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DELILLO SPECIAL ISSUE

War as Haiku: The Politics of Don DeLillo's Late Style

Matthew Shipe

Washington University in St. Louis, US
mashipe@wustl.edu

In the wake of *Underworld* (1997), Don DeLillo's work has been cast largely in a minor key. In this essay, I will focus on *Point Omega*, the work that I believe most clearly illuminates the political implications of DeLillo's late style as it tackles the consequences of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. More broadly, I hope to connect *Point Omega* to the work of DeLillo's contemporaries that have also speculated on the historical and political implications of the War on Terror. Centering on *Point Omega*, I am interested in how DeLillo has adopted a distinctive narrative form in his most recent fiction that frequently unsettles and complicates the historical narratives that he had established in his earlier work.

We like to think that America invented the future. We are comfortable with the future, intimate with it. But there are disturbances now, in large and small ways, a chain of reconsiderations. Where we live, how we travel, what we think about when we look at our children. For many people, the event has changed the grain of the most routine moment.

—Don DeLillo, “In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September” (2001)

In his posthumous volume *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (2006), Edward Said contemplates the work that artists produce toward the end of their lives, considering how as they grow older “their work and thought acquires a new idiom” (6). Appearing in the tumultuous opening decade of this new century, *On Late Style* has emerged as an especially relevant text as critics of post-1945 fiction have attempted to account for the late work of a generation of American writers—a generation that includes Philip Roth, Toni Morrison, John Updike, Thomas Pynchon, Joan Didion, and Don DeLillo to name but a few—who have dominated the national literary landscape for the past half century.¹ Inspired by Adorno’s 1937 essay “Late Style in Beethoven,” the book explores the ways in which the nearness of death can shape the aging artists’ imagination, the appeal of these final works frequently resting in their

¹ Taken together, these writers’ collected work has mapped out the political and cultural upheavals that transformed the United States in the decades after the Second World War and their most recent books have chronicled the upheavals of the new century. This group has also remained remarkably productive during the opening decade of this century: Updike produced a book a year until his death in January 2009; Pynchon has released three novels, including the gargantuan *Against the Day* (2006); Roth has published seven novels and a volume of criticism before announcing his retirement from fiction after the release of *Nemesis* (2010); Didion has completed four collections of nonfiction, most memorably her memoirs of loss *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) and *Blue Nights* (2011); Morrison has maintained her prominence, with her most recent novel, *God Bless the Child*, appearing in 2015; and DeLillo has published a series of brief novels—*The Body Artist* (2001), *Cosmopolis* (2003), *Falling Man* (2007), *Point Omega* (2010)—in the wake of his Cold War-era magnum opus *Underworld* (1997). In addition to these novels, he has also produced the plays *Love Lies Bleeding* (2006) and *The Word for Snow* (2007), as well as the short story collection, *The Angel Esmeralda* (2011).

capacity to disturb.² For Said, late style reflects the fragmentation—the sense of fissure and loss—associated with the aging body and the diminished mind. However, the feelings of diminishment that such a style often provokes also possess disturbing political implications. “Lateness is being at the end, fully conscious, full of memory, and also very (even preternaturally) aware of the present,” Said writes. “Adorno, like Beethoven, becomes therefore a figure of lateness itself, an untimely, scandalous, even catastrophic commentator on the present” (14).

Late style’s capacity to serve as a “catastrophic commentator on the present” remains in many ways the most tantalizing aspect of Said’s argument, suggesting the ways in which it can voice an unsettling critique of our present moment. More broadly, *On Late Style* offers a particularly useful lens for reading the work that this aforementioned generation of American writers has produced over the past fifteen years, allowing us to consider the ways in which they adapted their *métier* to reflect the unfolding political and economic tumult that the United States experienced during the opening years of the 21st century. Indeed, I would argue that these writers’ late work has achieved a deepened resonance, their most recent fiction offering a rich, and often troubling exploration of our current political situation that also unsettles our sense of their individual careers. The novels they have produced since the turn-of-the-century have frequently explicitly addressed the political upheaval and violence that has characterized the new century: Pynchon’s *Bleeding Edge* (2011) re-imagines the events and the possible conspiracies that culminated in the World Trade Center attacks; DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007) explores the aftermath of the attacks and attempts to narrate the event itself; Updike’s *Terrorist* (2006), a portrait of a would-be teenaged jihadist, responds to the realities created by the September 11th attacks, while also anticipating the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing; Roth’s *Exit Ghost* (2007) pivots on George W. Bush’s re-election in 2004 and the catastrophes

² “For Adorno,” Said writes in the opening of *On Late Style*, “lateness is the idea of surviving beyond what is acceptable and normal; in addition, lateness includes the idea that one cannot really go beyond lateness at all, cannot transcend or lift oneself out of lateness, but can only deepen the lateness. There is no transcendence or unity” (13).

that a second Bush administration seemingly portended for the future of the United States.³

Indeed, history has moved to the forefront of these writers' late work as they struggle to comprehend the events that they have experienced, while also positing a view of the past that often emphasizes, with renewed vigor, the contingencies that can inalterably shape an individual's experience. Their recent fiction frequently has presented a view that exposes the false sense of security that historical narratives so frequently project. Considering DeLillo's history of the Cold War in *Underworld* (1997), Samuel Cohen notes that "though it seems to be a novel about a time that is over and about the effects of that time on its present, [it] is in fact a novel motivated by anxiety concerning something it can't tell the story of: the future" (201). Cohen's argument here is useful as it not only offers a persuasive reading of *Underworld*, but because it more broadly suggests how a heightened anxiety regarding the future underscores these novelists' late works. "Turned wrong way round, the relentless unforeseen was what we schoolchildren studied as 'History,' harmless history, where everything unexpected in its own time is chronicled on the page as inevitable," the narrator Philip Roth proclaims in an oft-quoted passage from *The Plot Against*

³ Of these writers, I would argue that it is Updike and Roth who would seem to possess the most similar sensibility toward their country in their late work. Their late work swerves from angry laments about all that has been lost—a past both writers seem acutely aware was never as secure or as ideal as they would like to believe it was—toward a more wary pragmatism that the American experiment can survive into the future. "We move on, don't we? [. . .] As a nation. We try to learn from our mistakes," the protagonist of Updike's "Varieties of Religious Experience" (2002) asserts as his daughter and young granddaughter discuss the possibilities of rebuilding the World Trade Center towers. "Those towers were taller than they needed to be. The Arabs weren't wrong to feel them as a boast" (776). A similar wary faith can be felt throughout Roth's later fiction, but particularly in *Exit Ghost* as Nathan Zuckerman imagines consoling Jamie Logan, a young writer with whom Zuckerman becomes infatuated with, and her husband as they watch George W. Bush win re-election. The scene is both remarkable for the overwhelming sense of disbelief that Jamie expresses as results roll in that election night—the certainty that Bush's re-election marks a catastrophe from which America can never recover—and for the indignation that Zuckerman seems to have moved beyond. On the one hand, Zuckerman contextualizes and, to an extent, minimizes the trauma of Bush's re-election by comparing it with the central traumas (Pearl Harbor, Kennedy's assassination, Kent State) that shaped his view of his nation (Roth, *Exit* 86). There is also a whiff that Zuckerman believes that his generation's traumas have more weight than the current moment, but this is somewhat mitigated by his insistence that American history consists of a series of traumas that the nation has always had to absorb.

America (2004). “The terror of the unforeseen is what the science of history hides, turning a disaster into an epic” (113–4). “11 September infantilized this country,” a character in Pynchon’s *Bleeding Edge* declares in the days following the attacks. “It had a chance to grow up, instead it chose to default back to childhood” (336).

Of this group of writers, however, I would contend that it has been Don DeLillo whose style has most visibly shifted in his late period.⁴ The four short novels that DeLillo has published in the aftermath of *Underworld*—a quartet that consists of *The Body Artist* (2001), *Cosmopolis* (2003), the aforementioned *Falling Man*, and *Point Omega* (2010)—have featured elliptical narratives that reflect the overwhelming sense of uncertainty that has loomed over American life over the past fifteen years. The fiction that DeLillo has produced in the twenty-first century has been cast in a distinctive minor key, but in its elusiveness and difficulty, his late work corresponds neatly with the alienated and fragmented art that Said theorizes in *On Late Style*.⁵ “A novel determines its own size and shape and I’ve never tried to stretch an idea beyond the frame and structure it seemed to require. (*Underworld* wanted to be big and I didn’t attempt to stand in the way),” DeLillo noted in a 2010 interview on the smaller scope that has become the most distinctive feature of the four novels that he has published since *Underworld*. “The theme that seems to have evolved in my work during the past decade concerns time—time and loss. This was not a plan; the novels

⁴ Philip Roth and Toni Morrison have adopted a similar stripped down late style, a self-conscious terseness and difficulty that would seem to be a deliberate departure from their earlier work. Roth, in particular, seems to be invested in the possibilities opened up by late style as his late works—particularly *Exit Ghost* and the Nemeses tetralogy seem to contain the sense of fragmentation and difficulty that Said diagnoses in *On Late Style*. I have discussed the political implications of Roth’s late style in an earlier article that focused on *Exit Ghost*. See “*Exit Ghost* and the Politics of ‘Late Style.’” *Philip Roth Studies* 5.2 (2009): 189–204.

⁵ In *Understanding Don DeLillo* (2015), Don Veggian makes a similar point, suggesting the ways in which Said’s reading of lateness helps illuminate DeLillo’s twenty-first century output. However, Veggian makes a distinction between *Falling Man* and *Point Omega*, which he argues come closer to the difficult lateness that Adorno locates in late Beethoven and that Said finds in the Italian novelist Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, and *The Body Artist* and *Cosmopolis*, which Veggian claims “approximate the youthful energies of the late Verdi” (112). “What unites [DeLillo’s recent work] above these distinctions is another impulse,” Veggian writes, “one that might be described as DeLillo’s stubborn refusal to admit the present time as the only available path the future might take” (112).

have simply tended to edge in that direction" (PEN America). In their exploration of "time and loss," DeLillo's most recent novels have addressed (or anticipated in the case of *Cosmopolis*) the central traumas of the new millennium: the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, the economic crash of 2008, the Occupy Wall Street movement, and the blowback from the global War on Terror.⁶

Beyond engaging these crises, DeLillo's post-*Underworld* fiction has expressed a sense of political and cultural belatedness that can be keenly felt in the oblique style that has characterized his late work. Not only are these books notably shorter than his earlier fiction—*Falling Man* is the longest of his recent work at a slim two-hundred and forty-six pages—but they display a pared-down prose style that, at times, sharply counters the more robust approach that typified his earlier work.⁷ This change in DeLillo's style is particularly evident in the opening section of *Point Omega*. The novel's brief prologue centers on a nameless man as he views *24 Hour Psycho*, Douglas Gordon's acclaimed art installation in which Alfred Hitchcock's classic film was slowed down to two frames per second so that it took a full twenty-four hours to view. The opening section follows this anonymous character—a man who we later presume kidnaps and kills Jessie Elster, the daughter of Richard Elster, the political theorist who is at the heart of DeLillo's fifteenth novel—as he contemplates what *Psycho* (1960) reveals when viewed at that speed:

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. He stood and looked. In the time it took for Anthony Perkins to turn his head, there seemed to flow an array of ideas involving science and

⁶ "The future is always a wholeness, a sameness. We're all tall and happy there" Vija Kinski, the chief of theory for Eric Packer, informs the young billionaire asset manager at the center of *Cosmopolis*, in a passage indicative of the unease that informs much of DeLillo's late work. "This is why the future fails. It always fails. It can never be the cruel happy place we want to make it" (91).

⁷ In an amusing, but ultimately dismissive review of *Point Omega*, Sam Anderson notes how, "[r]eading late-phase DeLillo tends to make me feel like a late-phase DeLillo character: distant, confused, catatonic, drifting into dream worlds, missing dentist appointments, forgetting the meanings of basic words, and staring at everyday objects as if they were holy relics."

philosophy and nameless other things, or maybe he was seeing too much. 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 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. (*Point Omega* 5–6)

These last few lines would seem to be crucial to how we view DeLillo's late style: the stripped-down nature of the narrative forcing readers to bear down all the harder, his prose hinting at connections and meanings that the narrative ultimately refuses to confirm.⁸ Such moments reflect our impulse as readers to fill in the gaps that DeLillo's prose rips open. Indeed, the opening section of *Point Omega* offers itself as a sort of commentary on how we might approach the paucity of material that DeLillo presents within the novel. In his review, James Lasdun observes how *Point Omega* "is very much about lateness: late life, late empire, hindsight, dread, disappearance. It is also something of an object lesson in the methods of late-phase literature in general, where the high-gloss productions of the imagination in full spate give way to a sparser, stonier art of suggestion and juxtaposition."

While *Falling Man* has received the most sustained critical attention of any of DeLillo's recent releases, *Point Omega* is, in many ways, the richer novel, offering a provocative meditation on the nature and potential implications of late style. Taking its title from Teilhard de Chardin's notion of the Omega Point, a theory that the universe is consistently evolving so that it would one day "become one with the requisite Omega Point," DeLillo's fourteenth novel explores the repercussions of the seemingly perpetual War on Terror (Grau 57).⁹ In his reading of the novel, David Cowart notes

⁸ The prose here feels especially bare when read against the more robust style that characterizes DeLillo's prose in *Underworld*: compare this passage from *Point Omega* with the wonderfully absurd and elaborate description of the condom shop in *Underworld* with its "condoms that glowed in the dark and foreplay condoms and condoms marked with graffiti that stretched to your erection, a letter becoming a word, a word that expands to a phrase" (111).

⁹ In *Morality and the Human Future in the Thought of Teilhard de Chardin* (1976), Joseph A. Grau explains: "For Teilhard, the general line of ascent was from the extremely simple and multiple toward the extremely complex, ultimately unified in a special manner, in man, through consciousness—a consciousness that he, by extrapolation, would see reaching a higher unity in a higher form of human consciousness to become one with the requisite Omega Point, requisite because of the psychological necessity of such an ultimate personal Center to motivate and thus activate human love" (57).

how DeLillo in *Point Omega* “deflects problems of immediate political legitimacy toward larger, less topical questions of a civilization’s decline. He perpend the prospect of an omega point for the American empire” (32). Similarly, I would argue that *Point Omega* most fully illuminates the political implications that are contained within DeLillo’s late style.¹⁰ More than any of his other post-*Underworld* books, *Point Omega* contemplates the ever-expanding moral and political consequences of the United States’s foreign policy in the wake of the September 11th attacks as it renders the various male characters’ sexual desire and Elster’s neoconservative political faith as forms of pathological behavior that ultimately result in violence and loss.

DeLillo never explicitly threads together the different elements (*Psycho*, the war in Iraq, Teilhard de Chardin’s Omega Point) that constitute this very brief novel—a refusal to explain that would seem to be integral to his late style—but instead he insinuates how we might make the connections between politics, film, and theology. The gaps within the narrative make *Point Omega* a difficult and, at times, frustrating reading experience as the novel hints at more than it actually wants to convey. Nevertheless, DeLillo’s refusal to grant the reader any closure within the narrative produces the “nonharmonious, nonserene tension, and above all, a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness” that Said diagnoses as one of the central tenets of late style (7). Considering Ibsen’s final play, *When We Dead Awaken* (1899), Said notes how “Ibsen’s last plays suggest an angry and disturbed artist for whom the medium of drama provides an occasion to stir up more anxiety, tamper irrevocably with the possibility of closure, and leave the audience more perplexed and unsettled

¹⁰ Cowart’s “The Lady Vanishes: Don DeLillo’s *Point Omega*” offers a compelling reading of the novel’s politics, suggesting how it yields an “indirect anatomy of Americans’ acquiescence to the Iraq War and its spurious rationale” (46). My argument mainly departs from his in that it considers how Finley’s failure to interact with Elster inflects our view of the novel’s politics. Also of note is Martin Paul Eve’s “Too many goddamn echoes’: Historicizing the Iraq War in Don DeLillo’s *Point Omega*.” While Eve’s argument has a different emphasis than my own, his article offers a very useful framework for how *Point Omega* rewrites DeLillo’s earlier fiction. Eve argues how the novel “can be read as a text of transition to a new mode of warfare in which the massive state is no longer the central player. It can also, though, be read as a text that loops, that rehistoricizes, that builds patterns both literary-taxonomical and sociohistorical, a text that reruns the film of its antecedents, *Running Dog*, *Libra* and, of course, *Underworld*” (591).

than before" (7). This description would seem to neatly apply to *Point Omega*, as it uses late style's capacity to disturb to capture the ethical and political questions that have haunted the United States for the past decade. As he had in *Cosmopolis* and *Falling Man*, DeLillo experiments with chronology in *Point Omega*, forcing readers to piece together the different elements of the narrative. In the four chapters that constitute the heart of *Point Omega*, DeLillo focuses on Jim Finley, an aspiring filmmaker in his late thirties, as he attempts to persuade Elster to participate in a documentary where he would discuss "his time in government, in the blat and stammer of Iraq" (21). The book begins and ends with the anonymous viewer's contemplation of *24 Hour Psycho*, and his experience of viewing the film serves as the framework for how we approach the story that DeLillo traces in the middle sections of the book (the opening and closing sections are identified as taking place on September 3rd and 4th of 2006, while the middle sections take place in the weeks that follow).

In pursuit of his subject, Finley travels to Anza-Borrego, a remote location in the southern California desert, where Elster has retreated to after retiring from public life. There Finley attempts to convince the retired scholar to agree to be in a film where he would stand against a bare wall and discuss his role in planning the Iraq war. "The man stands there and relates the complete experience, everything that comes to mind, personalities, theories, details, feelings," Finley says of his concept for the film. "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" (DeLillo, *Point Omega* 21). His proposed project recalls both *The Fog of War* (2003)—Errol Morris' acclaimed documentary in which Robert McNamara re-assesses his role in the policies that resulted in the escalation of the Vietnam War—and the film project that David Bell pursues in DeLillo's debut novel, *Americana* (1971).¹¹ In many ways,

¹¹ "It'll be part dream, part fiction, part movies," Bell says of his proposed film. "An attempt to explore parts of my consciousness. Not quite autobiographical in the Jonas Mekas sense. I've said part movies. By that I mean certain juxtapositions of movies with reality, certain images that have stayed with me, certain influences too. I mean you can start with nothing but your own minor reality and end with an approximation of art. Ghosts and shadows everywhere in terms of technique. Bresson. Miklós Jancsó. Ozu. Shirley Clarke. The interview technique. The monologue. The anti-movie. The single camera position. The expressionless actor. The shot extended to its ultimate limit in time" (DeLillo, *Americana* 263).

Point Omega returns to the terrain that DeLillo covered in *Americana*, as both novels trace obsessive young New York filmmakers who trek west to capture their artistic vision and both end with their altered artists returning to New York after their encounters in the desert.¹²

In contrast to *Americana's* sprawling and somewhat unwieldy narrative structure, *Point Omega* appears finely chiseled; the novel is carefully structured as the anonymous viewer's observations on *24 Hour Psycho* bracket the action in the California desert. However, the meaning of this structure—the messy guilt and violence that it seemingly contains—remains partially veiled. Much like a Hitchcock film, the implied violence remains more terrifying than an action that is graphically displayed. The violence in the novel centers on Jessie Elster, who relocates from Manhattan to her father's desert home to escape an unhealthy romantic relationship. Her sudden disappearance two-thirds of the way through the novel becomes the catalyst for the action that consumes the rest of the book as a mass search is initiated to find her. The search proves to be largely futile: a knife is found but no evidence is discovered that connects it to her disappearance. While readers assume that the anonymous viewer presented in the novel's opening and concluding sections is responsible for Jessie's abduction (the knife suggesting that the anonymous viewer has become Norman Bates), the novel never fully confirms that suspicion. The book concludes with the viewer meeting Jessie at the *24 Hour Psycho* installation and getting her phone number, but the narrative refuses to fully reveal the extent of his guilt, or even if he is guilty at all.

Jessie's disappearance haunts the novel, and it is the unarticulated political implications of this suggested violence that begin to hint at the ways in which DeLillo engages the United States's foreign policy in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. More than either Updike and Roth, DeLillo has imagined the attacks as marking a

With the exception of the autobiographical impulse, Jim Finley's proposed film in *Point Omega* resembles Bell's project.

¹² Of course, David Bell is narrating *Americana* from a future vantage point near the end of the twentieth century. "There will be no fireworks when the century turns," Bell notes near the end of the book. "There will be no agonies in the garden" (DeLillo 347).

unique break within the nation's history, the event deflating the illusions of superiority that were created through the end of the Cold War and the rise of American technology.¹³ It is an argument that DeLillo eloquently makes in "In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September," his oft-cited response to September 11th that was originally published in the December 2001 issue of *Harper's*. Appearing only a few months after the fall of the World Trade Center, the essay explores what DeLillo terms as the "counternarrative," a "shadow history of false memories and imagined loss" that emerges from the attacks and anticipates his attempts to consider them in his fiction.¹⁴ Near the beginning of that essay, he suggests how the attacks have drastically altered our sense of the world and ourselves:

Terror's response is a narrative that has been developing over years, only now becoming inescapable. It is our lives and minds that are occupied now. This catastrophic event changes the way we think and act, moment to moment, week to week, for unknown weeks and months to come, and steely years.

¹³ In an essay that appeared in the first *New Yorker* published after the attacks and was later included in his collection *Due Considerations: Essays and Criticism* (2007), Updike emphasizes the nation's ability to move on from the September 11th. "The next morning, I went back to the open vantage from which we had watched the tower so dreadfully slip from sight," Updike writes at the conclusion of the essay. "The fresh sun shone on the eastward façades. A few boats tentatively moved in the river. The ruins were still sending out smoke, but Manhattan looked glorious. The day was offering itself as if nothing had changed" (118). In a 2004 essay that appeared before the publication of *The Plot Against America*, Roth posits a hesitant reading of the nation's future under George W. Bush, who he memorably describes as "a man unfit to run a hardware store let alone a nation like this one" ("The Story"). The Bush administration and the War on Terror that it instigated, Roth argues in the essay, "merely reaffirmed for me the maxim that informed the writing of all these books and that makes our lives as Americans as precarious as anyone else's: all the assurances are provisional, even here in a 200-year-old democracy." If Updike imagines a way forward that simultaneously acknowledges American fallibility, Roth tenders a more hesitant reading of the future, one that recognizes the way that the whims of history can suddenly collapse in on us as individuals or a nation. This is not to say that Roth's reading of history is wholly fatalistic.

¹⁴ Linda S. Kauffman offers a persuasive reading of "In the Ruins of the Future" that smartly connects the essay to DeLillo's depiction of the Moonies and terrorism in *Mao II* (1991) and to the depiction of the September 11th attacks in *Falling Man*. See "The Wake of Terror: Don DeLillo's 'In the Ruins of The Future,' 'Baader-Meinhof,' and *Falling Man*." *Modern Fiction Studies*, 54.2 (2008): 353–377.

Our world, parts of our world, have crumbled into theirs, which means we are living in a place of danger and rage.

In many ways, *Point Omega* brings readers back to the argument that DeLillo makes in “In the Ruins of the Future,” as the novel encourages readers to evaluate what it has meant to live for the past decade “in a place of danger and rage.” Despite his declaration in a 2010 interview that *Point Omega* is “not at all political,” DeLillo’s impulse to locate it in our actual history would seem to be vital to how we view the narrative’s potential politics; set during the “late summer/early fall” of 2006, the novel takes place three years after George W. Bush’s infamous declaration of “Mission Accomplished” as Iraq deteriorated into a chaotic civil war (“Conversation”). Commenting on DeLillo’s disclaimer, Cowart notes that the “remark signals a literary aspiration largely at odds with the scoring of cheap shots at the expense of the Bush administration and those who kept it in place for eight years. DeLillo seeks in this novel to represent the anguish of one whose error—ethical, epistemological, *linguistic*—takes on a moral gravity that verges on the tragic” (42).

The distinction that Cowart makes here is a vital one, suggesting how *Point Omega* appears uninterested in “scoring cheap shots” against George W. Bush while still remaining deeply invested in exploring the forces that led up to the invasion, as well as the implications that the failed invasion has on the future of the American empire. Unlike *Cosmopolis*, which features a fictional President Midwood, *Point Omega* remains firmly grounded in reality as it places Richard Elster within the Bush administration. “[Paul] Wolfowitz went to the World Bank. That was exile,” Elster informs Finley, distinguishing his decision to live in seclusion in the California desert from Wolfowitz’s post-White House career (DeLillo, *Point Omega* 23). DeLillo’s insistence on naming names within this book—in particular, his decision to situate the fictional Elster alongside Wolfowitz, who served as U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense and was, with Donald Rumsfeld, one of the primary advocates for the invasion of Iraq—is also noteworthy. Wolfowitz’s brief presence within the text reflects the ways in which *Point Omega* remains explicitly invested in evaluating the foreign policy decisions that shaped the past decade of American life.

After the brief prologue, the novel's opening two sections center on Finley's attempt to convince Elster to participate in his film, and it is in these sections where DeLillo most explicitly engages in the policies that the United States pursued in the wake of the September 11th attacks. "I still want a war. A great power has to act," Elster explains early in the novel. "We were struck hard. We need to retake the future. The force of will, the sheer visceral need. We can't let others shape our world, our minds. All they have are old dead despotic traditions. We have a living history and I thought I would be in the middle of it" (DeLillo, *Point Omega* 30). Elster's argument clearly echoes the neoconservative faith that the United States, in the power vacuum opened up by the conclusion of the Cold War, maintained the ability—and to a certain extent had the responsibility—to remake the world in its image. It was faith in American power that propelled the invasion of Iraq, and Elster possesses the fervor of a pure believer as he insists on distinguishing himself from the men for whom the war was simply "all priorities, statistics, evaluations, rationalizations" (30).

Perhaps not surprisingly, since *Point Omega* is a DeLillo novel, Elster conceptualizes war as an expression of language, imagining that the invasion could take the shape of a haiku. "Haiku means nothing beyond what it is," Elster informs Finley of his vision for the war. He continues,

A pond in summer, a leaf in the wind. It's human consciousness located in nature. It's the answer to everything in a set number of lines, a prescribed syllable count. I wanted a haiku war [. . .] I wanted a war in three lines. This was not a matter of force levels or logistics. What I wanted was a set of ideas linked to transient things. This is the soul of haiku. Bare everything to plain sight. See what's there. Things in war are transient. See what's there and then be prepared to watch it disappear. (29)

In many ways, Elster's desire to see the war as a haiku reflects how many in the Bush administration imagined that the invasion of Iraq would be a succinct and neatly self-contained conflict whose meaning—the democratization of the Middle East—would

neatly emerge. Elster, of course, realizes the irony of this notion of haiku war, as the war had dissolved into a seemingly endless morass of violence by 2006, the year in which *Point Omega* is set. Yet, he also maintains a faith that somehow war can somehow “bare everything to sight,” suggesting that he sees the war as expanding beyond the mere geopolitical goals of bringing democracy to the Middle East or, more cynically, helping the U.S. secure Iraq’s oil reserves. Instead, he posits war as a way of excavating “what’s there” before the progression of time erases it. What goes unsaid, though, is what Elster exactly means by this notion. What can war bring to the surface? What understanding is created?

Elster, however, fails to elaborate on these questions, and readers are left with the task of teasing out the implications of his metaphor. Adding to the difficulty, Finley rarely challenges the retired academic. To what extent Elster’s observations have any intellectual merit remains murky; DeLillo never quite reveals whether or not this particular emperor has any clothes.¹⁵ The filmmaker’s failure to engage Elster—to challenge him or push him to explicate his views—is crucial to understanding the dynamic that DeLillo establishes in the novel: a dialectic is hinted at but aborted with Finley’s silence becoming the non-illuminating commentary through which we approach Elster’s politics. “The liturgical gloom was gone from his voice,” Finley observes after Elster blames the other war planners for contaminating his war. “He was tired and detached, too separated from events to do justice to his resentment. I made it a point not to provoke further comment. It would come when it mattered, self-generated, on camera” (DeLillo, *Point Omega* 30). Finley’s silence again is significant. Although he hopes to challenge Elster in the film (a film that, in the wake of Jessie’s disappearance will never be made), his refusal to respond places the emphasis on Elster’s words themselves.

This silence seems even more meaningful when Finley recalls an essay of Elster’s entitled “Renditions.” The essay, which Finley recounts portions of, had focused on

¹⁵ In his consideration of Elster’s character, Cowart concludes that he continually appears “a bit specious, his pontification on ‘[t]he omega point’ [52, 72] and civilization’s putative appetite for ‘paroxysm’ [73] reading like Teilhard for tots or, to paraphrase Orson Welles’s famous remark, dollar-book D.H. Lawrence. Whatever his credentials, Elster is not much of a sage” (45).

the “word itself, earliest known use, changes in form and meaning, zero-grade forms, reduplicated forms, suffixed forms” and had brought Elster to the attention of certain Washington D.C. research centers and eventually the White House (DeLillo, *Point Omega* 33–4). The essay remains central to understanding his political vision, and Finley’s account of it in many ways stands at the heart of the political questions that haunt *Point Omega*. In contrast to his notion of the haiku war, Elster recognizes and, to a certain extent, embraces the violent need for retribution that would seem to be the motivating factor behind the invasion of Iraq. At the conclusion of “Renditions,” Elster vividly anticipates a future where:

men and women, in cubicles, wearing headphones, will be listening to secret tapes of the administration’s crimes while others study electronic records on computer screens and still others look at salvaged videotapes of caged men being subjected to severe physical pain and finally others, still others, behind closed doors, ask pointed questions of flesh-and-blood individuals. (33)

This conclusion demonstrates Elster’s awareness of how future generations will most likely interpret and then condemn that Bush administration’s handling of the War on Terror while also acknowledging the means (the headphones, computer screens, “salvaged videotapes”) through which they will encounter this past. Elster, however, would seem to be doing more than just parroting the critiques from the Left that claimed that Bush should be (or would be) tried as a war criminal. His mediation on the word *rendition* displays that he is attempting to do more than just justify the War on Terror or tweak liberals’ condemnation of the administration’s foreign policy:

Toward the end of the commentary [Elster] wrote about select current meanings of the word *rendition*—interpretation, translation, performance. Within those walls, somewhere, in seclusion, a drama is being enacted, old as human memory, he wrote, actors naked, chained, blindfolded, other actors with props of intimidation, the renderers, nameless and masked, dressed in

black, and what ensues, he wrote, is a revenge play that reflects the mass will and interprets the shadowy need of an entire nation, ours. (34)

The carefulness of Finley's description is worth commenting on here; the proliferation of commas not only makes this passage impossible to skim, but also points toward Finley's need to try preserve each of these elements, allowing for readers to see each one in isolation. More broadly, by imaging U.S. foreign policy—a policy that contains the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the “advanced interrogation” techniques employed at Abu Ghraib, and the perpetual detention of terror suspects at Guantanamo Bay—as a sort of “revenge play” Elster provocatively suggests how the policies pursued by the Bush administration are somehow the realization of the nation's unarticulated desire for vengeance. “I wondered if [Elster] was right,” Finley later muses, “that the country needed this, we needed it in our desperation, our dwindling, needed something, anything, whatever we could get, rendition, yes, and then invasion” (35). Again, Finley refuses to pursue this question, and silence prevails.

DeLillo situates these discussions on the nature of war alongside the anonymous man's reflections on Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho*. This juxtaposition pushes readers to contemplate the guilt and proclivity for violence that would seem to unite the novel's three central characters: the anonymous man viewing *24 Hour Psycho*; Finley, the film fanatic who desires Elster's adult daughter; and Elster, who maintains his belief in war's transformative power. The specter of Norman Bates, the mother-obsessed killer of Hitchcock's most famous film, hangs over *Point Omega*. Bates connects these seemingly disparate men; his presence within the novel hints at the ways in which we are all implicated in the violence and the cruelty that was contained within the expansive War on Terror. “Everybody remembers the killer's name, Norman Bates, but nobody remembers the victim's name,” the anonymous man observes in the novel's prologue. “Anthony Perkins is Norman Bates, Janet Leigh is Janet Leigh. The victim is required to share the name of the actress who plays her” (DeLillo, *Point Omega* 6). Like so many lines within *Point Omega*, this observation seems rich with potential meanings, implications that DeLillo hints at rather than fleshes out.

The killer is transformed, while the victim remains static: Janet Leigh will always be Janet Leigh and not Marion Crane, the character she plays in the film. Why this refusal to recognize Marion's character? Why do we view the victim as Leigh? And what does such violence signify?

Such questions seem important not only to how we might understand Jessie Elster's disappearance in the novel, but they would also seem crucial to how we comprehend the moral implications that DeLillo is interested in tracing out in *Point Omega*. To this point, I would argue that Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* and Hitchcock's original film play equally important roles as the novel progresses: the former offers DeLillo a chance to riff on art and how it can alter our experience of time (in many ways the theme that unites DeLillo's post-*Underworld* novels), while the murderous spirit of Hitchcock's *Psycho* seems to have bled into the individual consciousness of all of the novel's male characters. This transfusion (or transformation) remains particularly pronounced in the novel's conclusion where we see the anonymous man willing himself to dissolve into the role of Hitchcock's most infamous killer, as he obsessively watches the slowed-down version of the film: "The man separates himself from the wall and waits to be assimilated, pore by pore, to dissolve into the figure of Norman Bates, who will come into the house and walk up the stairs in subliminal time, two frames per second, and then turn toward the door of Mother's room" (DeLillo, *Point Omega* 116). For longtime DeLillo readers, this passage recalls the treatment of killers and assassins that runs throughout his earlier fiction—most notably his characterizations of Lee Harvey Oswald in *Libra* (1988) and the Texas Highway Killer in *Underworld*—but it also echoes the Oedipal desire that haunts David Bell in *Americana*.¹⁶

¹⁶ In particular, DeLillo's depiction of the anonymous man in *Point Omega* echoes the emphasis on transformation that the Texas Highway Killer in *Underworld* identifies as his reason for calling into the news anchor (Sue Ann) to discuss his crimes: "She made him feel real, talking on the phone. She gave him the feeling he was taking shape as himself, coming into the shape he'd always been intended to take, the thing of who he really was. It was like filling out—did you ever feel things pouring out from the center of who you are and taking the shape of the intended person?" (269).

What distinguishes *Point Omega* from these earlier works, however, is the way in which the killer's psychology can be felt in so many of the novel's characters, but particularly in the figure of Finley. Much like the anonymous viewer who stalks the installation of *24 Hour Psycho*, Finley appears obsessed with film's ability to transform reality; his estranged wife tells him at one point, "[f]ilm, film, film. If you were any more intense, you'd be a black hole" (DeLillo, *Point Omega* 27). Finley shares the anonymous viewer's belief in film's transformative power; his previous film had been a montage of Jerry Lewis's early telethons "to benefit people suffering from muscular dystrophy" (25). "This was social and historical material but edited well beyond the limits of information and objectivity and not itself a document," Finley says of the project. "I found something religious in it, maybe I was the only one, religious, rapturous, a man transported" (25). His connection with the anonymous viewer becomes more explicit once Jessie Elster arrives in the desert and he quickly becomes—similar to the anonymous viewer at the end of the novel—infatuated by her.¹⁷ Despite his reservations, Finley finds himself watching Jessie, positioning himself both as a director carefully composing the scene and as Bates stalking out his victim:

The bathroom door was open, midday, and Jessie was in there, barefoot, wearing a T-shirt and briefs, head over the basin, washing her face. I paused at the door. I wasn't sure whether I wanted her to see me there. I didn't imagine walking in and standing behind her and leaning into her, didn't see this clearly, my hands slipping under the T-shirt, my knees moving her legs apart so I could press more tightly, fit myself up and in, but it was there in some tenuous stroke of the moment, the idea of it, and when I moved away from the door I made no special effort to leave quietly (55).

This passage is one of the most remarkable in the novel, a departure from the sparseness that characterizes the bulk of DeLillo's prose in *Point Omega*, as Finley

¹⁷ Lasdun makes a similar point in his review, noting how "Finley becomes increasingly attracted to her, watching her with the same uneasy intentness as the unnamed man watching Janet Leigh in *Psycho*."

constructs a series of images (“barefoot, wearing a T-Shirt, head over basin”) that capture Jessie’s actions here. Not surprisingly, he presents these images as a series of discrete shots that we, as viewers, would have to unite into a whole, the fragmented images transforming Jessie’s body (in a sense slicing her apart). The sequence recalls the infamous bathroom scene in *Psycho*, but here the perspective is reversed as we watch Finley surveilling his subject. The passage’s lengthy final sentence remains particularly ominous and confused as he first suggests that he didn’t imagine intruding, before giving an explicit account of how he sees himself manipulating her body. The final sentence conveys a heightened level of sexual frenzy, indicating a proclivity for violence that Finley seems barely able to suppress.

This passage would also seemingly implicate Finley in Jessie’s disappearance, even though he clearly had no part in her abduction as he was out shopping for groceries with her father when she goes missing. Finley’s implied guilt in Jessie’s vanishing (and likely murder) is worth noting, as DeLillo begins to suggest how the violence contained within Hitchcock’s film—a violence that is mystified and seemingly transformed in *24 Hour Psycho*—appears pervasive, the film somehow capturing the zeitgeist. That said, no meaning or significance can be found in the mystery that surrounds Jessie’s disappearance—her absence confounds any attempts to discern its meaning or intent. “Nothing I might say to [Elster] was more or less likely than something else,” Finley confesses as the hope of Jessie’s safe return diminishes. “It had happened, whatever it was, and there was no point thinking back into it, although we would of course, or I would [. . .] This is what he was left with, lost times and places, the true life, over and over” (DeLillo, *Point Omega* 87–8). The sense of deep time that Elster had enjoyed in the desert—a sense of the long history contained within that landscape—also collapses with Jessie’s absence: “The desert was clairvoyant, this is what [Elster had] always believed, that the landscape unravels and reveals, it knows future as well as past. But now it made him feel enclosed and I understood this, hemmed in, pressed tight” (87).

More importantly, the expectation of transcendence, the evolutionary promise of de Chardin’s Omega Point, evaporates as Elster’s belief in the future—a belief that had informed his foreign policy—is shattered by his daughter’s permanent absence.

As they abandon Anza-Borrego to return to New York, essentially giving up hope that Jessie will ever return, Finley observes:

There we were, coming out of an empty sky. One man past knowing. The other knowing only that he would carry something with him from this day on, a stillness, a distance, and he saw himself in somebody's crowded loft, where he puts his hand to the rough surface of an old brick wall and then closes his eyes and listens. (DeLillo, *Point Omega* 99)

This moment begins to measure the ultimate consequences that Jessie's disappearance will have on these two men: Finley becomes even more estranged from himself—forever looking for a transcendence that will elude him—while Elster has collapsed into being a man out-of-time, his daughter's disappearance shattering his faith in time and in the future. On the one hand, Jessie's disappearance could be seen as Elster's punishment for the sins that he committed during the Bush administration, but such an allegorical reading flattens out what DeLillo seems to be doing in this conclusion. The universe that DeLillo imagines in *Point Omega* is not so neatly morally ordered, but instead is infused by a violence that seems as inexplicable as it is pervasive.

The novel, however, does not end with Finley and a shattered Elster returning to New York, but instead jumps back to September 4th where we see the anonymous viewer's first encounter with Jessie at the *24 Hour Psycho* installation. This epilogue tightly seals off the novel: Jessie's encounter with the viewer would seem to be the action that initiates the violence—but this seemingly causal connection is never verified—and we are left to puzzle out the connection between the different parts of this brief novel. In his reading of Beethoven's late style, Adorno notes how late works "are, for the most part, not round, but furrowed, even ravaged" (564). "Devoid of sweetness, bitter and spiny, they do not surrender themselves to mere delectation," Adorno continues. "They lack all the harmony that the classicist aesthetic is in the habit of demanding from works of art, and they show more traces of history than of growth" (564). The difficulty and "bitterness" that

Adorno describes permeates *Point Omega*; the novel's disjointed structure and its refusal to connect the dots of its plot certainly result in a difficult read. However, in its difficulty and its obscurity, it emerges as the most pungent and disturbing of DeLillo's late work. The novel captures the sense of fragmentation and difficulty that Said describes in *On Late Style*. In doing so, by being so self-consciously "late" in its design and style, the novel captures the violence and uncertainty that, for DeLillo, has saturated contemporary American life. Ultimately, *Point Omega* hints at (rather than fully exposes) the violence—the need for revenge and bloodshed that manifests itself both in the torture of terror suspects, as well as Jessie's disappearance—that would seem to be a consequence of the prolonged response to the September 11th attacks. This is not to say that the attacks themselves created this psychotic mindset; instead, DeLillo suggests that the guilt from this violence and an unspeakable need for retribution quietly shape all of us, altering how we view our future and ourselves. By returning to the anonymous viewer (instead of ending with Finley and Elster leaving the desert), *Point Omega* limits our ability to imagine a future and instead keeps us hermetically sealed in a cycle of violence that seems as perpetual as it does inexplicable.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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