering material decorated with squares and similar figures, all in shades of the same muted blue" (RS, 17) which serves to enhance the room's lack of identifiable basic geometry. The only furniture in the canister is a chair-bed, although the austerity is broken up by an imposing piece of technology assembled on one of the walls - a "limited input module" that communicates everything Billy does to the 'Space Brain Complex' "more than fifty stories straight up" (RS, 17).

### **Space Brain, Cyborg Subjectivity and Screaming**

Beginning to "...spread beyond its own hardware" (RS, 61), 'Space Brain' is a concrete metaphor for the paradigm shifts of science itself which, in the words of 'Space Brain's' programmer Shirl Trumpy, "refuses to be contained". At the centre of the hypertrophic 'machine', tended by "perhaps a hundred" technicians, is the 'void core', a space Billy refuses "to get taken into physically" (RS, 65). Maybe his refusal stems from the fact that, on a number of levels, 'Space Brain' is the technological equivalent of Billy himself:

i) Both, with the help of many assistants, are attempting to decode the message from space.

ii) Both have attracted the attention of a Honduran cartel who wish to 'lease time' on them and exploit their mental capabilities for profit by regulating "the money curve of the world" (RS, 146). Elux Troxl, the spokesman for the cartel, describes the "work modus" of his "international monopoly" to Billy:

"We acquire air space. We make motion studies in and out. We lease and sublease multi kinds of time – makeshift, standby, conceptual et al forth. Then we either buy, sell, retain or incite revolution, all totally nonprofitless, done merely to flux the curve our way" (RS, 147).

iii) Prior to making mathematical breakthroughs, Billy relies on intuitive responses to problems, searching the “deeper reaches of cognitive possibility”. In doing so his work’s “natural tendency” is “to provide a model of his own mind” (RS, 238). ‘Space Brain’ develops an “irritating little kink” or “glitch” in the way it thinks - an alphanumeric output that just happens to be an anagram of Descartes ‘cogito ergo sum’ (‘I think therefore I am.’) and thus evidence of metacognition and a recognition of ‘consciousness.’ One is a man with the mind of computer. The other is a computer with the mind of a man. Consequently, both are cyborgs. In the words of Donna Haraway:

“Late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert.” (CM, 274)

Early in the novel we learn of an encounter Billy has with a ‘crazy old woman’ in his childhood. Labelled by the Bronx community as ‘The Scream Lady’, her role in the narrative is parenthetical and yet neatly connects with the idea of confused subjectivity and the influence of technology on language and thought. However, there are two ways one could read this character: she is not by definition ‘damaged’.

Firstly, one could argue that DeLillo uses the character to highlight both humanity's frustration with the limitations of language and the state of information overload. Her written messages (Billy categorises them as ‘cryptic numeroglyphics’ - RS, 249) have a rolling and associative quality - facts and figures in endless torrent like a garbled news report - the links usually amusing and often insightful and disturbing:

“Stockmark ave/rage 549.74 (29/1929) grim pill  
of pilgrim welfare (fare/well) scumsuckers inc.  
& brownshirt king/pres. (press/king) of U.S. of  
S/hit/ler & secret (seek/credit) dung of U.S.  
Cong/Viet Cong & Christ/of/fear Columbus discovered  
Syph/ill/U.S. 1492.....”

Her schizophrenic prose appears to have been presented as a programming error. History becomes relayed as a rolling game of numerical and verbal association producing limited meaning only in the ironic connotations. For Jameson,

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schizophrenia can be connected with the privileged terms of postmodern cultural production - a “practice of the randomly heterogeneous and fragmentary and the aleatory” (CLLC, 25) - and serves as an aesthetic model. Indeed, her words seem to mimic the work of the Language Poets who have, in Jameson’s view, “adopted schizophrenic fragmentation as their fundamental aesthetic” (CLLC, 28). The ‘Scream Lady’ is no intentional postmodern poet however and when the machine breaks down, when her synaptic links refuse to acquiesce to the game, the voice of the woman within is heard in the iteration of the only logical response - a scream. Her primordial vocalizations counter the intricately woven construction, demonstrating the rage within the ‘machine’ - the unutterable anger inherent in the association of her country with terror, disease and the pursuit of capital, with Hitler, syphilis, and Black Monday:-

“Across the airshaft the scream lady cursed the universe...the woman shrieked and rattled, none of her words seeming to belong to any known language.” (RS, 72)

The struggle for the definition of appropriate language here is the struggle for self-identity and as such the ‘Scream Lady’ is in many ways an inverted corollary of ‘Space Brain’. On the one hand ‘The Scream Lady’ is ‘attempting’ to deny words - to return to the notion of the pre-verbal in order to express the inexpressible - while ‘Space Brain’ has anagrammatized a sophisticated concept to unify the hardware and software or body and mind of a machine. DeLillo’s experimentation with this opposition is further evidence of his fascination for language use - its limitations and link with the psychological development of the self. Billy muses upon the inexpressibility of the essential self while working on the Logicon project - a humorous counterpoint to ‘Space Brain’s’ Cartesian recognition of ‘consciousness’ :

“There is a life inside this life. A filling of gaps. There is something between the spaces...There is something in the space between what I know and what I am and what fills this space is what I know there are no words for.” (RS, 370)

Billy’s tongue-twister philosophical insight echoes Lacan’s denunciatory attack on the long held link between the self and the ego, an adaptation of Descartes: ‘I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think.’<sup>14</sup>

Both DeLillo and Lacan allude to the poststructural notion that language precedes and in fact defines what we know as 'real' - syntagmatic breakdown thus leads to psychological breakdown and a fractured view of 'reality.' Drawing on Lacan's work, Jameson connects the sequential linear sentence with psychic health:

"If we are unable to unify the past, present, and future of the sentence, then we are similarly unable to unify the past present, and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life. With the breakdown of the signifying chain, therefore, the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers." (CLLC, 27)

The 'Scream Lady' can therefore be read as a subject with little chance of achieving any kind of verbally defined 'cognitive mapping' – her conceptions of time and space are confused at the point of entrance: language. Billy looks beyond the signification process however - his 'spaces' can be interpreted as the gaps between words and symbols, and he realises that what lies between what 'he knows' and what 'he is' is unnameable. We may therefore assume that he recognises the futility of searching for a 'transcendental signified' that could define his identity in symbolic terms.

However, as mentioned, there is a second way of interpreting the 'Scream Lady'. For critics Deleuze and Guattari schizophrenia is a revolutionary and positive force operating politically within the unconscious, a form of liberation from the paranoia induced by fascism and forms of transcendent interpretation (such as Marxism or, in the case of *Ratner's Star*, science). Their theory of 'schizoanalysis' replaces what they see as repressive Freudian interpretations of the mind. They long for a return to the pre-symbolic and, importantly for this reading of *Ratner's Star*, suggest that children and the mad are groups, not fully 'Oedipalized', who are privileged enough to enjoy what the 'imaginary' has to offer. For them the 'Scream Lady' would have produced herself as free – "...finally able to say and do something simple in [her] own name."<sup>15</sup> How might they view Billy?

Interestingly, at one point in the novel Billy narrowly avoids an experiment that will result in the implantation of an electrode in his head producing an effect similar to the madness 'suffered' by the 'Scream Lady' – a "retrograde orbit" of signifiers. In citing the passage concerned, Charles Molesworth suggests that the "new mode of sensory awareness" (IDD, 149) the implant will engender correlates with Deleuze and

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Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*. Having "Space Brain capability" (RS, 243) the electrode has a problem – "it tends to overstimulate the left side of the brain" resulting in "an overpowering sense of sequence" or acute awareness of "the arrangement of things" (RS, 244) – and therefore Billy would find himself "analyzing a continuous series of acts in terms of their discrete components...a very detailed treatment of reality". Molesworth argues that the passage examines the entropic threat of a disorder wrought by the absence of system - "a superfluity of data" - through the eyes of the "mad" scientist who "believes that he can master the confusion of modern life by tracking it with an obsessive empirical accuracy":

"Empirical science thrives on contingency and time and space, for only there can the organizing principle of causality reign supreme. In place of purpose and pattern the mind is made to focus only on sequence and metonymy; causality becomes the only intelligible principle." (IDD, 150)

After much excuse making Billy ultimately rejects the offer of the implant, along with the commercial package that might accompany the procedure – "Lecture tours, talk shows, a quickie biography, T-shirts, funny buttons" (RS, 247) – and therefore manages to escape both a complete cyborg makeover and absolute commodification. However, the idea of the 'Anti-Oedipal' is given another twist in the novel in a more overt sense, one that relates to Billy's own sexuality.

At the end of the novel in a way Billy aligns himself with the 'Scream Lady' in his response to the eclipse - a "series of involuntary shrieks" that is as much a celebration of a coming of age and sexual maturity as it is a rejection of the transcendent interpretation of science. Indeed, *Ratner's Star* can be read as a bizarre 'rites of passage' novel exploring the crossing of the thresholds of sexual development and their connections with language. At the beginning of the book Billy is both anxious and curious about his own and others sexuality; concerned by the 'nameless things' that people do to one another and yet desperate to try this most intimate form of communication for himself. For example, upon meeting an attractive Zoologist, Rahda Hamadryad, Billy uses his privileged language/knowledge as a bargaining tool to try to experience a world far removed from his cerebral preoccupations:



"I'll talk if you let me do one small thing. I just want to touch your leg behind the knee. Nothing personal. The soft place behind the knee. In return for talk." (RS, 54)

Billy's intellectual interactions with others in the narrative seems at times to be a little like a kind of foreplay, using specialised language as a sublimation for his sexual energy. Late in the book Edna Lown proposes that language is connected with sexuality, an idea expounded by many critical theorists:

"As conjectured, it was specifically the mating calls of animals that directed early men and women toward their own variety of speech. Language thus became a communication associated with sexual activity. This connection imparted to language an erotically powerful duplicating property." (RS, 330)

In terms of childhood sexuality, (and we mustn't forget that Billy is only passing through the initial stages of puberty), there is one interesting link here to Lacanian theory. Lacan proposes that the development of language in a child begins with the prohibitive 'Law of the Father' the prevention of a child's overattachment to the mother. In the words of Lacan commentator, Anika Lemaire:

"By identifying with the father, the child receives a name and a place in the family constellation; restored to himself, he discovers that he is to be made in and by a world of Culture, language and civilization."<sup>16</sup>

In *Ratner's Star* however we can discern an inversion of the typical Oedipal categories in the name that Billy gives himself as a young child - 'mommy' - and the fact that his father is known as 'babe'. His mother, one could argue, might therefore be instituted as the father figure, not a ridiculous conclusion if we examine the few passages in which she features. Take for instance Billy's reaction to his mother's musical 'childspeak':

"Billy at four still thought of himself as something that would never be altered. "Small boy." He did not yet perceive the special kinship between humans of different sizes and failed to realize he was destined for other categories...Some years later, sitting in the bathtub, he would bounce in prepubescent rage on the smooth porcelain as his mother's head appeared in the doorway. "Is you is or is you ain't my baby?" "Drop dead please." (RS, 74)

With the move from the oceanic child (Freud) to the child realising the symbolic nature of the world (Lacan) comes linguistic experimentation - the beginnings of

language development and the recognition of a world split by opposition. Mimsy Mope Grimmer outlines for Billy the difficulties associated with entering this phase:

“You’re already past your prime, sexually speaking. The golden age is early infancy. Soon after this the corruption of the erotic instinct takes place. In a very short time everything falls apart. The solidarity of opposites is completely shattered. Before you’ve learned to put two words together, you are mired in an existence full of essential dichotomies.” (RS, 35)

Billy, compared to most children, enters this phase rather late, at least in terms of physically verbalising the words. His experimentation is internal rather than external: using language as thought, a way of talking to himself, a sort of protoschizophrenic dialogue:

“He didn’t talk until he was past the age of three...His mind knew words. He spoke with his mind and to his mind. To and with his mind. In time he will speak to his mouth with his mind and then from his mouth to the room and the people in the room.” (RS, 69)

As if providing a fictional basis to Derrida’s work on the differences between writing and speech - contesting Husserl’s phenomenological subordination of the former to the latter - Billy ‘retains’ his linguistic ability to ‘write’, not needing to assert his presence through speech. Strangely, the first thing Billy’s father wants Billy to communicate to him when he shares his competence with others is his response to the world of the subways:

““Soon as he talks I’m taking him into the subways,” Babe said. “I’m taking him down into the tunnels. I’m anxious to show him what the tunnels are like. But not until he talks. I want to hear his reaction.”” (RS, 69)

Endor, whose hole in the ground Billy heads for at the end of the book, has a different view of expressing his relationship to the underworld however. Words cannot express the process of digging in the dirt. For Endor, regression to the primitive is the key:

“I never claw without uttering sound. Otherwise what’s it all for? Never underestimate the value of clawing. But never simply claw. As you claw, utter whatever sound seem appropriate. Nonverbal sounds work best, I find.” (RS, 90)

Possibly the most interesting comments on language in its childhood forms are made by Edna Lown, a member of the Logicon Project. The second half of the book sees her

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grapple with the purposes and roots of language in a complex, alphabetised series of connected propositions. For her, babble and play-talk are held in high regard, indeed they could be the key to discovering a universal cosmic language:

“t. The codes to language contained in play-talk are the final secrets of childhood.”

“u. Is it silly to say that there is only one limit to language and that it is crossed, in the wrong direction, when the child is taught how to use words?”

“v. Does this mean that to break down language into its basic elements is to invent babbling rather than elementary propositions?”

“w. Is play-talk a form of discourse about language? That the answer is in the affirmative seems undeniable.”

“x. I’m tempted to say: babbling is metalanguage.” (RS, 365)

It appears that Edna concludes her journey of theory and reason with a logical impasse, fittingly marking the end of the alphabet: “z. What we have yet to learn how to say awaits our impossible attempt to free reality from the restrictions it must possess as long as there are humans to breed it” (RS, 392). However, in parenthesis, later in the book, the absurdity of the situation invokes a statement bearing no relation to any of the others, and marks a new beginning: “a. I’m tempted to say: give me a cookie.” As with his inversion of historical development - the advanced primitives that sent the message to space and the primitive scientists, represented by Endor in his hole - DeLillo here inverts an orthodoxy. Babble is elevated from a childish, meaningless form of communication to a metalanguage pregnant with hidden meaning – yet another form of temporal displacement in the novel.

It can be argued that the conclusion of the book coincides with the end of Billy’s ‘rites of passage’ - he has reached adulthood. Here both sexual release and intellectual enlightenment are expressed through an inarticulate vocalisation. Billy is ‘enlightened’ in both senses of the word. He is literally an illuminated figure “pedaling in a white area between the shadow bands that precede total solar eclipse” and has reached a state of epistemological nirvana - understanding the essentially oppositional structure of the world. He has recognised that if there is such a thing as an essential self it is not something that can be mediated through the conventional structures of language and consequently realises the futility of looking for a meaningful mode of communication (the ‘silence’ of the bell on his bike is a concrete metaphor for this impotence).

Billy's "zorgasm", a linguistic conflation using the subject of his abstruse theoretical work, is therefore an ejaculation of the inexpressible, the result of a strictly solo effort. He is no wiser about human sexuality, which still unnerves him, but with the help of others he now understands the "paradox of interlocking opposites" of which the world is constituted. The myth of the grand narrative having been exploded, he finds solace in laughing and shrieking.

iv) Both Billy and 'Space Brain' have at their centre a lonely place. With 'Space Brain' it's the void core. For Billy it's the space in his mind where abstract mathematics takes place. Often he tries to counter the loneliness by applying his thoughts to the real world, giving a concrete or social grounding to his hypotheses. On one occasion he tries to imagine himself entering a mathematical model, hiding inside "a page thin surface in order to measure curvature that varied from point to point" (RS, 142). On another, two men walking through the play maze are viewed as "Objects in topological space...Human members of open sets in reciprocal orbit" (RS, 114). However, after a hard session trying to solve the code, the pressure of his introversions begins to show:

"There was no way out once he was in, no genuine rest, no one to talk to who was capable of understanding the complexity (simplicity) of the problem or the approaches to a tentative solution. There came a time in every prolonged effort when he had a moment of near panic, or "terror in a lonely place," the original semantic content of that word. The lonely place was his own mind." (RS, 116/117)

Throughout the novel danger is presented to Billy in exterior space. Ironically, he finds real terror in his own mind through loneliness, the absence of logic, his overactive imagination (the fear of being dragged into Endor's hole in the ground) or merely thinking too much. After days working on the Logicon Project, Billy, like Endor, retreats to a space in which he attempts to reverse his concentration on mental processes. During the project, undertaken underground, time is measured in terms of bodily needs – waking time measured in hunger pangs and sleep time measured in 'lobsecs' (in reference to one of the characters' snore cycles.) Billy thus corresponds by allowing his body to dictate his sense of spatial comfort. Under a TV table covered by a blanket he attempts to replace pure thought with pure being – absolute awareness of himself as a "biological individual" and acute sensitivity to the body's odours and

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aches. For Billy this makes sense, and he no longer feels foolish. However, overturning the 'violent hierarchy' of thought and matter only serves to reinforce the fact that "Between himself and his idea of himself there was an area of total silence" (RS, 361) and he wonders what might happen if he could fill this space with "some aspect of that collective set of traits that enabled him to qualify as a persisting entity" (RS, 361). In other words, Billy senses that any deconstruction of the materialist/idealist dialectic of self inevitably leads to an absence of language – verbal silence equals authenticity and wholeness. In a way of course, as discussed, Billy achieves a kind of wholeness at the end of the novel as he returns to a state of pre-linguistic ecstasy, cycling between the shadow bands of an eclipse emitting purely emotive shrieks.

As we have seen in this section, and in the earlier discussion on monologism in the novel, shrieking and screaming feature strongly in *Ratner's Star* and connect with a number of human emotions ranging from the frustration of information overload to the elation of non-verbal expression. There is one character however, a Chinaman with a professional interest in prehistory, whose cries simply represent a sense of terror in exterior or 'real' space as he finds himself wedged in a cave whilst looking for archaeological evidence that will subvert the paradigm of linear evolutionary human history. The character's name is Maurice Wu and his hobby is the study of bats.

### **Echolocation, the Boomerang and Reflections of the Self**

The interrelated dimensions of time and space could not be more strongly represented in concrete form than fragments from human history embedded in geological strata. Described by Softly as having a flair for syncretistic thought – "Diametrically opposed entities partaking of each other's flesh" (RS, 313) – Maurice Wu's role in the Logicon Project is never made clear and so he amuses himself by excavating the rock strata in the caves beneath the cycloid. Having discovered through the 'potassium-argon dating' of artefacts the "revolutionary thesis" that "man's mental development" surges upwards the further back you go (a reversal of the arrow of time and dialectical development), Wu digs through layers of guano in bat caves for further material evidence to support this radical notion, believing at some point deep in the layers may be revealed a form of neoplastic. Eventually he finds a bronze circular mirror

suggestive of reverse evolution in its lack of ornamentation and a flat stone engraved with a recurring pattern reminding him of bats in flight that just happens to share the shape of Billy's stellated Twilligon, an arrowhead and a boomerang. Reflection (the mirror) and return (the boomerang) are of course both coincidentally present in the primary form of bat communication – the echo.

The echo has a strong thematic role in *Ratner's Star*. To begin with the message from the Artificial Radio Source extants (or ARSes), the underlying reason for setting up Field Experiment Number One, is ironically a communication sent from Earth millions of years ago – “One hundred and one pulses and gaps” (RS, 47) that had been transmitted into a space by Wu's highly developed past civilisation. As confirmed by Wu and his palindromic partner Walter X. Mainwaring (associated with a firm called ‘Cosmic Techniques’ who are “in the process of developing an echolocation quantifier” (RS, 364)), the message had recently been reflected back to Earth because Earth is in a mohole, or “value-dark dimension.” This ‘echo’ of an archaic signal is, as we know, deciphered by Billy as a temporal code denoting the imminent onset of an “unscheduled total eclipse of the sun” (RS, 419). DeLillo here sets up an interesting proposition that is used to aid the absurd historical symmetry running through the book and, as a recurrent theme of circularity and return, is complemented by the constant use of the ‘boomerang’ as a pictorial and literary metaphor. However, beyond the obvious connections with time and space in the novel, the echo can also be related to language theory and subjectivity.

Professor Jeremy Hawthorn defines echolalia as, “a term intended to convey the ceaseless echoing back and forth between signs whose significance is determined only relationally and not by any over-riding presence or fixed authority.”<sup>17</sup> Echolalia can therefore be read as an expression emphasising the arbitrariness of signification - the jumping between floating signifiers without recourse to a stable referent, much like Derrida's concept of trace, where in every sign there exists a trace of other words that sign has excluded in order to be itself as well as a trace of the ones that have gone before. If, as poststructuralists such as Frederic Jameson argue, language can be understood as a ‘prison-house’ - self-referential and enclosed - words can only be understood as merely echoes of one another, unrelated to experience and the world.

Drawing on the ideas discussed in the first section of this chapter, if we are to take the connotative meaning of the echo as 'returned communication in an isolating, enclosed space,' DeLillo's metaphor may be understood ontologically – human speakers, constrained in language, are communicating only with themselves. Meaning becomes a restless echo of referral to other meanings. Such self-reflexivity is generally recognised to be a primary concern of postmodern writers.

Acutely aware of an ironic parallel however, DeLillo presents us with a wonderful paradox in the form of the bat. Echolocation can of course be interpreted as both a form of communication and a reciprocal guidance system - a signal, or high pitched shriek is transmitted, 'received' by the 'other,' and reflected back. This is a form of communication interpreting the world with a high degree of specificity. The bat communicates with the 'other' and the position and size of the 'other' determine the nature of the returning communication. The 'other' is a passive communicator, the bat an active one - an 'echo' of the human development of the self, the need for reflection? Although non-linguistic, and non-human, echolocation could be interpreted as a form of communication that more than any other, comes close to unifying the signifier and signified. Is it any wonder that guano, or bat excrement, is the most valuable product to leave the cycloid?

For Maurice Wu, whose liking for syncretism leads him to muse upon latent histories, guano mining may be classed as one of a series of "Lost historic categories. Appearing neither in patterns nor as radioactive flashes" (RS, 387). As if quoting from a copy of Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*, Wu uses archaeology itself as a metaphor for differentiating between those events which fall through the excavator's sieve and the historical occurrences which remain "as elements in a definite pattern" (RS, 387), recognising that "latent in any period's estimation of itself as an age of reason is the specific history of the insane" (RS, 387) - (insanity and reason are of course placed in a coterminous foreground in *Ratner's Star*, with insanity seeming to win through in the end). Importantly, having experienced the terror of being wedged in space, it is through the "living madness" devoid of "special pattern" that Wu returns from his work in the bat cave, laughing at the "incredible storm roar of wings" around him: "the sense of an insane life rising out of what had been only moments earlier a set of

limestone surfaces” (RS, 395) a clear living metaphor for the multitudinous dimensions of history, the absence of a single discernible trajectory. Any connection with Walter Benjamin’s well-known allegory on the experience of modernity – the angel of history- is probably coincidental here but worth considering:

“His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling ruin upon ruin and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.”<sup>18</sup>

Scientific progress means little however if science cannot anticipate the behaviour of the material world. Strengthening the idea that the arrow of time has not only been blunted but reversed in *Ratner's Star*, at the end of the novel the scientists are in a way exposed as less developed than the ancient civilisation in their inability to predict the eclipse – scientific rationality has failed to gain mastery over the physical and social environment and, like primitives, they turn to the realm of magic, in particular the skills of a woman ‘shadow prophet’ to understand the phenomenon. Interestingly, before the prophet ‘performs’ Wu makes a gift of the ancient mirror he found in the strata to Softly, the leader of the project, but is warned that Softly hates mirrors and covers them up. We may read his rejection of reflection as indicative not only of his disgust for his own bodily form but also an inability to visualise asequential development and latent histories: an inability not shared by Cyril Kyriakos, an expert on transitional logic, who early in the novel argues that our view of the distant past “needs adjusting” and that the definition of the word ‘science’ may have to incorporate “obscure ritual and superstition.” For him, the past “continues to live not only in remote cultural pockets but more and more in the midst of our supercivilized urban centers” (RS, 36).

Nicky Perry, in a study of hyperreality and culture, connects Benjamin’s angel of history with Lewis Carroll’s titular heroine Alice, one of the inspirations for *Ratner's Star*, but suggests that where the angel is looking back at the ruins of modernity Alice is “introduced as a novitiate stranded at the post – and seemingly bereft of stable (self) representations(s).”<sup>19</sup> For Perry, Alice is disorientated by the new territory she finds

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herself in because she fails to understand “the (fictional, post/modern) world(s) in which representations are powerfully constitutive of material reality.”<sup>20</sup> Billy Twillig looks back through mathematical history, employing its changing methodologies in his bid to solve the star code, and, one could argue, has a firm grasp of the implications of modernity. However, it is only when he steps outside of history that things make sense - temporal stasis and not movement being the key to his new found wisdom. At one point in the novel, Shirl Trumpy, ‘Space Brain’s’ programmer, poses Billy a rhetorical question – “How can we learn from the past unless we repeat it? (RS, 64). The catalyst for Billy’s change is not a repetition of process, standing on the shoulders of others, but a new direction in thought, and this is engendered by a visit to Endor’s room.

### **Dreamtime in Endor’s Room**

“In the [aboriginal] dreamtime there is no separation between man and land...People wail at the places of their dreaming... Time is pure” (RS, 104)

DeLillo has said that abstract spatial analysis is “...a way to take psychology out of a character's mind and in to the room he occupies. I try to examine psychological states by looking at people in rooms, objects in rooms. It's a way of saying we can know something important about a character by the way he sees himself in relation to objects.” (ACH, 89). The episode in Endor’s room is a clear demonstration of this process.

Described by Endor as a room “in and of time” that would shelter Billy from “inevitable terror” (RS, 92), Endor’s room is in stark contrast to how Billy imagined it might look, with Endor’s “cluttered effects” generating “a sort of emotional warmth” (RS, 379). Like Billy’s canister and Taft Robinson’s room in *Endzone* (which incidentally has two clocks that correct one another, achieving a balance or “notion of how much space has to be reconstructed”)<sup>21</sup> with Endor’s room significance lies not in a quantity of status-connected objects but rather a few well chosen and, on first glance, unimportant pieces that seem to give the room an equilibrium and sense of spatial and psychological rationality and purpose: “a single light bulb, unshaded”; “a rocking chair, plain in appearance”, and a “Coca-Cola wall clock” (RS, 380). Endor suggested that the room might offer Billy a kind of “psychological security” and one could argue that this is offered by promoting or inspiring a form of cognitive mapping. For

instance Billy realises that the rocking chair has been provided to allow him to think and yet not be bored – the spatial movement is important here, the “fluid viewpoint produced by this rhythmic motion” (RS, 384). He also recognises why an analogue clock was chosen over a digital one – “Digital clocks took the “space” out of time” (RS, 384). For Billy: “There was something about the near bareness and the relative placement of the objects violating this bareness that made him feel the “inexpressiveness” of the room had been designed in highly precise terms... The more bare an area, it would appear, the deeper we see” (RS, 384). After a period of intense rocking in which he enjoys the illusion that “the room was gradually emptying itself of exhausted thought” (RS, 389) Billy eventually realises that the hands on the stopped clock correspond to the numbers in the star code and that something momentous is to happen at that time. However, the fact that space and time make sense in Endor’s room and that the answer was staring him in the face leads Billy to the conclusion that Endor must have known the answer all along and that he’d “interpreted the answer in a negative sense” (RS, 386).

### ***Ratner’s Star* as ‘Soft Machine’**

On his travels early in the novel Billy comes across a character called Siba Isten-Esru, an expert on deconstructing names, segmenting them “until nothing remains”, who feels it may be Billy’s destiny because of the component etymology of his surname “to bind together two distinct entities... To join the unjoinable” (RS, 155). But what, in the end, does Billy join? Upon relating his discovery in Endor’s room to the other scientists it becomes apparent that his intellectual accomplishment is pointless and that all his efforts have been in vain. In the words of Robert Hopper Softly, the results of Billy’s work belong to “a category of nonaccomplishment existing beyond total and contemptible failure” (RS, 416). One might argue however that outside of the narrative Billy does accomplish a union of another sort, a binding of character and reader – DeLillo’s intention all along. With *Ratner’s Star* both the reader and the protagonist experience spatial and temporal estrangement, alienated by the environment they have entered. By the end of the novel Billy yearns for the ‘psychological security’ that Endor promised his room would offer, imagining it to be, “A drawing room that provided to those who entered a sense of contentment, serenity, joy, well-being and comfort” (RS, 380), while the reader too hankers after a sort of comfort - the comfort

of well-rounded characters in recognisable spaces – literary humanism, mimesis and psychological realism. As LeClair recognises, *Ratner's Star* “resists consumption by the reader” (ITL, 136), while the simple clash of the first person chapter headings (e.g. ‘I make an entrance’) and third person narration in the second half of the novel, ‘Reflections’, are indicative markers of Billy’s existential division of self. And yet it is through reflection, absorbing new dimensions in psychological time and space, that ultimately, both the protagonist and, if the book achieves its aim, the reader, achieve a kind of cognitive mapping, not directly through the ‘adventure’ of the novel, the experience of extreme spatio-temporal disruption in doing and reading.

Fredric Jameson has said that the form of Raymond Chandler’s books “...reflects an initial American separation of people from each other, their need to be linked by some external force (in this case the detective) if they are ever to be fitted together as parts of the same picture puzzle. And this separation is projected out onto space itself...”<sup>22</sup> The detective is the binding agent of the work and the “landscape...is as much a social and psychological space as a physical one” (TI, 130). For Brian McHale the detective story is a non-canonised sister genre of the epistemologically focused modernist works. Science-fiction on the other hand, he argues, “is governed by the ontological dominant”<sup>23</sup> - an emphasis on being rather than knowing. Darko Suvin defines science-fiction as “literature of cognitive estrangement”, meaning it operates through a process of ontological defamiliarization, emphasising “representational discontinuities” or “the projection of a network of innovations, with their implications and consequences” (PF, 59), in the structure of the represented world and, in doing so, confronting the *known* world in a cognitive way. To simplify, in McHale’s words:

“Science fiction, by staging “close encounters” between different worlds, placing them in confrontation, foregrounds their respective structures and the disparities between them.” (PF, 60)

Scott Bukatman in *Terminal Space* argues that the seminal postmodern cyberpunk movie, *Blade Runner*, a conflation of science-fiction and the detective story, like the work of Chandler “...estranges and grounds the reader by emphasizing the reality of alienation” while maintaining a sense of cognitive mapping - that the “experience of spatial separation is, in fact, the true experience of the work” (TI, 143). The problem is that where Chandler’s alienation is contained in spaces of known dimensions the

coming of virtual or cyberspace radically extends and concentrates separation and makes representation difficult. Cyberpunk attempts such a representation: novels such as Gibson's *Neuromancer* articulating the insertion of human into machine. It is clear that, although not in its strictest sense a cyberpunk text, *Ratner's Star* shares some of the genre's tropes as well as this oscillation between epistemological and ontological dominance, foregrounding both the confrontations between known and constructed worlds and reflections upon existence within each dimension. In Bukatman's words, "If Gibson borrows from Burroughs and Pynchon, then Kathy Acker and Don DeLillo are poised to reappropriate that appropriation" (TI, 167). For McHale the poetics of science-fiction and postmodernism converge in cyberpunk. However, one could argue that published in 1976, at least five years prior to the flourishing of cyberpunk fiction, the novel anticipates, and in many ways goes beyond, the obvious narratives offered by writers such as Gibson. There is no disputing that for its time *Ratner's Star* was unique: a paradoxical anti-mimetic bricolage of simulated talk, revised and real history and spatial/temporal distortions, the novel is a subtle, sophisticated and ambitious undertaking that radically attempts to redraw the mind map of the reader. Moreover, one could argue with just cause that DeLillo has attempted to move beyond representation with this novel and forge a new connection between the work and its consuming audience.

For Bukatman, "an explanation for the relative paucity of virtual reality fictions lies in the fact that narrative *already* functions to construct an enveloping, simulated existence" (TI, 194):

"The virtual reality of narrative can...operate as a real interface between human and technologized culture, revealing or providing a continuity between subject and machine...In the hands of many writers, the text becomes a machine itself, or a machine-product...These automatic texts are not indicative of the writer's unconscious, but rather of their own cybernetic origins." (TI, 194/195).

Can *Ratner's Star* be understood in these terms? Is a text that is, by its writer's admission, all structure and system, a soft-machine producing a kind of cyberspace filled with abstractions: constructed or virtual characters and spaces? We as readers, in entering the novel, therefore experience the dislocation of the protagonist - a 'rounded' person with a personal history. Is it this identification of the human in the machine that produces a recognition of the changing dimensions of our own ontology - a form of

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cognitive mapping? In an interview with Tom LeClair, DeLillo enigmatically states that he offers the novel as a “new map of the world” (ACH, 80) later interpreted by LeClair as suggestive of the novel’s cartographic ‘imitation of a globe’ in its “deformation, squeezing here and ballooning there” (ITL, 123). But this is a new world with new dimensions outside of conventional mapmaking. Alice, in her journey to Wonderland, wonders, without knowledge of the definitions of the terms, what latitude and longitude she has got to. An Alice for the late twentieth century, Billy Twillig, like Donna Haraway’s cyborg is, in his experiences of the postmodern world, representative of the disorientating transition from “the comfortable old hierarchical dominations to the scary new networks” Haraway calls “the informatics of domination” (CM, 281). Finding a definition of self and a sense of time and space in such a world does not come easily. Haraway suggests that “The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world” (CM, 273). *Ratner’s Star* would seem to push the thesis further, suggesting that the world may not only be post-gender (anti-Oedipus) but post-historical too further complicating the matter. We as readers, like Billy, require a cognitive map of the territory if we are to decide whether to submit or scream. *Ratner’s Star*, possibly the first in a burgeoning postmodern chronotopic genre of cognitive (re)orientation, ironically adopting forms of the past to subvert history, could represent such a map.

## Conclusion – Filling the Spaces with Laughter

“Laughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically...In the comic world there is nothing for memory and tradition to do.” (Bakhtin, DI, 23)

“This interval of whiteness, suggestive of the space between perfectly ruled lines, prompted him to ring the metal bell. It made no sound, or none that he could hear, laughing as he was, alternately blank and shadow-banded, producing as he was this noise resembling laughter, expressing vocally what appeared to be a compelling emotion, crying out as he was, gasping into the stillness, emitting as he was this series of involuntary shrieks, particles bouncing in the air around him, the reproductive dust of existence.” (RS, 438)

What finally must we make of this curious piece of fiction – a work that holds the reader at arms length for much of the time, refusing conventional engagement with many of its characters, reconfiguring accepted notions of time and space and calling into question the structure of not only human language systems but the very scientific truths that govern our lives? Like Billy Twillig at the end of the novel, the reader seems poised on a fine line between light and darkness: on the one side understanding and enlightenment and on the other bafflement and alienation. Must we really believe that puzzlement is the state he wishes to leave us in as we close the book and walk away? In an interview in 1979 DeLillo admitted, “It’s hard to correspond to reality, to talk sensibly about an idea or a theme that originates in a writer’s desire to restructure reality” (ACH, 80). The difficulty with plans as ambitious as this is that the novel can appear to parody the parody – ending up a laughable obfuscation of its own underlying plan. Although the following passage taken from comments by Jean Sweet Venables, a member of the Logicon project, is a comic aside directed at theoreticians who strive to prevent interpretation, it highlights the dangers faced by writers striving to provide such a ‘restructuring’:

“There’s a whole class of writers who don’t want their books to be read...To express what is expressible isn’t why you write if you’re in this class of writers. To be understood is faintly embarrassing...If you’re in this class, what you have to do is either not publish or make absolutely sure your work leaves readers strewn along the margins.” (RS, 411)

Of course the main difficulty readers seem to have with *Ratner’s Star* is the question of whether or not they should try to keep up with the circuits, loops and inversions

DeLillo builds into his presented history of mathematics and logic. Should one, as DeLillo did in preparing for the novel, immerse oneself in the work of Wittgenstein, Godel and Pythagoras to get the most out of the text and recognise in detail what aspects of human reason are under scrutiny? For a reviewer in *The Washington Post* such prior learning is unnecessary as the “areas of knowledge central to *Ratner’s Star*” are developed in a way that allows “the expert [to] wallow while even the layman can splash happily in the shallows.”<sup>24</sup> Is this what DeLillo was hoping to achieve? Exactly what level of commitment does DeLillo expect from his reader? The following lengthy response by the writer to a posed connection between the above passage and the novel is illuminating:

“There’s an element of contempt for meanings. You want to write outside the usual framework. You want to dare readers to make a commitment you know they can’t make. That’s part of it. There’s also the sense of drowning in information and in the mass awareness of things. Everybody seems to know everything. Subjects surface and are totally exhausted in a matter of days or weeks, totally played out by the publishing industry and the broadcast industry. Nothing is too arcane to escape the treatment, the process. Making things difficult for the reader is less an attack on the reader than it is on the age and its facile knowledge-market. The writer is driven by his conviction that some truths aren’t arrived at so easily, that life is 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.” (ACH, 87)

So what is the reward the novel offers to those who do stick with it, managing to commit themselves to four hundred and thirty eight pages of technomathematical esoterica set in a far from ‘wonder’ land where ideas, if not matter, are both created *and* destroyed? As we have seen, the novel can offer a kind of cognitive mapping, allowing us to reprocess the dimensions of the postmodern territories we inhabit and metacognitively reflect upon our own interpretations of the semiotic systems that have come to define us. This of course offers us a route of resistance, a chance for us to decide if this is what we want. In this, if nothing else, the novel is political, placing us alongside its writer in the margins or Billy between the shadow bands. It is a strategy that has served DeLillo well and one that defines what he does:

“The writer is the man or woman who automatically takes a stance against his or her government. There are so many temptations for American writers to become part of the system and part of the structure that now, more than ever, we have to resist.”<sup>25</sup>

As a corollary of this resistance we may reassess our ideas of history and perceive how our (meta)narratives of progress often confuse, discriminate and omit in the name of order and the teleological end point – the enduring myth of the purpose behind catastrophe. In DeLillo’s words:

“I think fiction rescues history from its confusions. It can do this in the somewhat superficial way of filling in blank spaces. But it also can operate in a deeper way: providing the balance and rhythm we don’t experience in our daily lives, in our real lives. So the novel which is within history can also operate outside it – correcting, clearing up and, perhaps most important of all, finding rhythms and symmetries that we simply don’t encounter elsewhere.” (IDD, 56)

But maybe the real reward is none of the above. Maybe the importance of the novel rests in the sense of mystery it ascribes throughout to simple natural phenomena and behaviour, the way the world seems to hold back truths and constantly surprises us just when we think everything has been neatly explained. A little chaos and madness might actually be good for us and we should laugh as we face the inexpressible or stare into the abyss. Bakhtin tells us, in an examination of the ‘carnival’ in serio-comic genres, that “one ridicules in order to forget” and that “laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object...making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it” (DI,23). Socrates, the central hero of one of the earliest serio-comic genres, the Socratic dialogue, was often represented “wearing the popular mask of a bewildered fool” (DI, 24) in direct contrast to his “image of a wise man of the most elevated sort” (DI, 24). This contrast, suggests Bakhtin, is a form of “ambivalent self-praise” – “I am wiser than everyone, because I know that I know nothing” (DI, 24). We recall that at the end of the first section of *Ratner’s Star* - ‘Adventures’ – the final image is of the wisest mathematician in the cycloid, Billy Twillig, wearing a false moustache. In short, in Bakhtinian terms, *Ratner’s Star* removes the ‘epic distance’ from science and mathematics – compressing time and space in a looping subversion of its linear history – and therefore uncrowns or delegitimizes a privileged discourse, “the removal of an object from the distanced plane” (DI, 23) in order to dismember it or to turn it into a ‘dead



object'. As if on cue, at the end of the novel, Lester Bolin, part of the Logicon team, asks the question "Is science dead?" (RS, 420) to which he receives no reply. Softly's final rush to Endor's hole in the ground however seems to offer a resounding 'yes'.

Tom LeClair suggests that *Ratner's Star* itself is a 'mystery,' defiantly resisting, "consumption by the reader." Drawing upon the work of Roland Barthes, one could interpret the Zorgasm at the novel's conclusion as a reference to the *jouissance* of the reader who has made it, who has reached the end of his/her own journey through the text and after all that understood that there is nothing to understand, that all any of us can take as written is the certainty of birth and death – "the reproductive dust of existence." In the face of the 'paradox' and 'comedy' of 'interlocking opposites' laughing is the rational, the logical, the enlightened thing to do, removing fear, and, as Bakhtin says, allowing us to "approach the world realistically."

## Chapter Four

# Mystical Twins: Waste and Warfare in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*

"The ultimate bomb, the one no one talks about, would be the one which, not content simply to disperse things in space, would disperse them in time...When it explodes everything is thrown back into the past and, the more powerful the bomb, the further back it is thrown. Or better still, when it explodes some fragments are thrown into the past, others into the future."<sup>1</sup>

This characteristically enigmatic statement from Jean Baudrillard, taken from his philosophical travelogue *Cool Memories*, serves as a useful introduction to *Underworld* (1997), the gloriously massive masterwork of Don DeLillo. *Underworld* is in a sense an investigation of the fragments left behind following a few explosive events, time bombs if you will, that helped to define Cold War America - a journey through contemporary history and through the minds of figures growing up with the threat of annihilation and a rapidly changing society. In the words of the author:

"In those years we lived through two levels of danger. The possibility of a nuclear exchange between the United States and the Soviet Union. And the psychological sense of randomness and ambiguity that flowed from the assassinations and social disruptions of the 1960s."<sup>2</sup>

Since its publication at the end of 1997 *Underworld* has received both critical and public acclaim and DeLillo, for only the second time in his career (*Libra* being the first), has found himself topping the bestseller lists. An eight hundred and twenty seven page great white whale of a novel, as some might have us believe, *Underworld* is being hailed as a triumph of American writing, a literary monument to symbolize the end of the cold war and herald the beginning of a new millennium of peace: an everlasting détente unified by the cross border fiberoptic tentacles of the internet. However, as this chapter will attempt to outline, *Underworld* is much more than the sum of its many fragments, the broken pieces of a society searching for some kind of meaning as the shadow of the bomb slowly concedes to the light.

DeLillo has stated that the inspiration for writing *Underworld* came in the form of a 1951 newspaper front page that seemed to unconsciously compare a historic home run

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in a baseball game between the New York Giants and Brooklyn Dodgers with Russian nuclear weapons testing, both in their own way 'shots heard around the world.' J. Edgar Hoover, whom DeLillo later discovered had attended the baseball game, is depicted in the prologue to the novel musing upon the ramifications of the Soviet test while looking at a reproduction of a Breugel painting - *The Triumph of Death* - that had floated down to him from the stands along with other paper waste ejected by a celebrating crowd. This carefully drawn scene sets the reader on a narrative course where waste and weapons are consistently linked, a 'curious connection' lying beneath the surface of a society where, indeed, most of the truly important events seem to impact below the passage of daily routine and outward appearance.

In one sense DeLillo constructs the novel as a subtle bricolage of characters and events, using historical and fictional scraps to build the narrative. At the same time, expanding a similar focus in an earlier novel, *White Noise*, he uses waste and the global nuclear programme as motifs in an erudite critique of a counter-history of environmental misuse and questions the curious relationship between the product and the by-product in postmodern America. As this chapter will show, where environmental crisis in *White Noise* features, as one reviewer argues, as merely a subject through which the representational elements of a postmodern society may be refracted and thus interrogated, in *Underworld* the subject itself is scrutinized: the "dark underside" of consumerism examined from every angle, and what Cynthia Deitering labels as "toxic consciousness", or recognition and definition of the self in the configuration of garbage, taken to its logical end point.<sup>3</sup>

Like the other sections of the thesis, the argument will draw upon the work of theorists and critics whose ideas seem to illuminate DeLillo's underlying concerns and fit the drive of the chapter – in this case an environmental reading of *Underworld*. As such, much of the chapter will be dedicated to the burgeoning field of ecocriticism; with particular emphasis on how contemporary aesthetic practice can counter what many view to be a culturally induced environmental crisis. For instance, Richard Kerridge in his introduction to *Writing the Environment*, one of the first literature focused academic anthologies to provide a connection between environmental and critical theory, argues that the environmentally concerned writer should "dramatize the

occurrence of large events in individual lives...make contact between the public and the personal” in order to politicize the work of art.<sup>4</sup> There is certainly a strong sense that DeLillo has provided *Underworld* with a design that foregrounds the subjection of the individual to global forces, particularly the human suffering experienced in locales forgotten in the quest for capital growth or nuclear armament – areas given over to the dumping of waste or bomb testing. However, as with his other novels, he resists the tendentiousness of directing blame for social conditions or tragedies, preferring to examine the forces and their impacts rather than pillory those nations, groups or individuals who uphold or employ destructive strategies. His interest is in the mysterious undercurrents: the structures, codes and unspoken connections that lie beneath ‘the political’ that are the true causes of environmental crisis – commodification, a post-enlightenment scientific arrogance and the ‘media event’ – although surprisingly, as the chapter will show, DeLillo is ambivalent towards what one might feel could be the principal target for an ‘environmentally focused’ attack: technology or the dominance of the machine. There was certainly an element of this attack in *White Noise* – “technology reducing nature to a postmodern simulacrum”<sup>5</sup> – and one might have thought the attack would intensify as he turned his attention from a relatively innocuous toxic cloud to radioactive fallout. Instead, at times in *Underworld*, shying away from depicting the kind of alienation experienced by Jack Gladney in *White Noise*, he decides instead to adopt a Haraway like optimism about technology’s potential to liberate the self – cyberspace offered as a kind of living with(in) the enemy. The implicit argument seems to be that by reevaluating, appropriating and applying technology against itself, in the form of the internet, all conflict will be “programmed out”<sup>6</sup> as one form of excess (nuclear waste) is replaced by another, more benign form (the information explosion). Beginning with a close reading of how waste and warfare features in the novel, and expanding into an ecocritically informed discussion of authorial intention, particularly where technoscience is concerned, the aim is to profile the advances and failings of DeLillo’s green aesthetic.

### **The Scraps of History – Nick and Klara**

From beginning to end *Underworld* is, excuse the pun, littered with references to garbage and waste. From the rapidly distending Fresh Kills site on New York’s Staten Island to tiny pockets of domestic waste, products used and discarded form a

continuous visual and figurative backdrop to the narrative. The novel begins with a baseball game in 1951, and it is the trajectory of the baseball used in the game along with the personal history of its eventual owner and the novel's central character, Nick Shay, that gives the book its fitting narrative spine. The baseball, struck into the crowd for the winning home run by Bobby Thomson to give the Giants the pennant, is described as being "a deep sepia, veneered with dirt and turf and generational sweat...old, bunged up...bashed and tobacco-juiced...weather-spattered and characterized as a seafront house" (UW, 131): an age-worn item eventually purchased by Nick decades later for thirty-four thousand five hundred dollars. However, Nick's justification for purchasing the ball escapes the typical code of the commodity - status, investment, desire of the visual. Nick connects the ball with the 'mystery of loss', the ball 'commemorates failure' (UW, 97) - and when the reader learns of his bookie father's disappearance our own connection is made. A used, battered piece of leather is taken out of the realm of the uniform, of mechanical reproduction, and into the realm of aura and nostalgia: the unique and unrepeatable moment, a representation of "youth, solidarity and spirit."<sup>7</sup>

Before long the reader realises that waste, in both the material forms in his daily working life and the temporal sense - of time misspent and opportunities passed by - defines Nick's life. For instance, his job is a sort of "executive emeritus" at a Phoenix based waste disposal company with an "Inside track to the future. The Future of Waste" (UW, 282). In Nick's words:

"My firm was involved with waste. We were waste handlers, waste traders, cosmologists of waste... We were waste managers, waste giants, we processed universal waste..." (UW, 88)

Situated in a bronze tower described as resembling a "geometric turd" (UW, 163), Waste Containment or Whiz Co. as they are also known, are involved with waste on a global scale. However, their idea of a 'containment policy' works in ironic contrast to the Cold War US geopolitical policy of the same name. Rumours abound about one of their container ships circling the globe looking for an impoverished nation to accept its possibly dangerous cargo. In the words of Sims, one of its employees:

"A country will take a fee amounting to four times its gross national product to

accept a shipment of toxic waste. What happens after that? We don't want to know" (UW, 278).

Sailing from port to port for almost two years, rejected by even the LDCs ("less developed country in the language of banks and other global entities" (UW, 278)), and with a regular name change to disguise its movements, the ship gives rise to folk tales and paranoid conjecture about the actual nature of its contents – the dominant myth being it contains a different kind of waste in the form of class A narcotics. In Nick's words:

"One, it's a heroin shipment, which makes no sense...Two it's incinerator ash from the New York area. Industrial grade mainly. Twenty million pounds. Arsenic, copper, lead, mercury...Enormous quantities of heroin, I hear." (UW, 279)

Making the obvious connection between drugs and organised crime, Shay and Sims even consider the possibility that the vessel is mob-owned, extrapolating that as a consequence they both work for the Mafia. Despite their claims that they are "responsible men" (UW, 335) it is a thought that causes them little personal distress:

"But we like our jobs, don't we, Nick? Whoever owns the ships we use." (UW, 281)

However, as part of his foregrounding of the connectivity of events, DeLillo does present his protagonist with a form of suffering that seems to mock his insouciant reaction to the chance that he is playing a part, no matter how unwitting, in a conspiracy. As we learn later in the novel, Nick's wife is using heroin in the presence of the man with whom she is having an affair, his best friend from the company, Brian Glassic.

Paradoxically, at home Nick is a little more conscientious about waste and its disposal. Indeed, the global concerns of his vocation that often go unheeded often spill over into his domestic life, where they are taken far more seriously: recycling takes on a kind of religious significance - a moral obligation reinforced through a mnemonic litany that figures as a ritualistic motif in the narrative:

"We separate our household waste according to the guidelines. We rinse out the used cans and empty bottles and put them in their respective bins. We do

tin versus aluminium. We use a paper bag for the paper bags, pressing the smaller bags flat and fitting them into the large bag that we've set aside for the purpose. We bundle the newspapers but do not tie them in twine" (UW, 803/804).

Acutely aware of the currency of environmental policy, Nick recognizes that "people look at their garbage differently now, seeing every bottle and crushed carton in a planetary context" (UW, 88). Consequently, a recycling plant near his home takes on an almost spiritual significance, a place to take his granddaughter to watch a reversal of the alimentary process - the waste product reborn as commodity "alight with a kind of brave aging" (UW, 809). As is often the case, it is hard to gauge whether DeLillo has taken an ironic position here. Indications in the text that the domestic ritual may be perpetuating and not checking the capitalist system are manifold. For instance the subject of waste as commodity seems to impinge on the less quotidian areas of his characters' lives. On exploring a nice new restaurant Sims finds himself, "Looking at scraps of food on people's plates" (UW, 283), and is concerned by the fact that the restaurant cage their garbage so the derelicts don't steal it. Without wishing to ascribe authorial intention where none may exist there does seem to be, in DeLillo's representations of waste as commodity, an allegiance with the thought of Timothy Luke, a political scientist whose study of the discourses of ecocriticism, *Ecocritique*, reassesses the value of recycling. Luke argues that the unanticipated implication of what he identifies as a particularly North American kind of activism is that such behaviour "reaffirm[s] tenets of consumption rather than conservation"<sup>8</sup> – a pattern he terms as the 'ruse' of recycling:

"In the ruse of recycling, green consumerism, rather than leading to the elimination of massive consumption and material waste, appears instead only to be revalorizing the basic premises of material consumption and massive waste. By providing the symbolic and substantive means to rationalize resource use and cloak consumerism in the appearance of ecological activism, the cult of recycling as well as the call of saving the earth are not liberating nature from technological exploitation. On the contrary, they simply are providing a spate of rolling reprieves that cushion, but do not end, the destructive blows of an economy and culture that thrive on transforming the organic order of nature into the inorganic anarchy of capital."<sup>9</sup>

Nick's former lover, Klara Sax, recycles waste on a grander scale and with different motivations, attempting to absorb and reprocess the inorganic through nature and art – a mirroring of the domestic 'ruse' but as a continuation of the twentieth century's

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cultural heritage of aestheticizing found objects. For her recycling means spray painting decommissioned B52 bombers in the desert: in her words, an “Art project not a peace project...a landscape painting in which we use the landscape itself” (UW, 70). Visiting Klara on the desert site after decades of silence Nick himself arrives bright with brave aging, the rough edges of his Bronx childhood having been smoothed out by exercise, education and a purposeful life: a man reborn out of the junked lots of a wasted youth. However, it soon becomes clear, as Klara expounds her rationale for the project in an interview for French television, that unlike Nick’s form of recycling, based on the perpetuation of the commodity, her method of dealing with waste material is an attempt to step outside of the circular system in order to get at “the ordinary life behind the thing” (UW, 77) – in her words:

“See, we’re painting, hand-painting in some cases, putting our puny hands to great weapons systems, to systems that came out of the factories and assembly halls as near alike as possible, millions of components stamped out, repeated endlessly, and we’re trying to unrepeat, to find an element of felt life...” (UW, 77)

It is a project that Nick can identify with, a human simulacrum of middle class America, living a “quiet life in an unassuming house in a suburb of Phoenix...like someone in the Witness Protection Program” (UW, 66). Recycling for Nick, like all the other rituals of domesticity has become just another repetitive systemic act, all too obvious, controlled and in a sense unreal. His life has not been enriched by the household effects he has collected over the years which only serve to sadden him – he feels the “odd mortality that clings to every object” (UW, 804). Nick’s secret wish is to return to the “days of disarray” when he didn’t “give a damn or a fuck or a farthing” (UW, 806):

“I long for the days of disorder. I want them back, the days when I was alive on the earth, rippling in the quick of my skin, heedless and real. This is what I long for, the breach of peace, the days of disarray when I walked real streets and did things slap-bang and felt angry and ready all the time, a danger to others and a distant mystery to myself.” (UW, 810)

The problem is, as we learn later in the novel as Nick’s personal chronology spirals backwards, that it was an incident that occurred in one of those ‘days of disarray’ that shaped Nick’s future. Possibly the most powerful connection of waste and weapons



DeLillo makes in the novel, the 'wasting' of George the Waiter with a junked shotgun in a bizarre contrived suicide allows the reader to retrospectively understand his character's relationship with discarded objects and the 'mortality' that clings to them:

““Is it loaded?” “No,” George said...Nick pulled the trigger. In the extended interval of the trigger pull, the long quarter second, with the action of the trigger sluggish and rough, Nick saw into the smile on the other man's face. Then the thing went off and the noise busted through the room and even with the chair and body flying he had the thumbmark of George's face furrowed in his mind.” (UW, 780)

### **Matt in 'The Pocket'**

Ever fond of personalizing a dialectic - contrasting characters to allow both sides of an opposition in a particular argument to be heard - DeLillo provides us with Nick's brother Matt as an occupational antithesis. Conflict and weapons are his speciality. A government scientist and former chess champion Matt is portrayed “figuring out the lurid mathematics of a nuclear accident” (UW, 401) in a secret weapons research facility in New Mexico named 'The Pocket'. In Matt's words:

“The Pocket was one of those nice tight societies that replaces the world. It was the world made personal and consistently interesting because it was what you did, and others like you, and it was self-enclosed and self-referring and you did it all together in a place and language that were inaccessible to others” (UW, 412).

Not only is the language in 'The Pocket' inaccessible to outsiders but also, despite their common goal – the development of the bomb – the specialization and isolated nature of the scientists' work means that they are unaware of how *they* fit into the system, their data connecting “at levels and geographic points far removed from the desk toil and lab projects” (UW, 401). The feeling of colluding in, and yet feeling detached from, a totalising system inevitably arouses feelings of paranoia. But where his brother is accepting of the possibility of mob rule and toxic waste being foisted on LDCs, Matt and his colleagues carry a “certain select disquiet”, not knowing how “their arrays of numbers and symbols might enter nature” (UW, 408). Consequently, feeding off of the rumours surrounding his occupation, Matt is disturbed by the “supernatural underside of the arms race” (UW, 452), and sympathises with the Downwinders, a group of people within radioactive range of a bomb test site. At one point, at a party, he even has what he terms a paranoid episode in which he feels he

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“glimpsed some horrific system of connections in which you can’t tell the difference...between a soup can and a car bomb” (UW, 446). However, despite Matt’s reservations about his job - his “doubts about the rightness of his role” (UW, 404) - and his separation from The Bombheads, scientists “awed by the inner music of bomb technology” (UW, 404), he is strangely excited by a trip he takes with Janet, his girlfriend, to a wildlife preserve that doubles as a firing range. Matt’s area of expertise is safing mechanisms. Ironically, all that his would be wife wants is to feel safe. It is on the trip, while staying in a military bunker, that Matt shares and evaluates some of the secrets and rumours that had circulated in The Pocket:

“He told her about mountains hollowed out in New Mexico. These were storage sites for nuclear weapons. He told her about the gouged mountain in Colorado where huge wall screens could display the flight track of a missile launched from a base in Siberia... They did a bomb test in the nineteen-fifties in which a hundred pigs were dressed in custom-made GI field jackets and positioned at well-spaced intervals from the blast site...Then they exploded the device. Then they examined the uniforms on the barbecued pigs to evaluate the thermal qualities of the material. Because this was the point of the test” (UW, 457/459).

The trip seems to place the stamp of reality on his involvement with the tools of destruction, allows him to question the ethics of his place in the system and the absurdity of the system itself until finally he realises why deep down he suggested the trip in the first place. Although he hasn’t seen a single Bighorn, Pronghorn or Eagle - his stated rationale for going - he understands that, “He wasn’t made for this kind of work. He wanted to leave the job but he didn’t want to do it himself. He wanted [Janet] to do it for him” (UW, 461). Janet places his accountability in context though, has “no patience with his arias of the unreal” (UW, 461):

““I don’t think you should leave your job out of conscience. Conscience works both ways,” she said. “You have duties and obligations. If you’re not willing to do this work, the next person may be less qualified”... Whatever we’re doing in secret, she’d say, they’re doing something worse” (UW, 455/461).

Despite Janet’s dissuasions, as they leave the firing range Matt seems committed to a taking a new direction in life, leaving a job he likens to a strange dream or work of sensationalist fiction. But, as if on cue, two F-4 Phantom jets roar overhead and remind him of what attracted him to the industry in the first place: “...A power and thrust snatched from nature’s own greatness, or how men bend heaven to their

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methods" (UW, 468). Ultimately, he cannot tear himself away from the "splendid mystery" (UW, 409) of his vocation.

### **Detwiler and The Misshapens**

In counterpoint to the lives of the Shay brothers coursing through the novel, DeLillo presents us with waste and weapons in a number of connected vignettes, some involving figures from history, who also present reactions to the Cold War situation. For instance there is Sister Edgar, described as a nun "who'd once lined the walls of her room with Reynold wrap as a safeguard against nuclear fallout" (UW, 245), Lenny Bruce, the controversial comedian who punctuates his extemporized topical routines with the words, "We're all gonna die!" (UW, 506) and Marvin Lundy, a baseball memorabilia collector whose bowel movements, "...Seemed to change, gradually in grim stages as he and his wife moved East through Europe (UW, 309)...The deeper into communist country, the more foul his BMs...the smell infused with geopolitics" (UW, 311/312).

However, DeLillo is possibly at his most interesting when presenting the ideas of Jesse Detwiler, a garbage archaeologist and former Garbage Guerrilla who, back in the sixties, snatched J. Edgar Hoover's garbage in a bizarre parody of FBI investigative techniques. In the words of Hoover's scaremongering assistant, Clyde:

"Confidential source says [the Guerrillas] intend to take [the] garbage on tour. Rent halls in major cities. Get lefty sociologists to analyze the garbage item by item. Get hippies to rub it on their naked bodies. More or less have sex with it. Get poets to write poems about it. And finally, in the last city on the tour, they plan to eat it...And expel it...Publicly." "Confidential source says they will make a documentary film of the tour, for general release" (UW, 558).

Indeed, at the time, so concerned is Hoover that the Guerrillas will make his waste into "public theater" that he instructs his assistants to "Put out simulated garbage. Bland bits and pieces. Unnewsworthy" (UW, 558), very much like the Bureau's method of replacing the trash they have removed from the bins of criminals. As DeLillo explains:

"When FBI agents stole off in the night with some mobster's household trash, they substituted fake garbage, to allay suspicion - aromatic food scraps, anchovy tins, used tampons prepared by the lab division. Then they took the real garbage back for analysis by forensic experts on gambling, handwriting, fragmented paper, crumpled photographs, food stains, bloodstains and every

known subclass of scribbled Sicilian" (UW, 558).

At one point the paranoid Hoover, a man who has "an air-filtration system in his house to vaporize specks of dust" (UW, 50), fears the Guerrillas may even attempt to steal his corpse - the ultimate in human waste - should he die, remove it from the lead lined coffin he has planned to "keep him safe from nuclear war, from the Ravage and Decay of radiation fallout" (UW, 578). If waste for the FBI is a weapon against organised crime, in the hands of the Garbage Guerrillas it is a way of turning the system against itself. Like Greenpeace, who've claimed the warrior metaphor for themselves, the Garbage Guerrillas have adopted the military style techniques of the opposition, and are depicted storming Truman Capote's famous Black and White Ball as part of their protest.

However, the Jesse Detwiler we meet in the contemporary passages of the novel through his connection with Nick Shay, although still wholly committed to the problem of waste, is a little less militant about his approach to the subject. He sees his new role as Garbage Archaeologist as a distinctly pedagogical pursuit. For instance, he takes students into garbage dumps to "Make them understand the civilization they live in" (UW, 287). In his view both toxic and domestic garbage should be made accessible to the public, major sites becoming ironically analogous to the 'Most Photographed Barn in America' of *White Noise*, their iconic aura arguably more powerful than any emanating radioactivity:

"Bring garbage into the open. Let people see it and respect it. Don't hide your waste facilities. Make an architecture of waste. Design gorgeous buildings to recycle waste and invite people to collect their own garbage and bring it with them to the press rams and conveyors. Get to know your garbage. And the hot stuff, the chemical waste, the nuclear waste, this becomes a remote landscape of nostalgia. Bus tours and postcards, I guarantee it" (UW, 286)

In a wonderful alternative view of history, Detwiler suggests that garbage was the stimulus for mankind's intellectual growth - waste as pre-existing aporia - that which is surplus and demands to be fitted into the equation:

"Civilization did not rise and flourish as men hammered out hunting scenes on bronze gates and whispered philosophy under the stars, with garbage as a noisome offshoot, swept away and forgotten. No, garbage rose first, inciting people to build a civilization in response, in self-defense. We had to find ways

to discard our waste, to use what we couldn't discard, to reprocess what we couldn't use. Garbage pushed back. It mounted and spread. And it forced us to develop the logic and rigor that would lead to systematic investigations of reality, to science, art, music, mathematics" (UW, 287).

Civilization in Detwiler's view is merely a "control system" built to deal with the problem of garbage. Later in *Underworld*, Albert Bronzini, maths teacher and chess mentor to Matt Shay, tells his class about the ancient Mayan people who unlike most other early civilised societies:

"...Did not bury their dead with gleaming jewelry and other valuable objects. They used old broken things. They put cracked vases in with the dead, or chipped cups and tarnished bracelets. They used the dead as convenient means of garbage disposal" (UW, 767).

This problem of spatial limitation is echoed elsewhere in the narrative when we learn of a landfill built on sacred Indian land and a ruined ancient settlement Nick supposes was abandoned because the inhabitants "had no room to breathe, surrounded by their own mounting garbage" (UW, 343). Considering the ubiquity of waste in the environment of the novel this could be DeLillo's parable for future generations.

Unfortunately, the spatial limitations of this chapter prevent an outlining all of the sociological insights in *Underworld*. Needless to say, the connections between characters and themes seem endless, and from the baseball game to present day Phoenix and then back through the sixties to the Italian neighbourhood in the Bronx where we find a young Nick Shay embroiled in the shooting of a heroin junkie, it is the subtle opposition of waste and weapons that is most strongly reinforced. However, it is not until, *Das Kapital*, The Epilogue of the novel, that the dialectic becomes explained and resolved.

Set in present day Kazakhstan, The Epilogue is markedly different in tone and language to the tragic shooting in the Bronx illustrated at the end of the final part and closes the loop of Nick's narrative life. As the critic Tom LeClair recognises, having been, "Trained by Jesuits [after the homicide] to find secret connections, personally and scientifically detached, Nick intuits the bomb as sacred and American culture as landfill in the abyss opened by the bomb."<sup>10</sup> The callow, loudmouthed Italian-American standing over the body of a friend he has just shot has been replaced by the

sagacious waste executive we follow on a visit to a remote test site to witness an underground nuclear explosion. Here he meets Viktor, his Eastern parallel, a former history teacher with an executive position in Tchaika, a company that “sells nuclear explosions for ready cash” (UW, 788). In Nick’s words:

“They want us to supply the most dangerous waste we can find and they will destroy it for us. Depending on degree of danger, they will charge their customers - the corporation or government of municipality - between three hundred dollars and twelve hundred dollars per kilo... They will pick up waste anywhere in the world, ship it to Kazakhstan, put it in the ground and vaporize it. We will get a broker’s fee” (UW, 788).

Like the Pocket, the secret weapons development centre where Nick’s brother Matt worked on safing mechanisms, the Kazakh test site, named the Polygon, is not on the map. As they arrive at the gate to the complex, Brian Glassic, another employee of Whiz Co., remarks that “The gate resembles the entrance to a national park.” “Don’t be surprised, there will be tourists here someday” (UW, 792), replies Viktor, as if conversant in the ideas of Jesse Detwiler. Indeed, it seems that DeLillo has constructed the character of Viktor to somehow fuse the philosophy and vocations of the Shay brothers and the one time Garbage Guerilla, Detwiler. As with his previous novels, DeLillo has promoted the idea at the expense of the individual. Viktor is the mouthpiece for DeLillo’s explication and resolution of the variety of proposals and insights mooted over the previous eight hundred pages. It is thesis fiction at its finest. Nick prompts Viktor with the suggestion that, “There is a curious connection between weapons and waste.” ‘Maybe one is the mystical twin of the other’ Viktor replies. He says, ‘Waste is the devil twin. Because waste is the secret history, the underhistory...All those decades when we thought about weapons all the time and never thought about the dark multiplying byproduct.’” In Viktor’s view what they are about to do at the Polygon represents ‘The fusion of two streams of history...[the destruction of] contaminated waste by means of nuclear explosions’ (UW, 791).

And so we have the synthesis of DeLillo’s dialectic. Weapons and waste cancel each other out roughly 1km under the world, witnessed by the generals of high finance - industrialists, bankers and venture capitalists. The end of a Manichean struggle between the demonic and the godly – “a ground motion, a rumble underfoot” (UW, 798) a whimper - but not the end of the book. In an extraordinary mirroring of scenes

from Unterwelt, a long unknown Eisenstein movie described earlier in the novel, Nick is led by Viktor to a place named the Museum of Misshapens situated near the test site to witness evidence of horrific abnormalities suffered by children downwind of the radiation from Soviet tests. However, unlike Unterwelt's deformed crowds, "persecuted and altered...an inconvenient secret of the society around them" (UW, 443) who miraculously lose their disfigurement at the conclusion of the film, the children Nick watches playing follow the leader innocently in the streets have no chance of a cure and we are left the image of a boy, "ears set low, head sloped" (UW, 803), falling to the floor, ironically placed against a backdrop of intense natural beauty:

"Something about the juxtaposition deepened the moment, faces against the landscape, the enormous openness, the breadth of sheepland and divided sky that contains everything outside us, unbearably. All the banned words, the secrets kept in white-washed vaults, the half-forgotten plots – they're all out here now, seeping invisibly into the land and air, into the marrowed folds of the bone... The sky was divided, split diagonally, a flat blue, a soft slatey blue, like the head of a crested jay, and a yellow that wasn't even yellow, an enormous heartbreak yellow sweeping to the east, a smoky goldshot stain, and the kids with knotted arms fell down in a row." (UW, 802/803)

It is a poignant moment: a tableaux of human suffering in which the real "dark multiplying byproduct" of the machinations of the superpowers is finally revealed. Unlike the sunsets in *White Noise*, that seem more intense, more beautiful, following the chemical intrusion of the 'Airborne Toxic Event' - encouraging people to watch in awe - the 'waves and radiation' of nuclear testing has left an indelible and far from aesthetic mark on this part of the natural world. "These faces and bodies have enormous power", (UW, 801) Nick reflects, reminding us of how his brother reacted to the flyby of fighter planes. But where Matt is impressed by how men have bent "heaven to their methods", Nick begins to feel something 'drain out' of him – "Some old opposition, a capacity to resist" (UW, 801). Presented with a stark reminder that both East and West have their casualties in the form of the downwinders, Nick recognises that the cold war is over, its conflict of mutual distrust and scaremongering replaced by the ubiquitous "get-rich-quick plot. The plot of members-only and crush-the-weak. Raw capital spewing out." (UW, 802) A sobering vision of our "wild privatized times" (UW, 802).

## Cyberspace, Nature and Peace

“The cold war is your friend. You need it to stay on top.” (UW, 170)

“We cannot do peace. In a story, all people can do is not-war, and that stops the progress of the plot. War may be hell, but it is at least interesting. In the “battle of life,” peace is not a victory; it is an epitaph.”<sup>11</sup>

Despite DeLillo’s haunting depiction of bodily deformation and dystopian view of the perils of unchecked capitalism in the wake of the mutual destruction of waste and weapons, there does however seem to be a message of hope at the novel’s conclusion. The paranoid sense that everything is connected in the narrative, that there is some ineffable force uniting events in an underworld of contingency and fatalism, becomes something real and positive in the world in the shape of the Internet. Transcending borders, transcending geopolitics and the nationalised power centres at least in its idealised form, the Internet is offered by DeLillo as a virtual Eden, a paradisiacal reversal of the Tower of Babel. With a keystroke universal translation is possible and even history becomes absorbed in a hyperlinked cycle of infinite connectivity mimicking, and of course using, the closed relativistic system of language. Sister Edgar, the Cold War nun, is linked to J. Edgar Hoover by virtue of her name alone: “Sister and brother. A fantasy in cyberspace and a way of seeing the other side and a settling of differences that have less to do with gender than with difference itself, all argument, all conflict programmed out” (UW, 826). Having passed away in the real world, in cyberspace the sister is reborn, has “shed all that steam-ironed fabric” – her veil and habit – and is “exposed to every connection you can make on the world wide web.” (UW, 824). Following a lengthy and somewhat fantastic blending of reality and cyber unreality, the juxtaposition of the novelist’s room with computer representations of atomic detonations, the novel finally ends with the word peace flashing on a computer screen.

But is ‘peace’ simply what happens when the living misshapens have disappeared from sight, the Fresh Kills landfill has been hidden beneath layers of topsoil, recycled as a new geographical feature, and the bomb removed as a category of being? How does a civilisation that grew in response to waste and warfare respond to its absence, and will reducing human engagement with the world to a series of interactions with digital signifiers prevent the destruction of the environment? As many



environmentalists argue, the answer to our environmental problems may be a reestablishment of the sanctity of nature – a sacredness notably absent from western religion. However, the message of *Underworld* would seem to be that before nature can be revalorized as sacred (if that is indeed possible) it may have to beat off strong competition from the very thing that DeLillo, through gritted teeth, offers as its possible saviour - technology. Has the techno-sceptic finally surrendered to the machine, and if so, why? Has he recognised a link between the organic and the World Wide Web – the possibility of a new sense of community and an abolition of conflict? In the words of Timothy Parrish, “[With *Underworld* DeLillo] aims for what technology seems to deny - transcendence. [And yet] it may even turn out that transcendence and technology are connected too.”<sup>12</sup> For Jagtenberg and McKie, using communication studies to assess the ‘greening of postmodernity’, this connection of the sacred and the machine is recognisable in the new global systems:

“With the ecstatic union of communication technology comes the blurring of the distinction between biology and technology. As with Christianity and related technologies of self imposed by church-state formations, however, the black hole at the center – the godhead – is not fully on earth or in heaven. It is located somewhere far more intrusive, somewhere in-between, somewhere where you can’t get your being around the control processes – a place where information wants to be free: cyberspace and its quickly gestating embryo, the Internet.”<sup>13</sup>

Presented in the novel as a secular equivalent of God’s absolute knowledge, the Internet and its omniscience opens up global opportunities that can empower the marginalised, democratising the use-value of technology: a power that is not lost on DeLillo. For instance, Ismael Munoz, a graffiti artist and guardian of a Bronx tenement community aided by Sister Edgar, says of the new sacred:

“Some people have a personal god, okay. I’m looking to get a personal computer. What’s the difference, right?” (UW, 813)

Religion hadn’t helped the disenfranchised and dispossessed youngsters in Ismael’s care whose only memorial after their premature deaths is an angel he spray paints on a wall. However, practical, financial knowledge and a place to be heard may enable Ismael and his charges to raise themselves out of their abjection. Martha Bartter in her analysis of the atomic bomb in American science fiction argues that in post-holocaust literature the wasteland is usually depicted as “the enemy of community”<sup>14</sup> – not a

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space for regeneration and fresh beginnings. However, in DeLillo's ghetto, a wasteland created not by the atomic bomb but rather the explosion of capitalism, hope is provided for the homeless in the form of technology - a TV they find "layered in the geological age of leisure-time appliances" (UW, 812) in a garbage pit and the internet. Fittingly, the only programming they initially receive on the television is the flowing prices of the stock market, but it allows them to reconnect to the system from which they had been isolated, enabling them to partake in the "epidemic of seeing" that makes them part of the wider American community. But with the Internet they realise they could do so much more. Indeed, Ismael's ultimate aim is to go on-line, in his words to "Advertise my junk cars. Go, like, global. Scrap metal for these trodden countries looking to build a military" (UW, 812). Waste into weapons for profit. The worldwide web will provide him with a simulated space in which to trade and transcend the limitations of the real space in which he lives. In the words of Slavoj Zizek:

"In the social conditions of late capitalism, the very materiality of cyberspace automatically generates the illusory abstract space of 'friction-free' exchange in which the particularity of the participant's social position is obliterated."<sup>15</sup>

Zizek, a Lacanian theorist exploring the ways in which processes of digitalization and the artificial dimensions of cyberspace affect the status of subjectivity, as a means of examining the concept of cyberrevolutionism draws an important distinction between the 'naturalization of culture' "(market, society, etc. as living organisms)" and the 'culturalization of nature' "(life itself...conceived as a set of self-reproducing items as information - 'genes are memes')." <sup>16</sup> However, although, as Zizek argues, cyberspace or the World Wide Web can be viewed as a self-evolving 'natural' organism that is coterminous with Earth itself - both appearing as "gigantic self-regulated living systems whose basic structure is defined in terms of the process of coding and decoding" <sup>17</sup> - the process of naturalization 'obfuscates' the redefinition and recycling of existing power relations. In essence, nothing changes. Ismael's vision is mere fantasy with little prospect of coming true.

So what implications does the new configurations of technoscience have for environmentalism - is it another case of dashed hopes? And what impact might such a blurring of the distinctions between nature and culture, as defined by Zizek, have on

the natural world? The problem is that as 'a new sacred' that has somehow interposed itself in the vacuum left by organised religion, stealing the space reserved for nature by environmental groups, technology appropriates the natural world as religion once did, but in this case merely as an 'original' to simulate and then discard. Indeed, as Žižek postulates, being reviewed in terms of coding and systems, the generation of the environment itself can be compared to commodification and hyperreality:

"Technology no longer *merely* imitates nature, rather, it reveals the underlying mechanism which *generates* it, so that, in a sense, 'natural reality' itself becomes something 'simulated', and the only 'Real' is the underlying structure of DNA."<sup>18</sup>

For the wider community this co-option and absorption of nature by the machine may herald serious environmental implications. Some theorists have argued that the internet and cyberspace in general may lead to real space being rendered futile, a "vast useless body, which has been both abandoned and condemned."<sup>19</sup> As *Underworld* seems to suggest, nature may reassert itself as we turn our attention inwards, and our environmental policies may perhaps go some way further to reducing the levels of pollution and non-recyclable waste, but should rampant consumerism continue unabated well into the next millennium, as it probably will, the used and futile landmass we inhabit may in fact be viewed as a large dumping ground, forgotten as we pursue our leisure activities in cyber dimensions. Already changes are apparent. Instead of travelling to distant locations in search of culture, history and experience we are now beginning to visit the digital sites: colourful, consumerist web pages offering visitors a visual and aural feast of the spectacular - virtual walk-throughs and real-time cameras providing the illusion of presence. The most-photographed barn in America becomes the most visited web site. The positive though probably naïve view might be to think that global information systems allow us to transcend the manifold problems that both warfare and waste pose for society, that the only environments to be ravaged by conflict and consumption will be simulated or constructed ones. But the transference of human communication and conflict from the real world to the digital may in fact worsen the situation. As Jean Baudrillard suggests in *Simulations*, drawing upon a Borges fable of a map so closely related to the land that it covers it completely, it is the simulation and not the real that is preeminent today, "It is the map that precedes the territory...it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to

revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map.”<sup>20</sup>

One shouldn't put too much store in Baudrillard's wild hyperbole or Žižek's incisive articulation of the future however. There are, as DeLillo suggests in *Underworld*, positive sides to such technocentricity, particularly where warfare is concerned. For instance, there are obvious environmental benefits should war follow the same trajectory as capital, absorbed by artificial boundaries. The real world may become a wasteland, an ignored dumpsite, but at least it won't be a radioactive one scarred by conflict. As Žižek himself concedes, the notion may not be as ridiculous as it sounds:

“Why shouldn't 'real' warfare be replaced by a gigantic virtual war which will be over without the majority of ordinary people being aware that there was any war at all, like the virtual catastrophe which will occur without any perceptible change in the 'real' universe.”<sup>21</sup>

For Chris Hables Gray, an expert on postmodern warfare, moving conflict from exterior to interior space is a logical step, a progression that a) circumvents the difficulties imposed by the natural world on military strategies (Gray uses the example of “the slowdown of airstrikes caused by weather during Desert Storm”) and b) allows maximum disruption of the systems of power:

“In general, postmodern war is not an integration with nature, as ritual war was, or an adaptation to natural circumstances, as was necessary in ancient war. It isn't even the attempt to ignore nature, as many practitioners of modern war tried to do... In postmodern war nature becomes dominated enough to become another weapon, as with the Hamburg and Tokyo firestorms. Biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons are other examples of turning nature...into weapons, but for erasure you can't beat doctrines of cyberwar, which move most of the action into simulated terrain and human consciousness”<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, DeLillo does at one point in the novel broach the possibility that war has entered the phase of the simulacrum, adapting in response to a changed prize - information and the technological systems of power and manipulation rather than 'real' land. Outside of the struggle of re-emergent nations to assert their identity and reestablish their living space, no longer is border expansion or colonization the primary objective. As Nick Shay suggests in the Epilogue, for developed nations, control of information or the means to control the storage of information is rapidly replacing land acquisition as a security policy:

"I thought leaders of nations used to dream of vast land empires-expansion, annexation, troop movements, armored units driving in dusty juggernauts over the plains, the forced march of language and appetite, the digging of massed graves. They wanted to extend their shadows across the territories...Now they want computer chips" (UW, 787/788).

Viktor, Nick's Khazakhstani parallel, acknowledges the change but recognizes that the human element is still an important part of the equation. A part that often has to be removed: "Yes it is true that geography has moved inward and smallward. But we still have mass graves I think" (UW, 788).

So what, in the end, should we make of *Underworld's* conclusion, the imagined transubstantiation of the word 'Peace'? A word freed from the computer screen to become a thing in the world, to take "its sense of serenities and contentments out into the streets somehow, its whisper of reconciliation...the tone of agreement or treaty" (UW, 827). Some critics have connected the ending with TS Eliot's memorable conclusion of *The Wasteland* - a formal ending from an Upanishad or Hindu scripture: Shantih shantih shantih: or "the peace that passeth all understanding," one of many allusions to Eastern wisdom in a poem questioning the 'spiritual bankruptcy' of Western civilisation. *Underworld's* wasteland is of course more literal than moral, although there are some very strong religious questions tackled by DeLillo, particularly concerning the perceived absence or replacement of God. Moreover, like Eliot, DeLillo draws together East and West, allows us to visualise the global as well as local implications of our flawed actions: "Twelve hundred tons of plutonium waste", a society of downwinders caught in the fallout of bomb tests, and a living legacy of misshapens inhabiting the wastelands of our cities and towns. Perhaps it is this, placing the individual in a global context, emphasising collective accountability as well as national difference that DeLillo hopes will help us towards global peace and a reawakening of sustained environmentalism. However, although freighted with positive meaning, there is a strong argument for suggesting DeLillo intended melancholic undertones to his 'peace' - that the word connotes a giving in or acceptance of the status quo. As we have seen, for Nick Shay peace represents a stasis of the commodity system, something that needs to be breached to return to a real world of disorder and disarray. Although technoscience may eventually eradicate conflict there is no substitute for "the dense measures of experience" offered by the "offscreen,

unwebbed” world of chaos – the source material for novels. Indeed, for Martha Bartter, assessing the impact of peace on works of fiction, such an ending may be interpreted as an augury of the death of the novel in its present guise:

“Our assumptions about war include some values we might prefer not to recognise that we hold; our assumptions about peace make it seem unsuitable for fiction. Fiction needs a plot; a plot needs tension, which war automatically provides and peace does not.”<sup>23</sup>

One certainly gets the feeling that DeLillo, in completing *Underworld*, has exhausted a number of themes that have threaded through his work over three decades and eleven novels. Could peace also signify a future silence on matters such as commodification, the role of technology and men in small rooms – a movement towards some deeper mystery – the “thick tenor of lived things” (UW, 827)? DeLillo’s latest novel, *The Body Artist* (2001), examined in the concluding chapter of this thesis, does seem to herald at least a partial transition in this direction.

### **A Community of One, An Ecologism of Many**

“The other side of the globe is but the home of our correspondent...be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you”<sup>24</sup>

“...It’s only a sequence of pulses on a dullish screen and all it can do is make you pensive - a word that spreads a longing through the raw sprawl of the city and out across the dreaming bourns and orchards to the solitary hills” (UW, 827)

How then can we measure the success of DeLillo’s green aesthetic? Is there an underlying ethic he promulgates and can we interpret the text as didactic? Contrary to received opinion there is, as identified in this chapter, a strong case for arguing that, in writing *Underworld*, DeLillo was torn between his desire for a grand eradication of the demonic mystical twins of waste and warfare (symbolised at the novel’s end by the underground destruction of nuclear waste) and a sense of nostalgia – a longing for a return to a world where conflict and waste, as he has suggested, in part, define who we are. Paul Boyer posits in his study of the atomic bomb’s effect on American culture that, “The Bomb has become one of those categories of Being, like Space and Time, that...are built into the very structure of our minds, giving shape and meaning to all our perception.”<sup>25</sup> *Underworld* offers the question - What happens when an ontological category disappears? Marvin Lundy, collector of baseball memorabilia, and possible

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apologist for DeLillo's thoughts on the matter, is unequivocal:

"You need the leaders of both sides to keep the cold war going. It's the one constant thing. It's honest, it's dependable. Because when the tension and rivalry come to an end, that's when your worst nightmares begin. All the power and intimidation of the state will seep out of your personal bloodstream. You will no longer be the main...point of reference. Because other forces will come rushing in, demanding and challenging. The cold war is your friend. You need it to stay on top" (UW, 170)

In the introduction to the chapter, reference was made to a desired contact between the personal and the public; a dramatizing of "the occurrence of large events in individual lives" that would highlight environmental concerns. David Dowling in *Fictions of Nuclear Disaster* argues that "While nuclear disaster is pre-eminently a public occurrence – political, national and 'physical' – the premonition of disaster, the living through and survival afterwards, are all matters of psychic stress which often seem simply a more extreme form of the continuing modern angst."<sup>26</sup> DeLillo has clearly attempted to represent both the personal angst and the larger movements of public history in *Underworld* but in doing so failed to legislate for the impact that the nuclear crisis would have on his own work of fiction. Torn between denunciation and longing, he shares with writers such as Kafka, Borges and Pynchon, as Dowling puts it, "an attitude of mind fitting for the times – bewildered, oppressed, fantastical and paranoid"<sup>27</sup> and, there is a strong case for arguing that he would be sorry to see the cause of such an attitude disappear. What does the paranoid do when all the connections come together – when the system becomes outlined and trackable - and yet there is no identifiable, nameable external force left to fear? This transition from secure to insecure paranoia, in the words of DeLillo scholar Peter Knight, can mean that there is "little possibility of an integral personal or national identity"<sup>28</sup>:

"In effect, [Underworld] develops a notion of conspiracy without conspiring, its reconfigured paranoia an appropriate response to the bewildering complexities of the current world in which everything is connected but nothing adds up."<sup>29</sup>

To link with other sections of the thesis, if conspiracy theory is, as Fredric Jameson argues, "the poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age."<sup>30</sup> how is one to target those diffuse, evanescent and globally ubiquitous groups causing environmental destruction when, because the system eludes explanatory theory, cognitive mapping

becomes virtually impossible? Drawing on Barry Commoner's "seminal analysis of the environmental crisis" – *The Closing Circle* – Knight connects the Grand Unified Theory of history DeLillo alludes to in the novel, 'Everything is connected', with Commoner's 'First Law of Ecology' – "Everything is Connected to Everything Else"<sup>31</sup> – suggesting that both have emerged in response to a New World Order of complexity: like language an expanding yet decentred infrastructure or system. Jurgen Habermas terms this interpenetration of the system a 'colonization of the lifeworld' - systems dominating the everyday world of pragmatic communication. Maybe, in Baudrillardian terms, DeLillo sees in the system of the Internet the potential for putting complexity and connectivity to some use, a way of remapping the world and reinstating the self as a 'point-of-reference' – an acceptance of 'colonization'. Turning the system *against* itself also provides an outlet for what N. Luhmann calls, the 'resonances' of human communication about the environment:

"The changes in the real world, together with our cognitions of them set in motion a set of vibrations through society's channels for discussion which causes anxieties and result in laws, environmental education and possible changes in world-view."<sup>32</sup>

For Luhmann, "Society cannot communicate *with* its environment, only *about* its environment *within* itself"<sup>33</sup> and surely the Internet is the quickest and most efficient way of doing this. The cyberspace that DeLillo offers us which 'fastens, fits closely and binds together' (UW, 827) is therefore the perfect medium for exposure – for allowing the resonances of environmental concern to pass from individual to individual.

Henry David Thoreau, one of the first American literary environmentalists, and firm believer in the possibility of a transcendental utopia, espoused the idea of the "community of one": a human subject separate and yet connected to the repetitive sequence of life – "The individual is both a country and an ocean, a discrete unit and a component of totality."<sup>34</sup> In fusing the dichotomy of the discrete and the continuous - synthesising the dialectic of individual and crowd - DeLillo's representation of cyberspace is in a way a reawakening or postmodern upgrading of the Thoreauvian idea of transcendental utopia, one that allows for the penetration of technology in the hope that this will engender a community of the new sacred. His 'cyborgization' of



Sister Edgar, a decentering of the human subject through assimilation by technology, could therefore be read as a radical reevaluation of his personal and political position - the apogee of his 'toxic consciousness' - a surrender to the system. However, as the final words of the novel imply, DeLillo is still unsure of his position, maintaining his suspicion of the globalized networks as he sits pensively in front of the screen, unable or unwilling to shake his ingrained paranoia. After ten novels that suggest otherwise, are we really to accept that like his protagonist, Nick Shay, DeLillo believes "the caress of linked grids that give you a sense of order and command" heal the world, and that technology "expands your self-esteem and connects you in your well-pressed suit to the things that slip through the world otherwise unperceived"? (UW, 89) As a conventional eco-novel, *Underworld* consolidates the pervasive North American environmentalism of the nineties in the reflections of its characters and depictions of a world coming to terms with its garbage. But as a breviary for a radical acceptance and celebration of technoscience, it lacks the authorial commitment to persuade.

## Chapter Five

### Conclusions - DeLillo in Context

“...The new political art (if it is possible at all) will have to hold to the truth of postmodernism, that is to say to its fundamental object - the world space of multinational capital - achiev[ing] a breakthrough to some as yet unimaginable new mode of representing this last, in which we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion.” (Fredric Jameson)<sup>1</sup>

Throughout this thesis the point has been made time and again that Don DeLillo's novels are more than just simple reflections of a society disorientated by the massive ontological and perceptual changes wrought by the postmodern world space of late capitalism. Standing either between or beyond systems and theories, the novelist attempts to provide his reader with a melange of conventional genre-contained narrative and cutting edge socio-political metatheory that transcends what he has called the often 'tired and incorporated' prose of his peers, allowing the reader to cognitively map his/her place in [hyper]reality. Adapting the title of Walter Benjamin's famous essay, DeLillo's works of art are truly responsive to the age of simulacral reproduction. However, although in style and sensibilities DeLillo is a postmodernist, choosing as his 'dominant' human ontology and incorporating a metafictional awareness of the limitations and possibilities of his medium in his texts, his work often satisfies the criterion of other 'discursive constructions,' particularly modernism with its emphasis on epistemology, or the utilisation of "strategies which engage and foreground" the question of knowledge – i.e. "What are the limits of the knowable?"<sup>2</sup> Using the ideas of contemporary cultural commentator Fredric Jameson as an analytical tool, the conclusion to this thesis will place DeLillo's work in a contemporary literary context based on its metatheoretical narrative methodology, connecting it to other 'world' fictions of ambivalence towards capitalist [post]modernity rather than attempting to engage in a series of stylistic comparisons with the work of DeLillo's American peers.

From Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Voltaire's *Candide*, texts that interrogated the foundations of the Enlightenment project, right through to Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *1984*, fiction has shown that it is an art form that is eminently capable of incisively disarticulating the social, scientific or political structures formed in the name of human progress: checking unquestioned expansion by allowing readers to see the negative as well as the positive sides to modernity. Through techniques such as carnivalisation, allegory or scientific projection into dystopian futures, the novel has, for centuries, kept pace with social change by adapting its form to suit its environment. However, this engagement of flexible narrative methodology in order to meet shifting social conditions seemed to reach a temporary impasse in the second half of the twentieth century as cultural practice, affected by crises in areas as diverse as human subjectivity, historicism and philosophy, entered its own critical moment of instability. Indeed, in order to call into question, and set up modes of resistance against, the contemporary world order, the novel has had to attempt to adapt to a visually obsessed hyperreal age of spectacular simulacra, intertextuality and floating signifiers that by its very nature seems to exclude the simply prosaic. Trying to bend the morphology of the novel into some sort of relevant and powerful design in the face of more instantly gratifying imaginal mediums has for writers been at best a challenge and at worst an overly demanding and ultimately futile anachronistic venture. When enough people lament the death of both the novel and its author, soon everybody believes in their demise. But some writers have been able to rise to the challenge, choosing to use theoretical caveats such as the avoidance of the 'already written' and the de facto irony concomitant with this as the springboard for works that are able to reflexively examine the function of their craft while pushing the boundaries of novelistic resistance – all within the telling of a story. So just who are this postmodern avant-garde, what are the adaptations they have made, and how does DeLillo's work connect with the notion of an emancipatory aesthetic engendered by the capitalistic logic of the 'third machine age'?

### **The Postmodern Avant-Garde: From Parody to Historiography**

For Richard Murphy, any definition of postmodernism as an artistic movement inevitably depends upon a prior understanding of modernism and the historical 'expressionist' avant-garde: the latter, made up of artists as diverse as writer Gottfried

Benn, dramatist Bertolt Brecht and filmmaker Robert Wiene, understood as an ideologically self-critical force championing a “form of art whose central goal becomes the reintegration and “sublation” of art and life...a more practical kind of art with a clear social significance.”<sup>3</sup> In Murphy’s view postmodernism must be thought of as “a change of “dominant” within modernism, or as a realignment of a constellation of meaning mapped out in the shifting relations between the reference-points denoted by modernism, the contemporary and the avant-garde” (AG, 2): in other words it is a continuation and development of and not a break from previous artistic motivations. Using the ideas of Fredric Jameson to support his case, Murphy posits that postmodernism expands on the foregrounded discursiveness of the modernist aesthetic practice of remystifying and recoding the world - largely a reaction to the post-Enlightenment need for art to reflect a ‘realism of causality and quantification’ – and that, taking the lead from the historical avant-garde and its ‘counter-texts of expressionism,’ postmodernism “challenges the traditional notions of an unaffected, external perspective...by means of pastiche or parody [and the] foregrounding of intertextual relations” (AG, 262/263). Borrowing this time from Linda Hutcheon, Murphy asserts that the primary purpose of postmodernism is to provide a ““vision of interconnectedness” which acknowledges history and the factors of social determination at the same time as it both sees through the fallacy of the “histoire” and recognises that the ““reality’ of the past is discursive reality” rather than objective fact” (AG, 263). In short the manifesto of postmodernism, if there were to be such a thing, might read as ‘defamiliarise and remystify both the present and the past, while at all times laying bare the devices of the medium and the subjective and ultimately intertextual process of authorisation.’ If this is the case, and there is a movement of writers following this pattern, what opportunities does postmodernism hold for the politically intent - if any? For instance, many have argued, with some justification it has to be said, that postmodernism in its overt schematism lacks the potential for direct political and ideological engagement. Murphy suggests that the key to oppositional or counter-discourse within a postmodern aesthetic, or the undermining of the “socially institutionalized dominant discourses underpinning reality” (AG, 270), may be achieved by presenting the ‘unpresentable’ within parodic or rewritten texts – a methodology this thesis argues that DeLillo has followed in novels such as *Ratner’s Star* and *Libra*. This may be so, but for Fredric Jameson the key to subversive efficacy

is to use the undoubted latitude for novelistic invention postmodernism provides in order to undertake a 'fantastic historiographic' examination of the present by way of the past.

For Jameson, an observer of the postmodern scene working within traditional Marxist categories, narrative is not specifically a literary form or structure but rather a generic epistemological category that is at its heart socially symbolic. Jameson's radical contention is that rather than human beings making up stories to understand the world around them, reality comes to us in the shape of stories or representations of itself which demand interpretation. The implications of his view would be that the contemporary novelist is merely a hermeneutic conduit, giving us their reading of the manifest and latent content of the 'reality stories' that come to us all, and at all times subject to changes in society that affects the form their reconstituted narrative takes. However, as Jameson himself argues, this does not necessarily preclude the possibility that the writer can be politically insurgent and *have an effect*, provided he/she knows how to work the system. For Jameson, the postmodern era is characterised by a shift or displacement of the ontology of the subject, a movement from alienation to fragmentation and a commodification or reification of the individual arising from the 'cultural logic' of late capitalism: a change that has led to far reaching ramifications in aesthetic production. In order to re-establish connections with the world and counter this changing nature of reality, Jameson argues that all politically motivated artists should 'hold to the truth' of this changing world system by aiming to foreground it in the overt structure of their work – particularly when the intention of their work is to interrogate the present by way of the past: a methodology he labels as "fantastic historiography." In his view the 'reality-pluralism' or 'channel switching' of the 'new world' can "offer postmodern writers the most remarkable and untrammelled movement of invention" (CLLC, 368). On the one hand novelists can opt for maximum narrative innovation – what Jameson terms "Pynchonesque" fabulation or mythomania (presumably referring to *Gravity's Rainbow*), wherein the 'release and euphoria' of postmodern possibilities are channeled into a creating a "semblance of historical verisimilitude [which] is vibrated into multiple alternate patterns" (CLLC, 368). Or, inversely, they can underscore their purely fictional intent by allowing real-life people and events to unexpectedly appear and disappear from time to time within

the imaginary framework they have constructed – a kind of magic realism. Jameson uses E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* as an example of the second model (a book celebrated by DeLillo himself as a "democratic experiment" in language<sup>4</sup>), a methodology that, from the clearly evident enthusiastic hyperbole of the following passage, he seems to favour:

"...It is very precisely [the] interesting dissonance and the garish magic realism of [the] unexpected juxtaposition of [disparate materials] which is the bonus pleasure to be consumed...It is now no longer a matter of the breakup of some preexisting older organic unity, but rather the emergence of the multiple in new and unexpected ways, unrelated strings of events, types of discourse, modes of classification, and compartments of reality. This absolute and absolutely random pluralism...a coexistence not even of multiple and alternate worlds so much as of unrelated fuzzy sets and semiautonomous subsystems whose overlap is perceptually maintained like hallucinogenic depth planes in space of many dimensions is, of course, what is replicated by the rhetoric of decentering (and what informs official rhetorical and philosophical attacks on "totality"). This differentiation and specialization or semiautonomization of reality is then prior to what happens in the psyche – postmodern schizo-fragmentation as opposed to modern or modernist anxieties and hysterias – which takes the form of the world it models and seeks to reproduce in the form of experience as well as of concepts, with results as disastrous as those that would be encountered by a relatively simple natural organism given to mimetic camouflage and trying to approximate the op art laser dimensionality of a science-fictional environment of the far future." (CLLC, 371/372)

The more down to earth critic Linda Hutcheon, a luminary of the 'poetics of postmodernism,' suggests that the 'historiographic metafiction' Jameson describes "foregrounds the rejection of the claims of both 'authentic' representation and 'inauthentic' copy alike, and [through this practice] the very meaning of artistic originality is as forcefully challenged as is the transparency of historical referentiality."<sup>5</sup> Her assertion is that postmodern fiction is all about re-writing or re-presenting the past in the terms of the present in order to "prevent it from being conclusive and teleological."<sup>6</sup> Echoing Jameson's notion of reflecting the new dimensions of the postmodern world system within the work of art, one of the ways fiction can do this, argues Hutcheon, is by problematising the very notion of historical truth by exposing or mimicking the semiotic systems on which this truth is based: in other words, like DeLillo, pursuing a policy of language dissection. Although this thesis has shown that historiographic metafiction is just one of a number of novelistic techniques utilised by Don DeLillo (ontological frame-breaking and the vacillation

between controlled monologism and dialogism being notable others) and indeed, is only truly employed in a couple of his later novels, a combination of Hutcheon and Jameson's definition of political historiographic metafiction and Jameson's psychoanalytical distinction between modern and postmodern psychopathologies outlined in the above passage – the modernist one being a mimetic reaction to totality (anxiety/paranoia/hysteria) and the postmodernist a desire to destructure the system (schizoid) – offers us the means to provide both an *internal* and *external* contextualisation of DeLillo's work.

Far from being a writer following a single stylistic/formal manifesto Don DeLillo fluctuates between modernist and postmodernist poetics: from novel to novel and often within novels themselves. For example, DeLillo's first novel *Americana*, in which by his own admission, "great chunks of experience are hurled at the page,"<sup>7</sup> seems to be modernist in its first-person single narrated theme of 'authentic' representation and epistemology (as Tom LeClair recognises<sup>8</sup>), despite its typically postmodern search through multiple mediations of experience. Of course this could be read as signalling the confusion of a typical first novel oscillating between schools and unsure of its own direction. However, the conflation of modernist and postmodernist concerns and stylistics introduced in *Americana* is repeated in different equations in DeLillo's later novels, seeming to suggest that, quite rightly, he has avoided following a school of anyone else's conception. In *The Names* for instance, through his use of what Jameson terms the 'play of figuration' – "...inscrib[ing] a new sense of the absent global colonial system on the very syntax of poetic language itself, a new play of absence and presence that at its most simplified will be haunted by the exotic and be tattooed with foreign place names, and at its most intense will involve the invention of remarkable new languages and forms" – DeLillo presents an earnest combination of both modernist reactions to totality and the postmodern conveyance of "some sense that these new and enormous global realities are inaccessible to any individual subject or consciousness" (CLLC, 411). While in *White Noise*, DeLillo clearly embarks on a modernist binary process of remystifying and recoding the world coupled with highlighting the paranoia of a subject threatened by totalities he doesn't understand, all the while imbuing the narrative with a particularly postmodern reflexive irony and, for

the first time, an infectious dry humour, as he casts a wry smile at the very definition of representation.

Later novels *Libra* and *Underworld* of course clearly fit the model of historiographic metafiction – combining real and fictional characters in a narrative that is more schizoid than paranoid. *Libra* in particular, as Frank Lentricchia observes, contains “virtuoso changes of points of view that function as disconcerting repetitions of his characters’ obsessive shifts from first person to third.”<sup>9</sup> Lee Harvey Oswald’s story, that so easily could have been turned into a modernist ‘stream-of-consciousness’ insight into the mind of the assassin, instead through *Libra* becomes a postmodern critique that seems to interrogate the event in a more ‘theory minded’ and narratively experimental way than Norman Mailer’s equally postmodern historiography *Oswald’s Tale* published seven years later – *Libra*’s provocative effect of manipulating the reader into identifying with Oswald being the most likely reason for its attack by reviewers of the day. For Fredric Jameson, Kennedy’s assassination was an inaugural event that “gave what we call a Utopian glimpse into some collective communicational “festival” whose ultimate logic and promise is incompatible with our mode of production” (CLLC, 355). Arguably, *Libra* captures perfectly Kennedy’s ‘posthumous public meaning’ – “the projection of a new collective experience of projection” (CLLC, 355) – and as such is probably the first DeLillo novel that truly delivers on a metatheoretical as well as narrative level. Indeed, there is every suggestion in DeLillo’s work after *Libra* (*Mao II* and *Underworld*) that it was this novel that made him realise the powerful part that history could play in his fiction – tying together narrative and metatheory, the fantastic and the real and ‘making fresh’ his ideas on representation and language. DeLillo’s recognition that at last he had found the perfect popular political ‘blend’ seems to come across in his essay ‘The Power of History,’ written for *The New York Times* in 1997:

“Fiction will always examine the small anonymous corners of human experience. But there is also the magnetic force of public events and the people behind them. There is something in the novel itself, its size and psychological reach, its openness to strong social themes, that suggests a matching of odd-couple appetites – the solitary writer and the public figure at the teeming center of events. The writer wants to see inside the human works, down to dreams and routine gambling thoughts, in order to locate the neural strands that link him to men and women who shape history...The novelist does not want to tell you



things you already know about the great, the brave, the powerless and the cruel. Fiction slips into the skin of historical figures. It gives them sweaty palms and head colds and urine-stained underwear and lines to speak in private and the terror of restless nights. This is how consciousness is extended and human truth is seen new.”<sup>10</sup>

John Gardner has suggested that “True moral fiction is a laboratory experiment too difficult and dangerous to try in the World but safe and important in the mirror image of reality in the writer’s mind.”<sup>11</sup> From *Libra* onwards, DeLillo’s later fiction – characterised by difficult and dangerous manipulations of history and theory within the experimental confines of the postmodern novel – is true to this criterion and cuts right to the heart of Althusser’s definition of the ‘ideological’ as “the Imaginary representation of the subject’s relationship to his or her Real conditions of existence.” (CLLC, 415). In the words of Michael Gorra, “Don DeLillo now seems the writer, the one writer, who has been able to bend the sensibility of 1960s postmodernism, of Pynchon and Barth and Barthelme, towards a recognizable social world.”<sup>12</sup> However, although Gorra is right to recognise DeLillo as probably the most accessible of a new breed of postmodernists, he is certainly not the only writer in the world attempting to ‘extend the consciousness’ of his/her readership in the ways discussed. There are perhaps half a dozen notable ‘metatheoreticians’ plying their trade in contemporary fiction, two of the most well known operating from a distinctly European perspective.

### **DeLillo *vis-à-vis* Eco and Kundera: American vs. European Metatheoretical Fiction**

Throughout this thesis the claim has been made that Don DeLillo has embarked upon a process of borrowing theory for his own fictional ends in order to produce novels that are not merely *symptomatic* responses to the late capitalist world-system but actually go some way towards *diagnosing* perceived difficulties – a Jamesonian ideal. This methodology can lead to confusions of tonal reception – ambiguities of authorial purpose in the texts necessarily lead us to ask whether DeLillo is a postmodernist or in fact a ‘critiquer’ of postmodernism working within the medium he is disarticulating. Sometimes, while melding ideas in the crucible of the novel, DeLillo chooses to explode or satirise the implausible, pragmatically rejecting notions which seem overly abstract or just plain wrong. Usually, however, he releases concepts with perceived political efficacy into his constructed postmodern milieu to see if the solutions they

offer to the problems of hyperreality are workable. Although at first glance the principally 'Americacentric' subject matter of DeLillo's novels seems at odds with the work of Umberto Eco and Milan Kundera, all three, in their efforts to move beyond theory, can be seen to share the same principal goal.

In the opinion of Italian professor of semiotics and medievalist Umberto Eco, a true 'renaissance man' who is as happy writing popular journalism on the perils of hyperreality as specialist academic texts on literary hermeneutics, "...That which cannot be theorised about must be narrated."<sup>13</sup> To prove the point he has written two novels - *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum* - which seem to place his own academic theories on subjects as abstruse as infinite semiosis, medieval signification and the conflict between nominalism and realism, in a conventional narrative structure: the first an epistemological detective story that cognitively maps late-medieval Europe and by extension the postmodern world, and the second an ontologically focused word-labyrinth of paranoid readings and secret societies. Importantly for our comparison with DeLillo, both novels, as well as being works of metatheory, are also clear examples of historiographic metafiction, combining real figures from history with fantastic inventions.

Elizabeth Dipple in her book *The Unresolvable Plot: Reading Contemporary Fiction* examines how Eco makes the transition from theory to fiction in order to tackle that which cannot be conveyed in purely theoretical terms. In her view *The Name of the Rose* is a didactic novel with semiotic and interpretative theory built into its medieval whodunit plot, fulfilling its didactic aim through 'interpretative openness' rather than the conventional bond of transmission between author and reader - generating "interpretations which are almost infinite in number to demonstrate the 'infinite semiosis' that [Eco] argues for, but cannot show, in his critical writings."<sup>14</sup> (In this material exposition, Eco's novel seems to parallel Jameson's cultural politics of "planning the implosion of the logic of the simulacrum by dint of every (sic) greater doses of simulacra" (CLLC, 409) - a technique one might attribute to DeLillo.) Bearing in mind that Eco is of course both the author of the novel and the conceiver of the theory the novel explains, one might imagine that he protectively dissents against the ideas of potential detractors from history - thinkers who clash with his theories - and thus manipulates his reader into a linear dialectical advance with only one possible

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outcome. The problem is that, by its very definition, the Piercean notion of infinite semiosis Eco advances in *The Name of the Rose* paradoxically dissolves the linear dialectic: readers have to phenomenologically experience the *process* of reading, following hyperconvoluted philosophical paths rather than decoding multitudinous cloaked references contained in the novel, in order to understand the point that Eco is trying to make. One must accept discourse as endless reverberations, echoes and circular thoughts in *The Name of the Rose* in order to apprehend the semiotic system that underpins it, and every other, text/speech act. Amazingly, as Dipple laments, Eco seemed to undermine the central tenet of *The Name of the Rose* a year after it was published by bringing out a postscript that explained what he was trying to achieve – reducing a supremely ‘writerly’ text to the determined and ‘readerly.’ It was as if he had little faith in the possibility that an ‘ideal reader’ of his book existed who could make elaborate interpretations for him/herself. Contrastingly, other than providing a few choice suggestions in interviews or short essays, this is not a route that DeLillo has taken, transcending the limitations of Baudrillard, Benjamin et al.

DeLillo’s assessment, through narrative, of the implications of theory taken to the nth degree is, as this thesis has shown, open for discussion. Whether it is because the theory DeLillo expounds in his novels is largely an amalgamation of others or simply due to the fact that he ‘doesn’t want to talk about it,’ readers and critics alike must make up their own minds about what he is trying to achieve. Sometimes, through mouthpiece characters such as academic Murray Jay Siskind and garbage archaeologist Jesse Detwiler, DeLillo internally ‘signposts’ how to sort the theoretical data contained in the narrative. In this, these characters must be viewed as ‘help guides’ rather than necessary requirements of the plot. But it is unlikely that a writer so fascinated with everyday mystery would, for example, produce his own external reader’s guide to *Underworld*. Although Bill Gray’s ‘inconvenient’ death before satisfying the novel’s logical conclusion in *Mao II* could be read as a wonderfully ironic ‘laboratory experiment’ with Eco’s own unfulfilled belief that a writer should leave his work uncontaminated by authorial interpretation, summed up by his provocatively over-the-top statement that - “The author should die once he has finished writing. So as not to trouble the path of the text.”<sup>15</sup> – we feel that DeLillo is happy to be living and yet unavailable for comment. The question is, is this relative

interpretative reticence the only real difference that divides the fiction writer using theory to inform his narrative and the theorist who uses narrative to inform his theory? Are they not one and the same thing – equal in political impact, and like every author in this post-Barthes age of the deconstructed producer, ultimately unimportant next to the texts they have assembled? A brief examination of another of DeLillo's metatheoretical contemporaries, Milan Kundera, may provide the answer.

As a one time professor at the Prague Institute for Advanced Cinematic Studies, Czechoslovakian novelist Milan Kundera is another academic who, like Eco, has metamorphosed into a metatheoretical writer of fiction, taking to narrative as a way of grasping the 'existential code of the self'<sup>16</sup> and to "protect us from the forgetting of being" (AN, 17). In Kundera's words, all of his novels are 'meditative interrogations' on existence backed up by theory from the ages. But fearful of "the professors for whom art is only a derivative of philosophical and theoretical trends" (AN, 32), like DeLillo Kundera borrows the ideas of others (if more overtly alluding to his sources) in order to fashion 'unexpected openings' into new experimental ontological territories, moving beyond the theory itself and *privileging* the narrative form rather than simply consolidating academic works. Indeed, Kundera's work has many parallels with DeLillo's. For instance, as well as experimenting with historiography, he too has been accused of foregrounding ideas at the expense of character, of being overly abstract and avoiding interior monologue in order to examine situations and behaviour rather than try to impose psychological boundaries. Importantly, like DeLillo he also attempts in his novels to make sense of the way that cultural production affects being at its deepest level – the communist leader airbrushed out of a photograph and thus erased from history; 'imagologues' who dictate how we must look and feel at the 'end of history' in the absence of ideology; and the echoing cadence of Goethe's poetry and Beethoven's music informing the present. And these parallels between DeLillo and Kundera continue on a more overtly political level. Despite their opposition to different kinds of hegemonic totality both are acutely aware that the novel has to resist incorporation by the mass media – the "agents of the unification of the planet's history" (AN, 17) whose aesthetic is the production of 'kitsch.' Echoing DeLillo, Kundera believes that the only way the novel can survive is by working against the progress and spirit of the world that creates inert crowds rather

than enlightened individuals. It is this shared faith in the “imaginary paradise of individuals” that has earned both writers the coveted Jerusalem Prize: an international literary honour presented at the Jerusalem International Book Fair to a writer whose work expresses the theme of the freedom of the individual in society.

Despite the many similarities between the two writers there are however a number of important differences. Kundera’s novelistic methodology for achieving his ‘imaginary paradise’ is much the same as Umberto Eco’s demonstration of ‘infinite semiosis.’ Kundera’s stated aim is to avoid “apodictic and dogmatic discourse” in order to possess the ‘*wisdom of uncertainty*’ – “to take...the world as ambiguity, to be obliged to face not a single absolute truth but a welter of contradictory truths” (AN, 6). In order to do this he operates through the conventional postmodern form of dialogism rather than the open controlled monologism that this thesis has argued DeLillo uses from time to time in order to shock the reader into a recognition of ubiquitous uniformity. Likewise, the two are very different in their examinations of what in Brian McHale’s view are the paradoxically ‘traditional’ two most favoured themes of ontological postmodernism - human love and death: Kundera conveying the metaphysics of union and the existential implications of passing (death as a defining part of how one lives one’s life and connects with others) while DeLillo usually maintains a calculated distance from both, emphasising mechanics and unspeakability rather than ‘essences’ (although there is evidence to suggest that with his new publication *The Body Artist* (2001) DeLillo is moving closer to the Kunderan model of the existential novella, exemplified by works such as *Slowness* (1995) and *Identity* (1998) – magical mixtures of the imaginary and the real.) Furthermore, in answer to the question on the divide between the writer academic and the academic writer, as with Umberto Eco Kundera is unable to resist in a way undermining the power of his fiction by providing the reader with an explanatory breviary of sorts in the form of *The Art of the Novel* (1988). Although a reaction to poor ‘recomposing’ translations of his fiction, sections such as his personal dictionary of ‘sixty-three words’ lay bare the author’s motivations and remove some of the mystery from his work.

To conclude this minor deviation into a more global contextualisation of DeLillo’s work, despite many differences in style and approach it is clear that DeLillo, Kundera and Eco share the same primary artistic methodology – the espousal of a

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metatheoretical critique of the social grounded in narrative. However, in order to give a little more detail to the final theoretical contextualisation of DeLillo's work, and make claims for its place in contemporary literature, it is necessary to take a closer look at not only why he has chosen metatheory as his fictional voice but also the underlying basis of its structural poetics – the 'how.' The penultimate section of this chapter will show that DeLillo is one of the pioneers of a radically new politico-aesthetic methodology that holds firm to Fredric Jameson's call for a fresh approach to artistic production.

### **Metatheoretical Narrative and the Transcoding of Conceptual Terminologies**

Talking of theory rather than fiction, Fredric Jameson argues that in a climate of post-Wittgenstein cynicism towards the efficacy of discourse, where all forms of written and verbal communication from the formal to informal have been reduced to the status of language games, metaphor laden narrative, or commentary on the 'already written,' to pursue any kind of serious social critique requires a new approach to language. In Jameson's words:

"An aesthetics of this new "theoretical discourse would probably include the following features: it must not emit propositions, and it must not have the appearance of making primary statements or of having positive (or "affirmative") content. This reflects the widespread feeling that inasmuch as everything we utter is a moment in a larger chain or context, all statements that seem to be primary are in fact only links in some larger "text"... The much-decried poststructural swerve away from truth judgements and categories – comprehensible enough as a social reaction to a world already overpopulated with such things – is thus a second-degree effect of a more primary requirement of language, which is no longer to frame utterances in such a way that those categories might be appropriate. This is clearly a demanding aesthetic indeed, one in which the theorist walks a tightrope, the slightest lapse precipitating the sentences in question into the old-fashioned (system, ontology, metaphysics) or sheer opinion. What one then uses language for becomes an issue of life and death, particularly since the option of silence – a high-modernist one – is also excluded." (CLLC, 392)

But what Jameson sees as a quandary for the rational and positivist practices can be viewed as a radical opportunity for the arts. Indeed, as mentioned in this chapter, writers such as Umberto Eco and Milan Kundera have already recognised that crossing over into less stringent/rigorous disciplines allows them the latitude and 'laboratory space' in which to try out their ideas without the burden of 'truth judgements and

categories,' and in the process reach far more readers than they could possibly have obtained with academic texts – an operation one could argue that has its twentieth century roots in the novels of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. The important difference between this post-Sartrean school of 'hybrids' and their existential precursors, however, is that there is a good case for arguing that the postmodern age has created readers who can meet such metatheoreticians half-way within the virtual space of their creations, having developed their own incredulity towards not only the socio-philosophical metanarratives of the past but also the mimetic novel: a consciousness of artifice aided by the very nature of metafictional postmodern writing and intertextual cinema which both tend to reflect not empirical reality but simply the form, function and interchangeability of the mediums - what Paul De Man calls the self-reflecting mirror effect. Essentially abjuring any claim to mimetic representation, postmodern authors tend to foreground the fact that they are *mediating* a story and, whether latently or manifestly, some degree of social/historical/cultural critique, through narrative. The notion that any attempt at realism is automatically reduced to the status of pastiche, or what Jameson terms as 'blank parody' – cultural production as a nostalgic imitation of the already written – and is usually recognised as such, does of course prevent the embedding of social criticism in novels in the way that for instance Emile Zola and his contemporaries did at the end of the nineteenth century. But as mentioned throughout this thesis there are ways to get around this using the codes of the hyperreal post-industrial society the postmodern novel was born into – pitting simulacrum against simulacrum. For instance passive historicism, or as Jameson terms it, "the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past; the play of random stylistic allusion," (CLLC, 18) through a simple adaptation becomes an active political aesthetic decision in the form of metafictional historiography. Arguably the most important opportunity that the late-capitalist climate of fractured truths affords its cultural producers however is not a stronger tacit bond between author and reader – a conscious recognition of roles and practices – but rather the breaking down of discursive boundaries.

The most obvious ramification of reducing discourse, in all of its multitudinous communicational guises, to one underlying systemic code, is that it inevitably leads to an erosion of the boundaries once existing between hitherto substantive disciplines

such as art, science and philosophy. As if proving the point, over the last thirty years or so we have seen an explosion in *interdisciplinary* practices – a fusion of areas traditionally viewed as less than contiguous. Indeed, aside from the more specialised academic fields in which Jean-Francois Lyotard rightly argues some form of exclusivity still presides, preventing ‘non-speakers’ from entering, social theorists such as Jean Baudrillard can now veer wildly and hyperbolically from anthropological disquisitions on tribal practices to the semiotic significance of Disneyland without anyone (save perhaps Sokal and Bricmont) batting an eyelid. Fredric Jameson calls the new kind of operation underpinning this climate of interdisciplinary exchange *transcoding* – a way of “measuring what is sayable and thinkable in each of [the multitude of available] codes or idiolects” comparing one after the other to the “conceptual possibilities” of its competitor (CLLC, 394) – and it is a ‘par excellence’ realisation of this that Jameson argues is the key to the aesthetics of his new theoretical discourse. Where pure theory is concerned, in Jameson’s view the drawback of transcoding is that it is “retrospective and even potentially traditionalist and nostalgic, insofar as the proliferation of new codes is an endless process that at best cannibalizes the preceding ones and at worst consigns them to the historical dustheap” (CLLC, 394) – Jameson is careful to remind us, through a reference to Freudo-Marxism, of the difficulties inherent in “yoking two thought systems together.” Nevertheless, in Jameson’s view, provided the result of transcoding is the production of a new theoretical discourse or metacode that transcends and in a way effaces its original sources (“the new code...can in no way be considered a synthesis between [a] previous pair”(CLLC, 394)) the transcoding operation can lead to radical and revolutionary ways of grasping the world.

Believing that the production of this new theoretical discourse is some way away Jameson specifies two criteria that will have to be met in order for it to work: i) “The reordering of the semiotic equation [of signifier and signified] – the transcoding of the two distinct conceptual terminologies, their projection onto an axis of equivalence,” and ii) The generation of “strange new ambivalent abstractions, which look like traditional philosophical universals but are in reality as specific or particular as the paper they are printed on, and tend to turn ceaselessly into each other (that is to say into their own logical opposites)” (CLLC, 396). What Jameson seems to overlook in



his otherwise thorough examination of contemporary cultural production however is that contrary to his belief the strategy of transcoding has been operating within the poetics of postmodern fiction for some time now, being the very process that has allowed writers such as Don DeLillo and Umberto Eco (inchoate advocates of this new form) to provide a kind of cognitive mapping that situates their readers not only temporally and spatially but also epistemologically and ontologically. Indeed, it is the work of this burgeoning school of metatheorists, along with the novels of their cyberpunk cousins (who espouse the production of 'interface fiction': a crossover of SF and literary high culture that in its 'traumatic' examinations of technology ostensibly exposes the reader to fresh views of the world) that constitutes the clearest concrete example of the blueprint for a 'new political art' Jameson envisages.

Excusing Jameson's oversight (although he does applaud the strides made by cyberpunk) one could argue that the particular brand of metafiction DeLillo et al have adopted is judged to be successful when it is misunderstood and unrecognised in its political terms. If one could easily comprehend how DeLillo has adopted equivocation and ambivalence as strategies that project an axis of equivalence on both a semiotic and theoretical level, then this transparency would negate what he is trying to achieve. When transcoding works, the binary oppositions, generic forms and philosophical enquiries 'turn ceaselessly into one another' disguising any underlying totalising theory, and when it doesn't, the failed transcoded metatheoretical novel comes across as didactic, tendentious and naively schematic. We are thus, paradoxically, only really aware of metatheoretical fiction when it doesn't reach the criteria that define it. Unsurprisingly, some of DeLillo's novels are like this – seeming to fall short of the author's intentions and consequently coming under attack from the critics (although almost all of the 'newspaper review' criticisms cited in this thesis it must be said fail to take into account the methodology outlined here). At its apogee however, DeLillo's work is illustrative of a new 'holistic' mode of representing the world space of multinational capital that inculcates and cognitively maps outside of the reader's immediate perception – we feel intuitively connected to our environment for having read them. The big question is, can DeLillo develop his technique yet further, or has he nowhere left to go?

In order to answer this question, provide a clearer view of the final conclusions of this thesis, and show in some detail how the two part criteria of transcoded metatheory applies to DeLillo's work, this final chapter will end with a brief look at his latest publication – *The Body Artist* (2001).

### ***Plus ça change?: The Body Artist as Split and Reaffirmation***

“There has to be an imaginary point, a nonplace where language intersects with our perceptions of time and place...” (*The Body Artist*)<sup>17</sup>

In the opinion of long-time DeLillo critic John Leonard there are three sides to Don DeLillo: poster boy for postmodernism; bombhead, or poet of dread; and finally the secret sadhu, or holy man in search of god. For Leonard it was the secret sadhu that wrote *The Body Artist*. A novella of such slight proportions that it pushes the very definition of the term to its minimum limit, *The Body Artist* seems to represent Don DeLillo's answer to the hypothetical question, ‘How does one follow an 800 page novel that seems to encompass the gamut of contemporary American life?’ Running at 124 pages of uncoagulated type, according to its dust jacket *The Body Artist* is a “lean, sad, beautiful novel” that meditates on “love, time and human perception.”<sup>18</sup> The nouns in this description (though to a lesser extent ‘love’) are themes that have been covered before by DeLillo – *Ratner's Star* is nothing if not a meditation on time and human perception - but none of his previous eleven novels could justifiably have merited the adjectives lean, sad and beautiful. *End Zone* is short but so densely packed with ideas and dominated by language as to belie its length, *Libra* schematically manipulates us into cold empathy but doesn't invoke the deeper human emotions and, while enigmatic and rich with scenes of unparalleled prose style, *The Names* falls just the wrong side of beautiful. So does the publication of *The Body Artist* signal a departure for DeLillo – the shedding of a trusted methodology and the adoption of a new one?

On first reading the story of performance artist Lauren Hartke and the bizarre mourning process she follows after the suicide of her film-director husband – Rey Robles: ‘Cinema's Poet of Lonely Places’ - the novella does indeed appear to be like nothing DeLillo has ever written. For instance, its opening chapter – a coffee and blueberry breakfast in a typical American frame house - echoes the kind of ‘stay at

home' private sector fiction of Raymond Carver and Anne Tyler that Frank Lentricchia argues is the antithesis of DeLillo's project: minor, apolitical and with "No expense of intellect required. To be applied in eternal crises of the heart only."<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Hartke's later experiences with 'Mr Tuttle' – a mysterious man who materialises in one of the bedrooms in her rented house after her husband's demise and regurgitates the shared language of the couple in a singular style of speech devoid of tense stability – take DeLillo down another previously untrodden route in the form of the 'uncanny': 'Mr Tuttle' representing the classic figure of the double or familiar stranger (in Michael Gorra's words, the oddness and inexplicability of the novella making it "“The Turn of the Screw” to *Underworld's Golden Bowl*.”<sup>20</sup>) And yet if we look a little closer at this most subtle of pieces it is possible to discern a kind of paring down and sublimation of the previously at times overdetermined transcoding of metatheory that has defined DeLillo's other work. Indeed, it is important to clarify that the vast quantity of ideas DeLillo incorporated in his previous novels have not been sacrificed in *The Body Artist* in the pursuit of more conventional novelistic goals: rather they are so well blended into a single character exclusive third person narration (that at times draws the reader in with brief second person addresses to 'you') that they are not 'exposed' in the prose. Certainly, considering its length, the novella does exceptionally well to give such a thorough intellectual examination of the constructive dimensions of identity – time, space the body and language. For these reasons there is of course a good case for arguing that through *The Body Artist*, DeLillo is simply reacting to the criticism he has received about his one-dimensional characters, narrow tonal register and overemphasis on ideas and ideology. This maybe is the case. But the important thing is that he is reacting *without sacrificing* his manifold metatheoretical intentions. By focusing on the theoretical significance of the strange figure of 'Mr Tuttle' – a middle-aged foundling with a "cartoon head and body, chinless, stick-figured" who possesses the wonderful ability to "make [Lauren's] husband live in the air that rushed from his lungs into his vocal folds." (BA, 62) – it will soon become clear that although easy to read, *The Body Artist* is possibly DeLillo's most 'difficult' and cerebral work: a fiction that synthesises the ideas of phenomenologists and existentialists such as Heidegger and Sartre into a whole that seems to contextualise and transcend the original theory.

In the view of Karl Jaspers, an early definer of existential philosophy, there are two boundaries at which we pass beyond the verbally expressed limits of knowledge – ‘transcendence’ (that which lies outside of science, the content usually being God) and *Existenz* (the limitless capacity of our self for free decisions). For Jaspers these two boundaries come into sharp focus as a result of encounters we have with ‘ultimate situations’ – suffering, guilt and death. *The Body Artist*, within its fictional frame, explores both of these boundaries while getting to the root of how we, as human beings, grieve and come to terms with a nagging conscience following the expiration of a loved one. Although, as mentioned, the novella’s *mis en scene* will probably be dismissed by some critics as supporting the kind of domestic fiction that DeLillo has shied away from in the past, in terms of a philosophical exploration of ‘ultimate situations’ the marital abode is the perfect setting, allowing DeLillo to construct and then deconstruct the ‘familiar.’ “You’re my happy home. Here,” exclaims Robles before taking off to shoot himself. Haunted by the memories of her husband and wanting to “disappear in his smoke, be dead, be him” (BA, 34) Lauren stares indifferently at objects in fixed space while reading, obsessively cleans the bathroom and feels his presence in the rooms he used to prowl through, communicating ideas for his films into a tape recorder: as DeLillo tells us, “The world was lost inside her” (BA, 37). Following these revelations of grief, we as readers with a little knowledge of the affect major trauma has on the human mind, are therefore as unsurprised as Lauren is – “...she thought he was inevitable” (BA, 41) – when she discovers a personification of her anxiety in the form of a “smallish, fine-bodied” kid-like man in a third floor bedroom.

As a cartoon-like character without a concrete self-identity or collective simulacrum, ‘Mr Tuttle’ (named by Lauren after one of her high school teachers) may represent a humorous hyperbolic personification of the charges made by the author’s detractors: there is the slightest of suggestions that he may signal DeLillo parodying himself for his own amusement. But in terms of the story, as a man who quite literally replicates the voices of other characters, ‘Tuttle’ plays an important metatheoretical role, offering a critical lens for a multitude of philosophical refractions: mostly on the relationship between language, time and the ‘real’ world. A Heideggerian transubstantiation of the *unheimlich* (uncanny or unhomely), ‘Tuttle’ paradoxically enables Lauren to come to

terms with her grief and become at home with herself over time by i) allowing her to provide care towards the world (an important Heideggerian concept); and ii) like a living tape recorder or answerphone messaging service, processing and contextualising the intimate verbal personal history of her relationship with her husband by reproducing the words of the past. The following passage, in which ‘Tuttle’ attempts to communicate with Lauren, clearly illustrates how his garbled, ungrammatical speech is accepted by her as strangely soothing and rational on an unspoken level, a sacred incantation that draws her out of herself:

““Coming and going I am leaving. I will go and come. Leaving has come to me. We all, shall all, will all be left. Because I am here and where. And I will go or not or never. And I have seen what I will see. If I am where I will be. Because nothing comes between me.” It came out of him nonstop and it wasn’t schizophrenic speech or the whoop of rippling bodies shocked by god...It was pure chant, transparent, or was he saying something to her? She felt an elation that made it hard for her to listen carefully...And some terror at the edge, or fear of believing, some displacement of self, but this is the point, this is the wedge into ecstasy, the old deep meaning of the word, your eyes rolling upward in your skull.” (BA, 75)

In the opinion of John Leonard, the enigmatic chats Hartke has with ‘Tuttle’ seem like “verbal Rorschachs, verging at one extreme on the aphasic and at another on the glossolalic” – the kind of hypothetical conversation Noam Chomsky might have with an alien. It is true that on reading *The Body Artist* one is very much reminded of the chronoplastic race of extraterrestrials – the Tralfamadorians – in Kurt Vonnegut JR’s *Slaughterhouse Five* who, opposed to strictly linear human perceptions of time, perceive the past, present and future as one. However, if we look a little deeper into the content of ‘Tuttle’s speeches and Hartke’s reactions to her companion, it is possible to discern a method in DeLillo’s madness. Beneath the cryptic and eerie phrases one can identify the play of transcoding that has characterised much of DeLillo’s work.

As mentioned earlier, for Fredric Jameson transcoding is the key to producing new theoretical discourse and has a twofold criterion – i) projecting two distinct conceptual terminologies onto an ‘axis of equivalence,’ and ii) generating ‘strange new ambivalent abstractions’ that turn ceaselessly into their logical opposites. Without doubt transcoding is the precise methodology DeLillo has followed in producing this philosophical meditation on human ontology. Working outside of ‘pure theory’

however and using fiction as his 'axis of equivalence' allows DeLillo to project more than the two concepts Jameson imagines and provides more of an opportunity for ambivalent abstraction (DeLillo's favourite mode). For instance, Jameson cites Baudrillard and Lacan as pre-eminent examples of effective 'dual transcoders' – Baudrillard linking "the formula for exchange and use value (rewritten as a fraction) with the fraction for the sign itself (signifier and signified)" and Lacan identifying "the semiotic fraction with the "fraction" produced by the bar separating conscious from unconscious." (CLLC, 395). DeLillo's novella on the other hand attempts to project and 'make equivalent' a wide range of different 'pre-existing' philosophical perspectives on being and time based around oppositional distinctions, melding them into an ambivalent whole arranged around one main binary field made up of: i) linguistically constructed phenomenological perceptions of reality (words and linguistically referenced actual experiences dominating subjective views of the objective material world); and ii) 'natural' materialism (the human spirit and the mind and its mental constructions as functions, and evolutionary developments of, matter.) Indeed, it is the tension between these two fields that drives the novella. For instance, DeLillo frequently seems to engage with structuralist thoughts on the diachronic/synchronic dimensions and 'prison-house' of language while maintaining a hold on the concept of 'natural time' in order to examine the effect grief has on personal chronology – a temporal relativity beyond the understanding of science:

"There is nothing he can do to imagine time existing in reassuring sequence, passing, flowing, happening - the world happens, it has to, we feel it – with names and dates and distinctions. His future is unnamed. It is simultaneous, somehow, with the present. Neither happens before or after the other and they are equally accessible, perhaps, if only in his mind." (BA, 77); *On the word continuum* – "She thought it meant a continuous thing, a continuous whole, and the only way to distinguish one part from another, this from that, now from then, is by making arbitrary divisions." (BA, 91); "Maybe he falls, he slides if that is a useful word, from his experience of an objective world, the deepest description of space-time, where he does not feel a sense of future direction...If there is no sequential order except for what we engender to make us safe in the world, then maybe it is possible, what, to cross from one nameless state into another, except that clearly it isn't." (BA, 83)

Likewise Lauren's perceptions of the material world are oscillations between intrusive mediations of systemic knowledge and an acceptance of the world as existing outside of her understanding - an appreciation of the sublime:

“It was as though some, maybe, medieval scholastic had attempted to classify all known odors and had found something that did not fit into his system and had called it soya...” (BA, 16); *On the night sky* – “She watched for a long time and it began to spread and melt and go deeper still, developing strata and magnitudes and light-years in numbers so unapproachable that someone had to invent idiot names to represent the arrays of ones and zeros and powers and dominations because only the bedtime language of childhood can save us from awe and shame” (BA, 101); “At night the sky was very near, sprawled in star smoke and gamma cataclysms, but she didn’t see it the way she used to, as soul extension, dumb guttural wonder, a thing that lived outside language in the oldest part of her.” (BA, 37)

In the hands of a lesser writer, the policy of ‘ambivalent turning’ between the systemic and unsystemic, the phenomenological and material, DeLillo employs in *The Body Artist* could have been a disaster, the oscillation between poles leading to narrative confusion. That is not to say that the methodology works throughout the novella. At times he steps away from subtlety and provides the reader with signposted ‘thoughts’ such as Lauren’s Cartesian rationalisation of the mental and physical: “There’s nothing like a raging crap, she thought, to make mind and body one” (BA, 35). Likewise the phenomenological nominalist position often dominates its materialist essentialist opposite – a natural bias considering it has featured throughout DeLillo’s oeuvre:

“It was always as if. He did this or that as if. She needed a reference elsewhere to get him placed.” (BA, 45); “She named the visitor in his honor. Mr. Tuttle. She thought it would make him easier to see.” (BA, 48); “She took the soap out of his other hand and rubbed it on the cloth and washed his chest and arms, wordlessly naming his parts for him.” (BA, 68); ““The word for moonlight is moonlight.” This made her happy. It was logically complex and oddly moving and circularly beautiful and true – or maybe not so circular but straight as straight can be.” (BA, 82); “The best things in the house were the plank floor in the kitchen and the oak balustrade on the staircase. Just saying the words. Thinking the words.” (BA, 93)

Most of the time however, the oppositions he incorporates in the prose are well balanced and enliven the milieu he is asking the reader to enter – bringing the world to life by inviting us to appreciate a ‘holistic’ view of everyday objects and occurrences:

“You know more surely who you are on a strong bright day after a storm when the smallest falling leaf is stabbed with self-awareness.” (BA, 7); “When birds look into houses, what impossible worlds they see. Think. What a shedding of every knowable surface and process.” (BA, 22);

Inspired in part by 'The Artist Naked in a Cage,' a human rights address DeLillo wrote in 1997 on behalf of the Chinese writer Wei Jingsheng, which included references to Kafka's *A Hunger Artist*, *The Body Artist* is an attempt to understand, through transcoded metatheory, the changed nature of individual subjectivity. In Jean Baudrillard's view the 'postmodern avatar' of the subject is "a self-referential and self-operating unit... a tactician and promoter of his own existence whose point of reference is... merely the efficiency of his own functioning or performance."<sup>21</sup> Plunged into a reverie of self-actualisation following the death of her husband, performance artist Hartke is forced to confront the boundaries of her own existence – her ontological references – in order to discover exactly who she is when stripped of defining others. It is this process she subsequently examines in her own stage act: a form of exteriorised cognitive mapping. Culminating in an imitation of 'Tuttle' mouthing a monologue without a context and jumping into flailing seizures that remind her critic friend of "animated cartoons" and the reader of the whirling aborigine in *Ratner's Star*, Hartke's performance is ostensibly about "who we are when we are not rehearsing who we are" (BA, 110) – a piece that "begins in solitary otherness" and ends by becoming "familiar and even personal" (BA, 109-110). In other words it allows her to reconnect with the world. Indeed, one gets the feeling that, having been through this cathartic period, Hartke can drop her new found pastime of watching a live-streaming video feed on the internet from the edge of a two-lane road in Kotka, Finland and concentrate on her own 'real time' existence. The following passage, in which Hartke muses on the practice of reading a newspaper, seems to connect with this movement and DeLillo's own reflections on the incarceration of Wei Jingsheng:

"You separate the Sunday sections and there are endless identical lines of print with people living somewhere in the words and the strange contained reality of paper and ink seeps through the house for a week and when you look at a page and distinguish one line from another it begins to gather you into it and there are people being tortured halfway around the world, who speak another language, and you have conversations with them more or less uncontrollably until you become aware you are doing it and then you stop, seeing whatever is in front of you at the time, like a glass of juice in your husband's hand... Or you become someone else, one of the people in the story, doing dialogue of your own devising. You become a man at times, living between the lines, doing another version of the story." (BA, 19-20)



Living between the lines is DeLillo's favourite novelistic position. We have seen it so often in his work. Although one senses that he may have overdone his emphasis on multiple truths, uncertainty and ambivalence in *The Body Artist*, offering us sentences such as "...Something that is also something else, but what, and what" (BA, 36) and "Somehow. The weakest word in the language. And more or less. And maybe. Always maybe. She was always maybeing." (BA, 92) he gathers us into the 'strange contained reality' of his novella and asks that we too stop to recognise the world around us in order to encounter that which constructs our own subjectivity. More than anything therefore *The Body Artist* is an allegory on being and becoming. Although we stumble blindly in the face of the sublime, bombarded by the countless narratives that surround us, DeLillo's work attempts to render us "...defenseless against the truth of the world" (BA, 77) enabling us to come to terms with the fact that there is "finally just one" (BA, 35) ultimate truth – that we must make of our existence, our time, what we can.

A slim work, *The Body Artist*, as Michael Gorra argues, will probably play only a small role in any account of DeLillo's career. And yet it manages to consolidate the novelist's ambivalent position towards language examined throughout this thesis – its ability to support human identity while at the same time imprisoning the user in a system from which there is little hope of transcendence or a return to an earlier non-linguistic state. In a way Don DeLillo's critics are right to say that his characters are weak, but not for the reasons they believe. Drawn as one-dimensional not because the author cannot imbue them with the idiosyncrasies of speech and action that distinguish the individual from the masses, DeLillo's characters are weak because they are defined by the semiotic systems and strong words that circumscribe their lives. Sometimes they take refuge in silence, on other occasions they give in to the ecstasy of pure transparent chant or glossolalia, "their eyes rolling upwards in their skull" (BA, 75). Under extreme circumstances, as we have seen, they attempt to turn the language system against itself using words as weapons. In this they are mere reflections of the controlling mind of DeLillo, whose favoured intellectual pose is one of equivocation or ambivalent abstraction in the face of never-ending dialectics – a sorting of philosophical and political positions or truths without commitment to an outcome. In an interview in 1993 DeLillo stated his belief in the fact that "...Before everything, there's language": postmodernist, historiographic metafictionalist, metatheoretician he

may be, but, in the face of the power of the word, he shows us through his fictions of 'significant' struggle that he is as weak as the rest of us.

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