

# PRACTICAL JOKES: DON DELILLO'S *RATNER'S STAR* AND LITERARY GAMES

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**Abstract:** “Literary games” are strategies employed by writers to draw attention to, to disrupt, and even to subvert the conventions of literary production and reading. In his oddest novel, *Ratner's Star*, Don DeLillo employs many such strategies; strategies which not only provide the reader with much playful diversion, but which also have the practical consequence of guiding readers to alternative (and challenging) ways of engaging with literary texts. This paper explores the literary games played by DeLillo in his novel, *Ratner's Star* and suggests some of the practical implications these games have for our conception of what it means, in the aftermath of fundamental revolutions in linguistic and philosophical theory, to be a reader.

**Keywords:** Literary Games, Postmodernism, Roland Barthes, Quantum Mechanics.

**Resumen:** Los “juegos literarios” son estrategias de escritura empleadas por los escritores para dirigir la atención hacia las convenciones de la producción literaria y de su lectura, alterándolas e incluso desmantelándolas por completo. Don DeLillo emplea estas estrategias en la que probablemente sea su novela más extraña, *Ratner's Star*; donde además de proporcionar diversión al lector, tienen el efecto práctico de guiarle hacia modos alternativos (y desafiantes) de abordar un texto literario. Este artículo explora los juegos literarios utilizados por DeLillo en su novela *Ratner's Star* y estudia algunas implicaciones prácticas que estos juegos, fruto de una revolución trascendental en la teoría lingüística y filosófica, tienen en el concepto mismo de lector.

**Palabras clave:** Juegos literarios, Postmodernismo, Roland Barthes, Mecánica cuántica.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Don DeLillo's oddest novel, *Ratner's Star*, offers up, in the first two-hundred and seventy pages, a litany of grotesque eccentrics. First up is Byron Dyne, a man whose, “ears, lips and nose [gave] the impression they had been taken from a much larger person and grafted onto

this random face as part of a surgical jest" (19-20); next there is U. F. O. Schwarz, "a densely packed individual weighing well over three hundred pounds ... locked into the framework of his petrified baby fat", a man who "seemed to be sitting in his own lap" (51); later, Shirl Trumpy is introduced, "a woman who often laughed right through her own words ... making it hard at times to understand what she was saying and therefore why she was laughing" (61). Dozens of these sketched "characters" are arrayed like, as Peter Knight describes them, "mathematical functions within the larger equation of the plot structure" (Knight, 36). By the time the unpronounceable "contingency man" Kyzyl makes his entrance, a character who takes our protagonist Billy away from the conference of "experts in alternate physics" (169), (attended by such luminaries as Masha Simjian, Lepro, Maidengut and Bhang Pao), it becomes obvious that a joke is being played, not only on the increasingly bewildered Billy, but on the readers themselves. By part two of the novel this playfulness deepens, and the joke turns into a game, or a kind of literary jigsaw puzzle. In the first part of this essay, we will take a closer look at some of these early characters, or "mathematical functions", and show how they do more in "the equation" of the novel than might at first be apparent. In the second part, we will see how DeLillo's setting up of a kind of literary jigsaw puzzle is indicative of his view of reading and writing as (potentially) radical practices.

DeLillo himself has acknowledged the deliberate playfulness of the novel, calling it "[a book] of games ... where fiction itself is a sort of game." (DePietro 2005: 5) Elsewhere, he concedes that this reduction of characters to functional abstractions can be challenging for readers:

"I was trying to produce a book that would be naked structure ... To do this I felt I had to reduce the importance of people. The people had to play a role subservient to pattern, form, and so on. This is difficult, of course, for all concerned, but I believed I was doing something new and I was willing to take the risk" (LeClair and McCaffery 1988: 112).

While the literary games that DeLillo plays in *Ratner's Star* certainly make the novel "difficult", I will try to show that, for any reader intrepid enough to weather these difficulties, there are ample rewards; "the risk" DeLillo takes is, in the end, worth it.

There are few readers more intrepid, or exhaustively thorough, than Tom LeClair, whose chapter on *Ratner's Star* in his study of DeLillo, entitled *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (1988), betrays an obsessive nature shared by the subject of his book. He sums up the challenges and pitfalls of failing to play by the rules of the novel's game:

"Even though the excesses of abstraction and concretion are multiple and obvious ... the reader who does not recognize that these excesses point to and illustrate the historical/conceptual pattern that makes the novel a reciprocal whole will find the book a collection, an aggregate. This is why reviewers characterized it as just the opposite of what it most essentially is: a model, a system" (LeClair 1988: 121).

While LeClair's obsessive attention to detail is difficult to emulate, his approach to the excesses of the text is not. It is this approach that will allow us to appreciate the historical/conceptual significance of the literary games that DeLillo plays.

In subsequent, and more critically appraised, works DeLillo's taste for literary games is also evident. The game of "spot the baseball" that he plays with the mysterious journey of the famous baseball hit by Bobby Thomson to win the National Penant, as it makes its way through his most celebrated novel, *Underworld* (1998), is one such example; it pops up at various places throughout the novel's 800-plus pages, emerging, disappearing, re-emerging like an elusive quantum particle. This game, which challenges the reader to keep track of the slippery baseball, as it makes its way through the decades of the twentieth century, is a game that some readers clearly lose<sup>1</sup>. However, playful as this might be, nowhere in his body of work does DeLillo match the level of literary trickery on display in *Ratner's Star*. Therefore, this gem of a novel, buried deep amongst his earliest publications and often overlooked by critics, will be the focus of this essay.

DeLillo seems to be calling for, or seeking out, in his by turns hilarious and irritating playfulness, readers who are capable of dealing with this "difficulty". The joke is only on those readers who fail to realise that a joke is being played; the game is meaningless to those readers who do not know the rules of DeLillo's strange game. It is the aim of this paper to sketch out some of those rules and to wring from the notes of the text some kind of coherent tune. In doing this, it will become clear that DeLillo's decision to play with his readers is a very deliberate one and it will become evident that the game he is playing expresses perfectly two of the most central themes that he addresses, not just in *Ratner's Star*, but in almost all of his published works. Namely, the tragi-comic predicament of the postmodern subject, unmoored from the former certainties of science and religion, and the (potentially) radical position that literature and reading can occupy in the face of this predicament. DeLillo may be having fun playing a joke on his readers, but, his motives for doing so (and the implications that that joke has for readers) are entirely serious.

Certain questions are posed by DeLillo's choice to play with his readers. One may wonder why he risks testing the readers' patience by toying with them in this way. One may question the purpose of these games that, by engaging with his novel, readers are impelled to play.

The work of Roland Barthes on the subject of literary games will help to suggest some answers to these questions. For him the concept of "play" was central to the way in which a text functions; to the way in which meaning occurs to, and is activated by, readers of any text. His view of reading, a view shared by his fellow Deconstructionists, presents it not as a process of mining and then consumption of a text's meaning, but as a kind of performance carried out by the reader. In *S/Z*, he states that reading and "rereading is no longer consumption but play" (Barthes 1970: 16). Later, he again takes up this rhetoric of play when, in his essay "From Work to Text", he writes:

1 The renowned DeLillo scholar David Cowart writes: "A tiny speck of unique experience and real history, the baseball is in the car with Judson Rauch at the time of his fatal encounter with the Texas Highway Killer. If this detail goes unnoticed at a first reading, all the better for DeLillo's point" (Cowart, 2003). In fact, this is a sort of red herring, the baseball having already been "accidentally dumped with the household trash" (DeLillo, 1998) by the hapless degenerate Chuckie Wainwright some decades prior to Rauch's encounter with the Texas Highway Killer.

“the text itself plays ... and the reader plays twice over, playing the text as one plays a game, looking for a practice which re-produces it, but, in order that that practice not be reduced to a passive, inner mimesis ... also playing the text in a musical sense of the term” (Barthes 1977: 162).

That is to say, performing or re-producing the text in an active, perhaps even idiosyncratic, way, wringing from the “notes” on the page, as it were, a sound that only they, in concert with the particular text in question, could produce. The critic Wolfgang Iser shares Barthes view of reading as a kind of game, with the text allowing for different styles of play: “one text is potentially capable of several different realisations ... for each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way” (Iser 1974: 279). Iser’s analogy of reading as a game uses the rudimentary game of a child’s peg board game, while Barthes’ analogy of the playing, or performance, of music reveals a more complex view of the process of reading. This difference is indicative of the discrepancy that exists between both critics’ models of reading. As Brian Edwards has observed: “Iser’s ‘implied reader’ locates authority in the text’s frames, codes and predispositions which establish its reading guidelines” (Edwards 1998: 45). The text is, in effect, the peg board upon which readers place their pegs, or “fill in the gaps”. For Barthes, the text is not as stable as this, but is, in the hands of readers, something far more fragile and perishable. He famously described the text not as an “authority” with “frames, codes and predispositions”, but as, “a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (Barthes 1977: 146). While the Deconstructionist and Reader-response positions regarding the text may differ, their views on the reader as an active participant in the formation of a text’s meaning are consistent, and it is this conception of the reader that seems to be behind DeLillo’s willingness to, in the late 1970s, take the risk of writing more “difficult” fiction.

## 2 AN ADVENTUROUS JOKE

DeLillo’s protagonist, a 14-year-old mathematical genius named Billy Twillig, is plucked from the Bronx and transported to a government facility somewhere in central Asia, where he is expected to assist the scientists and mathematicians of “Field Experiment Number One”, a think-tank aiming to decipher an apparent message from a sophisticated, alien civilization. He is thus dropped into a deep and convoluted predicament.

On the one hand, he is left puzzled by his physical environment, which seems designed to produce the keenest sense of disorientation. The cycloid-shaped facility in the desert, “seemed to deflect natural light, causing perspectives to disappear ... making it necessary to look away from time to time [and producing a] feeling of solar mirage”. Once inside the facility, his trip to his living quarters includes a ride on an elevator which does nothing to orientate Billy: “there was no sense of movement ... Absolutely no vibration ... He might have been at rest or going sideways or diagonally ... He wanted to know he was moving and in which direction”. He is then led to his “canister”, but before arriving he is taken “through a series of subcorridors that ended at the mouth of a masonite labyrinth”. If there is any doubt left that Billy is being toyed with, it is dispelled when one of his companions describes the maze they have to negotiate before entering his room as being put there simply for “play value” (16/17).

Not only is poor little Billy Twillig physically adrift somewhere in central Asia, but he is also intellectually adrift amongst the crackpot “scientists” and pseudo-scientific hucksters of Field Experiment Number One. Faced with the problem of a universe that seems not to contain enough mass to hold it together, some of the scientists at the facility enjoy debauched parties as a way of coping with the anxiety of this realisation. One reveller explains it thus: “This is an end-of-the-world party ... Alcoholic stupors befitting the end of the world. Oblivion as conscious art ... reaction to the rumor that most of the universe is missing” (173). The theory of “dark matter” does nothing to reassure them and nor is it sufficient for the decorated figure of Orang Mohole, whose response is an alternative theory named, funnily enough, “Moholean Relativity”: “what ... happens in a mohole is that X-rays, gamma rays, ultraviolet light, radio waves, gas, dust clouds and so forth are trapped and held by relativistic forces we don't fully understand just yet”. He goes on to “clarify” what a mohole is: “It's part of a theoretical dimension lacking spatial extent and devoid of time value. Value-dark in other words”. The language he skilfully employs to explain himself makes his “theory” sound plausible in the same way that some of the wackier theories within astrophysics, like “wormholes”, can. If there is any doubt about his implausibility, and about DeLillo's attitude towards some of the excesses of scientific discourse, it is dispelled when, after the exposition of Mohole's theory, we read: “He rubbed his crotch briefly and then crossed his legs without remembering to unwedge his hand” (180-181).

It is not only the scientists that Billy encounters that test his patience and resolve to remain incredulous. Gerald Pence, a former scientist, returns from his pilgrimage in the Australian outback with a new name “Mutuka” (given to him because he “arrived among the nomadic people of the outback in a motor car”) and with an aborigine that he claims can “accomplish nothing less than the creation of an alternative to space and time” (102). Throughout “Mutuka”'s long and ludicrous speech about the powers of the aborigine (apparently “extrasensory perception is the least of his gifts” and “augury is the least of his powers”) the audience start to leave. Billy, who “didn't know whether they were leaving out of boredom or because Mutuka had claimed that the aborigine was capable of travelling into outer space” (105), decides to stay and is treated to the spectacle of the aborigine “with white hair and possibly three eyes ... sitting in time and ... whirling into the nth dimension” (108); either this, or an elaborate magic trick is being played on the audience. As one member claims, in a note passed around the auditorium, the effect of a rapidly spinning aborigine under a white shroud is achieved using, “an isometric graviton axis.” She who wrote the note, of course, “saw it twice in a nightclub act in Perth” (109).

The joke darkens when Cheops Feeley, a scientist whose medal is “given for work that is crazy in places”, attempts to persuade Billy to agree to have an implant fitted under his scalp; the purpose being to unite him with the Field Experiment's super computer, Space Brain. Cheops explains: “Here's our thinking on the matter. You with your enormous powers of abstraction. Space Brain with its unsurpassed superfine computations. A single dynamic entity” (244). As Cheops elaborates on the benefits, and potential side-effects, of the procedure Billy begins to notice several cats emerging from a box in the corner of the room. These cats appear, disappear, reappear: “slowly [one] cat worked its way over the

top of the box, followed by two others just as mangy ... [and] one of the cats lazily climbed back into the box as three others emerged ... The scabby cats seeped in and out of the box where the electrodes were stored" (243-245).

This is clearly a reference to Shrodinger's famous thought experiment devised as a response to the strangeness of Heisenberg's "uncertainty principle". The "uncertainty principle" states that the closer we look at the properties (speed, location, mass, and so on) of a particle at a quantum level the more elusive these properties become and the less able we are to know for sure what the true nature of that particle is; we have to talk about the possibility of the particle being in a particular place or travelling at a particular speed, because at a quantum level it is impossible to know these things for sure. This strange (playful) behaviour of matter forces us to consider that our acts of perception have an influence on the objective reality being observed. These baffling ideas inspired Shrodinger to devise his thought experiment: if a cat is placed in a sealed box and exposed to radioactive material, then, according to the rules of quantum mechanics, until an observer opens the box to find the cat dead, the cat is both simultaneously dead *and* alive. Shrodinger's thought experiment is meant to show the absurdity of applying these fundamental physical principles to our recognizable reality; a reality in which cats are simply killed when exposed to radio-active material.

Cheops Feeley and his side-kick, Hercule Leduc embody the dangers of taking these mysteries of mathematics and science too seriously. Leduc in particular shows that down that path madness lies. He says, "all of physical reality is a matter of convenience"; a statement which, after the revelations of the Heisenberg principle, could be seen to be within the realms of logic. However, there is not much logic behind what he goes on to say: "When we have succeeded in wedging an exception between the external world and our awareness of it, then we will discover that the divinity of the spirit of consciousness is based on the risks we are willing to take in order to fabricate pure terror and Olympian love" (246). Cheops compounds the daftness by imagining the fame and wealth Billy could enjoy if he agrees to go ahead with the implant: "Lecture tours, talk shows, a quickie biography, T-shirts, funny buttons. The ancillary rights alone could set us up for years. Endorsements, puzzles, games, mathematics LPs" (247). Apart from being a satire on the emergence, in recent decades, of "popular science" (the broad recognition of the Shrodinger's Cat thought experiment is an example of this), Cheops' last attempt to sell Billy on his insane idea is a joke too far. In response to Cheops' offer to set up a meeting for him with any hero he may have in the world community of scientists Billy brings everything back down to earth in his own inimitable way. His words end the conversation, and this most ridiculous of episodes in the novel: "People from the Bronx don't have heroes" (247).

These absurd travails remain comical, not because of any sense of *schadenfreude* on behalf of the reader, but because of Billy's combination of naivety and relentless, but always polite, incredulity. We share his unenviable position, which is the position of the modern subject: existing in a potentially incomprehensible universe, hamstrung by a language riddled with ambiguity and arbitrary (if any) connections to referents, surrounded by convenient fictions in the form of archaic belief systems or political ideologies and led by science, specifically quantum mechanics, into an ever more baffling view of "reality". However, what becomes clear in the second part of the novel is that Billy - representative



of the seemingly trapped contemporary subject - is not simply the butt of the joke; he can, in light of Barthes' vision of the reader as being *empowered* rather than hamstrung by the ambiguity and arbitrariness of language, be a player himself.

### 3 PUZZLING REFLECTIONS

While part one of the novel is playful in the sense that it is a joke played on both the protagonist and, by extension, the reader, part two, entitled Reflections, is playful in a different way; it is a game, a kind of literary jigsaw puzzle.

As part one ends, we are introduced to yet another odd-ball, Robert Hopper Softly, who is described as, "a child-sized man ...[with]... a shallow jaw and exceedingly wide mouth, a thumb-sucking machine, aggressively sensual, too much palpitating lip" (261). In part two he leads Billy into "the antrum", an underground replica of the above-ground government facility in part one. There Billy is to become a member of a crack team of boffins working on a project code-named Logicon, a project aimed at devising a language comprising solely of numerical symbols and radio waves, and, therefore, entirely free of the ambiguities and nuances that, as Softly sees it, hinder communication through words. Two key members of the team, Lester Bolin and Edna Lowns are introduced conventionally in sections of quick-fire dialogue with Softly and Billy, but there are sub-sections that are spliced within these passages that do not fit. For example:

"Sign over Spanish barber shops," Lown said. "Algebrista y sangrador. Bonesetter and bloodletter. Trying to solve the flow."

The slope was dark. There were matches and candles in the pack, however. A crack of flame by the light of which a man might refuel a carbide lamp. At her desk Edna removed the heavy glasses she wore and then reached down and unlaced her desert boots... (302).

The image of a man in the dark, on a slope, trying to refuel a carbide lamp is completely out of the context of Edna Lowns at her desk and in conversation with her colleague Lester Bolin. Certain questions arise: who is this man? Why is this man seemingly stranded in the dark and on a slope? Where, in relation to the Logicon team's offices, is the man located? And, due to the use of the modal verb "might", what are the conditions of this man's "existence" within the text? Does he "exist" on the same ontological plane as the other characters, that is to say, is he a character in their story?

These questions remain and deepen when, later in the text, we read of Edna still at her desk: "She opened her eyes. Maurice Wu. And put her glasses back on. Yes rested well rested. Time to shake off the dross of ordinary language. Maurice Wu squatting in the guano fields." (303). Here the mysterious character on the dark slope appears in the text again and is placed now on the slope of a bat cave; he is given a name that invades the main discourse actually splitting a sentence in two. This sentence ("She opened her eyes ... And put her glasses back on") is not part of Edna's inner monologue; it is part of the impersonal, third-person narrative. The effect this has, therefore, is to convey the idea of an unstable, unruly text with characters bursting out from the restraints of a conventional narrative and refusing to be introduced in the manner usually befitting a

literary text. It is not until ten pages later that the text “reins in” this unruly character and we get a more orthodox introduction: “Maurice Wu unencumbered by equipment and heavy clothing crossed the path to cube one. He was still a fairly young man, slender, appearing cheerfully relentless atop a long informal stride” (312). Finally, this enigmatic figure has worked his way into the team (and the text) as a fellow researcher and as another member of the Logicon team.

It would be unthinkable for DeLillo, in light of the fact that he is trying to write a “difficult”, unconventional novel in the 1970s, to introduce a new character with the above words and without any ironic comment or subversion. He does so here in order to critique the rigidity of narrative conventions; conventions which one would think were left behind in the realist novel of the nineteenth century, but which, in fact, stubbornly persist. A cursory glance at the introductions to various characters of some of DeLillo’s precursors and contemporaries reveals this. Mr. Shiftlet in “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” by Flannery O’Connor: “[H]is left coat sleeve was folded up to show there was only half an arm in it and his gaunt figure listed slightly to the side as if the breeze were pushing him. He had on a black town suit ...” (O’Connor 1955); Captain Paul Barrett in Philip Roth’s “Defender of the Faith”: “[H]e was short, gruff, and fiery, and indoors or out he wore his polished helmet liner down on his little eyes ...” (Roth 1959); George Grebe in Saul Bellow’s “Looking For Mr. Green”: “[He] was slender without being tall, stiff in the back, his legs looking shabby in a pair of old tweed pants gone through and fringing at the cuffs. With this stiffness, he kept his head forward ...” (Bellow 1968). By parodying the narrative conventions shown above, DeLillo is not necessarily being dismissive of these writers, or this approach to narrative, but he *is* staking a claim to a different approach; an approach that may, as he acknowledges in his interview with Thomas LeClair, “be difficult ... for all concerned” (DePietro 2005: 11).

DeLillo plays other games when introducing his characters. For instance, when Softly, the creepy over-sexed man-child and leader of the Logicon project, is lying in bed enjoying a dose of opiates, his thoughts turn (appropriately so) to “the peculiar demonic genius of street games”. He thinks of “tag”, “hide-n-seek”, “one o’ cat” and “stickball”, concluding that they were all “convenient fictions”. Then, suddenly, within the same paragraph there is a shift, a shift which reminds the reader that this fiction they are engaging with is anything but “convenient”: “Water flowing along a gutter on a city street. A figure trying to hail a cab. Umbrella and suitcase. This was Mainwearing...”. In the very same paragraph which sees Softly contemplating old street games, this shift takes the reader into the mind of a new character, Mainwearing, as he contemplates the games played by city bus drivers on rainy days:

“Give a bus driver a nearly empty bus during an off-hour with no one waiting at the designated stops and he’ll go smashing down the avenue, pupils dilated, a convulsive hum bubbling up from his throat, Softly opening his eyes, the great painted van careening down on stray dogs, derelicts, children, an interior point system in effect” (328).

In amongst Mainwearing’s contemplation of the sadism of city bus drivers we get another shift back to Softly in bed “opening his eyes”. The preceding words (“pupils dilated,



a convulsive hum bubbling up from his throat”) could just as well refer to the bus driver as much as to Softly. They could also refer to both; the decision as to who these words refer to is down to the reader to make. Regardless, the overall effect of splicing these characters’ perspectives together in this way is one of disorientation for the reader. We are challenged by these games of perspective to draw connections between characters and scenes that are not immediately obvious, or clearly flagged up by the author. In short, the reader is challenged to become an active participant in the game that this text is playing.

Before moving on to look at the final test of our hero Billy, a brief note on names, and the games that DeLillo plays with them, is necessary. Firstly, there are the two characters mentioned above, whose full names are Maurice X. Wu and Walter X. Mainwearing. John LeClair has noted the palindromic nature of their names and the connection between the two characters has been explored by Mark Osteen in his excellent full-length study on DeLillo, *American Magic and Dread* (2000). As he points out, “the ‘star message’ [discovered by Mainwearing] is an echo, an aural boomerang sent thousands of years ago by the same humans whose artifacts Wu has uncovered” (Osteen 2000: 93) through his toil in the guano fields. The ecological reading that Mainwearing gives for this is: “we get back only what we ourselves give” (405). This ecological message, fundamental to the text as a whole, is hinted at through DeLillo’s choice of names for these two characters. Names it seems are, therefore, important and worth paying attention to.

Another example of DeLillo’s name games is with Billy’s surname, which is Twillig, changed by his parents from Terwilliger. The removal of the two “er”s has to be significant, but what could it mean? The verb “to err” has two definitions: to be mistaken, or to do something immoral. Therefore, the removal of the two “er”s from the surname can be read as a reference to the fact of Billy’s innocence as a young boy, coupled with his relentless ability to be correct (that is, *unmistaken*) throughout the novel. This is consistent with Billy’s naivety and polite incredulity he displays, mentioned above, when faced with all of the absurdity he encounters. It is also, as Osteen observes, in contrast to the scientists that surround him: “DeLillo’s scientists err in mistaking their fictions for objective truth” (Osteen 2000: 97).

A final example (although there are dozens of names that would be worth thinking about and exploring further), is the case of Endor, the tragic casualty of the pursuit of knowledge, the one for whom the stubborn mysteries of the universe have proven too much, the ex-scientist who now lives in a hole subsisting on larvae and digging ever deeper into the dirt at the bottom of his hole. The reason for his madness and retreat from the world is suggested by his name. Consider what is, perhaps, the most fundamental question of all: Does the universe have an end, or, is it infinite? Clearly, Endor’s name is buried within this question and the impossibility of ever finding an answer to it is the reason for his interment. Endor, like Softly as we will see now, is a figure who acts as a warning against the inability to accept the unknown and embrace the numinous.

As part two progresses the various voices and styles that comprise the narrative are presented to the reader, in seemingly arbitrary order, as pieces of a puzzle; the task, it seems, is to fit these pieces together, in order to devise (or divine) a coherent reading of the text. Softly’s reflections on his affair with the journalist and novelist, Jean Sweet Venable, sit alongside Edna’s afforistic notes (“t. In advancing toward conclusions that are by nature

unshakable, we have attempted to set aside intuition", 392); Endor's scrawled equations (perused by Billy like a treasure map leading him to the source of the intergalactic message that brought him to the facility in the first place) sit alongside Maurice Wu's travails in the guano fields, and so on. The different characters can be seen as various strands that are woven together to make a single piece of rope, or more appropriately, considering the cosmological dimensions of the text, string. Another astronomical image that the text evokes, with its cast of disciples that surround a strange and compelling source of power, is the vortex produced by a super massive black hole, the totality that attracts all matter to its centre and allows nothing, not even light, to escape.

In the case of *Ratner's Star*, Robert Hopper Softly can be seen as this totality attracting all of those around him to his single doomed pursuit for a perfectly coherent language free of ambiguity<sup>2</sup>. It is difficult not to see Softly as a precursor to, and a kind of composite of, the unforgettable father and son that haunt Paul Auster's novella "City of Glass". In the first part of his seminal work *The New York Trilogy* (1987), Auster tells the story of Peter Stillman who keeps his son, also called Peter, locked in a dark room for the first nine years of his life in order to deprive him of language. Stillman's "logic" and explanation for doing this echoes the language of Robert Softly: "our words no longer correspond to the world ... names [have become] detached from things; words devolved into a collection of arbitrary signs ... [Therefore] ... I am in the process of inventing a new language" (Auster 1987: 198).

Softly is a typical DeLilloean type - also found in *Mao II* (1991) in the case of The Master and in *Great Jones Street* (1973) with the character Chess - that of the cult leader drawing his disciples to the deathly centre of his belief system. However, the novel offers a glimmer of hope through Billy's final resistance to and escape from Softly's vortex. The novel ends with Billy cycling along the edge of sunlight and shadow produced by an approaching eclipse:

"a measured length of darkness passed over him as ... he found himself pedaling in a white area between the shadow bands that precede total solar eclipse ... This interval of whiteness, suggestive of the space between perfectly ruled lines, prompted him to ring the metal bell" (438).

Billy bravely occupies the ambiguous space that exists between the precision of these "ruled lines", a precision so coveted and pursued by Softly. Softly's totalitarian quest for a "pure" language and his eventual failure can be read, therefore, as a warning against the folly of attempts to enforce coherence on a universe that may be inherently incoherent. Billy's occupation of an ambiguous space is, by contrast, a *celebration* of the fact that we have yet to explain everything in the universe, indeed, that perhaps the universe is terminally inexplicable. However, this is not a call for the consolations of mysticism. The implication is that, faced with this predicament, we should maintain the curiosity and questing nature of children; children like Billy. Peter Boxall's description of Ratner's response to a puzzling

2 The philosophical problem of mankind having to explain or represent reality with language (which is inherently ambiguous and beset with vagueness) is probably as old as philosophy itself, but one fairly modern response to this quandary, that is consistent with Softly's response, is that of Bertrand Russell's whose very language on the subject is mimicked by Softly. In his work, *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism* Russell called for the, "creation of a correct logical language" that would not be, "infected with vagueness" like the one that we are currently burdened with (Russell 1918).

universe is consistent with Softly's and several other characters in the novel: "Ratner's intellectual approach to the limits of the universe ... threatens him with an extinction of the questing spirit, a threat which leads him to conceal such limits, to cloak them with a mystic veil" (Boxall 2006: 55). Boxall, as I have attempted to do, contrasts this approach with that of Billy's: "The will to adventure, the desire to learn, the 'freedom to invent' (RS 194) that Endor tells Billy is his most precious gift, these rely, perhaps, on the permeability of the universe, the contingency of its limits, the secrecy of its mechanics" (Boxall 2006: 55). Billy's attempt to embrace these things comes in the form of an escape, with him desperately cycling away from Softly's mad world. This escape, with its "fanfare" of a metal bell, is presented as heroic.

Also, what normally occurs in the space between ruled lines? Well, writing and, by extension, reading; two activities where an acceptance and, indeed, an embrace of things like polysemy and indeterminateness is necessary. These are things that Softly, and various other characters in *Ratner's Star* cannot accept, preferring a hopeless pursuit for what is described in the first paragraph of the novel as "pebble-rubbed" certainty. In that first paragraph the reader is invited to join Billy on his journey away from this certainty and towards the enigmatic world of language, whether mathematical or literary. His departure time from New York is

"subject to verification, pebble-rubbed ... real as the number one. But ahead was the somnolent horizon, pulsing in the dust and fumes, a fiction whose limits were determined by one's perspective, not unlike those imaginary quantities (the square root of minus-one, for instance) that lead to fresh dimensions" (3).

This invitation to join Billy is also a challenge for the reader to accept uncertainty and, through the act of reading, to encounter their own "fresh dimensions". The uncertainty inherent to language, and the opportunity this provides for readers to interact and play with texts, is something that Roland Barthes was well aware of. As he explained it in *The Pleasure of the Text*: we read "to multiply the signifiers, not to reach some ultimate signified"; through this process "the subject gains access to bliss ...[to]... the possibility of a dialectics of desire, of an 'unpredictability' of bliss: the bets are not placed, there can still be a game" (Barthes 1975: 4).

#### 4 CONCLUSIONS

A clue to DeLillo's motives for playing the games that he plays can be found buried in the notes of Edna Lowms. Note "f" reads: "It is both silly and useful to conclude that human speech derived from the cries of animals" (330). The words "silly and useful" could be used to describe games, in general, and literary games, specifically; hence, the title of this essay. The games played by DeLillo in *Ratner's Star* are, on one level, fun or "silly", but, on another level, they are practical and "useful". This is a novel of "practical jokes", because any reader's decision to play along with this particular novel should not only provide them with diversion, but also with the practical consequence of guiding them to alternative (and challenging) ways of engaging with literary texts.

Having said that, any joke requires, as is the case with tricks or games, a certain amount of trust between the participants. DeLillo, with *Ratner's Star*, seems to be putting that trust between him and his readers to the test. He shows a hitherto unprecedented confidence in challenging the reader to play along with him, to follow him down the Mohole of his imagination and to not miss out on the fun to be had if one does follow. However, any relationship of genuine trust has to be reciprocal and involve equal partners; a reader who simply "follows" will not be up to the task of animating this strange giant of a novel. For any reader who accepts DeLillo's challenge, and for any reader who is willing to be a truly active participant in the playing of its already rather strange notes, the reward is much hilarity and not an insignificant amount of enlightenment.

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