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DELILLO SPECIAL ISSUE

Death and Metafiction: On the "Ingenious Architecture" of *Point Omega*

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This essay proposes a method for re-reading Don DeLillo's 2010 novel *Point Omega*. While criticism of the novel focuses on DeLillo's recent metafictional gestures toward ineffability and existential despair, this essay reads the novel as a metafictional gesture toward the necessity of fiction in the twenty-first century. It does so by reviewing the tripartite structure of the novel as being the product, in its entirety, of the protagonist Jim Finley. The main narrative of the novel consists of his first-person account of a traumatic experience in the desert of California with Iraq War propagandist Richard Elster. The chapters that bookend the novel tell, in an omniscient third-person mode, of an unnamed man viewing Douglas Gordon's film *24-Hour Psycho* at the Museum of Modern Art. This essay reads these bookending sections as also authored by Finley, rather than by an invisible narrator or an implied author. To do so reads *Point Omega* as the story first and foremost of a character coming to terms with trauma and tragedy by turning to fiction, rather than by abandoning communication, as does Elster. Such a reading reaffirms DeLillo's faith in the power of fiction to cope with twenty-first century ills, and with death itself.

Introduction

Don DeLillo is regarded as “one of the key cultural anatomists” of contemporary America (Wiese 2). Time and again exhibiting a “prophetic tone” in his novels (Wilcox 89), DeLillo “manage[s] to be influenced by, in step with, and somehow one step ahead of the zeitgeist” (Kavadlo 76). But DeLillo’s anatomies of American culture more often than not take the form of autopsies. At the center of DeLillo’s aesthetic vision is the felt presence of death and its various manifestations: murder, suicide, terrorism, kidnapping, rape, totalitarianism, media simulation, paranoia, and consumerism, as well as a general despair and emptiness. His novels also exhibit an “uncanny sensitivity to the most disturbing currents of our age – often before they become perceptible” (Coward, “Lady” 39). To read a DeLillo novel is to observe our current and future ills in their nascent stages, to the extent that he might be considered our foremost guide through millennial hell (Adelman 161).

But while he speaks of the contemporary death-saturated atmosphere, DeLillo transcends the topical by speaking of a universal condition. Adam Thurschwell, writing about *Cosmopolis*, puts it this way: death is “the one traumatic event whose effects can *only* be experienced prior to its event [. . .] Death, just because we know that it will occur but do not know when, encroaches on every present moment of our experience [. . .] it structures the very nature of our experience” (287, italics in original). DeLillo’s fiction dwells in this recognition, imagining “the extent to which one can exist in one’s own death” (Helvacioğlu 183).¹ DeLillo is contemporary America’s leading chronicler of death because he proceeds from a recognition that a sensitivity to the omnipresence of death is an integral aspect of the human experience. But he also believes that this sensitivity is simultaneously exacerbated and suppressed by the millennial cultural climate, where heightened dread is assuaged by an increased emphasis on comfort and distraction.

For John Coyle, DeLillo “seems to insist, in a spirit of high seriousness, on the necessary role of art as the one intelligent means available of making sense of

¹ See Polatinsky and Scherzinger for a discussion of DeLillo’s treatment of near-death experiences. They focus on *Falling Man*, placing that novel in dialogue with Blanchot’s *The Instant of My Death* and Derrida’s *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*.

death" (28). But given the climate of simulation, "the representation of death poses enormous challenges" (Kaufmann 366), because there is "no easy way to identify a specific instance in which to isolate the actuality of death" (Helvacıoglu 187). The novel, the tool which "reveal[s] consciousness," must penetrate the atmosphere of hyper-mediation in order to encounter the presence of death with sufficient focus – to be *present to death* (DeLillo, *Mao II* 200). But the novel must also contend with its own mediating strategies; the legacy of postmodernism consists of the question not only of whether the novel will survive in the new millennium, but also of whether the novel – and language itself – is even capable of dealing with the question of death without itself becoming yet another form of mediation. Can the novel, DeLillo's work asks, bring us closer to a sense of presence, or does it only add another layer of discourse that must be penetrated by the vigilant consciousness? In this way DeLillo's work is metafictional to the core: so many of his novels, in their form and content, address the novel's ability—or lack thereof—to regain a spirituality that can encounter death with a clear mind.

This problem, though central to DeLillo's career in general, comes into acute focus in the twenty-first century. After the monumental artistic and critical success of *Underworld* (1997), DeLillo turned to a lean presentation, tending toward abstraction, evoking a Beckettian modernism bent on silence and failure.² These works – *The Body Artist* (2001), *Cosmopolis* (2003), *Falling Man* (2007), and *Point Omega* (2010) – consist of a "contracted minimalism" (2), writes Martin Paul Eve (about *Point Omega*), a "form of withdrawal" (3) that reflects a seeming loss of hope in the possibilities of art to assuage trauma and stem the apocalyptic tendencies of the age (Adelman 160). These tendencies seem to culminate in *Point Omega*, a slim but dense meditation on the nature of time, violence, and moral complicity – the relationship between death and art.

This essay will address the critical trend to view *Point Omega* as the culmination of DeLillo's pursuit of a fictional abstraction that seems to despair over the possibilities of fiction in the age of terror and torture. In many ways, the novel gestures

² See Nel for a fruitful discussion of DeLillo's modernist aesthetic tendencies in dialogue with his view of postmodern life.

toward ineffability. Richard Elster's theoretical prognostications about the end of human existence clash with the inexplicable disappearance and presumed murder of his daughter, Jessie. He is left a shell of a man, unable to speak. Jim Finley, in turn, abandons his project of documenting Elster's thoughts on film. This disaster is bookended by scenes at New York's Museum of Modern Art, where an unnamed man views Douglas Gordon's film *24 Hour Psycho*, in which Hitchcock's original film is slowed to a running time of two frames per second. The man, in his obsessive (re) viewing of the film, comes to meditate on humanity's inability to perceive what Elster might call "[t]he true life" (DeLillo, *Point Omega* 17) and embraces a murderous mindset. On the surface, if one were to speak of *Point Omega's* metafictional qualities, she would point out the many gestures toward our final inability to come to terms with both local and cosmic death – the hell that we have wrought, and the hell that awaits us.

But this essay proposes a way to re-read the novel, focusing on its subtle rhetorical dynamics, what Michiko Kakutani called its "ingenious architecture." To do so reveals that *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. It is a metafictional assertion of the *necessity* of fiction to grapple with these concerns. Finley's turn to fiction exhibits a persistent longing to write, despite all situations. By reading Finley as the author of *both* the main narrative of his time with Elster and the "Anonymity" sections, many new ways of reading the novel suddenly come to light.

In order to make this claim, this essay will consider critical reactions to *Point Omega* that address its "lack of representational quality" (Giaino 176). In one area, critics lament the novel's deferral of dramaturgy for the sake of perceived narrative stasis. In another area, critics accuse DeLillo of self-parody, as Elster's theoretical discourse is a hyperbolic manifestation of what are otherwise regarded as DeLillo's "prophetic" tendencies. The most significant critical reaction addresses the extent to which the metafictional characteristics of the novel ultimately gesture toward abstraction, nothingness, and despair over the possibilities of representing reality – and death – in language and narrative.

Critical Perspectives

Sam Anderson is one of many critics who address DeLillo's recent preoccupation with slowing down time. He argues that not only does *Point Omega* "[fit] right into [the] glacial aesthetic" of DeLillo's fiction since *Underworld*; "[y]ou could even say it's something of a breakthrough" or a culmination of his fascination with time (Anderson).³ Anderson reflects a general critical disparagement of DeLillo's recent experiments with time, lamenting that *Point Omega* "brings us, in just over 100 pages, as close to pure stasis as we're ever likely to get. He continues, asserting "DeLillo is, after Beckett and Robbe-Grillet, the indisputable master of grinding plot to the brink of stasis and then recording its every last movement. *Point Omega* seems like a logical endpoint of that quest" (Anderson). DeLillo frames this thematic preoccupation with time as a matter of consciousness in an interview with Charles McGrath: "The idea of time and motion and the question of what we see, what we miss when we look at things in a conventional manner – all that seemed very inviting to me to think about." DeLillo suggests that modifications of conventional narrative temporalities lead to an altered state of consciousness. His interest in slowing time "to reveal consciousness" (*Mao II* 200) appears in many forms throughout his career, especially at moments close to death.⁴ In the twenty-first century, DeLillo's use of such techniques seem to build in a crescendo toward *Point Omega*, in which seemingly nothing happens, and what pointedly *does* happen is obscured from view and never explained.

³ For further discussion on DeLillo's interest in time in his twenty-first century novels, see Coale on DeLillo's robust engagement with quantum theory.

⁴ Across many novels, DeLillo has exhibited a penchant for slowing down time to narrate the moment of death. In *White Noise*, Jack Gladney rehearses his plan to kill Willie Mink several times and with several iterations, slowing his actual progress toward murder to a near halt. In *Libra*, Kennedy's assassination is re-narrated from multiple perspectives, to give the reader a sense of a frozen moment in time. In *Mao II*, DeLillo zooms the narrative lens in to focus on Bill Gray's thoughts in stream-of-consciousness style. The reader experiences his final moment through his eyes, thinking his thoughts. At the conclusion of the main narrative of *Underworld*, the narrator repeats Nick Shay's thoughts in the moments directly following his accidental shooting of George the Waiter. The same sentence is repeated over and over, with variations, thus indicating the depth of Nick's trauma. *Point Omega* literalizes this concept through its *ekphrasis* of *24-Hour Psycho*, in which the moment of death is depicted in extreme slow motion.

The reader is therefore left with questions about DeLillo's faith in the efficacy of the novel. If the novel is not meant to unfold action and the motives for them, what, as Mary Holland asks, is the point?

These temporal techniques dovetail in *Point Omega* with theoretical style that is exaggerated to the degree that critics suggest that DeLillo's penchant for pseudo-philosophical discourse has finally caught up with him.⁵ Holland asserts that "all the pompous meaning-of-life talk narcissistically vomited up by the main (male) characters" offers a "killingly abstract philosophy, reaching beyond posthumanism into inanimacy." The preponderance of "hollow theorizing and mystic mouthwash" (Robson) suggests that "the curse of self-parody appears to be taking hold" (Cheuse). John Banville argues that in his recent novels DeLillo's "dialogue is becoming increasingly stylized, frequently reading like the subtitles from one of Antonioni's more jadedly pseudo-sophisticated movies of the early 1960s." Kakutani laments that

there is something suffocating and airless about this entire production. Unlike the people in his most memorable novels, the three characters here do not live in a recognizable America or recognizable reality – rather, they feel like roles written for a stylized and highly contrived theater piece.

In general, critics have responded mostly negatively to the theoretical tenor of the novel, noting a shift in DeLillo's "prophetic tone" (Wilcox 89). In *Point Omega*, DeLillo seems to offer almost pure concept, pure experiment, subordinating narrative to a static plane of abstraction. Elster is the vehicle for this mode of discourse, but rather

⁵ DeLillo has satirized the theorist figure in several novels, exacerbating their discursive allure to the point of absurdity (and to the point that critics mistakenly associate DeLillo's worldview with theirs). Examples of these characters abound across novels, and almost all of them address an aspect of death. In *The Names*, Owen Brademas exhibits a fascination and murky involvement with a Greek death cult. *White Noise*'s Murray Siskind, an actual academic theorist, espouses Baudrillardian theories and a commensurate relativistic stance. Jesse Detwiler of *Underworld*, a billionaire waste manager, believes that civilization was built around its rapidly accumulating waste, and not the other way around. Vija Kinski of *Cosmopolis*, Eric Packer's "chief of theory," accuses a self-immolator of unoriginality. In *Falling Man*, former suspected terrorist-turned-art dealer Martin Ridnour echoes Baudrillard's idea that the Twin Towers existed solely as a provocation for their destruction.

than view the novel as a failed stylization of theory, this article will view the novel on the whole as a fictional(ized) rebuttal of Elster.

But scholarship on *Point Omega* furthers this connection between metafictionality and despair. David Cowart observes DeLillo's continued technique of depicting art within art, serving as "a reflection [. . .] of the DeLillo work in which it appears" (33). In *Point Omega*, DeLillo's depiction of Douglas Gordon's rendition of Hitchcock's *Psycho* (a densely layered *ekphrasis* and meta-commentary) makes one feel that "one is encountering subtle, enigmatic distillations of all that troubles Americans at the millennial crossroads" (Cowart 33). Moreover, the novel's dramaturgical mirroring of Hitchcock's *The Lady Vanishes*, combined with its self-conscious deferral of closure, solidifies, for Cowart, the thematic centrality of existential mystery, in which the novel threatens to uncover the "nothing" at the heart of human experience (40).

Martin Paul Eve notes the "bidirectionality" of *Point Omega's* metafictional dynamics, which gesture in one direction toward the formal preoccupations of DeLillo's earlier work, and in another direction toward allusive connections between the Cold War and the Iraq War (13). By taking up the postmodernist "aspects" of "metafictional commentary, ontological indeterminacy, and [his] intra-corpus intertextuality," DeLillo underscores, for Eve, the political efficacy of metafiction, which provides a "critical distancing apparatus" that allows readers to make broad connections about the nature of war (6, 5). Agreeing with Cowart, Eve asserts that making those connections, in turn, "deflects problems of immediate political legitimacy toward larger, less topical questions of a civilization's decline" (Eve 17, quoting Cowart). But as it "perpend[s] the prospect of an omega point for the American empire," *Point Omega*, and DeLillo's work in general, is "seeking a course towards self-obliteration and recognition of nonknowledge" (18). DeLillo's metafictional strategies position the novel as a tool of prophecy, whereby a sufficient amount of distance provides a deeper and longer view of the arc of decline. In Eve's view, the novel's refusal to represent current realities more sufficiently reflects the failure of humanity to make meaning, to survive politically and morally.

Askold Melnyczuk picks up this tone of despair, pointing out Elster's penchant for post-structuralist relativism. In his essay on renditions, Elster attempts to divert

the reality of violence and suffering through a linguistic maze, replete with “footnotes like nested snakes,” but with “no mention of black sites, third-party states or international treaties and conventions” (DeLillo, *Point Omega* 34). Melnyczuk warns of the danger of this line of thinking, a clear side effect of the age of theory. He therefore underscores the poetics of complicity at the heart of the novel, which “has raised the subject of war, raised the issue of our complicity [. . .] the book hints at how our capacity for ignoring the consequences of our actions is nurtured and worked by multiple cultural forces” (Melnyczuk 212). The novel does nothing less than raise “the issue we must confront if we hope to understand ourselves [. . .] Are we willing to acknowledge the suffering we have inflicted and continue to cause, or do we believe it doesn’t matter? What we call a failure of imagination, a deficit of compassion, was once more directly labeled ‘evil’” (213). In the novel’s embodiment of “evil” in Elster’s Mephistophelean theories – Elster, whom Melnyczuk labels one of “Goebbels’s disciples (210)” – we find the stakes of reading itself, which involves and implicates, for Melnyczuk, one’s entire ethical and spiritual being.

Liliana Naydan further underscores this question of representational deferral that instigates a suspension of moral complicity, but with a hopeful gesture. In *Point Omega*, she argues, “Violent acts [. . .] remain felt yet beyond the threshold of perception, seen yet unseen and perhaps un-seeable” (Naydan 94). There is a “dissonance between violence and perception” by which “violence, like art, takes on an aura of mystery” (94, 95). The violent act, such as Jessie’s disappearance, is an “absent presence” (98). But Naydan also counts Finley’s abandoned film as another absent presence, which in turn would contain (despite its subject) no represented acts of violence, rendering the war itself “an absent presence within another absent presence” (98). But, for Naydan, these absent presences lead not to despair necessarily as much as to a religiously-styled sense of mystery, which serves the ultimate purpose of “reviv[ing] the ever-flexible, ever-curious literary imagination” (100). Behind the mystery – both literal non-knowing and the “mysteries of faith” reflective of DeLillo’s religious background – is contemplation beyond the search for literal meaning, contemplation which invests the novel with renewed power in the age of unknowing (Naydan 100). The embrace of a contemplative stance serves, for Naydan, as an

antidote to fundamentalism of any stripe (100). The novel becomes a moral agent in its ability to suspend meaning for the sake of fruitful mystery.

Critics are of course correct to note a correlation between DeLillo's preoccupation with the ineffable and his seeming despair over moral agency. But despite the understandable focus on ineffability, despair, and decline, these critical accounts of *Point Omega's* metafictionality and approach to death overlook one crucial aspect. Namely, *Point Omega*, inasmuch as it depicts a mysterious tragedy and metafictionally comments on the nature of violence and terror, also tells first and foremost of the birth of a writer. The novel's vexing structure invites inquiry into its rhetorical inception. That is to say, if Finley authored the memoiristic account of his experience in the desert, who authors the "Anonymity" chapters that bookend that narrative? Or, to rephrase the question through Gerard Genette's reframing of narrative point of view, we might ask: Who speaks those sections? And who *sees* those sections?⁶

Finley's Novel

Altering our answer to these questions renders *Point Omega* "skillfully interconnected and coherent" (Hauptfleisch). It becomes a "supremely ethereal but potent equation" – a far cry from the foray into abstraction that critics perceive (Holland). How are we able to make this critical adjustment? In one perspectival shift. Critics generally view the novel as consisting of distinct discursive zones: the chapters in which Finley tells of his experience with Elster in the desert, and the "Anonymity" chapters which bookend the novel, told from a close third-person omniscient perspective. Together these exclusive zones contribute to a broader commentary on the relationship between art and violence, and so on. What no critic has pursued, to my knowledge, is the extent to which the "Anonymity" chapters are *also* told by Finley himself, who has assumed an omniscient narratorial stance in order to manifest his

⁶ The questions "Who speaks?" and "Who sees?" occupy the core of Genette's development of the concept of focalization, his reformulation of the traditional concept of point of view to include a more detailed discussion of how information is managed and revealed by a given narrator. See Chapters 4 and 5 of *Narrative Discourse*.

rhetorical aims. The remainder of this essay will argue that to read the novel in this way “reinvigorates the novelist as a visionary rhetorical force” (Naydan 95).

In her review of the novel, Kakutani claims that *Point Omega* consists of “an ingenious architecture that gains resonance in retrospect.” But where might we locate the origin of a retrospective reading? I suggest that we locate it at an epiphanic moment for Finley, in which he implicitly discovers that he will write a novel. Finley recognizes the vacuity of Elster’s theories in the face of his own personal tragedy, the loss of his daughter:

I thought of his remarks about matter and being, those long nights on the deck, half smashed, he and I, transcendence, paroxysm, the end of human consciousness. It seemed so much dead echo now. Point omega. A million years away. The omega point has narrowed, here and now, to the point of a knife as it enters a body. All the man’s grand themes funneled down to local grief, one body, out there somewhere, or not. (DeLillo, *Point Omega* 98)

Finley realizes that Elster’s narrativization of human destiny into catastrophic paroxysm was flawed to the core, despite its theoretical allure. “The story was here,” rather, “not in Iraq or in Washington, and we were leaving it behind and taking it with us, both” (99). Finley’s original story, his proposed experimental film of Elster, dissipates. But he is not left with the silent despair that will seem to haunt Elster for the rest of his days. Quite the contrary. Finley discovers a new story, focused on this local death, the story that he will take with him, the story that he will build a book around.

And so Jessie’s death does not become the “absent presence” which signals the ultimate inefficacy of language and the novel. Rather, it becomes the impetus for Finley’s only solution to his grief and confusion: writing. Her disappearance, more so than even his obsession with Elster,⁷ becomes the center of his consciousness.

⁷ Speaking about his work on Jerry Lewis, Finley says, “I tormented myself [. . .] I became Jerry’s frenzied double, eyeballs popping out of my head [. . .] My My wife said to me once, ‘Film, film, film. If you were any more intense, you’d be a black hole. A singularity,’ she said. ‘No light escapes’” (DeLillo, *Point Omega* 27).

When we read *Point Omega* in its entirety as Finley's *response* to his experience in the desert, several under-explored thematic dynamics demand consideration.

First, a reading of the novel as a veiled allegory of the Iraq War becomes limited. Though critics may assert that "it would seem that DeLillo has failed us in the traditional realist sense by refusing to provide an allegorical resolution to illustrate more fully the evil of the Iraq conflict," a sensitive reading of DeLillo's work always reveals a reach toward issues beyond the topical (Giaino 177). DeLillo claims that this novel is "not at all political" (DePietro), asserting that "I wanted to suggest things rather than explore them fully" (Alter). This may be DeLillo's simplified way of affirming the novel's suggestive qualities in general – a claim that the novel's purpose is not to resolve and to assert, but to suspend and suggest. Through Finley, *Point Omega* becomes a novel *about* the ability to suspend and suggest, and the freedom that type of writing brings.

Finley must turn to art somehow. Artistic expression is woven into the fabric of his identity. Even the most devastating tragedies must be responded to. In this way, Finley is more like DeLillo than Elster is. Rather than prognosticate in a vacuum, Finley obsessively works through his experiences in nuanced expression. He is one of DeLillo's many artist figures, who, Mark Osteen points out, partake of a "Dedalian" pattern of recoil and release. Like Stephen Dedalus, DeLillo's "artist figure coils inward in order to spring outward, often with a new work that redefines his or her artistic practice" (Osteen 137). While many of DeLillo's artist figures, such as Klara Sax and Lauren Hartke, produce works that become a *mise-en-abyme* for the text that contains them; in many cases, DeLillo's first-person narrators exhibit this Dedalian pattern as well, and the works they produce *are* the texts which tell of their crisis. Like David Bell in *Americana* (1971), Gary Harkness in *End Zone* (1972), Bucky Wunderlick in *Great Jones Street* (1973), James Axton in *The Names* (1982), Jack Gladney in *White Noise* (1985), and (even, in a way) Nick Shay in *Underworld*, Finley experiences radical *ascesis*, a breakdown of his consciousness to the point of either transcendence or devastation, which allows him to return with an expression commensurate of his experience. *Point Omega* is the chronicle of that spiritual turn. Finley's work in film – both his work on Jerry Lewis, "[a]n idea [. . .] that remains an idea," and his envisioned

film for Elster – exhibit an absence of authorial presence, a chaotic montage on the one hand and an uncut monologue on the other (DeLillo, *Point Omega* 25). Finley's work in *Point Omega*, on the other hand, constitutes the discovery of a refracted voice, an ability to say and un-say, to know and un-know. Writing, and the novel, gives him this power of self-discovery.

When we read *Point Omega* in its entirety as Finley's, we come to understand the novel's plotless-ness, its deferral of closure or allegorical posture. Rather, the novel's "ingenious architecture" comes to function more like what James Phelan calls a progression. The concept of progression allows a narrative to be viewed as a "developing whole," which is "given shape and direction by the way in which an author introduces, complicates, and resolves (or fails to resolve) certain instabilities which are the developing focus of the authorial audience's interest in narrative" (Phelan 15). Such "instabilities" occur at the level of story (events and characters) and discourse (the strategic articulation of events and characters). A progression therefore encompasses plotting and includes several other factors. When an instability occurs at the level of discourse, Phelan labels it a "tension," which invites questions of "value, belief, opinion, knowledge, and expectation, between authors and/or narrators on the one hand, and the authorial audience on the other" (15). It is at the level of tension that we are invited to read *Point Omega* – as a complicated dialogue between Finley and his experiences, between Finley and his representation of his experiences, and finally between DeLillo, Finley, his novel, and his audience. But again, this recognition can only occur in retrospect. The reader can only read "Anonymity" as written by Finley after reading the entirety of *Point Omega*, because the reader does not know Finley until the beginning of the first chapter, after "Anonymity." The rhetorical design therefore becomes totally clear only after the reader has passed through Finley's intense emotional trial.

These tensions operate at micro- and macro-levels of the text. On the micro-level, the shift in point-of-view—from third-person, to first-person, then back to third-person—invites the reader to view the three sections of the novel as distinct zones. Such a reading assumes the presence of an external author, whether we label him DeLillo or some

“implied” version of him.⁸ But, if we think of Finley as the author of all three sections, we perceive a more dynamic engagement with his artistic development. On the one hand, his first-person narrative of his encounter with Elster, though it is eventually characterized by Jessie’s disappearance, is at first characterized by Finley’s naïveté, obsessiveness, and fascination with Elster. Elster’s theoretical allure speaks to Finley’s view of his own work. Each man rejects the banalities of daily life, and each man pushes his expression to the limits of representation and comprehension.

But in the “Anonymity” section, Finley invents another man who can exhibit a different kind of non-knowing. The man marvels at *24 Hour Psycho*, and the narrator fluidly moves in and out of his consciousness: “It takes close attention to see what is happening in front of you. It takes work, pious effort, to see what you are looking at. He was mesmerized by this, the depths that were possible in the slowing of motion, the things to see, the depths of things so easy to miss in the shallow habit of seeing” (DeLillo, *Point Omega* 13). Who speaks these words? The first two sentences are aphoristic, almost theoretical pronouncements about the nature of artistic reception. Are they spoken by an external narrator, by the man to himself, or both? The third sentence is a summary of the man’s impression, from a more external position. And so we see a subtle, dynamic deployment of narrative omniscience. Earlier, the man himself vocalizes the power of this kind of closeness:

He found himself undistracted for some minutes by the coming and going of others and he was able to look at the film with the degree of intensity that was required. The nature of the film permitted total concentration and also depended on it. The film’s merciless pacing had no meaning without a corresponding watchfulness, the individual whose absolute alertness did not betray what was demanded [. . .] But it was impossible to see too much. The less there was to see, the harder he looked, the more he saw. This was the point. To

⁸ Since it was coined by Wayne Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, “the implied author,” referring to the author’s “second self” who invisibly governs the norms of a particular text, has been one of the most contested concepts in narrative theory (75). For a robust debate on the topic, see the spring 2011 issue of *Style*.

see what's here, finally to look and to know you're looking, to feel time passing, to be alive to what is happening in the smallest registers of motion (5–6).

Again, the narrator is slipping between a reportage of the man's thoughts and a direct representation of them, when they speak together. The man's comments on close attention, the importance of zooming in, function metafictionally, to gesture toward the possibility of fiction to have a similar kind of lens. But Finley's narrative will dramatize the dangers of being unprepared to look closely.

The first "Anonymity" section is characterized by this close perspective, floating between theoretical aphorism and reportage of thought and action. That perspective exhibits the tension between knowing and non-knowing, naïve fascination and self-reproach. In the following passage, near the end of the chapter, the narrative voice evokes the man's thought process by alternating between summary and direct representation of his thoughts:

He began to understand, after all this time, that he'd been standing here waiting for something. What was it? It was something outside conscious grasp until now. He'd been waiting for a woman to arrive, a woman alone, someone he might talk to, here at the wall, in whispers, sparingly of course, or later, somewhere, trading ideas and impressions, what they'd seen and how they felt about it. Wasn't that it? He was thinking a woman would enter who'd stay and watch for a time, finding her way to a place at the wall, an hour, half an hour, that was enough, half an hour, that was sufficient, a serious person, soft-spoken, wearing a pale summer dress.

Jerk.

It felt real, the pace was paradoxically real, bodies moving musically, barely moving, twelve-tone, things barely happening, cause and effect so drastically drawn apart that it seemed real to him, the way all things in the physical world that we don't understand are said to be real. (DeLillo, *Point Omega* 14)

In swift movements, the narrator unfolds the man's imagination, his fantasy, followed by a sudden, one-word cessation of that train of thought (in the form of self-rebuke), before slipping back into the theoretical musings that characterized the earlier parts of the chapter. But only in retrospect, after reading the drama of the subsequent pages, does the reader encounter the narrator's introduction, his suggestion, of the violence to come, a violence that springs from our complicity in artistic representation. Here, the reader encounters a compelling *ekphrastic* mode, in which idealized notions of deep attention take the stage.

On micro-levels of the text, the turn to omniscience in the third-person mode unlocks for Finley new possibilities for working through his own conflict of non-knowing. In the unnamed man, we see a dramatization of Finley's mystification (with art, and with theory) combined with earnest attempts to understand what he experiences. But once the reader gains a macro-level view of the text in retrospect, the full force of Finley's perspectival choices become clear. The reader returns to the museum in "Anonymity 2" having experienced a total disaster: a life taken, another life destroyed, and another life changed forever. The chapter begins with a reportorial stance: "Norman Bates, scary bland, is putting down the phone" (101). But that phrase, "scary bland," again announces the presence of a mind at work, a mind depicted openly by a close omniscient narrator. Is "scary bland" the words of the narrator, or of the man himself? It is both, an exhibition of the advantage of third-person discourse. But the man's scrutiny of the film, of the discrepancies at the editorial level, of the flattening of violence in slow motion, has a different air after the disaster in the desert. The man's internal discussions of seriousness, the parameters of viewing, memory games, and so on now strike the reader as vacuous rather than perceptive or wise.

Most striking of course in "Anonymity 2" is the wish-fulfillment that ensues – the entry of the woman the man longed for at the end of "Anonymity." At this moment, the notion that Finley may have written these chapters becomes most apparent. The reader already knows that Finley and Elster had visited the exhibit (they are portrayed as an elder academic with young protégé in "Anonymity"), and the reader

also learns that Jessie had visited the exhibit a day after they did, a deliberate revelation that bolsters the notion that Finley authored the “Anonymity” sections. Finley turns this detail into a possible explanation of Jessie’s disappearance. The reader is led to assume that the unnamed man may in fact be Dennis, the man Jessie’s mother accuses of strange motives. The novel concludes with the future of Dennis and Jessie’s relationship left open, but with an ominous tone. After the woman we might presume to be Jessie departs from the exhibit, the man intensifies his desire to merge his consciousness with the film: “He wanted the film to move even more slowly, requiring deeper involvement of eye and mind, always that, the thing he sees tunneling into the blood, into dense sensation, sharing consciousness with him” (115). Merging with the film is the logical conclusion of his close attention. He sheds his identity with the hope of becoming Norman Bates. He imagines raping the woman – a reflection of Finley’s brief thoughts of raping Jessie himself (55) – and he imagines the guard shooting himself in the head. “He is not responsible for these thoughts,” the narrator (thinking with the man) muses, “But they’re his thoughts, aren’t they?” (116). Or are they? By the end of “Anonymity 2,” the reader is privy to the extent that the man’s encounter with film has subsumed his entire imagination. And so the action of the novel concludes as “[t]he man separates himself from the wall and waits to be assimilated, pore by pore, to dissolve into the figure of Norman Bates” (116). The film’s transformation of the man’s consciousness is complete. In the final lines of the novel, the narrator and the man speak together, but he is in character, so to speak:

Sometimes he sits by her bed and says something and then looks at her and waits for an answer.

Sometimes he just looks at her.

Sometimes a wind comes before the rain and sends birds sailing past the window, spirit birds that ride the night, stranger than dreams (117).

The man’s merging of identity with Norman Bates is reflected by the narratorial merging of voices in this final moment. Who speaks these words? Who sees the man’s mind? If the answer is Jim Finley, we encounter the extent to which his fictional

invention serves as an explanation for Jessie's disappearance. He locates final causality in the fragility of the human mind, its ability to surrender its better nature. And art stands at the center of that morbid transformation. Finley's narrative of disaster gestures toward the ways that we, as storytelling and story-consuming beings, are all capable of evil.

The clear counterpoint to this reading of *Point Omega* is this: Could we not just as easily view these narratorial dynamics as being the work of DeLillo himself, rather than of Finley? When we read *Point Omega* as being authored by DeLillo alone, we engage a different set of questions, regarding DeLillo's career, his thematic and stylistic preoccupations, and so on. We operate in a critical mode. Such a mode leads to assertions, like Kakutani's, that the characters "feel more like holograms than human beings." But to read *Point Omega* as Finley's is to (re)humanize the drama, to keep the audience at the level of the characters.

To turn again to rhetorical narratology, we might view this issue through the lens of Peter Rabinowitz's formulation of audiences. For Rabinowitz, every literary text exhibits a layered notion of its audience, and the "actual" audience of the text must actively "join" these various types of audiences at one point or another during reading (126). On the one hand, the actual audience joins the "authorial audience," whereby the audience attempts to align itself with the hypothetical audience of the author's imagination (126). For Rabinowitz, no author can "write without making certain assumptions about his readers' beliefs, knowledge, and familiarity with conventions. His artistic choices are based upon these assumptions, conscious or unconscious, and to a certain extent, his artistic success will depend on their accuracy" (126). At a basic level, the authorial audience and the author work together to preserve the fictiveness of a fiction – that is to say, when we watch a performance of *Othello* in a theater, we do not leap from our seats and call an ambulance when Desdemona is killed. We understand the fictiveness of the situation. At more complicated levels, Nabokov's authorial audience would be different in its erudition and cultural background than, say, Steinbeck's. Certain amounts of reading and experience are required to engage with Nabokov, and his narrators assume (and toy with) that background. At the interpretive level, to "join" the authorial audience means to

be in dialogue with the author first and foremost, thereby experiencing a work of art as an act of communication with designed effects.

What would *Point Omega's* authorial audience look like? What kind of background might DeLillo assume on the part of his audience? First, that audience would understand the context of the Iraq War and the practice of renditions, in order to ascertain DeLillo's subtle engagement with those matters. Second, DeLillo might assume that his readers are familiar with Hitchcock's *Psycho*, if not Gordon's "rendition" of it. Third, and most interestingly, DeLillo might assume that his readers are familiar with his previous work, and the extent to which this new work echoes and/or deviates from it. On one level, he might be sensitive to the extent to which he is regarded as a "postmodernist," a term that yields several (often false) assumptions about him. On another level, he may be mindful of the extent to which his works deal with religious themes, often at their extremity, in the form of asceticism and fundamentalism. He might be mindful of how the desert functions as a motif within those themes. He might also be considering the reader's knowledge of his other artist-characters, or even his theorist-characters, and the extent to which the characters in *Point Omega* respond to those previous formulations. In short, to join the authorial audience is to remain in dialogue with DeLillo alone. This is the audience that critics join, in order to contextualize and evaluate – they might say to "understand" – DeLillo's new work.

But Rabinowitz formulates another type of audience, which adds a layer of complication. While the actual audience joins the authorial audience to glean the author's motives and preoccupations as closely and as accurately as possible, the actual audience must also necessarily join the "narrative audience," which suspends disbelief and treats the world of the text seriously, as if it were real, however temporarily (127). To use to Rabinowitz's examples, the narrative audience of *War and Peace* assumes its narrator to be a historian and reads his characters – Natasha, Pierre, and Andrei – as real in order to understand the work in its totality (127). Joining the narrative audience is no less necessary than joining the authorial audience: if we were *not* to do so when reading, say, *Cinderella*, then the audience may interpret the

heroine's relationship with the fairy godmother as a neurotic projection rather than a real encounter, in turn misinterpreting the story (129).

Joining the narrative audience facilitates dramatic and empathetic engagement. It preserves the unique immersive quality of reading. Joining the narrative audience of *Point Omega* allows us to dive more deeply than an allegorical reading does. It allows us to treat Elster not as a mouthpiece for a warped ideology; rather we encounter "the anguish of one whose error – ethical, epistemological, *linguistic* – takes on a moral gravity that verges on the tragic" (Coward 42, italics in original). And we feel the sting of Jessie's disappearance in Finley's consciousness, as he comes to grips with all that has happened. This essay has focused on Finley from the angle of the narrative audience. We treat his first-person account of his experience in the desert as a true experience, a non-fictional account, regardless of the extent to which it engages the techniques of fictionalization. We focus on how the story becomes a *Künstlerroman*, in which Finley's artistic sensibilities are transformed by his traumatic experience. We come to dwell on the emotional, psychological, and spiritual motives of his artistic choices. And we come, I argue, to believe that he wrote the "Anonymity" chapters.

We have now arrived at the real utility of thinking about *Point Omega* through Rabinowitz's formulation. By joining the narrative audience, reading "Anonymity" and "Anonymity 2" as Finley's expression of his artistic growth, we can in turn come to join Finley's *authorial* audience. What would it mean to join Finley's authorial audience? It would include a significant interpretive shift. More than perceive DeLillo's thematic and aesthetic preoccupations, we attempt to view the events of *Point Omega* in a refracted way, by which DeLillo's preoccupations are filtered through the consciousness of a fictionalized other.

Many interpretive dynamics are now in play. Rather than view the novel as a culmination of DeLillo's fascination with theoretical discourse and a final devolution into self-parody as many critics have it, we read the novel as an intricate *refutation* of the theory-oriented worldview. In "Anonymity," Finley presents the unnamed man's musings as poignant, attractive, alluring. Such allure is reflected in Elster's provocative theories throughout the main narrative. But such a view is forcefully undercut by the violence

that ensues. Elster's prognostications resonate as hollow in the face of real tragedy. The man's musings are stripped of weight as we recognize the dangers of complicity.

Through his layered presentation of modes of thought, his intricate weaving of voices with his own, DeLillo exhibits his belief in the possibilities of fiction. Finley's turn to writing reflects DeLillo's own faith in language and the novel, his belief in writing as a humble act. In his interview with *The Paris Review* (1993), DeLillo speaks of his craft in almost religious terms:

There's a zone I aspire to [. . .] It's a state of automatic writing, and it represents the paradox that's at the center of a writer's consciousness [. . .] First you look for discipline and control. You want to exercise your will, bend the language your way, bend the world your way. You want to control the flow of impulses, images, words, faces, ideas. But there's a higher place, a secret aspiration. You want to let go. You want to lose yourself in language, become a carrier or messenger. The best moments involve a loss of control. It's a kind of rapture. (Begley)

We see a vacillation between these two modes in *Point Omega*. On the one hand, art that is represented and discussed – *24 Hour Psycho*, Finley's first film, even Elster's essay on renditions – are acts of control and manipulation. They are contrived conceptual pieces that exhibit authorial and directorial motive. On the other hand, however, these works inspire (intentionally or otherwise) a sense of mystification or rapture, clearly exhibited by the unnamed man and also by Finley, who gets so lost in his work that he loses a sense of himself. But Finley's turn to writing completes the paradigm that DeLillo discusses and that completion is connected, for DeLillo, to the qualities of the novel itself. In his essay "The Power of History" (1997), DeLillo puts it this way:

Fiction will always examine the small anonymous corners of human experience [. . .] The writer wants to see inside the human works, down to dreams and routine rambling thoughts, in order to locate the neural strands that link him to men and women who shape history [. . .] Against the force of

history, so powerful, visible and real, the novelist poses the idiosyncratic self [. . .] It is fiction's role to imagine deeply, to follow obscure urges into unreliable regions of experience – child-memored, existential and outside time.

The novel is the dream release, the suspension of reality that history needs to escape its own brutal confinements.

In a way, Elster represents the force of brutal history in his quest to shape a “haiku war” in Iraq (DeLillo, *Point Omega* 29) and lay a Mephistophelean sheen over shadow prisons and torture. And though Finley's proposed film of Elster would seem to offer an “idiosyncratic self” in the form of an uncut monologue, even Elster himself understands the extent to which such a film would be politically motivated, or at least perceived as such. Finley seems to understand this problem by the end of his time in the desert. But again, he does not revert to silence. Rather, he turns to this novel, *Point Omega*, in a way that affirms DeLillo's belief in the persistent power of fiction. As Gary Adelman suggests, “DeLillo's affirmation of language [. . .] seems to open the possibility of art mattering – of language having mystical and inexhaustible vitality” (13). This essay asserts that though DeLillo stacks the deck against vitality in *Point Omega* from a number of angles, he does so in order to dramatize the continued possibility for fiction to matter after the millennium.

We can conclude with one more perhaps daring assertion. To make this interpretive shift in our reading of *Point Omega* may, to return to Rabinowitz, constitute our joining of another type of audience, an audience “for which the narrator wishes he were writing” (134). Rabinowitz labels it the “ideal narrative audience” (134). This audience, he writes, “believes the narrator, accepts his judgments, sympathizes with his plight, laughs at his jokes even when they are bad” (134). It is a form of allegiance, of near-complete identification with the narrator. Finley models this type of allegiance in the main narrative through his fascination with Elster, only to realize the error in such thinking by the end of that section. His writing of *Point Omega* is a metafictional commentary on the dangers of that kind of identification. He presents himself at his intellectually weakest, as a form of self-rebuke.

This interpretation has been offered in reference to DeLillo himself, whereby he “imagine[s] his own secret sharer” in Elster, whose “whiffs from the sewer of preten- tion” threaten to undermine DeLillo’s otherwise sensitive and critical engagement with theory (Cowart 32, 31). DeLillo dares to undertake a “remarkably self-aware self-critique” (Holland). Moreover, as we know that DeLillo visited the Gordon exhibit multiple times in 2006 (McGrath), we see in the unnamed man a chan- neling of DeLillo’s self-critique through someone who comes to embrace murder. DeLillo imagines his own complicity in violence through art. But he does so, this article asserts, through a technique unique to fiction: the refraction of narrative voices, a refraction which “reveal[s] consciousness” (*Mao II* 200). To read Finley as the author of all three sections is to read the novel as it was perhaps meant to be read – to read *Point Omega* as a subtle declaration of the persistent power of fiction in the face of death.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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