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## DELILLO SPECIAL ISSUE

# *Weekend Warriors: DeLillo's "The Uniforms," *Players*, and Film-to-Page Reappearance*

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This article argues that what DeLillo refers to as the "radical intent" attached to the early short story "The Uniforms" does not point to political radicalism but instead to a new way of thinking about adaptation. This aesthetically radical form of film-to-page adaptation does not privilege the source text, oftentimes subverting the source's original purpose outright. This decentering of the cinematic source text also lets DeLillo express doubt about what film can accomplish politically, while emphasizing that the basic grammar of cinema can do things that literature cannot.

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"The Uniforms," originally published in *The Carolina Quarterly* in 1970 and not included in the decades-spanning collection of short stories *The Angel Esmeralda* (2011), remains one of Don DeLillo's most under-commented upon early stories, even as it illuminates DeLillo's thoughts on the relationship between film and fiction—and between visual and print culture more broadly—as well as, or better than, his later novels. "The Uniforms" is inspired by Jean-Luc Godard's radical film *Weekend* (1967), particularly those scenes in which a roving band of revolutionaries go on a violent rampage against the bourgeoisie, a key sequence from Godard's most outspokenly leftist period of his career. The band of radicals in "The Uniforms," like that in the Godard film, raises all manner of hell, but it isn't always clear toward what end. While certainly a political writer in the broadest sense of the term, DeLillo has never been as strident as Godard, so it's intriguing that DeLillo posits this ironic story as a quietly revolutionary literary gesture.

Well before DeLillo repurposed "The Uniforms" by giving it a new context in the prologue to *Players* (1977), DeLillo commented directly on the story's intent. In 1973, "The Uniforms" was reprinted in an idiosyncratic anthology, edited by Jack Hicks, called *Cutting Edges: Young American Fiction for the '70s*. In a short author's statement in the anthology's appendix, DeLillo writes that in "The Uniforms" he attempted "to avoid the short story's blander landscapes." In fact, to DeLillo, it's hardly a story at all, but "a movie as much as anything else," though, he quickly adds, the story "is an attempt to hammer and nail my own frame around somebody else's movie," and therefore to create a film-to-page adaptation as opposed to the reverse. He concludes, "I guess I was just trying to find one small way in which literature might be less rigid in the sources it uses. Thousands of short stories and novels have been made into movies. I simply tried to reverse the process." Fair (and modest) enough—but then DeLillo drops a quiet bombshell. "I submit this mode of work," he continues, "as a legitimate challenge to writers of radical intent" ("Appendix" 532–533).

But is there truly, to borrow DeLillo's term, "radical intent" here? If so, is it aesthetic radicalism or political radicalism? And is it the most useful move critically to think of this story—as most of those who have written about it have—in

terms of how it anticipates the subject matter of the later novels? After all, I agree with David Cowart's observation that "DeLillo's engagement with cinematic art was never a matter of simply moving a story out of one medium and into another" ("The Lady Vanishes" 33). In recalling the origin of "The Uniforms," DeLillo gives due credit to Godard, but he also defangs this filmmaker-slash-provocateur, calling him "mock-illustrious" and acknowledging that *Weekend* has "boring parts," which DeLillo has helpfully removed ("Appendix" 533). DeLillo works neither to further Godard's illustriousness nor to mock his excesses, but instead to reveal how both personal and political identities are inextricably tied to the visual—and for DeLillo, as both cinephile and twentieth-century novelist, the visual means the cinematic more often than not. In expressing concern over the intrusion of visual culture into print culture every bit as much as *White Noise* (1985) or *Mao II* (1991) would later do—but crucially doing so with explicitly cinematic language—"The Uniforms" emerges not as mere apprentice work, but as fully realized conceptual fiction.

Ultimately, there is radical intent in "The Uniforms," but not in any political sense, traditionally understood. After all, DeLillo's politics are far from strident or simplistic, at least in the forms in which he has chosen to make them public: as Cowart notes, "[e]ven the infrequent essays—'American Blood,' 'In the Ruins of the Future'—feature more in the way of parable than pronouncement" ("The Lady Vanishes" 41). Instead, "The Uniforms," like other extended meditations on the power of cinema in DeLillo's fiction (including *Players*), questions the extent to which film as an essentially visual art form can speak truth to power with any efficacy at all. I would argue, though, that DeLillo displays aesthetically radical intent in "The Uniforms" (and other cinematically inspired fiction) as film-to-page adaptation and cinematic intertextuality become narrative tools that are every bit as valid as more traditionally literary techniques. By the time DeLillo is done playing around with *Weekend*, the basic idea of *Weekend* in DeLillo doesn't look so much like *Weekend* anymore. As a result, no version of any text in DeLillo—historical, literary, cinematic, or otherwise—comes to be understood as its definitive rendering.

On one level, that assertion should not come as a shock: Lyotard, Foucault, Derrida, and others have made theoretically-minded readers and critics quite

doubtful of grand narratives for a few decades now. But in many circles, a hierarchy of literary and cinematic forms remains powerful: novels are supposed to be more important than short stories; art films are supposed to be more important than mainstream movies; and film adaptations are often thought successful when they capture the spirit of the literary text fully. For DeLillo, instead, turning experimental cinema into conceptual fiction, the question of whether “The Uniforms” gets Godard right is beside the point entirely, especially when “The Uniforms” remains stuck in a critical paradigm that says the story’s importance lies only in it being a rehearsal for *Players*.

In the polemical essay that opens his book *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents* (2007), a chapter that functions as a kind of state-of-the-subfield address, Thomas Leitch asserts that scholarship on the relationship between film and literature, decades after courses on “Shakespeare on film” and “the literary Hitchcock” have made their way into college curricula, remains confoundingly stuck in neutral, still too eager to privilege the literary text over the cinematic text. Leitch writes,

studies of adaptation tend to privilege literature over film in two ways. By organizing themselves around canonical authors, they establish a presumptive criterion for each new adaptation. And by arranging adaptations as spokes around the hub of such a strong authorial figure, they establish literature as a proximate cause of adaptation that makes fidelity to the source text central to the field. (3)

Of course, a text like “The Uniforms” throws quite a wrench into this for reasons I’ve previewed earlier, but even more than that, the story is a reminder that the short story—or more accurately, this short story—just can’t do some things that *Weekend* can. Another notable theorist of adaptation, Francesco Casetti, suggests that the term “adaptation” may itself be the problem. Casetti works to resituate adaptation as “reappearance,” defining reappearance as “a new discursive event that locates itself in a certain time and space in society, one that, at the same time, carries within itself the memory of an earlier discursive event” (82). By this logic, speaking of adaptation of literature to film (or vice versa) should require more than simple comparison and

contrast. Instead, “what matters is the new role and place that the later event takes on within the discursive field, more than the abstract faithfulness that it can claim with respect to the source text” (82). Casetti encapsulates his discussion of reappearance by observing that adaptation is “*recontextualization of the text*” or “*reformulation of its communicative situation*” (83, emphasis in original). Helpfully, Casetti’s formulation of reappearance refuses to privilege the original source material over the reappearance that comes later chronologically, nor does it automatically view one art form as aesthetically superior to another. I would suggest, then, that Casetti’s concept of reappearance becomes more relevant than traditionally defined adaptation to DeLillo’s form of cinematic intertextuality.

### **“The Uniforms:” Reappearance as Hammering a Frame Around Another’s Movie**

Introducing “The Uniforms” via some basic plot summary would likely be in order here, but “The Uniforms” is about as plot-centric as most late-1960s Godard films, to put it mildly. In “The Uniforms,” we meet a group of violent radicals, described via a sardonic, detached, distant, third-person narrator. They are clearly well read, well informed, and well educated; the precise purpose of their rebellion remains unclear, though. Still, each has a prescribed role to play within the cabal: one gets described as the group “theoretician and heartless bastard;” another edits film of revolutionary attacks; another “lecture[s] at the University on Tuesdays” (DeLillo 4). They rape, pillage, and murder in an attempt to strike back at the perceived excesses of the bourgeoisie. And on occasion, of course, they discuss movies, both as entertainment and as a record of their own political action. As the story opens, one radical is “back at the ex-farm editing filmclips of the attack on the police barracks;” another says “she had been a student in Prague at the time when all the newsreels were being made,” presumably during the Prague Spring of 1968, while a third responds by explaining “why so much of the footage seemed over-exposed” (4, 5).

As the radicals continue to lay waste to whatever and whomever they run against, specific markers of setting are few, though their territory is clearly under dispute. They pass through vaguely defined sites of implied authority like “the first

checkpoint” and note “[a]rmed personal carriers” passing by with jaded dispassion (5). The most intensely observed details, in contrast, refer to articles of clothing and consumer products: a tank does not contain chemicals, but “products made by Dow Chemical;” no radical carries an unnamed generic camera, but one wields “the Hasselblad 500 EL” (6, 7). Halfway through the story, following a detailed discussion of how military uniforms have looked in Hollywood films, the radicals shoot a plane out of the sky and then encounter a film crew shooting a commercial. They kill the commercial’s cast and crew, not failing to take their “Gucci wallets, Tiffany cigarette cases, and Patek Philippe wristwatches” (8). They move on to a university (where they kill several security guards), then to a golf course (where they kill several golfers), in a scene that will reappear later in DeLillo’s body of work. Next come detailed descriptions of what each radical in the group wears, followed by the ominous implied beginning to a standoff with federal troops. “Many would die that night, but they would not. They would live until the end and even beyond,” DeLillo concludes, recalling *Weekend’s* famous closing title: not merely *fin*, but *fin de cinema*: “the end of cinema” (“The Uniforms” 11).

The most sustained critical attention to “The Uniforms” until now comes courtesy of Mark Osteen, who examines it in his book *American Magic and Dread* alongside two other early uncollected DeLillo stories (“Coming Sun. Mon. Tues.” and “Baghdad Towers West”) as a way of shedding light onto DeLillo’s debut novel, *Americana* (1971). The story rates a few cursory mentions in other studies of DeLillo, primarily because DeLillo reworked the story by re-adapting it into a fictional film: the in-flight movie playing on an airplane in the prologue of his fifth novel, *Players*. Osteen is insightful on “The Uniforms,” and he explains well how each of these early stories includes initial discussion of themes that DeLillo would later develop in more complex detail in novels. Certainly in the case of “The Uniforms,” the connection between terrorism and media that animates *Mao II* is present, as is the unsettling tone with which the narrator implicitly asserts that image has replaced word, a familiar idea to readers of *White Noise* and *Mao II* and *Great Jones Street* (1973) and *Running Dog* (1978) and the list could go on.

Osteen helpfully explicates several references to Godard films in these early stories, but in doing so, he's largely falling back into the strategy that Leitch decries: Osteen doesn't dismiss "The Uniforms" entirely, but he does imply that it ought to be valued because it involves the first appearances of certain concerns that will crop up and get more expertly developed in later, strictly literary contexts. DeLillo's early stories, Osteen writes, "demonstrate DeLillo's debt to avant-garde cinema and function as previews for DeLillo's later work, introducing situations, characters, and scenes that he later reuses" (*American Magic* 9). DeLillo, as novelist, becomes the hub around which discussion of this story ought to revolve; the stories' value lies in their ability to adumbrate the concerns of the novels. Godard becomes less a collaborator or a provider of an unusually apt source text and more a surprising conceptual source. And given that the full text of Osteen's study often considers DeLillo in terms of highly literary ancestors—Nabokov, Carroll, Beckett, and the like—Godard winds up being treated by extension more as a creator of narrative than as a creator of image.

Crucially, DeLillo understands the creation of narrative and the creation of image as separate (but sometimes overlapping) spheres. DeLillo commented in an early interview on his non-literary influences that the great European midcentury directors "seem to find an art and a seriousness which I think was completely unexpected and which had once been the province of literature alone. So that a popular art was suddenly seen as a serious art. And this was interesting and inspiring" (DeCurtis 67). DeLillo evinces awareness of a cultural hierarchy that divides these two media while expressing a willingness to question that divide's very existence, much as he does in "The Uniforms."

We know, of course, that DeLillo knows his modernist cinema — in the aforementioned interview, he comments on his revelatory discovery of the "force that movies could have emotionally and intellectually in what I consider the great era of the European films: Godard, Antonioni, Fellini, Bergman" (DeCurtis 67). "The Uniforms" is full of sly nods to Godard, most obviously one radical's decision to nickname another "Breathless" (DeLillo 4). Osteen has helpfully catalogued the specific references to *Weekend*,



but the Godard allusions include hat-tips to other films (*American Magic* 14). One radical carries Molotov cocktails “in a Coca-Cola sixpack,” recalling the reference to “the children of Marx and Coca-Cola” in Godard’s *Masculin Féminin* (1966) (DeLillo, “The Uniforms” 5). Another revolutionary “went through his collection of money-saving coupons for Maxim, Crest, Dial, Lucky Strike, Comet, Sylvania, and Buick Electra. He spread the coupons on the table and they all looked at them, admiring the bright colors” (7). The description recalls the final image of *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (1967), an array of consumer products artfully arranged on grass, positioning consumer culture as an unwelcome intruder onto the natural world.

Film history references that aren’t Godard-specific exist in abundance as well: a female radical, assumedly a blonde bombshell type, is nicknamed Harlow (4). She will later refer to being radicalized “during the time of the filming of Pontecorvo’s great fictional documentary,” the paradoxical reference there being to *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) (5). Harlow participated in the protests of May 1968, we learn, but only “at the Cannes and Venice film festivals” (7). Later, when the radicals encounter “a film crew shooting a television commercial for a movie about television,” one radical recalls Alain Resnais’ film *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), asking “the crew whether it was true or false that Resnais had faked the filmclips of the bomb victims in his movie about Hiroshima. Two men answered true and were killed,” and our narrator is uninterested in telling us whether they were right or not (8). Another radical claims that his father “had been in the hills with Buñuel when the latter had declared that the days of the slow dissolve were numbered,” pointing the way forward to Godard’s trademark use of the quick jump cut in his earliest films, like *Breathless* (1960) and *Band of Outsiders* (1964) (9). These film allusions can be quite witty, as in the story’s best punch line, a swipe at naïve but well-meaning Hollywood liberalism in the description of a professor who briefly shields the band of radicals: “He had been forced to leave his homeland,” we’re told, “when Stanley Kramer arrived to do a movie full of social content” (8–9).

Great as such a line is for the film buffs in the reading audience, there would be little reason to discuss “The Uniforms” as an experiment in adaptation of radical intent if the story were merely a movie geek’s game of spot-the-allusion. For those interested in adaptation, though, the more interesting cinematic presences come via

intrusions of cinematic grammar into more traditional literary narration: one revolutionary recalls a “soft-focus childhood and saw himself running in slow-motion” before imagining himself “[i]n flashback” (6, 8). DeLillo emphasizes here that certain narrative devices are more open to the filmmaker than to the fiction writer. As dependent as cinema is on time and image, manipulation of narrative pace through a technique like slow motion, or manipulation of imagery via a mediating photographic technique like soft focus, will always, DeLillo reminds us, result in a manipulation of story content that is far more direct and visceral than the short story’s use of narrative flashback or linguistically-described sensory detail.

Another example: elsewhere, one character’s voice is “overdubbed” on another’s, and a scene change occurs “as in a jumpcut” (7, 9). The overdubbing scene in particular is a notably direct lift from *Weekend*: in a key sequence near the center of Godard’s film, two garbage men eat sandwiches, stare directly at the camera, and launch a critique of colonialism. In the notes to the recent Criterion DVD release of *Weekend*, novelist Gary Indiana explains, “[t]he scene is essential for understanding the overall premise of *Weekend*, and at the same time so excruciatingly static that critics of the time advised the audience to go out for a coffee as soon as it started” (it’s probably what DeLillo was referring to as the excised boring parts). Notably, though, in this static but oddly compelling sequence, more often than not we’re seeing only one man in the frame, while hearing the other one speaking. As a result, DeLillo’s reference to overdubbing underlines that Godard employs a technique that cinematic narrative can do far more directly than print narrative ever could: we’re forced to watch one character, while hearing the voice and worldview of another. In other words: even the freest of free indirect discourse on the page is still indirect, while cinema can disconnect image from soundtrack (and hence subject from thought) more organically.

Crucially, that “overdubbed monologue” in “The Uniforms” focuses on visuality, classic film, and violence. It’s a faux-scholarly explication of perceived differences between the American Revolution and the U.S. Civil War, but it transpires solely in terms of image—the titular historical uniforms are described in detail. “The artfilm or underground newsreel potential of any military engagement varies according to

the cinematic value of the uniforms that are worn. John Ford and John Huston, in their films of the American Civil War,” the monologue goes in part, “have shown that tight dusty uniforms are most acceptable to the devouring eye of history and the camera. The improvised uniforms of scouts and infiltrators in particular have proved inspiring to the modern filmmaker and revolutionary [. . .] We have thrown off the shackles of black-and-white revisionism. We will shoot in color because color is the color of childhood fantasy” (DeLillo, “The Uniforms” 7). Indeed, the last two pages of the story include a numbered, detailed list of the items of clothing the radicals are wearing—and in that list colors are prominent.

One way to interpret this monologue is to assert that for these quasi-revolutionaries, actual commitments are secondary to image. And indeed, that’s the primary way it’s been discussed in existing criticism. Mark Osteen asserts, “the politics of DeLillo’s revolutionaries are merely a pretext for murder and rape” (*American Magic* 14). Their “radicalism equals the ability to arrange a fashionably outrageous ensemble,” Osteen continues (15). Douglas Keesey writes of the story, “[v]iolence is motivated by a desire to look good in front of the cameras rather than to force a change in an unjust system” (206). But comments like those, in their focus on how admittedly nebulous the radicals’ political stance is, threaten to obscure the ways that DeLillo still has in mind less nebulous, more precise intentions that are more aesthetic than political.

Consider the monologue’s comically tautological last line: “color is the color of childhood fantasy.” It reads as silly not solely due to its tautology, but also due to the absence of actual, present color to work as support to the claim. And all of this cinematic language of overdubbing and jump cuts and soft focus emphasizes how medium-specific meaning is made through medium-specific cinematic technique—and 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. The story is not cinematic because it is interested in visuality—it is cinematic because the ways it emphasizes visuality sharply define the limits of how visual and how temporal a short story can be without the actual image and timeboundedness of film.

Since the story is ultimately more about cinematic aesthetics than political reality, DeLillo reveals in “The Uniforms” no particular interest of his own in savaging the bourgeoisie, at least not with the ferocity of Godard. But he does share Godard’s fascination with classic Hollywood film, with the potential power of images to distort truth, and the workings of propaganda, especially as it can apply to military force. But that doesn’t mean that either creator—Godard or DeLillo—has a monopoly on these ideas, or, crucially, this particular narrative. Put another way, if no adaptation is a replication of a source text, all are still rewritings of source texts, or, as Casetti would have it, reappearances.

Leitch asserts that in the conventional wisdom surrounding film adaptation (which he rejects), the literary text tends to take precedence over the cinematic text: “[w]henver we teach a film adaptation—whenver we watch an adaptation as an adaptation—we treat it as an intertext designed to be looked through, like a window on the source text” (17). He acknowledges that adaptations depend on source texts in limited ways but continues, “thinking of them exclusively in these terms inevitably impoverishes them because it reduces them to the single function of replicating (or, worse, failing to replicate) the details of that single source text” (17). In this mode of thinking, no particular version of a single text—source, adaptation, or re-adaptation—gets particular privilege. Leitch writes of the old critical canard that “the book is better than the movie”: “the book will always be better than any adaptation because it is always *better at being itself* [. . .] Of course it’s better at being itself; so is the movie better at being itself; so is everything in the universe” (16, emphasis in original). As a result, I would assert, treating “The Uniforms” as a window on Godard (or “The Uniforms” as a window on *Players*) is unfair—as Casetti would claim, it does not fully take into account the conditions of Godard’s reappearance in DeLillo, reconsidering the story as a new discursive event. And if we take seriously DeLillo’s comment that the story is a challenge to writers of radical intent—and the politics of the story are so quixotic and sardonic that I would not argue he means political radicalism—then a discussion of those writers of radical intent might also include literary critics ready to challenge some conventional wisdom about cinematically-inspired literature as well.

### ***Players*: Reappearance as the Subversion of the Subversion**

In *Players*, DeLillo allows Godard's *Weekend* to reappear in his fiction with yet another level of remove, beginning by giving a shocking film new meaning by evacuating it of language, replacing its soundtrack with another that is intentionally inappropriate. Additionally, *Players* depicts a viewing audience and describes their physical site of viewership, both of which, taken together, alter the film's context drastically. In so doing, DeLillo adapts "The Uniforms" himself, removing it even further from Godard's *Weekend* and demonstrating that either of his rethinkings of Godard can stand on its own. Put another way, DeLillo rewrites Godard with perhaps more irony than anger in "The Uniforms," and then in *Players* DeLillo rewrites DeLillo with more irony still.

The opening chapter of *Players*, titled simply "The Movie," is set in a piano lounge on board an airplane in flight. An inflight movie is being projected in the bar, but "[w]ithout headsets, of course, the people in the piano bar aren't able to hear the sound track of the movie being shown" (DeLillo, *Players* 4). Instead, the lounge's pianist plays "a typical score for a silent film," amusing the passengers with the incongruity of a tinkly, yet melodramatic piano scoring scenes of bloody rampage (4). The film scenes described are indebted to "The Uniforms." The earlier story's longest sustained sequence of violence takes place on a golf course, where victims are described as "white Protestants" with "absurd fat bodies," one of whom carries in his wallet "a signed snapshot of Lyndon Johnson on all fours" (DeLillo, "The Uniforms" 9, 10). However, instead of the direct description of the band of revolutionaries that comprises "The Uniforms," *Players* depicts people watching the murderous gang attack golfers on film, while finding the whole thing rather comic at that. "What conceivably makes this even funnier (to some) is the nature of the game itself. Golf. That anal round of scrupulous caution and petty griefs," DeLillo calls it (*Players* 9). *Weekend* has reappeared, filtered through "The Uniforms," in a scene from *Players* set a few miles above the surface of the earth in a relatively luxurious setting. None of these appearances of Godard's basic idea is the definitive tale of movie-loving leftist guerrillas, though like "The Uniforms," *Players* uses cinematic language to emphasize what literature still cannot duplicate from the screen.

*Players'* prologue includes a paragraph-long (and occasionally quite pedantic) lesson in narrative positioning, explaining how cinematic grammar can capture something directly—level of narrative distance from depicted subject matter—that literary language must work harder to convey: “It’s worthwhile to point out that the characters and landscape are being seen though the special viewpoint of a long lens. This is a lesson in the intimacy of distance [. . .] What the camera shares with those watching is an appreciation of optical cunning. The sense of being unseen. The audience as privileged onlookers” (DeLillo, *Players* 6). When the revolutionaries enter the story (or more accurately, the frame), DeLillo describes their entrance cinematically, as if ceding narrative control to an imagined camera: one of the gang, “his back to the camera, rises from the underbrush in the immediate foreground, about two hundred yards from the golfers” (7). A little later, another man “faces the camera” in “diverse” clothing, and the camera’s “long lens picks out a man and woman standing at the top of a small hill,” two more guerrillas (7). Meanwhile, viewers in the piano bar evince awareness of how the improvised silent-movie-esque score works to subvert the pillaging onscreen: “To the glamour of revolutionary violence [. . .] the piano’s shiny tinkle brings an irony too apt to be ignored. The simple innocence of this music undermines the photogenic terror, reducing it to an empty swirl” (8). It’s akin to Godard’s tactic of making us watch one garbageman while listening to another, but here taken to an absurd degree. Where Godard exploited the relationship between film and sound by blurring the lines between the image and the voiceover, the non-cinematic music in this scene (it can’t truly be called nondiegetic sound, as it exists outside the film altogether) works actively to undermine the film. *Weekend* provides related auditory counterpoint to the image on the screen, while “The Uniforms” emphasizes the impossibility of doing exactly that in literature. *Players* attempts ironic counterpoint, but can only do so by introducing music that is not inherent to the fictional film on the page.

All the while, DeLillo’s skepticism toward the alleged political program of these revolutionaries is even more evident here than it was in “The Uniforms.” First, DeLillo places this reappearance of *Weekend* not in an arthouse theater, a site of viewership that positions itself as an alternative to the cultural hegemony of the Hollywood

mainstream. Instead, DeLillo casts this onboard lounge as a corridor of power, albeit one that any passenger with a ticket can enter, with the ability to ironize any radicalism it sees onscreen. The successfully undermined film becomes laden with “gruesomely humorous ambiguity, a spectacle of ridiculous people doing awful things to total fools” (*Players* 9). It’s even unintentionally comic, when viewed with the accompaniment of silly music. DeLillo describes the guerrilla leader as he “fires several rounds into the air—a blood rite or passionate declaration. Buster Keaton, says the piano” (10). And not only that—to use a phrase that always seeks to defang cinematic power—it’s *just a movie* in *Players*.

Where “The Uniforms” narrates the revolutionaries’ actions with immediacy, this novel’s prologue makes them undeniably unreal—not to be confused with real terrorists. Osteen asserts that in “The Uniforms,” “[t]he past is just a film; wars and war movies are the same thing” (*American Magic* 14). In contrast, the violence in *Players* “exists only in a film, and perhaps we are to reflect that terrorism can hardly be said to have existed before the media that terrorists exploit and depend on” (Cowart, *Don DeLillo* 44–45). True, but this is a piece of fictional film, as the “credits superimposed” on the opening image implies, not a news report (DeLillo, *Players* 4). So as Godard’s leftist fury has been reduced to the nearly ignored cinematic background noise on a jumbo jet, viewed by a well-heeled audience who laughs at the carnage that the film’s characters intend for them, the subversion of *Weekend* is complete. With it, a subversion of “The Uniforms” occurs too, suggesting that the real power of this quasi-revolutionary narrative lies not in its ability to perform radical cultural or political work, but in its endless potential for reappearance.

### ***Point Omega: Reappearance as the Departure from the Departure***

I will conclude by briefly addressing an important cinematic reappearance in DeLillo’s most recent novel, *Point Omega* (2010), another case of DeLillo’s invocation of multiple versions of cinematic narratives that, retrospectively, helps explain the radical intent of “The Uniforms” on its own terms. *Point Omega* is bookended by two chapters, titled “Anonymity” and “Anonymity 2,” that take place at a cinematic art instal-

lation. DeLillo describes a real artwork, Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* (1993), that projects Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) at such a speed that it takes a full twenty-four hours to screen the film in its entirety. Instead of the standard twenty-four frames per second, Gordon's film advances at about two frames per second. These chapters' relationship to the core narrative of *Point Omega* is unclear until the narrator of the bulk of the novel, filmmaker Jim Finley, reveals that he met Richard Elster at a 2006 installation of *24 Hour Psycho* at the Museum of Modern Art in order to persuade him to participate in a documentary film project (60–61). Elster, an architect of the Iraq War, resists the idea of the film, but still invites Finley to his California desert home. Finley proposes a documentary that would consist of a single take of Elster explaining whatever he would care to explain about his role in, well, whatever he would care to take credit for. By the end of the novel, the project has been aborted before it's even begun, but not before DeLillo makes clear that it was a doomed idea, never really viable as a politically resistant artwork.

Existing academic criticism that explicates the cinematic resonances of *Point Omega* has focused primarily on DeLillo's echoes of Hitchcock, especially in the examples of Mark Osteen's and David Cowart's articles. Many reviews of this novel, though, focused instead on the resemblance of Finley's planned project to Errol Morris film *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (2003), about the former Secretary of Defense and architect of the Vietnam War. It is that intertextual connection that I will discuss here, as DeLillo invokes Morris only obliquely, then makes clear how the unproduced fictional film within *Point Omega* would fail anyway. DeLillo invokes a cinematic source text indirectly (here, *The Fog of War*), lets it reappear under his terms, and then subverts its potential power, just as he did with *Weekend*.

Perhaps more than any other cinematic artist of his generation, Errol Morris has been devoted to the craft of nonfiction filmmaking while acknowledging the blurriness of the line between nonfiction and fiction. This makes him an apt model, even if an unintentional one, for DeLillo's conceptually minded Finley. Morris masterpiece, *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), was famously disqualified from consideration for the Best



Documentary Feature Oscar because it included re-enactments, rendering it a nonfiction film but not truly a documentary in the judgment of the Academy. For his film essay about Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (1991), Morris reconstructed Hawking's office on a soundstage and manipulated the lighting during interviews to achieve particular dreamlike effects, David Sterritt reports. And consider Morris most well-known technological contribution to nonfiction filmmaking, which he playfully calls the Interrotron. A technique for projecting Morris (or any other interviewer's) own face onto a two-way mirror in front of a camera lens, it lets an interviewee maintain eye contact with the camera and the interviewer simultaneously. As a result, the interview takes on the qualities of an actual conversation—i.e., an ostensibly authentic human interaction—and the recording of a film—i.e., an ostensibly artificial act—at the same time. Since DeLillo has reused *Weekend* both as straight raw material for fiction (in "The Uniforms") and as highly ironized fiction-within-fiction (in *Players*), his apparent interest in cinematic work that both is and isn't overtly a construction should come as no surprise.

Less powerful a cinematic artist than Morris to be sure, *Point Omega's* Jim Finley tries to convince Elster to participate in something that Finley simply cannot deliver. Finley admits that his experience as a director is meager: he has created one conceptual pastiche of a documentary, an hour-long edit of Jerry Lewis performing on his annual muscular dystrophy telethon, but with no other acts onscreen. The remainder "was all Jerry, pure performance [. . .] a crew-cut sweating man in semidelirium, a disease artist, begging us to send money to cure his afflicted children" (DeLillo, *Point Omega* 26). Finley added a droning ambient soundtrack, so as to position "Jerry outside the moment, in some larger surround, ahistorical, a man on a mission from God" (26). Finley admits to finding "something religious in it," but this film still lets its subject reappear, to borrow Casetti's term again, only as a bit of a grotesque (DeLillo, *Point Omega* 25). Finley clearly intends more of a show of respect to Elster than he did to Jerry Lewis—tellingly, Finley's narration consistently calls Elster by his last name, while Jerry Lewis frequently becomes just Jerry—but he has an uphill battle, DeLillo reminds us.

Elster's unwillingness to cooperate entirely aside, Finley's concept is untenable. He pitches a filming procedure to Elster that tries to persuade Elster that he's in good, reasonable, objective hands. The lack of images of any sort surrounding Elster will place focus on Elster's own accounting for his thoughts and actions:

"No plush armchair with warm lighting and books on a shelf in the background. Just a man and a wall [. . .] The man stands there and relates the complete experience, everything that comes to mind, personalities, theories, details, feelings. You're the man. There's no offscreen voice asking questions. There's no interspersed combat footage or comments from others, on-camera or off [. . .] A simple head shot" (DeLillo, *Point Omega* 21). Finley imagines that his film, purified of images, will not be susceptible to the distortions of truth that visuality can bear—those same distortions of truth so decried by the visuality of the war film as analyzed in the "The Uniforms" (with this in mind, it is telling that Errol Morris personal website includes a complete transcript of *The Fog of War*, as if to suggest that his film can and perhaps should be read as a strictly textual document) (Morris). Later, though, Finley's increasingly persistent persuasion can't help but introduce an intentional design element: "I have the wall, I know the wall, it's in a loft in Brooklyn, big messy industrial loft." This perfect wall is "mostly pale gray, some cracks, some stains, but these are not distractions, they're not self-conscious design elements" (DeLillo, *Point Omega* 27). His film, necessarily a visual text, will have its elements of visual design, no matter how much Finley resists the visual and understands images to be potentially misleading. That said, Finley also specifies the film will be in black and white, recalling the equation in "The Uniforms" of color with "childhood fantasy" (DeLillo, *Point Omega* 45; "The Uniforms" 7). If color equals fantasy, then this film's lack of color will signify seriousness of purpose and a clear-eyed rejection of fantasy.

Later, after Finley dismissed entirely the possibility of Elster's cooperation, following the disappearance of Elster's daughter, Finley appears to console himself with some

self-rationalization. Some visual meaning in this film was always unavoidable, given how expressive the human face is: "On film the face is the soul. The man is a soul in distress, as in Dreyer or Bergman, a flawed character in a chamber drama, justifying his war and condemning the men who made it" (DeLillo, *Point Omega* 99). Now that Finley is certain the film will not happen, he invokes filmmakers who create fictional narrative cinema. He clings to a desire for aesthetic purity, comparing Elster to cinematic faces as filmed by the most austere of European directors, but even then, Finley appears to ignore that such austerity is an intentional stylistic decision, in its own way as controlled as Finley's selection of the perfect wall (or, for that matter, Morris use of his Interrotron). Ultimately, in *Point Omega*, a film evacuated of extraneous images, reduced to a solitary man speaking in front of an unadorned wall (whether that man is Richard Elster or Jerry Lewis) falls short of the purity of concept that its creator desires. In *Players*, a movie that may have once had some purity of concept loses it as the conditions of its reappearance reduce its images to kitsch. In "The Uniforms," there has always been nothing but image.

Taken together, *Weekend*, "The Uniforms," and *Players* present multiple versions of the same story without ever asserting that the edition we read or view at any given moment bears any particular authority over its predecessor or its successor. This may not be a politically radical move, as DeLillo's own commentary on "The Uniforms" so coyly implies, but it is a move that demands a quieter paradigm shift in the ways we think about film and literature. DeLillo encourages us not to instantly privilege the literary text over the cinematic text, or the overtly subversive over the quietly subversive. DeLillo does not see film as quite so politically efficacious or ideologically pure as its creators may hope for it to be. That said, DeLillo still wields a form of considerable artistic power in how he lets source material reappear, especially as his uses of intertextuality work to upend conventional hierarchies regarding what kinds of stories and storytellers ought to bear the most cultural capital. In order for this power to be understood fully, though, some conventional wisdom must be challenged. And for DeLillo scholars in particular, thinking intertextually about adaptation of any given text, especially one frequently and unfairly viewed as minor, may require going to some unexpected intertexts: for "The Uniforms," not

just *Weekend* and *Players*, but *The Fog of War* and *Point Omega*. The radical intent that DeLillo implies could exist in “The Uniforms” ultimately does not admit direct leftist political action nearly so much as it suggests a variety of new ways that cinematic adaptation could work.

## Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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