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DeLillo Special Issue

How to Cite: Alberts, C 2016 Introduction: On Influence. *Orbit: Writing around Pynchon*, 4(2): 1, pp. 1–11, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.16995/orbit.198>

Published: 31 May 2016

Peer Review:

This article is a non-peer-reviewed introduction to a special issue of *Orbit: Writing around Pynchon*, which is a journal of the Open Library of Humanities.

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Crystal Alberts, 'Introduction: On Influence' (2016) 4(2): 1
Orbit: Writing around Pynchon, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.16995/orbit.198>

DELILLO SPECIAL ISSUE

Introduction: On Influence

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Don DeLillo's works have been mapped through various networks of influence throughout their prolific reception history. This special issue addresses these aspects of influence on the 45th anniversary of the publication of *Americana*.

From the business card “engraved with his name and ‘I don’t want to talk about it’” (LeClair, “Interview” 19) to his 1985 acceptance speech for his first National Book Award (“I’m sorry I couldn’t be here tonight, but I thank you all for coming” (Purcell)), in a century that, according to one DeLillo character, “is *on film*” (*The Names* 200) and more recently *is online*, Don DeLillo’s general shunning of the spotlight is rivaled only by Thomas Pynchon, William Gaddis, and J.D. Salinger. Unlike Pynchon or Salinger, DeLillo has actually made public appearances;¹ however, like Gaddis, he has also avoided turning himself “into a performer, into a celebrity like Byron” (Gaddis 2), preferring instead to let his written work speak for itself because, for him, “[w]hen you try to unravel something you’ve written, you belittle it in a way” (LeClair, “Interview” 20).

Although he has been one from time to time since the 1990s, DeLillo has seemingly never been “happy being a public figure” (Burn), and shortly after the sale of his archive to the University of Texas, Austin’s Harry Ransom Center (HRC), DeLillo stated that he was doing his “best to disappear from public view, which” he added, “is tougher than it sounds” (“Letter to Alberts”). DeLillo’s persistent refusal to participate in the commodification of the author does not mean that he has withdrawn from the world, but rather it has enabled him “to move transparently within it” (LeClair, “Missing Writers” 51). In fact, even without the expected advertisements of himself, from the beginning of his career, DeLillo’s work has shaped the way that we view the world, so much so that, in November 2015, he was awarded the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters for lifetime achievement. According to Harold Augenbraum, the National Book Foundation’s Executive Director, “Don DeLillo is unquestionably one of the greatest novelists of his generation [. . .] He has had an enormous influence on the two generations of writers that followed, and his work will continue to resonate for generations to come.” At the 66th NBA Awards

¹ His first public reading is reported to have happened November 26, 1990 at the 92nd Street Y (<https://www.nytimes.com/books/97/03/16/lifetimes/delillo.html>). His first promotional book tour was in 1991, after which he declared “I’m retiring [. . .] This is the beginning and end of my promotional career” (Burn). While still relatively rare, he has made more appearances since 1997.

Ceremony, DeLillo began his acceptance speech by stating “[y]es, I am here to talk about myself,” but then, perhaps in the spirit of his previous appearance, he quickly shifted focus to talk about books, none of which were written by him. One might say that by remembering the first paperbacks he ever owned, “[w]ho [he] was, where [he] was, what these books meant to [him] when [he] read them for the first time,” DeLillo was touching on the idea of influence, which was ultimately an appropriate subject for that occasion (National Book Foundation).

It is also fitting, here, in an introduction to a special journal issue on his work honoring the 45th Anniversary of DeLillo’s first novel, *Americana* (1971). While there have been a number of edited collections and monographs dedicated to DeLillo over the years, this one stands out for a few reasons. Rather than concentrate on some of his most frequently analyzed books, such as *White Noise* (1985), *Underworld* (1997), or *Falling Man* (2007), this issue includes new articles on less commonly—or rarely—discussed texts, like *The Names* (1982), *Cosmopolis* (2003), and *Point Omega* (2010), as well as two of his earliest publications “The Uniforms” (1970) and, of course, *Americana*, demonstrating the need for increased attention to DeLillo’s full body of work. This issue also contains a number of articles that are firmly grounded in the *Don DeLillo Papers* housed by the HRC, offering insights into DeLillo’s research and creative process that haven’t been articulated elsewhere. Regardless of whether it is based on his archive, close reading, or both, each article, in one way or another, touches on influence: who influenced DeLillo, what influenced DeLillo, or how DeLillo has influenced others.

Along those lines, many scholars acknowledge that cinema impacts DeLillo’s writing. DeLillo has admitted it himself time and again in interviews, mentioning not only the films of Jean-Luc Godard, who “had a more immediate effect on [his] early work than anything [he’d] ever read” (LeClair, “Interview” 25), but also those of Michelangelo Antonioni, Federico Fellini, Ingmar Bergman, Stanley Kubrick, and Howard Hawks (DeCurtis 59). In “*Weekend Warriors: DeLillo’s ‘The Uniforms,’ Players, and Film-to-Page Reappearance,*” Matthew Luter considers Godard’s 1967 film in relation to one of DeLillo’s earliest, and least discussed, short stories, “The Uniforms,”

as well as its later iteration in the prologue to DeLillo's fifth novel. Luter points to allusions to Godard in the text, like others before him, but goes further, identifying references to John Ford, John Huston, Alain Resnais, and Gillo Pontecorvo. However, Luter declares: "to assert that 'The Uniforms' is a piece of cinematically-inspired fiction because it borrows from *Weekend* or because it makes some brainy allusions to the French New Wave is to miss how truly cinematic the story is" (Luter 10). In this article, Luter carefully details the cinematic aesthetics of "The Uniforms:" the places where the grammar and techniques of a filmmaker make themselves known in the narrative. He demonstrates the ways that DeLillo not only subverts Godard, but also subverts himself with the reappearance of this story in *Players* (1977) and asks that we reconsider the way that we think about adaptation.

Similar to Luter, Graley Herren highlights the role that film plays in DeLillo's work, in this case in relation to DeLillo's first novel *Americana*, citing allusions to Bergman, Akira Kurosawa, and, of course, Godard. But more importantly, as Herren notes, David Bell is the first of DeLillo's many filmmaker characters, one who sees the silver screen as a giant mirror and who "is dazzled by the sacramental simulations of commercial America: the groundless, superficial, idealized screen images peddled by his commercial executive father and epitomized by his celluloid *Imago Dei* Burt Lancaster" (Herren 8). While he makes no claims that Lacan has directly influenced DeLillo, in "American Narcissus: Lacanian Reflections on DeLillo's *Americana*," Herren goes beyond Freud to focus instead on how Lacan's Mirror Stage can help readers analyze David Bell's love of self, mother, and country.

Americana has been cited as the text most influenced by DeLillo's own personal experience "in the sense that [he] drew material more directly from people and situations [he] knew firsthand" (LeClair, "Interview" 20); however, in his seventh novel, DeLillo moves away from New York, the city that had played a central role in many of his works dating back to what seems to be his first published short story, "The River Jordan" (1960). As Cornelius Collins notes in "Gathering Facts for the End of the World': Don DeLillo's Archive of Global Turbulence," *The Names* has long been considered a turning point in DeLillo's career by scholars and DeLillo himself, who declared that the unfamiliarity of the Greek landscape "made [him] feel almost duty

bound to get it right” and this “motivation” has “informed his work ever since” (Collins 4, internal citations omitted). While film and images also appear, Collins asserts that DeLillo’s manipulation of his sources—from English-language dailies to texts by political theorists, which have remained mostly unexplored until now—is also essential to understanding DeLillo. In particular, based on a close examination of the research materials housed by the HRC that informed *The Names*, *Mao II* (1991), and *Cosmopolis*, Collins investigates the complicated ways in which DeLillo’s thoughts on global capitalism shifted over the course of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

These two threads—politics and film—intertwine in *Point Omega*, as Matthew Shipe points out in “War as Haiku: The Politics of Don DeLillo’s Late Style.” Situating DeLillo among his contemporaries—Thomas Pynchon, Philip Roth, John Updike, and others—Shipe argues that these authors’ most recent work offers “a rich, and often troubling exploration of our current political situation” that frequently “explicitly address[es] the political upheaval and violence that has characterized the new century” (3). Shipe supports his claims through an analysis of *Point Omega* and its spare prose in light of Edward Said’s theories on work by artists near the end of their lives. Shipe also discusses the ongoing, but changing, role of film in DeLillo’s work from the “bare stretch of wall” that David Bell uses as a backdrop in *Americana* to the industrial loft wall that Jim Finley has in mind for his documentary of Richard Elster, the political theorist who helped to orchestrate the second Iraq War (*Americana* 283; *Point Omega* 45). Specifically, Shipe considers how the viewing of Douglas Gordon’s *24 Hour Psycho* at the beginning and end of DeLillo’s fifteenth novel influences the way the reader experiences the middle section that focuses on Finley, one of DeLillo’s latest filmmakers.

Brian Chappell also meditates on the structure of DeLillo’s late novel in “Death and Metafiction: On the ‘Ingenious Architecture’ of *Point Omega*.” According to Chappell, as “contemporary America’s leading chronicler of death,” DeLillo is not only aware that death is omnipresent and “an integral aspect of the human experience,” but he is also cognizant that this awareness “is simultaneously exacerbated and suppressed by the millennial cultural climate, where heightened dread is assuaged

by an increased emphasis on comfort and distraction" (2). With this cultural situation in mind, Chappell suggests that DeLillo's novel contemplates what role, if any, fiction plays when encountering death in the hyper-mediated, twenty-first century world. Similar to Shipe, Chappell focuses on the importance of *24 Hour Psycho*; however, Chappell argues that the middle of *Point Omega* holds the key to understanding the "Anonymity" sections that begin and end the text. In fact, Chappell asserts that Finley authors all three, because "*Point Omega* is first and foremost a document of one man's coming-to-terms with his personal grief and the silence that awaits him after death" (4). In so doing, Chappell views this novel from a completely different angle than any other critic to this point.

Alternative perceptions and DeLillo as "ingenious architect" are also central to "Freud is finished, Einstein's next": Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*, Chaos Theory, and Quantum Entanglement," my own contribution to this issue (Stade). Like Collins' article, this one is also based on research conducted in the *Don DeLillo Papers* at the HRC, but rather than tracking DeLillo's ongoing thoughts on global politics, this one traces DeLillo's decades long contemplation of mathematics, physics, and time. Specifically, this essay considers DeLillo's thirteenth novel in relation to his fourth, *Ratner's Star* (1976), which, as DeLillo explains, "is a book which is almost all structure. The structure of the book is the book" (DeCurtis 59). This article argues that the symmetrical form of *Cosmopolis* mirrors the pivotal moment in which it is set (between the Cold War and the age of terror) and the period in which it was written (between pre- and post-9/11). It also considers the pervasive zero-oneness of the twenty-first century as displayed in *Cosmopolis*, suggesting that there is a parallel between the entwined existence of Eric Packer and Benno Levin and the world after "the huge antenna [fell] out of the sky, straight down, blunt end first, like an arrow moving backwards in time" ("Ruins").

With DeLillo's lifetime achievement award and the release of his sixteenth novel at the age of 79, recent reviewers have reflected on DeLillo's career and his impact on contemporary culture and literature. Many repeat some accepted truths about him. For example, Xan Brooks asserts that DeLillo

has made it his business to speak the language of America; to channel its tensions and pick at its scabs. He's tackled (and in some cases anticipated) the underside of pop stardom (in *Great Jones Street*, his third novel, published in 1973), the dark glamour of terrorism (*Mao II*, 1991), the consequences of cyber-capitalism (2003's *Cosmopolis*), the impact of the A-bomb (*Underworld*, 1997).

Another favorite truism has also appeared more than once—"[a]ll plots tend to move deathward"—the sentence that can be (and seemingly has been) used to explain nearly all of DeLillo's work (Anderson). Charles Finch, in a piece on *Zero K* (2016), takes a slightly different approach, declaring

now that we're some distance from his earlier career it seems increasingly clear that no writer of his era — not Pynchon, not Morrison, not Roth — has had anything close to his influence on American fiction. You see his fingerprints on the most diverse set of authors, from Jonathan Franzen to Rachel Kushner to Jennifer Egan to Adam Johnson to Colson Whitehead to Deborah Eisenberg. Any time a writer in the last 30 years has addressed mass culture or irony or late capitalism, DeLillo has been lurking (Finch).

Notable names missing from this list of next generation authors influenced by DeLillo include, among numerous others, Paul Auster, Richard Powers, and, of course, David Foster Wallace, whose work is also the subject of a (forthcoming) special issue of *Orbit: Writing around Pynchon*.

The relationship between DeLillo, Wallace, and their work is frequently alluded to in Wallace scholarship; however, as Graham Foster points out, it is generally an observation made in passing that has yet to be explored in depth. Based on his careful research in the archives of both DeLillo and Wallace, Foster begins to rectify this deficiency in "A Deep Insider's Elegiac Tribute: The Work of Don DeLillo in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*." Foster demonstrates how DeLillo's *End Zone* (1972), in particular, profoundly influenced Wallace's magnum opus. But, Wallace's use of

DeLillo is not simply Wallace's attempt to critique and throw off his postmodern forefathers, as he did John Barth in "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way" (1989), rather, according to Foster, Wallace picks up some of DeLillo's thematic concerns and carries them forward, all while consciously echoing DeLillo's structure and style to his own ends.

Those who have had the opportunity to look at Wallace's copies of DeLillo's novels or his correspondence with DeLillo at the HRC can attest that Wallace carefully studied the style of DeLillo's prose, noting its alliteration, assonance, and rhythm.² This close attention to sentences and paragraphs might explain why DeLillo, who describes himself as a writer who is "very concerned with questions of language" (Nance), discussed his work with Wallace and vice versa, although he usually prefers not to, choosing instead to "talk about movies" with other authors because they're "easier" (Kellogg). However, Wallace isn't the only one who has paid such close attention to DeLillo's language, as suggested by the long list of writers who have been influenced by DeLillo. In his recent review of *Zero K*, Joshua Ferris confesses, "I don't read a DeLillo novel for its plot, character, setting [. . .] I read a DeLillo novel for its sentences." And the scholars in this collection, more often than not, are concerned with this same type of close reading, documenting the intricate way that DeLillo constructs his texts, noting how he incorporated and manipulated outside sources, observing the reoccurring structural patterns of his narratives, in short, offering new ways of looking at the work of Don DeLillo—whose influence has already been felt for forty-five years and which will continue to be for generations to come—in the hopes of revealing some of what "DeLillo – the seeker, the prophet, the mystic, the guide – sees" (Ferris).

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

² See, for example, Wallace's copy of *End Zone* or Wallace's letter to DeLillo dated 19 January 1997.

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How to cite this article: Alberts, C 2016 Introduction: On Influence. *Orbit: Writing around Pynchon*, 4(2): 1, pp. 1–11, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.16995/orbit.198>

Published: 31 May 2016

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