

## **Don Delillo's *Point Omega*: Mediated Vision and the Novel After the Subject**

In a 2014 article on Don Delillo's 2010 novel *Point Omega*, Pieter Vermeulen argues that it 'can be read as an attempt to overcome the reliance of the novel form on distinctive events and identifiable individual agents'. For Vermeulen these constituent parts of the historical structure of the novel form 'can be considered as limitations on the novel's ability to abandon conventional realisms and imagine the geological ramifications of culture' in the Anthropocene.<sup>1</sup> His argument adapts Peter Boxall's reading of *Point Omega* as articulating a crisis in traditional 'mechanics of narrative' in the wake of the unprecedented time-space compression of the twenty-first century, what Boxall quotes Paul Virilio as calling the advent of an 'era of instantaneity', to a conception of human agency that sites its territory no longer in the individual subject but the entire planet that human social production has remade in its own image.<sup>2</sup> But Vermeulen ends by suggesting that the novel does not really engage the 'vast anonymity' that 'has overwhelmed the bare outlines of a human plot, and come to assert itself as a blockage on the human scale it encompasses': returning in different forms to the question this poses for traditional narrative mechanics, *Point Omega* shows 'that it has not yet managed to answer it.'<sup>3</sup>

As I will go on to show, this account is in places problematic. *Point Omega*, Vermeulen writes, elaborates an account of time—developed partly through an evocation of Douglas Gordon's video installation *24 Hour Psycho*—as a 'depsychologizing operation in the novel

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1 Pieter Vermeulen, 'Don Delillo's *Point Omega*, the Anthropocene, and the Scales of Literature', *Studio Neophilologica*, 87.sup1 (2015), 68-81 (p. 77).

2 Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013),

3 Vermeulen, p. 78-79.

form', one which shifts the scale of the novel away from the focalising point of the individual subject towards that of cosmic or geological time. But what actually happens to the subject in this operation? The subject cannot be said to simply dissolve in *Point Omega's* 'tentative narrative innovations', nor does Vermeulen specify what a fully depsychologised Anthropocenic novel would look like, not even turning to existing models of anti-psychological fiction such as the *nouveau roman*. This proceeds, I argue, from the lack of an account of the transformations of the subject in relation not only to the novel form but the wider sociopolitical ecology of media time within which it exists. The media technologies, I will argue, that form the foil or armature of the novel's disarticulated narrative structure and point of view, performing the crisis of the novel form as 'invested in the exploration of the fate of the individual', simultaneously imply or reconstitute the subject.<sup>4</sup>

It may be useful to give some sense of the novel's structure, and then to rehearse some of the points in Vermeulen's argument. *Point Omega* is structured around four central chapters, narrated in the first person by Jim Finley, a filmmaker angling to work on a film centred on Richard Elster, 'a defense intellectual' as Finley describes him, who was employed 'to conceptualize [...] to apply overarching ideas and principles' in the 2003 Iraq War.<sup>5</sup> Bookending these chapters are two sections, titled 'Anonymity', using for the most part a close third person narration. These sections, occupying the usual structural position of a frame story, centre around a nameless male figure watching, on two consecutive days, *24 Hour Psycho*. In the second of the central chapters, Elster's daughter, Jessie, arrives at his house in the Colorado Desert of southern California and, in the third, disappears whilst Elster and Finley are out buying groceries. What appears to empirically connect these parts

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4 Vermeulen, p. 74; *ibid.*, p. 70; *ibid.*, p. 69.

5 Don DeLillo, *Point Omega* (London: Picador, 2010), p. 35, p. 23.

is not an easily recognised hierarchy of story levels but the occluded presence or absence of characters, clues to which appear at intervals throughout the text: thus, Elster and Finley seem to make a cameo in the opening 'Anonymity' section; the young woman who appears in the final section and talks to the protagonist has been identified with Jessie, thus identifying him with the vaguely menacing figure whom Jessie's mother knows as Dennis; the conclusion that he is responsible for Jessie's disappearance is one that Finley certainly entertains, brusquely asking the mother about him, but, as most of the commentators who follow this reading admit, the novel never sanctions or gives conclusive proof of this solution.

*24 Hour Psycho* which slows Hitchcock's film to the equivalent of 2 frames per second, enacts, Vermeulen writes, the elimination of even the occluded or etiolated forms of subjectivity that underpinned the 'narrative grammar' of earlier DeLillo novels: by vastly slowing down the film to a temporality 'beyond human boundaries', Gordon 'takes up a film that is often seen as a paradigmatic illustration of Freudian psychoanalysis, only to remove the model of subjectivity that underlies it.'<sup>6</sup> Whilst we can contest Vermeulen's account of *Psycho*, it seems correct that *Point Omega*'s narrative stasis proceeds from a recapitulation of this radical flattening and dispersal of subjectivity. For example, the protagonist of the 'Anonymity' sections speculates 'how many weeks or months before the film's time scheme absorbed his own', as it had 'subsumed' the 'broad horror of the old gothic movie'? On the novel's final pages, as it loops back to the installation room, he 'waits to be assimilated, pore by pore, to dissolve into the figure of Norman Bates'—but not quite the Bates of *Psycho*,

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6 Vermeulen, p. 73.

which he feels he cannot now ever see again in the same way: '[t]he original movie was fiction, this was real.'<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, the artwork only invokes the classical models of cinematic time and spectatorial subjectivity as a reminiscence: the real-life work was performed using a VHS copy of the Hitchcock film, controlled digitally, while later exhibition versions have been digital transfers; as the protagonist notes, this is why details unnoticed in the original film leap out in the projection.<sup>8</sup> This absorption extends to Finley in the desert, for whom time itself becomes something visible: 'I keep seeing the words. Heat, space, stillness, distance. They've become visual states of mind [...] That's the other word, time.' Elster contemplates with closed eyes the diachronic spread of time as synchronic images: 'silently divining the nature of later extinctions, grassy plains in picture books for children, a region swarming with happy camels and giant zebras, mastodons, sabretooth tigers.' Notably Finley in turn sees this landscape of condensed time in terms of film: looking out from 'remote trailheads' he sits 'in the car, conjuring the film, shooting the film, staring out at sandstone wastes.'<sup>9</sup> It is worth remembering the place of the desert in Hollywood cinema, as a synecdoche of its specific way of seeing, exemplified by John Ford's paradigmatic Westerns: deserts, as Jean Baudrillard noted, came to constitute an image of filmic vision as such, and the forms of narrative that lead through the filmic to the weightlessness of death, a movement that terminates in the cinematic revisionisms of the 1970s, from Peckinpah's *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* to Hellman's *Two Lane Blacktop* and Antonioni's *The Passenger*.<sup>10</sup> At the hermeneutic centre of the text, the point through which the narrative slowly and tenuously

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7 Delillo, p. 7-8; *ibid.*, p. 148, 17.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 14, 130.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 24; *ibid.*, p. 25; *ibid.*, p. 41.

10 Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1986), p. 1, 5.

loops, is a denatured image of digital time, the organising narratorial subject dispersed into 'pure film, pure time.'<sup>11</sup>

This prompts the question of why it is necessary to lead away from the subject's disposition in this structure, as Vermeulen does. For here the image—and this may be the mechanism that underpins the 'tentative' nature of the text's 'innovations'—enacts a formal double-bind: even as it performs the narratorial subject's dispersal, reduction, atomisation, it relies on the pre-existing formal codes of narratorial subjectivity it negates. In shifting the discussion to the frozen conceptual image of geology Vermeulen here in effect imposes on the novel the very shift from a diachronic to a synchronic structure he sees it as performing. Novelistic texts unfold diachronically in time, and so conventionally depend on narratorial frames of relative stability, even if these are produced serially. Even if the organising narratorial subject is subjected to the form of synchronic freezing or petrification that Vermeulen shows to occur in *Point Omega*, some grounding technique or formal machinery is required to produce the narrative in time.

This, then, is *24 Hour Psycho's* dialectically opposing function within *Point Omega*. In the same movement by which it disintegrates identity, it instantiates or forms it, by bringing buried narrative kernels, readymades or intertexts as narrative material. In the first 'Anonymity' section, the very first description of the chapter's subject states that he is 'standing against the north wall, barely visible', his first visible action being that he 'moved a hand towards his face, repeating, ever so slowly, the action of a figure on the screen.' He moves to the other side of the screen—and this is the first instance of free indirect discourse in the novel, the point where he moves away from being seen purely externally—

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11 Delillo, p. 7.

to ‘watch the same action in a flipped image’: ‘[h]e knew it’ would appear flipped ‘but needed to see it [...] what made this side of the screen any less truthful than the other side?’, he asks.<sup>12</sup> Looking, then, becomes an epistemological or subjective operation whose content is flat or arbitrary but nonetheless possesses a privileged force within the narrative economy of dedifferentiation that we’ve seen. Things *are* only insofar as they *appear*. Similarly, although the subject of the ‘Anonymity’ sections thinks of real life as ‘the strange bright fact that breathes and eats out there, the thing that’s not the movies’, what seems to pursue the characters in the novel is film narrative itself, specifically the plot of *Psycho*. The central chapters’ narrative structure of multiple and overlapping flashbacks set against a static present inscribes a movement between urban space and the desert that mirrors that of *Psycho*, whose pivotal deaths occur after Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) travels from Phoenix out into the trackless desert (“‘Then the locale changes. California, I think’”, as the ‘Anonymity’ protagonist speculates). Although it is this figure who seems most obviously to echo Norman Bates—we learn that ‘his mother had passed on’ and he is possessed by scopophilia—it is Finley who ends up, in a parallelism informed by the formal juxtaposition of story levels, taking on the role. The opening section’s triangulation of voyeurism, in which the protagonist is ‘watching the two men [Elster and Finley], they were watching the screen, Anthony Perkins at his peephole was watching Janet Leigh undress’ is condensed down into Finley’s fascination with Jessie: in the scene before she disappears, he imagines the two of them in separate spaces, ‘only a meter away’, connected as if by montage, and comes to look into her room, only to realise ‘that she was looking at me’. This sequence of disconnected looking follows that of *Psycho*, which moves straight from a perpendicular

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12 Ibid, p. 3-4; *ibid*, p. 4-5.

close-up of Bates to a POV shot of Leigh; the sequence directly precedes the moment of revelation of the shower scene.<sup>13</sup> Even in the absence of narrative movement of the sort that realism requires, plot reasserts itself as what, in the words of the narrator of Delillo's *White Noise*, Jack Gladney, 'move[s] deathward'.<sup>14</sup>

It is clear that there is an unresolved structural antinomy here at the level of the technics of the digital image and of subjectivity, which it seems Vermeulen's account does not get at. The shift that Vermeulen proposes is in essence the decoupling of narration from subjectivity, from realist narrative as a machinery of subjectivation. What I would like to do finally is to make some suggestions regarding this antinomy that attempt to address the questions of point of view that I have begun to sketch out, and to show these as grounded within a wider materialist frame of digital labour and time.

As we have seen, at the centre of the text is an identification between the narratorial subject position and the technologised image, in which looking becomes 'passing from this body into a quivering image on the screen', a unification with that in which 'it was impossible to see too much'.<sup>15</sup> David Trotter has analysed a similar formal identification in certain modernist texts with 'film's neutrality as a medium', a 'will-to-automatism' that reintroduces or re-enacts 'the neutrality of literature itself [...] as a medium'. Notably, Trotter also identifies 'no shortage of will-to-automatism' in the forms of remediation frequently seen within digital culture, a process that *Point Omega* performs in reverse.<sup>16</sup> The text's overall narrative movement, as a series of seemingly static scenes propelled internally only by the rigid exchange-structure of dialogue, admits many individual

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13 Ibid, p. 19; *ibid*, p. 137; *ibid*, p. 10; *ibid*, p. 10, p. 92-93.

14 Delillo, *White Noise* (London: Picador, 1984), p. 26.

15 Delillo, *Omega*, p. 129, p. 6.

16 David Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), p. 9-10; *ibid*, p. 10.

moments when perspective shifts from the dominants (free indirect discourse, first-person) to a more free-floating pictorial style. The most notable examples are those that open and close the text: the first four and a half paragraphs essay a distant (though seemingly not omniscient) third-person; in the last section, directly after the moment of longing for merging quoted the text finishes with three paragraphs in which it is impossible to tell if the subject 'he' is the protagonist or Norman Bates.<sup>17</sup> These shifts suggest that one is an aspect of the other: narrative itself becomes a 'fort-da oscillation' (as Graley Herren terms it) or modulation within an essentially static system, as the text cycles back to its fatal centre.<sup>18</sup> The synchronic and the diachronic, then, are united at the higher level of a digital automatism of form.

For Jonathan Crary, writing in 2013, these questions of a digital mode of appearance are indexed to a historical transformation of subjectivity. Under the neoliberal temporal regime that he has called '24/7', there is an 'overturning of assumptions about the position and agency of an observer in the expanding array of technical means for making acts of seeing themselves into objects of observation'. The image-life of contemporary capital, we can say, is an expanded field of 'perpetual illumination' in which subjects are situated without the 'historically accumulated understandings' of 'the position and agency of an observer'. Such a regime of permanent visibility, Crary writes, is coupled to 'a time without time, a time extracted from any material or identifiable demarcations, a time without sequence or recurrence': the time of capital's permanent revolutionisation of the means of production (to use Marx and Engels' phrase) converges with stasis.<sup>19</sup> Trotter writes of cinema's 'double

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17 Delillo, *Omega*, p. 3-4, p. 148.

18 Graley Herren, 'Don Delillo's Art Stalkers', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 61.1 (2015), 138-167 (139).

19 Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 48; *ibid.*, p. 33, p. 47; p. 29.



logic', the ways in which film's perceptive mode makes the world 'at once impossibly close [...] and indelibly marked by remoteness', substituting for the viewing subject 'the instrumentality of a nonliving agent'.<sup>20</sup> What I have tried, in conclusion, to suggest in this analysis is that the complex set of mediations through which the narrative machinery of *Point Omega* moves reconfigure the narratorial subject as what Crary calls a 'hallucination of presence': presence and absence in one.<sup>21</sup> The reordered form of novelistic time that Boxall and Vermeulen see in *Point Omega* can be seen, therefore, as the formal correlate of the abstraction of the category of the subject within 24/7 capitalism.

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20 Trotter, p. 10, p. 3

21 Crary, p. 29.