

**The Search for a Political Aesthetic in the Fiction of Don
DeLillo**

Anne Longmuir

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Abstract

This thesis charts the search for an effective political aesthetic in the fiction of Don DeLillo. It examines all twelve of DeLillo's novels from *Americana* (1971) to *The Body Artist* (2001). It argues DeLillo is one of the most important contemporary American writers, precisely because his fiction takes on a culture, that of the United States of America, and engages with geopolitics and history. DeLillo has been accused of apoliticism, but on the contrary this thesis demonstrates that the quest for an effective political aesthetic has been central to DeLillo's project from the start. DeLillo's aesthetic, which is often self-consciously enacted through the figure of the artist or writer in his novel, is furthermore set up in opposition to the dominant culture of late twentieth century America. This thesis concurs with Fredric Jameson's argument that this dominant culture, postmodernism, is the superstructural manifestation of late capitalism. This thesis argues that DeLillo's position to this culture is dialectical, as he struggles to find a place of resistance from within it. Furthermore, this thesis also argues that DeLillo positions the hope for political resistance with the marginalised, such as women, homosexuals and ethnic groups. It concludes DeLillo finds his solution in a semiotic aesthetic. This aesthetic, springing in part from the subject's own body, is not entirely predetermined by the pre-existing narrative of the dominant culture, thereby restoring the individual speaking subject to some extent. However, this thesis argues that DeLillo also recognises the capacity of the dominant culture to continually reabsorb any transgression, hence it is only in an avant-garde art – one that can continually “make it new” – that any real hope for political resistance lies. Crucially, DeLillo plays this out in his own aesthetic by continually adopting different discourses and even in the case of *The Body Artist* producing a difficult and deliberately unpopular text. Finally, as his recourse to the avant-garde suggests, this thesis argues that it is wrong to regard DeLillo as an “exemplary postmodernist” as many, including Martin Amis do, concluding that his work is characterised by a strong modernist impulse.

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I declare that this thesis has been completed by me and is all my own work.

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“Equal to the complexities and excesses of the culture”: The Fiction of Don DeLillo

The introduction to this thesis has several principle objectives. Firstly, it intends to offer an introduction to the subject of this thesis, the contemporary American writer, Don DeLillo. This will include a brief examination of DeLillo’s changing literary status, and of the particular ironies and issues raised by his recent canonisation. Secondly, this chapter will outline the purpose and objectives of this thesis. It will argue that DeLillo is one of our most important contemporary writers, who deserves our extended critical attention. It will then detail the main arguments of this thesis, which contends that DeLillo’s fiction is characterised by the search for an effective political aesthetic. Finally, it will address the implications of this argument for current critical assessments of DeLillo, most notably his repeated identification as an “exemplary postmodernist” (Cowart, “More Advanced the Deeper we Dig’: *Ratner’s Star*” 608; Amis, “Thoroughly post-modern millennium” 29).

Twenty years ago Don DeLillo looked to Norman Bryson like a member of “a lost generation, left stranded by the decade’s urge to pantheonize” (Bryson 145). Editions of his work were hard to come by, sales – with the exception of *End Zone* (1972) – were modest and academic criticism of his fiction was almost non-existent¹. Two decades later, the situation is very different. Academic interest in DeLillo’s fiction has exploded. Not only are there three new books of criticism devoted to DeLillo due out this year alone², but a Don DeLillo society has been formed, whose stated purpose is “to encourage the scholarly study

¹ Despite having published six novels only two pieces of criticism, both on *End Zone*, had been published on DeLillo’s fiction, by 1980.

² David Cowart. *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language*. University of Georgia Press, 2002.
Joseph Dewey and Steve Kellman, eds. *Under/Words: Perspectives on Don DeLillo’s Underworld*. University of Delaware Press, 2002.
John Duvall. *Don DeLillo’s Underworld: A Reader’s Guide*. New York and London: Continuum Publishing, 2002.

of and general interest in the work of Don DeLillo” (*The Don DeLillo Society* n.pag). Furthermore, DeLillo’s growing status has been matched by a shift in his critical standing. For much of his early career, DeLillo was read in the shadow of Thomas Pynchon. As Brian McHale’s statement in *Constructing Postmodernism* reveals, DeLillo was regarded as an interesting writer, but still fundamentally derivative of Pynchon as late as 1992: “many other writers in Pynchon’s mode have emerged or have come to my attention, including weakly epigonic ones such as Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson (*Illuminatus!*, 1975), and more robustly independent ones such as [...] Don DeLillo” (280). In contrast, DeLillo is now regarded as an extremely significant writer in his own right, and is regularly invoked as a key influence by younger writers such as Jay McInerney and David Foster Wallace, who are themselves deemed important interpreters of recent American culture. Critics and writers have also begun making major claims on DeLillo’s behalf. John Duvall, for example, claims that “DeLillo emerges as one of the cartographers of contemporary cognition that [Fredric] Jameson calls for in his work” (“From Valparaiso to Jerusalem” 562), whilst novelist Lorrie Moore states of DeLillo that “no one can match his ability to let America, the bad dream of it, speak through his pen” (7). However, whilst DeLillo’s status within academic circles has been steadily growing since he received the Award in Literature from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1984, it was the commercial and critical success of *Underworld* (1997) that resulted in the extension of DeLillo’s fame beyond the academy. His name now appears frequently in magazine and newspaper articles on subjects as diverse as the pop group “Nine Inch Nails” (Pareles 2.31) and the contaminated Coca-Cola scare of 1999 (Lanchester 6.7). DeLillo is usually invoked in such pieces as a kind of higher cultural authority invested with the power to shed light on events that older epistemologies seem unable to explain. Julie Birchill’s article on the murder of British TV presenter Jill Dando provides an illustration of just such a use of DeLillo:

Word quickly spread that Jill Dando, a name everybody seemed to recognise, had been murdered; and we communally understood that we were in the grip of the kind of excitingly dire event that Don DeLillo had in mind when he noted that everything around us now tends to channel our lives toward some final reality in print or in film. (Birchill 2.2)

It is easy to see why journalists, like Birchill, employ DeLillo as a kind of postmodern guru, able to shed light on events and situations that our conventional systems of knowledge seem unable to comprehend, when writers and academics, like those mentioned above, do the same. Indeed, DeLillo is now regularly invoked by academics and journalists as *the* writer who can explain us to ourselves, with a prescience that has become legendary, as Timothy L. Parrish writes, “the second half of the American twentieth century [...] is coming to look like nothing other than DeLillo’s own invention” (721). But such references to DeLillo have another significance. As John Duvall states – knowingly – in his introduction to the *Modern Fiction Studies* special on DeLillo, that DeLillo is “becoming fully institutionalised: the processes of canonization are in play” (“From Valparaiso to Jerusalem” 557), so we must also now recognise that DeLillo is becoming fully packaged, that the processes of commodification are also in play. Like the “Broad media coverage” (*Ratner’s Star* 247) that Cheops Feeley wants to utilise to package little Billy Twillig in *Ratner’s Star* (1976), media exposure has resulted in the retrospective packaging of DeLillo as a brand name, a cultural trademark to be employed by anyone wishing to gesture towards the culture of late capitalism. And it is important for us to recognise how recent this packaging is, and to understand its formation.

These processes of canonization and commodification can affect all writers, but they are especially interesting in DeLillo’s case, because DeLillo seemed to avoid them for so many years. Until the publication of *Underworld*, DeLillo gave few interviews and made even fewer public appearances. His novels included no biographical information beyond the year and place of his birth (1936, New York City), and he carried, famously, a business card stating “I don’t want to talk about it” (LeClair, “An Interview with Don DeLillo” 79).

Indeed, as late as 1997 DeLillo was awarded seven out of ten on the reclusiveness scale by "Entertainment Weekly" (Moran 151). DeLillo has refuted claims that he was deliberately trying to create a "Thomas Pynchon/ J. D. Salinger mystique" (Billen 25) and that his reclusiveness was itself a kind of publicity stunt, arguing with some justification that "no one was exactly clamouring for my attention" (Billen 25). Instead he has argued that his reluctance to seek out publicity stemmed from his conviction that the writer should work against the dominant culture, and that this activity is possible only if the writer remains on the margins of that culture. As DeLillo told Jonathon Bing:

There are writers who refuse to make public appearances. Writers who say "no". Writers in opposition, not necessarily in a specific way. But there are those of us who write books that are not easily absorbed by the culture, who refuse to have their photographs taken, who refuse to give interviews. And at some level, this may be largely a matter of personal disinclination. But there may also be an element in which such writers are refusing to become part of the all-incorporating treadmill of consumption and disposal. (Bing N. pag)

The centrality of this conviction to DeLillo's work is clear, and not just in novels like *Americana* (1971), *Great Jones Street* (1973), *Mao II* (1991), *Underworld* and *The Body Artist* (2001) that literally depict artists who attempt to say "no". His work is also haunted by characters whose subjectivity has been predetermined by a dominant cultural narrative, like Gary Harkness, Lyle Wynant, Glen Selvy and Lee Harvey Oswald, and who, consequently, can find no place of opposition. But having established that DeLillo's reclusiveness was a result of one of the central convictions that shape his fiction, how should we figure his recent canonization and commodification?

The irony of DeLillo's current situation is exemplified by the award of the Jerusalem prize to DeLillo in 1999. The award was given in recognition of the "unrelenting struggle against even the most sophisticated form of repression of individual and public freedom during the last half century" (19th Jerusalem n.pag) that characterises DeLillo's work. However, awards are themselves a means of incorporating a writer from the margins

into the mainstream, and can result in the neutralization of that writer's very oppositional strategies, as DeLillo himself points to in the attempted co-option of graffiti artist, Moonman 157, by the artistic establishment in *Underworld*. In other words, the very recognition that DeLillo's fiction now receives, results, according to DeLillo's own standards, in its assimilation and incorporation. It is ironic too, that it was the promotion of *Underworld* in particular that should have placed DeLillo in this position, because the importance of the artist at the margins is one of the central themes of this novel. That DeLillo is aware of this anomaly is made clear by his most recent novel, *The Body Artist*, which can be read as a response to the problem created by the success of *Underworld*. This novel is a self-conscious exploration of the role of the artist. It juxtaposes DeLillo's two key artistic paradigms: Rey Robles, a filmmaker, whose subjectivity and work are entirely absorbed by the dominant culture, and Lauren Hartke, a performance artist, whose art maintains some oppositional strategies successfully. Whilst *Underworld* is a relatively accessible novel, being a piece of conventionally realist fiction, *The Body Artist* is a difficult and obscure text. This thesis interprets this obscurity as a deliberate strategy on DeLillo's part, a means of creating a more politically resistant work of fiction and hence a more resistant artistic subjectivity, as DeLillo adheres to Theodor Adorno's maxim that art that resists realism is less susceptible to commodification and absorption.

There is an ambiguity in the title of this thesis, *The Search for a Political Aesthetic in the Fiction of Don DeLillo*. It is intended to indicate this thesis's contention that DeLillo is one of our most important contemporary writers, because his fiction is characterised by the search for an effective political aesthetic – a project that DeLillo applies self-reflexively to his own artistic position, as the discussion above illustrates. However, some critics claim to have searched for any sign of political engagement in DeLillo's fiction and been unable to find it. As John Kucich writes, "DeLillo is a dramatic instance of a white male writer whose political instincts have been paralyzed by postmodern fetishizing of the social origins

of political art” (334). Thus, this thesis not only charts the development of DeLillo’s search for an effective political aesthetic, but also on a more fundamental level refutes the argument of critics like Kucich, by demonstrating that whilst DeLillo may not always find a site of opposition or resistance, his fiction is always politically engaged. This political commitment can be demonstrated on a number of levels. Firstly, there is the breadth of DeLillo’s vision, which is calibrated on a global rather than a regional or national scale. As Bill Millard states, “While most mainstream fiction of the Reagan era is marked by regionalisms and privations that bespeak an alarming poverty of imagination, DeLillo dares to project a world in its full political complexity and to grapple with ideas that might make some sense of events observed in the public sphere” (N. pag). Secondly, there is DeLillo’s tackling of the dynamics of geo-politics (*Mao II*, *The Names* (1982), *Underworld*), as well as the repercussions of specific historical events (the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the end of the Cold War, the Iran Hostage crisis). Thirdly, there is DeLillo’s interrogation of how we *know* about such events, a concern with questions of epistemology that is manifested in his interest in the technologies of reproduction like photography and film, and, of course, in his fiction’s deep interest in the philosophy of language. His novels are pervaded by the idea that any foundation or ground for systems of knowledge has been lost, an idea that can be expressed in many ways: as the death of God, the loss of the father, the absence of a transcendental centre. This loss has important ramifications for language, because in the absence of the word of God, or *logos*, the relationship between words and things is no longer guaranteed. The effect is to introduce an ambiguity into language, which has repercussions on our ability to know reality and history that can be felt throughout DeLillo’s work. Thus, historical events are never taken as given, as they are in the fiction of Norman Mailer, Gore Vidal or Tom Wolfe; rather DeLillo recognises his own references to them as constructs, produced not from “reality”, but from what Fredric Jameson refers to as “our own pop images and simulacra of that history” (*Postmodernism* 25). But most

important is DeLillo's recognition that this postmodern phenomenon is also a matter of politics, because DeLillo realises, like Foucault, that "how it is that one particular statement appeared rather than another" (Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* 27) is a question of power.

That DeLillo recognises this postmodern phenomenon as political is crucial to this thesis's argument. DeLillo has long been identified as a postmodern writer, as the number of articles (21 and counting) whose title includes the word "postmodern" or one of its variants attests. This thesis, however, sets out to challenge this piece of received wisdom, arguing that casual use of the word "postmodern" does DeLillo's fiction an injustice in many important ways. This chapter has argued that DeLillo's fiction is characterised by the search for a political aesthetic. It is essential that we recognise that the culture that this aesthetic is set up in opposition to is postmodernism, the dominant culture of late twentieth century America. DeLillo is implicated in this culture, as we all are, being "now so deeply immersed in postmodernist space, so deeply suffused and infected by its new cultural categories, that the luxury of the old-fashioned ideological critique, the indignant moral denunciation of the other, becomes unavailable" (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 46). However, DeLillo is not an "exemplary postmodernist", because, as this thesis contends, DeLillo's search for an effective political aesthetic should be specifically recognised as the search for a site of resistance against postmodern culture.

But before investigating DeLillo's relationship to postmodernism any further, a number of issues must be raised regarding use of this word, not least the fact that DeLillo himself does not like term. As he told Richard Williams:

Postmodern seems to mean different things in regard to different disciplines. In architecture and art it means one or two different things. In fiction it seems to be another. When people say *White Noise* is postmodern, I don't really complain. I don't say it myself. But I don't see *Underworld* as postmodern. Maybe it's the last modernist gasp. I don't know. (32)

With characteristic intelligence, DeLillo points here to one of the key problems regarding this term. That is, the problem of its definition, or rather its lack of definition. As McHale writes of Joseph McElroy's novel, "determining whether *Women and Men* is a postmodernist text does in fact 'all depend' on which construct of postmodernism one is operating with" (*Constructing Postmodernism* 206), so the comprehension of DeLillo's fiction as postmodern also depends on which definition of postmodernism one is employing. And it is a particularly difficult term to define. Fredric Jameson calls it "internally conflicted and contradictory" (*Postmodernism* xxii), Ihab Hassan has written, "I have not defined Modernism; I can define Postmodernism less" (24), Brian McHale states, "Postmodernist? Nothing about this term is unproblematic, nothing is entirely satisfactory" (*Postmodernist Fiction* 3), whilst John Frow argues that "To speak or write the word is to be caught up in a prescriptive network which loosely specifies a limited number of possible moves" (*Time and Commodity Culture* 15). Too many critics use this term without acknowledging this problem, particularly in relation to DeLillo's fiction. Not only do they fail to specify their critical antecedents, but they also fail to make clear whether they regard postmodernism as an unavoidable condition of late capitalism as Jameson and Jean Baudrillard do, or whether they regard it as an optional artistic style, as Brian McHale suggests it may be. Similarly, such critics draw no distinction between postmodern fiction and fiction about postmodern culture, though without this distinction it is impossible to ascertain whether DeLillo's work subscribes to the idea that a critical position outside postmodern culture is possible. To fail to respond to these issues is to assume that postmodernism exists somewhere out there, a complete and indisputable entity. In order to avoid some of these pitfalls, this thesis will now set out its own position.

This thesis works primarily within the definition supplied by Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Capitalism*, which is itself influenced by the writings of Jean Baudrillard and the notion that postmodern culture is characterised by what

Baudrillard calls “the structural law of value” (*Symbolic Exchange and Death* 50). Baudrillard expresses the concept of “the structural law of value” in terms of language and economics. In linguistic terms he refers to Ferdinand de Saussure’s argument that the meaning of a signifier derives not from its relationship to the signified, but from its difference from every other signifier. In economic terms he describes a situation in which the value of a product stems not from its use value, but its exchange value. This abandonment of referential or use value results in a sense of depthlessness, cited by Jameson as “perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms” (*Postmodernism* 9), as the notion of the real beneath the sign is effaced. This depthlessness is manifested not only “in a culture increasingly dominated by space and spatial logic” (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 25), but in the collapse of hermeneutic modes of interpretation, which assume the dialectics of essence and appearance, authenticity and inauthenticity, signifier and signified. The dominance of “the structural law of value” also results in an order of signs characterised by indeterminacy, a postmodern phenomenon noted above in the discussion of the absence of a transcendental centre. But perhaps the most crucial aspect of Jameson’s postmodernism, for the purposes of this thesis, is his insistence that it should be recognised as a historical phenomenon rather than an optional artistic style, being the superstructural manifestation of late capitalism and American economic imperialism. Most importantly, this thesis’s selection of this particular construction of postmodernism is not merely a matter of personal preference; this thesis also maintains that this is the model to which DeLillo’s fiction itself subscribes.

That DeLillo views postmodernism as the superstructural manifestation of late capitalism is clear from his first novel, *Americana*. Not only is this novel dominated by television and advertising, which are literally cultural manifestations of capitalism, but the dominant of *Americana* is also geographic, just as Jameson defines the dominant of postmodern culture. Furthermore, as this thesis’s chapter on *Americana* illustrates, DeLillo

explicitly relates this spatial form to images of imperialism through the myth of the frontier. Here DeLillo demonstrates that this culture is a form of neo-colonialism, just as Jameson does, “postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world” (*Postmodernism* 5). This is an interpretation of postmodern culture that DeLillo will return to again and again in novels like *Players* (1977), *Running Dog* (1978) and *The Names* which deal with American imperialism, both through contemporary instances, like the Vietnam War and American intervention in the Middle East, and the myth of the Western. Indeed, that DeLillo seeks a place of resistance to this culture is made clear by the identification of characters like David Bell and Glen Selvy with the first colonised people of America, the Native Americans. In these early novels DeLillo attempts to produce an effective political aesthetic through the only means Jameson can envision in *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* – by employing the spatial logic of late capitalism. As Jameson writes, “The political form of postmodernism, if there ever is any, will have as its vocation the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping, on a social as well as spatial scale” (*Postmodernism* 54). Hence John Duvall’s comment that “DeLillo emerges as one of the cartographers of contemporary cognition that [Fredric] Jameson calls for in his work” (“From Valparaiso to Jerusalem” 562). Most importantly, DeLillo attempts to use this spatial form in each novel to historicise postmodern culture – as Jameson directs. This is most extensively practised in *The Names*, which refers historic material events in a synchronic rather than diachronic form. However, it can also be witnessed in *Americana* and *Running Dog* which juxtapose different historic periods through geography: postmodern culture is represented by the contemporary U.S. city, for example, whilst the older “originary” America is represented by the desert of the West. DeLillo also cites specific events as heralding the start of this age, most notably, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, which DeLillo figures repeatedly as a key moment in U.S. culture, “the seven

seconds that broke the back of the American century” (*Libra* 181). Crucially, even this is expressed spatially as David Bell takes John F. Kennedy’s final fateful route through Dallas at the close of *Americana*. In later novels, like *Libra* (1988), DeLillo’s approach to history becomes a little more straightforward, with some return to the temporal axis of narrative history. But DeLillo’s approach to history is never unquestioning. As *The Names* demonstrates, DeLillo’s employment of historical events is accompanied by a questioning of the very possibility historical representation, whilst even his more overtly historical novels like *Libra* and *Underworld* proclaim, respectively, “This is a work of imagination” (*Libra* 458) and reveal ur-histories beneath the official history of the Cold War. It is important to recognise however, that DeLillo’s historicising of postmodern culture is a key component in his search for a political aesthetic. This attempt to think historically constitutes a move to achieve critical distance by thinking against the very logic of the age.

Ultimately, however, the space for political resistance in DeLillo’s fiction lies not only in thinking history – which DeLillo recognises is always fraught with difficulty – but also with an avant-garde bodily aesthetic. In early novels, like *End Zone* and *Ratner’s Star* (1976), DeLillo confronts the fundamental dilemma that language creates for the concept of autonomous subjectivity. Namely, that there can be no subjectivity without language, yet language always also predetermines this subjectivity, because it is a pre-existing system into which the individual is born. This results in a self subject to a pre-existing authoritative discourse, whose dominance is not a matter of truth or rightness, but of *power*. One of the problems with history, (and this is one reason why DeLillo does not entirely rely on it) is that it can be recognised as just such an authoritative discourse. DeLillo’s attempt to find a solution to this problem is an integral part of his search for effective political resistance. In *End Zone*, Gary Harkness withdraws from the authoritative discourse of American football, only to end the novel with a silence that also marks the eradication of his subjectivity, whilst in *Ratner’s Star*, DeLillo attempts to circumvent the problem of culturally dominant

discourses, by questing for a language that is objectively true, and which therefore escapes power relations. This thesis posits DeLillo's breakthrough to this problem in *Great Jones Street* in his adoption of the semiotic aesthetic. This discourse allows the subject expression, but without entailing complete submission to a larger culture or language, because it springs in part from the subject's own body.

The question of individual subjectivity has always been central to DeLillo's oeuvre, and his search for a political aesthetic. This should also be seen as a key part of DeLillo's resistance to postmodern culture, because postmodern subjectivity, where experience is broken down into "a series of pure and unrelated presents in time" (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 27), cannot support any opposition or resistance. However, DeLillo does not return to older, modernist conceptions of the self unquestioningly. Jack Gladney, Bill Gray and James Axton would all seem to display modernist sensibilities. Each assumes the integrity of the self, and each concurs with McHale's definition of the modernist figure, as "the cognitive hero of an epistemological quest" (*Constructing Postmodernism* 148). But DeLillo tempers these depictions of subjective integrity by undermining the unity of each narrative. The effect is to suggest that Jack, Bill and James's subjectivities may not be unified and distinct, but porous and unbounded. But despite such disruptions, DeLillo nonetheless returns again and again to the idea of the individual as a site of resistance. This can be detected most significantly in DeLillo's depiction of the body as a place of authentic experience. This is exemplified both by Nick's desire to return to "the days of disorder" when he was "dumb-muscled and angry and real" (*Underworld* 810) and by the description of the disabled Micklethwaite boy in *Great Jones Street*, "Because of his disfigurement, everything about him was pervasively real [...] The boy was unforgettable in the sheer organic power of his presence" (161). Similarly, it can be observed in the depictions of sex in *End Zone*, *Underworld* and *Ratner's Star* (not *White Noise* (1985)), where sex is shown to be the one activity where language possesses *presence*, as the following description in *End*

Zone illustrates, “Myna stepped away from the clothes, aware of the moment’s dynamics, positing herself as the knowable word, the fleshmade sigh and syllable” (217-8). However, just as DeLillo tempers his depiction of subjective integrity, so he is careful to temper his depiction of the body by revealing, in novels like *White Noise* and *The Body Artist*, that it too is subject to the power relations of late capitalism.

But DeLillo’s most developed deployment of individual bodily presence as a site of resistance is witnessed in the notion of the semiotic aesthetic. The figure of the artist has been crucial to DeLillo’s novels since *Americana*. Not only does this novel feature Sullivan, a sculptor, and Brand, a novelist, but Bell himself also wants to become an artist. Like T. S. Eliot, DeLillo differentiates artistic subjectivity from that of his other characters, seeing it as our best hope for autonomy from the dominant culture. Given that the problem with characters like Gary Harkness, Glen Selvy, Karen Janney and Lyle Wynant is that they are subject to prewritten discourses, it is unsurprising that DeLillo should locate hope for resistance in those characters who can create their own discourses and narratives. But in order that the aesthetic products of his artists escape subjection to any pre-existing discourse, DeLillo turns to the notion of a bodily or semiotic aesthetic. This can be witnessed even in DeLillo’s first novel, *Americana*, in Sullivan’s sculptures, for example, which like look like “afterbirth” (106). However, it is most extensively and successfully developed for the first time in *Great Jones Street*. In this novel, DeLillo presents Bucky Wunderlick’s Mountain Tapes as an aesthetic that cannot be entirely absorbed back into the dominant culture, because they spring – in part – from Bucky’s own body, and have not therefore been entirely predetermined by a pre-existing authoritative discourse. DeLillo will return to the semiotic repeatedly as a site of resistance in his novels, in the infantile narrative of Tap’s novel in *The Names*, in the spoon painting Karen Janney discovers in *Mao II*, in “the felt life” (77) of Klara Sax’s paintings in *Underworld*, and, most extensively, in the performance art of Lauren Hartke in *The Body Artist*. In each instance,

the semiotic preserves some bodily presence that has the potential to escape absorption or incorporation into the dominant cultural narrative

Critics like Robert Tower have argued that DeLillo's fiction is characterised by a deep-rooted paranoia, envisaging a world in which "Everything is connected" (*Underworld* 825). In contrast, this thesis argues that DeLillo's fiction presents an incoherent world, a polyphony of voices which cannot be "systematized together" (Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* 149) into a unified narrative. In other words, DeLillo's novels are characterised by a Bakhtinian heteroglossia, where different voices and discourses meet and collide. Furthermore, this heteroglossia is politically motivated as Bill Gray's description of the novel in *Mao II* illustrates, "It's a democratic shout. [...] The spray of talent, the spray of ideas. One thing unlike another, one voice unlike the next. Ambiguities, contradictions, whispers, hints" (159). Indeed, understanding the novel as a democratic force also allows us to understand why, despite the significance placed on the figure of the artist, DeLillo undermines the modernist subjectivities of James Axton, Jack Gladney and Bill Gray, and even the bodily unity of artists like Lauren Hartke. Like Walter Benjamin, DeLillo realises that "creativity, genius and eternal value" are "concepts whose uncontrolled ... application would lead to a processing of data in the Fascist sense" (Benjamin 212). Thus, DeLillo does not fully endorse a return to romantic subjectivity or the epiphany, the moment of truth, because he does not endorse the possibility of a discourse that allows unmediated access to reality – as *Ratner's Star* demonstrates. Instead he offers heterogeneous aesthetic discourses as a means of escaping or subverting a dominant narrative or culture - and will do so even at the risk of sidelining his "own" voice in his fiction, as Ryan Simmons recognises: "what is remarkable is that he concedes his own voice to be just one more narrative among others" (693). This can also help us understand why DeLillo's artists so often belong to political minorities, being women or members of non-WASP ethnic groups, because the function of these artistic voices is to disrupt the dominant political discourse of the United States. As

stated earlier, like Foucault, DeLillo recognises the dominance of one discourse over another to be a matter of power. Hence the purpose of DeLillo's artists is not to produce an alternative, authentic or authoritative discourse, but instead to disrupt the dominant narrative of late twentieth century America from the political margins.

Finally, DeLillo also recognises that this aesthetic must continually make itself new, if it is to remain disruptive and resistant. This is an argument that can not only be witnessed in the performance art of Lauren Hartke in *The Body Art* or the changing techniques and styles adopted by Klara Sax in *Underworld*, DeLillo also applies it self reflexively to his own fiction, as the number of different discourses he has adopted indicates. And it is here that we can recognise once more the full extent of the folly of identifying DeLillo as an exemplary postmodernist. Like the instances of "amphibious fiction" (164), cited by McHale in *Constructing Postmodernism*, such as *The Name of the Rose* (1980), DeLillo's novels can be constructed as postmodern texts. But it is a label that does not quite fit, as Brian McHale's own confusion over DeLillo illustrates. DeLillo appears several times as a bit player in *Constructing Postmodernism*, but McHale seems unable to make up his mind how he should be regarded, referring to DeLillo sometimes as a "postmodernist" (178) and sometimes as a "late modernist" (194). As Stephen Baker recognises, the classification of DeLillo's work must remain fundamentally ambiguous: "The dilemmas of modernism return in these postmodernist texts both to be absorbed by postmodernist conflictness and simultaneously to subject that postmodernist conflictness to the historicising critique of the modernist aesthetic" (119). DeLillo's emphasis on individual subjectivity, the special significance of the artist and his return to Modernist maxim of "making it new" indicates that DeLillo's fiction is finally amphibious – neither fully postmodern or modernist. Indeed, it may be best characterised as fiction about postmodernism that is both subject to its logic and resistant to it.

DeLillo once told an interviewer that the fiction he admired most was that which was “equal to the complexities and excesses of the culture” (Begley, “The Art of Fiction CXXXV: Don DeLillo” 289). This thesis sets out to demonstrate that DeLillo’s fiction more than meets his own criteria. Few other contemporary writers can hope to meet his achievements, for few others display the breadth of his vision, the intelligence of his writing, the nerve to think our present time in history or the determination to find an aesthetic that can offer an effective site of political resistance.

“Megaamerica”: Postmodern Space in *Americana*

This thesis contends that Don DeLillo comes closer than almost any other contemporary writer to achieving what Jameson acknowledges to be almost impossible, namely, thinking our present time in history. Furthermore, this thesis argues that this ambition can be witnessed in DeLillo’s fiction right from *Americana* (1971), which exhibits a scope and subject matter as untypical of first novels, as DeLillo is untypical of contemporary novelists. DeLillo has stated that the fiction he admires most is that which is “equal to the complexities and excesses of the culture” (Begley, “The Art of Fiction CXXXV: Don DeLillo” 289), and *Americana* should undoubtedly be regarded as his first attempt to fulfil this aspiration. As such, the importance of this novel in DeLillo’s canon of work should not be underestimated, because it marks a decisive change of direction in his writing, as DeLillo has himself stated: “with *Americana*, I made an enormous leap, and I think this is what made me a writer” (Billen 32). Most significantly, the “enormous leap” that *Americana* represents in DeLillo’s work is most obviously manifested in geographical terms. For as Fred L. Gardarpe writes, what *Americana* marks is DeLillo’s movement “out of little Italy and into big America” (176) as he abandons the regionalism of his early short stories, set in the Italian-American districts of his childhood in New York, in favour of a novel which attempts to encompass the whole of the United States – as its title makes breathtakingly explicit. In other words, the ambition and scope of *Americana* should not just be attributed to DeLillo’s abandonment of the confines of the short story for the more expansive form of the novel, but should also be regarded as a bold artistic manifesto, a declaration of his intent to take on a nation. Furthermore, that DeLillo chooses to consider America through its geography is also crucial, because it demonstrates DeLillo’s anticipation of Jameson’s argument in *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) that the

“political form of postmodernism, if there ever is any, will have as its vocation the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping, on a social as well as spatial scale” (54).

Americana has proven to be a remarkably successful artistic manifesto, because this novel prefigures almost all of the major themes and ideas that dominate DeLillo’s later work, as several critics have recognised. Tom LeClair, for instance, calls *Americana* “an invaluable sourcebook for DeLillo’s career, the origin of numerous loops (themes, situations, images) that he develops in his later fiction” (*In the Loop* 33), whilst Neil Isaacs states of this novel that “it was as if he [DeLillo] were setting down material that could be put to better use in more carefully crafted, focused, structured work later on” (91). This can be verified on the level of the smallest particulars as well as that of the broadest themes, from the reference to “H. C. Porny” that crops up here (367) and in *Running Dog* (1978) (112) to *Americana*’s prefiguring of what is often regarded as the dominant theme of DeLillo’s fiction: the impact of technologies of reproduction upon our construction and conception of reality. And there are many other examples of themes and situations that will be repeated in DeLillo’s later work, such as the depiction of a subjectivity constituted by cinematic images, like David Bell’s, or the juxtaposition of film and language as means of representation. Frank Lentricchia goes even further than either Isaacs or LeClair, implying that DeLillo’s later work cannot be understood without reference to *Americana*. He cites the scene in which Glen Yost, playing David Bell’s father, states that advertising “moves him [the consumer] from first person consciousness to third person” (270) as one of the “Two scenes in Don DeLillo’s fiction” that are “primal for his [DeLillo’s] imagination of America” (“*Libra* as Postmodern Critique” 193) (the other being, predictably, the Most Photographed Barn in America in *White Noise* (1985)). But most significantly from this chapter’s perspective, *Americana* is also the first of DeLillo’s novels to introduce and develop the theme of place and space that will later recur in novels like *End Zone* (1972),

Great Jones Street (1973), *Running Dog*, *The Names*, *White Noise*, *Mao II* (1991) and *Underworld* (1997).

There are two basic dimensions to DeLillo's interrogation of the theme of place and space in his fiction. One dimension is his investigation of the concepts of space and place themselves in late capitalism; the other is his exploration of ideas of and about America. *Americana* introduces and explores both aspects. So, for example, in this novel David Bell finds himself inhabiting the new spaces of late capitalism, like motel rooms and supermarkets. These new spaces are characterised by their endless and identical repetition across the continent. The effect is to erode any sense of the local, because these spaces are "non-places", identified by Marc Auge as spaces "which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity" (77). As DeLillo writes in *Players* (1977), such spaces are "Indefinite locations. Positions regarded as occupied by something" (24). DeLillo's interest in this new spatial phenomenon is instructive, indicating that his rejection of the regionalism of his early short stories, like "Take the "A" Train" and "Spaghetti and Meatballs", is a product of his recognition that, in the age of late capitalism, regionalism has become an outmoded concept, as all space becomes global space. As Jameson writes: "place in the United States today no longer exists, or, more precisely, it exists at a much feebler level, surcharged by all kinds of other more powerful but also more abstract spaces" (*Postmodernism* 127). But the distinguishing feature of postmodern space is not merely the loss of place, as Anthony Giddens's description of the space of modernity in much the same terms as Jameson's description of postmodern space illustrates: "In conditions of modernity, space become increasingly phantasmagoric: that is to say, locales are thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them" (Giddens 19). Rather postmodern space is distinguished by the subject's relation to it. Thus, whilst Giddens's subject is able to draw some comfort from modern spaces, because its repetitions provide "[t]he reassurance of the familiar, so important to a sense of ontological security" (140), the

space of late capitalism is entirely disorienting and alienating: “this latest mutation in space – postmodern hyperspace – has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptively, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world” (*Postmodernism* 44). This disorientation has important ramifications for subjectivity, because without the ability to represent the space one inhabits, it is difficult to distinguish the self as an autonomous being. That David Bell exhibits just such a fractured self indicates that the conception of space in this novel is closer to Jameson’s than Giddens’s. But *Americana* is also a novel about American space in particular, as both its title and its subject matter, a road trip across the United States, make apparent. Furthermore, it does not merely offer descriptions of archetypal American locations – the New York metropolis, quaint New England, the Midwestern small town and the desert – it also offers an investigation of America as it exists on television, in film and in literature. In other words, *Americana* also explores America as it exists as an *idea*, and more precisely, the way in which this idea precedes and shapes the material reality of the continent. It is here we can see how the two dimensions of DeLillo’s investigation of the themes of place and space relate, for not only are the new kinds of spaces of late capitalism, like the motel and the supermarket, fundamentally American inventions, but they also represent abstract ideas made concrete – much like America itself. As Baudrillard writes, America is not interested in “conceptualizing reality, but realizing concepts and materializing ideas” (*America* 84).

However, before investigating the theme of place and space in *Americana* it is essential to make explicit the theoretical concepts that are implicit in the above discussion. As well as drawing on Marc Auge’s concept of non-place and Baudrillard’s notion of the hyperreal, where “the real is not only what can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced” (“Simulations” 186), this chapter also makes reference to the idea of postmodern space, as explored by Fredric Jameson in *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural*

Logic of Late Capitalism (1991). This concept of postmodern space is essential to this thesis's understanding of DeLillo's work, because it provides a language with which we can understand a number of the features of novels like *Americana*. For example, it is a primary aim of this thesis to investigate the relationship of DeLillo's fiction to theories of the postmodern, and the concept of postmodern space is central to Jameson's definition, at least. He not only sees postmodernism as the result of a spatial phenomenon, the expansion of capitalism around the globe, but he argues that the only "'moment of truth' of postmodernism" (*Postmodernism* 49) is "the whole extraordinary demoralizing and depressing original new global space" (*Postmodernism* 49). Furthermore, Jameson argues that only cultural productions that attempt to map postmodern space can hope to have any political import. This argument has important implications for a thesis that seeks to demonstrate the political engagement of DeLillo's texts. Secondly, an exploration of postmodern space can help us resolve one of the most contentious issues regarding DeLillo, namely, the question of whether his fiction lacks critical distance from the culture it seeks to depict, for Jameson argues that this distance is also affected by the collapsing of space in late capitalism: "distances in general (including 'critical distance' in particular) have very precisely been abolished in the new space of postmodernism" (*Postmodernism* 48). Thirdly, the concept of postmodern space is also implied in John Duvall's contention that "DeLillo emerges as one of the cartographers of contemporary cognition that Jameson calls for in his work" ("From Valparaiso to Jerusalem" 562) and it would seem essential to tackle the relationship of DeLillo's fiction to this term, if this thesis is to argue, as it does in its introduction, that DeLillo comes closer than any contemporary writer to thinking our present time in history. Finally, postmodern space not only has important implications for the conditions and possibilities of human knowledge and understanding, it also has implications for conceptions of subjectivity itself, because without the ability to distinguish

and represent an objective world, the subject cannot conceive of itself as an autonomous, discrete being.

Of course, with the exception of the writings of Ihab Hassan, the term postmodern was not in use when *Americana* was published in 1971. But it is reasonable to investigate this novel alongside the concept of postmodern space, simply because this novel anticipates so many discussions and definitions of the concept, again demonstrating the extraordinary prescience of DeLillo's fiction. Indeed, although the theme of space and place can be witnessed time and again in DeLillo's later fiction, it is DeLillo's first novel that exhibits most unequivocally what Jameson calls a "certain spatial turn" (*Postmodernism* 154). This is indicated by *Americana*'s title and subject matter, both of which imply a geographic focus. Furthermore, *Americana* is also structured spatially, because each part of this novel does not denote a particular period of time, as is traditional, but a *location*. Thus, Part One is set in New York and depicts David's present employment at the television station as well as his memories of his married life in the city with Merry. The location of Part Two is Old Holly, as David recounts incidents from his childhood and adolescence. Part Three is set in Fort Curtis, whilst the location of Part Four is the West. The effect of this structure is to disrupt the temporal flow of the novel, as it jumps between past, present and future, indicating conclusively that *Americana* is dominated not by the temporal but by the spatial. DeLillo's own description of the inspiration for *Americana* makes this clear, for this novel was inspired not by an event or incident, but by a place:

I don't always know when or where an idea first hits the nervous system, but I remember *Americana*. I was sailing in Maine with two friends, and we put into small harbor on Mt. Desert Island. And I was sitting on a railroad tie waiting to take a shower, and I had a glimpse of a street maybe fifty yards away and a sense of beautiful old houses and rows of elms and maples and a stillness and wistfulness - and the street seemed to carry its own built in longing ... And whatever roads the novel eventually followed, I believe I maintained the idea of the quiet street if only as counterpoint, as lost innocence. (Begley, "The Art of Fiction CXXXV: Don DeLillo" 279)

DeLillo's comments also indicate that *Americana* is about juxtaposing different kinds of spaces, like the new spaces of late capitalism against older American locations, such as the small town. Indeed, David Bell's journey should be interpreted, like Glen Selvy's in *Running Dog*, as an attempt to recover a more authentic place by seeking out what is often imagined as the older originary space of America – the West.

Jameson defines postmodern space as a space that “transcends the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself” (*Postmodernism* 44). He cites the example of the Westin Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles, whose architecture is so confusing that no one can ever find any of its stores twice (*Postmodernism* 44). DeLillo has depicted such spaces on numerous occasions in his work, most notably in the scene in *White Noise*, where an elderly couple, the Treadwells, are found hiding in a kiosk in a shopping centre, after “wandering through the mall for two days, lost, confused and frightened” (59). Similarly, Pammy in *Players* finds it impossible to orientate herself in New York's famous World Trade Center and continually finds herself in the “wrong tower” (15), whilst the revolving bar overlooking Times Square in *Mao II* causes Scott to feel “as if blocks of time and space had come loose and drifted” (23). But it is in *Americana* that DeLillo first introduces this idea of the disorientating new space of late capitalism. As the following description indicates, New York is depicted in *Americana* as an archetypal postmodern space:

In winter, when the darkness always comes before you expect it and all those lights begin to pinch through the stale mist, New York becomes a gigantic wedding cake. You board the singing elevator and drop an eighth of a mile in ten seconds flat. Your ears hum as you are decompressed. It is an almost frighteningly impersonal process and yet something of this kind seems necessary to translate you from the image to what is actually impaled on that dainty fork. (27-8)

The subject does not manoeuvre himself through this city; rather its buildings process him. And as Jameson describes postmodern space as exhibiting “an alarming disjunction point between the body and its built environment” (*Postmodernism* 44), so the disjunction between the body and space of New York results in actual physical discomfort: “Your ears

hum as you are decompressed.” But this passage also points to another important feature of postmodern space: hyperreality, where a space is transformed into “the image or simulacrum” (*Postmodernism* 119). It is the difficulty of relating the “image” to “what is actually impaled on that dainty fork” (28) or as Jameson puts it, the difficulty of relating the “abstract space of the superstate or multinational capitalism today” to “the existential daily life of people in their traditional rooms and tract houses” (*Postmodernism* 128) that results in the disorientation of the subject.

This disorientation of the subject is illustrated most clearly by the protagonist of *Americana*, David Bell. As a television executive and the son of an advertising man, Bell is particularly susceptible to the image or simulation, as he admits: “All the impulses of all the media were fed into the circuitry of my dreams” (130), and his relationship to the space that he inhabits is entirely coloured by representations and reproductions in mass media. He describes Brand’s aunt’s house, for example, as “the place where everyone’s grandmother lives in television commercials” (115), whilst the setting of his first meeting with Merry is described in cinematic terms: “as if arranged for the whim of a camera” (30). But most significantly, David cannot distinguish between the image and the actual landscape, “That night after the movie, driving my father’s car along the country roads, I began to wonder how real the landscape truly was and how much of a dream is a dream” (13). The result is his complete inability to orientate himself spatially: “The concept of distances has always stunned me - meridians, latitudes, international datelines; swinging with the arc of the earth, while I am forever stationary, all distant places seem elusive to me, sliding away and under, hard to get mail to” (74). But David is not only aware of his inability to comprehend the space he inhabits, he also aware of its impact on his subjectivity, which increasingly seems as simulational as New York itself: “There were times when I thought all of us at the network existed only on videotape” (23). Similarly, because he is unable to represent the world he inhabits, he finds it difficult to distinguish himself as an autonomous being, as his

description of watching television illustrates: "I could not tell what was happening on the screen and it didn't seem to matter. Sitting that close all I could perceive was that meshed effect, those stormy notes, but it drew me in and held me as if I were an integral part of the set, my molecules mating with those millions of dots" (43). By the same token, the "conventionally' handsome" (12) David is continually confused with film stars and television celebrities, for as Warren Beasley states, David bears "a strong facial resemblance to a number of Hollywood stars known for their interchangeability" (93). In other words, David's subjectivity is indistinguishable from cinematic representations of subjectivity. His trip across America should be interpreted therefore as an attempt to recover an authentic sense of self by recovering an authentic sense of place, a connection DeLillo makes clear in the following description: "they journeyed toward their own interior limits" (203).

That David's journey is an attempt to recover some kind of transcendental truth is made apparent by his repeated description of the trip in religious terms. When he first proposes the journey, for example, he tells Sullivan, "I'd like to do something more religious" (10), whilst he shaves his chest before the trip as "a ritual cleansing of the body, a prelude to the sacred journey" (124). He even explains his choice of vehicle in these terms: "I said, 'Planes aren't religious yet. Cars are religious. Maybe planes will be next'" (49). David's desire to drive rather than fly also indicates that this journey is to be about creating a cognitive map of America for the car, unlike the plane, allows this illusion because in a car one can see where one is going. That the journey is perceived as an epistemological unravelling is also indicated by the description of the road as "a straight line of marked length and limits" (350) – a description later echoed in *Running Dog*. But the journey is also explicitly about America, because as David states, he is "determined not to stray even for a moment beyond the borders of our native land" (203), and more importantly, about the recovery of an older America, as David tells Pike, "We'll discover all the lost roads of

America" (49). This is also indicated by the initial object of David's trip: a Navaho Indian reserve, for American Indians are, literally, the original people of America. And indeed, American Indians are depicted in the novel as offering access to a more authentic existence. Leonard Zajac, for instance, finds a kind of spiritual peace with the Havasupai Indians, whilst a member of the commune living with Apache Indians in Arizona describes the experience as "the total thing [...] It outruns all the other scenes by miles. We all live like persons" (355). In other words, David hopes that the recovery of the authentic originary space of America will allow him to escape the simulational culture of New York and gain an authentic sense of self: "I felt an urge to leave that place, to go roaring onto a long straight expressway into the West; to forget the film and what it was beginning to mean to me; to face mountains and deserts; to smash my likeness, prism of all my images, and become finally a man who lives by his own power and smell" (236).

But David's attempt to recover an origin or authentic space fails, as his failure ever to find the Navaho reserve indicates. That the reserve was to serve as the setting for his documentary is also significant, for it indicates, in a neat pun, that David never succeeds in being *on location*. Indeed, he never succeeds in orientating himself at all, because he is never quite sure where he is, as his conversation with Sullivan reveals:

"Where are we anyway?" she said.

"It could be Indiana. But it could be Illinois or Kentucky. I'm not sure."

"I guess it doesn't matter. I don't know why I ask, but what's west of here?"

"Iowa, I think. Although maybe Iowa is further north. I'm trying to remember what's below Iowa." (209)

Similarly, he is unable to experience any location unmediated by a televisual, photographic or cinematic representation, because something, in this case advertising, always gets in the way: "All America was on the verge of spring and the countryside was coming to glory, what we could see of the countryside through the smoke and billboards" (111). In other words, David's attempt to recover genuine American locations succeeds only in recovering hyperspaces like Fort Curtis, which cannot be experienced, only re-experienced, so

completely do they fulfil a pre-existing archetype: "That street was a thoroughly American place, monument of collective nostalgia" (301). Furthermore, even as he travels westwards he encounters other examples of postmodern spaces, like the motel, structures in which identical spaces are "Repeated endlessly" (257) with the effect not only of disorientating, but also of actually erasing the subject: "you can easily forget who you are here; you can sit on your bed and become *man sitting on bed*, an abstraction to compete with infinity itself" (257). What is more, the car is not "religious" (49), as David believes, but is another example of the non-place, as Marc Auge reminds us. Not only has the car resulted in the construction of American cities and towns on a scale that cannot be negotiated by the human body, but the experience of driving, especially in the west, is also intimately related to the experience of film as the construction of an entire genre, the road movie, indicates. This is a familiar idea in Baudrillard's writing: "The unfolding of the desert is infinitely close to the timelessness of film" (*America* 1), but DeLillo also notes it in *Mao II*, "The car was serial travel, a sprocketed motion that shot her attention span to pieces. Even when the car generated a dull flat landscape she found it hard to unravel herself from the stutter reality of the broken white line and the picture in the window and the Kleenex in the box and break into real talk" (29). Furthermore, the very idea of a road trip across the USA also has countless *literary* precedents. LeClair cites Henry Miller, Jack Kerouac, and William Burroughs (*In the Loop* 34), but one could quite easily add John Steinbeck, William Faulkner and Vladimir Nabokov to this list. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the America that David recovers in the West is not its authentic, originary moment, but its representation:

Literature is what we passed and left behind, that more than men and cactus [...] Whether the novels and songs usurped the land, or took something true from it, is not so much the issue as this: that what I was engaged in was merely a literary venture, an attempt to find pattern and motive, to make of something wild a squeamish thesis on the essence of the nation's soul. (349)

Sullivan recognises the fallacy of his trip right from the start, quoting Walt Whitman's famous line, "I hear America singing" (27), in response to David's litany of U.S. States.

What Sullivan recognises is that American space has always been a kind of hyperspace, because it has always been preconceived, has always first existed as an idea. She quotes Black Knife, a Native American, who – significantly – does not offer access to an authentic, originary America, but who instead argues that “We must realize we are living in Megaamerica. Neon, fiber glass, Plexiglass, polyurethane, Mylar, Acrylite” (119). It is here that we should stress again that American space and postmodern space are to a large extent synonymous, and that postmodern space can be seen as a manifestation of American neo-colonialism. As Jameson writes: “Yet this is the point at which I must remind the reader of the obvious; namely, that this whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world” (*Postmodernism* 5). What DeLillo demonstrates by using Black Knife and Sullivan to debunk David’s hopes of finding the originary space of America is that even America’s first people cannot offer a site of resistance to this new colonisation. This is because the landmass we know of as “America” has always been a hyperspace, because its landscape has always already existed as an abstraction, as a concept. As Brian Jarvis writes in *Postmodern Cartographies*: “Long before America was officially charted, in the crude sketches of Enlightenment cartography, its landscapes had been discovered across the wide Sargasso Sea of the imagination” (1). In other words, we cannot recover or *even imagine* the authentic, originary moment or people of America – and especially not in the West.

This idea will recur time and again in DeLillo’s fiction, most notably in *Running Dog* and *The Names*, where, as in *Americana*, DeLillo will again explore the possibilities of resistance offered by the colonised, before finally stressing the impossibility of recovering an unmediated experience of the West or America. Thus, as David Bell recovers not the origin of America, but only its literary representation, so Glen Selvy, despite adopting a Native American name, “Running Dog”, recovers not the West, but the *Western*. Similarly,

as David Bell notes the relationship of the desert and film: "I loved the landscapes, the sense of near equation called forth by man and space, the cowboy facing the silent hills; there it was, the true subject of film, space itself, how to arrange it and people it, time hung in a desert window, how to win over sand and bone" (239-40), so Frank Volterra in *The Names* recognises that film is always implied in the American desert:

The desert fits the screen. It is the screen. Low horizontal, high verticals. People talk about classic westerns. The classic thing has always been the space, the emptiness. The lines are drawn for us. All we have to do is insert the figures, men in dusty boots, certain faces. Figures in open space have always been what film is all about. American film. (198)

Indeed, the only point of origin David Bell comes close to recovering in *Americana* is the originary moment of postmodern America, as he re-enacts the last, fateful journey of John F. Kennedy in Dallas. This, if anything, marks the inception of David Bell's America, because it is the assassination of J.F.K. that DeLillo argues leaves subjects unable to "grid the world" (*Libra* 414). In other words, it is this moment that DeLillo claims signals the shift from modern to postmodern America, as subjects' experience of space becomes marked by the failure of cognitive mapping.

Furthermore, as David fails to recover an authentic American space, so he fails to recover an authentic sense of self, because without the ability to map his surroundings, Bell cannot properly distinguish his subjectivity. Both Jameson and DeLillo make this relationship between subjectivity and space clear, by figuring postmodern space in psychoanalytic terms. Jameson draws on Lacan to explain his concept of cognitive mapping. He points out cognitive mapping does not merely require "existential data (the empirical position of the subject)" (*Postmodernism* 52), but also "unlived, abstract conceptions of the geographic totality" (*Postmodernism* 52). The only way the subject can reconcile the two is through Ideology, which Jameson argues, drawing on both Althusser and Lacan, is "the representation of the subject's *Imaginary* relationship to his or her *Real* conditions of existence" (Althusser qtd in Jameson, *Postmodernism* 51). The final element of Lacan's

tripartite system is the Symbolic, and it is this that Jameson cites as cartography's "representational dialectic of the codes and capacities of individual language or media" (*Postmodernism* 54). The postmodern subject lacks not only the necessary Ideology to conceive of the totality, but also, as Jameson's description of the culture of late capitalism as schizophrenic indicates (*Postmodernism* 26), access to the Symbolic that is essential to represent this space. That the culture of late capitalism is characterised by such psychosis is made clear in *Americana* in DeLillo's depiction of David Bell's own familial relationships, which, like Lee Harvey Oswald's in *Libra*, are characterised by the failure of the paternal metaphor. In other words, Bell's father does not offer a means of pinning down the signifying chain as the Father ought to, because, as his employment in advertising signals, he is complicit with the postmodern culture of late twentieth century American, where signs are exchanged, not against the real, but against each other. This absence of the nom-du-pere is confirmed by the depiction of David's subjectivity, because David remains stuck in the imaginary phase. He can only reaffirm his sense of self by identification with an external image, such as the mirror or movie screen:

I had almost the same kind of relationship with my mirror that many of my contemporaries had with their analysts. When I began to wonder who I was, I took the simple step of lathering my face and shaving. It all became so clear, so wonderful. I was blue-eyed David Bell. Obviously my life depended on this fact. (11)

Burt was like a city in which we are all living. He was that big. Within the conflux of shadow and time, there was room for all of us and I knew I must extend myself until the molecules parted and I was spliced into the image. (12-3)

This failure to access the Symbolic order has a number of repercussions. Not only does Bell lack the language necessary to map the space around him, he is also unable to distinguish himself from it. Entrance into the symbolic order is the point at which the subject recognises his difference from the world around him. The ego of the imaginary phase, by contrast, identifies him or herself entirely with the surrounding external reality, as Bell's relationship

with his television indicates: “my molecules mating with those millions of dots” (43). In other words, the ego of the imaginary order is unable to conceive of him or herself as a separate entity, and is therefore unable to map the space inhabited.

But DeLillo is careful to indicate that this psychosis is not restricted to David Bell. As the identification with external images results, inevitably, in a division of the self, the “splitting between the *I* which is perceived and the *I* which does the perceiving” (Belsey 597), so DeLillo reveals this as the fundamental condition of American subjectivity in the late twentieth century, where the imaginary mirror of identification is the television screen:

“How does a successful television commercial affect the viewer?” [...]

“It moves him from first person consciousness to third person. In this country there is a universal third person, the man we all want to be. Advertising has discovered this man. It uses him to express the possibilities open to the consumer. To consume in America is not to buy; it is to dream.” (270)

But Jameson is careful to stress that the inability of the subject to map postmodern space is not just a result of the breakdown of the Symbolic. Jameson also reminds us that it is a failure of the Imaginary to reconcile the subject to the Real (*Postmodernism* 53). DeLillo’s identification of the defining relationship of late twentieth century as that of the consumer and their television screen indicates just such a failure of the Imaginary, because this relationship does not articulate a relationship with the Real, which Lacan defines as that which escapes symbolisation, but rather with representations, with the Symbolic. This is also signalled by David’s repeated epiphanic vision of a woman lifting her leg in the bath (208, 319), because this epiphany gestures not to the real or a moment of truth, but to a television advertisement (259). David’s journey can be interpreted therefore not only as a search for origin, but also as an attempt to rearticulate the relationship of the Imaginary and the Real. The Imaginary phase is strongly associated with early childhood and the mother in Lacan’s writing. That David Bell’s trip across the states is also figured as an attempt to recover his mother, supports this interpretation, as David attempts to reproduce the same

Imaginary relationship with the land as he once had with his mother. This association of the maternal with America is present from the first. Warren Beasley calls the USA “mamaland” (231), whilst Carol Deming states, “Patriotism [...] Our sons must return to their mother. She is waiting with open legs” (226). More specifically, David’s trip can be interpreted as his attempted rebirthing. He spends his last night in New York, for example, in the cocoon, an installation built by a Swiss artist, which is significantly womb-like: “It had been his hope to fashion an environment that would be a work of life as opposed to one of art, an organism insulated from the hostile outer topography, a clump of palpitating caterpillars, a micro world, a man beyond the man who made it” (108). Similarly, David’s red Mustang car is described as possessing a “wrap-around fallopian coziness” (111). But it is Sullivan, one of David’s travelling companions, who comes to epitomise this association of America and the maternal, because she is at once intimately associated with David’s own mother and with aboriginal Americans. Thus David not only describes her sculptures as “afterbirth” (106), but he also mistakes her for his own mother on occasion, as his description of Sullivan reveals: “A shape in the shape of my mother was forming in the doorway” (110). Similarly, his fascination with Sullivan’s shoe at Quincy’s party (“I couldn’t take my eyes off that empty shoe” (10)) springs from a memory of his mother: “She was wearing just one shoe. The other was on the floor, a black shoe, upright, near the wall” (195). David also explicitly associates Sullivan with the original population of American, describing her as “pre-Columbian” (9) and as “an avenging squaw” (336). That Sullivan is associated with an older, originary America is extremely important, because it indicates that, as postmodern America is associated with David Bell’s advertising executive father, so pre-postmodern America is intimately associated with the mother.

David attempts to recover the Imaginary relationship with his mother by fulfilling his Oedipal fantasy with his mother-substitute, Sullivan. He believes that “Only Sullivan [...] could save me” (107), and that her work offers “the salvation of the republic” (106),

indicating David Cowart is right to argue that DeLillo extends Oedipal conceptions of the self beyond individual identity to national identity ("For Whom the Bell Tolls" 603). Indeed, the actual fulfilment of David's fantasy with Sullivan is figured as a return both to home and to the West: "I listened to what she was thinking. Little mothers' sons. He wants to wake up alone. Michelangelo's David. Wasp of the Wild West. He is home at last" (334). However, as Sullivan recognises that David's journey can recover only a literary version of America, so she also recognises that his Oedipal desire can also only recover another pre-existing narrative. Not only does she tell David: "You're such a lovable cliché, my love" (336), but her quotation of Whitman ("I hear America singing" (27)) reminds us that this mapping of the self onto America also has literary precedents, and not just Whitman, but others like Allen Ginsberg too. David has some awareness of this himself, writing of his Oedipal attraction his mother, "I knew what was happening and I did not care to argue with the doctors of that knowledge" (196). But most significantly, as the pre-postmodern America David recovers is one that has always already been written, so David is unable to recover his first Imaginary relationship with his mother. Just as Sullivan betrays David with Brand, a man whose very name gestures to the culture of late capitalism, so the phallus has already intruded into David Bell's relationship with his own mother. David's mother not only tells him of her violation at the hands of Doctor Weber (139), she also contracts cancer of the cervix, itself a literal product of contact with the penis. But most significantly, her illness reveals the extent to which the female body, like America itself, has already been colonised by a masculine order of knowledge: "The doctor had wanted to take everything out" (169).

But aside from such scrutiny of DeLillo's depiction of postmodern space and its impact on subjectivity in *Americana*, it is also essential to examine the implications of his decision to tackle this theme. The concept of postmodern space is central to Jameson's definition of postmodernism not least because it stands "as the symbol and analogon of that

even sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as subjects” (*Postmodernism* 44). In other words, Jameson posits postmodern space as symptomatic of our current inability to comprehend the totality of our reality, or to think our present time in history. DeLillo explicitly concurs with this interpretation in *The Names*, in his description of that archetypal postmodern space, the airport: “The process convinces us that at any moment we may have to submit to the force that is implied in all this, the unknown authority behind it, behind the categories, the languages we don’t understand” (254), and his attempt to tackle this fundamental problem must therefore be interpreted as proof of his attempt at least to write fiction “equal to the complexities and excesses of the culture” (Begley, “The Art of Fiction CXXXV: Don DeLillo” 289). Furthermore, that DeLillo makes this the focus of his first novel indicates both the ambition and startling prescience of his fiction. Cognitive mapping of postmodern space is also, according to Jameson, the only way to achieve political art in the late capitalism, and it is a primary intention of this thesis to demonstrate that despite the claims of other critics, DeLillo’s work does possess political import. These issues are best examined in *Americana* through the idea of critical distance; a form of space which Jameson claims has collapsed in postmodern culture.

Americana is a novel of writers and artists – called a “künstlerroman” (*In the Loop* 34) by Tom LeClair – which on one level depicts the struggle of the artist to achieve critical distance in the space of late twentieth century America. This can be observed in the character of David Bell himself. He writes of his desire to become an artist, like Brand and Sullivan: “I wanted to become an artist, as I believed them to be, an individual willing to deal in the complexities of truth. I was most successful. I ended in silence and darkness, sitting still, a maker of objects that imitate my predilection” (347). As this statement reveals, his impulses are modernist; David seeks epiphanies, moments of authenticity and truth. He

still believes in the integrity of the artistic mind and hopes through his journey, and the film he makes of it, to create an aesthetic rendering of America that will allow him to bolster his sense of self, by introducing some critical distance between his subjectivity and the space he inhabits. However, though David does achieve enough critical distance in order to recognise that his modernist impulses are obsolete, he is none the less unable to escape the hyperreal space of twentieth century America. This failure is signalled by the close of the novel, as David returns to the first postmodern space of *Americana*: New York. What is more, once on board the plane a woman asks David for his autograph, indicating that his subjectivity is still absolutely interchangeable with that of movie stars on the cinema screen. Sullivan and Brand are little more successful. Sullivan is never seduced by the myth of origin or truth as David is, but she never achieves critical distance from the culture of late twentieth century America, because her art is incorporated into this culture, as its purchase by global multinational companies indicates: "At least thirty had been bought by various corporations. A chemical firm in Muncie had recently purchased three of her smaller things and placed them in the lobby" (106). Similarly, Brand's very name and the description of his aunt's house as "the place where everyone's grandmother lives in television commercials" (115) suggests he has also been subsumed into America's commodity culture. And though his novel is certainly intended as a piece of counterculture: "The whole country's going to puke blood when they read it" (205), it only avoids incorporation because its writer chooses "words of the same color as the paper on which they were written" (347). Here DeLillo may actually be guilty of what so many critics have accused him of: the failure to offer any political alternative to the dominant culture of late twentieth century America. But it is interesting to note the development of such ideas in his writing for DeLillo will later offer a very noisy alternative to the silence of Brand's blank pages: heteroglossia, where a plethora of different voices will offer, if not an alternative, at least a relativisation of the dominant

cultural narrative. We see traces of this idea in *Americana*, in the description of the radio output:

I listened to the radio half the night, changing stations, countries, hemispheres, switching to shortwave and ships at sea, the whole nightworld scratching out there, entangled languages, voices in storms of passion and static, commercials, prayers, newscasts, poems, soccer riots, threats of death and war and revolution, laughter from the mountains and appeals to reason from the broad plains, demonstration in La Paz, landslide in Zurich, assassination in Dakar, fire in Melbourne, confusion in Tokyo, tragedy in Athens. (231)

However, we must also recognise that the radio is also complicit with the hyperreal culture of postmodern America, for not only is it an instance of the technology of reproduction, but it also helps collapse space and distance. Rather, it is in novels like *Great Jones Street*, *The Names*, *Underworld* and *The Body Artist* that DeLillo will really explore this notion of heteroglossia as a democratic space and, by combining it with the bodily aesthetic already nascent in his description of Sullivan's art, offer us a real alternative to the silence of Brand's blank pages.

In his article "From Valparaiso to Jerusalem: DeLillo and the Moment of Canonization", John Duvall makes a very big claim for DeLillo, arguing that he "emerges as one of the cartographers of contemporary cognition that Jameson calls for in his work" (562). In other words, Duvall proposes that DeLillo achieves the near impossible task of thinking our present time in history. We know DeLillo shares this aspiration: he has told us so himself, and *Americana* should certainly be regarded as his first attempt to fulfil it. Indeed, we should recognise DeLillo's "discovery" in *Americana* that subjectivity is always necessarily a function of an already written language as a remarkable accomplishment in 1971. Similarly, DeLillo's tackling of the theme of postmodern space to explore the impact of technologies of reproduction and global capitalism on the subjective experience of space shows enormous prescience. But whether DeLillo succeeds in creating a cognitive map of America in this, his first novel, is debatable, because the problem of critical distance that

will haunt his later fiction first raises its ugly head in this novel. However, though the silence of Brand's blank pages may indicate the ultimate pessimism of this novel, without *Americana's* groundbreaking exploration of postmodern space, it is unlikely that DeLillo would have later discovered a place of resistance and democracy in the heteroglossia of his later work.

“But let’s keep things simple”: *End Zone* as Language-Game Paradigm

Like Don DeLillo’s first novel, *Americana* (1971), *End Zone* (1972) depicts a young man’s flight westwards across the United States in search of a site of authenticity or origin. Unlike *Americana*, however, which shares a “formlessness” and “sense of being overwritten prose” (*End Zone* 49) with Gary Harkness’s overweight roommate Anatole Bloomberg, *End Zone* is a pared-down, minimalist novel. Whereas Richard Ford’s *The Sportswriter* (1986) rejects the notion that “Sports is just a paradigm” (Ford 131), DeLillo employs American football as just that. In other words, *End Zone* is not about sport at all, as DeLillo himself reminds us: “*End Zone* wasn’t about football” (DeCurtis, “An Outside in This Society” 57). Rather *End Zone* utilises the structure and grammar of the game to explore language and its politics. As DeLillo told Tom LeClair, “It may be the case that with *End Zone* I began to suspect that language was a subject as well as an instrument in my work” (“An Interview with Don DeLillo” 81). This chapter is, in the words of *End Zone*’s narrator, Gary Harkness, going to “keep things simple” (4). That is, it will restrict its investigation of this novel to the manner in which *End Zone* functions as the paradigmatic exploration of the theme of the language and its politics in DeLillo’s fiction, before demonstrating that the seeds of the beginning of DeLillo’s next novel, *Great Jones Street* (1973), are contained in *End Zone*’s own ending.

The affinity between American football and language is made explicit in *End Zone*, because as Gary Harkness tells us, football “is the one sport guided by language, by the word signal, the snap number, the color code, the play name” (112). DeLillo clearly revels in the language of football, in the impenetrable jargon of the playnames, much as he will later celebrate technical and scientific idioms in *Ratner’s Star* (1976), as the following passage illustrates:

Monsoon sweep, string-in left, ready right

Cradle-out, drill-9 shiver, ends chuff.
Broadside option, flow-and-go. (116)

But football is more than a specific discourse in *End Zone*; it also operates as a paradigm of the language-game itself. This is signalled by the very name of the college, Logos College. This name also indicates that the structure of this language-game is logocentric, where the relationship between names and things is determined by a central being or presence. In the instance of American football, this being is the coach, who literally creates the play-names: “Each play must have a name. The naming of plays is important. All teams run the same plays. But each team uses an entirely different system of naming. Coaches stay up well into the night in order to name plays. They heat and reheat coffee on an old burner. No play begins until its name is called” (118). Creed acts as the origin and guarantor of language in *End Zone*, limiting play, much as God is traditionally assumed to do. And DeLillo makes clear the analogy between Coach Creed and God, the archetypal *logos* or originary source of language. Not only is Creed’s name heavily symbolic, as befits a coach referred to as the “man upstairs” (97), but we are also told that he was born “in either a log cabin or a manger” (9) and that he “became famous for creating order out of chaos” (10). Furthermore, Coach Creed’s language is also described as “hyperatavistic” (63), supporting Tom LeClair’s point that “[l]ogocentrism in *End Zone*, as in *Of Grammatology*, is very closely associated with paternal authority” (“Deconstructing the Logos” 113).

However, just as Jonathan Culler writes that “[t]he practitioner of deconstruction works within the terms of the system but in order to breach it” (*On Deconstruction* 86), so DeLillo depicts logocentric language in this novel in order to undermine it, just as he will later do in works such as *The Names* (1982), *Libra* (1988) and *Underworld* (1997). Indeed this undoing of logocentrism is signalled in *End Zone* by the very means that DeLillo chooses to explore language: American football. Depicting logocentric language through a game is DeLillo’s most subversive act, because the rules and signs of a game are *by*

definition without foundation. As Jean Baudrillard reminds us in *Seduction* that “[t]he rule functions as the parodic simulacrum of the Law” (149), so we can recognise Coach Creed’s play names in *End Zone* as a parodic simulacrum of logocentric language. Similarly, DeLillo is also careful to subvert logocentrism through his depiction of the word of the father in this novel. The most obvious example of the undoing of the word of the father is in the description of Gary’s father’s sign, “WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH THE TOUGH GET GOING”:

I looked at this sign for three years (roughly from ages fourteen to seventeen) before I began to perceive a certain beauty in it. The sentiment of course had small appeal but it seemed that beauty flew from the words themselves, the letters, consonants swallowing vowels, aggression and tenderness, a semi-self-re-creation from line to line, word to word, letter to letter. All meaning faded. The words became pictures. It was a sinister thing to discover at such an age, that words can escape their meanings. A strange beauty that sign began to express. (17)

Here the failure of the father to act as a foundation or ground for language is signalled by the breakdown of the relationship between words and things, as his language comes to illustrate Bakhtin’s argument that “[i]f completely deprived of its authority” the word of the father “becomes simply an object, a *relic*, a *thing*” (344).

DeLillo also hints repeatedly at the absence of a fundamental ground or being. God is the missing answer to a crossword puzzle clue: “Supreme being of heaven and earth. Three letters” (8), whilst Gary castigates Raymond Toony for drawing analogies between Creed and the almighty: “Toony, this shit about the man upstairs. Is the man upstairs supposed to be synonymous with God or what? Because either way it’s an outmoded concept. It’s a concept that’s incredibly outmoded. It makes absolutely no theological sense” (98). However, Gary does not so much reject the idea of centre at this point, as reject Coach Creed or God as a centre. As Gary had earlier abandoned his father’s language for that of Coach Creed, so he has now replaced the language of American football with that of nuclear warfare, where the bomb acts another kind of centre (“The bombs are a kind of

God" (80)). This also serves to undermine logocentric language because, as Derrida argues in "Structure, sign and play", the substitution of centre for centre indicates "that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed-locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign substitutions came into play" (280). But the significance of the absence of a fundamental ground or foundation is not so much ambiguity or slippage *within* the language-game in *End Zone*, as the reiteration of the contingency of the entire structure. As Wittgenstein reminds us in *On Certainty*, "[i]t does not strike me as if this system were more certain than a certainty within it" (26). In other words, the impact of *End Zone*'s subversion of logocentrism is a questioning of the relationship of this structure to the world it is meant to represent. DeLillo's undoing of logocentrism serves to undermine the relationship between words and things, by questioning whether any language-game can refer outside itself.

But although DeLillo recognises the groundlessness of the language-game in this novel, he nonetheless struggles to find any alternative to it. It may be "only a game, but it's the only game" (*End Zone* 129), echoing the argument of the only philosopher to be directly referred to in the text, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who maintained that "the language-game is so to say something unpredictable. I mean: it is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there – like our life" (73). Furthermore, DeLillo also recognises, as he will later do in so many other novels, that the desire for structure, *even when it is acknowledged to be arbitrary*, is one of the "real needs of man" (164). In other words, DeLillo recognises that language, even or especially when it is divorced from all claim to meaning, possesses a comfort value, hence the "strange beauty" of his father's sign. But we can also witness this phenomenon elsewhere in *End Zone*. Lippy Margolis, for instance, is "calmed by the incoherent doctrines" (18) of textbook economics, whilst Billy Mast finds that "German words gave him comfort, though not as much as they used to when he didn't

know what they meant” (142). Here the importance of the novel’s setting becomes clear, for such language-games are repeatedly figured in the text as solace against the “silence” that “hung over the land” (31) that surrounds Logos College. As Gary states of the game “Bang you’re dead”, “there was that reason above all to appreciate the game; it forced cracks in the enveloping silence” (33). That this silence represents, as it will later do in *White Noise* (1985), the silence of death, is also made explicit in *End Zone*. As DeLillo writes:

Most lives are guided by clichés. They have a soothing effect on the mind and they express the kind of widely accepted sentiment that, when peeled back, is seen to be a denial of silence. Their menace is hidden with the darker crimes of thought and language. In the face of death, this menace vanishes altogether. Death is the best sort of cliché. The trite saying is never more comforting, more restful, as in times of mourning. Flowers are set about the room; we stand very close to walls, uttering the lush banalities. (69)

This is extremely significant because it indicates that the only alternative that *End Zone* seems to find to the contingent structures of the language-game is a self-eradicating silence.

DeLillo’s undermining of logocentric language is, as we would expect, extremely sophisticated. Despite pointing to the arbitrary nature of Creed’s language, DeLillo nonetheless recognises its mastery – after all Creed’s commands may be just “play names”, but his football players nonetheless obey them religiously: “Words” really do “move the body into position” (45). Like Michel Foucault, DeLillo recognises that the dominance of certain discourses, like Creed’s language, is the result not of their intrinsic rightness or truth, but of power relations. And the dominance of such language has important implications for DeLillo’s conception of subjectivity both in *End Zone* and his later fiction. Such language is an example of what M. M. Bakhtin calls “authoritative discourse” or “the word of the fathers” (342), that is “a prior discourse” which “strives to determine the very bases of our ideological interrelations with the world, the very basis of our behaviour” (342). Thus, that Larry Nix is “a nihilist” (203) was predetermined by the word of his father, who gave him his name: “He blames it on his name. Nix meaning no, no thanks,

nothing” (203). And even the instances of babbling or glossolalia in *End Zone* can be interpreted as examples of authoritative discourse, because they demonstrate the manner in which language speaks *through* the subject, as Gary’s comments on Bobby Luke’s endless repetition of the meaningless cliché that “he would go through a brick wall for Coach Creed” (53) illustrates: “Maybe the words were commissioned, as it were, by language itself, by that compartment of language in which are kept all bits of diction designed to outlive the men who abuse them, all phrases that reduce speech to units of sound, lullabies processed through intricate systems” (54). But the clearest instance of such an authoritative language is Coach Creed’s, for his words literally determine both the identity of his players and their actions within the football game. Gary attempts to escape the predetermined subjectivity imposed on him by Creed by immersing himself in the discourse of nuclear war, but notably fails to construct another identity outside the framework of football, as he concedes after his promotion to captain: “I was now part of the apparatus” (202). But the most important issue to ascertain here is whether DeLillo believes that this problem is an unavoidable condition of language because language always inevitably precedes us, or whether DeLillo believes in the possibility of constructing a subjectivity from a new language, one in which the word is, in Bakhtin’s words, at least “half-ours” (345). Indeed, it is such a language that Taft Robinson seems to call for when he tells Gary that a “new way of life requires a new language” (234). Bakhtin calls such a language, which could “awaken new and independent words” (345) and reveal “even newer ways *to mean*” (345), an “internally persuasive discourse” (342) and Gary does seem to come close to such a language during his brief sexual encounter with Myna in the library. Not only does Gary describe the naked Myna as “positing herself as the knowable word, fleshmade sigh and syllable” (218) but he also seems driven to create some new kind of language during the episode: “To mark the event I brought new noises to the room, vowel sounds predominating” (217), as patriarchal, logocentric language is rejected in favour of a

feminine, bodily discourse – as it will later in *Great Jones Street*, *Ratner's Star*, and *Underworld* and *The Body Artist* (2001). But Myna and Gary's activities are interrupted, with Gary's failure to construct a new subjectivity that escapes external discourses signalled by his adoption of the name of a non-existent student "Robert Reynolds" (218). "Robert Reynolds" has not only been constructed by others - students in Alan Zapalac's class – but he exists only as discourse. This identification with an empty signifier prefigures the final eradication of Gary's self: "In my room at five o'clock the next morning I drank half a cup of lukewarm water. It was the last of food or drink I would take for many days. High fevers burned a thin straight channel through my brain. In the end they had to carry me to the infirmary and feed me through plastic tubes" (241-2). Here Gary abandons language and slips – quite literally for it is the last paragraph of the novel – into silence.

DeLillo also explores this idea through the characters of Myna Corbett, Taft Robinson and Anatole Bloomberg and it here that we can recognise the intrinsically political nature of DeLillo's discussion of language, for each of these three characters belongs to a politically marginalised group, being respectively female, black and Jewish. Myna, Taft and Anatole are each constructed as "other" in the language of football, as the players' chants of "Nigger, Kike" (119) and "cunt" (117) illustrate, reminding us that the language of games always requires an "other", epitomised by the genderless, nameless "it" of childhood tag. But DeLillo is also careful to select characters who also represent groups who are constructed as "other" in the language of mainstream America, to demonstrate the material consequences of all contingent language games. Like Gary, Myna, Taft and Anatole also attempt to escape the predetermined subjectivities imposed upon them by an external discourse. However, like Gary, all fail and end only by diminishing themselves: both Myna and Anatole lose physical presence, whilst Taft becomes silent and inert. As the only point of resistance to the dominant narrative in *Americana* is found in the blank pages of Brand's novel, so in *End Zone*, DeLillo seems to posit self-eradicating silence as our only

alternative to a predetermined subjectivity. Much like the protagonist of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), to which DeLillo makes explicit reference in the opening paragraph of the novel ("The mansion has long been haunted (double metaphor coming up) by the invisible man" (3)), DeLillo's characters retreat into small, dark rooms, unable to find any other viable space of resistance. This is illustrated most starkly by the shadowy figure of the "queer on the squad" (25, 154), another "other" in the discourse of football and American culture. The "queer", like Robert Reynolds, exists only as discourse, as locker-room rumour. He seems to have completed the process that Taft, Myna, Anatole and Gary have begun, because he has already completely evaporated into the desert. His case is instructive, because in disappearing the "queer" has lost all existence, except in the language of the dominant. In other words, the "queer on the squad" demonstrates that silence, rather than being a form of resistance, is in fact be a form of complicity, as subjectivity is entirely rendered in terms determined by the dominant culture. Hence, it is no coincidence that DeLillo chooses to put the calls for "a new language" for a "new way of life" (234) in the mouth of one of his marginalised characters, Taft Robinson.

Great Jones Street opens where *End Zone* closes, as Douglas Keesey notes: "*Great Jones Street* might be read as the further adventures of Gary Harkness" (*Don DeLillo* 48). But whereas *End Zone* seems unable to establish a new language for a new way of life, *Great Jones Street* recognises that the only hope for political resistance lies in solving this problem. In *End Zone*, Gary Harkness states "But in some form of void, freed from consciousness, the mind remakes itself. What we must know must be learned from blanked-out pages. To begin to reword the overflowing world" (89). And we may argue that it is the silence between *End Zone* and *Great Jones Street* that DeLillo learns to do precisely this – reword the overflowing world.

Great Jones Street, or, "How to Survive a Dead Idea"

Great Jones Street (1973), DeLillo's third novel, is still largely overlooked by critics. There have been only two articles published on the novel to date, along with a chapter a piece in Douglas Keesey's *Don DeLillo* (1993), Tom LeClair's *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (1987) and *Introducing Don DeLillo* (1991). Neither is this novel particularly well regarded: Robert Nadeau, for instance, calls it "DeLillo's least impressive, most transparent narrative" (168). But this chapter argues that *Great Jones Street* does not deserve to be dismissed so lightly, because it represents, in fact, something of a turning point in DeLillo's examination of the relationship between politics and art. Its ambition should not be ignored, for it is in this novel that DeLillo attempts to move beyond the final self-eradicating silence of *End Zone* (1972) and the blank pages of *Americana* (1971). *Great Jones Street* explicitly and self-consciously tackles the conceptual impasse that characterises DeLillo's two earlier novels (which is reflected even in the title of *End Zone*) by attempting to identify a site of resistance to dominant cultural and social discourses that does not also entail loss of individual subjectivity. This chapter explores this idea through the writings of Julia Kristeva, which provide a critical language that allows us to understand the manner in which DeLillo brings together such themes as art, language, the body and death in *Great Jones Street*. That DeLillo returns to these themes again in later novels like *Mao II* (1991), *Underworld* (1997) and most recently *The Body Artist* (2001) indicates that *Great Jones Street* is not an aberration in the canon of DeLillo's work, but instead is the first exploration of ideas that will become increasingly central to his oeuvre.

Great Jones Street opens where *End Zone* leaves off, that is, with the withdrawal of the novel's main protagonist into silence and exile, leading Douglas Keesey to note "*Great Jones Street* might be read as the further adventures of Gary Harkness" (*Don DeLillo* 48). But *Great Jones Street* is more than a re-examination of some of the themes and arguments

of *End Zone*: it is also a self-conscious attempt to move beyond the arguments of DeLillo's second novel, by overcoming the impasse that Gary Harkness reaches. Whereas the only alternative Harkness is able to discover to the authoritative discourses that determine his subjectivity and reality is a self-annihilating silence, Bucky Wunderlick attempts to move through and beyond this stage. As Bucky states, "I was interested in endings, in how to survive a dead idea" (3-4). Gary Harkness has already pointed to this possibility in *End Zone*, stating, "in some form of void, freed from consciousness, the mind remakes itself. What we must know must be learned from blanked-out pages. To begin to reword the overflowing world" (89). But it is in *Great Jones Street* that DeLillo attempts to test this idea through the adventures of his hero of rock and roll, Bucky Wunderlick. That DeLillo explores this regeneration through the figure of an artist is also important because it signals DeLillo's clear acknowledgement that the arguments of *End Zone* and *Americana* must be applied self-reflexively. In other words, the assertion DeLillo makes in *End Zone* and *Americana* that authoritative discourses determine our subjectivity and our reality must also be applied to DeLillo's own aesthetic statements. *Americana* is an astonishing novel, given that DeLillo makes this statement about American culture in his first piece of full-length fiction, and even more importantly, so "early in the cultural matrix" (68) as Lasher in *White Noise* (1985) might put it. But neither *Americana* nor *End Zone* fully considers the implications of this argument. They do not acknowledge the contradiction inherent in their assertion that resistance to the dominant culture is possible only by withdrawing from language, when by making this statement, *End Zone* and *Americana* would also seem to offer sites of opposition. In contrast, *Great Jones Street* is a self-conscious exploration of the possibility of active and vocal resistance – an exploration essential to the survival not only of Bucky's artistic voice, but DeLillo's. In seeking a politicised aesthetic in *Great Jones Street*, DeLillo seeks a site of opposition to the dominant social and cultural

discourses that is vital if voices like his own are to be heard and preserved. The novel is thus a self-reflexive interrogation of the author's responsibility.

But DeLillo is also aware in *Great Jones Street* that traditional sites of resistance have been subsumed into the culture of late capitalism, and that therefore, a new approach is required. He satirises the political impotence of the academy, for instance, whose subversive impulses have been lost in bureaucratic discourses that closely resemble those of the state, as his depiction of the "*Issues Committee of the Permanent Symposium for the Restoration of Democratic Options*" (102) illustrates. Similarly, DeLillo is careful to remind us that rock music, so often regarded as an emblem of counter culture, is actually a huge multinational business, which markets the idea of rebellion to teenagers within the parameters of late capitalism. DeLillo makes this connection between rock music and global capitalism clear in *Great Jones Street*, not only in his depiction of Transparanoia, the huge conglomerate that owns Bucky and his band, but also in his description of the Mountain Tapes, which become known as "the product" (132, 149), despite not being recorded for distribution or commercial gain. Similarly, the man from ABC turns out only to be interested in rebellion because it is marketable: "But there's a softening in the market as old faces crumble and new slots become available. I'm trying to fill some of these slots with youth-orientated conceptals. [...] We make demands on you not because we're media leeches of whatever media but frankly because proportionate demands are being made on us" (128). Here DeLillo points to what Herbert Marcuse calls "desublimation" where the "oppositional, alien and transcendent elements" in art are obliterated by their "wholesale incorporation into the established order, through their reproduction and display on a massive scale" (57). Rather than concurring with Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of "carnivalization", where subversive drives penetrate and disrupt the existing social order, DeLillo argues that eruption of such drives into the dominant culture results in their neutralisation and incorporation. In other words, the man from ABC is not interested in disrupting

“commercial brainwash” (217) with Bucky’s voice as he claims, rather he is interested in rendering Bucky’s voice in the terms of this culture, as another commodity to be marketed and exchanged. It is this recognition of the capacity of the dominant social order to subsume dissent that leads to the conceptual impasse of *End Zone*. Unable to imagine the “new language” (*End Zone* 234) called for by Taft Robinson that could avoid this incorporation, Gary Harkness retreats into silence.

Great Jones Street starts from this point, and Bucky’s self-imposed isolation should be interpreted, like Gary Harkness’s, as an attempt to escape the dominant social order and the self imposed by that order. Furthermore, as in *End Zone*, DeLillo depicts the social and the symbolic as synonymous in *Great Jones Street*, for Bucky’s retreat from society is also manifested as a retreat from language. Azarian notes that in the period before Bucky’s disappearance “You hadn’t said more than five words in about a week and a half, Bucky” (35), whilst what Bucky did utter became increasingly incomprehensible, as Azarian states: “You were on your knees making faces at some old woman in a wheelchair. I knew it wasn’t a joke. It was too unreal for that. You were sweating and babbling and making incredible unreal faces at the old woman” (34-5). Both Gary and Bucky recognise their relationship to language as paradigmatic of their relationship to the social order, because the symbolic order, like the social, precedes and determines their subjectivity. The only space for resistance or opposition it would seem is therefore in a self-eradicating silence it would seem, that undoes the self created by the socio-symbolic order. This conclusion is supported by the association DeLillo draws between death and silence in each novel, for a self-willed death is also a means of unmaking the self imposed by the existing system.

That suicide can be an act of resistance is made clear, by DeLillo’s careful demonstration of the manner in which late capitalism represses and controls death in *Great Jones Street*. Watney points explicitly to state control of death, “NTBR means not to be resuscitated. Certain patients in certain hospitals throughout England are marked NTBR.

These patients include the elderly, the malignant and the chronic. In the event of heart stoppage, such patients are left un-re-suss-ee-tay-ted” (156). Whilst the man from ABC illustrates the manner in which this culture attempts to preserve the body against death:

Television. Maybe it was all a study in the art of mummification. The effect of the medium is so evanescent that those who work in its time apparatus feel the need to preserve themselves, delivering their bodies to be lacquered and trussed, sprayed into the rarest of pressurized jellies, all to one end, a release from the perilous context of time. This is their only vanity, to expect to dwell forever in the hermetic subcorridors, free of every ravage, secure as old kings asleep in sodium. (136)

What is more, as Bataille argues, death can be interpreted as the absolute limit, so Bucky’s fans’ desire for his death should be interpreted, as their desire for the ultimate act of rebellion. Bucky recognises that his kind of fame rests on transgressing the laws - sometimes literally - of the socio-symbolic order. As he puts it “Fame, this special kind, feeds itself on outrage, on what the counselors of lesser men would consider bad publicity - hysteria in limousines, knife fights in the audience, bizarre litigation, treachery, pandemonium and drugs” (1). Suicide would therefore be the natural culmination of his fame, as Bucky states “Perhaps the only natural law attaching to true fame is that the famous man is compelled, eventually, to commit suicide” (1). This reveals Bucky’s disappearance as a pale imitation of the real act of rebellion his fans desired, for the crowd wants Bucky to die for them, like Christ. In this way, the fragility of the symbolic order can be demonstrated without requiring their own eradication. This is also signalled by the kind of death the crowd desire, for it is a death characterised by uncertainty and undecideability:

Your suicide should take place in a city like Tangier or Port-au-Prince or Auckland, New Zealand. Some semi-mysterious or remote place is probably best for your kind of suicide. That way the news is late, the news is garbled, the news is full of contradictions. A doubt always lingers that way. Even when they produce your body, there’s a doubt or a shadow of a doubt. Maybe it’s somebody else. Maybe it’s a look-alike provided by the local police. The perfect suicide is when people know you’re dead on one level but refuse to accept it on a deeper level. (243)

In other words, not only do the crowd desire a self-willed death, but they also seek a death whose telling will introduce slippage into the socio-symbolic order. Furthermore, such ambiguity would weaken the very limit transgressed, by undermining the finality of death.

But as attractive and compelling as this argument is, *Great Jones Street* nonetheless marks DeLillo's attempt to overcome the endzone of suicide and silence that characterises his first two novels. And so DeLillo finally rejects the notion of death or silence as the only means of disrupting the dominant order in his third novel. He achieves this on one level by demonstrating that Bucky's death is actually willed by the system, that it is as much a state-controlled death as those of patients marked NTBR. Bucky does not want to commit suicide himself, rather he is urged to by the shadowy figure of Bohack. Similarly, Bucky's silence is also clearly manipulated. It begins as an act of resistance, but is soon managed by others. Not only does Dr Pepper threaten to "extend your [Bucky's] sabbatical" (219), but the Happy Valley commune force-feed Bucky a drug which results in "Loss of speech in other words" (255). Most significantly, Bucky discovers that this drug was created by the "U.S. Guv" (255), who may have decided that "the best way to silence troublemakers is literally" (255). In other words, as George Bataille, drawing on Hegel, argues that transgression reinscribes the law it breaks, so DeLillo demonstrates in *Great Jones Street* that the deathly silence of *Americana* and *End Zone* is actually complicit with the dominant socio-symbolic order. This is signalled by the very location of Bucky's retreat, for Bucky chooses to hide out in New York's Great Jones Street, which is in the heart of the city's financial district. This point is extremely important, because it indicates DeLillo's recognition that effective resistance must be capable of disrupting the very logic of the dominant social order, in order that it is not immediately reabsorbed.

In order to explore this idea, this chapter will draw upon Julia Kristeva's theory of the semiotic as explored in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974). This thesis hopes never to prioritise or privilege a critical text over DeLillo's own novels but rather to employ such



writing as intertexts, that equally illuminate and are illuminated by DeLillo's work. Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* is a case in point. Published a year after *Great Jones Street*, there are a number of important affinities between the texts. Like DeLillo, Kristeva is seeking a way of restoring the individual speaking subject, for like DeLillo, Kristeva regards this as essential to the success of political revolution. She argues that the subject in language has either been conceived of as a "transcendental ego cut off from its body, its unconscious and also its history" ("The System and the Speaking Subject" 28) as in traditional linguistics, or has been abandoned altogether, as in Derridean theories of language. As Kristeva writes, such theory "gives up on the subject and must remain ignorant not only of his functioning as social practice, but also of his chances for experiencing jouissance or being put to death" (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 142). Kristeva's solution is to posit the idea of semiotic discourse, the pre-symbolic, non-signifying language of mother and child, which is characterised by subjective bodily drives and jouissance. This language allows the subject expression, but without entailing its complete submission to a larger system, because the language springs from the subject's own body. Significantly, Kristeva identifies the semiotic most strongly with art, leading her to argue, as DeLillo does, that art and artists offer the best hope for rewriting or relativising the dominant order. She calls art "this semiotization of the symbolic" (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 79) and argues that it can result in "the production of a different kind of subject, one capable of bringing about new social relations, and thus joining in the process of capitalism's subversion" (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 105). DeLillo is also interested in such ideas in *Great Jones Street*, because he also recognises that the semiotic offers a mode of expression that can escape incorporation into the socio-symbolic order and which can therefore offer an active site of resistance against that culture.

DeLillo does show an interest in the semiotic aspect of art before *Great Jones Street*. Sullivan's sculptures in *Americana*, for instance, are described as "handcrafted

afterbirth” (106), suggesting their affinity with the maternal body. Similarly, Billy Mast’s study of German poems in *End Zone* can be interpreted as an example of the semiotic, as the language of this poetry is absolutely non-signifying, because Billy cannot understand a word of German. But it is in *Great Jones Street* that DeLillo really begins to explore the semiotic as a place of opposition, as his depiction of the inhabitants of the tenement on Great Jones Street makes clear. In the upper storey lives Fenig, an artist who belongs entirely to the socio-symbolic order. Fenig’s art is entirely orientated towards the capitalist exchange system. Not only does his name literally mean penny, but as he himself says, “Some writers presume to be men of letters. I’m a man of numbers” (51). And such is Fenig’s immersion in the market economy, that it has resulted in the dispersal of his subjectivity, prompting Bucky to wonder if “In Fenig’s closet were four more Fenigs, laced, hooded, neatly creased” (223). In contrast, the inhabitant of the basement, the Micklethwaite boy, represents the pure semiotic. He is entirely outside language: he has neither a name nor a father. Furthermore, his existence is bodily, as Bucky states: “The boy was unforgettable in the sheer organic power of his presence” (161). His art form is his dreams, which Bucky describes as possessing “the beauty and horror of wordless things” (52). And he is completely outside of the market economy that defines Fenig, as his mother tells us: “My husband had all kinds of cockamamie ideas. First off he wanted to sell the kid to a carnival. But who’d buy him?” (134). The difference between Fenig and the Micklethwaite boy is colourfully demonstrated when marauders, motivated by “[t]he idea of domination” (163), attempt to take over the building. The group is a “runaway contingent” (191) of the Happy Valley commune, who may themselves be criminals or connected to the U.S. government. In either instance, the marauders should be interpreted as a reinscription of the law, remembering Bataille’s argument that “transgression does not deny the taboo but transcends and completes it” (55). Whereas Fenig, the artist who couches his work in terms of the dominant culture, finds himself and his room taken over, the intruders are unable to

subjugate the Micklethwaite boy. As Mrs Micklethwaite states “‘It was him that stopped them,’ she said. ‘They seen him there and that stopped them cold’” (160). In other words, DeLillo literally depicts the ability of the semiotic to resist incorporation in this scene.

Like Kristeva, DeLillo identifies political resistance most strongly with art, “the semiotization of the symbolic”, and *Great Jones Street* should also be recognised as DeLillo’s self-reflexive search for a semiotic aesthetic that avoids desublimation into the culture of late capitalism. This can be witnessed in Fenig’s experiments with pornography. DeLillo returns to the theme of pornography on a number of occasions in his writing. The central plot device of *Running Dog* (1978) is a supposedly pornographic film of Hitler, whilst in *White Noise*, Jack and Babette read erotica to each other rather than have sex. But it is in *Great Jones Street* that DeLillo first introduces this theme in his description of Eric Fenig’s attempt to write “Pornographic children’s literature” (49). That DeLillo lights on pornography is significant, for like rock music, which was itself initially regarded as a kind of kiddie-porn in light of its young audience and sexually explicit lyrics (we think of the early response to Elvis the Pelvis), pornography has always been associated with subversive, anti-establishment movements. In his book, *Pornocopia* (1999), Lawrence O’Toole reminds us that early porn was always regarded as politically subversive:

throughout early modern European history, ‘pornography’ was used chiefly to satirise, criticise, to tilt at the Church, the state, the monarchy. This was political porn: product of the birth of print culture and the beginning of an urban market society where increasing numbers of people, partly distanced from laws of kinship, met to trade ideas, as well as commodities, and inevitably to question the values of traditional authorities who they now rivalled in the power game. Porn was controlled during this period not because it was obscene but because it was seditious, blasphemous or defamatory. (1)

Similarly, pornography has tended to be defined as that which is outside the law: it is what cannot be said, cannot be shown, what is outside the social-symbolic order. As Lynne Hunt writes, “pornography has always been defined in part by the efforts undertaken to regulate it” (5). And as befits such a disruptive art form, pornography would seem to contain a strong

semiotic element. It not only depicts bodies and orgasm, but its aim is to elicit sexual response and arousal in its reader or viewer. Pornography can be interpreted as the literal attempt to release the *jouissance* that Kristeva claims can result in “cracking the socio-symbolic order, splitting it open” (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 79). Furthermore, Fenig’s porn is also explicitly infantile, like Kristeva’s description of the semiotic. But just as rock music may in fact be a means of defusing rebellious impulses, so DeLillo’s portrayal of pornography is tempered. Fenig is not motivated by any subversive desire to crack the socio-symbolic order; rather he is motivated by the market. He lights on kiddie-porn because he recognises this as a gap in the market: “I think this may be the only untapped field in all of literature” (49). Fenig is driven by late capitalism’s desire for novelty, the endless stream of new goods, which keeps the market moving. Furthermore, Fenig discovers porn can become another form of authoritative discourse: “‘I failed at pornography,’ he said, ‘because it put me in a position where I the writer was being manipulated by what I wrote. This is the essence of living in P-ville. It makes people easy to manipulate. It puts people on the level of things’” (223). In other words, pornography allows the semiotic drives of the body and its *jouissance* to be incorporated into the market, neutering any subversive power they may have held, leading Fenig to state, “Every pornographic work brings us closer to fascism” (224). Just as rock music can be a form of marketed and hence controlled rebellion, so pornography can subsume dangerous bodily drives into the socio-symbolic order. In other words, neither porn nor rock and roll are sufficient to the task of providing a space outside capitalism in which the semiotic can speak.

But though pornography, the most overtly bodily aesthetic, is ultimately rejected as site of resistance in *Great Jones Street*, DeLillo does find an alternative in that other aesthetic product of late capitalism, rock music. DeLillo’s choice of a musician as his main protagonist is significant, for non-vocal music is entirely semiotic, as Kristeva writes “there are nonverbal signifying systems that are constructed exclusively on the basis of the

semiotic (music for example)” (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 24). DeLillo confirms Kristeva’s interpretation, ascribing Opel’s love of music explicitly to her desire for the pre-symbolic: “She wanted to exist as music does, nowhere, beyond the maps of language” (12). Furthermore, Bucky is also aware that his art is associated with the body and bodily drives. He wishes his music to have material effect on the bodies of his fans, for instance: “What I’d like to do really is I’d like to injure people with my sound. Maybe actually kill some of them” (105), whilst his description of his fame is associated with maternal and sexual drives: “the circumstance of one man imparting an *erotic* terror to the dreams of the republic. Understand the man who must inhabit these extreme regions, monstrous and *vulval*, damp with memories of violation” (1) [emphasis added]. *Great Jones Street* represents DeLillo’s search for the “new language” called for by Taft Robinson in *End Zone*, and we should recognise that even Bucky’s lyrics, which belong, nominally at least, to the symbolic order, become increasingly dominated by the semiotic as his career progresses. His early lyrics have obvious political and social import, with their explicit references to American involvement in Vietnam, as these lyrics from his album “American War Sutra” illustrate:

Got a murder degree
 From I. T. T.
 Shot three holes in a cripple

To the highlands I was sent
 To the highlands
 Flute music playing
 They’re counting up the dead
 Flute music playing in the highlands

Who’s that out there
 Edging toward the banquet of my dumb fear
 Slant eyes burning in this bible bush

VC Honey
 With her curls and tap shoes
 VC sweetheart twirling her baton (97)

However, Bucky's lyrics become increasingly incomprehensible with each successive album, culminating in chants of "Pee-pee-maw-maw" (118) and "Baba baba baba" (204). As DeLillo told one interviewer, "Bucky Wunderlick's music moves from political enjoyment to extreme self-awareness and childlike babbling" ("Interview with Don DeLillo" 82). In other words, the symbolic function of his language is systematically disrupted by semiotic drives, as his lyrics begin to include a number of references to motherhood and the body. Indeed, the Mountain Tapes seem incontrovertible instances of semiotic discourses. Their language is described as "genuinely infantile" (148), and contains self-reflexive references to the body:

I touch my hand
One touch one
One is touching
One is touched
Touching touching
Hand touch hand
I touch my hand
My hand touch me (207)

Furthermore, these tapes were conceived in an anechoic chamber, a room designed to block out all noise. Not only does this womblike space resemble the locus of the semiotic in Kristeva's writing, the *chora*, but other connections with the semiotic can be discerned. In such a room, John Cage claimed the only noise he could hear was his own heart beating (Clements n.pag). In other words, such a space can be interpreted as the archetypal semiotic space, for it deadens all external sounds, leaving only the sound of the body. But the true significance of the Mountain Tapes lies in their ability, unlike Fenig's pornography, to resist incorporation.

Thus as the Micklethwaite boy escapes domination, so DeLillo explicitly points to these tapes, not Bucky's early, overtly political work, as a means of overcoming the impasse of *End Zone*. As Bohack tells Bucky "We want your silence. You know that. But even if you took your own life right now, we wouldn't have what we want. Why? Because of the

mountain tapes. Because the tapes are about to be released. New legends, new sounds, new confusions. [...] There's no silence with the tapes on the market" (245-6). In other words, Bucky succeeds in doing what Gary Harkness could not through the Mountain Tapes: finding a site of resistance that does not entail a self-eradicating silence. The result is to locate a place both for oppositional voices and a politicised aesthetic. But we should be wary of oversimplifying the significance of this music. As critics interpretations of "Pee-pee-maw-maw" and "Baba baba baba" as Oedipal reveal, for example, the apparently non-signifying language of the Mountain Tapes can be recuperated back into the symbolic realm. Similarly, the Mountain Tapes may be examples of a semiotic or pre-symbolic art, but they are also tightly bound up in the circulation of signs that characterises late capitalism. Not only are they referred to as "the product", but Bucky makes it clear that this music belongs firmly to the culture of reproduction, stating "The effect of the tapes is that they're tapes" (188). Furthermore, this music is marked by another paradox, for as Bucky states, the Mountain Tapes were "[d]one at a certain time under the weight of a certain emotion. Done on the spot and with many imperfections. This material can't be duplicated in a concert situation" (188). In other words, this music is at once unrepeatable and yet endlessly reproducible.

These paradoxes are extremely important, for whilst Kristeva argues that the pure semiotic slips in to the chaos of psychosis, it is the eruption of the semiotic *in* the symbolic that carries the real hope for revolution. As she writes, it is the "poetic language practices within and against the social order" that offer "the ultimate means of its transformation or subversion, the precondition for its survival and revolution" (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 81). In other words, as transgression may offer only a temporary haven, before the law reasserts itself, so we may interpret the apparent paradoxes of the Mountain Tapes as our only hope for resistance, because these signal the residue that does not get absorbed back into the system. Thus, whilst Bucky's lyrics are recuperable, the "noise" that is his music is

not. Similarly, whilst the tapes can be reproduced, or desublimated, the moment of their creation, “the certain time under the weight of a certain emotion” cannot. The paradoxical nature of mountain tapes may thus represent this operation of the semiotic within the symbolic, where an instance of semiotic discourse is circulated by the symbolic order - and it is this that offers the ultimate hope for revolution.

This paradox or dialectic is extremely important, because DeLillo does not site resistance to the dominant social order in the idea of a unified and homogeneous opposite, but in heterogeneity and undecideability, for unity and stasis are themselves characteristics of the symbolic order. Or to put it in Kristevan terms, DeLillo hopes to replace the singularity and sameness of the phallic with the multiplicity and difference of the genital. This can be demonstrated by examining DeLillo’s treatment of sex, the body and artistic subjectivity in *Great Jones Street*.

Sex has a special significance in DeLillo’s fiction. We have already noted that it is during his interrupted amorous encounter with Myna in the library that Gary Harkness comes closest to achieving a new form of language in *End Zone*, whilst in *Ratner’s Star* and *Underworld* sex is closely associated with semiotic language. In *Ratner’s Star*, DeLillo refers to a post-coital “failure (or instinctive disinclination) to produce coherent speech” (280), whilst in *Underworld*, Nick Shay states “I’m not saying sex is our divinity. Please. Only that sex is the one secret we have that approximates an exalted state and that we share, two people share wordlessly more or less and equally more or less, and this makes it powerful and mysterious and worth sheltering” (297). Sex shares this significance in *Great Jones Street*. Indeed, the quotation that Mark Osteen chooses to title his article with, “a moral form to master commerce” (70), refers specifically to the one sex scene in *Great Jones Street*. That Osteen fails to contextualise this quotation is instructive, for it indicates his misapprehension of the importance of sex and the body in this and other DeLillo novels. Sex is significant in DeLillo’s writing for a number of reasons. Most notably, sex disrupts

the singular and unitary nature of the socio-symbolic order, as all good semiotic drives should. DeLillo and Kristeva agree that revolution requires a newly conceived notion of subjectivity, and sex can undermine, literally, the fixed and discrete self imposed by the symbolic order by reminding us that the boundaries of our bodies are permeable. Sex also undoes the primary signifier of the symbolic order, the phallus. Not only does it reveal the phallus as literally inconstant and precarious, but it also demonstrates the fragmented and contradictory nature of subjectivity, because, as Camille Paglia puts it, the phallus is “something that goes both hard and soft, that he is not totally in control of” (11). Furthermore, the penis finds itself during sex in that most undecidable of spaces - the vagina, an inside, which Derrida reminds us, is also an outside. And significantly, DeLillo draws direct comparison between the disruptive power of sex and art in *Great Jones Street*:

it was art we sought to shape, a moral form to master commerce, the bodies we were and the danger we needed, that of dredging each other's insufficiencies, touring the deepest holes. We rode an odd moment now, laughter back and forth, her eyes alert to love's delight, an instant only, then down to pelvic business, rack and pinion, the poet's word dropping off the page. (70)

However, as art can be desublimated, so sex can also be commodified, as Fenig's pornography illustrates. But in the non-signifying communicative aspect of sex experienced by Bucky and Opel, like Nick and Donna in *Underworld*, there is something that has the potential to escape codification.

That sex undermines the notion of the body as stable and fixed is extremely important, for DeLillo is careful never to posit the body as an ontological essence. This is made apparent in the depiction of Dr Pepper, because the way in which we conceive the body has a direct bearing on how we interpret this character. On the one hand, Dr Pepper, the mysterious leader of the Happy Gang, seems to function in the text as the phallus. He offers Bucky a way back out of his psychosis and seems to be the secret centre of *Great Jones Street*, controlling and manipulating events. As Menefee states, “Every time I meet

some stranger somewhere I automatically assume it's Dr Pepper in disguise probing at my loyalty" (168), suggesting that, like God, Dr Pepper is omniscient. On the other hand, Dr Pepper appears to lack any essential being. He is described as "The touring clown doubly self-effaced" (179) and is associated with acting and the cinema: "His deadpan expression was classically intact, put together from a strip of silent film, frame by frame. His speech was flat and rickety, hard-working in its plainness, the voice of an actor delivering monologues from a rocking chair" (170). Here, as Pynchon does in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), DeLillo offers a parody of the conspiracy novel where the centre is displaced, because in this second interpretation, Dr Pepper is a fetish; a sign that is substituted for the phallus. Just as he shares his name with a popular soft drink, so Dr Pepper seems to belong to the endless circulation of commodities in late capitalism. The key moment where this undecidability is brought to the fore is in Bucky's meeting with Chess. Chess suggests that he may be Pepper himself, which would mean that:

everything's been a lie up to now. I managed the whole thing it means. I guided the product from hand to hand. It was my circle, point by point, the product originating at Happy Valley and ending there. It would mean that you've been the victim of the paranoid man's ultimate fear. Everything that takes place is taking place solely to mislead you. Your reality is managed by others. Logic is inside out. (253-4)

In other words, if Chess *is* Pepper, then Pepper really is the phallus, the centre that controls and maintains our reality. But as Chess points out "The man is four inches taller than I am. Pepper's feats in the realm of disguise are well-known and well documented but the man can't hide four inches of muscle, bone and tissue" (253). Thus, for Bucky or indeed the reader to regard Dr Pepper as the phallus or centre of *Great Jones Street* entails them denying the body any fixed or essential being. In contrast, by crediting the body with an irreducible ontological essence, whereby "the man can't hide four inches of muscle, bone and tissue", we are forced to dismiss the idea of centre or phallus. But what is most

important is that DeLillo preserves this uncertainty - a dialectic that helps disrupt the symbolic order.

DeLillo demonstrates in *Great Jones Street*, as he will later in *Mao II*, that the ease of reproduction has resulted in an ever-stronger desire for the original, or more precisely the origin of any piece of art. Thus in an age of mechanical reproduction, DeLillo argues that it is Bucky Wunderlick himself, his bodily presence, that the crowd thirst after. As Globke says “Bucky Wunderlick. That’s what people want. In the flesh” (10), and later: “Don’t think of it as a performance. Think of it as an appearance” (198). But as DeLillo does not support the notion of the body as a ontological essence, so he does not support the traditional logocentric conception of the artist as origin nor the notion of a fixed, stable *essential* identity. DeLillo brings these ideas together even more clearly in his latest novel, *The Body Artist*, where the body of artist Lauren Hartke, which “encompasses both sexes and a number of nameless states” (109), is also her material. In rejecting the notion of a unitary artistic subjectivity in this novel, as in *Great Jones Street*, DeLillo instead promotes the notion, like Kristeva, of the “subject in process”, that is, the subject as heterogeneous being that exceeds the symbolic order.

Bucky is literally depicted as a subject in process in *Great Jones Street*. Bucky emerges from the silence which finally engulfs Gary Harkness, as DeLillo himself has confirmed: “*Great Jones Street* bends back on itself in the sense that the book is the narrator’s way of resurfacing” (“An Interview with Don DeLillo” 87). He recovers language, and a self-reflexive language of the body at that: “*Mouth* was the first word to reach me, dropping from one speech mechanism to the other. It happened while I was looking at my face in the mirror, examining its strange parts, *hanu, ous, leb, oog, nakka*, and when I opened my mouth out came the word for that part, word instead of sound, *mouth*, startling me” (264). Furthermore, this language is not fully symbolic, belonging as it does to the mirror stage of Bucky’s rebirthing process. And we can argue that Bucky has fulfilled

Kristeva's argument that "In returning, through the event of death, toward that which produces its break; in exporting semiotic motility across the border on which the symbolic is established, the artist sketches out a kind of second birth" (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 70). Bucky has not recovered an entirely semiotic existence, as his own assessment of his success makes clear:

Soon all was normal, a return to prior modes. This was my double defeat, first a chance not taken to reappear in the midst of people and forces made to my design and then a second enterprise denied, alternate to the first, permanent withdrawal to that unimprinted level where all sound is silken and nothing erodes in the mad weather of language. (264-5)

But by injecting the semiotic into the symbolic in the form of the Mountain Tapes, Bucky may have recovered our best chance for rebellion and revolution. What is more, where Gary Harkness disappears into the void, Bucky's subjectivity multiplies:

Meanwhile the rumors accumulate. Kidnap, exile, torture, self-mutilation and death. The most beguiling of the rumors has me living among beggars and syphilitics, performing good works, patron saint of all those men who hear the river-whistles sing the mysteries and who return to sleep in wine by the south wheel of the city. (265)

By dying already, Bucky has ensured he will never leave.

DeLillo will return to this depiction of artistic subjectivity repeatedly in his fiction, and it can be witnessed in the distinctions DeLillo makes in his treatment of different kinds of artist. Those whose art is part of the symbolic order, like writers, film makers and photographers, find themselves erased or eroded in some way. In *Mao II*, for example, writer Bill Gray dies an anonymous death on board a Greek ferry, whilst photographer Brita Nilson finds the boundaries of her self blurred: "She was thinking that everything that came into her mind lately and developed as a perception seemed at once to enter the culture, to become a painting or photograph or hairstyle or slogan" (165). Film maker Rey Robles of *The Body Artist* literally eradicates himself by committing suicide, though we learn from his obituary that any "original" self has long been obliterated: "Mr Robles' accounts of his early life were inconsistent but the most persuasive independent version suggest he was 64

at his death [...] he adopted the name Rey Robles, after a minor character he played in an obscure film noir” (27-8). By working within the symbolic order these artists erase the elements of their subjectivity that exceed this order, the residue that offers permanent resistance, and are reduced to expressions of this system. In contrast, DeLillo’s artists who work in non-signifying mediums are able to maintain their individual subjectivity in opposition to the dominant social order. This can be witnessed in the conceptual art of Klara Sax in *Underworld*, whose art aims to preserve “an element of felt life” (77) and who works in the colours of the body, and in body artist Lauren Hartke in DeLillo’s latest novel, who is able to prevent her art ever being subsumed into the culture of reproduction because her material, her bodily presence, is literally unreproducible. We can also detect this impulse in DeLillo’s treatment of graffiti in *Mao II* and *Underworld*, another art form, like the rock music and pornography of *Great Jones Street*, which is often regarded as subversive. DeLillo is careful to stress the close links between graffiti and individual identity as this passage about the destruction of graffiti in *Underworld* makes clear:

All his two-in-the-morning spray-crazy unpaid labor getting buffed away in minutes. Forget orange juice, man. This was the new graffiti killer, some weirdshit chemical from the CIA.

It’s like you knock a picture off a shelf and someone dies. Only this time it’s you that’s in the photo.

That’s how some writers felt about their tags. (438)

But it is important also to recognise the subtlety and complexity of DeLillo’s argument. These tags mark the creation of identity outside the dominant culture, for graffiti, as Baudrillard reminds us “challenges bourgeois identity and anonymity at the same time” (*Symbolic Exchange and Death* 83). In other words, like the uncertainty over Dr Pepper’s body and the multiplicity of Bucky’s subjectivity, DeLillo employs graffiti as a means of replacing the singular phallic conception of the self with a heterogeneous genital conception. Furthermore, graffiti artists are only anonymous to some; like all artists they imply an audience. Here we should recognise that DeLillo does not attempt to restore the

speaking subject in isolation. Just as DeLillo cites resistance in the non-signifying *communicative* aspects of sex, so his political aesthetic requires an audience of sorts. In this way, his political aesthetic can truly claim to be a new language.

As *Great Jones Street* is an attempt to apply the ideas of *Americana* and *End Zone* self-reflexively, so we should also apply these ideas about artistic subjectivity to DeLillo himself. Regarded for years as another reclusive author in the mode of Thomas Pynchon or J. D. Salinger, it is tempting to conflate Bucky's self-imposed isolation with this image of DeLillo. After all, he told Tom LeClair, quoting Joyce, that the lack of personal information available on him was the result of "silence, exile, cunning and so on" ("An Interview with Don DeLillo" 80). But this is almost certainly an error. In 1973, DeLillo would have had very little reason to hide out: he had written only two novels, and, despite *End Zone's* healthy sales, was hardly famous. But DeLillo has always been cautious regarding publicity. His approach could not be further from the likes of Bret Easton Ellis and Jay McInerney, who seemed to appear as often in the gossip columns as literary supplements in the 1980s. But neither did DeLillo shun all publicity like Salinger or Pynchon, as the number of interviews he has given in the past twenty years attests (Joseph Walker cites 35 in his recent bibliography). Indeed, DeLillo has claimed that his early obscurity was not a deliberate strategy on his part, but rather due to lack of media interest. As he told one interviewer, "no one was exactly clamouring for my attention" (Billen 25). The difference between Salinger or Pynchon and DeLillo and Easton Ellis or McInerney and DeLillo, is that he has never actively sought nor actively rejected media attention. In this light we should recognise DeLillo's own attempt to find a third option to the silence of Pynchon and Salinger and the media overload of Easton Ellis and McInerney, as a manifestation of the same drive to overcome the reductive either/or of *Americana* and *End Zone*, that motivates Bucky Wunderlick, that is, the striving to "survive a dead idea".

***Ratner's Star*: "The Goddamn Fun is Over"**

Ratner's Star (1976) is, if not the least read, then certainly the least enjoyed of DeLillo's novels. When the narrator refers to "a whole class of writers who don't want their books to be read" (410), *Ratner's Star's* reader may give a start of recognition. As Mark Osteen writes of DeLillo's fourth novel in *American Magic and Dread* (2000): "its cartoonish characters, static structure, and arcane subject matter make it difficult to comprehend and even more difficult to like" (61). Furthermore, it is DeLillo's most derivative novel, drawing heavily on Thomas Pynchon. It is also an untidy, unsatisfying novel in many ways, packed with lines that gesture to difficult and important themes, like "let's forget about history" (287) and "to bear a name is both terrible and necessary" (287), that are never fully developed. As a consequence critics have tended to, in the words of Tom LeClair, "dodge the monster that hulks at the center of his [DeLillo's] career" (*In the Loop* 113), with only a handful of articles published on this novel in the past two and half decades. This chapter intends to offer reading *Ratner's Star* that will make this novel, if not easier to like, then certainly easier to comprehend within DeLillo's body of work. It will argue that one reason readers and critics have had such problems with *Ratner's Star* is that this novel represents a detour in DeLillo's fiction, as DeLillo digresses to demonstrate that which has been taken for granted in his earlier fiction: the impossibility of a universal, objective language.

As this thesis has demonstrated, DeLillo's first three novels chart an important trajectory in the development of his artistic project, *Great Jones Street* (1973) being DeLillo's tentative solution to the problem set up in his first two novels, *Americana* (1971) and *End Zone* (1972). That problem is how to resist the dominant cultural and social discourse, without also eradicating individual subjectivity. DeLillo attempts to "survive this dead idea" (3) in *Great Jones Street* by locating a potential site of resistance in the semiotic, a mode of expression characterised by bodily drives and jouissance that can escape

incorporation because it springs from the subject's own body. In *Ratner's Star*, DeLillo adopts an entirely different approach to this problem, as he turns his attention to that which was assumed to be impossible in his earlier fiction, namely, a language that escapes power relations because it offers an accurate representation of reality without ambiguity or slippage. Whereas the authoritative discourses that dominated *Americana*, *End Zone* and *Great Jones Street* were cultural, those of American consumer capitalism and football, in *Ratner's Star* DeLillo explores the possibility of an authoritative discourse that can lay claim to objective truth. Such a language would inevitably precede and predetermine subjectivity, but would also, by its very nature, transcend culturally determined power relations.

DeLillo approaches this problem in *Ratner's Star* by offering a taxonomy of languages. Indeed, part of the reason *Ratner's Star* is an unsatisfying reading experience may derive from this very feature, because it creates, like DeLillo's schematic history of mathematics that accompanies it, an episodic novel, whose parts seem disconnected and never form a cohesive whole. This taxonomy of language ranges from the glossolalia of the "scream lady", to Faye's descriptions of her husband's imitations of "the batting stances of famous ballplayers of the past" (26), to mathematics itself. The scream lady's words are explicitly described as meaningless, a form of language without referents: "Some nights he came close to understanding the sense of particular shriek or the last several words in a long medley of invective. But it always eluded him" (27). In contrast, we are told of mathematics, that "there is no reality more independent of our perception and more true to itself" (40). Identifying the principal function of *Ratner's Star* as an assessment of the possibility of a universal, objective language can therefore help us understand why DeLillo chose to devote most attention to this particular language in *Ratner's Star*, rather than the glossolalia of the scream lady or Faye's descriptions. DeLillo's early novels also famously adopt different kinds of language; DeLillo's interest in the taxonomy of languages is not confined to this

novel. However, DeLillo's employment of mathematical idioms in *Ratner's Star* should be differentiated from his earlier word play. Indeed, it can be seen as absolute rejection of the word play of his earlier novels, because, unlike the language of American football, mathematics seems to offer an escape from what Jameson calls "the prison house of language". Like philosophy, which often finds itself drawn towards mathematics, DeLillo lights on this discipline in *Ratner's Star* because it seems to offer the best hope of an objective language, free from ambiguity. As Bertrand Russell commented: "I wanted certainty in the kind of way in which people want religious faith. I thought that certainty is more likely to be found in mathematics than elsewhere" (qtd Davis and Hersh 333).

DeLillo plays out this concept of mathematics as an escape from the "prison house of language" explicitly through the descriptions of Billy Twillig's childhood. Billy grows up in the Bronx area of New York. His childhood is characterised by the interaction of a plethora of different languages. As DeLillo tells us, these are "polyglot surroundings" (26). But the languages that Billy encounters are not merely those of an immigrant population. There are also the yells and shouts of the woman, known simply as "the scream lady" (27), who lives across the hall from Billy. Her words seem not "to belong to any known language" (72) and possess no apparent meaning. Similarly, his mother's language seems equally meaningless. When Faye speaks to him, it is to imitate his imitation of her: "His mother often called him mommy. As a small child he naturally mimicked many of the things Faye said and often she responded with loving impersonations of his original facsimile" (24). Like the language of Wilder and Babette in *White Noise* and Lee and Marguerite Oswald in *Libra*, Faye's language seems absolutely non-referring, belonging still to the imaginary, semiotic discourse of the mother-child dyad. Even the street talk of the Bronx seems more a matter of ritual than meaning, as Ralphie Buber and Consagra's exchange illustrates: "'Go to the other street or I break your hole,' Consagra said. 'Keep talk, nice-nice, I come there kill'" (253). Billy does not revel in his "polyglot surroundings"; rather he is scared by

language. He fears his father's dog, for example, in case it speaks, "If it opened its mouth it would speak. Words, not sounds. Fleshed meaning to replace those familiar growls" (26) and, like Wilder in *White Noise*, he develops language late. For Billy this is because he prefers speaking "To and with his mind" (69), without the contamination of meaning that language can bring.

Mathematics is explicitly presented as a means of escaping the messiness of the languages that Billy encounters in the Bronx. Unlike the scream lady's howling, his mother's self-reflexive language or the ritualised insults of the street, mathematics seems to offer a language that is not only referential, but absolute: "The sweet clean shock of number theory. The natural undamped resonance of the symbols. Never more nor less than what was meant" (26). Life in the Bronx is characterised by confusion and violence: "Often it ended incoherently. There were stabbings, riots, thunderstorms" (71), but mathematics seems to offer Billy a means of dealing with the chaos, just as "a textbook on economics" (18) calms Lippy Margolis in *End Zone*. Furthermore, as the structure provided by football becomes a means of overcoming the fear of death in *End Zone*, so Billy employs maths to deal with his angst in *Ratner's Star*. When Billy believes his parents are plotting to dispose of him, he repeats the mantra "Count to ten to ten to ten to ten" (28), whilst a near death experience in a runaway subway car results in his realisation that "there is at least one prime number between a given number and its double" (5). Like American football it seems, mathematics answers one of "the real needs of man" (*End Zone* 121) – the desire for a consistent, logical framework from which to construct our reality.

That mathematics offers Billy an escape from ambiguous and non-referential language is also exemplified by his mother's recreation of him as a "superstar" (25). When Billy's mother renames him, she not only disrupts their mother-child bond by differentiating Billy from her in a way that her earlier name for him, "Mommy" (24), had not, but she also removes the non-signifying elements from his name. By turning Terwilliger into Twillig,

Faye twice removes a marker of hesitation: “e-r” (25). In other words, Faye removes instances of the semiotic, the non-signifying parts of language that “a man speaking Dutch might share with a man speaking Chinese” (*The Body Artist* 66).

In the Platonist view, mathematical objects are real. Mathematicians do not invent mathematics, they discover it. Mathematics, in other words, is a representational system that expresses truths about the universe that are clear and indubitable. Furthermore, this representational system, unlike language, is free of the contradictions and slippages that characterise words. DeLillo offers many voices in *Ratner’s Star* that concur with Billy’s initial assessment of maths. Numbers, we are told, “exist beyond human thought. Divine order through number. Number as absolute reality” (258), whilst DeLillo confirms the difference between mathematics and language: “Numbers had two natures; they existed as themselves, abstractly, and as units for measuring distances and counting objects. Words could not be separated from their use. This fact made logical traps easy to fall into and hard to get out of” (86). Indeed, even the novel’s central plot device, the interstellar message, confirms Billy’s Platonist view, because the very supposition that the signal is mathematical in form is based on the assumption that mathematics offers an objective, accurate representation of reality, and is hence a universal language. Thorkild expresses this explicitly in *Ratner’s Star*:

Mathematics, so the argument goes, is the universal language. A civilization initiating contact would surely attempt to establish an identifying link through the grammar of mathematics, which is a higher grammar than all the others and the only conceivable bond between creatures who differ in every other respect. (163)

This argument has frequently been made by “earthbound” mathematicians, who cite the independent discovery of mathematical theorems, such as those by Srinivasa Ramanujan,

“an obscure and poor young man from India” (Davis and Hersh 57), as evidence confirming that this discipline is discovered not invented¹.

Ratner's Star is a meticulously plotted novel, reflecting DeLillo's desire “to build a novel that was not only about mathematics to some extent but which itself would become a piece of mathematics” (LeClair, “An Interview with Don DeLillo” 59). The first half, “Adventures”, obliquely charts the history of mathematics from the Mesopotamians to Cantor (LeClair, *In the Loop* 125), whilst the second, “Reflections”, plunges back through this history, this time mentioning each mathematician by name. Until the mid-nineteenth century, the conception of mathematics as an objective account of reality was unchallenged. However, the discovery of non-Euclidean geometry left geometry, one of its most important foundations, severely weakened. The early twentieth century saw a number of mathematicians attempt to remedy this “crisis in foundations” (Davis and Hersh 333). It is unsurprising, therefore, that Billy should spend longer in this period of mathematics through the course of the novel than any other (the second half of the novel, “Reflections”, is devoted to this enterprise), because it was during this period that mathematicians themselves were forced to examine the assumptions that grounded the notion that mathematics is an objective rendering of reality. In particular, DeLillo focuses on the Logician project, which involved a number of mathematicians, most notably Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead. The Logicians attempted to demonstrate that “*all arithmetical notions* can be defined in purely logical ideas, and that all the axioms of arithmetic can be deduced from a small number of basic propositions certifiable as purely logical truths” (Nagel and Newman 42), believing that success would “justify Platonism, by passing on to

¹ By an odd and extremely apposite coincidence, precisely the same plot device of an apparently extra-terrestrial message is also used by the Polish author, Stanislaw Lem, to explore the conception of mathematics as a universal language in his novel, *His Master's Voice* (1968). Further, as Lem's novel was not translated into English from its original Polish until 1983, it is impossible either Lem or DeLillo could have influenced each other. Like Ramanujan's independent development of mathematical theorems, the coincidence of DeLillo's and Lem's work would, in a curious way, seem to confirm Billy's initial Platonist view.

the rest of mathematics the indubitability of logic itself” (Davis and Hersh 332). DeLillo renders this in *Ratner’s Star* in Billy’s encounter with the Logicon mathematicians, who are searching for a “universal logical language” (285), in which:

There would be no inconsistencies or exceptions to the rules. As we formulated our cosmic discourse, basing it on principles of neo-logistic thought, we could make our transmission increasingly abstract and difficult, assuming, we hope safely, that those on the other end had correctly interpreted previous transmissions. (287)

Russell and Whitehead’s efforts resulted in the *Principia Mathematica* (1903), which, as Davis and Reuban remind us, “has been accepted as ‘the outstanding example of an unreadable masterpiece’” (137-8) – much as *Ratner’s Star* has been accepted in DeLillo’s canon. That Russell and Whitehead take 362 pages to demonstrate that $1+1=2$ indicates the failure of the project, as the rendering of an intuitive truth ended up being far more complex than the original arithmetical statement. DeLillo parodies this failure in his account of the “committee formed to define the word science” (30). Despite meeting regularly over the course of years and producing a definition that runs “to some five hundred pages” (30), the committee continues to debate this word.

David Hilbert’s solution to the Logicist problem was to use metamathematics to demonstrate the consistency of mathematics. His solution did not offer a foundation in the traditional sense, because it did not attempt to demonstrate that mathematics was true, only that it was consistent with itself. As Davis and Hersh remark, this solution “tried to make it safe by turning it [mathematics] into a meaningless game” (336). The Logicon mathematicians try the same strategy in *Ratner’s Star*. As Lester Bolin states: “I can’t perfect the control system without a metalanguage. Logic rendering just won’t work. The machine won’t be able to render Logicon or speak Logicon until I figure out how to separate the language as a system of meaningless signs from the language about the language” (339). However, Godel’s incompleteness theorems in 1930 proved Hilbert’s program was unattainable, because any consistent formal system strong enough to contain elementary

arithmetic would be unable to prove its own consistency. Certainty in mathematics was found to be a matter of infinite regression, as Russell remarked:

I was continually reminded of the fable about the elephant and the tortoise. Having constructed an elephant upon which the mathematical world could rest, I found the elephant tottering, and proceeded to construct a tortoise to keep the elephant from falling. But the tortoise was no more secure than the elephant, and after some twenty years of very arduous toil, I came to the conclusion that there was nothing more that I could do in the way of making mathematical knowledge indubitable. (qtd David and Hersh 333)

The Logicon project in *Ratner's Star* meets the same fate. Softly, the head of the Logicon project develops an increasingly frequent habit of speaking in quotes, which turns language into a "meaningless game", much as Hilbert's solution did to mathematics: "when he put quotes around words for commonplace objects, the effect was unsettling. He wasn't simply isolating an object from its name; he seemed to be trying to empty an entire system of meaning" (334). Softly ends the novel burying underground in to "the hole's hole" (438), searching in vain for an origin that will end this infinite regression.

That mathematics is not, ultimately, regarded as a universal language in *Ratner's Star* is also indicated by the nature of the message itself. Rather than coming from an extra-terrestrial culture, the message turns out to have been sent from earth, thousands of years ago. Its contents refer to the time of a solar eclipse. This is significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, it indicates that the message cannot be said to be evidence of a *universal* language, because it originates from earth. Secondly, that it signals when a solar eclipse will take place indicates that it is entirely relative to our position in time and space. Thirdly, that the time is given in base sixty is also important, because the choice of number system, *if not numbers*, is entirely arbitrary – like words in any language. As Mainwaring says "We get back only what we ourselves give ... We've reconstructed the ARS extants and it turns out to be us" (405). Rather than discovering an originary, fruitful language, as the novel's early frequent reference to motherhood and birth seemed to signal, Field Experiment Number One

has discovered an entirely recursive language, one in which – and DeLillo does not put too fine a point on it – we find ourselves disappearing up our own arseholes.

That this language, rather than referring outside itself, is actually self-reflexive is also indicated by the form of *Ratner's Star*. As DeLillo told Tom LeClair: “The structure of the book *is* the book” (“An Interview with Don DeLillo” 59). Each half of *Ratner's Star* reflects the other: “They are opposites. Adventures, reflections. Positive, negative. Discrete, continuous. Day, night. Left brain, right brain” (“An Interview with Don DeLillo” 87), whilst as the building that houses the Field Experiment Number One mirrors itself above and below ground (“Same shape upside down” (282)), so Billy's experiences reflect each other. In the first half of the novel Billy is above ground, in the second he burrows below ground. Furthermore, the novel is also circular. Not only does Billy have a bandage on his finger at the beginning from a cut he sustained at the end of the novel, but the solution to *Ratner's Star* is present in the first few pages of the novel:

He'd recently read (handwriting cunning and urgent) that the sixty-system was about four thousand years old, obviously far from extinct. More clever than most, those Mesopotamians. Natural algebraic capacity. Beady-eyed men in ziggurats predicting eclipse. (5)

Furthermore, that language is something that even Billy Twillig cannot ultimately get outside is indicated by the close of the novel, where Billy literally seems to disappear into the black and white lines of text:

A measured length of darkness passed over him as he neared the hole and then he found himself pedaling in a white area between the shadow bands that precede total solar eclipse. The interval of whiteness suggestive of the space between perfectly ruled lines, prompted him to ring the metal bell. It made no sound, or none that he could hear, laughing as he was, alternately blank and shadow-banded (438)

And the text is full of things that come back, like Billy's own mathematical invention, the Twilligon, which is shaped like a boomerang.

Ratner's Star is, in addition to being a piece of science fiction, a coming-of-age novel. Billy Twillig literally grows up through the course of the book: “He put his hands

under his shirt and rubbed his chest and stomach. He was growing, he was aging” (361). Billy’s physical development mirrors the development of mathematical thought. As Billy enters adulthood, so he also abandons his Platonist view of mathematics, in favour of the formalist view, in which mathematics is regarded as a “meaningless game”. He recognises the fallacy of the Logicon project, which can never refer outside itself: “What was strange was that Billy, looking at the page, fully realised the beauty of Logicon or at least its potential beauty as seen in the nearly surreal cleanness of its ideography: nothing unnecessary, nothing concealed, a sense of what he instinctively regarded as ‘extreme Chinese formalism,’ the mechanical drawing that *is* the machine” (359). Rather than regarding mathematics as a denotative language that points to an external reality, the Logicon project forces Billy to recognise that maths gestures only to its own structures. Any reality revealed by such mathematics is also constructed by this mathematics. As Billy puts it, “the mechanical drawing *is* the machine”. And finally, Billy draws a connection between mathematics and the non-referential languages of his Bronx childhood: “Googolplex and glossolalia” (361).

But we can also detect DeLillo’s undermining of this notion of mathematics as a universal language in his decision to select a pure mathematician as his hero. Firstly, there is the inherent paradox in the conception of mathematics as a universal language, because this language is actually understood by only a very few people. As Billy Twillig states of Zorgs, one of his fields of research: “Practically nobody knows what they even are” (417). Secondly, there is the issue that pure mathematics is, by definition, not conceived in relation to reality. As DeLillo writes: “As a mathematician he was free from subjection to reality, free to impose his ideas and designs on his test environment” (117). DeLillo goes even further, suggesting that the value of mathematics may not be as an accurate and objective rendering of reality, but rather as an elaborate aesthetic form of expression. As DeLillo writes: “What did mathematics grow *against*? Not nature but imagination” (80). Indeed, as

the quotation above indicates, Billy's recognition of the fallacy of the Logicon project is accompanied by a new sense of the beauty of mathematics. DeLillo also makes an explicit connection between mathematics and the kind of art that pushes against the dominant conception of reality: "Mathematics is the only avant-garde remaining in the whole province of art. It's pure art, lad. Art and science. Art, science and language" (85). As the self-reflexive form of *Ratner's Star* reflects the nature of the message, so the source of this novel's structure, Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass* (1871) indicates DeLillo's final assessment of the nature of mathematics, because Carroll, or Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, to give him his real name, was both a mathematician and an artist. In other words, mathematics for DeLillo is ultimately not a universal objective language, but an art form.

The Bronx scenes in this novel also exemplify this connection of mathematics to aesthetic representation. These episodes seem entirely discrete in style and tone from the rest of the novel. As John Johnson writes: "conventionally novelistic sections, such as the flashbacks to Billy Twillig's family life read like vestigial remnants of simulacra of a superannuated form" (172). These episodes form part of the taxonomy of languages in *Ratner's Star*, because DeLillo does not merely refer to different kinds of discourse in this novel, he also enacts them. Thus, these realist passages erupt into sections of science fiction and absurdist prose, for example. What is important to note is that these "conventionally novelistic sections" represent precisely the same effort as the Logicon project: that is the attempt to render reality accurately in a system of representation. In both cases, the existence of an objective, referential language is assumed. In contemporary American fiction, this attitude is exemplified by the efforts of Tom Wolfe and Gore Vidal, writers who believe that realism is "not just another device" (Wolfe xviii), that the novelist "should head out into society as a reporter" (Wolfe xxi) and that realism "tells us more about ourselves as, let us be seriously scientific, genetic arrangements than any mirror set in the roadway"

(Vidal v). But most crucial with regard to *Ratner's Star*, however, is that the realist project in literature was formulated most explicitly in the mid-nineteenth century with, for example, the publication of *Le Realisme* (1857), a manifesto by the French novelist, Champfleury and the work of writers like Emile Zola and Gustave Flaubert. This is because this period is precisely the period in which two of *Ratner's Star's* most important intertexts, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, were published. In other words, these intertexts serve not only to point to the connections between mathematics and art, but also to highlight the subversion of realist fiction at its height by a mathematician. The *Alice* books not only indicate the non-referring dimension of language: "The Hatter's remark seemed to her to have no sort of meaning in it, and yet it was certainly English" (72), but also unsettle notions of reality. Carroll's reference to Bishop Berkeley's argument that all material objects are only things in the mind of God in Tweedledum's comment to Alice that she's "only a sort of thing in his [Red King's] dream" (189) is a direct metaphysical challenge to the empiricism of the Platonist *weltanschauung*. And just as the second half of *Ratner's Star*, "Reflections", points explicitly to the self-reflexive, non-referring nature of language and mathematics, so the failure of realism is indicated by DeLillo's entire abandonment of this form in the second half of the novel.

Furthermore, as mathematics is finally deemed a self-reflexive, aesthetic language, so the model for this language is not the language of the father, but the language of Billy's mother. Even Edna Lown in her search for Logicon is ultimately forced to conclude, "language, classed by gender is undoubtedly female" (330). Like Bucky's music in *Great Jones Street*, mathematics is finally identified as a semiotic discourse, as the final fusing of jouissance with mathematics at the very close of the novel indicates: "Zorgasm" (438). In other words, *Ratner's Star* seems finally to return to the model of language Billy attempted to leave behind when he left the Bronx. This connection between maths and a feminine semiotic language is also exemplified by the scream lady's notes, which remind us that

mathematics looks, to the uninitiated, like an apparently nonsensical, non-referring language:

Stockmark ave/rage 549.74 (29/1929) grim pill
of pilgrim welfare (fare/well) scumsuckers inc.
& brownshirt king/pres. (press/king) of U.S. of
S/hit/ler & secret (seek/credit) dung of U.S.
Cong/Viet Cong & Christ /of/fear Columbus discovered
syph/ill/U.S. 1492 + 1929=3421/1234/4321 astro/bones buried
under ever/grin tree in Rock/fooler Center 50 St. +
5 Ave. = 55 St/Ave/Stave (Cane Abe/L/incoln 1865 +
1492 + 1929=5286/ PANCA DVI ASTA SAS (73)

However, as we can dimly perceive meaning in even the scream lady's notes, like connections drawn between American capitalism, Columbus' voyage and the Vietnam war, so meaning can be perceived in mathematics. But it is Billy's mother who is the prime instance of the semiotic in *Ratner's Star*. Not only is her language self-reflexive, but her speech is also undifferentiated from Billy's and non-referring: "Their [Billy and Faye's] speech began to deteriorate: 'Coming to get, get, get you'" (132). Furthermore, Faye is repeatedly associated with an aesthetic form: cinema. Of course, film can be regarded as prime instance of the culture of reproduction. Indeed, Walter Benjamin singles it out in this way: "the difficulties which photography caused traditional aesthetics were mere child's play as compared to those raised by film" (227). As such it would seem to belong to the dominant culture of late twentieth century America that DeLillo is trying to escape. And Faye's imagination does seem to have been colonised by this artform to an alarming degree. As she tells Billy: "Movies are the dreams I never had" (136). However, Faye's movie watching was not a passive experience:

We talked back to the movies then. You could do that then. If somebody in the picture said something stupid, you said something back. If you wanted action, you told them to stop kissing behind the ear and get to the swordplay. The ushers went up and down the aisles with their flashlights, trying to shush people up and telling people to get their feet off the seats. Boys tried to pick up girls. People squeezed in and out of the aisles through the whole movie, going to the bathroom, going for candy and soda, going to the lobby to just hang around. Meanwhile the balcony is a total zoo with smooching, arguments, heavy

necking, candy wrappers flying around, feet up on the seats, talking back to the picture. (136-7)

In other words, just as Bucky Wunderlick finds a space for resistance even in the mass produced art form of rock music, by answering the movies back Faye makes this artform self-reflexive and recursive. What is more, as the eruption of sexual energy reveals, “Boys tried to pick up girls”, the cinema was also a space for semiotic desires, an interpretation confirmed by cinema’s association with the maternal in *Underworld*:

Klara remembered it now, suddenly so familiar, the feeling of plush and mothered comfort, it felt like her mother hovering, a space soothingly wombed and curved, and the way the proscenium arch rayed out into the ceiling, about eight stories at its highest point, and the spoked rows of downy seat, and the choral staircases that softened the side walls, and the overvastness that seemed allowable, your one indulgence of this type, shrinking everyone in the hall to child size, heads turning and lifting, a rediscovered surprise and delight floating over the crowd, not the last such emotion that people would share this evening. (427)

But as stressed in this thesis’s chapter on *Great Jones Street*, DeLillo can only posit a temporary space of resistance in the semiotic before it is reabsorbed. Faye’s movie-going illustrates this perfectly. The cinema, once a space of subversion and jouissance, has been assimilated and incorporated. As Faye states:

Around here they’re either shut down, or supermarkets, or high crime areas with chandeliers. So its TV for me. No great loss as long as they keep showing the classics. The movie industry perished in about the nineteen forties anyway. Artistically it just dropped dead. (137)

And Faye’s own absorption into this culture is revealed not only by her obsessive TV-watching, but also by her willingness to allow Billy to be absorbed by the commodity culture of late capitalism:

Constant reader of trade publications and fan magazines, she was familiar with modern theories of promotion and packaging; the star system; mystique, charisma and product appeal; *and so*, when her own small boy early demonstrated that he was no ordinary Bronx boy devoted to street-fighting and venereal entertainment, *she instantly* began to think in terms of mass audience awareness. (25)

Just as the vegetoid mass in Faye's sink threatens, she has been "incorporated, transformed and metabolized" (132).

Tom LeClair does not call *Ratner's Star* "the monster that hulks at the center of his career" (*In the Loop* 113) merely because it was chronologically DeLillo's central book when *In the Loop* was published. He also regards it as aesthetically central, calling it "DeLillo's most theoretically sophisticated and intellectually demanding book" (113). *Ratner's Star* is undoubtedly "theoretically sophisticated and intellectually demanding", but it is a mistake to regard it as the aesthetic centre of DeLillo's work. Rather than being a key novel that "foreshadows in useful ways his subsequent books" (*In the Loop* 113), *Ratner's Star* should be interpreted as a detour in DeLillo's project. The notion of a universal language, flirted with in this novel, is never dwelt on at length again in DeLillo's fiction, whilst his immediately subsequent novels, *Players* (1977) and *Running Dog* (1978), plunge back into genre games, as DeLillo demonstrates once more that rather than accurately representing reality, language infects and constructs it. In other words, despite the detour that *Ratner's Star* represents in DeLillo's project, it seems that "The goddamn fun" (275) is not quite over yet.

***Players, Running Dog* and “the law of the confusion of genres and gender”**

DeLillo's fifth and sixth novels, *Players* (1977) and *Running Dog* (1978), have often been regarded collectively by critics. Both Tom LeClair and Bill Mullen write about the novels together, whilst even Mark Osteen, who does not, refers to *Running Dog* as the “companion novel” (*American Magic and Dread* 144) of *Players*. This association is understandable given the close publication dates of the novels (only a year apart), and the similarities in their content and form. Not only do both novels deal with “what their characters call a ‘double life’: sexual, commercial, and political intrigues, spying, violence, and terrorism” (*In the Loop* 145) as Tom LeClair reminds us, but both adopt the conventions of the thriller genre and are “marked by a generic intertextuality” (Mullen 114). This chapter intends to argue, however, that *Players* and *Running Dog* should not only be regarded as companion novels, but also as a continuous project. In other words, the exploration of a perceived shift in American culture, from the stability and certitudes of the fifties to the epistemological uncertainty and indeterminacy of post-Vietnam America, begun in *Players*, is continued and resolved in *Running Dog*. Furthermore, that this is a continuous project is signalled by DeLillo's employment of genre in each novel, with the thriller genre adopted by Lyle Wynant in *Players* as a means of escaping the uncertainty of late twentieth century America, abandoned by Glen Selvy in *Running Dog*, when it proves inadequate to the task. But unlike other explorations of DeLillo's deployment of genre, such as John Johnston's “Generic difficulties in the novels of Don DeLillo” and John Frow's interrogation of *Running Dog* alongside the thrillers of Robert Ludlum, “Intertextuality”, this chapter will also demonstrate the connection between genre and gender in these novels. It will argue that the disruption of gender in *Players* and *Running Dog* is a manifestation of the same phenomenon as the disruption of genre: namely, the indeterminacy of the sign in the age of

late capitalism. Hence, Jean Baudrillard's statement that "the law which is imposed on us by the situation itself and which we can call postmodern" is "the law of the confusion of genres and genders" ("Transpolitics, Transsexuality, Transaesthetics" 10). This argument has profound implications for any critical assessment of DeLillo's work, indicating that it may be more appropriate to discuss DeLillo's relationship to the postmodern through these early novels, rather than through the novel that has been adopted as a postmodern primer by so many critics, *White Noise* (1985). Furthermore, as in the rest of his fiction, DeLillo's exploration of gender demonstrates that the hope for political resistance lies with marginalised groups.

Of course, DeLillo's use of the conventions of genre fiction is not limited to *Players* and *Running Dog*. Rather, as John Johnston recognises in "Generic Difficulties in the Novels of Don DeLillo", DeLillo's interest in genre is a significant feature of his early novels, "In a period of fourteen years, from 1971 to 1985, Don DeLillo published eight works of prose fiction that appropriate visible aspects of a wide range of subgenres of the novel" (261). *Players* and *Running Dog* are preceded by a bildungsroman, *Americana* (1971), a sports novel, *End Zone* (1972), a rock novel, *Great Jones Street* (1973) and a piece of science fiction, *Ratner's Star* (1976). The very fact that DeLillo employs the conventions of "low-brow" fiction carries important implications for our interpretation and understanding of his work, because this "effacement [...] of the older (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture," is cited by Fredric Jameson as "one of the fundamental features of all the postmodernisms" (*Postmodernism* 2). The employment of low art in so-called literary fiction undermines the structures through which we have traditionally interpreted art, revealing them to be arbitrary and contingent, rather than fundamental and absolute. Thus DeLillo does not only point to the loss of authorised cultural standards in *Running Dog* in Lightborne's comments, "Before pop art, there was such a thing as bad taste. Now there's kitsch, schlock, camp and porn"

(148), but actually enacts it in his fiction through his use of genre. Similarly, DeLillo's employment of so many different genres also has ramifications. Not only does it undermine, in Jameson's words, "the high modernist concept of a unique style" (*Postmodernism* 15), but the generic discontinuity of novels like *Ratner's Star*, *Players* and *Running Dog* can be specifically equated with channel-hopping, itself "so often taken by media theorists as the very epitome of a postmodern attention and perceptual apparatus" (*Postmodernism* 373). The significance of generic discontinuity, like channel hopping, is in its exposure of the "compartmentalization of reality" (*Postmodernism* 373), where moments are conceived not as different points on a "temporal scale" (*Postmodernism* 373) but in terms of "spatial separation" (*Postmodernism* 373). This is a manifestation of the depthlessness that Fredric Jameson claims characterises postmodernism, not only in obvious metaphorical terms, but also in epistemological terms. The abandonment of the "temporal scale" results in a crisis of history, as history becomes unthinkable in a culture, whose paradigmatic model of understanding is spatial. In other words, as discussed in this thesis's chapter on *Americana*, geography, not history, is the dominant of late capitalism.

The number of different genres that DeLillo employs also has epistemological implications, indicating that he is principally interested in how genres function as discourses that determine our construction of reality, rather than in any genre in particular. Jameson also recognises this as a characteristic of postmodernism, arguing that "far from being extinct, the older genres, released like viruses from their traditional ecosystem, have now spread out and colonized reality itself" (*Postmodernism* 371). DeLillo's employment of genre as a play of signs would also seem to be confirmed by his abandonment of the thriller halfway through *Running Dog*, a metafictional strategy which exposes the codes of the thriller as limited and arbitrary. Furthermore, DeLillo's decision to write *The Names* (1982) immediately after *Players* and *Running Dog* suggests that DeLillo does not distinguish the ontological status of historical discourse, the focus of *The Names*, from the codes of the

thriller or the rules of American football. This would seem to indicate DeLillo's acceptance of the collapse of history in late capitalism, where "the past as 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts" (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 18). In other words, DeLillo's apparent lack of distinction between the status of low-brow genres and of history would suggest that in his fiction, history does not offer unmediated access to the Real, but has become just another aesthetic style. In other words, as Jameson writes of pastiche, DeLillo does not seem to assume that "some healthy linguistic normality still exists" (*Postmodernism* 17). Clearly this has consequences for this chapter's argument that DeLillo historicises the indeterminacy of the sign in these novels. However, it points also to DeLillo's recognition that within the culture of late capitalism, the notion of history is problematic. Jameson recognises it is impossible to adopt a critical position outside postmodernism, because we are all, "now so deeply immersed in postmodernist space, so deeply suffused and infected by its new cultural categories, that the luxury of the old-fashioned ideological critique, the indignant moral denunciation of the other, becomes unavailable" (*Postmodernism* 46). This point is crucial to our understanding of *Players* and *Running Dog*. Unable to locate a position outside late capitalism, DeLillo at once applies its logic in his employment of genre, and resists it by using genre to point to postmodern culture as a historical phenomenon. This allows us to understand DeLillo's novels in much the same terms that Fredric Jameson uses to describe his own approach to postmodernism, that is, as "a genuinely dialectical attempt to think our present time in history" (*Postmodernism* 46).

This chapter has argued that DeLillo's deployment of so many different kinds of genre fiction indicates that he is not interested in any particular genre, but rather in genre in general as a means of constructing or interpreting reality. However, we must recognise that though DeLillo has employed a wide range of styles, he has returned to the thriller more often than any other genre. Besides *Players* and *Running Dog*, we can detect elements of the

thriller in Jack Gladney's trip into Germantown to shoot Willie Mink in *White Noise*, in the final revelations of secret CIA involvement in *The Names* and, of course, in *Libra*. Furthermore, strong similarities can be detected between the thriller and another of DeLillo's favourite themes, the conspiracy theory, as illustrated by Patrick O'Donnell's article, "Obvious Paranoia: The Politics of Don DeLillo's *Running Dog*", which tackles both. Thus, this chapter will now argue that DeLillo is particularly interested in the thriller and its implicit ideology. It will argue that this genre performs a specific function in *Players* and *Running Dog*, as DeLillo exposes and subverts the ideology of the thriller to demonstrate a shift in American culture, from the epistemological certainty of the 1950s to the indeterminacy of the postmodern culture of late capitalism.

According to Jean Baudrillard, postmodern culture is characterised by the dominance of "the structural law of value" (*Symbolic Exchange and Death* 50). Baudrillard expresses this concept of "the structural law of value" in terms of language and economics. In linguistic terms he refers to Saussure's argument that the meaning of a signifier derives not from its relationship to the signified, but from its difference from every other signifier. In economic terms he describes a situation in which the value of a product stems not from its use, but its exchange value. This abandonment of referential or use value results in the same sense of depthlessness that Jameson recognises as "perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms" (*Postmodernism* 9), as the notion of the Real beneath the sign is effaced. But this depthlessness is manifested not only "in a culture increasingly dominated by space and spatial logic" (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 25) as discussed earlier and in this thesis's chapter on *Americana*, it is also manifested in the collapse of hermeneutic modes of interpretation, which assume the dialectics of essence and appearance, authenticity and inauthenticity, signifier and signified. The order of signs that dominates late capitalism is, therefore, uninterpretable according to traditional modes of interpretation, which assumes meaning exists below the surface to be uncovered. As

Baudrillard states of what he calls “the current code-governed phase” (*Symbolic Exchange and Death* 50), “At this level, the question of signs and their rational destinations, their ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’, their repression, reversal, the illusions they form of what silence or of parallel significations, is completely effaced” (*Symbolic Exchange and Death* 57). Furthermore, the dominance of the structural law of value also results in an order of signs characterised by indeterminacy. As Baudrillard states of “The Emancipation of the Sign”, “remove the obligation to designate something and it finally becomes free, indifferent and totally indeterminate, in the structural or combinatory play which succeeds the previous rule of determinate equivalence” (*Symbolic Exchange and Death* 6).

In contrast to this culture, the thriller adheres both to the depth model of thought and assumes the symbolic order to be strong and fixed. The thriller’s subscription to the traditional hermeneutics of interpretation is illustrated by its plot structure, which moves towards denouement – the uncovering of a previously hidden truth. Similarly, the thriller’s faith in the relationship of sign and referent is illustrated by the centrality of the secret plot or machination, where a linguistic construction is seen to result in the manipulation of reality. The presence of death illustrates most clearly the thriller’s operation in the dialectic of the sign and the real because, as Leonard Wilcox reminds us, death “is the ultimate signified, the single natural event which ultimately cannot be subsumed into simulacra, models, and codes” (353 n.). Further, that the power of death is wielded over the thriller’s secret agent by his superiors, indicates that this relationship exists within a strong symbolic order, where in Baudrillard’s words, the sign “retains its full value as a prohibition, and each carries with it a reciprocal obligation between castes, clans or persons, so signs are not arbitrary” (*Symbolic Exchange and Death* 50). The thriller’s adherence to the idea of a strong symbolic order is also illustrated by the centred network of the traditional espionage thriller, where characters and events are connected to each other in a way that is determined or organised by some entity. This centred network mimics the structure of the strong

symbolic order, as defined by Lacan, where a transcendental signifier limits the play of meaning in language. Indeed, the thriller will also often play out this parallel literally, through the secret code, which is, in effect, a controlled vocabulary determined by the thriller's secret centre.

Both *Players* and *Running Dog* associate the thriller with such epistemological sureness. It is on the strength of this promise of certainty that the genre is adopted in *Players*, whilst it is the failure of the thriller to fulfil this promise that leads to its abandonment in *Running Dog*. DeLillo planned *Players* as an interrogation of "the intimacy of language. What people who live together really sound like" (LeClair "An Interview with Don DeLillo" 84), but as Lyle gets drawn into the terrorist plot, it shifts genre, from a domestic novel to thriller, just as *Running Dog* switches from thriller to western. Pammy and Lyle's life prior to this shift in the novel is characterised by the indeterminacy and uncertainty that Baudrillard recognises in postmodern culture. Ethan complains to Pammy that she lives in a "solid void" (140), "without references" (140), whilst Lyle literally works at the Exchange, where money circulates and is exchanged against itself, according to the structural law of value. Their reality is a hyperreality, "mediated" as Bill Mullen writes, "by everything from consumer processes, advertising and pop psychology to the allure of varieties of narrative adventure fantasies" (115). They prefer representation or reproductions to a more "authentic" experience. Lyle is bored at the theatre, suffering a "kind of torpor [...] generated by three dimensional bodies, real space as opposed to the manipulated depth of film" (100). Indeed, Lyle no longer seems even to believe in any external reality, stating "There's nothing out there. That's my point. Everybody went away. You can here doors blowing in the wind. The scientists are mystified" (72). Lyle's very identity is also subject to this hyperreality. Not only is his personality a simulacrum, constructed from comedy routines memorised from records (39), but he also seems susceptible to the same circulation as the money traded at the Exchange: "In the electronic

clatter it was possible to feel you were part of a breathtakingly intricate quest for order and elucidation, for identity among the constituents of a system” (28). When George Sedbauer is shot in the Exchange, causing “a collapse in pattern” (28), Lyle realises how fragile and uncertain his existence is. His turn to the thriller narrative of the terrorists is explicitly presented as a means of restoring epistemological certainty, as DeLillo himself confirmed in an interview with Adam Begley:

People need rules and boundaries, and if society doesn't provide them in sufficient measure, the estranged individual may drift into something deeper and more dangerous. Terrorism is built on structure. A terrorist act is a structured narrative played out over days or weeks or even years if there are hostages involved. What we call the shadow life of terrorists or gun runners or double agents is in fact the place where a certain clarity takes effect, where definitions matter, and both sides tend to follow the same set of rules. (“The Art of Fiction CXXXV: Don DeLillo” 289)

However, Lyle attempts not just to return a sense of order to his own life, but to late twentieth century America as well.

A. J. Kinnear sits at the heart of the terrorist network, functioning as the transcendental signifier that fixes the signifying chain, as his description as “a regulating influence, a control of sorts, providing standards of technique” (179) illustrates. Furthermore, as with Mudger in *Running Dog*, Kinnear's role as the transcendental signifier is played out through language. Thus we are told he has literally guaranteed and determined language in the past, “A. J. taught voice and diction, junior college level” (153), whilst his language is the centre of the terrorist plot, “It was reducing itself, the whole series of events, his own participation, to this one element, J.'s voice, the carrier waves relaying it from some remote location” (158). Kinnear understands that Lyle's decision to abandon the narrative of domesticity for that of the thriller is entirely motivated by a desire for the security that the thriller apparently offers: “You need this, don't you? A sense of structure. A logical basis for further exposition” (106). Furthermore, he recognises that the instability and uncertainty facing Lyle is the same instability and uncertainty that faces contemporary

America: “It’s this uncertainty over sources and ultimate goals,’ Kinnear said. ‘It’s everywhere, isn’t it? Mazes, you’re correct. Intricate techniques. Our big problem in the past as a nation, was that we didn’t give our government credit for being the totally entangling force that it was’” (104). That this should be regarded as a historical phenomenon is signalled by the repeated oblique references to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Just as in *Americana*, *Libra* and *Underworld*, this moment is positioned as heralding the start of the postmodern age. Kinnear’s questions about Sedbauer’s murder, for example, self-consciously parodies the questions surrounding the death of JFK:

“What really happened?” Kinnear said. “Who really ordered the wire taps? Why were the papers shredded and what did they say? Why does this autopsy report differ from than one? Was it one bullet or more? Who erased the tapes? Was so-and-so’d death an accidents or murder? How did organized crime get involved - who let *them* in? How deeply are the corporations involved in this or that mystery, this or that crime, these murders, these programs of systematic torture? Who ordered these massive surveillance programs? Who wrote the anonymous letters? Why did these witnesses drop out of sight? Where are the files? Where are the missing bullet fragments? Did the suspect work for the intelligence service or didn’t he? Why do these four eyewitness accounts clash so totally? What happened, Lyle, on the floor that day?” (104)

Here DeLillo draws a careful and deliberate parallel between the moment that alters Lyle’s reality and the moment that altered that of the United States as a whole. Kinnear recognises the effect of each was to introduce an element of doubt and uncertainty, of epistemological unravelling. Thus the information that Kinnear offers Lyle as a way of resolving this uncertainty is information about Lee Harvey Oswald. This is what Lyle waits for at the close of the novel, still hoping to maintain the structure and certitude that Kinnear has offered him: “He decides to organize his waiting. This will help pull things into a systematic pattern or the illusion of a systematic pattern” (211). In other words, Lyle’s crisis is America’s crisis, and a specifically historical phenomenon at that.

In a sense, *Running Dog* opens where *Players* leaves off, launching straight into thriller mode, with the murder of Christoph Ludecke. And as the traditional ideological assumptions of the thriller are played out in the terrorist organisation in *Players*, so they are

played out in the depiction of the secret criminal organisation, Radial Matrix, in *Running Dog*. Like the terrorist group in *Players*, who seem all knowing, Radial Matrix conforms to the thriller stereotype of the omniscient underground organisation with agents and influence everywhere. All the principal characters are in some way connected - some unwittingly - to this organisation. Furthermore, as its name suggests this organisation is a centred structure, with only one headquarters from which, as Selvy is told, "All clandestine work would issue" (155). Just as Kinnear functions as the transcendental signifier, fixing the signifying chain in *Players*, so the head of Radial Matrix, Earl Mudger, determines and guarantees the structure of his organisation. As DeLillo tells us "One set of rules. Mudger's. Nobody else gets to use them" (91). DeLillo also plays out this parallel between Radial Matrix and the strong symbolic order through language itself, for it is Mudger who determines the secret vocabulary of *Running Dog*, coding Grace DeLaney as "FCB [...] Flat-Chested Bitch" (220), and the murder of Glen Selvy as an "adjustment" (105). DeLillo also makes clear Mudger's adherence to the depth model of thought through his attitude to language, because Mudger believes in the fixed and absolute relationship of words and referents, as illustrated by his attitude to his woodworking tools: "The names of things in these two rooms constituted a near-secret knowledge. [...] You couldn't use tools and materials well, he believed, unless you knew their proper names" (119). Further, that *Running Dog*, like other thrillers, operates within the dialectic of the sign and the real, is also signalled by Mudger's ability to order the execution of his agents, which indicates that his power is exercised, not in the symbolic realm, but the real.

But whilst the thriller mode is adopted in each novel as a way of maintaining order and structure, DeLillo is also careful to demonstrate that this mode is inadequate to the task. The manner in which DeLillo subverts the traditional ideological assumptions of thriller in *Players* and *Running Dog* is most significant, because whilst the notion of epistemological certainty is conveyed through the content of each novel, DeLillo utilises the *form* of each to

undermine this assumption. This has crucial implications given the significance of form in postmodern aesthetics and it is here that DeLillo shows his real sophistication as a novelist. That is, whilst adherence to the notion of a strong symbolic order can be witnessed in the content of *Players* and *Running Dog*, the form of each demonstrates the loss of the referent and the consequent waning of content. Thus, the structures of *Players* and *Running Dog* move not towards closure and denouement like the traditional thriller, but towards indeterminacy and ambiguity. *Players* ends inconclusively, with Lyle waiting in a room for a phone call that may never come, his very identity fading: "The propped figure, for instance, is barely recognizable as male. Shedding capabilities and traits by the second, he can still be described (but quickly) as well-formed, sentient and fair. We know nothing else about him" (212). Similarly, Patrick O'Donnell notes of *Running Dog* in his article "Obvious Paranoia: The Politics of Don DeLillo's *Running Dog*" that "as a 'thriller', the novel is disappointing. There is no climax here, no resolution, not even a 'treasure' in the form of a cultural artifact recording Hitler's sex life" (61). DeLillo even makes explicit the failure of *Running Dog* to conform *formally* to the idea of a strong symbolic order, by inserting a critical commentary on the plot within novel itself, in the form of Grace Delaney's assessment of Moll Robbin's piece on Radial Matrix. As she tells Moll "there *is* design, there *are* implications, there *is* a web of sorts, a series of interconnection" but "it's too shaky. Too iffy. Not enough footing. I do miss that. A sense of solid footing" (133). In other words, what Grace points out is that the structure of *Running Dog* is, unlike the traditional thriller, characterised by slippage and indeterminacy.

Indeed, it is in *Running Dog*, the second novel of the pair, that DeLillo makes most explicit the failure of the thriller ideology. Lyle adopts the thriller in *Players* as a means of structuring his world, but it is in *Running Dog* that the full extent of the fallacy of this project is revealed. In this novel "there is a web of sorts" (133), but this web is decentred. The characters and events in *Running Dog* are connected, but there is no determining force

organising this network. The novel may open with a piece of graffiti that reads “*Alles nach Gottes Willen*” (4), but as DeLillo reminds us “Weapons have become godless since then” (4). Whilst Kinnear gradually disappears from *Players*, Mudger is fully exposed as a fraud, as the collapse of Radial Matrix indicates. His impotence is highlighted by Selvy’s murder which happens only because Selvy engineers it, as Mudger himself realises, “He wants to be found” (173). But DeLillo does not only introduce indeterminacy into *Running Dog* by revealing Mudger’s inability to control the network; he also demonstrates that this thriller does not operate in the dialectic of the sign and the real, but in a simulational world, just like the one Lyle tries to escape in *Players*. Thus, as Mudger’s threat to construct a tape that purports to be a recording of an amorous encounter between Moll and Senator Percival (92) indicates, Mudger cannot manipulate the real, only its representations. This loss of the referent is most apparent in the last scene of the novel, as Levi Blackwater prepares to give Selvy the Indian air burial he desired. This is a symbolic ritual that begins with “plucking a few strands of hair from the top of the dead man’s head” (246), but the referent, Selvy’s head, is literally lost – stolen by the Radial Matrix agents who murdered him.

And so instead of the epistemological certainty that usually characterises thrillers, *Running Dog* exists in the simulational world of the code, for the symbolic order of *Running Dog* is a decentred structure. Mudger himself points to this, specifically equating this phenomenon with technology:

“When technology reaches a certain level, people begin to feel like criminals,” he said. “Someone is after you, the computers maybe, the machine-police. You can’t escape investigation. The facts about you and your whole existence have been collected or are being collected. Banks, insurance companies, credit organizations, tax examiners, passport offices, reporting services, police agencies, intelligence gatherers. It’s a little like what I was saying before. Devices make us pliant. If *they* [DeLillo’s emphasis] issue a print-out saying we’re guilty, then we’re guilty. But it goes even deeper, doesn’t it? It’s the presence alone, the very fact, the superabundance of technology, that makes us feel we’re committing crimes. Just the fact that these things exist at this widespread level. The processing machines, the scanners, the sorters. That’s enough to make us feel like

criminals. What enormous weight. What complex programs. *And there's no one to explain it to us* [emphasis added]." (93)

What Mudger is describing is here what Jameson refers to as "the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of late capitalism" (*Postmodernism* 37-8). But not only have governments and multinational corporations literally dispersed themselves, as the terrorists in *Players* also recognise: "All this decentralization we see. Is it a reaction to terror? I amuse myself by thinking they have a master plan to eliminate prominent targets" (109), late capitalism is also characterised by an order of signs that have become uninterpretable according to older hermeneutic modes of interpretation, because the transcendental signifier is lost. As DeLillo explicitly states in *Running Dog*, we are in the age of "The God of Body. The God of Lipstick and Silk. The God of Nylon, Scent and Shadow" (4), because the transcendental centre has been entirely effaced by signs. This statement points to crux of DeLillo's subversion of the thriller genre in *Running Dog*, as he substitutes a decentred network of depthless, indeterminate signs, for the strong, symbolic order that usually characterises the thriller. Thus whilst the terrorists of *Players* explicitly position themselves in opposition to this system, Radial Matrix is exposed as just such a decentred structure. In other words, whilst Lyle adopts the codes of the thriller by joining the terrorists in *Players* as a means of protection against the uncertainties of post-assassination America, these codes, represented by Radial Matrix, are shown to be unable to escape the indeterminacy of the sign in *Running Dog*.

Both Radial Matrix in *Running Dog* and the terrorists in *Players* are associated with games. The in-flight movie that opens *Players* and which foretells the novel's plot (DeLillo calls it the "novel in miniature" (LeClair, "Interview with Don DeLillo" 152)) shows terrorists attacking business men on a golf course. Similarly, the moment that catapults Lyle into the world of the thriller, the murder of George Sedbauer, is carried out with a starter's pistol. In *Running Dog*, Lomax first appears dressed for golf, whilst as

Mudger later tells Moll of radial Matrix, “Loyalties are so interwoven, the thing’s a game” (89). These references to games confirm that neither the terrorists in *Players* nor Radial Matrix in *Running Dog* are able to support a strong symbolic order, because whilst “the Law is based on a transcendent sequence of necessary signs,” rules are “an immanent sequence of arbitrary signs” (Baudrillard, *Seduction* 131). That is, rules are uninterpretable and decentred structures, which despite their practical effects are essentially arbitrary. In other words, both the terrorists and Radial Matrix ultimately lack the transcendental signifier. This distinction between rules and laws also allows us to interpret Selvy’s “routine” (81) as a set of rules, an arbitrary system that Selvy applies as if they were laws, in the hope of suppressing “things he didn’t care to know about. Textures, entanglements, riddles, words” (107). Similarly, his engineering of his own death is an attempt to maintain the myth that Mudger’s rules are Laws. By arranging his own death in accordance with Mudger’s wishes, Selvy attempts to bolster the illusion that Mudger can determine events.

Indeed, DeLillo’s eventual abandonment of the thriller genre in the second novel of the pair, *Running Dog*, is best understood through the character of Glen Selvy, because it is through Selvy that DeLillo makes the switch from thriller to western. Selvy and Lyle share a number of characteristics. As an intelligence agent, Selvy has predicated his entire identity on the codes of the thriller, just as Lyle attempts to in *Players*. His attraction to this discourse stems from his adherence to the conception of reality as a regulated structure, as he states “I believe in codes” (33), just as Lyle initially takes comfort in the structures offered by the Exchange, “Lyle sometimes carried yellow teleprinter slips with him for days. He saw in the numbers and stock symbols an artful reduction of the external world to printed output, the machine’s coded model of exactitude” (70). What Selvy fears most is ambiguity and slippage, but he believes this lifestyle can contain it: “It was a calculated existence, this. He preferred life narrowed down to unfinished rooms” (54). However, both Lyle and Selvy discover the codes of the thriller are inadequate in an age dominated by the

structural law of value, and neither finds the rules of the thriller sufficient to protect their subjectivity or *weltanschauung*. Lyle's subjectivity is fragile before his encounter with the terrorists. However, his involvement with them results in the almost complete eradication of his self. Furthermore, the terrorists' plot does not allow Lyle to escape the culture of late capitalism and resolve the crisis of history facing America. Instead it leads him to that most postmodern of spaces, the motel room, a space that is characterised by uncertainty, as he waits for a call that may or may not come. Indeed rather than the transcendental signifier, the phallus, that could guarantee Lyle's reality, the terrorist group can only offer a fetish, an empty stand-in, in the form of the plastic dildo that Rosemary straps on at the novel's close. Selvy similarly discovers that the codes of the thriller are inadequate. His *weltanschauung* is first disrupted by the murder of Christoph Ludecke. As DeLillo states, "The connection was unexpected. It didn't fit the known world as recently constructed. It was a peculiar element in a series of events otherwise joined in explainable ways" (81). This discovery forces Selvy to recognise that Radial Matrix is not the organisation he thought it was, but rather that it is, in Lomax's words, characterised by "slippage" (107). This introduces ambiguity and indeterminacy into Selvy's worldview: "It brought things to the surface, or close to it – things he didn't care to know about. Textures, entanglements, riddles, words. It compromised the routine" (107). Furthermore, the collapse of the structures of thriller also threatens Selvy's identity, just as Lyle's is threatened, because Selvy has predicated his entire subjectivity on Radial Matrix (indeed, this organisation literally constructed him, providing "a resume – background, education, past employment, so forth. All of it was verifiable, none of it true" (156)). Selvy's subjectivity has never been strong – as the name "Self'y suggests, Selvy has only sort of got a self. He has no identity outside this organisation, and so has no choice but to help them murder him, because to defeat Radial Matrix would be to destroy the very entity on which his subjectivity is based – in either instance he faces eradication. Like Gary Harkness in *End Zone*, Lyle and Selvy's identities

are entirely determined by a pre-existing authoritative discourse, as like Foucault's subjects, they internalise power relations.

As Lyle attempts to resolve this problem by adopting a different genre, so Selvy abandons the thriller; a move explicitly described as a means of eradicating ambiguity and indeterminacy:

All behind him [Selvy] now. Cities, buildings, people, systems. All the relationships and links. The plan, the execution, the sequel. He could forget that now. He'd traveled the event. He'd come all the way down the straight white line. [...] All that incoherence. Selection, election, option, alternative. All behind him now. Codes and formats. Courses of action. Values, bias, predilection. (192)

In other words, Selvy, who "believes in codes" (33), puts his faith in another discourse, one that allows him to reconstruct his relationship with Radial Matrix in way that makes his assassination meaningful, rather than the result of misinformation (which it is). The epistemological structure Selvy adopts is a teleological narrative, in which his death is a meaningful event, characterised by determinacy and closure, "It was becoming clear. He was starting to understand what it meant. [...] It was clear, finally. The whole point. Everything. All this time he'd been preparing to die" (183). This structure is the western, in which Selvy recasts himself as an Indian, "Running Dog" (160) and the Radial Matrix agents as cowboys in pursuit. However, it is important to examine why Selvy adopts the western, for it is not the only genre whose "plots," in Jack Gladney's words, "tend to move deathward" (*White Noise* 26).

This chapter will now examine the import of the western in *Running Dog*, arguing that it is not employed as pastiche, an empty play of signs, but rather that the choice of this genre is determined by an ulterior motive: namely to historicise the loss of the referent. Both Baudrillard and Jameson argue that postmodern culture is a historical condition. Furthermore, both also argue it is also essentially an America phenomenon. Baudrillard comments, "America is neither dream nor reality. It is hyperreality" (*America* 28), whilst

Fredric Jameson states, “this whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world” (*Postmodernism* 5). Selvy’s adoption of the western should, therefore, be understood as an attempt to escape the simulational world of late twentieth century America through a discourse that apparently allows access to an older, pre-postmodern America. DeLillo makes this shift from postmodern to this other America clear in the text, as Selvy abandons Washington, the seat of government, for the American west. In other words, he abandons the modern nation state for a national identity based on geography – much as David Bell attempts to in *Americana*. DeLillo explicitly juxtaposes these two Americas, making explicit that the metropolis of late capitalism is a simulational world. As Moll states of her own apartment:

I realize looking around this place that I don’t have any furniture in the strict sense. I stack clothes in those modular boxes in the bedroom. I work at a folding table. I have a wall unit. It’s just as well, isn’t it? If you don’t live in a house on your own piece of property, there’s no point owning real things. If you’re floating in the air, ten-twenty-thirty stories up, might as well live with play objects, shiny balls and ornaments. (109-10)

Similarly, as the boy with the walkie-talkie at Forty-fifth Street makes clear, every American city street is a film set:

“Code blue,” he said. “Prepare to activate all units. People in the street, take your positions. Camera one, code blue. This is a take. Give me a reflector over here. This set is closed. Camera’s rolling, you people. Everybody’s live. We are shooting live. This is a live action scene. Prepare sound stage to record. All right, you cab drivers, let’s hear it. Watch those cables, everybody. Closing the set to all but essential personnel. Nude scene, nude scene. Get it moving, everybody, please. Am leaving the district. Repeat. Am leaving the district.” (114-5)

In stark contrast to this simulational world, DeLillo states of the desert “Landscape is truth” (229). Furthermore, that this journey is a quest to recover a sense of authenticity is also made clear by the way in which it is played out as a quest for origin. Thus, Selvy not only travels to the desert in an attempt to recover the making of America, but he also adopts the identity of the first American, the Indian. Furthermore, Selvy also returns to his own origin,

Marathon Mines, the government centre that first constructed his identity as an agent, and takes a young girl, Nadine Rademacher, back to her father.

But as well as an attempt to recover an older, pre-postmodern existence, Selvy's adoption of the western is also an attempt to recover a unified identity, just as Lyle hopes to by adopting the thriller. Jameson reminds us that postmodern subjectivity is characterised by "fragmentation" (14) and "decentering" (15). This problem is compounded in Selvy's case for he is a double agent. Furthermore, that Radial Matrix is a "breakaway unit of the U.S. intelligence apparatus" (75) allows DeLillo to play out the internal contradictions of American identity through the subjectivity of Selvy. Significantly, such conflicts are associated with the America of late capitalism, in particular with such events as the Kennedy assassination and the Vietnam War, which engendered endemic distrust of government within the United States. DeLillo makes this explicit in *Players* in Kinnear's comments:

"Our big problem in the past as a nation, was that we didn't give our government credit for being the totally entangling force that it was. They were even more evil than we'd imagined. More evil and much more interesting. Assassination, blackmail, torture, enormous improbably intrigues. All these convolutions and relationships. Assorted sexual episodes. Terribly, terribly interesting, all of it. Cameras, microphones, so forth. We thought they bombed villages, killed children for the sake of technology, so it could shake itself out, and for certain abstractions. We didn't give them credit for the rest of it. Behind every stark fact we encounter layers of ambiguity. This is all so alien to the liberal spirit. It's a wonder they're bearing up at all. This haze of conspiracies and multiple interpretations. So much for the great instructing vision of the federal government." (104)

DeLillo also points to this with regard to the Kennedy assassination in "The Word, the Image and the Gun", a television documentary he made in collaboration with the BBC: "When Kennedy was shot something changed forever in America. [...] We became a little paranoid, we developed a sense of the secret manipulation of history – your 'there's something they aren't telling us' [...] Certainly we had a greater faith in government before he was killed". That the very title of *Running Dog* refers both to the Vietnam War and a

counterculture magazine set up in opposition to it, indicates that the theme of the fragmentation of US identity is also at the very heart of this novel. This sense of internal distrust is epitomised by the alcoholic whose hallucinations are of FBI hidden cameras and bugs, "On a step leading down to the toilets another man sat sprawled, mumbling something about his landlord working for the FBI. The FBI had placed cameras and bugging devices not only in his apartment but everywhere he went. They preceded him, anticipating every stop he made, day or night" (62). This allows us to interpret Selvy's abandonment of the thriller for the western as an attempt not only to abandon the postmodern culture of contemporary USA for an older, more authentic America, but also as an attempt to recover a unified identity by exchanging an American identity predicated on government, now discredited as fragmented and untrustworthy, for one based on geography.

That DeLillo considers postmodernism to be a historical phenomenon would also seem to be indicated by the references to actual historical events in *Players* and *Running Dog*, in particular the Kennedy assassination and the Vietnam conflict, for both events are referred to in terms of epistemological uncertainty. Indeed, DeLillo has confirmed as much with regard to *Running Dog* in an interview with Adam Begley:

Maybe this novel is a response to the war in Vietnam - this is what I'm getting at - and how the war affected the way people worked out their own strategies, how individuals conducted their own lives. There's a rampant need among the characters, a driving urge that certain characters feel to acquire the book's sacred object, a home movie made in Hitler's bunker. All the paranoia, manipulation, violence, all the sleazy desires are a form of fallout from the Vietnam experience. ("The Art of Fiction CXXXV: Don DeLillo" 302)

Thus, in *Players*, Kinnear makes frequent references to the confusion engendered by the U.S. government activities in Vietnam and to the Kennedy assassination. In *Running Dog* Mrs Percival, who has "been reading the Warren Report for eight or nine years" (71), has lost herself in a maze of paper, much like Nicholas Branch in *Libra*, trying to make sense of the assassination of President Kennedy: "She is sitting up in bed. Her face gleams with

some kind of restorative ointment. All over the room are volumes of the Warren Report along with her notebooks full of ‘correlative data’” (198). Similarly, Richie Armbrister conceives of his own death in terms of the Kennedy assassination, and is afraid not of dying, but a death characterised, like Kennedy’s, by indeterminacy¹.

Richie was obsessed not only by his impending assassination but by the conflicting reports that would ensue. He’d been shot by one white male, or two white males, or one white male with a mulatto child. The rifle used had no prints, had several sets of prints, now being checked, or had several sets of prints but they’d been accidentally wiped off by the police. (189)

As in *Players*, Vietnam is also explicitly associated with a sense of epistemological uncertainty in *Running Dog*:

Vietnam, in more ways than one, was a war based on hybrid gibberish. But Mudger could understand the importance of this on the most basic of levels, the grunt level, where the fighting man stood and where technical idiom was often the only element of precision, the only true beauty, he could take with him into the realms of ambiguity. (208)

Of course, we must be careful when invoking historical events in our reading of any literary text, and especially those of a writer like DeLillo, who questions the ontological status of historical discourse. Furthermore, these problems are compounded in our present discussion, because the argument that DeLillo historicises the loss of the referent would seem to be internally conflicted, when the loss of the referent actually precludes historical thinking. However, because *Players* and *Running Dog* consider the crisis of historicity through famously simulational events like the assassination of President Kennedy and Vietnam, we can argue that DeLillo presents the only realism possible in postmodern culture. As Jameson argues:

If there is any realism left here, it is a ‘realism’ that is meant to derive from the shock of grasping that confinement and of slowly becoming aware of a

¹ This interpretation of the Kennedy assassination as a pivotal moment in American history is also apparent in DeLillo’s other work. There are references to the murder in almost every novel, whilst he describes the assassination in *Libra*, the novel devoted to the event, as “the seven seconds that broke the back of the American century” (181). DeLillo has also written an article, “American Blood” on the assassination, whilst in the documentary “The Word, The Image and The Gun” he states, “When Kennedy was shot something changed forever in America. Something opened up – a sense of randomness, deep ambiguity. We lost the narrative thread.”

new and original historical situation in which we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach. (25)

In other words, as in their employment of genre, *Players* and *Running Dog* point to the loss of the historical referent through the cultural logic of late capitalism itself, by employing events that have, famously, been subsumed into their representations, rather than by attempting to represent directly the historical real.

That *Running Dog* is ultimately trapped within the cultural logic of late capitalism is also reflected in the failure of Selvy's quest, for he recovers not the historical referent, but what Jameson calls "our own pop images and simulacra of that history" (25). In other words, he recovers not the original, authentic America, but its representation, the western, for Selvy sees the landscape in cinematic terms, as "Memory, a film. Rush of adolescent daydreams. He'd been through it in his mind a hundred times, although never to the end" (239). As Nadine explicitly recognises "This is turning into a Western" (186). Here the significance of DeLillo's juxtaposition of Selvy's murder with the screening of the Nazi film becomes apparent, for the quest for the Nazi film in *Running Dog* is also an attempt to recover the historical referent. However, as Selvy recovers only the simulational west of the western movie, so Lightborne can only retrieve the simulacra of history. Not only is Lightborne's history literally a representation, because it is a film, but layers of representation are built into the film itself. The film, which reputedly depicted a sex orgy in the bunker in Berlin, actually shows Hitler doing an impersonation of Charlie Chaplin, which has been gleaned from watching Chaplin's films of Chaplin, doing an impersonation of Hitler, which itself was gleaned from Hitler's own propaganda films. In other words, the film is a copy (filmic representation) of a copy (Hitler's impersonation of Chaplin) of a copy (Chaplin's films) of a copy (Chaplin's impersonation of Hitler) of a copy (Hitler's own propaganda films). Furthermore, even the very form of Selvy's quest adheres to the cultural logic of late capitalism, because it is played out geographically in accordance with

the “spatial logic” (Jameson 25) of postmodernism. Crucially Selvy, like Lyle, sought to resolve a crisis in history, but is unable to escape the spatial logic of late capitalism.

Both Jameson and Baudrillard regard postmodernism as the defining feature of the current stage of capitalism. Baudrillard calls it “the end of production”, Jameson “late capitalism”. Selvy’s recourse to the Western with its geographical focus has other important consequences in this light, because what the Western depicts, of course, is the colonisation of the North American continent by white settlers. This is especially pertinent when we remember Jameson’s argument that what postmodernism represents is the latest stage of American imperialism: “this whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world” (*Postmodernism* 5). DeLillo makes this connection between late capitalism and neo-colonialism apparent in *Players*. Pammy works at the World Trade Centre, which is carefully presented as a dislocated space, fitting for the centre of this decentred global system, “To Pammy the towers didn't seem permanent. They remained concepts, no less transient for all their bulk than some routine distortion of light.” (19), whilst Lyle works at the Exchange, symbol of “the idea of worldwide money” (107) that the terrorists want to destroy. DeLillo is careful to make the connection between this current economic imperialism and the old style colonisation of the American West clear. It is no coincidence that the terrorist attack on the golfing businessmen in the in-flight movie is described as “a little bit like cowboys and Indians” (9). In *Running Dog*, the novel’s very title refers to American economic imperialism, being a quotation from Ho Chi Minh, “Capitalist lackeys and running dogs” (30), whilst the description of Mudger’s activities in Vietnam make clear the parallel between older military colonisation and that war:

It was while Mudger was on loan to Special Forces for unknown duties that he became something of a legend in Vietnam. Apparently he established a feudal barony complete with loyal ARVN soldiers (loyal to him, not the government) as well as pimps, black marketeers, shoeshine boys, war refugees, bar girls, deserters, pickpockets and others. (84)

Significantly, DeLillo draws similar comparisons between neo-colonialism and the settling of the American West in his most extensive exploration of American imperialism, *The Names*, in businessmen David Keller and Dick Borden discussion of cowboys (56). And it is here we should recognise that DeLillo not only uses genre to historicise the loss of the referent in *Players* and *Running Dog*, but that DeLillo also politicises these genres by using them to point to different stages of American colonisation. In other words, though DeLillo's employment of genre may indicate his adherence to the cultural logic of late capitalism, DeLillo also succeeds in subverting and resisting this cultural logic, by using genre to historicise and politicise postmodernism.

But perhaps the most significant feature of Sely's return to the origin is that this is also played out as a return to the father, because as stated in the introduction, DeLillo also plays out the indeterminacy of the sign through gender. But before examining how DeLillo achieves this, it is important to examine the ways in which postmodern culture has been characterised as feminine. Of course, the perceived affinity between femininity and the play of signs is long standing, as the traditional association of artifice with the feminine indicates, leading Joan Riviere to write in the 1930s, "The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the 'masquerade'. My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing" (38). Lacan also subsumes the feminine into its signs, stating that "Images and symbols *for* the woman cannot be isolated from images and symbols of the woman" (*Feminine Sexuality* 90). In other words, the feminine has always been characterised as appearance with no essence, surface without depth. As such the feminine would seem to have an obvious affinity with postmodern culture, as defined by the structural law of value and the indeterminacy of signs. Jean Baudrillard explicitly links the feminine to the postmodern. As he states in *Seduction*, "Now surprisingly, this proposition,

that in the feminine very distinction between authenticity and artifice is without foundation, also defines the space of simulation” (11). Furthermore, Baudrillard recognises that this affinity stems not only from the indeterminacy of the sign, but that it can also be witnessed in economic terms. As he states, “Now this *utopian* continuity and availability can only be incarnated in the female sex. This is why in this society everything - objects, goods, services, relations of all types - will be feminized, sexualised in a feminine fashion” (*Seduction* 26). This is especially important when we consider DeLillo’s comments on *Running Dog*:

What I was really getting at in *Running Dog* was a sense of the terrible acquisitiveness in which we live, coupled with a final indifference to the object. After all the mad attempts to acquire the thing, everyone suddenly decides that, well, maybe we really don’t care about this so much anyway. (DeCurtis “An Outside in This Society” 64)

What both Baudrillard and DeLillo refer to is the consumerist culture of late capitalism, in which all subjectivity is feminized, that is characterised by its awareness of its lack. This lack is exploited by late capitalism in order to maintain an insatiable appetite for its products².

That DeLillo explores the indeterminacy of signs through the disruption of gender roles is clear in *Players* and *Running Dog*. In *Players*, the failure of the father to maintain his mythic position is illustrated by Pammy’s father, who is shown to be impotent, begging for documentation that would provide symbolic authentication of his existence, “He lived then near the northern point of Manhattan, mentally distressed, a man who preferred gestures to speech. [...] On the phone he begged for documents. Birth certificate, savings passbook, social security card, memberships, compensations, group plans” (55). Similarly, the novel closes with somewhat of a reversal in gender of Rosemary and Lyle. She wears a

² Of course, Lacan argues that masculine subjectivity is also characterised by lack. Despite this, the gendered nature of the transcendental signifier, the phallus, has resulted in a stronger association of the feminine with lack.

plastic phallus, whilst Lyle, whose appearance was always feminine, possessing a quality of “near-effeteness” (26), is barely recognisable as male. In *Running Dog*, DeLillo not only draws on images of feminine artifice (“The God of Lipstick and Silk. The God of Nylon, Scent and Shadow” (4)) like Baudrillard, to express the effacement of the centre by signs in a simulational world, but he also employs Baudrillard’s other favourite analogy, the transvestite. The transvestite is of enormous importance in any gendered interpretation of postmodernism, for what the transvestite emblematises is the breakdown of the relationship between sign and referent. That is, by dressing in the clothes of the opposite sex, the transvestite deliberately breaks down the relationship of sign (clothing) and referent (genitalia). As such Baudrillard has drawn on the transvestite more than once to explore postmodern culture, arguing that “It is easier for a non-female/female than for a real woman, already legitimated by her sex, to move amongst the signs and take seduction to the limit. Only the non-female/female can exercise an untainted fascination, because s/he is more seductive than sexual” (*Seduction* 13). DeLillo points to this breakdown of signification explicitly with regard to his transvestite, Christoph Ludecke. Thus, it is Christoph Ludecke, described as a “*queer* [emphasis added] bit of intelligence” (82), who first disrupts Selvy’s *weltanschauung*, whilst the policemen who discover Ludecke’s dead body recognise him immediately as a “discrepancy in the landscape” (4):

“These days, what is it? Everybody’s in disguise.”

“I know, sergeant.”

“Tell me how in the hell people are supposed to know who’s the police. All this dressing up. The police don’t know each other. Junkies, car boosters, beards, hats. Blind man with a dog, he could turn around and shoot you. It used to be you could go by the clothes. But you can’t go by the clothes anymore.”

“You go by the sex organs.” (8-9)

That the two men taking part in this conversation are policemen is significant, for as literal “law enforcers”, they are particularly upset by any indication that the order that they enforce may be subject to slippage and indeterminacy – especially because it is through such signs

themselves, in the form of their badges, that they maintain their authority. Furthermore, that the referent effaced by the female impersonator is the penis is especially important, given the significance attributed to the phallus in linguistic terms by psychoanalytic critics. That is, the female impersonator not only reveals the indeterminacy of the sign by undermining the relationship of sign and referent, but she literally employs signs to efface “the organ actually invested with this signifying function” (*Feminine Sexuality* 84) the phallus, the very referent that could pin down the signifying system. As such, we can understand why Baudrillard would choose the transvestite or female impersonator as a primary metaphorical expression of postmodern culture. As he writes of transvestism in “Transpolitics, Transsexuality, Transaesthetics”, “One will also find it in the hybridisation of all differences, in the indistinctions of all desires, in a culture which plays on the promiscuity of all genres, of all signs, all models” (20). Of course this confusion of signs also helps us understand why Selvy’s Western adventure is doomed to failure, for the signs there too have been confused, with the lone American hero adopting a Native American identity, whilst the Vietnamese enemies dress as cowboys. Indeed, this can also be recognised as a disruption of gender, given the feminisation of the ethnic other, and particularly the Viet Cong, in American cultural representation.

That the Nazi film is in the possession of Christoph Ludecke, a transvestite, is an apparent paradox, for this film seems to represent the absent centre or the lost phallus, in *Running Dog*. This is played out on several levels. For example, the connections between fascism and the phallus are made explicit, as Lightborne’s comments makes clear, “Fascinating, yes. An interesting word. From the Latin *fascinus*. An amulet shaped like a phallus. A word progressing from the same root as the word ‘fascism’” (151). This reminds us that fascistic societies are, like the feudal societies cited by Baudrillard, characterised by strong symbolic orders. Furthermore, that the film is a *Nazi* artefact is also important, because the Nazis and, in particular, the holocaust, have been taken as a test case for

postmodernism. This event, it is argued, is one that cannot be said to be subsumed by its representation, cannot be dismissed as just another text. Therefore, the film can be said to represent epistemological certainty, because it is a product of the one event that cannot be “postmodernised”. DeLillo points to this explicitly in Lightborne’s statement with regard to the film that “history is true” (244). Similarly, in Lightborne’s spiel to a prospective buyer, “‘History is so comforting,’ he told the man. ‘Isn’t this why people collect? To own a fragment of the tangible past. Life is fleeting, and we seek consolation in durable things’” (104). That the film is purportedly pornographic is also significant, for the pornographic apparently offers unmediated access to the real. As Baudrillard writes:

And it is this that is fascinating, this excess of reality, this hyperreality of things. The only phantasy in pornography, if there is one, is this not a phantasy of sex, but of the real, and its absorption into something other than the real, the hyperreal. Pornographic voyeurism is not a sexual voyeurism, but a voyeurism of representation and its perdition, a dizziness born of the loss of the scene and the irruption of the obscene. (*Seduction* 29)

Furthermore, that Vietnam veteran Earl Mudger seeks the film is also important, for the Second World War is widely perceived to possess a sense of epistemological certainty and purpose that the Vietnam conflict did not. His desire for a souvenir from World War Two can therefore be interpreted, like Paul Berlin’s journey to Paris in Tim O’Brien’s *Going After Cacciato* (1978), as an expression of his desire to recover the certitudes that characterised that war. Indeed, not only was the outcome of World War Two regarded as a moral victory, it also represented a successful imperialist adventure, as Western Europe became an American sphere of interest, in a way Vietnam did not. Thus, the Nazi film is presented on a number of different levels in *Running Dog* as the object that can make good the lack that characterises postmodern culture. However, just as Selvy does not gain access to the west, but to the western, so the film turns out to epitomise the simulational culture of late capitalism – just like its transvestite owner.

DeLillo also maintains the connection between the indeterminacy of sign and the feminine in his depiction of his female characters, for he is careful to demonstrate that these characters are more adept at the game of signs than their male counterparts. On one fundamental level this is because, unlike the novel's male characters, they do not believe in a transcendental centre or phallus that could guarantee certainty and stability of meaning. Instead, they recognise that desire for such certainty stems from a fundamental lack. This is made apparent by Moll's attitude to quests:

Moll was suspicious of quests. At the bottom of most long and obsessive searches, in her view, was some vital deficiency on the part of the individual in pursuit, a meagerness of spirit. [...] Even more depressing than the nature of a given quest was the likely result. Whether people searched for an object of some kind, or inner occasion, or answer, or state of being, it was almost always disappointing. People came up against themselves in the end. Nothing but themselves. Of course there were those who believed the search itself was all that mattered. The search itself is the reward. (224)

Thus, DeLillo's female characters recognise they are free to make and remake sign systems. This is reflected in their attitudes to their own identity. Moll, for example, carefully constructs the self she presents to Senator Percival:

She wore thong sandals, a loose cotton dress and a hip sash - an outfit she used whenever she felt a deceptive appearance was called for. A date with a man she suspected she might dislike, for instance. She believed herself to be attractive, although not quite this way. Clothes, used in this manner, were a method of safeguarding her true self, pending developments. (29)

Furthermore, Moll is literally a writer, whereas the "mechanical" (17) Selvy is a "reader" (28). In other words, whereas Moll is able to construct and manipulate signs systems, Selvy can only adopt a pre-formed narratives. Thus, not only is Selvy literally constructed by Radial Matrix, "Eventually he provided a resume - background, education, past employment, so forth. All of it was verifiable, none of it true" (156), but when he finds the thriller narrative untenable he has no option but to adopt another pre-written discourse. As Douglas Keesey states, "In discarding his unhappy role in a spy story for what he hopes will

be a better part in a western, Selvy has merely exchanged one myth of self for another” (*Don DeLillo* 108).

We can also witness this with regard to the character of Nadine Rademacher. When Selvy encounters Nadine she is involved in “NUDE STORYTELLING” (118). Men have written the stories, but bit by bit Nadine changes them:

All I know, I’m not doing “Flaming Panties.” That story’s so sick I’ve been changing it little by little. A little every day. I don’t care who complains. It’s a story that relies on combinations. Incest is just the beginning. It *starts* with incest. Then near the end it just becomes reciting words. Some words I just won’t say. It piles on phrases. It becomes red meat. (126)

Nadine’s awareness of the possibility of play in sign systems is also indicated by her statement “This is turning into a Western” (186), for just as Moll is suspicious of quests, Nadine recognises Selvy’s attempt to recover some kind of authentic origin of America as phallacious.

This chapter has demonstrated the manner in which Don DeLillo’s *Players* and *Running Dog* concur with Jean Baudrillard’s argument that “the law which is imposed on us by the situation itself and which we can call postmodern” is “the law of the confusion of genres and genders” (“Transpolitics, Transsexuality, Transaesthetics” 10). Both novels switch genres and both depict a disruption of gender roles. However, neither should be considered an indisputably postmodern text. For though *Players* and *Running Dog* are more deserving of this term than many other novels of DeLillo are, because they apply the cultural logic of late capitalism formally, we should still recognise DeLillo’s approach as dialectic. This is because DeLillo’s employment of genre is imbued with an ulterior motive: namely to demonstrate the loss of the referent as historical phenomenon and to point to postmodernism as the cultural manifestation of the latest wave of American imperialism. That he does so through the form of these novels indicates an acknowledgement that even resistance to postmodernism must be expressed through the logic of late capitalism – just as his references to famously simulational historical events also do. Furthermore, *Players* ends

with the eradication of the subjectivity of one of its central characters, in *Running Dog*, DeLillo is able to find a space for the individual within late capitalism. As Jameson demands that we “make some effort to think the cultural evolution of late capitalism dialectically, as catastrophe and progress altogether” (*Postmodernism* 47), so we can also witness this dialectic in *Running Dog*, as DeLillo also recognises the individual opportunities offered by postmodern culture. This he expresses through gender, as DeLillo demonstrates that the indeterminacy of the sign allows women, like Moll Robbins, to make and remake themselves, instead of submitting themselves to an older, pre-formed master narrative. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the pre-formed discourses employed by DeLillo in *Players* and *Running Dog*, the thriller and the western, are traditionally regarded as masculine narratives, for as the characters of Lyle Wynant and Glen Selvy demonstrates, belief in codes can result in the eradication of individual subjectivity. As DeLillo states in *Running Dog*, “All conspiracies begin with individual self-repression” (183).

The Language of History: *The Names* and The Iran Hostage Crisis

As *Americana* (1971) signalled DeLillo's move "out of Little Italy and into big America" (Gardarpe 176), so *The Names* signals another shift in his fiction, as DeLillo goes overseas, determined to take on late twentieth century geopolitics as well. Crucially, this new international focus allows DeLillo to develop his interrogation of the relationship of postmodern culture to American imperialism, begun in *Players* and *Running Dog*. This is one reason Arnold Weinstein has stated of *The Names* (1982) that it "is certain to gain in stature as DeLillo's novelistic status becomes clearer to us in the coming years" (289). As yet *The Names* is still overshadowed by the novel that immediately followed it, *White Noise* (1985), if we take as our point of comparison the amount of academic writing each has generated. This chapter, however, will attempt to support Weinstein's assessment of *The Names*, by demonstrating that it is a seminal text that grounds DeLillo's subsequent fiction. Tom LeClair calls *The Names*, DeLillo's "'breakthrough' book" because it was "more widely and positively reviewed than his previous works" (*In the Loop* 180). This chapter will endeavour to demonstrate that *The Names* also constitutes another kind of breakthrough: namely, DeLillo's use of a more "realistic" fiction to interrogate questions of epistemology, language and geopolitics to an unprecedented extent.

It is a primary argument of this chapter that *The Names* has frequently suffered from critical under-reading in the past. That is, readings of *The Names* have repeatedly rendered it as a metaphysical meditation on language, whilst ignoring the political ramifications and historical circumstances of the text. This is a common problem with criticism on DeLillo's fiction, for as Matthew J. Morris notes, reviewers often prefer "emphasizing the linguistic structures of his [DeLillo's] novels at the expense of their political implications" (113), but which seems particularly acute with regard to *The Names*. This critical emphasis on abstract discussions of language has been evident from the first, as early book reviews of *The Names*

indicate. For example, Josh Rubins suggests in the *New York Review of Books* that *The Names*'s "theme is spelled out in text-book bold: 'Could reality be phonetic, a matter of gutturals and dentals?'" (48), whilst David Bosworth tells us confidently in the *Boston Review* that "*The Names* is about 'naming', about language, about its irrational, emotive, almost mystical power" (30). The same approach is also evident amongst more extended academic criticism, as a glance at the titles of a few articles illustrate. For example, Paula Bryant's "Discussing the Untellable: Don DeLillo's *The Names*", Dennis A. Foster's "Alphabetic Pleasures: *The Names*", Matthew J. Morris's "Murdering Words: Language and Action in Don DeLillo's *The Names*" and Arnold Weinstein's "Don DeLillo: Rendering the Words of the Tribe."

Though the theoretical positions and critical vocabulary of these critics vary, their interrogations of DeLillo's treatment of language in *The Names* tend to rest on the same basic premise, that is, an interpretation of *The Names* as a quest for an authentic language. Critic Paula Bryant expresses this most explicitly: "In *The Names*, his most complex novel to date, DeLillo lures the reader on a labyrinthine trek through language itself, culminating in a radical final chapter, offered as a reaffirmative metafictional response to the serious questions about language the novel itself raises" ("Discussing the Untellable" 16). What makes this final chapter "reaffirmative" of language in Bryant's view, is that it inspires Jim Axton "to rewrite reality with the only medium available [...] writing" ("Discussing the Untellable" 29), and thus frees him from "an authoritarian world constructed from language which has become reductive and coercive" ("Discussing the Untellable" 16). Bryant's use of critical terms like "signifier and signified" ("Discussing the Untellable" 29), together with her frequent references to Michel Foucault, indicates that her critical position is indebted to the theories of post-structuralism. Thus for her, an authentic language is not one that allows us to escape from the prison house of language, because such escape is impossible. But Bryant's most significant point in terms of this chapter's argument, and one

that is not entirely consistent with her espousal of that post-structuralist tenet that “the world is created from the word” (“Discussing the Untellable” 29), is that this process of rewriting reality also allows “direct interchange between self and other” (“Discussing the Untellable” 29). The “fleeting, satisfying exchange” Bryant perceives between “writer and reader” in which “signifier and signified unite” (“Discussing the Untellable” 29), signals not only her belief in a human subjectivity that transcends language, but in the possibility of a “vital language” (“Discussing the Untellable” 29), that allows genuine connection between individuals.

Dennis A. Foster’s “Alphabetic Pleasures: Don DeLillo’s *The Names*”, like Bryant’s article, recognises a desire for an authentic language in *The Names*. But whereas Bryant expresses this language as one that allows genuine communication between subjects, Foster draws on the psychoanalytic theory of Julia Kristeva for his critical vocabulary and definitions. He renders the desire for authentic language in *The Names* as the urge to recover prelinguistic discourse, that is, “a use of language that functions without symbolic representation” (Foster 159). Foster argues that not only do the cultists attempt to recover this language in *The Names*: “Abecedarians reach toward the primal stuff of language” (159), but so also does James: “What Axton seeks in his pursuit of the cult, in looking for these alphabetic coincidences, is a method to get back to the first time of language, to circumvent reasonable thought and encounter the aural and alphabetic destiny of words: Axestone” (160). He cites James’s encounter with Janet Ruffing to illustrate this desire to recover a prelinguistic language: “He wants the words to take on solidity, become a part of the voice and mouth, shed the ordinary sense that screens language, just as the formal movements of belly dancing screen the body they display” (168). That Bryant also seizes on this incident to highlight the inadequacy of “conventional language” illustrates the deep similarity between her and Foster’s readings of *The Names*, despite their different critical vocabulary: “He recognizes that not only do Janet’s make-up and gauzy costume constitute

a mask that separates her body from his, even while pointing to it. So, too, does the self-reflective language they must use - conventional language is itself a mask, the old words molded into place by the press of connotation" (Bryant, "Discussing the Untellable" 21). But unlike Bryant, Foster argues that *The Names* does not depict the recovery, however brief, of an authentic language, stating instead that prelinguistic discourse remains a "lost pleasure" (172), that can only be gestured at by our systems.

Paul A. Maltby uses yet another set of critical vocabulary to describe the search for authentic language in *The Names* in his article "The Romantic Metaphysics of Don DeLillo". He draws on the language of Romantic and modernist literature, arguing that DeLillo's novels are driven by a desire to experience the "visionary moment, with all its pretensions to truth and transcendence" (259). At such a moment, he argues language "can reveal human existence in significant ways" (263). Like Foster, he interprets the actions of the cult as driven by a desire to recover such an authentic language: "people calling themselves 'abecedarians' (210) form a murder cult whose strategy is to match the initials of their victims' names to those of the place names where the murders occur - all in a misguided effort to restore a sense of the intrinsic or self-revealing significance of names" (Maltby 262-3). Maltby concludes that such moments of transcendent language are achieved in *The Names*: "one can hardly miss the novel's overall insistence on the spoken word - especially on talk at the familiar, everyday, pre-abstract level of communication - as the purest expression of primal visionary language" (263). But unlike Bryant, Maltby is careful to stress the important ramifications of such an argument for any interpretation of DeLillo's work: "the terms in which he identifies visionary experience in his fiction will be seen to align him closely with a Romantic sensibility that they must radically qualify any reading of him as a postmodern writer" (260).

Fredric Jameson recognises that the novel's interest in language can be interpreted in two different ways, in his review of *The Names*, either as an exploration of "post-

structuralist thematics” or as a “development of the theme of language or talking” (“Reviews” 120). Douglas Keesey’s approach seems closest to the latter, for it is resolutely untheorised. Nonetheless, Keesey’s interpretation resembles those others examined, for it also argues that DeLillo’s novel is characterised by its opposition of authentic and inauthentic language:

All around them, the business travelers hear the natives communicating in a language rooted in a common place of birth and a shared past. In not learning these people’s language or traditions, in speaking an abstract business English with its impersonal ways, the Westerners are losing touch with the basic joys of human life on earth: true involvement, meaningful conversation, the satisfaction of common desires. (*Don DeLillo* 120)

The tacit suppositions that found Keesey’s statement are that language is capable of allowing human subjects complete and full communication, that human subjectivity exists independently of language and that there is a universal human nature. But whatever critical position Keesey may write from, like Bryant and Maltby, he believes that DeLillo finally reaffirms our faith in language: “In reading Tap’s account of Owen’s life with his ‘flamboyant prose’ and ‘spirited misspellings’, James is able to get back in touch with his friends’, his son’s and his own emotions to rediscover language’s connection with an imperfect but aspiring humanity” (*Don DeLillo* 129). Once more, a critical reading of *The Names* reduces DeLillo’s novel to the search for and recovery of meaningful language.

The common attribute of this reaffirming, authentic language that each of these critics perceives as the object of DeLillo’s quest in *The Names* is its ability to connect with things outside itself. Thus, for example, whilst Bryant accepts that “the world is created from the word” (“Discussing the Untellable” 29), she does not accept that human subjectivity is constituted by language, proposing instead that the reaffirmed language of the final chapter of *The Names* allows reader and writer to connect. Maltby goes further than Bryant, arguing that in the “visionary moments” of language in *The Names*, language is able to refer outside itself and to become a means of understanding the things in the world, rather

than being merely a thing in the world itself. For Keesey, the least overtly theoretical of the critics discussed, authentic language is one that allows proper connection and understanding of other human subjects. Similarly, Dennis A. Foster depicts the desired language of *The Names* as one of absolute connection, as he draws on Kristeva's definition of prelinguistic discourse, where the word does not only refer to thing itself, but actually implies its physical presence.

That only one of these critics, Dennis A. Foster, argues that DeLillo does not depict the recovery of an authentic language, together with the emphasis these critics have placed on the referential qualities of language, makes their neglect of the political and historical conditions of this novel extremely surprising. One might expect such a reaffirmation of the ability of language to refer outside itself to prompt a critical reading of *The Names* that explores the material and historical conditions of the novel. Indeed, one argument most often employed against DeLillo and other so-called postmodern writers, like Robert Coover and John Barth, is that their fiction lacks political engagement *because* they subscribe to post-structuralist ideas of language. If reality is revealed as nothing more than the endless play and dissemination of texts, the argument goes, political commitment is impossible, for concepts such as value, justice and human rights, cannot survive this decentring. Thus, that Bryant, Maltby and Keesey reject this interpretation, at least implicitly, of DeLillo as a postmodern writer, suggests that they also reject this interpretation of DeLillo's novels as lacking political engagement. But neither Bryant nor Maltby discuss the political ramifications of *The Names*. Keesey does recognise *The Names*'s interest in colonialism, but by describing "the new era of multinational business" as marking "a return to the glorious days of nineteenth century imperialism, when countries like Great Britain held sway over much of the world" (*Don DeLillo* 118), he sidesteps any contemporary political implications. Rather than engaging with late twentieth century U.S. foreign policy, Keesey

renders DeLillo's concerns over American colonialism in terms of a long-dead, politically impotent empire.

Not all readings of *The Names*, however, have ignored the political implications of the novel. Matthew J. Morris's article, "Murdering Words: Language and Action in Don DeLillo's *The Names*", for example, recognises the over-emphasis many critics have placed on philosophical meditations on language at the expense of the political dimensions of this novel, and attempts to overcome it: "I hope therefore to show that instead of talking about the opposition between linguistic structure and worldly action in this novel, we should be talking about how different kinds of language permeate and motivate the novel's action" (113). And Morris does succeed to a certain extent, most importantly in demonstrating the similarities between the abecedarians and the CIA, two organisations that can be said to represent, respectively, the theme of language and of political power in *The Names*: "This scene [cult murder in India] dramatizes the ease with which the pursuit of knowledge, however, abstract, become allied with the abuse of power; in the following chapter the same point emerges on a larger scale when Jim learns that the Northeast Group actually collects information for the CIA" (Morris 114). Similarly, Arnold Weinstein recognises the similarities between the cult's activities and global politics: "the most vexing and arresting link between the secret language cult and the international business community is the common terror that informs both: terrorism as the new global fact of political and economic life, and violent death as the uncanny signature of the cult itself" (293). But what both Morris and Weinstein fail to explore is DeLillo's references to specific historical and political events in *The Names*. Just as Bryant, Maltby and Keesey discuss language in abstract, universalising terms, so Morris and Weinstein discuss politics only in general terms. In doing so, they ignore DeLillo's most audacious experiment, as he makes repeated reference to actual historical events within a novel that constantly questions whether language can ever authentically represent reality.

The Names is concerned with language, and with the broader epistemological questions such a concern entails. But it does not explore the philosophy of language in isolation. Rather *The Names* examines these themes within a very specific location and period. In doing so, DeLillo not only succeeds in creating a novel that is literally conscious of external political events, but also in creating a novel that raises questions of epistemology and language with regard to such events and our understanding of them. Much of the criticism examined on *The Names* has failed because the novel has been treated as an autonomous text. This chapter argues, however, that the extent of DeLillo's project in *The Names* can only be understood if the novel is subjected to an intertextual reading, where the "general discursive space that makes a text intelligible" (Culler, "Presupposition and Intertextuality" 106) is explored. As John Frow reminds us, no text is a "self-contained structure" ("Intertextuality and Ontology" 46), and this is especially the case with regard to *The Names*, where the text's central dilemma (Can language refer outside itself?), is played out through reference to actual historical events. Such an intertextual approach to *The Names* is fraught with difficulty, for the critic must always be wary of privileging the historical text as an authoritative narrative. Thus, this chapter will employ historical events to illuminate *The Names*, not as "moments of authority or points of origin" (Culler, "Presupposition and Intertextuality" 117), but as intertexts, whose "identification", in the words of John Frow, are "an act of interpretation [...] not a real and causative source but a theoretical construct formed by and serving the purposes of a reading" ("Intertextuality and Ontology" 46). Thomas Carmichael is right to cite Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* when he argues that "DeLillo's fiction should be read intertextually, or should be read in Fredric Jameson's terms as the 'rewriting of restructuring of a prior historical or ideological *subtext*, it being always understood that that "subtext" is not immediately present as such'" ("Lee Harvey Oswald and the Postmodern Subject" 205). But he is wrong to cite the most significant intertexts of this novel as Tap's story and Volterra's film.

Rather, this chapter argues that the most fruitful reading of *The Names* is to be found through the novel's historical intertexts.

This thesis has argued that *Americana*, *Players* and *Running Dog* historicise postmodern culture through reference to specific material events, most notably the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and American involvement in Vietnam. *The Names* goes a step further, being carefully and precisely plotted against the Iran Hostage Crisis. That *The Names* is set during a very specific time span has been noted by only a few critics. Josh Rubins mentions it: "The novel's casual references to its international timeframe - Iran and terrorism, 1979-1980 - are sufficient to suggest global ramifications" (48), as does Paul A. Harris: "Rather than unfolding a the development of a personal or political relationship over a sustained period, the book traces back through the events of a single year [...] At regular intervals, the narrative voice abruptly steps out of its present to register a sequence of global political developments" (196). Most significant is the manner in which DeLillo conveys this time scale, that is, in relation to the Muslim calendar and events in the Middle East. For instance, we know the novel begins in the summer of 1979 because James tells us that "This summer, the summer in which we sat on his broad terrace, was the period after the Shah left Iran, before the hostages were taken, before the Grand Mosque and Afghanistan" (66). Similarly, we are able to pinpoint Tap and Rajiv's visit to Athens to between 26th July 1979 and 24th August 1979, thanks to James's comment, "It's Ramadan" (88). A conversation with Charles Maitland can be ascertained as taking place in late November or early December 1979, by James's description of the flood of American citizens arriving in Athens: "They would come on scheduled flights out of Beirut, Tripoli, Baghdad, out of Islamabad and Karachi, out of Bahrain, Muscat, Kuwait and Dubai, the wives and children of businessmen and diplomats, causing room shortages in Athens hotels, adding stories, new stories all the time" (96). This mass exodus was the result of the U.S. government's instruction to its embassies in eleven Moslem countries on 27th November

1979, that they should begin a “voluntary drawdown” of diplomats’ families and nonessential personnel because of anti-American feeling in the Middle East and Asia. Similarly, DeLillo indicates that a relaxing day on the beach in Rhodes with David Keller and Lindsay takes place between 14th November 1979, when President Carter froze all official Iranian government assets in the U.S.A. and 24th April 1980, when Desert One, the abortive rescue mission to free the hostages held in Tehran, took place:

This was the period after the President ordered a freeze of Iranian assets held in U.S. banks. Desert One was still to come, the commando raid that ended two hundred and fifty miles from Tehran. It was the winter Rowser learned that the Shi’ite underground movement, Dawa, was stockpiling weapons in the Gulf. It was the winter before the car bombings in Nablus and Ramallah, before the military took power in Turkey, tanks in the street, soldiers painting over wall slogans. It was before Iraqi ground troops moved into Iran at four points along the border, before the oilfields burned and the sirens sounded through Baghdad, through Rashid Street and the passageways of the Souks, before the blackouts, the masking of headlights, people hurrying out of teahouses, off the double-decker buses. (233)

These are not the only references to external political events in *The Names*. But the cumulative effect of collating even these few examples is quite startling, as it becomes apparent just how carefully DeLillo has plotted the novel Bryant calls “language obsessed” (“Discussing the Untellable” 17) against actual global political events. The number of references prompts this chapter to cite these events and, in particular, the Iranian revolution and subsequent hostage crisis, as intertexts, for they signal a “general discursive space” that makes *The Names* intelligible in a manner not anticipated by criticism that interprets DeLillo’s novel in isolation.

The Iranian revolution and the subsequent hostage crisis, where 52 U.S. embassy staff were held by Iranian students in Tehran for 444 days from 4th November 1979, are the subject of repeated reference in *The Names*. Never dwelt on for more than half a page, these events nonetheless figure persistently as the backdrop against which the novel’s action and philosophical meditations are played out. For example, it is Iran that Eliades cites when discussing the “curious way Americans educate themselves” (58) through television: “Look,

this is Iran, this is Iraq. Let us pronounce the word correctly. E-ron. E-ronians. This is a Sunni, this is a Shi'ite. Very good" (58). Similarly, we discover that David Keller lives in Athens, because he was forced to leave his previous posting, Tehran, by the revolution. Even James is connected, for as a political risk analyst for the Middle East, he is responsible for collating information on the situation in Iran. The hostage crisis then, not only creates more paperwork for James: "It was the winter the hostages were taken in Tehran and Rowser put the entire section on duplicate. This meant all records had to be copied and sent to Athens" (143) but makes James acutely aware of the danger of being an American in certain regions of the world: "Our Iranian control was dead, shot by two men in the street" (143). Indeed, it is only against the background of the Iranian hostage crisis that the magnitude of David Keller's plan to put the drunk and unconscious American, Hardeman, on a plane to Tehran becomes apparent: not so much a prank, as a death sentence.

Thus, on one very basic level, the Iranian Hostage Crisis provides DeLillo with a platform to explore a crisis in American identity, signalled in the novel by the refrain, "Are they killing Americans? (45, 193). To be taken hostage or targeted because of nationality undermines traditional American assumptions about identity, because such actions treat subjects, not as individuals, but as ciphers, symbols of the nations whose passport they hold. Tony Tanner argues that these two contradictory definitions of subjectivity pervade American literature:

there is an abiding dream in American literature that an unpatterned, unconditioned life is possible, in which your movements and stillnesses, choices and repudiations are all your own; and that there is also an abiding American dread that someone else is patterning your life, that there are all sorts of invisible plots a foot to rob you of your autonomy of thought and action, that conditioning is ubiquitous. (*City of Words* 15)

Both the hostage crisis and *The Names* are permeated by these opposing definitions of identity. This is reflected, for example, in the contemporary media coverage of the hostage crisis. The U.S. media supported the definition of American subjectivity as autonomous and

self-made, by depicting the hostages as individuals, with families and unique personal histories, just as they would later do with victims of September 11th in the *New York Times*'s "Portraits of Grief", for example. By contrast, the Iranians were characterised as "a large anonymous mob, deindividualised, dehumanised" (Said, *Covering Islam* 95), sending a clear message: American subjectivity is distinguished by autonomy, whilst that of non-Americans is characterised by submission to a larger system. As such, the hostage crisis seemed an incomprehensible and cruel act, for as even Warren Christopher acknowledges, the hostage crisis can only be understood "against the background of gross and prolonged abuses by the Shah and the history of U.S. involvement with him" (27). In other words, the hostage crisis can only be understood once the hostages are interpreted as symbols of American intervention, that is, as expressions of a larger system. This is made explicit by advice of Christian Bourguet, a French lawyer, to President Carter:

You must understand that it is not against their person that the action is being taken. Of course, you can see that. They have not been harmed. They have not been hurt. No attempt has been made to kill them. You must understand that it is a symbol, that is on the plane of symbols that we have to think about this matter. (Said, *Covering Islam* XXVI)

The hostage crisis, thus, forced recognition that American identity, like that of the Iranian mob, is determined and conditioned by a larger pre-existing system.

Similarly, the American characters in *The Names* are compelled to recognise that their lives are not determined by their actions alone, as they recognise that their nationality has turned them into targets. This is reflected both in the comment: "Wasn't there a sense, we Americans felt, in which we had it coming?" (41) and in the assassination attempt on James:

Why was I standing rigid on a wooded hill, fists clenched, facing a man with a gun? The situation pressed me to recall. This was the only thing to penetrate that blank moment - an awareness I could not connect to things. The words would come later. The single word, the final item on the list.
American. (328)

James's realisation that this attack was prompted by his nationality forces an awareness, like that forced on the U.S. government, that even American identity may not be autonomous and self-made, but is instead conditioned by a larger code. Fredric Jameson labels the cult murders of *The Names* incomprehensible, stating that they are "absolutely meaningless for me" ("Reviews" 121). However, read in conjunction with the hostage crisis, it becomes clear that Jameson fails to understand the cult murders for the very same reason that America could not comprehend why Iranian students would hold U.S. citizens. That is, because both the U.S. and Jameson interpret these victims as individuals, rather than as symbols of a larger system. As the Hostage Crisis can be comprehended once the American hostages are read as ciphers representing the U.S.A., so the cult murders can only be understood once their victims are interpreted as expressions of a larger system – language. This affinity between the Hostage Crisis and the cult killings in *The Names* is revealed by DeLillo's description of the cult murders as "A death by system, by machine intellect" (175), for both the targeting of individuals by nationality and by alphabetic correspondence deny their victims a unique and individual subjectivity. It is no coincidence that DeLillo refers to a "cult murder in northern Iran" (174), for the cult murders are another manifestation of the assumption that lies behind both the Hostage Crisis in Iran and the other political killings mentioned in *The Names*: namely, that individuals are not autonomous, but are created and conditioned by a larger system - be it language or geopolitics.

This "abiding American dread" that identity may always be programmed by an existing ideology or culture, pervades all of DeLillo's novels, from Gary Harkness's struggle to create a self outside the framework of American football in *Endzone* (1972), to Karen Janney's choice between an explicitly controlled life in the Moonies, or an implicitly conditioned identity in "mainstream" America in *Mao II* (1991). It can also be witnessed in DeLillo's obsession with crowds, in which individuals are literally lost, an obsession most

apparent in *Mao II*, but which also surfaces, for example, in the baseball games of *Underworld* (1997) and the descriptions of Nazi rallies in *White Noise* (1985). That DeLillo's interest in issues of identity predates *The Names* is significant, for indicates that the Iranian hostage crisis is not, in Frow's words, "a real and causative source" of this novel, but rather that it functions as an intertext. We may not cite the Iranian hostage crisis as an origin for *The Names*, but we can argue that both are preconditioned by the same "general discursive space". John Frow argues that:

Intertextual analysis is distinguished from source criticism both by its stress on interpretation rather than the establishment of particular facts, and by its rejection of unilinear causality (the concept of influence) in favour of an account of the work performed upon intertextual material and its functional integration in the later text. ("Intertextuality and Ontology" 46)

The identification of the hostage crisis as an intertext of *The Names* demonstrates just such an analysis, for not only can we recognise important affinities between the hostage crisis and DeLillo's novel (both illustrate conflicting conceptions of identity, for example) but *The Names* can also be interpreted as internalising a critique of the hostage crisis, as James's comments on the targeting of American citizens reveal:

America is the world's living myth. There's no sense of wrong when you kill an American or blame America for some local disaster. This is our function, to be character types, to embody recurring themes that people can use to comfort themselves, justify themselves and so on. We're here to accommodate. Whatever people need, we provide. A myth is a useful thing. (114)

Thus, the identification of the hostage crisis as an intertext of *The Names* does not stem principally from DeLillo's explicit references to the event. Rather this identification is prompted by an interpretation that recognises both that *The Names* and the hostage crisis can be subjected to the same critical analysis, and that *The Names* also internalises an critique of the cultural codes that shaped America's reaction to the hostage crisis.

But as the hostage crisis echoes DeLillo's obsession with the individual and the crowd, it also brings to the fore another of DeLillo's favourite themes: the growth of the

electronic media and the subsequent “loss of the real”. Though perhaps overlooked now in discussions of “media events”, in favour of the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Watergate or the Gulf War, the Iran Hostage Crisis did mark a significant moment in the development of the electronic media. Not only did the crisis receive massive coverage as Christopher Andrew tells us (“the hostage crisis had more intensive coverage than any event since the Second World War, even including Vietnam” (449)) but new technology meant that news and pictures could be relayed faster than ever before. The intensity of the coverage and the speed with which it reached the United States led to a situation where, in the words of Edward Said “Iran seemed to be *in* American lives, and yet deeply alien from it, with unprecedented intensity” (Said, *Covering Islam* 25). It is against the background of such instant and blanket coverage of global events that the experience of Kathryn’s dad in *The Names* can be understood:

Most of his anger came from TV. All that violence, crime, political cowardice, government deception, all that appeasement, that official faintheartedness. It rankled, it curled him into a furious ball, a fetus of pure rage. The six o’clock news, the seven o’clock news, the eleven o’clock news. He sat there collecting it, doubled up with his tapioca pudding. The TV set was a rage-making machine, working at him all the time, giving him direction and scope, enlarging him in a sense, filling him with a world rage, a great stalking soreness and rancor. (178)

The instantaneous nature of the modern media, as noted by Said, collapses geographical distances, creating a “world rage” as television makes all its events seem simultaneously present. Furthermore, the presence of the TV set in the domestic sphere, alongside “tapioca pudding”, personalises conflicts. Just as the US hostages were depicted by the American media, not as symbols of American intervention in Iran, but as innocent individuals, so the insertion of global politics into the home ensures that individuals, like Kathryn’s dad, interpret events not in terms of larger systems, but as personal affronts.

But as well as relaying news from Tehran, the media also shaped and participated in those events. Deborah Holmes notes, for example, that “often Iran and the United States

addressed each other only through the media” (74). Furthermore, not only did the student hostage takers often “schedule ‘events’ to meet satellite deadlines and nightly news broadcasts in the United States” (Said, *Covering Islam* 76), but they gave interviews to CBS’s “Sixty Minutes” in favour of PBS’s “MacNeil-Lehrer Report”, because the former had higher ratings (Holmes 56). These examples demonstrate the manner in which media representation of events during the hostage crisis actually came to subsume the events themselves, for events were self-consciously enacted *only in order* that they be reproduced on American television screens. This development has important ramifications, not least with regard to the manner in which reality is conceived, for as Jean Baudrillard states of this new electronic age: “The very definition of real becomes: that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction” (“Simulations” 186). DeLillo’s interest in the impact of media reproduction on reality is well known, for it is a central issue in his most widely studied novel, *White Noise*. But significantly, this interest is prefigured in *The Names*. Just as the plane passengers in *White Noise* feel that they survived a near plane crash “for nothing” (92), on discovering that it will not be reported in the press, for example, so James Axton meets an Irishman who complains “that he kept walking into scenes of destruction and bloodshed that never got reported” (194). Like the plane passengers of *White Noise*, the Irishman is not concerned about his personal safety – “the death itself seemed not so much to matter” (194) – but rather that his death might not be covered, and thus “as though the thing had never happened” (194). Both the Irishman and the plane passengers of *White Noise*, like the Iranian students in Tehran, subscribe to Baudrillard’s definition of hyperreality, where only reproduction in the media can authenticate their experiences.

Again, we should not regard the media coverage of the Iran hostage crisis as a means of *explaining* DeLillo’s interest in this issue in *The Names*. Rather, what is significant is the manner in which *The Names* internalises an interpretation of the impact of the press that can usefully be applied to the Iran hostage crisis. Not only can this be detected

in DeLillo's description of the Irishman's experiences; a direct commentary on the behaviour of the American press regarding the Middle East is also provided by the Greek, Eliades:

I think it's only in a crisis that Americans see other people. It has to be an American crisis, of course. If two countries fight that do not supply the Americans with some precious commodity, then the education of the public does not take place. But when the dictator falls, when the oil is threatened, then you turn on the television and they tell you where the country is, what the language is, how to pronounce the names of the leaders, what the religion is all about, and maybe you can cut out recipes in the newspaper of Persian dishes. I will tell you. The whole world takes an interest in this curious way Americans educate themselves. TV. Look, this is Iran, this is Iraq. Let us pronounce the word correctly. E-ron. E-ronians, This is a Sunni, this is a Shi"ite. Very good. Next year we do the Philippine Islands, okay? (58)

But Eliades's comments are most significant because they introduce a crucial political dimension to Baudrillard's definition of hyperreality, where "the real is not only what can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced" ("Simulations"186), by reminding us that such reproduction and representation has hitherto been a prerogative of the West. Eliades's comments thus carry important ramifications: not only do they demonstrate DeLillo's political engagement with specific historic events, but they also signal DeLillo's determination to politicise one of the tenets of postmodernism.

Most importantly Eliades's interest in American cultural and economic imperialism signals another point of connection between *The Names* and the Iranian hostage crisis. America's relationship with Iran before the revolution typifies the pattern of U.S. intervention overseas. Never formalised or institutionalised in the manner that the imperialism of Britain or France was in the nineteenth century, American domination has always been, in the words of Edward Said, "insular" with "no longstanding tradition of direct rule overseas" (*Culture and Imperialism* 350). Such was the case with Iran, where America had periodically intervened since the 1950s, when it reinstated the Shah on the throne. Since that time the United States's relationship with Iran had to a large extent been

an economic one, determined by that most precious of commodities, oil. However, more insidious, political intervention should also be noted: the CIA, for example, trained and equipped SAVAK, the notorious Iranian secret police, whilst, in return for the sale of arms, the Shah allowed the U.S. to station listening devices along Iran's border with the U.S.S.R. We should thus interpret the Iranian revolution's rejection of Western law and morality, and its very vocal hostility to the United States, as the rejection of a coloniser and its culture. Furthermore, the hostage crisis itself should be interpreted as a direct consequence of American imperialism, because the storming of the U.S. embassy in Tehran was prompted by the perception that the U.S. was again interfering in Iran's domestic politics.

The Names points explicitly to the issue of American intervention overseas, not least in its very setting in the "strategically located" (236) Greece, the site of covert U.S. action for years. A number of its characters, James Axton, David Keller and George Rowser, for example, are also businessmen directly involved in the activities of Western multinational companies in the middle east, whilst DeLillo makes the connection between economic and political colonialism clear when the business for which James works is revealed to be supplying the CIA with information. Similarly, Eliades, voicing the complaints of another of America's unofficial colonies, Greece, explicitly links political and economic imperialism:

Our future does not belong to us. It is owned by Americans. The Sixth Fleet, the men who command the bases on our soil, the military officers who fill the U.S. embassy, the political officers who threaten to stop the economic aid, the businessmen who threaten to stop investing, the bankers who lend money to Turkey. [...] The bidet of America we call this place. Do you want to hear the history of foreign interference in this century alone? (236-7)

That *The Names* insists we should recognise economic imperialism overseas as just as invidious as the more visible imperialism of the nineteenth century is also made clear by the comparisons drawn between the two. Charles Maitland comments "more than once" that the experience of the Western businessmen is "like the Empire" (7), whilst a description of the

guard outside the Mainland Bank in Lahore, indicates that the accoutrements of the institutionalised imperialism of the nineteenth century can be used to disguise its lingering economic legacy:

An elderly turbaned fellow with enormous drooping moustache, a tunic and pajama pants, a curved dagger in his sash and a pair of pointed slippers. A relative of the doorman at the Hilton. The outfit seemed intended to register in people's minds the hopeful truth that colonialism was a tourist ornament now, utterly safe to display in public. The foreign bank he guarded was a co-survivor of the picturesque past, exerting no more influence than the man himself. (269)

Furthermore, DeLillo does not only draw on images of European imperialism: as in *Players* and *Running Dog*, *The Names* is peppered with references to cowboys. This is illustrated by a conversation between businessmen Dick Borden and David Keller:

"Topper," Dick Borden said. "That was Hopalong Cassidy's horse."
David said, 'Hopalong Cassidy? I'm talking about *cowboys*, man. Guys who got down there in the shit and the muck. Guys with broken-down rummy sidekicks."
"Hoppy had a sidekick. He chewed tobacky." (56)

These references remind us both that the attention of American frontiersmen has been drawn overseas now the West is won, and that this new global capitalism is a peculiarly American phenomenon. But most importantly, these references to Westerns in *The Names* indicate, as they do in *Running Dog*, DeLillo's interest in the coloniser's representation of its own imperialist activities.

The Iran hostage crisis should not be regarded as the privileged or authoritative narrative from which *The Names* originates. However, it is worth noting that the events in Tehran brought the issue of the United States's intervention overseas forcibly to the fore, injecting DeLillo's interest in imperialism with a specific historic relevance. Once more *The Names* can be interpreted as a critique of the cultural codes that shaped America's activities overseas in the late seventies. Furthermore, this is not limited to the occasional explicit references to the hostage crisis and imperialism in *The Names*; it also applies to DeLillo's more extended meditation on the impact of colonialism. Indeed, striking parallels can be

observed between the novel's mediations on language and the issues raised by the hostage crisis. As the critics examined above have all noted, *The Names* questions the ability of language to represent reality: what the hostage crisis brought into sharp relief was the ability of the West to represent the reality of non-Western cultures. In other words, the United States's handling of the Iranian hostage crisis can be interpreted as the living embodiment of the central philosophical question of DeLillo's novel – can language authentically represent reality?

A central tenet of post-colonial theory is that representation itself has hitherto been a prerogative of the political and cultural power of the West. The colonised have therefore only been known – to the West at least – through Western representation. Furthermore, these representations have often been drawn, not from contact with the colonised or their culture, but from other images produced by the West. These images often characterise the colonised as the “other” of the West: in other words, they function to define the coloniser's identity, rather than the identity of the colonised. As such these representations preclude the West from ever “knowing” the colonised – just as the Western and the myth of the frontier preclude us from knowing pre-Columbian America. This phenomenon can be witnessed in *The Names* in DeLillo's description of the casual Orientalism of business travellers:

All these places were one-sentence stories to us. Someone would turn up, utter a sentence about foot-long lizards in his hotel room in Niamey, and this became the solid matter of the place, the means we used to fix it in our minds. The sentence was effective, overshadowing deeper fears, hesitations, a rife disquiet. There was around us almost nothing we knew as familiar and safe. Only our hotels rising from the lees of perennial renovation. The sense of things was different in such a way that we could only register the edges of some elaborate secret. (94)

Not only are these travellers incapable of understanding other societies except through the stories of other Westerners, but the impact of their representations is always to reduce and contain foreign cultures. The Iranian hostage crisis exemplifies the epistemological problem raised by colonialism, as indeed, Edward Said's decision to devote an entire book to it,

Covering Islam, indicates. The United States's understanding of Iran both before and after the revolution was characterised by ignorance and misinterpretation. Even those Americans involved with Iran as representatives of the U. S. government, for example, succeeded only in illustrating one of post-colonialism's central arguments: namely, that what the West knows about the non-Western world it knows "in the framework of colonialism" (Said, *Covering Islam* 155). Like the business travellers in *The Names* who rely on the stories of other Westerners to understand foreign cultures, so the U.S. government knew little about Iran other than what other Western sources could tell it. As Gary Sick states:

The United States, over a period of nearly a decade, had permitted its own contacts in Iranian society to be concentrated almost exclusively on the court; the Western-educated elite and official relations with military and security institutions. Very few experienced officers in the embassy could speak the local language, and there was virtually no contact with merchants of the bazaar, let alone the clergy. (66)

The result of this "framework of colonialism" was America's complete misinterpretation of events in Iran, as illustrated by the CIA report of August 1978 that stated that Iran was not in a "revolutionary or even pre-revolutionary situation" (Andrew 439). *The Names* has usually been interpreted as a novel that questions the relationship of words and things: the Iranian Revolution and the subsequent hostage crisis literally forced the U.S.A. to recognise a dislocation between the two, for the language of the CIA and official government reports bore no relation to the events in Iran.

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith and Helen Tiffin remind us in *The Empire Writes Back* that colonial power is sustained through language: "Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of "truth", "order", and "reality" become established" (7). Both the Iranian Hostage Crisis and *The Names* support this correlation between language, representation and imperialism. In *The Names*, for example, Eliades recognises that

knowledge and power are intimately connected, as the following conversation with James illustrates:

“This is interesting to me, the curious connection between Greek and American intelligence agencies.”

“Why curious?”

“The Greek government doesn’t know what goes on between them.”

“What makes you think the American government knows? This is the nature of intelligence, isn’t it? The final enemy is government. Only government threatens their existence.”

“The nature of power. The nature of intelligence.” (236-7)

This correlation between knowledge and power is also revealed by the story of Rawlinson, an employee of the East India Company, and his efforts to decipher cuneiform writing. Owen interprets it as an example of “how far men will go to satisfy a pattern, or find a pattern, or fit together the elements of a pattern” (80). Kathryn, by contrast, interprets Rawlinson’s activities, not as the rarefied pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, but as an attempt to “subdue and codify” (80). Like Foucault she recognises that:

truth isn’t outside power, or lacking in power; contrary to a myth whose history and functions would repay further study, truth isn’t the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded on liberating themselves. Truth is a ‘thing’ of this world, it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. (“Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” 379).

In other words, Kathryn understands that the appropriation of a colonised’s language or culture into the institutions of Western knowledge is a strategy of domination. The Iran Hostage crisis similarly illustrates this relationship of language, power and imperialism, though negatively. Unlike Rawlinson, U.S. officials in Tehran generally could not read Persian, nor did they involve themselves in Iranian culture. This inability to read the situation in Iran led literally to American loss of control in the region. They were unable either to properly interpret the situation or to appropriate Iranian culture into Western systems of knowledge. Lacking mastery over Iran’s native languages, the U.S.A. was thus unable to “subdue and codify” the Iranian revolution.

The impact of the United States's very public intelligence failure over the Iran hostage crisis was to create an *awareness* of the inability of Western systems of knowledge to comprehend non-Western cultures. This confirms the position of the Iran hostage crisis as one of a series of events, including, of course, the Vietnam War, that forced America to recognise that its values were not universal. Examination of Western accounts of the crisis reveals this same theme repeatedly, as, for example, Abraham A. Ribicoff's description of the hostage crisis illustrates:

It was a time when our antagonists refused even to acknowledge the existence of basic norms that all nations had hitherto considered sacrosanct. The very premises of traditional international diplomacy were thrown to the winds [...] In similar crises in the future, it will be wrong and indeed dangerous to assume that the other actors are motivated by the kinds of forces that shape American behaviour. (395)

Ribicoff's use of the term "basic norms" is most significant, for what the hostage crisis demonstrated, was the fallacious nature of this concept, as Iran's behaviour revealed these "basic norms" as cultural constructs of the West. Gary Sick recognises this explicitly:

Those of us who are products of Western cultural tradition - even if our national origins are in Africa or Asia share certain assumptions that are so firmly ingrained that they no longer require discussion but are regarded as natural law [...] The participation of the church in a revolutionary movement was neither new or particularly disturbing, but the notion of a popular revolution leading the establishment of a theocratic state seemed so unlikely as to be absurd. (164)

This sense that the hostage crisis undermined Western systems of knowledge is reiterated by other accounts. Christopher Andrew, for example, recognises that America's failure to predict the Iranian revolution stemmed from the inability of Western epistemologies to accommodate the very concept of a theocratic state: "the appeal of his [Ayatollah Khomeini] call for the establishment of a religious philosopher king, the *velayat-e faqih*, was almost beyond the understanding of the secularized West" (440). Similarly, Edward Said reminds us that the Iranian revolution simply could not be accounted for by Western political theory: "the people who overthrew the Shah were similarly not explainable

according to the canons of behaviour presupposed by modernisation theory” (*Covering Islam* 29). But the most telling response was that of Harold H. Saunders, then Assistant Secretary of State for the Near East and South Asia, who states that on hearing of Hostage Crisis: “I found myself asking ‘Is the world unraveling?’” (35). As Saunders’s comments reveal, the Iran hostage crisis fundamentally disrupted many of the assumptions that found conceptions of reality in the West.

Significantly, DeLillo also depicts contact with non-Western cultures as resulting in an undermining of faith in Western thought and philosophy in *The Names*. This signalled clearly in Owen’s experiences in India:

Owen tried intently to collect information, make sense of this. There were coconuts, monkeys, peacocks, burning charcoal. In the sanctum was a black marble image of Lord Shiva, four-faced, gleaming. Who were these people, more strange to him than the millennial dead? Why couldn’t he place them in some stable context? Precision was one of the raptures he allowed himself, the lyncean skill for selection and detail, the Greek gift, but here it was useless, overwhelmed by the powerful rush of things, the raw proximity and lack of common measure. (280)

Here DeLillo explicitly represents Western thought, “the Greek gift”, not as an objective system of knowledge capable of dissecting and comprehending reality accurately, but as an ineffective tool, unable to accommodate or comprehend anything but its own cultural products. This decentring of Western thought is most commonly associated with the post-structuralist school of philosophy, and in particular, with Jacques Derrida’s dismantling of logocentrism, where Western thought is conceived not as based on a fixed origin or transcendental centre that guarantees meaning, but instead as subject to a play of meaning. *The Names* can be read as a novel that explores this new awareness of the absence of a centre that could found Western systems of knowledge, an interpretation that gives the novel’s setting in Greece, the birthplace of Western philosophy, special relevance. This can be witnessed, for example, in the experience of DeLillo’s business travellers, as contact

with non-Western cultures forces them to recognise “truth” as a function of culture, as relative and not absolute:

It seemed we'd lost our capacity to select, to ferret out particularity and trace it to some center which our minds could relocate in knowable surroundings. There was no equivalent core. The forces were different, the orders of response eluded us. Tenses and inflections. Truth was different, the spoken universe, and men with guns were everywhere. (94)

Here DeLillo even employs the same terminology as Derrida, referring to a “center” that could guarantee meaning. Furthermore, as Derrida argues that in the absence of a fixed origin “everything became discourse” (279), so DeLillo depicts the new, confusing reality that faces these Western travellers as constituted in language: “Tenses and inflections”, “the spoken universe”. Similarly, Charles Maitland’s comments to James, that “They keep changing the names [...] The names we grew up with. The countries, the images. Persia for one. We grew up with Persia. What a vast picture that name evoked” (239) indicates this same sense that Western systems of signification are no longer guaranteed, but as a result of contact with non-Western sources, are subject to disruption and slippage.

This disruption of language, where the absence of a transcendental centre or fixed origin introduces play of meaning, can also be witnessed in the Iran hostage crisis. The U.S. government’s very public intelligence failure over Iran, for example, signalled clearly a dislocation between language and reality. Similarly, Iran itself seemed constantly to introduce doubt and ambiguity, as President Jimmy Carter discovered when trying to fix Khomeini’s words:

There is some confusion about what Khomeini actually said – ‘if the shah is not returned, the hostages could be tried’ or ‘will be tried’. We tried to get the Farsi or Persian-language version, to translate it ourselves for more accuracy. Later it turned out that he said different things to different interviewers. Diary, July 31, 1980 (Carter 465)

This leads Warren Christopher to depict Iran in terms of absence, as “a composite, with no settled voice or identity” (6), just as David Keller does in *The Names*: “Iran is different. Collapsed presence, collapsed business. A black hole in other words” (233). But the

inability of Western vocabulary to contain the events in Tehran can be witnessed most clearly in the West's designation of the Hostage Crisis as a "lawless act" (Christopher 10). Not only has international law largely been conceived and constructed by the West, but it is also literally constituted in language. Thus by committing a "lawless act", Iran literally put itself outside the boundaries of Western language. This was manifested in the format of the final settlement documents, as the U.S. was literally forced by the particular linguistic difficulties of the hostage crisis to abandon its traditional legal format. As Warren Christopher writes: "It was clear that long and complicated documents could not easily survive translation into French and farsi, nor were such documents likely to be comprehended in Tehran. Therefore, the settlement documents were short and simple" (21). Furthermore, Iran's "lawless act" had other implications, because as Jay Clayton reminds us in *The Pleasures of Babel*, the function of law is "both to restrict meaning and itself be meaningful" (14). In other words, the function of law in the West is to act as a centre that limits play. The Hostage Crisis then forced the U.S. to recognise that law, like language, is not guaranteed by a fundamental, absolute and transcendental centre, but that it operates only through consensus. Warren Christopher makes this point explicitly:

Ultimately, the release of the hostages came about in a substantial part because Iran found itself completely isolated in the world community _ not because other countries were necessarily friendly to the United States, but because they almost universally were offended by at Iran's transgressions against international law. In that sense, while it took time, obedience to the Vienna conventions was imposed not legally through a judicial forum but diplomatically by the countries of the world. (11)

This interpretation of both DeLillo's novel and the Iranian Hostage Crisis as depictions of a breakdown of Western thought can also be witnessed in their undermining of polarised modes of thought. Such binary oppositions are inextricably linked to logocentrism, as the twofold opposition of centre and structure itself illustrates. Thus, just as the Iran hostage crisis and *The Names* illustrate the decentering of Western thought through the disruption of signification, so they undermine its binary oppositions. The

thought patterns of James's boss and CIA frontman, George Rowser, for example, are explicitly described in binary terms:

“How does his mind work?”
“On-off, zero-one.” (97)

Significantly, however, Rowser is finally forced to resign by the events in Iran, which he describes as “Developments no one could have foreseen” (268), as his binary structures of thought are finally revealed as inadequate to accommodate the events in Tehran. This can also be witnessed in America's attitude to the hostage crisis, for this event exploded the polarised oppositions that had hitherto structured Western knowledge. As we are reminded in *Rise to Globalism*, the U.S. government found it extremely difficult to understand that Iran did not conform to either of the contemporary dominant political systems: “Accustomed, like its predecessors to thinking exclusively in terms of the Cold War, it [the Carter administration] was unable to adjust to a fundamentalist religious revolution that denounced the United States and the Soviet Union equally” (Ambrose and Brinkley 296). The Iran hostage crisis, like September 11th, thus forced the U.S.A. to recognise the limitations of its vocabulary, for the oppositions of East and West, capitalist and communist, USA and USSR, could not encompass or accurately represent the political reality of the middle east. Here again, the physical location of *The Names* is significant, for Greece literally bounds many of the binary oppositions, such as East and West, Christian and Muslim, Communist and Capitalist, that were undermined by the Iranian revolution and subsequent hostage crisis.

But one of the most important affinities between DeLillo's novel and the manner in which the Iranian hostage crisis revealed the limitations of Western thought can be witnessed in the role of the CIA in each. DeLillo has repeatedly figured the CIA as performing the role of centre or fixed origin in his fiction. In *Libra* (1988), for example, the CIA is referred to as “the best organized church in the Christian world, a mission to collect

and store everything that everyone has ever said and then reduce it to a microdot and call it God” (260). Similarly, in *The Names*, DeLillo argues that the CIA performs the same role for Americans, as the U.S. does for the rest of the world, namely, that of a centre of knowledge and certainty:

If America is the world’s living myth, then the CIA is America’s myth. All the themes are there, in tiers of silence, whole bureaucracies of silences, in conspiracies and doublings and brilliant betrayals. The agency takes on shapes and appearances, embodying whatever we need at a given time to know ourselves or unburden ourselves. (317)

In other words, DeLillo repeatedly figures the CIA as the fixed origin that ultimately determines truth. However, as he repeatedly decentres logocentric thought in his novels, so he is also careful to reveal the CIA as fraudulent, as he makes explicit in *Libra*:

He [Nicholas Branch] thought they’d [CIA] built a vast theology, a formal coded body of knowledge that was basically play material, secret-keeping, one of the keener pleasures and conflicts of childhood. Now he wonders if the Agency is protecting something very much like its identity - protecting its truth, its theology of secrets. (442)

The impact of the Iran hostage crisis was also to reveal, quite literally, the fallibility of this secular God. For example, despite having more agents per capita in Tehran than anywhere else in the world (Ambrose and Brinkley 295), the CIA completely failed to predict the Iranian revolution. The CIA had suffered similar intelligence failures in the past, notably the Bay of Pigs, which DeLillo refers to in *Libra*, but the crucial difference with regard to Iran was that this failure became public knowledge. A note written by President Jimmy Carter to Cyrus Vance, Zbigniew Brzezinski and Stan Turner, stating that he was “dissatisfied with the quality of political intelligence” (Andrew 439) was leaked to the press, setting off a debate about U.S. intelligence capabilities that continued for more than a year. Thus, the Iranian revolution made the limitations of the CIA publicly known, forcing a recognition that the perception of the CIA as holder of secrets was only “America’s myth”, and that the CIA, in fact, was incapable of determining truth or guaranteeing meaning. This sense of an absence or vacuum at the heart of U.S. government would be compounded in later years by

the Iran-Contra affair – itself an indirect consequence of the hostage crisis of 1979/81 – when the President of the United States, Ronald Reagan, would retain office by arguing, not that he was a centre of authority and knowledge, but that he was ignorant.

In contrast to the failure of the West's "secular god", both *The Names* and the Iran hostage crisis associate Eastern religion with fixed and stable meaning – just as DeLillo later does in *Mao II*. In *The Names*, for example, James recognises that the Islamic states of the Middle East are characterised by absolute certainties: "These Mideast societies are at a particular pitch right now. There's no doubt or ambiguity. They burn with a clear vision" (115). Similarly, Gary Sick characterises the *weltanschauung* of Islamic Iran as one in which "events are perceived as neither random nor aimless: rather they must be understood as purposeful to some grand scheme or strategy, however difficult it may be to fathom" (33). Indeed, even the term "fundamentalist" should signal the West's association of strong religious faith and the fixed certainties, echoing as it does Derrida's definition of logocentric thought as "the concept of a play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude" (279). Furthermore, both *The Names* and the Western response to the Iran hostage crisis also associate religion with a stable and fixed language. *The Names* is littered with references to ancient religious texts carved in stone, where alphabets and language have become literally immutable. Similarly, the function of Iran's new religious leader was literally to determine meaning and limit play in language, as Edward Said explains: "the new Iranian constitution specified a *faqih* as the nation's guide, a *faqih* being, not a philosopher king, as the media seemed to believe, but literally a master of *fiqh*, of jurisprudential hermeneutics - in other words, a great reader" (*Covering Islam* 62). But most significantly, both *The Names* and the Iranian hostage crisis depict strong religious faith as antithetical to Western society. James is unnerved by the faith of others in God: "these streams of belief made me uneasy" (146), whilst the West regarded Iran's Islamic fundamentalism with suspicion: "To Westerners and

Americans, 'Islam' represents a resurgent atavism, which suggests not only the threat of a return to the middle ages but the destruction of what is regularly referred to as the democratic order in the Western world" (Said, *Covering Islam* 51). Furthermore, the unease provoked by strong religious faith, observable in both *The Names* and the hostage crisis, indicates the West's perception of its own values and structures as fluid and uncertain, for as Edward Said notes the West constructs Islam as its "other" and opposite: "another aspect of the public image of Islam in the new geo-political intellectual setting is that it is invariably found in a confrontational relationship with whatever is normal, Western, everyday, 'ours'" (38). In other words, the West's construction of the values of Islamic society as centred and absolute, implies that it perceives its own values as decentred and relative.

Related to the West's attitude towards religion is its conception of individual identity. This is significant because the idea of a unified, autonomous subjectivity is another manifestation of logocentric thought, as Derrida makes clear when citing examples of the fixed origins that have dominated Western philosophy: "It could be shown that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated an invariable presence – *eidōs, arche, telos, energeia, ousia*, (essence, existence, substance, subject) *aletheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man and so forth" (280). Paradoxically, however, though strong religious faith is itself a manifestation of logocentrism, it can actually undermine this logocentric conception of individual identity as autonomous and self-determined. This is because religious faith entails a belief in an external fixed origin that determines the world and also the self. As such, religious faith can be seen as inevitably reducing subjects to expressions of a system. This attitude can be witnessed in the Western media's persistent equation of Islamic fundamentalism with chanting mobs, in which subjects are perceived to have surrendered their autonomy to a larger code. Of course, religious fundamentalism also exists in the West, but as Said states,

few Western commentators “decrying the apparent upsurge in Islamic religiosity connected it to the upsurge in the United States of television religions numbering many millions of adherents, or to the fact that two of the three major presidential candidates in the 1980 election were enthusiastic born-again Christian” (*Covering Islam* 30). The reluctance of America to recognise its own religious fundamentalism in the same terms as that of Iran must stem therefore from its cherished conception of American identity as autonomous and unconditioned – a conception inconsistent with the implications of strong religious belief.

This equation of religious faith and loss of individuality can also be witnessed in *The Names*, for as Owen’s statement reveals: “Masses of people scare me. Religion. People driven by the same powerful emotion” (24), DeLillo intimately connects strong religious faith with the crowd, that emblem of the loss of self in his fiction. Furthermore, Owen makes this connection between the erosion of individual identity and religion even more explicit, as he employs the language of religion to describe his experience in an Indian crowd: “Was it a grace to be there, to lose oneself in the mortal crowd, surrendering, giving oneself over to mass awe, to disappearance in others?” (285). DeLillo also depicts religion in terms of individual submission to another’s language. Not only can we witness this in *Mao II* in the behaviour of the crowd at the Moonie wedding: “They chant for one language, one word, for the time when the names are lost” (16) but in Owen’s memories of glossolalia, where the individual’s language is literally substituted for that of the “spirit”, with the result that “Normal understanding is surpassed, the self and its machinery obliterated.” (307). That DeLillo depicts Owen finally accepting designation as a Christian, “simply by way of fundamental identification” (281), is significant, because it indicates his acknowledgement, like that of James regarding his nationality, that American identity is not distinguished from that of the East by its autonomy, but that it must also submit to larger codes and systems.

Thus, both *The Names* and the Iranian Hostage Crisis forced a relativisation of Western thought and philosophy, as its certainties are revealed, not as absolutes, but as cultural constructs. Derrida figures this decentring as stemming from within Western thought itself, citing the works of Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger (280) as catalysts. In contrast, DeLillo seems to situate this rupture historically in *The Names*, depicting its cause as Western contact with non-Western systems of knowledge. This is extremely significant, for here DeLillo would seem to support Fredric Jameson's position, who calls for just such a historicising of post-structuralist theory in *The Political Unconscious*: "it would be desirable for those who celebrate the discovery of the Symbolic to reflect on the historical conditions of possibility of this new and specifically modern sense of the linguistic, semiotic, textual constructions of reality" (63). This move is essential if any kind of critical distance or political resistance is to be achieved in late capitalism. But as Jameson also recognises, this move is fraught with difficulty, because it faces an "an enormously complex representational dialectic" (*Postmodernism* 54). DeLillo is clearly aware of this representational difficulty in *The Names*, as the continual questioning of the referential abilities of language and the validity of historical narratives, alongside reference to actual political events, illustrates. Thus, not only does *The Names* explicitly question the ability of language to represent history, as Emmerich's comments to Owen Brademas reveal: "This is not history. This is precisely the opposite of history. An alphabet of utter stillness. We track static letters when we read. This is a logical paradox" (291-2), but DeLillo never presents historical events as directly lived experiences. Instead, they are always presented as *narrated* events. Just as DeLillo tells us the business travellers know foreign cultures through the "one sentence stories" of other Westerners, so we "know" events in Tehran through other peoples' stories. For example, the widespread demonstrations against the Shah that took place in December 1978 are related through James's narration of a story told by David Keller. The result of this technique in *The Names* is to emphasis that what we

know about reality, we know through linguistic structures. Furthermore, as the following quotation illustrates, the references to external historical events are fragmentary and synchronic, rather than diachronic: “This was the summer before crowds attacked the U.S. embassies in Islamabad and Tripoli, before the assassinations of American technicians in Turkey, before Liberia, the executions on the beach, the stoning of dead bodies, the evacuation of personnel from the Mainland Bank” (67). The effect of this is to undermine the traditional logocentric conception of history as a singular teleological narrative, pointing instead, as in *Americana*, *Players* and *Running Dog*, to the depthlessness that characterises late capitalism. This is a culture whose dominant is geographic, not historical – as befits any imperialist movement. Furthermore, that Tom LeClair points out, “the governing form” of *The Names* “is spatial: three approximately equal parts entitled ‘The Island,’ ‘The Mountain,’ and ‘The Desert,’ as well as a short epilogue called ‘The Prairie’” (*In the Loop* 179), indicates that like *Players* and *Running Dog*, *The Names* does not escape this cultural logic. In other words, *The Names* represents a dialectical attempt to think historically in an age governed by the spatial logic of the geographic.

It is now generally accepted that history is not “extra-textual”. As Roland Barthes writes in “The Discourse of History”:

The fact can only have a linguistic existence, as a term in a discourse, and yet it is exactly as if this existence were merely the ‘copy’, purely and simply, of another existence situated in the extra-structural domain of the ‘real’. This type of discourse is doubtless the only type in which the referent is aimed for as something external to the discourse, without it ever being possible to attain it outside this discourse. (121)

As demonstrated above, DeLillo’s employment of historical events supports this assessment, and incidentally, this chapter’s method of reading, where historical events are employed, not as “real and causative sources” of the novel, but as *intertexts*. Hence, what we have designated as *The Names*’s historicising of post-structuralism, may be more accurately described, not as DeLillo’s presentation of the impact of extra-linguistic events

on Western patterns of thought, but as the impact of their textualisation on Western thought. Unlike Derrida, then, who argues in “Structure, Sign and Play”, that the decentring of Western thought stems from the interaction of literary texts, DeLillo argues that the decentring of Western thought stems from the interaction of literary texts and the social text. In other words, DeLillo depicts the undermining of Western thought as resulting from the impact of the textualised social and political being on Western thought. But an important distinction should be made here between DeLillo’s employment of these political texts and, for example, those literary intertexts cited by Thomas Carmichael, Tap’s novel and Volterra’s film. The difference is that these political intertexts, unlike literary texts, are examples of *limited* discourses, where the play of meaning is always limited by institutionalised structures. That is, we recognise a difference between DeLillo’s references to the Iran hostage crisis and to Volterra’s film, because what DeLillo writes about the Hostage Crisis is limited, like all historical discourse, by earlier textual accounts. But we must also recognise that in employing political intertexts, DeLillo deliberately gestures towards the edge of textuality, towards the inaccessible Real, characterised by Jameson, as an “absent cause” (*Political Unconscious* 35). It is this impulse in *The Names* that does much to repudiate the accusations of critics, like John Kucich, who claim DeLillo is “unwilling or unable to take the next step toward any kind of political assertion” (334). Thus, instead of ignoring references to actual political events in *The Names*, critics must recognise that DeLillo’s references to narrated material events signal that we should also employ these in our readings. In this way, we can read *The Names*, not as a transcendently significant text, but locally, using this general discursive space to make intelligible both its specific and wider political implications.

This thesis argues that DeLillo’s novels are characterised by the search for a political aesthetic. *The Names*’s struggle to think our present time in history, indicates that it should be recognised as an attempted enactment of this projected political aesthetic. By

pointing to postmodern culture as the latest manifestation of American imperialism, the novel succeeds in politicising late capitalism. Furthermore, that it employs the spatial logic of late capitalism indicates it may be an instance of the “global cognitive mapping” (*Postmodernism* 54) that Jameson calls for in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. However, *The Names* is also one of DeLillo’s most realistic novels, a form Adorno recognises as politically conservative, regardless of content, because it is so easily absorbed by the dominant culture:

This hostility to anything alien or alienating can accommodate itself much more easily to literary realism of any provenance, even if it proclaims itself critical or socialist, than to works which swear allegiance to no political slogans, but whose mere guise is enough to disrupt the whole system of rigid coordinates that governs authoritarian personalities. (179)

But there is one section of *The Names* that seems closer to the more resistant political aesthetic DeLillo proposes in *Great Jones Street* – Tap’s novel. Not only is this closer to semiotic discourse, being literally a child’s work, but in its “spirited misspellings” (313), Tap also ensures the non-signifying nature of much of his writing. This leads James to compare it to a form of art specifically identified as by semiotic by Kristeva, when he calls it “spoken poetry” (313). Furthermore, as DeLillo recognises in *Great Jones Street* that the avant-garde is the only possible site of an effective political aesthetic, because only art that continually “makes it new” escapes being reabsorbed, so Tap’s novel remakes language: “I found these mangled words exhilarating. He’d made them new again, made me see how they worked, what they really were. They were ancient things, secret, reshapable” (313). But not only does Tap’s novel represent the avant-garde in a realist novel, it also literally disrupts the monologic form of James’s narrative in *The Names*, just as Bill Gray’s writing erupts into the omniscient narrator’s discourse in *Mao II*. In other words, Tap’s writing literally introduces heteroglossia into “the word of the father”, to employ Bakhtin’s term for authoritative discourse. Thus, whilst *The Names* represents DeLillo’s acknowledgement that it is only possible to think historically within the cultural logic of late capitalism, it is Tap’s

novel that signals finally his hope for a political aesthetic that can disrupt this culture and escape incorporation.

“No one sees the barn anymore”: Postmodernism and *White Noise*

Frank Lentricchia states in his introduction to *New Essays on White Noise* that “In the lingo of the publishing trade *White Noise* was DeLillo’s ‘breakthrough’ book” (Lentricchia, “Introduction” 6). Indeed, this was the period that first saw Don DeLillo receive official recognition from the American literary establishment, with an award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1984 and the American Book Award for fiction for *White Noise* in 1985. Unsurprisingly, with such commendations, *White Noise* was self-consciously lauded by contemporary critics and reviewers as the novel that would bring DeLillo to a wider audience. Jayne Anne Phillips stated in the *New York Times* that the publication of *White Noise* meant that “the fiction of Don DeLillo is no longer a well kept secret of a dedicated following” (Phillips n.pag), whilst in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Roz Kaveney recognised this novel as DeLillo’s most accessible to date: “*White Noise* is more in the mainstream of contemporary American fiction” (Kaveney 56). But *White Noise* not only sold more copies than any of DeLillo’s previous novels, it soon also began to appear on university reading lists and has become DeLillo’s most written and talked about novel within academic circles. Crucially, *White Noise* is most often discussed in relation to postmodernism in the academy, becoming a sort of postmodern primer. As Cornel Bonca writes: “It is my sense that *White Noise* has begun to replace *The Crying of Lot 49* as the one book professors use to introduce students to a postmodern sensibility” (456). This association of the novel with postmodernism is unsurprising. *White Noise* not only deals with two of the classic “postmodern topoi” (*Constructing Postmodernism* 15) identified by Brian McHale, television and paranoia, it also depicts a hyperreal culture where referents are elided into their media representations. But we should be careful of accepting the identification of *White Noise* with postmodernism too readily, because *White Noise* is in danger of becoming the Most Photographed Barn in America of DeLillo’s

novels. Just as no one can see the barn, because they have already seen the signs, so it has become difficult to see *White Noise*, because it is always already known as DeLillo's archetypal postmodern novel. In an attempt to overcome this critical impasse, this chapter intends to begin its interrogation of *White Noise* through its signs. It will examine the way in which several critics have treated *White Noise*, with particular reference to their use of the term "postmodern". It will then assess the validity of this label with regard to *White Noise*, before arguing that by shifting our reading away from the familiar ground of the Most Photographed Barn in America and the Airborne Toxic Event, we are able to identify points of resistance to postmodern culture in this novel.

As stated repeatedly in this thesis, the term "postmodern" is, like the growth in Jack Gladney's body, a "nebulous mass" with "no definite shape, form or limits" (280). This thesis has always attempted to make its own position explicit: it adheres principally to Jameson's definition of postmodern culture, outlined in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. However, what is immediately striking about the criticism on *White Noise* is how many critics make no indication of their critical antecedents, using the term "postmodern" and its variants glibly, as if it were not at all contentious. Frank Lentricchia's "Tales of the Electronic Tribe" and N. H. Reeve and Richard Kerridge's "Toxic Events: Postmodernism and DeLillo's *White Noise*" are prime examples of this problem. Frank Lentricchia does make some reference to the "burgeoning variety of theories of postmodernism" ("Tales of the Electronic Tribe" 88), indicating his acknowledgement of the difficulties of the term, but he gives no indication of his critical antecedents, referring only vaguely to "postmodern theorists [...] of the French type" ("Tales of the Electronic Tribe" 88). Similarly, Reeves and Kerridge refer to "the postmodernist view" (306) and "characteristically postmodern features" (307) without ever stating whose postmodernism they are invoking. Indeed they do not even supply a bibliography, leaving the reader to attempt to deduce their working definition of the term from occasional comments. We can

ascertain that they appear sometimes to be influenced by Fredric Jameson, evinced by their use of the term “late capitalism” (306), and sometimes Jean-Francois Lyotard, as indicated by their reference to “the postmodernist rejection of the metanarrative” (307). However, we are left in the dark about such important issues as whether they consider postmodernism to be an artistic style or historical period, and about whether or not they consider the postmodern condition to be inescapable. Indeed, Reeves and Kerridge themselves seem confused about these issues. On the one hand they question the possibility of genuine critical distance in late capitalism:

For all the satirical pressure it applies to so many aspects of the contemporary world, *White Noise* recognises that the positions from which any such overview can proceed are themselves continually at risk of undermining. If they are to be found at all, it will be in the face of the postmodern insistence that every discourse is endlessly interpenetrated by others, rather than by the presumption that the discourse of ironic scrutiny, for example, already occupies a place which somehow escapes these conditions. (305)

On the other hand, they are happy to describe *White Noise* as a “satire” (306), which surely entails the very critical distance, whose possibility they question only a page earlier.

This question of the possibility of getting outside postmodern culture is one that cuts to the heart of most critics’ readings of *White Noise* – whether or not they acknowledge it. Indeed, whilst most of the critics examined here are happy to identify *White Noise* with the postmodern, most also recognise that DeLillo’s attitude to postmodern culture is not one of unbridled enthusiasm. Cornel Bonca reminds us that *White Noise* “does not ‘celebrate’ the white noise of advertising and mass media” (473), Noel King argues that *White Noise* presents “an extreme ambivalence” (81) in the face of postmodern culture, whilst Leonard Wilcox argues that this novel is “critical of a commodified, fast-image culture that threatens to bring about ‘the end of interiority’” (363). Furthermore, as these and other critics realise, DeLillo seeks some position, if not of resistance, then at least of critical distance to this culture. Both the articles by Leonard Wilcox and Reeves and Kerridge refer to *White Noise* as a satire, whilst Baker, Lentricchia and Paul Cantor all argue that *White Noise* represents

DeLillo's attempt to achieve some critical purchase on the age. Lentricchia argues this is why DeLillo employs a first person narrative, which allows him "to write a social criticism of its author's place and time, while showing its readers the difficulty of doing so with a clean conscious and an un-self-deluded mind" ("Tales of the Electronic Tribe" 93). Paul Cantor argues that DeLillo is disturbed by the postmodern present, but too shrewd to romanticise the past. He concludes that DeLillo is distant enough to criticise the postmodern, but too much a part of this culture to offer any alternative: "DeLillo himself seems unable to break out of the postmodern circle and offer a convincing alternative to its diminished reality" (61). Stephen Baker agrees with Lentricchia and Cantor that "DeLillo's representations remain determined by the postmodern itself", but goes further than either Lentricchia or Cantor, questioning whether DeLillo achieves any critical distance, arguing that any claim of "self-critique [...] remains unjustified until it can be shown that DeLillo's texts, through the self-consciousness of their ideological function and its determining conditions, are able to achieve an internal reflection of the conflicts and contradictions of historical processes; in other words, to achieve a properly historic internal dialectic" (117). Crucial to this question is a distinction that only Baker and Cantor discuss explicitly, namely, the distinction between postmodern fiction and novels about postmodern culture. As Cantor puts it "Is DeLillo a postmodern writer or is he a pathologist of postmodernism?" (58). Postmodern fiction is inevitably and by definition infected by the cultural logic of late capitalism. Fiction *about* postmodernity is not.

It is here that the question of definition becomes crucial. What makes a novel postmodern, rather than simply about postmodernism? Is all cultural production in late capitalism necessarily postmodern, or can some occupy a space outside this culture? *White Noise* is undeniably concerned with postmodern culture, as the "Most Photographed Barn in America", the shooting of Willie Mink and other incidents illustrate. Furthermore, DeLillo's depiction of postmodern culture does share important affinities with those of influential

cultural theorists of postmodernism, such as Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson. As Leonard Wilcox states “the informational world Baudrillard delineates bears a striking resemblance to the world of *White Noise*” (346), because both are characterised by the elision of the referent into its sign, as the Most Photographed Barn in America illustrates. Similarly, like Jameson, DeLillo draws a clear connection between postmodern culture and late capitalism, as the centrality of the supermarket to *White Noise* attests. DeLillo’s depiction of space and history in *White Noise* also echoes ideas set out in *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. The incident when the Treadwells get lost in the mall finds a direct parallel in Jameson’s discussion of postmodern architecture, which results in buildings in which “it is quite impossible to get your bearings” (Jameson 43), whilst Jack and Babette’s treatment of history as a pick ‘n’ mix counter from which to spice up their sex life, resembles the flattening out of history that Jameson cites as a key feature of postmodern culture. Furthermore, as the critics above all recognise, DeLillo’s attitude to postmodernism resembles Jameson’s own dialectic approach to the subject. But despite these affinities, we should remember that postmodern fiction is not defined by content alone. For Brian McHale, for example, the key feature of postmodern fiction is not so much the “postmodern topoi” he cites, as the disruption of the fiction’s own ontology from within the text. Indeed, McHale’s argument in *Constructing Postmodernism* that modernist fiction is concerned with questions of epistemology and postmodernist fiction with questions of ontology would seem to place *White Noise* firmly in the former category. As Noel King wonders, is *White Noise* “a slyly modernist meditation on postmodern themes?” (69). This interpretation of *White Noise* may also explain its popularity with readers and why academics have chosen it over *The Crying of Lot 49* as an introduction to postmodernism, because *White Noise* allows readers to enjoy the comfortable position of engaging with postmodern culture from within a stable ontology. In other words, readers feel a strong affinity with this novel because *White Noise* seems to be, paradoxically, an authentic

depiction of the inauthenticity of their reality. This interpretation of *White Noise* as a novel about postmodernity is supported by John Frow's *Time and Commodity Culture: Essays in Cultural Theory and Postmodernity*, which cites *White Noise* as if it were an instance of cultural criticism, rather than fiction, whereby passages like the following are interspersed throughout Frow's own text without further exposition: "In the main street of Iron City is 'a tall old Moorish movie theater, now remarkably a mosque'; it is flanked by 'blank structures called the Terminal building, the Packer building, the Commerce Building. How close this was to a classic photography of regret'" (79).

Like McHale, Jameson also argues that postmodern art is not defined by content alone. As he writes:

in the *weaker* [emphasis added] productions of postmodernism the aesthetic embodiment of such processes often tends to slip back more comfortably into a mere thematic representation of content - into narrative which are *about* [Jameson's emphasis] the processes of reproduction and include movie cameras, video, tape recorders, the whole technology of the production and reproduction of the simulacrum. (*Postmodernism* 37)

Instead, for Jameson the defining features of the fully postmodern aesthetic are formal. This reflects the "new kind of flatness or depthlessness" that characterises postmodern culture, which results in, amongst other things, the waning of content. Ascertaining whether *White Noise* is formally postmodern would seem, therefore, a useful way of judging quite how deeply implicated it is in this culture, and hence how much critical distance it achieves. However, *White Noise* does not immediately strike the reader as being anything other than a traditional realist narrative. John Frow writes: "*White Noise* is obsessed with one of the classical aims of the realist novel: the construction of typicality" (419), Noel King argues that it seems "quite a traditional novel in terms of structure" (69), whilst Frank Lentricchia states that "In *White Noise*, DeLillo rewrites the classic naturalist novel" ("Tales of the Electronic Tribe" 99). It does not employ typographical experiment, obtrusive author intervention, dramatisation of the reader or critical discussion within the story, some of the

features of postmodern fiction that Patricia Waugh cites in *Metafiction* (22). Furthermore, *White Noise*'s use of the first person narrative would seem to confirm its status as a modernist novel, because "the idea of autonomous and authentic subjectivity out of which springs vision and illumination" (Wilcox 349) belongs to a modernist rather than postmodernist aesthetic. Indeed, it is this feature that leads Wilcox to recognise Jack Gladney as "a modernist displaced in a postmodernist world" (348), as *White Noise* is once again deemed a modernist meditation on postmodern themes.

However, some formal features have been cited as signalling *White Noise*'s status as a postmodern text. The most commonly referred to are the brand names that crop up repeatedly in the text in groups of three: "Mastercard, Visa, American Express" (100), and DeLillo's use of pastiche. Indeed, even Kenneth Millard, who is resistant to readings of *White Noise* as an example of postmodern fiction concedes that the brand names that pepper the novel are "perhaps the novel's only postmodern structural feature" (130). Who is speaking these brand names is a bone of contention. Michael Valdez Moses argues "it is clear that these incursions cannot be directly credited to Jack Gladney's narrative voice" (64), whilst Stephen Baker, Frank Lentricchia and Leonard Wilcox agree that they signal the colonisation of Jack's subjectivity by the commodity culture of late capitalism. Lentricchia's argument that "*White Noise* is a first person narrative, and it could therefore be no one else" ("Tales of the Electronic tribe" 102) seems a rather naïve critical position to adopt. But whether or not we agree that Gladney is speaking these words is immaterial; what is important is that these brand names disrupt Jack Gladney's first person narrative. In other words, whether spoken by Gladney's unconscious or the unconscious of the culture, these brand names indicate that *White Noise*'s first person narrative has been breached by the very culture it hoped to dissect. It is this that leads Stephen Baker to argue that the culture of late capitalism determines "the very *form* of the narrative surface" (95) of *White Noise*, indicating that this novel is both a "representation and an exemplar of the American cultural

industry” (95) – in other words that *White Noise* is both a novel about postmodernity and a piece of postmodern fiction.

Baker also cites *White Noise*'s use of pastiche as another indication that this novel is “formally postmodern”, pointing to sentences like “It was a cold bright day with intermittent winds out of the east” (4). Such sentences seem an example of pastiche or suspensive irony – if there is a satiric impulse we are not entirely sure what it is. Similarly, Leonard Wilcox points to the Willie Mink scene as an example of such linguistic mimicry, calling it “a pastiche of the existential epiphany” (354), and, like Baker, he refers to Jameson's argument on pastiche from *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. However, whilst Baker concludes that DeLillo's formal subjection to the cultural logic of late capitalism indicates the failure of his critique, Wilcox argues that DeLillo actually uses the formal devices of postmodernism against itself:

If DeLillo uses postmodern devices like parody, pastiche, and parodic intertextual echoes, if he exhibits an interest in the play of language in the postmodern text (exhibited especially in a novel like *The Names*), these devices are deployed with a commitment to interrogate culture in America, to connect the transformations of narrative and subjectivity to cultural and historical processes. (362)

In other words, Wilcox would seem to argue that DeLillo finds a place of critical distance and resistance *within* postmodern culture.

Noel King makes a similar argument in “Reading *White Noise*: Floating Remarks”. King's entire article is concerned with the collapse of critical distance in postmodern culture (King is, of course, heavily influenced by Jameson). He questions how we can hope to comment on *White Noise*, when it is “one of the sharpest meditations on the postmodern available, a meditation, moreover, which is delivered in such a way as to resist further analytical description or elaboration” (69). However, whilst most of his article examines how we can achieve critical distance in our approach to *White Noise*, he does also examine DeLillo's critical distance to postmodern culture within the text. For Noel King, *White Noise*

is formally postmodern because it collapses the distinction between fiction and criticism, producing a narrative that anticipates any secondary language it might engender. He argues that this is an example of the flattening out of the traditional hermeneutic model of interpretation that Jameson cites as characteristic of postmodern aesthetics. However, just as Wilcox argues that *White Noise* uses the formal devices of postmodernism against itself, so King also identifies this structural feature as “helping reformulate ‘modernist notions of critical distance’” (81). As Jameson recognised that “the political form of postmodernism, if there ever is any, will have as its vocation the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping, on a social as well as spatial scale” (*Postmodernism* 54), so King recognises the ficto-critical as just such a spatial form – and one that for King is the only “productive position” available in postmodern culture.

But if, as King and Wilcox argue, DeLillo uses postmodern devices against postmodernism, is *White Noise* still a piece of postmodern fiction? Is it not the absence of any ulterior motive and an unresponsiveness to traditional modes of interpretation, that makes Jameson cite these devices as postmodern in the first place? Indeed, surely what the extensive readings of King and Wilcox demonstrate, if nothing else, is the very openness of these so-called postmodern features to traditional interpretation. Despite the novel’s moments of pastiche, suspensive irony and the breaching of the first person narrative of Jack Gladney, it should not therefore be considered an exemplary instance of postmodern fiction. Not only is the majority of the novel a traditional realist narrative, but even the formal devices of postmodernism employed by DeLillo respond well to traditional interpretation and would seem to have some critical function – as Wilcox and King’s analyses demonstrate at length. Indeed, even the tripartite brand names that pepper the text can be interpreted as satirical. These brand names may evade interpretation, both within and without the text (brand names are deliberately constructed so), but they do not evade consumption. In employing brand names to disrupt the text of *White Noise*, DeLillo reminds us that his

assessment of postmodern culture is politically motivated, because, like Jameson, he recognises it as the cultural manifestation of late capitalism.

These questions over even the most apparently incontestable formal postmodern features of *White Noise* prompt this chapter and thesis to argue that *White Noise* is not fully postmodern, but is instead an example of what Brian McHale calls “amphibious fiction” (*Constructing Postmodernism* 164) – fiction that can be constructed as postmodern, but which nonetheless contains strong modernist impulses. This is apparent even in DeLillo’s use of brand names, which are often regarded as the novel’s one unquestionably postmodern feature. This is illustrated by the scene in which Jack Gladney overhears his daughter sleepily murmur “Toyota Celica”. Jack states:

The utterance was beautiful and mysterious, gold-shot with looming wonder. It was like the name of an ancient power in the sky, tablet-carved in cuneiform. It made me feel that something hovered. [...] How could these near-nonsense words, murmured in a child’s restless sleep, make me sense a meaning, a presence? [...] Whatever its source, the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence. (155)

If we deem *White Noise* an instance of postmodern fiction, we are forced to read this scene as an example of suspensive irony, defined by McHale as “the attitude of someone who is half kidding, though we are not quite sure about what” (*Constructing Postmodernism* 21). However, there is evidence from DeLillo’s interviews and other fiction that this scene should be regarded as a genuine epiphany in the modernist tradition. As DeLillo told Adam Begley, that the Toyota Celica scene should be regarded as an example of “computer mysticism”, as “pure chant” (“The Art of Fiction CXXXV: Don DeLillo” 291). James Axton experiences a similar moment of transcendence in *The Names*, on reading his son’s manuscript. As James states, “I found these mangled words exhilarating. He’d made them new again, made me see how they worked, what they really were. They were ancient things, secret, reshapable” (313). *Underworld* (1997) is also full of epiphanic moments, including Brian Glassic’s visit to the Fresh Kills Landfill and Klara Sax’s visit to Sabatio Rodia’s

tower. These are also difficult to read ironically, especially given DeLillo's acknowledgement that *Underworld* is characterised by a "drive towards transcendence" (Billen 25). It is such moments have lead Paul Maltby to argue that "the terms in which he [DeLillo] identifies visionary experience in his fiction will be seen to align him so closely with a Romantic sensibility that they must radically qualify any reading of him as a postmodern writer" (280) – a position with which this thesis concurs. Indeed, when we reconsider the Toyota Celica scene, we see that this brand name promises not just the uninterpretable surface of the postmodern culture of representation, but also belongs to an untellable, aesthetic discourse. Just as DeLillo finds something recuperable in that great capitalist enterprise, rock and roll, in *Great Jones Street*, so, by finding beauty in the empty signs of the commodity culture, he finds something in the very cultural logic of late capitalism that eludes commodification. Fredric Jameson argues that "What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally" (*Postmodernism* 4). By finding beauty in commodity production, DeLillo succeeds in turning this process on its head. Indeed, as DeLillo told Anthony DeCurtis, one of the aims of *White Noise* was "to find a kind of radiance in dailiness" ("An Outsider in this Society" 63). Frank Lentricchia recognises something of this in Jack Gladney's rummaging through the detritus of commodity culture, which he cites as the novel's primary instance of the transforming power of art, before comparing it to Keats's "Ode to a Greek Urn": "a subtle compact with Keats is made in the covert celebration of the power (Jack's and John's both) of aesthetic redemption, transcendence to the plane of art" ("Tales of the Electronic Tribe" 106). This can also be observed in *White Noise*'s treatment of the extraordinary sunsets that are the result of the Airborne Toxic Event. Not only does Jack deliberately render them in terms of art ("Another postmodern sunset, rich in romantic imagery" (227)), but they become a public aesthetic spectacle: "People had been coming here ever since the first of the new sunsets, parking their own cars, standing around in the bitter wind to chat nervously and

look. There were four cars here already, others certain to come. The overpass had become a scenic outlook” (171). Like garbage, these sunsets represent the residue of the technological and commercial processes of late capitalism, being the result of a chemical spill – and it is this residue that eludes commodification that DeLillo celebrates.

Most importantly, this resistant aesthetic is a bodily, semiotic one in *White Noise*, just as it is *Great Jones Street*, *Underworld* and *The Body Artist*. This can be observed if we return to Jack’s rummaging through the garbage. Lentricchia is correct to recognise this as a moment of redemption through aesthetics, and correct to recognise that “When Jack thinks, sees, and feels in the categories of art [...] Jack the victim is magically transmuted into Jack the victor” (104). Throughout his fiction, from *Americana* to *The Body Artist*, DeLillo has awarded a special place to artistic consciousness, recognising it as our best hope of escaping a predetermined subjectivity, and creating an autonomous individuality. However, whilst Lentricchia argues that the contents of the garbage compactor signal “what I, impoverished postmodern poet, have to deal with” (“Tales of the Electronic Tribe” 106), we should recognise that, just as Jack finds beauty in “Toyota Celica”, the contents of the garbage compactor also have special significance. This scene is epiphanic, just as the waste scenes in *Underworld* are, like Brian Glassic’s visit to the Fresh Kills landfill and Nick and Klara’s visits to Watts Tower. In DeLillo’s fiction, garbage is repeatedly positioned as offering some deliverance, “Maybe we feel a reverence for waste, for the redemptive qualities of the things we use and discard” (*Underworld* 809), and is explicitly associated with art. Not only does Jack call the compacted cube of rubbish “an ironic modern sculpture” (259), but in *Underworld* both Sabatia Rodia and Klara Sax literally construct their art from waste. But most importantly, in terms of thesis’s broader argument, this redemptive waste aesthetic can also be shown to be a manifestation of the bodily semiotic discourse that DeLillo posits as our only hope of an effective political resistance.

In DeLillo's fiction garbage is associated with the semiotic on a number of levels.

Firstly, waste is always associated with the body and bodily drives in DeLillo's fiction. In *Underworld*, Brian Glassic's visit to Fresh Kill's landfill prompts an erotic daydream:

Specks and glints, ragtails of color appeared in the stratified mass of covering soil, fabric scraps from the garment center, stirred by the wind, or maybe that teal thing is a bikini brief that belonged to a secretary from Queens, and Brian found he could create a flash infatuation, she is dark-eyed and reads the tabloids and paints her nails and eats lunch out of molded styrofoam, and he gives her gifts and she gives him condoms, and it all ends up here, newsprint, emery boards, sexy underwear, coaxed into high relief by the rumbling dozers – think of all his multitudinous spermlings with their history of high family foreheads, stranded in a Ramses body bag and rolled snug in the deepdown waste. (185)

In *The Body Artist*, Lauren Hartke's body maintenance produces bodily waste: "She had a thing she stuck in her mouth, an edged implement, smallish plastic, and she pressed it to the back of her tongue and scraped whatever debris might be massed there, a slurry of food, mucus and bacteria" (97). In *White Noise*, Jack finds "a banana skin with a tampon inside" in amongst the rubbish and "a horrible clotted mass of hair, soap, ear swabs, crushed roaches, flip-top rings, sterile pads smeared with pus and bacon fat, strands of frayed dental floss" (259). Secondly, as the semiotic is a discourse that exists outside of the symbolic, so DeLillo explicitly describes waste as existing outside language, as Klara Sax's reference to Robert Oppenheimer's naming of the early nuclear bomb "merde" (77) reveals:

He meant something that eludes naming is automatically relegated, he is saying, to the status of shit. You can't name it. It's too big or evil or outside your experience. It's also shit because it's garbage, it's waste material. (*Underworld* 77)

And crucially Kristeva herself concurs with this association of waste and the semiotic:

It is only now, and only on the basis of a theory of the speaking subject as subject of a heterogeneous process, that semiotics can show that what lies outside its metalinguistic mode of operation – the "remainder", the "waste" – is what, in the process of the speaking subject, represents the moment in which it is set in action, put on trial, put to death: a heterogeneity with respect to system, operating within the practice and one which is liable, if not seen for what it is, to be reified into a transcendence. ("The System and the Speaking Subject" 30-1)

Thirdly this association of garbage with the semiotic is supported by its association with desire in DeLillo's fiction. In *White Noise*, Jack Gladney finds erotically charged pieces of trash: "a crayon drawing of a figure with full breasts and male genitals" (259), "a pair of shredded undershorts with lipstick markings, perhaps a memento of Grayview Motel" (259), whilst in *Underworld*, Fresh Kill's landfill is described possessing "every kind of used and lost object of desire" (185). In psychoanalytic terms, desire, like the semiotic, is something that cannot be articulated in the symbolic order. As Lacan states: "desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the very phenomenon of their splitting" (*Feminine Sexuality* 81). But crucially, these desires are not only erotic in DeLillo's fiction, they also represent the sublimation of erotic drives into commodity capitalism. This is extremely important because it indicates that waste also represents the failure of late capitalism to entirely colonise our subjectivities, for its goods ultimately fail to satisfy our desires. Garbage, therefore, represents something the dominant culture cannot absorb, though it may try to hide it – as the trash compactor in *White Noise* and Nick Shay's employment at Waste Containment in *Underworld* signal.

But we do not only discover traces of the semiotic in *White Noise*'s treatment of trash. The semiotic is also positioned as a source of resistance against postmodern culture through the figure of Babette. The semiotic is, of course, strongly associated with the maternal in Kristeva's writing. As Kristeva writes "the mother's body [...] becomes the ordering principle of the semiotic *chora*" (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 28). And Babette is very strongly associated with the maternal in *White Noise* – by Jack Gladney at least. Jack's previous wives all, crucially, worked for intelligence organisations, "my former wives, who had a tendency to feel estranged from the objective world – a self-absorbed and high-strung bunch, with ties to the intelligence community" (6). In contrast to these women, who are deeply immersed in the socio-symbolic order, Babette fulfils the traditional role of

the mother. She stays at home to look after a brood of children – half not her own – and is treated by Jack almost as if she were his mother. Rather than have sex, Babette reads him erotic bedtime stories, whilst Jack likes to nestle his head between her breasts, murmuring “Baba” (177). What is more, as the semiotic is a bodily discourse, so Babette’s most striking feature is her bodily presence: “Babette is tall and ample; there is a girth and heft to her” (5). Crucially, others find security in Babette’s physicality, as she becomes a buffer against the epistemological uncertainties of postmodern culture. She teaches classes on eating and sitting that reinforce the apparent certainties of our bodily existence. As Babette states:

Knowledge changes everyday. People like to have their beliefs reinforced. Don’t lie down after eating a heavy meal. Don’t drink liquor on an empty stomach. If you must swim, wait at least an hour after eating. The world is more complicated for adults than it is for children. We didn’t grow up with all these shifting facts and attitudes. One day they just started appearing. (171)

Similarly, Jack derives comfort from Babette’s body: “Nightly I moved toward her breasts, nuzzling into that designated space like a wounded sub into its repair dock. I drew courage from her breasts, her warm mouth, her browsing hands, from the skimming tips of her fingers on my back” (172). Jack’s subjectivity is manifestly constructed. He invents a middle initial to create the persona “J. A. K. Gladney” (16) and adopts dark glasses and his gown as a means of giving himself more “presence”. However, the effect is to elide any authentic presence entirely into these signifiers. As Jack states: “I am the false character that follows the name around” (17). In other words, Jack’s traditional modernist subjectivity is clearly susceptible to postmodernising. What Babette’s bodily presence seems to offer, in contrast, is a more authentic subjectivity that can escape this culture.

But Babette does not only represent a more authentic existence to Jack, she also represents an opportunity to recover the pre-symbolic mother-child relationship that could protect him from his fear of death. In this pre-symbolic relationship, the child does distinguish itself as a separate entity from its mother – a relationship Jack tries to recover by insisting there be no secrets between him and Babette: “You cherish the wife who tells you

everything" (194-5). Given Winnie Richard's recognition that death is "Self, self, self" (229), the child cannot conceive its own death, because it cannot conceive the limits of its self. Thus, by attempting to recover the pre-symbolic relationship of mother and child with Babette, Jack hopes to elude his fear of death. DeLillo also makes this phenomenon explicit with regard to Wilder. As Murray Jay Siskind states of the Gladney's youngest child: "You sense his total ego, his freedom from limits" (289), before adding "He doesn't know he's going to die" (289) – a conclusion confirmed by Wilder's death-defying tricycle trip across the highway. Babette shares this faith in the mother-child bond, though through her relationship with her own children, rather than with Jack. She regards children as a talisman against death: "She also thinks nothing can happen to us as long as there are dependent children in the house. The kids are a guarantee of our longevity" (100). She draws most comfort from her young son Wilder, whose vocabulary has, significantly, "stalled at twenty-five words" (236). Indeed, it is his silence that appeals most, "There's enough talk. What is talk? I don't want him to talk. The less he talks the better" (264), because it signals his failure to enter the symbolic order, indicating that the mother-child bond is still intact. This connection between the symbolic order and death, confirmed by Kristeva, "In all known societies, this founding break of the symbolic order is represented by murder – the killing of a man, a slave, a prisoner an animal" (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 70), is reinforced later in *White Noise*, when Jack mistakes Babette's father for death: "It was not Death that stood before me but only Vernon Dickey, my father-in-law" (244).

Crucially, however, Jack finds himself undergoing a second oedipal crisis, when he sees Babette on TV. This moment signals his awareness that she, like him belongs to the symbolic order (she has after all become a representation) and that his attempt to recover the mother-child bond is doomed to failure. Indeed, Jack's reaction is to utter the cry of a baby, "A two-syllable infantile cry, *ba-ba*, issued from the deeps of my soul" (104), just as a child's first entrance into language, in psychoanalytic terms, indicates its separation from

the mother. And as Jack had recognised some protection from the fear of death in his relationship with Babette, he associates his separation from this mother figure with death: “her appearance on the screen made me think of her as some distant figure from the past, some ex-wife and absentee mother, a walker in the mists of the dead” (104). Significantly, this occurs after Babette has begun taking the Dylar tablets to overcome her fear of death – that is, after she has turned to a technological product of late capitalism. These tablets fail because they move Babette entirely into the symbolic order. One side effect of the Dylar tablets is to make the individual unable to distinguish words from things. But rather than moving the subject back into the imaginary realm of the mother and child, where “the linguistic sign is not yet articulated as the absence of an object and as the distinction between the real and symbolic” (Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* 26), the effect is to move the subject entirely into the symbolic order. As in Baudrillard’s discussion of postmodern culture, the subject finds referents entirely elided into their signs. Hence when Jack Gladney shouts “Plunging aircraft!” (309), Dylar peddler and addict Willie Mink adopts “the recommended crash position, head well forward, hands clasped behind his knees” (309). Like Mr Tuttle in *The Body Artist*, Willie Mink has become the archetypal postmodern man with no sense of bodily presence. As Frank Lentricchia writes: “Willy [sic] Mink is a voice without a center, a jumbled bunch of fragments from various contemporary jargons, mostly emanating from the TV he sits in front of with the sound turned down, overdosing on Dylar” (“Tales of the Electronic Tribe” 113). Similarly, by taking the Dylar tablets, Babette also subjects her body – once a source of resistance to postmodern culture – to this culture’s technological processes.

Thus, whilst DeLillo clearly posits a potential in the semiotic to resist postmodern culture in *White Noise*, just as he does in novels like *Great Jones Street* and *Underworld*, the enterprise is not entirely successful in this novel. As Reeves and Kerridge note, moments of bodily exertion and pain offer glimpses of the authentic in *White Noise*: “when the world

reasserts itself against the dominance of concept” (Reeve and Kerridge 317). However, they must also concede the body’s own susceptibility to postmodern culture. Just as in *The Body Artist*, DeLillo explores the body’s vulnerability to power relations in *White Noise*. Thus, not only does Babette abandon her body to Dylar, but Heinrich also invests no sense of presence in his body, seeing it rather as an item of property to be modified and reconstructed at will, “She can take hair from other parts of my head and surgically implant it where it’s needed” (181). Similarly, during the airborne toxic event, Steffie and Denise experience “real” bodily symptoms at the prompting of the media, “If Steffie had learned about *déjà vu* on the radio but then missed the subsequent upgrading to more deadly conditions, it could mean she was in a position to be tricked by her own apparatus of suggestibility” (125). But the most clear instance is Jack Gladney’s projected death as a result of his exposure to the airborne toxic event. Jack’s illness is known only through the sign system of the coded computer printouts, whilst his comment that “There’s something artificial about my death” (283), suggests that this death should not be read as an emblem of the authentic, of the one boundary that cannot be rendered through representation, but as a peculiarly postmodern experience. Jack and Babette’s fear of death can be interpreted as indicating their complicity with postmodern culture, their final reluctance to embrace the real, because it entails, inevitably, this event, which Leonard Wilcox calls “the single natural event which ultimately cannot be subsumed into simulacra, models, and codes” (353 n.). However, this apparent “postmodernising” of death indicates DeLillo’s awareness of the difficulties of locating any space of resistance, even if Jack and Babette were able to overcome their fear of death. Just as Paul Cantor observes that DeLillo pushes the historical boundaries of postmodernism further and further back into the past in his depiction of Hitler and the German nuns, so it seems even this ultimate boundary is susceptible.

For all its accessibility, *White Noise* is a troubling novel. Few critics are able to pin it down without qualifications or concessions. It is not a fully postmodern text – it strives for

moments of transcendence and resistance against this culture. Yet it finds itself continually forced to extend the scope and range of postmodernism further into the past, to the body and even to death. Despite this, DeLillo demonstrates the same determination to find some residue in this culture that cannot be absorbed, as he places his faith in a bodily semiotic aesthetic once again, exemplified in this novel by motherhood and waste.

***Libra*: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Failure of the Paternal Metaphor**

Brian McHale argues in *Constructing Postmodernism* that modernist fiction is concerned with questions of epistemology, whilst postmodernist fiction is concerned with questions of ontology. In this respect, *Libra* would seem to be an example of postmodern fiction because, unlike Norman Mailer's self-proclaimed non-fiction novel, *Oswald's Tale* (1995), Don DeLillo's novel *Libra* is not an attempt to answer any of the epistemological questions surrounding the Kennedy assassination. Instead, Don DeLillo employs the assassination of President John F. Kennedy to reveal an absence that renders such epistemological questions obsolete. The absence uncovered in *Libra* is, as it is in the rest of DeLillo's fiction, the absence of what Derrida calls the "centre" or "fixed origin" that limits play in meaning. It is apparent from the depiction of fathers in *The Names*, *White Noise* and *Underworld* that this dismantling of logocentrism is also a dismantling of phallogentrism, but it is in *Libra* that DeLillo's equation of the transcendental signified of logocentrism with the transcendental signifier of psychoanalytic criticism, the phallus, can be witnessed most clearly. This chapter intends to demonstrate this with particular reference to the issue of subjectivity in *Libra*, in order to demonstrate the significance of the individual speaking subject to DeLillo's search for effective political resistance. Furthermore, this chapter will argue that it is crucial that DeLillo's most extensive investigation of subjectivity is played out against the background of the Kennedy assassination, because this moment, in November 1963, has been repeatedly posited, by DeLillo and others, as heralding the postmodern age.

Critics and reviewers have long noted Don DeLillo's fascination with the Kennedy assassination. Besides his article on the events of 22nd November 1963, "American Blood" (1983), references to the assassination crop up in *Americana* (1971), *Running Dog* (1978), and *Underworld* (1998). DeLillo has also repeatedly testified to the impact of the shooting on his writing. For example, in the documentary, "The Word, The Image and The Gun", that

DeLillo made in collaboration with the BBC, he states: “I think it’s true that none of my novels could have been written in the world that existed before the assassination”, whilst DeLillo has said of the Kennedy assassination in an interview: “Maybe it invented me [...] As I was working on *Libra*, it occurred to me that a lot of tendencies in my first eight novels seemed to be collecting around the dark center of the assassination. So it’s possible I wouldn’t have become the kind of writer I am if it weren’t for the assassination” (DeCurtis, “An Outsider in This Society” 48). In DeLillo’s fiction the assassination is, as he states of the Zapruder film, “a major emblem of uncertainty and chaos” (*Libra* 441). The failure of David Bell’s cognitive orientation in *Americana*, for example, is signalled by his re-enactment of Kennedy’s final, fateful route through Dallas, a journey that marks the start of his return to New York, and his failure to escape the cultural logic of late capitalism. Similarly, in *Players* (1977), the Kennedy assassination becomes the archetypal symbol of epistemological and ontological insecurity, as Kinnear’s conversation with Lyle reveals:

“What really happened?” Kinnear said. “Who really ordered the wire taps? Why were the papers shredded and what did they say? Why does this autopsy report differ from than one? Was it one bullet or more? Who erased the tapes? Was so-and-so’s death an accidents or murder? How did organized crime get involved - who let *them* in? How deeply are the corporations involved in this or that mystery, this or that crime, these murders, these programs of systematic torture? Who ordered these massive surveillance programs? Who wrote the anonymous letters? Why did these witnesses drop out of sight? Where are the files? Where are the missing bullet fragments? Did the suspect work for the intelligence service or didn’t he? Why do these four eyewitness accounts clash so totally? What happened, Lyle, on the floor that day?” (104)

In *Running Dog*, Mrs Percival, who has “been reading the Warren Report for eight or nine years” (71), has lost herself in a maze of paper, much like Nicholas Branch in *Libra*, trying to make sense of the assassination of President Kennedy: “She is sitting up in bed. Her face gleams with some kind of restorative ointment. All over the room are volumes of the Warren Report along with her notebooks full of ‘correlative data’” (198). Similarly, Richie

Armbrister lives in fear of a death like Kennedy's, characterised by indeterminacy and a lack of finality:

Richie was obsessed not only by his impending assassination but by the conflicting reports that would ensue. He'd been shot by one white male, or two white males, or one white male with a mulatto child. The rifle used had no prints, had several sets of prints, now being checked, or had several sets of prints but they'd been accidentally wiped off by the police. (*Running Dog* 189)

These themes culminate in the Zapruder film, which appears in *Underworld* as well as *Libra*. The film not only demonstrates the impossibility of knowing what really happened, no matter how often, in Marvin Lundy's words, "you analyze the dots" (*Underworld* 175), but it also represents the hyperreality of this event, and most importantly, the hyperreality of Kennedy's death. For most critics, it is this hyperreality that renders the Kennedy assassination "arguably the first major event in postmodern cultural history" (Carmichael, "Lee Harvey Oswald and the Postmodern Subject" 207). Even Jameson states that "In modern North American history, of course, the assassination of John F. Kennedy was a unique event, not least because it was a unique collective (and media, communicational) experience, which trained people to read such events in a new way" (355). Furthermore, like Jameson's definition of postmodern art, this example of Baudrillardian hyperreality offers no way to complete the hermeneutic gesture (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 8). It is an event that has yielded hundreds of interpretations but no definitive answer. But aside from these features the other key reason for the association of the Kennedy assassination with postmodernity is that the ambiguities surrounding this event blur the ultimate boundary – death – just as Jack Gladney's nebulous mass does in *White Noise*.

So the reason why the assassination of President John F. Kennedy has dogged DeLillo and his work is precisely because this event has thwarted epistemological questions and confounded interpretation through the traditional logocentric systems of thought that are "based on a desire for truth" (Cuddon 510). This point is crucial to any interpretation of

Libra, revealing as fundamental misreadings both George Will's famous criticism that *Libra* is "yet another exercise in blaming America for Oswald's act of derangement" ("Shallow Look at the Mind of an Assassin" A25) and Robert Tower's designation of DeLillo as "chief shaman of the paranoid school of American fiction" (6-7). *Libra* is not another exercise in blaming America, because *Libra* is not an attempt to explain the Kennedy assassination, as DeLillo himself points out in the Author's Note to *Libra*: "This is a work of imagination. [...] I've made no attempt to furnish factual answers to any questions raised by the assassination" (458). Instead, by revealing the absence of the centre that extends "the play of signification infinitely" (Derrida 280), *Libra* renders obsolete attempts to find a single, indisputable explanation of the assassination. Similarly, DeLillo is not a paranoid peddler of conspiracy theories, because such theories are predicated on the assumed existence of an underlying truth, and the possibility of achieving totalisation, as Jameson recognises: "conspiracy theory (and its garish narrative manifestations) must be seen as a degraded attempt – through the figuration of advanced technology - to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system" (*Postmodernism* 38). By dismantling logocentrism, DeLillo dismantles both of these founding premises of paranoia, because not only is the concept of a fundamental underlying truth inextricably bound to the idea of a transcendental signified, but so is the possibility of achieving totalisation, as Derrida makes plain in "Structure, Sign and Play": "If totalisation no longer has any meaning, it is not because the infiniteness of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite discourse, but because the nature of the field – that is, language and a finite language – excludes totalization" (Derrida 280).

That DeLillo regards the assassination of President John F. Kennedy as the moment that reveals the absence of the centre is made apparent both in *Libra* and in DeLillo's discussion of the event in "The Word, The Image and The Gun". For example, he is careful

in both to stress the impossibility of answering even the simplest questions about the assassination. He states in “The Word, The Image and The Gun” that “We couldn’t seem to find out what happened, even at the most basic level – how many gunmen, how many shots, how many wounds on the President’s body. There was no coherent reality we could analyse and study” whilst he reminds us in *Libra* that nothing with regard to this event, not even the most basic of facts, is certain: “Oswald’s eyes are gray, they are blue, they are brown. He is five feet nine, five feet ten, five feet eleven. He is right-handed, he is left-handed. He drives a car, he does not. He is a crack shot and a dud. Branch has support for all these propositions in eyewitness testimony and commission exhibits” (300). In other words, even on the most fundamental level, the assassination is shown to thwart the desire for a single, indisputable truth that characterises logocentrism. DeLillo is also careful to reveal the absence of the transcendental signified as the moment when the possibilities of play in meaning are exposed, as another of his statements in “The Word, The Image and The Gun” makes explicit: “When Kennedy was shot something changed forever in America. Something opened up – a sense of randomness, deep ambiguity. We lost the narrative thread. See this is what happened – the assassination left an emptiness that made everything plausible, made us susceptible to the most incredible ideas and fantasies”. For DeLillo, like Derrida, the moment that the absence of the centre is uncovered is “the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when in the absence of a center or origin everything became discourse” (Derrida 280).

Libra plays out this moment when “everything became discourse” in its depiction of the aftermath of the Kennedy assassination, confirming that DeLillo regards the shooting of Kennedy as the moment that reveals the absence of the centre. Post-assassination, DeLillo describes an absence and an emptiness, which, it seems, can only be filled by a word:

They sensed the incompleteness out there, gaps, spaces, vacant seats, lobbies emptied out, disconnections, dark cities, stopped lives. People were

lonely for news. Only news could make them whole again, restore sensation. Three hundred reporters in a compact space, all pushing to extract a word. A word is a magic wish. A word from anyone. With a word, they could begin to grid the world, make an instant surface that people can see and touch together. (414)

The Kennedy assassination is thus literally depicted as the moment that decentres logocentrism, because what is absent is the *logos* – the Word of God that guarantees meaning in language. But DeLillo is also careful to demonstrate the consequences of this absence, describing, like Derrida, a world in which everything has become discourse, in which meaning is not produced by the relationship of the signified to signifier, but by the play of difference between all signifiers in the signifying chain.

This can be witnessed most clearly in the character of Nicholas Branch, the man who has been employed by the CIA to write the official secret history of the Kennedy assassination. As predicted by Derrida, Branch finds his quest for totality thwarted by the excesses of language, both by the literal quantity of material written on the event (“Sometimes he looks around him, horrified by the weight of it all, the career of paper. He sits in the data-spew of hundreds of lives. There’s no end in sight” (15)) and by the excess of meaning that every text and fact brings, the “endless suggestiveness” (57). Indeed, Branch comes to conceive of the Warren Report in novelistic terms, as “The Joycean Book of America - the novel in which nothing is left out” (182). Most importantly, Branch also recognises that with such an excess of meaning, there is no hope of ever discovering a conspiracy theory that that will account for everything: “There is enough mystery in the facts as we know them, enough of conspiracy, coincidence, loose ends, dead ends, multiple interpretations. There is no need, he thinks, to invent the grand masterful scheme, the plot that reaches flawlessly in a dozen directions” (58). In the absence of the centre such a desire for totalisation is thwarted by the infinite play of language.

Significantly, however, the Kennedy assassination is not only presented as an endlessly undecidable text in retrospect. The conspirators' plot to kill John F. Kennedy is also presented as a linguistic construction (the pun on the word "plot" is almost too obvious to mention). This is most important, because what DeLillo depicts in *Libra* is not the moment when American culture changed, but the moment that the already endlessly discursive nature of that culture was revealed. This carries important implications for any examination of DeLillo's attitude to postmodernism, as DeLillo seems to continually push back the boundaries of postmodernism, just as he does in *White Noise* through the appearance of the atheist German nuns. Thus, even before the assassination Win Everett conceives of his plot as a text to be manipulated, "We do the whole thing with paper. Passports, drivers' licenses, address books [...] We script a person or persons out of ordinary pocket litter" (28). Indeed, for Win, the beauty of his plot is that it exists only at textual level, allowing him to achieve the closure he desires, without actually ending the President's life. But DeLillo is careful not only to reveal the textual nature of the world before the Kennedy assassination, he also demonstrates the already present suggestiveness and ambiguities of such texts. That the president is shot and killed, despite the intentions of the plot's author, Win Everett, is the most obvious indication that meaning in language is subject to play, but there are other earlier signs. For example, the first suggestion that we should distrust Win Everett's attitude to language comes in the very depiction of Win reading: "Win was in the living room turning the pages of a book. This is what he did, according to his wife, instead of reading" (31). This passage reveals Win to be a "bad reader," undermining any stance he takes on language and interpretation. Similarly, DeLillo's description of the Bay of Pigs indicates that meaning is "running out of control" (70) before the Kennedy assassination, for the disaster of the Bay of Pigs is depicted as a direct result of the breakdown of signification. DeLillo describes signs being misread ("The

seaweed in reconnaissance photos turned out to be coral reef" (70)), signifiers being split ("The same ship used two different names" (70)) and even the entire abandonment of sign systems ("Planes flew with insignia painted out" (70)). As one member of the CIA, T. J. Mackey, describes the night of the Cuban invasion: "There was strange and flawed material out there, a deep distance full of illusions, deceptions, eerie perspectives" (70). Even the event itself is subject to the play of signification, as the splitting and dispersal of its signifier indicates: "Bahia de Cochinos, the Bay of Pigs, the Battle of Giron - whatever you wanted to call it" (121). Furthermore, that the Bay of Pigs brings the conspirators together, because it is the "consciousness they shared unspokenly" (121), allows us to recognise that the purpose of the conspirators' plot is not to disrupt, but is instead an attempt to reinscribe a sense of order and closure:

I am convinced this is what we have to do to get Cuba back. The plan has levels and variations I've only begun to explore but it is already, essentially, right. I feel its rightness. I know what scientists mean when they talk about elegant solutions. This plan speaks to something deep inside me. It has a powerful logic. I've felt it unfolding for weeks, like a dream whose meaning slowly becomes apparent. This is the condition we've always wanted to reach. It's the life insight, the life-secret. (28)

As the conspirators' plot reminds us, the Kennedy assassination is not the moment that creates the absence of the centre, rather it is the most dramatic and public demonstration of this absence.

That the Kennedy assassination holds such a prominent place in DeLillo's fiction is extremely important, because it signals DeLillo's determination, like Baudrillard and Jameson, to historicise postmodernity. However, instances like the conspirators' plot illustrate his difficulties in delimiting this culture. As in *White Noise*, such moments indicate the difficulty of achieving critical distance or escaping the logic of postmodernity. But despite this, the Kennedy assassination in DeLillo's fiction should be understood as marking the moment that the cultural dominant of America shifted, because it was this event

that transformed America's *weltanschauung*. As DeLillo writes in "American Blood": "We seem from that moment to have entered a world of randomness and ambiguity, a world totally modern in the way it shades into the century's 'emptiest' literature, the study of what is uncertain and unresolved in our lives, the literature of estrangement and silence" (22). Furthermore, that it is the assassination of an American president, and one who took the USA into Vietnam (a war that resonates throughout DeLillo's fiction) reminds us that DeLillo also recognises postmodern culture as the latest manifestation of American neo-colonialism. Indeed, what the death of the president who oversaw the Bay of Pigs disaster may signal is a shift from the older military imperialism to a new economic colonialism – represented in *Libra* by Marina's response to American consumer culture:

They had very little money, practically no money. But Marina was happy just to walk the aisles of the Safeway near Robert's house. The packages of frozen food. The colors and abundance.

Lee got angry one night, coming back from a day of looking for work. He told her she was becoming American in record-breaking time. (226)

But most important in terms of this thesis's broader argument, is that DeLillo's most extensive investigation of subjectivity is played out against the Kennedy assassination – the moment that the cultural dominant shifted – because for DeLillo, like Kristeva, any effective political resistance to postmodernity is dependent on the restoration of the individual speaking subject. Lee Harvey Oswald takes the most explicit political stance against American consumer capitalism of all DeLillo's characters: he reads Marx, he defects to the USSR. However, his subjectivity is also fragmented and dispersed. In other words, *Libra* should be read as another investigation of the possibility of political resistance in the second half of the American century, through an investigation of the possibility of the restoration of the individual speaking subject.

Thus, in terms of DeLillo's broader project, Oswald's subjectivity is critical. He is the most determined of all DeLillo's characters to achieve some level of political resistance

to late twentieth century American culture, but as many critics have noted he also represents that archetypal postmodern self, as Thomas Carmichael's article, "Lee Harvey Oswald and the Postmodern Subject" illustrates. The notion of an essential consciousness that is the source of belief and actions is another manifestation of the concept of "centre" or "transcendental signified" that marks logocentric thought, as Derrida makes clear: "It could be shown that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated an invariable presence – *eidōs, arche, telos, energeia, ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject) *aletheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man and so forth" (280). In the absence of "centre" or "being" to determine the self, it too becomes subject to the same play of signification. It is unsurprising, therefore, that *Libra's* dismantling of logocentrism should include a dismantling of the notion of autonomous, unified subjectivity, an endeavour which is manifested most clearly in the character of Lee Harvey Oswald. For as KGB officer Alek Kirilenko recognises, Lee Harvey Oswald introduces uncertainty and ambiguity into truths that were previously held as self-evident: "The lesson of Lee H. Oswald was that easy cases are never easy. It made him think of the classical axioms of his early training in geometry and arithmetic. Sad to learn that those self-evident truths, *necessary truths*, faltered so badly when subjected to rigorous examination. No plane surfaces here. We are living in curved space" (164).

Oswald's heterogeneous subjectivity is explicitly rendered: we are told, for example, that Lee "had two existences" (47) and that he seeks a "second and safer identity" (166). But it is that Lee's self-alienation is manifested most clearly in his language that is most significant, for this demonstrates the affinities between DeLillo's description of Lee Harvey Oswald's subjectivity and post-structuralist theories of the self, as propounded by Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes. As Derrida proposes that in the absence of "presence" or "being" everything is discourse, including the self, so DeLillo depicts Lee's subjectivity

as constituted by language. This is illustrated by his self-reflexive narrative, because as his first encounter with David Ferrie shows, Lee Harvey Oswald must narrate himself to become: “for the rest of his time here he experienced what was happening and at the same moment, although slightly apart, recounted it all for Robert. He had a little vision of himself. He saw himself narrating the story to Robert Sproul, relishing his own broad manner of description even as the moment was unfolding in the present” (45). Such self-narration results in the splitting of Lee’s signifier between the subject and object positions in language. This is described in *Libra* as resulting directly in the division of Lee’s self, “The more he [Lee] spoke, the more he felt he was softly split in two” (90), indicating that the Oswald’s subjectivity is determined entirely by its signifiers. Furthermore, Lee also discovers that the language he uses to construct himself is never fixed or certain: “language tricked him with its inconsistencies. He watched sentences deteriorate, powerless to make them right. The nature of things was to be elusive. Things slipped through his perceptions. He could not get a grip on the runaway world” (211), revealing that Lee is, like the post-structuralist subject, split and dispersed by language.

But the most significant aspect of *Libra*’s treatment of subjectivity is the manifestation of Lee’s split and dispersed self in terms of a confused sexual and gender identity. This association of the heterogeneous self and the disruption of gender can also be witnessed in the transvestism of Christoph Ludecke in *Running Dog*, Rosemary’s donning of a dildo in *Players* and Lauren Hartke’s gender shifting in *The Body Artist*. This indicates DeLillo’s equation of the transcendental signified of logocentrism with the transcendental signifier of psychoanalytic theory, where the father and phallus are recognised as specific instances of the transcendental centre, guaranteeing meaning and stability in language, as the centre guarantees the structure. This equation is made by other critics, like Helene Cixous, for example, who claims that the phallus is *the* primary example of centre or *logos*:

“the logocentric project had always been, undeniably, to *found* (fund) phallogentrism” (289). But whilst some critics have noted the sexual ambiguities present in *Libra*, none have given this feature the treatment it deserves. For example, John Johnston recognises that Oswald first adopts the alias Hidell after his visit to a gay bar in Tokyo, but he fails to note Lee’s projection of his later homosexual impulses and experiences onto Hidell. Similarly, Thomas Carmichael invokes Lacan in his discussion of the constitution of subjectivity, but fails to examine the importance of sexual identity in both Lacan’s theory and *Libra*. David Willman recognises that Win Everett’s enforced retirement to the Texas Women’s University is a “humiliating symbolic castration” (Willman 411), but does not explore the full implications of Win’s expulsion from the masculine order. However, it is essential to recognise that the Lee’s self-alienation is not just a result of the absence of “being” or centre, but is also presented by DeLillo as a product of the absence of the phallus.

Both psychoanalytic and post-structuralist theory agree that it is in language that the self is constituted, and that this also results, inevitably and irrevocably, in the splitting of the self. In psychoanalytic theory, this is because the symbolic order is founded on a moment of division when the intrusion of the phallus ruptures the mother-child dyad. As Jacqueline Rose states:

Symbolisation starts, therefore, when the child gets its first sense that something could be missing, words stand for objects, because they have to spoken at the moment when the object is first lost. For Lacan, the subject can only operate within language by constantly repeating that moment of fundamental and irreducible division. The subject is therefore constituted in language as this division or splitting. (Rose 31)

But whereas in post-structuralist theory, the self is dispersed by the play of the language, in psychoanalytic theory this play of signification can be limited. According to Lacan, this is achieved by the transcendental signifier, the phallus, which acts as a *point du capiton* or “upholstery button,” that pins down the floating mass of signification. What Lee Harvey Oswald’s subjectivity illustrates in *Libra* is not only the effects of the absence of the centre,

but also the absence of the “upholstery button,” the phallus, what Lacan calls “the failure of the paternal metaphor” (*Ecrits* 215).

In Lacan’s view it is the father and the intrusion of the phallus that introduces the subject to the law of the language system. In the absence of the “paternal metaphor,” the subject cannot escape the claustrophobic mother-child dyad of the imaginary realm, and cannot acquire the “nom-du-pere” essential for entry into the symbolic order and for proper family relationships. Hence, the failure of the paternal metaphor exhibits itself in the subject’s inability to become a full family member and in the subject’s relationship to language. Lee Harvey Oswald’s subjectivity clearly corresponds to Lacan’s description of the psychotic subject. For example, the absence of his father is remarked upon repeatedly. We are told that he had “a turbulence running through him, the accepted fact of a fatherless boy” (4), whilst it is his father’s absence not his mother’s presence that is remarked upon in his introduction to his written work: “He wrote a sketch titled ‘About the Author.’ The author is the son of an insurance man whose early death ‘left a far mean streak of indepenence brought on by negleck’” (213). Furthermore, as Marguerite Oswald’s statement reveals, the early death of Lee’s father has left the mother-child dyad intact: “Most boys think their daddy hung the moon. But the poor man just crashed to the lawn and that was the end of the only happy part of my adult life. It is Marguerite and Lee ever since. We are a mother and son. [...] I took back my name, your honor. Marguerite Claverie Oswald” (11). This passage also points to Lee’s literal failure to acquire the “nom-du-pere,” because he carries, like that other fatherless character, Nick Shay in *Underworld*, his mother’s maiden name. And as Lacan predicts, this mother-child relationship is also suffocatingly claustrophobic: “Ever since he could remember, they’d shared cramped spaces. It was the basic Oswald memory. He could smell the air she moved through, could smell her clothes hanging behind a door, a tropical mist of corsets and toilet water. He entered bathrooms in the full aura of her stink”

(35). This claustrophobia is also manifested linguistically, “The voice called out from the kitchen, the toilet flushed. He knew the inflections and the pauses, knew what she would say, word for word, before she spoke” (38). It is this linguistic claustrophobia that results in the crisis in Lee’s identity, because the conversations held between Lee and his mother elide the differentiation of subject position that the language of the father brings, and which allows the creation of an apparently autonomous social self. Babette, of course, enjoys much the same relationship with Wilder in *White Noise*. Furthermore, without the phallus to rupture the mother-child dyad, Lee becomes both subject and object of discourse, “She was always there, watching him, measuring their destiny in her mind. He had two existences, his own and the one she maintained for him” (47). Lee’s exclusion from the masculine symbolic order is also literal, because Lee is excluded from language, as DeLillo makes explicit: “He could not clearly see the picture that is called a word. [...] He saw spaces, incomplete features, and tried to guess at the rest. [...] the language tricked him with its inconsistencies. He watched sentences deteriorate, powerless to make them right” (211). Lee’s psychosis also manifests itself in his failure to fit into the family model, “A family expects you to be one thing when you’re another. They twist you out of shape. You have a brother with a good job and a nice wife and nice kids and they want you to be a person they will recognize” (244). Lee hopes fatherhood will allow him to inscribe himself into the masculine order: “When Marina told him she was pregnant he thought his life made sense at last. A father took part. He had a place, an obligation” (206), but without the *nom-du-pere* himself, Lee cannot perform the role of father as his inability even to name his own child indicates. Lee wishes to name his daughter, June Marina, after her mother, not himself significantly, but finds the naming function, the prerogative of the father in psychoanalytic theory, given over to the state: “In the end the bureaucrats insisted that the baby’s middle name must be the same as the father’s first” (210).

Lee's failure to acquire the Name of the Father, thus forces him to occupy a position outside the masculine order. In other words, Lee still belongs to the imaginary order of the mother-child bond, and most importantly in terms of this thesis's broader argument, the semiotic. This interpretation of Lee's subjectivity is supported by *Libra*, for not only does he carry his mother's maiden name, but even his first name is feminine, as Scalzo's comment to Lee indicates: "They call your name every day in class. But what kind of name is Lee? That's a girl's name or what?" (7). Similarly, like Lacan's woman, Lee is "not all" (*Feminine Sexuality* 144), for as Marina recognises Oswald's subjectivity is characterised by lack: "He was never fully there" (202). This conception of Lee as feminine can also help explain his split self in language, because if in the patriarchal symbolic order, the subject position is masculine and the object feminine, Lee's simultaneous adoption of both indicates a personality whose gender is confused. Furthermore, Lee's erratic language can be read as a literal expression of Lacan's definition of the insoluble position of woman in relation to the symbolic order: "There is for her something insurmountable, something unacceptable, in the fact of being placed as an object in the symbolic order to which at the same time, she is subjected as much as the man" (*Feminine Sexuality* 45). But most importantly, recognising Lee as feminine can help us understand why he must constantly narrate or perform himself, a habit seen most clearly in his suicide attempt in Moscow, which Lee conceives of as melodrama: "*somewhere, a violin plays, as I watch my life whirl away. [...] I think to myself, 'How easy to die' [...] and 'A sweet death, (to violins)*" (152-3). For femininity, as Joan Riviere recognises, is indistinguishable from masquerade: "The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the 'masquerade'. My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing" (Riviere 38). Here the self that is characterised by lack finds refuge in adornment and the mask.

Once we recognise that Lee Harvey Oswald's subjectivity is constituted by lack, the reason for his fascination with alternative ideological systems becomes apparent. For Lee has enough self-consciousness to recognise that in his existing ideology he is "a zero in the system" (357). Lee's interest in communism thus reflects a search for an ideology that will imbue his existence with meaning, as his attitude towards his Marxist books illustrates: "The books were private, like something you find and hide, some lucky piece that contains the secret of who you are. [...] They altered the room, charged it with meaning. The drabness of his surroundings, his own shabby clothes were explained and transformed by these books. He saw himself as part of something vast and sweeping" (41). In Lacanian terms, Lee conceives of the USSR and communism as the "Other" that has the power to make him whole, as Jacqueline Rose writes: "The Other appears to hold the 'truth' of the subject and the power to make good its loss" (Rose 32). Lee's attempt to learn Russian, the language of the "Other", can be interpreted, therefore, as an attempt to build a more unified and whole self: "Working with her, making the new sounds, watching her lips, repeating words and syllables, hearing his own flat voice take on texture and dimension, he could almost believe he was being remade on the spot, given an opening to some larger and deeper version of himself" (113). But as Nick Shay's effort to build another self in his father's language fails in *Underworld*, so Lee's attempt to rebuild himself is unsuccessful, signalling that he remains excluded from the symbolic order. Indeed, as Lee later recognises, he is as much a "zero in the system" of communism as of capitalism: "He feels he is living at the center of an emptiness. He wants to sense a structure that includes him, a definition clear enough to specify where he belongs. But the system floats right through him, through everything, even the revolution. He is a zero in the system" (357). DeLillo is careful to demonstrate that the "Other" that Lee seeks to make him whole is as divided and marked by lack as Lee himself, as the description of Lee's Russian teacher, Dr Braunfels, illustrates:

“There was a mock girlishness about her, several levels of something tricky and derisive. [...] She had that cropped uneven hair that was way too young and made him think she was undependable, a person who could not survive without double meanings, or saying one thing to mean the opposite” (111-2). Not only is Dr Braunfels’s language revealed as indeterminate, which signals the absence of the *logos*, she is sexually ambiguous, which indicates that, like Lee, she lacks the phallus. The “Other” is thus revealed in *Libra* not as the fantasised place of knowledge and certainty but as a place as split and fractured as Lee’s own subject.

As Lee’s interest in different ideological systems illustrates his desire to make good his lack, so we can understand the import of Lee’s bisexuality in *Libra*. Not only does it represent another aspect of his exclusion from the dominant patriarchal symbolic order, but his means of dealing with it also indicate his desire for a self that is unified and whole. Most significantly, this is played out in the text through the depiction of Lee’s alter ego Hidell, for as a dispersed self indicates the absence of “being”, the sexualising of this division signals DeLillo’s equation of *logos* and phallus. Thus, not only does Hidell represent “the unconscious, or the discourse of the other” (Thomas 112) as Glen Thomas recognises, Hidell also acts as the repository of Lee’s homosexual impulses. Lee first conceives of Hidell after his visit to a gay bar in Japan, where Hidell represents Lee’s linguistic repression of the visit, “Hidell means don’t tell” (89), and he continues to project his homosexual experiences onto Hidell throughout the novel, as the assault by David Ferrie on Lee illustrates:

a hand on Hidell [...] Ferrie was breathing all over him, covering his head and neck with heavy breath.
Hide the L in Lee
No one will see (341)

Lee’s projection of his homosexual impulses onto Hidell indicates his desire to externalise the contradictory impulses in his self and thus become a whole and unified subject. But here

DeLillo reveals even the concept of double, in which the contradictory elements of the self are externalised, as “faintly anachronistic if not actually obsolete” (“Superlinear Fiction of Historical Diagram” 332) as John Johnston recognises, for even Lee’s double, Hidell, is a divided subject. This indicates the real significance of DeLillo’s reference to Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*:

Hidell means don’t tell
The id is hell.
Jerkle and Hide in their little cell. (101)

Lee’s alias Hidell actually represents self and Other in *one* subject, as its conflation of the names of the most famous of literary doubles, Jekyll and Hyde, indicates.

Once we have recognised that Lee’s fragmented self is a product of the failure of the paternal metaphor, we can understand his desire to write himself into history as another manifestation of his desire to inscribe himself into the masculine symbolic order, that will make whole his self: “History means to merge. The purpose of history is to climb out of your own skin. He [Lee] knew what Trotsky had written, that revolution leads us out of the dark night of the isolated self. We live forever in history, outside ego and id” (101). This can also be witnessed in Lee’s attitude to President Kennedy, because Lee comes to regard Kennedy just as he had communism and the USSR, that is, as his “Other”. Lee notes similarities between himself and Kennedy: “Coincidence. Lee was always reading two or three books, like Kennedy. Did military service in the Pacific, like Kennedy. Poor handwriting, terrible speller, like Kennedy. Wives pregnant at the same time. Brothers named Robert” (336), and imbues them with significance. Lee figures Kennedy as his doppelganger, “the positive Libran” (315) who can make good the lack of Lee, “the negative Libran” (315). Indeed, Lee even believes his entry into the symbolic order has been successful after the assassination for his fragmented self seems to have been made whole: “His life had a single clear subject now, called Lee Harvey Oswald. He and Kennedy were

partners. The figure of the gunman in the window was inextricable from the victim and his history” (435). In terms of DeLillo’s broader project, this desire to be made whole is Lee’s key mistake. Kristeva recognises that it is in the heterogeneous self that that potential for revolution lies whereas the transcendental self is politically repressive: “To rediscover practice by way of system, by rehabilitating what is heterogeneous to the system of meaning and what calls in question the transcendental subject: these, it seems to me, are the stakes for which semiotics is now playing” (“The System and the Speaking Subject” 31). But rather than recognise the potential for revolution in his “genital” self, as Bucky Wunderlick, Klara Sax and Lauren Hartke do, Lee ends up, like Gary Harkness, Lyle Wynant, Glen Selvy and Rey Robles, obliterating his identity in his quest for a “phallic” self. In other words, by failing to utilise his heterogeneous subjectivity, Oswald becomes instead a kind of scarecrow, like Willie Mink in *White Noise*, or Mr Tuttle in *The Body Artist*, constructed from the empty play of the dominant culture’s signifiers.

Indeed, the assassination of Kennedy can be interpreted as Oswald’s enactment of the Oedipus complex. In killing the father of the nation, Oswald is literally renamed, gaining a middle name, like John Fitzgerald Kennedy and Francis Gary Powers, that marks him as “a chapter in the imagination of the state” (198). Furthermore, this extra name not only marks Lee’s entry into history, but also signals his acquisition of the nom-du-pere essential to enter the masculine symbolic order. However, as stated earlier, DeLillo’s undermining of logocentrism is also manifested as a dismantling of phallogentrism, for not only does DeLillo, like Derrida, reveal the absence of the centre, he also, like Lacan, argues that no one can possess the phallus. In other words, not only does DeLillo’s depiction of Lee Harvey Oswald demonstrate that the self that strives to be whole is politically ineffective – Lee ends up shooting a President he respected and admired – but DeLillo demonstrates that there is no possibility of acquiring a transcendent, whole self in any case. And significantly,

one way in which *Libra* demonstrates this is through the figure of John F. Kennedy himself.

As Lacan's phallus is "the object of desire" (*Ecrits* 322), because it offers the possibility of making whole the self, so President John F. Kennedy, "the object of a thousand longings" (324), represents an opportunity to making good the self's loss. Indeed, Kennedy seems actually to have the phallus, for his subjectivity seems whole and unified. He is consistently associated with the masculine order, as this description of Washington illustrates: "the theater of the Kennedy's, the capital city that measured itself to a certain kind of manliness, a confidence and promise, the grace to take the maximum dare" (53). Similarly, his mastering the CIA's secrets ("he holds the secrets. The dangerous secrets that used to be held outside government. Plots, conspiracies, secrets of revolution, secrets of the end of the social order" (68)) allows him to pose as a rival centre of knowledge and certainty. But most importantly, Kennedy looks "like himself, like photographs" (392). In other words, Kennedy does not need to perform himself, or adopt a masquerade to adorn his lack, because his self is whole - apparently. Indeed, it is this that gives Kennedy's media representations such power, as Banister remarks, "It's not just Kennedy himself [...] It's the glowing picture we keep getting. He actually glows in most of his photographs" (67-8). And DeLillo is careful to demonstrate that Lee Harvey Oswald is not alone in identifying strongly with the President, for as the description of the crowd awaiting JFK's arrival in Dallas indicates, John F. Kennedy holds out the promise of wholeness to others than just the psychotic Oswald: "They were here to surround the brittle body of one man and claim his smile, receive some token of the bounty of his soul" (394).

But as Lacan reminds us that no one can ever possess the phallus, for it represents "the nostalgia of lack-in-having" (*Feminine Sexuality* 83), so *Libra*'s JFK is finally revealed as constituted by lack. He visits Dallas, looking like his photographs, and yet physically he is crumbling: "There was only a trace of the cortisone bloat that sometimes affected his face

- cortisone for his Addison's disease, a back brace for his degenerating discs" (392), because John F. Kennedy cannot even achieve bodily wholeness. Instead, as Banister's comment that "this Kennedy goes around with ten or fifteen people who look just like him" (141) reveals, President Kennedy's subjectivity is as split and dispersed as Oswald's. Indeed, whilst "looking like himself, like photographs" may seem to be the source of Kennedy's power, these media representations may actually result in the dispersal of Kennedy's self, as the scrap of paper Kennedy carries in his pocket suggests: "For weeks he'd carried a scrap of paper with scribbled lines of some bloody Shakespearean ruin. *They whirl asunder and dismember me*" (393). This interpretation is supported by DeLillo's description of the dispersal of the hostage's image in *Mao II*, which also results in the disintegration of his subjectivity:

they'd given him a second self, an immortality, the spirit of Jean-Claude Julien. He was a digital mosaic in the processing grid, lines of ghostly type on microfilm. They were putting him together, storing his data in starfish satellites, bouncing his image off the moon. He saw himself floating to the far shores of space, past his own death and back again. But he sensed they'd forgotten his body by now. He was lost in the wavebands, one more code for the computer mesh, for the memory of crimes too pointless to be solved. (112)

This relationship between the splitting of the self and media representations can best be understood by returning to Lacan. Not only does Lacan argue that the self is inevitably divided by its entry into language, he also proposes another stage in the construction of the subject that exists prior to the entry into the symbolic order, and which is also characterised by division. This stage is the mirror stage, when the infant, who has not yet gained full control over its body, learns to identify itself with its image, which promises wholeness:

The mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation - and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic - and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure of the subject's entire mental development. (Lacan, *Ecrits* 4)

But rather than resulting in a newly unified self, this identification instead splits the self, as the subject is divided between the *I* who perceives, and the *I* who is perceived. Kennedy's photographs, and the media representations of the hostage in *Mao II*, can be regarded in much the same light as Lacan's mirror, for in both the subject's identity is fractured by its identification with images outside itself. But most importantly, these media images indicate that Kennedy's identity is still constituted in the imaginary realm. In other words, Kennedy, like Lee Harvey Oswald, has failed to move into the symbolic order and has failed to acquire the phallus.

DeLillo also performs this undermining of phallogentrism with regards to the CIA. Like Kennedy, the CIA is described as inherently masculine: "They were the pure line, a natural extension of schoolboy societies, secret oaths and initiations, the body of assumptions common to young men of a certain discernible dash" (30). It too poses as a place of knowledge and certainty. We are told, for example, of the CIA, that "They understand more deeply than you think they do" (20). The CIA is also a place of secrets, which we can recognise as a specifically masculine characteristic, for masculinity is built on exclusion and secrets, of course, exclude. This is indicated by Larry Parmenter's conversation with his wife, Beryl:

"I don't think I could ever begin to imagine in years and years of living intimately with a man what it is like to be him."

"Funny. I thought women were the secret."

"No no no no no," she said softly, as if correcting a touchy child. "That's the wisdom handed down from man to boy, through the ages, a hundred generations of knowledge and experience. But it is just another Agency lie." (128-9)

Furthermore, like the father, the CIA possesses privilege of naming, and thereby controlling the identity of its subjects:

After his letter of reprimand, Parmenter had been assigned to what was joshingly called the slave directorate, a support division of clandestine services, and he'd been issued a new badge with a diminished number of

little red letters around the edges. His wife said, "How many letters do you have to lose before you disappear?" (117-8)

Connections are also drawn between the CIA and the original father, God: "Beryl saw it as the best organised church in the Christian world, a mission to collect and store everything that everyone has ever said and then reduce it to a microdot and call it God" (260). But, as Kennedy is finally exposed as lacking the phallus, so in retrospect Nicholas Branch is able to recognise the CIA as fraudulent: "He thought they'd built a vast theology, a formal coded body of knowledge that was basically play material, secret-keeping, one of the keener pleasures and conflicts of childhood. Now he wonders if the Agency is protecting something very much like its identity - protecting its own truth, its theology of secrets" (442). The CIA is revealed, not as possessing the phallus and hence able to pin down the floating mass of signification, but as subject itself to the play of meaning in language. Its "formal coded body of knowledge" is nothing more than masquerade, an attempt to disguise its lack, as Parmenter's response to Everett's questions about Lee Harvey Oswald signals incontrovertibly: "The way we fake our own files, who knows for sure?" (74).

Bearing this in mind, we should return to the conspirators' plot. The conspirators' plot has already been interpreted as an attempt to achieve closure, a kind of totality, after the Bay of Pigs disaster, which revealed meaning running out of control in the absence of a centre or fixed origin. But once we recognise that DeLillo believes no one can possess the phallus, we can witness that this dismantling of logocentrism is also a dismantling of phallogocentrism. For the conspirators' plot, which is an attempt to reinscribe a sense of order, is also an attempt to recover the phallus, because the conspirators, like Lee Harvey Oswald, are also characterised by lack.

This is played out most obviously in the character of the plot's author, Win Everett, whose expulsion from the CIA, as David Willman rightly recognises, is a "humiliating symbolic castration" (411). Everett was removed from the CIA after failing a polygraph test,

or in other words, after he was literally betrayed by his body. Utilising the ideas of Kristeva, we may read this as the result of the eruption of the feminine language of the body into the masculine discourse of CIA – and it is this that is shown to have the truly disruptive power in *Libra*. Furthermore, as Kaja Silverman notes that “those defying its [masculinity’s] conditions, generally find themselves relegated to the more accommodating category of femininity” (Silverman 342), so Win Everett is literally relegated to the feminine, for the CIA set him up in the Texas Women’s University. Win Everett’s plot, which strives for closure and totality, can be interpreted, therefore, as an attempt to reinscribe Win into the masculine order and to recover the phallus. Hence, Win’s delight in the textual nature of his plot, for he intends it to operate in the masculine symbolic order only. As Win’s faith in the power of authorial intention exposed him as a logocentrist, so it reveals his belief in phallogentrism, which characterises the father, like the author, as the guarantor of meaning in language. But as DeLillo is careful to undermine Win’s logocentrism, so he undermines his phallogentrism. Not only does he achieve this by revealing Win’s failure to guarantee the meaning of his plot, which signals his failure to acquire the *point de capiton*, the phallus, but DeLillo also literally undermines Win’s role as father. His daughter, Suzanne, questions his paternity: “The whole reason for the Figures was to hide them until the time when she might need them. She had to keep them near and safe in case the people who called themselves her mother and father were really somebody else” (366). As Lee’s failure to acquire the *nom-du-pere* disrupts his family relations, so the absence of the phallus results in the undermining of Win Everett’s family bonds.

Similarly, the depiction of Everett’s fellow conspirator, David Ferrie, also reveals that the plotters are characterised by lack. Like Everett, Ferrie is also excluded from the masculine symbolic order, in his case because he is homosexual. Furthermore, his lack is manifested literally in his baldness, as the description of Ferrie without his wig indicates:

“He looked unclear, half erased” (340). Just as Everett attempts to reinscribe himself through his plot, so Ferrie is also forced to construct a self: “he pasted on his homemade eyebrows and mohair toupee” (29). But, unlike the other performers of masquerade in *Libra*, Ferrie is self-conscious of his masquerade and of his lack. As he states: “Instead of hiding it, I adorn it, I dress it up” (316). It is this self-consciousness that is most important, for it allows Ferrie to recognise that there is little difference between his mohair wig and his pilot’s uniform: “You wear a uniform, it makes all the difference. Look at me. I put on my captain’s jacket, all this bleary shit just falls away. I become a captain for Eastern. I talk like a captain. I instill confidence in anxious travelers. I actually fly the goddamn plane” (45). Through Ferrie, DeLillo points to the masquerade inherent in all displays of masculinity, reminding us, as Lacan does, that “virile display itself appears as feminine” (*Feminine Sexuality* 85). Furthermore, by pointing to the absence of the phallus, as well as the transcendental centre of logocentrism, DeLillo reveals identity in *Libra* as fundamentally feminine – that is, characterised by lack. Indeed whilst the split and divided nature of Lee Harvey Oswald is immediately apparent, *Libra* proposes that even those who seem to have acquired the paternal metaphor are still inevitably constituted by lack, as Lacan also argues: “man cannot aim at being whole (the ‘total personality’) once the play of displacement and condensation to which he is committed in the exercise of his functions, marks his relation as subject to the signifier” (*Feminine Sexuality* 81).

But there is another implication of DeLillo’s dismantling of phallogentrism in *Libra*, because it also allows us to interpret the culture of postmodernism, that the Kennedy assassination is often claimed to have heralded, as a culture characterised by a fundamental psychosis. Not only does the failure of the paternal metaphor result in the kind of disturbance in the signifying chain that characterises postmodern culture, as Fredric Jameson recognises in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (26-7),

but it also indicates a failure to move from the imaginary realm to the symbolic. Postmodern culture can be said to belong to the imaginary realm, for as Frederic Jameson recognises, it is “essentially a visual culture” (*Postmodernism* 299). Furthermore, Jameson also singles out the Kennedy assassination as the moment that this culture of images was unleashed: “this event was also something like the coming of age of the whole media culture that had been set in place in the late 1940s and the 1950s” (*Postmodernism* 355). It is in these terms that we can understand Frank Lentricchia’s definition of postmodern subjectivity as a “Filmic self-consciousness” (“*Libra* as Postmodern Critique” 208) that marks “the desire for the universal third-person” (“*Libra* as Postmodern Critique” 193), as another manifestation of Lacan’s mirror stage. But rather than identifying with his or her own image in the mirror, the postmodern subject identifies with an image on screen. The identification of a nation with images of President Kennedy in *Libra* can be understood in these terms, as can Lee’s excitement that John Wayne matches his screen image, for this seems to confirm the promise of wholeness and unity that the actor holds on film, “He wants to get close to John Wayne, say something authentic. He watches John Wayne talk and laugh. It’s remarkable and startling to see the screen laugh repeated in life. It makes him feel good. The man is doubly real” (93). But it is that Lee Harvey Oswald is finally turned into a media image himself that is most important, because in his final appearance he forces his audience to identify with him, “He is commentating on the documentary footage even as it is being shot. Then he himself is shot, and shot, and shot, and the look becomes another kind of knowledge. But he has made us part of his dying” (447). By making us part of his dying, Oswald denies to us forever the possibility of ever achieving a singular unified self, for he forces his audience to identify with a self that is split and fractured. For not only does his dissemination in the media disperse his subjectivity, but his endlessly replayed death also removes even “the possibility of death as a terminal state for the subject” (Thomas 117) as

Glen Thomas recognises. Lee Harvey Oswald's subjectivity in *Libra* reveals that the mirror of imaginary identification is cracked.

Don DeLillo's *Libra* depicts the Kennedy assassination as the moment that exposes not only the absence of the centre, but also the failure of the paternal metaphor. This interpretation of the Kennedy assassination as a disruption of the masculine order is not unique to DeLillo. For example, the *Warren Commission Report*, Norman Mailer's *Oswald's Tale* and Oliver Stone's film *JFK* all present Lee Harvey Oswald's crime as the product of an overbearing mother or his own repressed homosexuality. But there are crucial differences between these interpretations and DeLillo's depiction of the failure of the paternal metaphor in *Libra*. Not only does DeLillo deploy the popular psychology of Mailer and the Warren Report self-consciously, as Marguerite Oswald's statement reveals ("I am not the looming mother of a boy's bad dream" (49)), but DeLillo also recognises that all identity, not just feminine, is characterised by lack, and is always and inevitably split. Unlike Mailer or the writers of the *Warren Commission Report*, DeLillo does not believe anyone can possess the phallus – and it is this that saves DeLillo from John Kucich's claim that his work suffers from "extraneous bouts of traditional misogyny" (Kucich 341). Indeed, DeLillo demonstrates in this and other novels that the hope for effective political resistance lies not in the whole, transcendent self, but heterogeneous, feminine subjectivity.

***Mao II*: “A Democratic Shout”**

Though it did not impact on public or critical consciousness the way in which *Libra* (1988) and *Underworld* (1997) did, the significance of *Mao II* (1992) should not be underestimated. If *Americana* (1971) is DeLillo’s “hurled” (LeClair, *In the Loop* 33) book, a novel in which “it was as if he [DeLillo] were setting down material that could be put to better use in more carefully crafted, focused, structured work later on” (Isaacs 91), then *Mao II* is the novel in which the themes and material that pervade DeLillo’s fiction are dealt with most elegantly and succinctly – DeLillo’s oeuvre writ small, one might say. The novel deals with all the archetypal DeLillo themes: the impact of mechanical reproduction on conceptions of reality, the juxtaposition of the crowd and the individual, terrorism, the role of the artist and the artist’s potential for resistance. But what is most significant about DeLillo’s tenth novel is not so much the presence of these familiar themes, as their careful plotting against material events, because it is this that allows DeLillo to explore the possibility of a political aesthetic that preserves individual subjectivity against the specific historical background of the late twentieth century.

But *Mao II* is also a novel with a resonance unpredicted on its publication in 1992, which may yet result in it taking a more prominent place in the canon of DeLillo’s work, because *Mao II* will, for the foreseeable future, be read in the shadow of the events of September

11th 2001, when two hijacked passenger jets crashed into New York’s World Trade Center. The association of *Mao II* with these events is in part a product of the novel’s central themes: terrorism and extreme non-Christian religious belief. It opens with a description of a Moonie wedding in Yankee Stadium, where the Reverend Moon weds thirteen thousand people, all of whom “really believe” (8), and closes with a visit to a terrorist leader in Beirut, a city that has itself become synonymous with terrorism and religious

fundamentalism. Even more significantly, DeLillo brings both of these themes to American soil in *Mao II*, in the shape of the Moonie wedding in Yankee Stadium, and in the refrain, “Beirut, Beirut, its just like Beirut” (173), that Karen hears continually on the streets of New York. The boldness of this move prior to the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center and the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, when terrorism was still regarded as something that only happened outside the United States, should not be ignored. Here DeLillo prompts America to step, in Slavok Zizek’s words, “through the fantasmatic screen separating it from the Outside world” (N. pag), just as Bill Gray does literally when he travels from his hide-out in upstate New York to Beirut. DeLillo asks America to recognise that the assumption that U.S. should be immune from this kind of violence is both naïve and fundamentally unjust. But *Mao II* does not only highlight the susceptibility of the U.S. to terrorism nine years before the attacks on New York and Washington; the Twin Towers are also a continual presence in this novel as they are in every DeLillo novel set in New York after their construction.

The Twin Towers have always represented a disquieting space in DeLillo’s fiction. In *Players* (1977), for example, Pammy continually finds herself disoriented and dwarfed by these spaces: “She felt abstract terms were called for in the face of such tyrannic grandeur. Four times a day she was dwarfed, progressively midgeted, walking across that purplish-blue rug. Spaces. Indefinite locations. Positions regarded as occupied by something.” (24). Similarly, the WTC not only dominates the cover of *Underworld*, but the construction of the towers overshadows Klara Sax’s view of New York – and her consciousness: “The World Trade Center was under construction, already towering, twin-towering, with cranes tilted at the summits and work elevators sliding up the flanks. She saw it almost everywhere she went” (372). But it is *Mao II*’s exploration of terrorism against the repeated descriptions of the Twin Towers that gives this novel, of all DeLillo’s work, the strongest resonance after September 11th. As in DeLillo’s other fiction, the towers are described as physically

dominating the city of New York in *Mao II*: “Out of the south windows the Trade towers stood cut against the night, intensely massed and near. This is the word ‘loomed’ in all its prolonged and impending force” (87). Furthermore, the towers also permeate the inner mental life of the city’s inhabitants. Brita regards these “two black latex slabs” (165) as “her towers” (165), whose presence is a constant source of aggravation, as her conversation with Bill reveals:

“You’ll wonder what made you mad.”
“I already have the World Trade Center.”
“And it’s already harmless and ageless. Forgotten-looking. And think how much worse.”
“What?” she said.
“If there was only one tower instead of two.”
“You mean they interact. There is a play of light.”
“Wouldn’t a single tower be much worse?”
“No, because my big complaint is only partly size. The size is deadly. But having two of them is like a comment, it’s like a dialogue, only I don’t know what they’re saying.” (40)

The apparent prescience of DeLillo’s fiction has often been noted. Margaret Roberts, for example, claimed – in an article about *Mao II* – that his novels have “the evocative power of a soothsayer”. After September 11th, it is difficult to ignore the central place DeLillo continued to give to the Twin Towers in his fiction, when for many like Bill Gray, the towers had already become “harmless and ageless. Forgotten-looking” (40). They appear so frequently in DeLillo’s fiction, because they play an important symbolic role, representing the connection between the new, disorientating space of postmodernism and global capitalism, “the twin towers in the distance, a model of behemoth mass production, units that roll identically off the line and end up in your supermarket, stamped with the day’s prices” (*Underworld* 377-8). DeLillo’s apparent prescience is not the result of any kind of soothsaying; rather it is the result of DeLillo’s long-held recognition, shared with Fredric Jameson, that this connection between postmodern culture and global economics, represented by the World Trade Center, is the latest form of imperialism. His anticipation of attacks against the U.S.A. and American citizens in his fiction stems from his realisation, as

far back as *The Names* (1982), that American neo-colonialism was bound to result in some kind of response. As DeLillo writes in *The Names* “Wasn’t there a sense, we Americans felt, in which we had it coming?” (41). That the terrorists also recognised the significance of the towers, reminds us that terrorism, like literature, also operates on the level of symbols, and that this is part of “the curious knot that binds novelists and terrorists” (41).

DeLillo has also long been regarded as a kind of terrorism “guru” – in part because of *Mao II*, as Adam Begley writes:

Because *Mao II*, *The Names* and *Players*, books either wholly or in part about the workings of political violence, DeLillo has become a kind of honorary expert on terrorism. Every time a bomb goes off he gets another round of phone calls from magazine and newspaper editors looking for comment, a word or two from a guy with the inside skinny. (“Don DeLillo: *Americana*, *Mao II* and *Underworld*” 492)

In light of this and the frequency with which the towers turn up in his fiction many were quick to turn to DeLillo after the September 11th attacks. On the internet, DeLillo news groups exchanged auspicious passages from his novels and pondered the cover to the hardback edition of *Underworld* – was that a bird or a plane flying into the Twin Towers? Vince Passaro cited DeLillo, along with Gore Vidal, as one of “a couple of authors whom we suspect COULD add to the available pool of wisdom on what is happening right now” (Passaro, “Don DeLillo and the Towers” n.pag). In the press, journalists and writers also employed DeLillo, though a little more rationally. Judith Shulevitz wrote in the New York Times: “Somewhere deep in my heart, I have always longed for a catastrophe like the present one. Such wishes may seem appalling once they have come true, but we harbor them nonetheless. The novelist Don DeLillo has called this our ‘tone of enthusiasm for runaway calamity’” (6.28), Martin Amis stated in *The Guardian*: “the temperature of planetary fear has been lifted towards the feverish; ‘the world hum’, in Don DeLillo’s phrase, is now as audible as tinitus” (“The First Circle of Hell” 2.5), whilst Ian McEwan wrote in the same newspaper, “even the best minds, the best or darkest dreamers of disaster on a gigantic

scale, from Tolstoy and Wells to Don DeLillo, could not have delivered us into the nightmare available on television news channels” (2.2). None noted the irony of turning to DeLillo to help understand their response to the attacks, an author who claims in *Mao II* that terrorism has made the novelist obsolete: “Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated” (41). Nor did the glut of pieces from writers like Jay McInerney, Arundhati Roy and Salman Rushdie, as well as McEwan and Amis meet with any comment. Terrorists may have the power to “alter the inner life of the culture”, but the response of the media on both sides of the Atlantic to the destruction of the World Trade Center seems to indicate writers hold a more important place in this culture than ever before – another instance of the “curious knot” at the heart of *Mao II*. In light of these arguments and the argument made in *Mao II*, the decision of DeLillo himself to step into the fray with the publication of “In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on terror and loss in the shadow of September”, demands close examination. This is most especially important because this essay seems to offer a tacit withdrawal of some of the claims of *Mao II*.

Mao II is a novel invested with a sense of the future. We are told that Karen Janney, an ex-Moonie, carries “the virus of the future” (119) and that “The future belongs to crowds” (16). Post September 11th, DeLillo no longer seems quite so confident about this future as the very title of his essay on the events, “In the Ruins of the Future”, indicates. DeLillo not only recognises that “the terrorists of Sept. 11 want to bring back the past” (“In the Ruins of the Future” 34), but that the attacks have literally moved New York backwards in time to the old skyline of the 1960s: “Now a small group of men have literally altered our skyline. We have fallen back in time and space” (“In the Ruins of the Future” 38). With reference to *Mao II*, what the September 11th attacks force DeLillo to recognise is his earlier tacit support of the argument, made most famously by Francis Fukuyama, that liberal

democracy is the “final form of human government” (xi) and hence constitutes the “end of history” (xi). Despite the emphasis placed on belief and blind faith in *Mao II*, DeLillo’s believers are passive and infantilised, “the blessed couple eat kiddie food and use baby names because they feel so small in his presence” (6), whilst his terrorists reject religion and the suicide tactics of September 11th. As Rashid states: “They are not making a race to go to God. We don’t train them for paradise. No martyrs here” (233). What is more, they are a Maoist group, and they still belong to the old Communist/ Capitalist dichotomy. Indeed, George Haddad, the terrorist’s “respectable” spokesman, seems to argue that it is such terrorism, unaffiliated to any religion, that represents the future:

“It’s an idea. It’s a picture of Lebanon without the Syrians, Palestinians and Israelis, without the Iranian volunteers, the religious wars. We need a model that transcends all the bitter history. Something enormous and commanding. A figure of absolute being. This is crucial, Bill. In societies struggling to remake themselves, total politics, total authority, total being.” (158)

In other words, DeLillo seems unable to imagine an alternative to the ideological battle between Communism and capitalism, which Fukuyama regards as the last before history ended with the victory of liberal democracy. It is this that prompts Peter Baker to write of *Mao II*’s terrorist leader, “Abu Rashid represents, in my view, DeLillo’s imaginative ‘failure’ even to attempt to render any kind of satisfactory counterpart to the Western novelist in the figure of the terrorist leader.” (N. pag). This imaginative failure is uncharacteristic of DeLillo, as John McClure notes of *Mao II*:

Its claim to embody an achieved ideal of democratic practice is as specious as that of the nation [U.S.A] whose ideals it celebrates. If DeLillo wants to defend democracy, he will have to recover the more authentically democratic vision of his earlier works, in which its enemies include the very institutions that proclaim it, and its defense requires unveilings at home rather than crusades abroad. (“Systems and Secrets: Don DeLillo’s Postmodern Thrillers” 149)

The “more authentically democratic vision of his earlier works” refers to novels like *The Names*, which are acutely sensitive to the limitations both of liberal democracy and of the Western view of the world. Indeed, *The Names* points directly to the imaginative failure of

the Carter administration, whose inability to imagine the entry of a third term into the binary of Communism and Capitalism resulted in the Iran Hostage Crisis. *Mao II*'s failure of imagination is especially strange given one of the key events that inspired this novel was the fatwa issued against Salman Rushdie – an incident that pointed not to America's old enemy, Communism, but to the theocratic Muslim state, the third term of the Iran Hostage Crisis. Post Twin Towers, whose destruction can be regarded as the symbolic explosion of the binaries that dominate Western thought by this third term, DeLillo is forced to recognise the error of his and Fukuyama's assumptions, writing: "We like to think 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" ("In the Ruins of the Future" 39). It is instructive that DeLillo adheres to the developmental model employed by Fukuyama and others in describing the events of September 11th, where liberal democracy and global capitalism are equated with the future, and the terrorists and the theocratic state with the past: "the future has yielded, for now, to medieval expedience, the old slow furies of cutthroat religion" ("In the Ruins of the Future" 37). But this should not be recognised as a prediction, as Fukuyama's *End of History* often has, but instead as a value judgement on DeLillo's part:

Two forces in the world, past and future. With the end of Communism, the ideas and principles of modern democracy were seen clearly to prevail, whatever the inequalities of the system itself. This is still the case. But now there is a global theocratic state, unboundaried and floating and so obsolete it must depend on suicidal fervor to gain its aims.

Ideas evolve and de-evolve, and history is turned on end. ("In the Ruins of the Future" 40)

DeLillo recognises that the meaning of "past" and "future" have shifted, because the Western developmental model of history has been fundamentally disrupted. As DeLillo writes: "This is over now ... The narrative ends in rubble, and it is left to us to create the counternarrative" ("In the Ruins of the Future" 34). DeLillo sides with the "future", but recognises now that this "future" is no longer inevitable.

Commentators have already begun attempting to create the counternarratives that could accommodate the events of September 11th. Many have started by rejecting Fukuyama's stance, like right-wing journalist George Will, who saluted the U.S.A.'s return from its "decade-long holiday from history" ("Terror is a Tactic of the Weak" 15). Others, like psychoanalytic critic, Slavok Zizek, have seen the attacks as marking the return of the real. Of course, its signification may not be settled, as Slavok Zizek states: "it is open how the events will be symbolized, what their symbolic efficiency will be, what acts they will be evoked to justify" (N. pag), but the combination of these associations suggest that September 11th may eventually become the moment commonly cited as the end of postmodernism, just as the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the event that haunts so much of DeLillo's fiction, is often evoked as its opening moment. Indeed, the destruction of the Twin Towers was the destruction of a symbol of postmodernity. DeLillo seems to share this perception of September 11th as the return of the real, for all it looked like a movie, as he acknowledges in his essay on the events: "It was bright and totalizing, and some of us said it was unreal. When we say a thing is unreal, we mean it is too real, a phenomenon so unaccountable and yet so bound to the power of objective fact that we can't tilt it to the slant of our perceptions" (38). But unlike Wills uncomplicated view of history, DeLillo shares Zizek's problem with the real, positing the loss of the Twin Towers as the supreme sublime moment of recent history, an instant, like the Lacanian Real, that cannot be accommodated or represented in the Symbolic order. This problem of representation is apparent even on the most basic level; the unnameable, unrepresentable nature of this event is signalled by its stripped-down, denotative referents: "September 11th", "9-11" or the oblique, knowing "recent events". Despite this uncertainty over its eventual symbolisation, however, September 11th will undoubtedly have enormous significance in American culture for years to come. In light of this and DeLillo's determination to write fiction that tries to "think our present time in history", it is interesting to speculate whether 9-11 will have been

the event that dominates DeLillo's later fiction, as the assassination of Kennedy dominates his earlier work.

As this thesis has demonstrated, DeLillo has been concerned throughout his oeuvre to find a space for political resistance against the dominant culture that does not result in the eradication of individual subjectivity. DeLillo seems to find a temporary solution, at least, in the semiotic aesthetic, a solution first propounded in *Great Jones Street*. In a number of ways, *Mao II* can be seen as a return to or a reworking of this theme, as Mark Ireton writes of this novel in "The American Pursuit of Loneliness: Don DeLillo's *Great Jones Street* and *Mao II*": "This may, then, be a case of rewriting an earlier novel; a new treatise on privacy in the media-world" (n.pag). What is more, it is interesting to note that Warhol's drawing "Mao II" dates from 1973, the year of *Great Jones Street*'s publication. However, whilst *Great Jones Street* is populated by cartoonish figures, with no discernible specific historic context, besides from occasional oblique references to Vietnam in Bucky Wunderlick's lyrics, *Mao II* will not only carry the resonance of September 11th for some time to come, but it also was inspired by series of actual incidents, including the photograph of J. D. Salinger that appeared in the *New York Post* and a mass Moonie wedding in Korea. Furthermore, like *The Names*, *Mao II* is also plotted very carefully against external historical events, allowing us to trace a timeline through the novel from 1988 to 1989. These events include the Lockerbie bombing, the Hillsborough disaster, Tianamen Square and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini. Unspoken and unnamed in the novel is the event that haunts it: the fatwa against Rushdie for alleged blasphemy in *The Satanic Verses*. The centrality of this event to the novel is signalled by the repetition of a phrase from *Mao II*, "democratic shout" (159), in the Salman Rushdie Defence Pamphlet that DeLillo wrote with Paul Auster, whilst as this novel's title indicates, the principle theme of *Mao II* is the relationship between politics and the artist.

In other words, what is abstract and general in *Great Jones Street* becomes material and specific in *Mao II*. The dominant culture that both Bill and Bucky resist is the reproductive culture of late capitalism – a specifically American culture. Both at first attempt simply to isolate themselves from this culture, but both find that this withdrawal results in a further commodification of their selves – and one that they cannot control. Their self-imposed exile becomes an internalisation of power relations, like the hunger strike of Kafka's protagonist in "The Hunger Artist", referred to in DeLillo's essay, "The Artist Naked in the Cage". As DeLillo writes:

In a culture, ours, that tries to absorb and neutralize every threat to consumer consciousness, the spectacle of a man living as a dog has a kind of shifting eloquence. ... But it also suggests the grim idea that the performance artist, liberated from Soviet state control, hair cropped, and dog collar secured, may be carrying his own culture's atavistic wish for order and repression. ("The Artist Naked in the Cage" 6-7)

Like Bucky, Bill has become subsumed into his products, as Scott's trip to a New York book store reveals: "He went to the section on modern classics and found Bill Gray's two lean novels in their latest trade editions, a matched pair banded in austere umbers and rusts. He like to check the shelf for Bill" (20). Both emerge from their isolation, and attempt to find a vocal site of resistance. But whereas Bucky encounters the shadowy figure of Dr Pepper and the Happy Gang – who may or may not be government operatives, but are certainly American, at least – Bill finds himself in a strange alliance with foreign terrorism.

As Peter Baker points out, terrorism tends, by the nature of who defines it, to be that which is in opposition to the United States:

Whether one supports American foreign policy or not, and whatever one's views may be on recent armed conflicts and other acts of violence committed in the context of these struggles, it should be clear that the terms "terrorism" and "terrorist" are markers invoked to build ideological consensus for certain kinds of U.S. domination abroad. (n.pag)

Indeed, any resistance to the dominant American culture is rendered Other by the very act of resistance. Perpetrators are immediately assumed to be foreign, as the initial response to the

Oklahoma City bombing illustrates, and deemed “un-American” should they turn out to be U.S. citizens. Bill, like DeLillo’s other artists, thus finds himself in a similar position to the terrorist, because the commodity culture of late capitalism that he hopes to resist is the dominant American culture. Hence the connections drawn between artists and terrorists in DeLillo’s fiction – Lauren Hartke’s hair, for example is described as “terroristic” (103) in *The Body Artist*. These connections are also drawn repeatedly in *Mao II*. Brita tells Scott that she feels as if she is “being taken to see some terrorist chief at his secret retreat in the mountains” (27), when he drives her to meet Bill, for example. Similarly, George Haddad argues: “It’s the novelist who understands the secret life, the rage that underlies all obscurity and neglect. You’re half murderers, most of you” (157), whilst Bill claims “There’s a curious knot that binds terrorists and novelists” (41). Indeed, Bill even states that terrorism has made the novelist obsolete: “Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated” (41). In other words, Bill argues that both terrorism and writers attempt to disrupt the dominant narrative, but terrorism does so more successfully, because terrorism escapes incorporation, in a way that writers no longer can: “Only the terrorist stands outside. The culture hasn’t figured out how to assimilate him” (157).

But DeLillo does not celebrate the terrorist. As “In the Ruins of the Future” makes clear, DeLillo may actively criticise liberal democracy, but it still his favoured form of society. He recognises terrorism’s suppression of the individual speaking subject and its connection to totalitarianism: “It’s pure myth, the terrorist as solitary outlaw. These groups are backed by repressive governments. They’re perfect little totalitarian states. They carry the old wild-eyed vision, total destruction and total order” (158). This erosion of subjectivity impacts both on its victims and its proponents. Jean-Claude Julien finds his bodily presence, the key to any aesthetic resistance in DeLillo’s fiction, elided by his

capture by the Maoist terrorist group – and his reproduction in the Western media, two complicit forces:

In the beginning there were people in many cities who had his name on their breath. He knew they were out there, the intelligence network, the diplomatic back-channel, technicians, military men. He had tumbled into the new culture, the system of world terror, and they'd given him a second self, an immortality, the spirit of Jean-Claude Julien. He was a digital mosaic in the processing grid, lines of ghostly type on microfilm. They were putting him together, storing his data in starfish satellites, bouncing his image off the moon. He saw himself floating to the far shores of space, past his own death and back again. But he sensed they'd forgotten his body by now. He was lost in the wavebands, one more code for the computer mesh, for the memory of crimes too pointless to be solved. (112)

Abu Rashid's followers, even more starkly, must cover their faces and wear pictures of Rashid pinned to their chests, with the result that "the image of Rashid is their identity" (233). Similarly, just as Lyle's subjectivity is effaced after joining the terrorist group in *Players*, Bill Gray's decision to become a character in the terrorist plot results in a complete eradication of his self. Bill agrees to swap places with the hostage but dies alone and anonymous on board a ferry before arriving in Beirut, his identification documents stolen by one of the ship's cleaners. In each of these instances, characters abandon the semblance of autonomous subjectivity for a self proscribed by a pre-existing, authoritarian narrative.

Here DeLillo further develops the connection between the writer and the terrorist or totalitarian figure. DeLillo makes it clear that his terrorists and dictators adopt the role of the writer as a creator of meaning. Chairman Mao, for example, is literally portrayed as a writer, "Mao was a poet" (162), whose totalitarian narrative, published as the little red book, became the only narrative his people need: "This is the unchanged narrative every culture needs in order to survive. In China the narrative belonged to Mao" (162). What is more, DeLillo's terrorists and dictators use the cultural value of the artist to give their narrative's authority, as DeLillo's description of the painting, *Gorby I* demonstrates: "in this one picture she could detect a maximum statement about the dissolvability of the artist and the exaltation of the public figure, about how it is possible to fuse images, Mikhail

Gorbachev's and Marilyn Monroe's, and to steal auras, Gold Marilyn's and Dead-White Andy's" (134). This use of the figure of the artist extends beyond stealing "auras" however. Rashid's group literally hold a poet, Jean-Claude Julien, hoping to upgrade him for Bill Gray, a writer with more presence, whilst Mao and the Ayatollah Khomeini attempt to protect the integrity of their narratives by destroying dissident writers. DeLillo's use of the word "aura" here is not accidental, but rather a reference to Walter Benjamin's "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", which explicitly describes this kind of aestheticised politics. Furthermore, Benjamin recognises this phenomenon as peculiarly Fascist, "The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life" (241). He argues totalitarian figures adopt the ritual values that art possessed before mechanical reproduction, to support absolute rather than relative cultural values. This is because prior to mechanical reproduction, the aura of a work of art stemmed from its singularity, and "outmoded concepts, such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery – concepts whose uncontrolled (and at present almost uncontrollable) application would lead to a processing of data in the Fascist sense" (218). In other words, the older conception of art supports the monologic cultures that are always seen as repressive of individual subjectivity in DeLillo's fiction. It is against such cultures that DeLillo posits his artists, as potential sites of resistance, able to disrupt the dominant narrative.

In light of this, it is essential to re-examine the character of Bill Gray. Bill Gray has been mistaken by a number of critics for DeLillo himself. Adam Begley, for example, describes Bill Gray as "DeLillo's stand-in and spokesman" ("*Don DeLillo: Americana, Mao II and Underworld*" 497). This misapprehension is unsurprising given DeLillo's mischievous comment to an interviewer that sometimes he is tempted to "change my name to Bill Gray and disappear" (Passaro, "Dangerous Don DeLillo" 38). However, Bill Gray is not DeLillo and does not represent DeLillo's voice. Rather DeLillo undermines Bill's voice and work in a way that he never does with Bucky Wunderlick. Firstly, it should be noted

that Bill's aesthetic can no longer claim to provide any resistance to the dominant culture. His two earliest novels have been, in Herbert Marcuse's phrase, completely desublimated, as their inclusion in the Modern Classics section in the bookshop indicates. Secondly, whilst his work in progress does have the bodily presence that DeLillo regards as so important to a successful political aesthetic, it is a *deformed* presence:

He looked at the sentence, six disconsolate words, and saw the entire book as it took occasional shape in his mind, a neutered near-human dragging through the house, humpbacked, hydrocephalic, with puckered lips and soft skin, dribbling brain fluid from its mouth. (55)

I keep seeing my book wandering through the halls. There the thing is, creeping feebly, if you can imagine a naked humped creature with filed-down genitals, only worse, because it's head bulges at the top and there's a gargoylish tongue jutting at a corner of the mouth and truly terrible feet. (92)

And as the reference to "filed-down genitals" reveals, there is no possibility of the jouissance essential to DeLillo's and Kristeva's political aesthetic. But most importantly, Bill's project is characterised by monologue, rather than heteroglossia. As Bill tells us "Every sentence has a truth waiting at the end of it" (48). Hence his repeated association with the novel's dictators. Not only does George Haddad tell Bill: "You could have been a Maoist, Bill. ... You would have written what the culture needed in order to see itself. And you would have seen the need for an absolute being, a way out of weakness and confusion" (163), but the description of Karen as "like something out of Bill Gray" (77) clearly indicates that she has simply substituted Bill's narrative for that of the Reverend Moon. Furthermore, Bill's failure to "reproduce mechanically" his last novel ensures it belongs to the old order of art, with all its associations with absolute cultural values and Fascism. Unlike the Dadaists who "intended and achieved ... a relentless destruction of the aura of their creations, which they branded as reproductions, with the very means of production" (Benjamin 237-8), it seems Bill's work does not represent a space for disruptive voices, but is instead another authoritative discourse.

DeLillo also makes the nature of Bill's writing clear through his critique of language as a patriarchal structure. Like Bakhtin, DeLillo associates authoritative discourse with "the words of the fathers" (342). Thus DeLillo's dictators are not only associated with writers, but with fathers. For example, the disciples of the Reverend Moon are infantilised: "The blessed couples eat kiddie food and use baby names in his presence because they feel so small in his presence" (6), whilst the crowd that fight over the Ayatollah Khomeini's corpse, are described as fighting over their father's body: "The living do not accept that their father is dead" (89). Similarly, Bill is also associated with the fathers of authoritative discourse as daughter's frequent reference to him as the "Mythical Father" (113) makes clear. However, Liz is also careful to undermine such authoritative patriarchal discourse. Not only is Liz a lesbian, signalling her rejection of the authoritative discourse of heterosexuality, but her references to Bill's absence as a father point directly to his failures as a writer:

We don't think your behavior had anything to do with writing. We think the Mythical Father used writing as an excuse for just about everything. That's how we analyze the matter, Daddy. We think writing was never the burden and sorrow you made it out to be but as a matter of fact was your convenient crutch and your convenient alibi for every possible failure to be decent. (114)

The connection drawn by Liz reveals that as Bill failed to maintain a literal presence as Liz's father, so he has failed to maintain any presence in his writing.

Bill believes writing and identity are closely linked, as his attitude to the hostage, Jean Claude Julien reveals: "He could have told George he was writing about the hostage to bring him back, to return a meaning that had been lost to the world when they locked him in that room" (200). However, Bill is finally forced to recognise the impossibility of reproducing any real self in writing: "He walked down the hall to piss or spit. He stood by the window dreaming. This was the man as he saw himself. The biographer who didn't examine these things (not that there would ever be a biographer) couldn't begin to know the catchments, the odd-corner deeps of Bill's true life" (136). This reveals the fatal flaw in the

old Romantic model of authorship, which in fact, as Mark Osteen writes, makes Bill “more exploitable by what Guy Debord famously calls the ‘society of spectacle’” (*American Magic and Dread* 193). His attempts to protect the integrity of art by protecting the integrity of his self have not been successful. Despite his reluctance to publish and his reclusiveness, Bill has been absorbed into the culture of late capitalism, as the mass of material generated on the subject of Bill Gray reveals: “There were stacks of magazines and journals containing articles about Bill’s work and about his disappearance, his concealment, his retirement, his alleged change of identity, his rumored suicide, his return to work, his work-in-progress, his death, his rumored return” (31). Bill is aware of the problem and hopes to rectify it by allowing the publication of his photograph. As he remarks to Brita: “I think I need these pictures more than you do. To break down the monolith I’ve built.” (44). But the photographing of Bill Gray serves only to signal, incontrovertibly, that Bill is now authored by others, rather than self-written. As he says to Brita, “I’ve become someone’s material. Yours, Brita” (43). First a construct of magazine articles, then Brita, it is no surprise Bill slips into the terrorists’ plot so easily. As Mark Osteen notes, Bill has finally become a brand name: “he is just a ‘bill,’ a universal equivalent, a blank counter upon which others can write and from whom others can profit” (*American Magic and Dread* 197). Like Rey Robles in *The Body Artist*, who adopted the name of a “minor character he played in an obscure film noir” (28), Bill is ultimately only a player in someone else’s story. In other words, Bill’s concept of the writer has proved useless to protect either the “authority” of his novels – or his self.

In contrast, the only artistic voice that seems to survive intact at the close of *Mao II* is that of Ali 21, a graffiti artist in Beirut, who is able to avoid incorporation through his self-created identity. Like Warhol in *Mao II*, Klara Sax, Lenny Bruce, Moonman 157 in *Underworld* and Lauren Hartke in *The Body Artist*, Ali 21 recognises that artists must write themselves, if they are to avoid being written. Furthermore, this self should not adhere to

the old absolutes of the Romantic model of authorship, but should be unfixed and unstable, if it is to avoid absorption into the dominant culture more than temporarily, because, as Georges Bataille recognises, transgression always reinscribes the law it breaks. Thus, just as Lauren Hartke changes age, size and sex to avoid incorporation, so Warhol tells Brita “The secret of being me is that I’m only half here” (135). Furthermore, recognising the space for resistance in late capitalism as small, these artists also use the apparatus of the dominant culture against it. Warhol adopts the mass production techniques of commodity culture, Hartke scours and excoriates her body with supermarket beauty products, whilst Ali 21 uses the technology of the state – aerosol spray paint – against it. It is here we can recognise that the real spot of resistance offered by Bill Gray is not in his published novels, which were desublimated years ago, or his work in progress, which possesses the cult value of the older, Fascistic conception of art, but in his mantra “Measure your head before ordering” (170). Just as there is some redemptive power in rock n’ roll in *Great Jones Street*, so advertising seems to offer something recuperable in *Mao II*. Like Warhol’s art, this phrase represents the appropriation of mass culture by the artist. Furthermore, this phrase has a specific meaning in Bill’s family context, thereby returning an individual impulse to something mass-produced, just as Klara Sax does in *Underworld* by repainting B-52 bombers in the colours of the body. Most significantly, this prose, “Measure your head before ordering”, from the Sears Roebuck catalogue, is anonymous, like the work of the graffiti artist, and it is this anonymity which protects its writer from incorporation or assimilation into the dominant order.

There is only one writer mentioned by name in *Mao II*: Samuel Beckett. Bill Gray states: “Beckett is the last writer to shape the way we think and see. After him, the major work involves midair explosions and crumbled buildings. This is the new tragic narrative” (157). Beckett’s role here is pivotal, with Gray claiming him as the last writer to produce a successful political aesthetic. DeLillo’s selection of Beckett is key for a number of reasons.

Firstly, what Beckett and his character's seek, but never reach, is silence. DeLillo's characters, like Bill Gray, fall easily into silence, only to discover too late, like Kafka's hunger artist, that it does not offer a place of resistance, but instead only of complicity with the dominant culture. Gray's reference to Beckett may signal then, both his regret that he followed Beckett's advice, and his hope that like Beckett's characters, he can keep on talking. But we should also recall Adorno's argument here, who reminds us that Beckett is not absorbed into the dominant culture because his work, which disrupts dominant conceptions of reality, resists commodification. Furthermore, Adorno regards Beckett's abstraction as much more effective than a politically radical, but conventionally realist piece of art, like those produced by Sartre or Brecht. As Adorno writes: "Kafka and Beckett arouse the fear which existentialism merely talks about. By dismantling appearance, they explode from within the art that which committed proclamation subjugates from without, and hence only in appearance. The inescapability of their work compels the change of attitude, which committed works merely demand" (191). In other words, whilst Bill's novels are politically neutered, it is art that challenges the law of the dominant culture, as semiotic art does, that maintains political impetus. Here we can recognise the painting with a "real spoon with impacted food that was also real" (173) stuck to it, that Karen Janney discovers in a New York art gallery as an example of just such art. This scene is reminiscent of a scene in DeLillo's pseudonymous novel *Amazons* (1980), which also features a painting with a spoon stuck to it (102). What the spoon seems to offer in both novels is an unreproducible, unabsorbable presence – the signified, not the signifier. As Natasha, an art critic, explains in *Amazons*:

Once upon a time, we might have worked and fought and struggled to come up with a suitable explanation for the spoon. We might have searched for metaphors and images. We now know this isn't necessary. It is a spoon. This is all we have to say, and it is almost too much. I can easily envision a day when it will be too much. The paint is paint. This is how we have learned to respond to it And the spoon is a spoon. (103)

The spoon represents in both novels an instance of the semiotic that disrupts the law of the dominant culture by disrupting the Symbolic order. Like Bucky Wunderlick's music and Lauren Hartke's art, the spoon painting possesses a presence that escapes incorporation.

But it is also worth noting that Beckett is often claimed as pivotal in another sense, crossing over between the modern and postmodern. This is extremely important when considering the place of DeLillo's fiction. Long regarded as a postmodernist, his work does contain clear modernist elements. For example, DeLillo's recognition that the dominant culture will continually reabsorb acts of transgression, results in his awareness that the only hope for political resistance lies in the avant-garde, in continually "making it new". Similarly, the special role given to the artist in his fiction as creators of counternarratives is typically modernist. However, *Mao II* should be regarded as DeLillo's rejection of some of the elements of the modernist concept of authorship. He rejects the integrity of the artist's subjectivity, in favour of an artistic subjectivity that is unfixed and unstable, constructed in and against the dominant order. The role of DeLillo's artist is not to produce "new wholes", eternal and indubitable, but to disrupt the dominant narrative, to introduce heteroglossia, where there was monologue. This is a disruption DeLillo plays out formally in this text, by allowing Bill Gray's writing about the hostage to erupt into the narrative of *Mao II*. And so DeLillo not only finds himself sitting between modernism and postmodernism like Beckett, but also producing fiction that does not sloganise, "but whose mere guise is enough to disrupt the whole system of rigid coordinates that governs authoritarian personalities" (Adorno 179).

Mao II touches on all of DeLillo's principle themes, and does so against the background of a specific material history. Its approach to geopolitics lacks some of the sophistication and sensitivity of *The Names*, but the prescience of this novel indicates the broad success of its thinking of our present time in history. Most importantly, *Mao II* offers an important rethinking of the place of the artist and politics that paves the way for

Underworld and *The Body Artist*. Critics have noticed the great contrast between DeLillo's last two novels, the former dealing with crowds and history on a very broad scale, the latter dealing with the grief of one woman. But *Mao II* introduces both these themes, and indicates their connection. From the mass Moonie wedding that opens the novel, to the wedding in Beirut that closes it, DeLillo lights on the subject of power and politics, through the moment that marks the "juncture of the 'body' and the 'population'" (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 124) – marriage. In this respect, *Mao II* prepares the way for *Underworld* and *The Body Artist*'s more extensive exploration of power, subjectivity and aesthetics.

Of Bomb and Baseballs: Marginal Voices in *Underworld*

Like *Mao II*, *Underworld* opens with a description of a crowd in a baseball stadium in New York. And like *Mao II*, *Underworld* is a novel concerned with crowds and the extent to which mass power relations impact on and produce individual subjectivity. But whilst DeLillo's earlier novels, like *End Zone* and *Mao II*, are suspicious of any pre-existing narratives that determine subjectivity, *Underworld* seems to support such an authoritative discourse, by offering a vision of unity and coherence, in which "Everything is connected" (825). This vision is created in the novel by the use of recurring motifs and themes, most notably the bomb, the baseball and waste. Critics and reviewers have noted *Underworld*'s connections from its publication, and many have taken the trouble to cite the novel's recurring themes and patterns in their writing. Some have even accused DeLillo of creating a novel that realises the paranoid imaginings of his characters. Richard Williams argues, for example, that *Underworld* "ends up flattering the paranoid vision of Hoover, because it so immaculately fulfils Hoover's deepest wishes" (32) whilst Tony Tanner states that *Underworld* has "a rather wearily uniform paranoid texture" ("Afterthoughts on Don DeLillo's *Underworld*" 58). This chapter will examine *Underworld*, revealing centres that adhere to the structuralist concept of fixed origins, as expounded by Derrida in his essay, "Structure, Sign and Play", and which create this appearance of unity and connectedness. However, this chapter will then argue that DeLillo's novel, like Derrida's philosophy, does not ultimately support notions of stable centres or of fundamentally coherent structures. Instead, *Underworld* is concerned with undermining the narratives that the power structures of late capitalism still produce, despite the absence of a centre that could guarantee their truth or rightfulness. This chapter will conclude that *Underworld* is not a novel that supports a singular authoritative discourse, but rather one, like *Great Jones Street*, *Mao II* and *The*

Body Artist, that attempts to disrupt and resist such monologia through the figure of the artist at the margins.

Derrida argues that certain and stable meaning stems from the centre that guarantees the structure: “The concept of a centred structure is in fact the concept of a play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which itself is beyond the reach of play” (279). *Underworld* seems to play out Jacques Derrida’s analysis literally, for meaning seems determined and play limited within the novel by fixed centres. This creates the “paranoid texture” detected by Tanner, because it mimics the structure of paranoia, which is based on the fundamentally logocentric notion that an unknown centre organises reality.

The most notable centres within *Underworld* are the bomb and baseball, each of which spawns its own plot, and is regarded, like Derrida’s centre, as a guarantor of certainty. For example, that the destructive power of the bomb is seen, paradoxically, to grant the stability of the Cold War period is made clear by Marvin Lundy’s statement to Brian Glassic: “You need the leaders of both sides to keep the Cold War going. It’s the one constant thing. It’s honest, it’s dependable” (170) and by Klara Sax’s remarks: “Power meant something thirty, forty years ago. It was stable, it was focused, it was a tangible thing. [...] And it held us together, the Soviets and us. Maybe it held the world together” (76). Both Lundy and Sax ascribe the constancy of the Cold War period to the concept of Mutual Assured Destruction, whereby it was assumed that neither the Soviets nor the Americans dared risk a war, because the power of the bomb could result in the annihilation of both sides. In other words, the stability of the Cold War period depended on the bomb remaining outside the structure it governs, much as Derrida argues the centre does: “The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality) the totality *has its center elsewhere*” (279). The baseball is regarded as a similar touchstone of certainty and comfort, as Nick’s moment of panic after a nightmare

illustrates: “You have to know the feel of a baseball in your hand, going back a while, connecting many things, before you can understand why a man would sit in a chair at four in the morning holding such an object, clutching it - how it fits the palm so reassuringly” (131). And its role as a guarantor of meaning is revealed by the religious metaphors used to describe it: “I go to ball games when I go at all for the sake of keeping up. It’s a fall from grace if you don’t keep up. Nick has fallen from grace” (95), which echo the description of baseball in *Mao II*: “The names of those ballplayers were his [Bill Gray’s] night prayer, his reverent petition to God, with wording that remained eternally the same” (136). Furthermore, as the bomb, like the centre, exists outside the structure it governs, so the baseball, which has become a kind of fetish object, can no longer be used in play.

But as well as guaranteeing the structure, Derrida argues that the centre governs the structure. That is, the centre does not only limit play and secure meaning, it determines the way in which the structure is expressed. Here again *Underworld*’s bomb and baseball correspond to Derrida’s description. For example, the baseball produces its own language, as Sims, Glassic and Nick’s conversation illustrates: “We must have resembled three mathematicians so lost in their highly refined work that they haven’t noticed how quaint and opaque the terminology is, how double-meaning’d. We argued the language and tried to unravel it for the outsider” (93). Similarly, *Underworld*’s bomb is shown to be the dominant metaphor of American culture in the Cold War period. Indeed, DeLillo spoke of the role of the bomb in these terms in an interview given to the *Irish Times* to mark the publication of

Underworld:

Here [in America], it’s [the Cold War] inevitably associated not just with danger but with popular culture. You think of the mutant monster movies and then you think of Cadillacs and tail fins and Jayne Mansfield [...] The consumer impulse becomes associated with whatever reality is informing our psychology, even a deadly dangerous reality. (O’Toole n.pag)

The role of the bomb as dominant metaphor of the Cold War era can be witnessed most clearly in the depiction of Eric Deming’s childhood. Eric likens his condom to a nuclear

warhead: “He liked using a condom because it had a sleek metallic shimmer, like his favorite weapons system, the Honest John, a surface-to-surface missile with a warhead that carried yields of up to forty kilotons” (514). He eats “Hydrox cookies because the name sounded like rocket fuel” (519), whilst his mother, Erica, has a Jell-O mould that is “sort of guided missile-like” (515).

But the affinities between the Derridean centre and DeLillo’s depiction of the bomb and the baseball are not limited to the role of each as a guarantor and determinate of meaning. Derrida’s centre is also inextricably linked to polarised oppositions, and the bomb and the baseball again demonstrate their correspondence to Derrida’s analysis in the new sets of binary oppositions that they create on October 3rd, 1951. The Bobby Thomson homer divides the crowd into winners and losers, Dodgers and Giants fans, and even black and white, as Bill and Cotter fight over the ball, whilst the bomb crystallises the polarities of the Cold War period. Similarly, *Underworld* corresponds to Derrida’s statement that the centre has shifted from era to era, that it is in fact “a series of substitutions of center for center” (279), because the inception of a new era, depicted in *Underworld*’s prologue, is signalled by the substitutions of the new centres of the bomb and baseball. In the explosion of the bomb, for example, we witness the “faith that replaces God with radioactivity” (251), whilst Bobby Thomson’s home run heralds the new centre that will govern the ur-text of *Underworld*, the underground history that exists beneath the official history of the Cold War period.

The description elucidated above of the functioning of the baseball and the bomb as transcendental centres within the structure of *Underworld* would seem to support the text’s own assertion that “Everything is connected” (825), and hence the “paranoid texture” that Tanner senses in the novel. However, it is important to return to Derrida’s analysis of the concept of centre in his essay “Structure, sign and play”. Whilst the substitution of new centres in the prologue of *Underworld* corresponds to Derrida’s analysis, Derrida also

recognises that this very substitution invalidates the role of the centre as fixed origin and guarantor of meaning. Such substitution reveals the centre, not as an absolute and a determinate of structure, but as a function of structure:

The substitute does not substitute itself for anything which has somehow existed before it. Henceforth, it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign substitutions came into play. (Derrida 280)

Indeed, the very presence of the ur-text in *Underworld*, in the shape of the baseball's history, should alert us to the arbitrariness of the centre. Of course, it can be argued that such arbitrariness does not necessarily imply incoherence, but it does open up the possibilities of play, because if the centre is inevitably absent, so is the absolute meaning it guaranteed. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the second centre of *Underworld*, the baseball, is itself an emblem of games and play, because the absence of the centre is played out literally and self-consciously in *Underworld's* depiction of the bomb and baseball, suggesting that the criticisms of reviewers, like Tony Tanner and Richard Williams, are ultimately without foundation. By concurring with Derrida's final analysis of the centre, *Underworld* does not support a "paranoid texture"; rather it undermines it, by denying the belief that an unknown centre organises reality.

Neither the bomb nor baseball exist as transcendental centres, but concur instead with Derrida's analysis and merely *signify* the centre. The bomb is not the guarantor of stability during the Cold War period; rather, it is the potential explosion of the bomb that guarantees peace. Indeed, *Underworld* shows doubt and uncertainty to be inversely proportional to the probability of nuclear conflict, because it is only when the Cuban Missile Crisis looms that conflicting individual interpretations ever seem likely to be replaced by a single absolute narrative:

"We're all gonna die!"

Lenny loves the postexistential bent of this line. In his giddy shriek the audience can hear the obliteration of the idea of uniqueness and free choice. They can hear the replacement of human isolation by massive and unvaried ruin. (507)

As the crisis fades we return to “other, deeper, vaguer matters” (629). This decentring of the stability of the Cold War carries massive implications as DeLillo undermines any nostalgia for a past in which things were certain, and is key to understanding his attitude to postmodernity. Just as in *Libra*’s treatment of the Kennedy assassination, what DeLillo historicises is not the absence of the centre, but the *revelation* of the absence of the centre that results in a shift of the cultural dominant. Thus when we return to his descriptions of life in the fifties, we find not security and certainty, but unseen dangers, significantly in the form of radiation – the hidden side effect of the bomb. For example, there is the x-ray machine in the shoe shop that Matt remembers “spraying your feet with radiation” (198), and the story of Dr Teller who witnessed the world’s first atomic explosion wearing only suntan lotion for protection (84). Similarly, contraband screenings of the Zapruder film in the early 1970s in *Underworld* force its audience to face the uncertainty and insecurity already introduced into Cold War America by the Kennedy assassination:

a woman seated on the floor spun away and covered her face because it was completely new, you see, suppressed all these years, this was the famous headshot and they had to contend with the impact – aside from the fact that this was the President being shot, past the outer limits of this fact they had to contend with the impact that any high-velocity bullet of a certain lethal engineering will make on any human head, and the sheering of tissue and braincase was a terrible revelation.

And oh shit, oh god it came from the front, didn’t it? (488-9)

As the thoughts of Nick’s wife, Marion, reveal, the difference is not that we have lost the centre, but that we know now that the centre has always been absent: “this was the difference, less in lost things than in knowledge become suspicious and alert” (165).

It is only when we understand that the centre represented by the bomb is characterised by absence that we can understand the true function of the baseball in *Underworld*. We know the baseball is not a transcendental centre because, like the parrot in

Julian Barnes's novel, *Flaubert's Parrot*, its history is incomplete, and its authenticity uncertain, because the final link to Bobby Thomson's bat is never uncovered. And yet the actual baseball is present in the text in a way that the bomb is not. Indeed, the appeal of the baseball to Nick would seem to be its very tangibility. It is this apparent presence that indicates that the real function of the baseball, which is its essentially supplementary character, because it is, in Derrida's words, "the sign which replaces the center, which supplements it, taking the center's place in its absence" (289). This supplementary character can be witnessed in Nick's description of the baseball as "all about losing [...] the mystery of loss" (97), and in Marvin Lundy's desperate search for it, which parallels his earlier hunt for his brother behind the iron curtain. The difference is that he loses his brother to the Soviets, but acquires the baseball. Significantly, Marvin recognises the supplementary nature of the baseball himself, concluding that his "frantic passion" (191) for it is the result of "some terror working deep beneath the skin that made him gather up things, amass possessions and effects against the dark shape of some unshouderable loss" (191-2).

That neither the bomb nor baseball is a transcendental centre carries major implications, opening up the possibilities of play in meaning. As Jacques Derrida states of the absence of the centre:

This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a centre or origin, everything became discourse – provided we can agree on this word – that is to say, a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified is never absolutely present outside the system of difference (280)

Significantly, this play of meaning is revealed in *Underworld's* very depiction of the substitution of the new centres of bomb and baseball. J. Edgar Hoover, for example, recognises that the threat of the bomb will unleash a torrent of narratives: "For every atmospheric blast, every glimpse we get of the bared force of nature, that weird peeled eyeball exploding over the desert - for every one of these he [Hoover] reckons a hundred plots go underground, to spawn and skein" (51). Similarly, the motion of the baseball is

seen to herald endless possibilities, “The difference comes when the ball is hit. Then nothing is the same. [...] There are things that apply unrepeatably, muscle memory and pumping blood and jots of dust, the narrative that lives in the space of the official play-by-play” (27). That only one narrative will become the “official play-by-play” signals the key significance of the absence of the centre in *Underworld*, because DeLillo is concerned with the manner in which one narrative can still dominate a culture or a ballgame. The prevalence of such narratives cannot be explained by their naturalness or rightness, because *Underworld* has revealed the centre, which traditionally guarantees such narratives, as absent. If *Underworld* is an anxious novel, then, it is not because it fears that an unknown centre is governing the structure, but because, even in the absence of the centre, play is limited and certain narratives still achieve an almost unassailable dominance. In other words, DeLillo recognises, like Foucault, that truth is not so much a matter of rightness, as *power* – and it is such authoritative discourses of “truth” that he hopes to disrupt and relativise in this and other novels.

But the bomb and the baseball are not the only examples of absent centres in *Underworld*. Indeed, St Anthony, who appears to Rosemary’s neighbour, could be termed the patron saint of this novel, for he is the patron saint of lost things. That he appears to a neighbour of Rosemary’s is significant, because what Rosemary has lost is her man, as indeed have many Bronx women, as the description of the monks’ visit indicates:

they were men in a place where few men remained. Teenage boys in clusters, armed drug dealers - these were the men of the immediate streets. She [Sister Edgar] didn’t know where the others had gone, the *fathers* [emphasis added], living with second or third families, hidden in rooming houses or sleeping under highways in refrigerator boxes, buried in the potter’s field on Hart Island. (240)

There are many other instances of absent fathers of *Underworld*. Both Sabatio Rodia, the builder of the Watts Towers, and Ismael Munoz, the Bronx graffiti artist, for example, have abandoned their families, whilst Nick Shay acknowledges that his role as a father was a

“phony role [...] None of it ever belonged to me except in the sense that I filled out the forms” (796). *Underworld*'s treatment of the father is of special importance, because the father and phallus are in effect specific instances of the centre, acting as a transcendental signifier that guarantees meaning and stability in language, as the centre guarantees the structure. Indeed, psychoanalytic and some feminist critics, like Helene Cixous, would claim that the phallus is *the* primary transcendental signifier, as Cixous states “the logocentric project had always been, undeniably, to *found* (fund) phallogentrism” (289). Feminist critics have attempted to undermine the phallus's role as a transcendental signifier, and whilst not wishing to stake a feminist claim for DeLillo without proper justification, it is possible to argue that his dismantling of logocentrism also manifests itself as a dismantling of phallogentrism in *Underworld*. Not only does DeLillo connect the bomb directly with the phallus in his description of Eric Deming's childhood and “megadeath hard-ons” (404), but he also recognises the “Other” in gendered terms in *Underworld*, as his description of Klara Sax illustrates: “She was mostly invisible, humanly invisible to people in the market down the street and not just youngsters hurrying past a hazy shape in the aisles, the unfocused stuff of middle age, but people in general - okay, men in general - who gave her generic status at best” (373).

In psychoanalytic criticism, the father and the phallus are intimately connected with the acquisition of symbolic language. Thus, in the literal absence of his father, Nick senses a disjunction in his self, because he cannot enter into the symbolic order fully. For example, though he has carried his mother's name from birth, Nick does not recognise it as his own: “I told him [Matt] Jimmy was dead under his own name. We were the ones with assumed names” (276). Nick's adherence to a phallogentric conception of language and self is also illustrated by his attempts to constitute a new self through his acquisition of language:

All that winter I shoveled snow and read books. The lines of print, the alphabetic characters, the strokes of the shovel when I cleared a walk, the linear arrangement of words on a page, the shovel strokes, the rote exercises

in school texts, the novels I read, the dictionaries I found in the tiny library, the nature and shape of books, the routine of shovel strokes in deep snow - this was how I began to build an individual. (503)

Indeed, his story can be characterised as his search for the lost language of the father. For example, Nick tries literally to recover his father's language, Italian, which he offers as providing a more authentic experience than English: "I say to my wife. I tell her not to give up on me. I tell her there's an Italian word, or a Latin word, that explains everything. Then I tell her the word" (275). Similarly, his decision to become a Latin teacher reflects a longing for an absolute, phallogentric language, for as a dead language, Latin is fixed and stable. Latin is also the language of the Catholic mass, and as the connections drawn between religion and baseball highlight the role of the latter as a guarantor of meaning, so the connections drawn between religion and language remind us that religion relies on a fixed and stable discourse. Indeed, Nick is literally retaught language by a group of Jesuit fathers, who offer him a language in which meaning is stable and can provide a method of knowing "reality" more deeply, as Father Paulus's words to Nick illustrate: "You didn't see the thing because you don't know how to look. And you don't know how to look because you don't know the names" (540). In the philosophy of the Jesuit fathers, language is not problematic, because there is no slippage in the relationship between signifier and signified, because the original father, God, guarantees this relationship.

But Nick does not develop a more "real" self in language, because ultimately, *Underworld* does not concur with the Jesuitical view of language. There is slippage between the signifier and signified, because the father, like the other centres of the novel, is absent. Furthermore, this absence is not only literal; *Underworld's* absent father has also been exiled from the symbolic order he was meant to guarantee. This is revealed by Nick's visit to the Watts Towers. Here we learn of the disappearance of Jimmy Constanza's own narrative: "Jimmy was an edge-seeker, a palmist, inferring the future out of his own lined flesh, but he looked at his hand one day, according to my little brother, and it was blank"

(276). Similarly, we are told that Sabatio Rodia, who built the towers and also abandoned his family, was “probably illiterate” (276) and that his “narrative is mostly blank spaces” (276). And Nick’s failure to build a more authentic self in language is revealed by another manifestation of his desire to recover his father’s language, his “search for the one word, the one syllable” with which he “would eliminate distraction and edge closer to God’s unknowable self” (296). The phrase Nick chooses is “*Todo y Nada*” (297), a Spanish phrase that literally translates as “all and nothing”, though Nick translates it as “The best sex” (297), which he posits as offering an authentic language: “I’m not saying that sex is our divinity. Please. Only that sex is the one secret that we have that approximates an exalted state and that we share, two people share *wordlessly* [emphasis added] more or less and equally more or less, and this makes it powerful and mysterious and worth sheltering” (297). But the bond Nick describes is not that of a symbolic language; rather this wordless language has a semiotic quality, because it is based on the body. “*Todo y Nada*” does not seem to bring Nick closer to a masculine symbolic language, but crucially to a feminine, non-symbolic language: Nick sets out to recover the lost language of the father, but may in fact resuscitate the semiotic language of his mother. Indeed, even after a lifetime then of attempting to rebuild the language of his father, Nick does not recognise his father’s name, “When I come across his name on a document it always makes me pause, it gives me pause, the name in jumpy type on some stamped document, James Nicholas Constanza, the raised stamp that marks the thing official, the document in the dusty bottom drawer, the sense of slight confusion until I realize who he is” (805). Thus, Nick finally realises that his immersion in symbolic language has not succeeded in constituting a more authentic self. Instead, he develops nostalgia for his old identity, based, significantly, on his body: “I want them back, the days when I was alive on the earth, rippling in the quick of my skin, heedless and real. I was dumb-muscled and angry and real” (810). In other words, as in *Great Jones*

Street, *White Noise* and *The Body Artist*, DeLillo returns once more to the notion of a bodily, semiotic identity.

DeLillo's return to the semiotic can also be witnessed in his treatment of artists in *Underworld*. As in *Great Jones Street*, *Mao II* and *The Body Artist*, artists and art provide a space at the margins for narratives outside the dominant culture in *Underworld*. This is a familiar DeLillo theme, because the role of artists in DeLillo's novels is never to uncover underlying truths, but to relativise the dominant narrative and offer some spots of resistance. This can be witnessed in each artist's identity, for whilst in logocentric philosophies, the integrity of the artist's identity has guaranteed the authenticity of their work, in *Underworld*, a novel of absent centres, the identities of the artists are no more coherent than that of Nick Shay. For example, all have changed their names. Klara Sax was born Sachs, Ismael Munoz's tag is Moonman 157, and Lenny Bruce's real name is Leonard Alfred Schneider. Each change of name disguises an ethnic origin outside the WASP norm, for, in Lenny's own words, each change of name is a movement "toward the invisible middle" (592), which allows the artists to work both within a culture and at its edges. Like Lauren Hartke and Bucky Wunderlick, who also exhibit such shifting identities, these artists realise the potential of heterogeneous subjectivity to escape pre-existing cultural discourses, in a way artists, like Bill Gray and Rey Robles, who adhere to an older romantic conception of the artist, cannot.

The showing of Eisenstein's forgotten classic "Unterwelt", which is intercut with scenes of Ismael's graffiti, is probably the most telling exposition of the role of DeLillo's artists. This fictional film "Unterwelt", whose title literally means underworld, was also an underground film, that is, made secretly at the margins of a repressive regime. This film is juxtaposed with graffiti art, for graffiti is clearly its Western equivalent – art subject to repression by the state. In both instances the state will attempt either to destroy the art or incorporate the artist. Thus, whilst Eisenstein's film was hidden for years, to protect it from

a state that would have destroyed it, Moonman's trains are systematically stripped of his graffiti art. Similarly, as Eisenstein made Soviet propaganda films, art critics search for Moonman hoping to incorporate him into the establishment. Klara Sax's interpretation of "Unterwelt" could as easily be applied to graffiti art: "This is a film about Us and Them, isn't it? They can say who they are, you have to lie. They control the language, you have to improvise and dissemble. They establish the limits of your existence" (444). Indeed, this statement provides an exposition both of DeLillo's treatment of artists and art in *Underworld*, and his broader theme of the dominance of certain cultural narratives. Furthermore, DeLillo is also careful to gender this film. It is shown in a cinema that is explicitly associated with the feminine, and, what is more, a space that seems to resemble the semiotic *chora* in Kristeva's writing:

Klara remembered it now, suddenly so familiar, the feeling of plush and mothered comfort, it felt like her mother hovering, a space soothingly wombed and curved, and the way the proscenium arch rayed out into the ceiling, about eight stories at its highest point, and the spoked rows of downy seat, and the choral staircases that softened the side walls, and the overvastness that seemed allowable, your one indulgence of this type, shrinking everyone in the hall to child size, heads turning and lifting, a rediscovered surprise and delight floating over the crowd, not the last such emotion that people would share this evening. (427)

It is preceded by a choreographic display by the Rockettes, who offer a parody of the production line subjectivity that haunts DeLillo's fiction:

They were wearing West Point gray and came out saluting, thirty-six women remade as interchangeable parts, height, shape, race and type, with plumed dress hats and fringed titties and faces buttered a christmassy pink but isn't it odd they're wearing bondage collars – saluting and high-kicking in machine unison and Klara thought they were kind of great and so did everyone else. (428)

But crucially, the Rockettes disrupt this authoritative narrative of the self through a disruption of gender – just as Lauren Hartke will do in *The Body Artist*. As DeLillo writes of the dance display, "It's a cross-dressing event either way" (428). This point is extremely important, because what DeLillo promotes as the hope for political resistance is not a

transcendent, romantic notion of subjectivity, but a heterogeneous one, for, as Kristeva reminds us, only the subject in process can hope to escape incorporation into a culture that continually reabsorbs all rebellion. And in *Underworld*, as in novels like *Running Dog*, *Libra* and *The Body Artist*, DeLillo expresses this constructed, heterogeneous subjectivity as feminine, as the description of Acey Greene's art makes clear:

If women have a condition called incompleteness, and some recover nicely and some don't, then these paintings were flaunting it, loving it, shoving it in your face. [...] Acey used off-tones, flesh tones, complete nonpop, a lot of sand and amber and a beautiful burnt rose, a sunburnt strip that ran across the top of every canvas, a little sad and frayed, and all of it slightly blurry and doubled, color-xeroxed, that was the telling touch – you have copycat Jayne, the reproduced goddess, and she is all the more strong for being unoriginal. (489-90)

The power of the subject in process can also be witnessed in the significance of graffiti art in *Underworld*. Graffiti is the art form most closely associated with the individual, as Klara Sax's description of it as "the romance of the ego" (394) illustrates. Indeed, the purpose of graffiti is often simply to state "I exist". This is illustrated by Ali 21's graffiti in *Mao II*, "It says Ali 21. It says Here I Am Again Courtesy Ali 21" (229) and by the attitude of graffiti artists to the destruction of their work in *Underworld*: "It's like you knock a picture off a shelf and someone dies. Only this time it's you that's in the photo. That's how some writers felt about their tags" (438). However, the subject of graffiti art is not a transcendent, essential subject, but one that is deliberately *constructed*. As Baudrillard writes of graffiti:

It is interpreted (and I am talking about admiring interpretations here) in terms of a reclamation of identity and personal freedom, as non-conformism [...] OK, but "it" does not speak like that, it is our bourgeois-existentialist romanticism that speaks like that, the unique and incomparable being that each of us is, but who gets ground down by the city. Black youths themselves have no personality to defend, from the outset they are defending the community. Their revolt challenges bourgeois identity and anonymity at the same time. (*Symbolic Exchange and Death* 83-4)

That the graffiti artist uses the state's own technology to construct this identity is crucial, pointing to the dialectical stance of the graffiti artist who must find a place of resistance and

a new identity within the logic of the dominant culture. This dialectical approach to identity can also be witnessed in *Underworld* in the Miracle of Esmeralda and Klara's B-52 project in the desert.

The scene in which a murdered girl's image appears on an advertising billboard is clearly epiphanic. We are told: "It's how the news becomes so powerful it doesn't need TV or newspapers. It exists in people's perceptions. It's something they invent, strong enough to seem real. It's the news without the media" (819). But the epiphany represented by the Miracle of Esmeralda is not that of an unmediated experience – she does after all appear on an advertising billboard – but instead of an individual subjectivity that eludes, temporarily, the commodity culture of late capitalism. This is made clear by Sister Edgar's response: "She sees Esmeralda's face take shape under the rainbow of bounteous juice and above the little suburban lake and there is a sense of someone living in the image, an animating spirit – less than a tender second of life, less than half a second and the spot is dark again" (822). This sense of a moment's resistance within the dominant culture is reinforced by Esmeralda's later appearance on the World Wide Web, as DeLillo demonstrates once more the way in which something recuperable can be recovered from the technology of late capitalism. Similarly, Klara Sax's project aims to recover the individual from the mass production of capitalism. As she states, she hopes "to unrepeat, to find an element of felt life" (77) in B-52 bombers that "came out of the factories and assembly halls as near alike as possible, millions of components stamped out, repeated endlessly" (77). She explicitly describes her project as possessing a "graffiti instinct" (77) and signals the connection between graffiti art and the individual, in her decision to save an example of nose art, Long Tall Sally, because "this is an individual life" (78). Klara's project is also indicated by her use of colour, for she and her helpers take industrial grey planes and paint them in the colours of the body:

But these colors did not simply draw down power from the sky or lift it from the landforms around us. They pushed and pulled. They were in conflict with each other, to be read emotionally, skin pigments and industrial grays and a rampant red appearing repeatedly through the piece - the red of something released, a burst sac, all blood-pus thickness and runny underyellow. (83)

These colours indicate a movement from the symbolic order of the cultural dominant to the semiotic realm of the margin, like that made by other artists in DeLillo's novels, including Bucky Wunderlick in *Great Jones Street* and Lauren Hartke in *The Body Artist*. But not only do Klara's art and the Miracle of Esmeralda attempt to restore the individual, they both also do so using the technology of the dominant culture, like graffiti art. As Bucky Wunderlick finds a space of resistance in rock and roll in *Great Jones Street*, Jack Gladney finds beauty in advertising slogans and garbage in *White Noise* and Bill Gray finds a moment of individual expression in a phrase from the Sears Roebuck catalogue in *Mao II*, so both Esmeralda's appearance on the billboard and web and Klara's employment of B-52 bombers represent the use of state technology against the state. And DeLillo's employment of the internet is especially pertinent here when we remember that that internet was itself the invention of the U.S. military.

But this endeavour to find something recuperable in late capitalism can be witnessed most clearly in the depiction of waste in *Underworld*. As stated earlier, DeLillo's artists work at the margins. Waste is the marginalised other of both capitalist production and the Cold War period. It is locked in opposition with the bomb: "The fusion of two streams of history, weapons and waste" (791), and is its unspoken element: "Because waste is the secret history, the underhistory" (791). Indeed, as Klara Sax's reference to J. Robert Oppenheimer's description of the bomb indicates, waste is the term given to those elements that the symbolic order cannot accommodate: "He meant something that eludes naming is automatically relegated, he is saying, to the status of shit. You can't name it. It's too big or evil or outside your experience" (77). In other words, waste shares important characteristics

with semiotic, feminine language, and represents by definition, a position outside the cultural dominant.

Waste's position as part of the semiotic becomes clear when we examine consumer garbage in terms of the psychoanalytic concept of desire. Lacan states that desire is the inarticulatable gap between what we need or want and what we demand: "desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the very phenomenon of their splitting" (*Feminine Sexuality* 81). In the commodity culture of late capitalism, desire has become subject to the money markets, as DeLillo makes clear in *Underworld*: "the attenuating influence of money that's electronic and sex that cyberspaced, untouched money and computer safe sex, the convergence of consumer desire" (785). Waste thus represents our inarticulatable desire, because it consists of the consumer goods that we have discarded, because they did not satisfy this desire. DeLillo plays this out explicitly in the text. We are told Fresh Kills Landfill contains "every kind of used and lost object of desire" (185), whilst Nick and Marian's shopping trip is described as a visit to "Floating zones of desire. It was the what, the dismantling of desire into a thousand subspecialities, into spin offs and narrowings, edgewise whispers of self" (319). Most importantly, capitalism is explicitly depicted, post Cold War, as attempting to tailor itself to our individual desires: "This is what desire seemed to demand. A method of production that will custom-cater to cultural and personal needs, not to Cold War ideologies of massive uniformity. And the system pretends to go along, to become more supple and resourceful, less dependent of rigid categories" (786). However, the duplicity of the capitalist system is revealed by Nick's realisation that all products are already waste, "Marion and I saw products as garbage even when they sat gleaming of store shelves, yet unbought" (121). The system still seeks ultimately to assimilate difference, not satisfy individual desire. Waste, thus, represents a spot of resistance to the dominant culture of late capitalism, because it represents the individual

desires that this culture could not absorb or incorporate – hence its urge to hide garbage through companies like Nick’s employer, Waste Containment.

Given this role, it is unsurprising that, as in the fiction of Thomas Pynchon, waste plays an important role in DeLillo’s fiction. Indeed, garbage repeatedly provides the backdrop to epiphanies including Jack Gladney’s encounter with the trash compactor in *White Noise*, Brian Glassic’s visit to the Fresh Kill’s Landfill, Nick Shay and Klara Sax’s visits to the Watts Towers, and the Miracle of Esmeralda in *Underworld*. Furthermore it is also strongly associated with work of artists who attempt to resist the culture of late capitalism. As Jonathan Culler writes in “Rubbish Theory”:

At a time when there are fewer and fewer conventions sufficiently rigorously established so that to violate them is taboo, and when it is thus more and more difficult to innovate by *breaking* rules, the possibilities of change may well lie in junk and rubbish and in the mechanism whereby the transient and functional may, when reduced to rubbish, be discovered and become durable. (179)

Klara Sax, of course, worked with waste in the seventies, becoming known as the “bag lady” (70), whilst the Watts Towers are built entirely out of garbage. The scenes at the Watts Towers are extremely important, because it is here that the semiotic culminates in this novel. Not only are the towers constructed from waste, but they were also built by an absent father, who has moved outside the symbolic order. Furthermore, that the Watts Towers represent an individual voice is made clear in their careful links to graffiti art: “SR carved in archways like the gang graffiti in the streets outside” (277), and by Klara Sax’s response to them, which indicates that the experience of the Watts Towers is a bodily experience: “She was weak with sensation, weak with seeing and feeling. She touched and pressed” (492). We may term the Watts Towers the embodiment of DeLillo’s artistic project, for in representing an unassimilated semiotic aesthetic, they “work against the culture” (Billen 25), just as DeLillo claims *Underworld* does in his interview with Andrew Billen.

Underworld is a novel of absent centres. But rather than describing a world in which such decentring has opened up the possibilities of play, DeLillo depicts the continued

struggle of individual voices to be heard against the cultural dominant. *Underworld* is not a paranoid novel, for it is not about offering an alternative narrative with which to read history, rather it is concerned with rescuing the individual voice from assimilation. This philosophy is epitomised by Lenny Bruce. For whilst he is regarded by some of his fans as “their diamond cutter, their cool doomed master of uncommon truth” (625), the strength of Lenny’s act is not in a single powerful voice, but in the multitude of voices it contains: “Lenny’s habitual scat, the vocal apparatus with its endless shifts and modulations and assumed identities, the release of underground words and tensions” (506). Lenny’s sets are the verbal equivalent of the palimpsest. What he offers us is not “uncommon truth”, for *Underworld* is not about replacing one dominant narrative with another. What Lenny offers us is plethora of American voices, a democratic space – and it is surely no coincidence that his “habitual scat” refers also the unspoken “Other” of *Underworld*: waste¹.

¹ ‘scat 1. Dung; (pl.) droppings’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

Body Fascism: Lauren Hartke's own totalitarian state

To date critical response to Don DeLillo's most recent novel, *The Body Artist* (2001), has been marked by a slight bewilderment. After the grand historical sweep and eight hundred odd pages of *Underworld* (1997), few newspaper critics at least have known what to make of this slim volume, whose length reflects the narrowness of its focus. Cole Morton in the *Independent on Sunday* can only exclaim, "God, but it's a beautiful book" (51), whilst Brian Case in *Time Out* concludes no less vaguely, that this is "Not an easy book to digest" (54). The only consensus amongst critics would seem to be that *The Body Artist* is not in keeping with DeLillo's earlier work. As Stephen Amidon in the *New Statesman* puts it, "The hope is that this is an aberration from his remarkable body of work, rather than a sombre, dead-end culmination of it" (53). This chapter intends to demonstrate, however, that such critics have failed to understand *The Body Artist* precisely because they have not read it in the context of DeLillo's other eleven novels. *The Body Artist* is not a deviation from DeLillo's earlier works, but is instead an important reworking and development of some of the most salient ideas in his fiction. Most notable amongst these ideas is the rethinking of the body engaged in by *The Body Artist*, as DeLillo demonstrates that it, like the subject, can be determined and controlled by the dominant power. Furthermore, just as *Great Jones Street* (1973), *Mao II* (1991) and *Underworld* depict the only hope for political resistance in an aesthetic that can escape absorption into the dominant culture, so *The Body Artist* represents DeLillo's attempt to produce just such an artistic statement. In other words, this chapter argues that, rather than being an unlikely successor to *Underworld*, *The Body Artist* is instead a timely and necessary addition to DeLillo's body of work after the critical and commercial success of *Underworld* seemed likely to result in DeLillo's incorporation into what he calls "the age and its facile knowledge market" (LeClair, "An Interview with Don DeLillo" 87). Just as

DeLillo refused to capitalise on the success of *End Zone* (1972), his earliest bestseller, so *The Body Artist* does not capitalise on the success of *Underworld*. Ezra Pound's modernist maxim was "Make it new" and *The Body Artist* does just that as DeLillo continues to place himself in the vanguard of innovative fiction – a move that signals, crucially, the strong modernist impulse in his work.

On the surface, *The Body Artist* could not be more different from its immediate predecessor, *Underworld*. Whereas *Underworld* is over eight hundred pages long, *The Body Artist* manages just over one hundred pages. *Underworld*'s countless characters live through five decades of American history, whilst *The Body Artist* depicts the life of one woman over period of a few months. *Underworld* makes specific reference to many actual historical figures and events, whilst *The Body Artist* gestures vaguely and only occasionally to "newspaper stories" (9). *Underworld*'s depiction of the Cold War and its aftermath was overtly political; *The Body Artist* seems to Michael Gorra, at least, to be "DeLillo with the politics left out, without conspiracies and secret histories, with no bomb and no environment - no world situation - to worry over" (21). As its sales reflect, *Underworld* is an accessible novel. In comparison, *The Body Artist* makes rigorous demands on its readers. In Mr Tuttle's ramblings particularly, such as the following enigmatic passage, DeLillo seems to display what he called in an interview with Tom LeClair, "an element of contempt for meanings" ("An Interview with Don DeLillo" 87): "Coming and going I am leaving. I will go and come. Leaving has come to me. We all, shall all, will all be left. Because I am here and where. And I will go or not or never. And I have seen what I will see. If I am where I will be. Because nothing comes between me" (74). DeLillo has repeatedly paraphrased John Cheever's maxim in interviews that "the job of the writer is not to describe the thoughts of an adulterous woman standing at the window watching rain streak the glass. The writer [...] should understand those forty people trying to get the baseball,

understand the other ten or twenty thousand people who leave the stadium when the game is over” (Nardotti 90, Streitfield C4). It is a maxim that makes *The Body Artist* seem as resolutely uncharacteristic of DeLillo, as *Underworld* is characteristic.

But all that is difficult and apparently unlike DeLillo in *The Body Artist* can be understood once it is interpreted as part of a deliberate aesthetic strategy through which DeLillo resists incorporation and absorption. As DeLillo told Tom LeClair, “This writer is working against the age and so he feels some satisfaction at not being widely read. He is diminished by an audience” (“An Interview with Don DeLillo” 87). Just as Adorno argues in “Commitment” that Samuel Beckett is not absorbed into the dominant culture because his work resists commodification, so we can recognise the difficulty of *The Body Artist* as a deliberate strategy of resistance. Rather than being an “aberration from his [DeLillo’s] remarkable body of work”, *The Body Artist* is instead another important reworking of one of the most salient themes in DeLillo’s fiction: namely, the possibility of an aesthetic that can avoid incorporation into “the age and its facile knowledge market”. Such an aesthetic could maintain critical distance and, most importantly, political import. These ideas have been explored in this thesis before, most notably in the chapters on *Underworld*, *Mao II* and, of course, *Great Jones Street*. This thesis wishes to avoid the trap of regarding DeLillo’s most recent novel as the culmination of his previous work, as Mark Osteen fails to in his recent book on DeLillo, *American Magic and Dread* (2000). However, it is important to recognise *The Body Artist* as DeLillo’s most complex study, so far, of the possibilities of a political aesthetic. In other words, the novel that Michael Gorra calls “DeLillo with the politics left out” (21) may in fact be his most political to date.

One reason that some critics have had difficulty incorporating *The Body Artist* into their understanding of DeLillo is that this novel has abandoned the crowd, the “world situation” (Gorra 21) and, apparently, politics, for the story of one woman. However, if we

refer to Foucault in our reading of DeLillo, as Gorra suggests but fails to do, “It is worth remembering - I expect our successors will remember it - that his career follows in time on that of Foucault” (21), we are able to understand *The Body Artist* as a companion novel to *Underworld*. Foucault chose to write his *History of Sexuality* (1978) because he recognised sex as a “crucial target of a power organised around the management of life rather than death” because it allows a “juncture of the ‘body’ and the ‘population’” (*History of Sexuality* 124). If *Underworld*, the novel of crowds, examines power in terms of population, then *The Body Artist* devotes itself to the other dimension identified by Foucault, that is, the impact of power on the body. Indeed, it is possible to regard DeLillo’s last three novels as just such an investigation into the operation of power on the individual and population. *Underworld* and *The Body Artist* explore each dimension broadly in isolation, whilst *Mao II*, the novel which opens the trilogy, juxtaposes the crowd and the individual, before closing with a description of a wedding party in Beirut – a symbol of the very “juncture of the ‘body’ and ‘population’”, identified by Foucault.

Like DeLillo, Foucault sees the body and *jouissance*, to use Kristeva’s word, as a site of resistance. He argues that “bodies and pleasure” should be regarded as “[t]he rallying point for the counter attack against the deployment of sexuality” (*History of Sexuality* 157), which he maintains is a discourse produced by power in order to manage bodies. But the body does not escape power in Foucault’s view; rather the body is central to his conception of power relations. This is because Foucault does not believe power acts on the subject, because the subject is itself a product of power. Instead, he argues that the body is all that is available to power, pointing out, for example, that though violence is no longer actually inflicted upon the body, it is still the focus of punishment:

But we can surely accept the general proposition that, in our societies, the systems of punishment are to be situated in a certain “political economy” of the body: even if they do not make use of violent or bloody punishment, even when they use “lenient” methods involving confinement or correction,

it is always the body that is at issue – the body and its forces, their utility and their docility, their distribution and their submission. (*The Foucault Reader* 172)

This conjunction of DeLillo and Foucault allows us to understand the relation of the body to the deep-seated concern in DeLillo's fiction that individual subjectivity is not autonomous but is instead predetermined by a larger pre-existent system. DeLillo, like Kristeva and Judith Butler, has never regarded the body as an unproblematic site of authenticity, as the ambiguity over whether a man can "hide four inches of muscle bone and tissue" (253) in *Great Jones Street* exemplifies. *The Body Artist* shares this recognition of the contingency of the body, as the following description indicates:

She looked at her face in the bathroom mirror and tried to understand why it looked different from the same face downstairs, in the full-length mirror in the front hall, although it shouldn't be hard to understand at all, she thought, because faces look different all the time and everywhere, based on a hundred daily variables, but then again, she thought, why do I look different? (63)

But whilst in novels like *Great Jones Street*, the "genital" nature of the body, to use Kristeva's word, is cited as a source of resistance to a "phallic" culture; in *The Body Artist* DeLillo recognises that identifying the body as contingent must also entail an acknowledgement that the body is also – as Foucault argues – subject to power relations.

DeLillo has hinted at these ideas in his earlier fiction. In his portrayal of Myna Corbett in *End Zone*, for instance, DeLillo examines the impact of power relations on the bodies of young women. Myna Corbett chooses to lose weight, believing this to be an autonomous gesture that will allow her to resurrect a self that has not been predetermined by consumer capitalism: "I'm ready to find out whether I really exist or whether I'm something that's just been put together as a market for junk mail" (228-9). However, in doing so she subjects her body to another pre-written discourse, that of feminine beauty, and so exchanges one predetermined self for another. This is a particularly instructive instance of the operation of power relations, being an explicit example of a subject's

internalisation of the constraints of power. What is more, it highlights the centrality of visibility and appearance to the operation of power relations, because as Foucault argues, with regard to the Panopticon in *Discipline and Punish*, it is the operation of discipline through surveillance and observation that results in the subject's internalisation of power constraints:

He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; becomes the principle of his own subjection. (*Discipline and Punish* 202-3)

DeLillo's fiction contains many other instances of a subject's internalisation of power relations on the body, from James Axton's and Nick Shay's running to Glen Selvy's "routine". Indeed, Gary Harkness's hunger strike can be interpreted as an unequivocal admission of defeat to the dominant power.

But there is another important point of contact between Foucault and DeLillo's writing on the body, because both connect the impact of power on the body with capitalism, as the reasoning behind Myna's dieting suggests. Like the bodily asceticism of James, Glen and Nick, this can be recognised as a means of controlling and channelling the body in favour of capitalism – after all a fit worker is a good worker. This is supported by the direct connection DeLillo draws between jogging and capitalism in *Underworld*, in reference to the production of goods designed specifically to aid this activity: "I didn't like to run with house keys jiggling in my pocket. The ankle wallet answered a need. It spoke directly to my personal concern. It made me feel there were people out there in the world of product development and merchandising and gift cataloguing who understood the nature of my little nagging needs" (86). But we should also take into account Foucault's careful revision of the commonly held perception of capitalism's repression of the body. Capitalism does impact materially on the body, and suppress some talk of it, but Foucault does not cite these

techniques as the primary instances of control. Instead Foucault argues that it is not silence, but capitalism's multiplication of discourses on sex and the body, that is the "great subjugation" (*History of Sexuality* 21). As Foucault writes, "What is at issue, briefly, is the overall 'discursive fact', the way in which sex is put into discourse" (*History of Sexuality* 11). In other words, whilst writing or talking about sex and the body may seem a transgressive act, it is in fact complicit with the operation of power relations, leading Foucault, like DeLillo, to site resistance in "the body and its pleasures" (*History of Sexuality* 157). The scene in *End Zone* in which Myna and Gary almost have sex in the college library exemplifies this. Here bodily pleasure literally erupts in a place of discourse and disrupts language: "To mark the event I brought new noises to the room, vowel sounds predominating" (217). In contrast, the "turning of real lives into writing" is regarded by both DeLillo and Foucault "as a procedure of objectification and subjection" (*The Foucault Reader* 203-4), as DeLillo's description of "the book-walled limits of the self" (48) in *The Body Artist* indicates. This allows us to recognise Rey Robles's "bullshit autobiography" (32) in *The Body Artist*, as Rey's internalisation of the demands of power, as he completes the subjugation of his self, by turning it into discourse.

But what is particularly interesting in terms of DeLillo's fiction is the development of his exploration of identity to encompass both mind and body. The increasing centrality of the body allows DeLillo to make important connections between his ideas about a political aesthetic and the importance of returning the speaking subject. As Bucky Wunderlick's body is both a potential site of resistance and subjugation (we think of his force-feeding), so *The Body Artist* reveals the body's potential for domination and resistance. The importance of the body to this novel is apparent right from the start. The minute detail of the opening chapter is not just a demonstration of the virtuosity of DeLillo; it also serves to demonstrate

the *embodiedness* of our daily existence. We see this in DeLillo's very precise descriptions of bodily movement:

she had to lean away from the counter when he approached, her milk carton poised, so he could open the drawer and get a butter knife. (10)

She scraped her upper teeth over her tongue to rid her system of the complicated sense memory of someone else's hair. (11)

She saw him move his hand to his breast pocket and then pause and lower it to the cup. (18)

It is also apparent in DeLillo's obsession with body maintenance in this novel, in the repeated references to eating, washing, defecation and sex. But the fullest consideration of the body as a site of resistance and power can be witnessed in DeLillo's depiction of Lauren's bodily preparations and performance.

In many ways, Lauren's art form obeys traditional cultural structures. She presents a female spectacle for the male gaze, for example, and her art does not upset the pairing of the mind/body dualism to the male/female opposition. But Lauren is also careful to subvert all these norms – it is for good reason that DeLillo describes her hair as “terroristic” (103). Like the real life French artist, Orlan, who shares Lauren and DeLillo's belief that “art has to be transgressive, disruptive and unpleasant in order to have a social function” (Orlan qtd. in Davis 172), Lauren uses beauty aids in order to create ugliness. Furthermore, the self that Lauren produces is a grotesque parody of the Western ideal of feminine beauty, as she subverts what Foucault calls power's “normalising gaze”. As “the normalising gaze” of Western power relations produces a notion of beauty characterised by effacement and diminishment, valuing white-blond hair over dark, white skin over brown, thin bodies over fat and smooth hairless skin, so Lauren proceeds to raze herself. She depigments her skin, bleaches her hair, wax-strips her body hair and exfoliates. As DeLillo writes, “This was her work, to disappear from all her former venues of aspect and bearing and to become a blankness, a bodyslate erased of every past resemblance” (84). In exaggerating the cosmetic

routines propounded by women's magazines, DeLillo reveals these beauty regimes as instruments of control, means by which the body - and especially the female body - are subjugated and restrained. The delight that Lauren takes in excoriating her bodily secretions reminds us that the body is figured in contemporary culture as requiring constant maintenance and, to use a Foucauldian word, *surveillance*:

She used astringents to remove soap residues, greases and chronic lurking dirt. There were plastic strips that she stuck on and peeled off, grubbing up numerous pluglike impurities from her follicles and pores.

A hidden system, interesting, these tallowy secretions, glandular events of the body cosmos, small festers and eruptions, impacted fats, oil, salt and sweat and how nearly scholarly the pleasures of extraction. (84)

Contemporary culture teaches us that our body can betray us through its secretions and odours. What DeLillo reminds us in *The Body Artist* is that this control and suppression of the anti-social eruptions of our bodies, signals both the subjugation of our individual identities to a larger predetermined system and, most importantly, our internalisation of power relations. Hence Rey's comment to Lauren: "I think you are making your own little totalitarian society, [...] where you are the dictator, absolutely, and also the oppressed people, he said, perhaps, admiringly, one artist to another" (57). And that DeLillo, like Foucault, expressly connects these power relations to late capitalism is clear, for the instruments of bodily control are piled high in the malls and stores of America: "She didn't have to go to Tangier to buy loofahs and orange sticks. It was all in the malls, in the high aisles, and so were the facial brushes, razors and oatmeal scrubs" (84).

But the true subversion of Lauren's art lies in performance itself, in her visibility to an audience, for surveillance and observation are cited by Foucault as principal instruments of subjugation. However, whilst disciplinary power employs visibility as a means of controlling the subject by inducing the internalisation of power relations, Lauren uses her visibility to reveal the impact of power on the body. In other words, by performing on stage in front of an audience, Hartke makes overt the surveillance techniques employed by power.

Furthermore, that Hartke performs the body demonstrates an awareness that the self is always produced, contradicting any claim that DeLillo's novels return to an idea of the body as an ontological essence. Her act involves repeated and stylised gestures that make explicit the *conventional* nature of the body and its conformity to the arbitrary standards of the "normalising gaze":

Here is a woman in executive attire, carrying a briefcase, who checks the time on her wristwatch and tries to hail a taxi. She glides rather formally (perhaps inspired by the elderly Japanese) from one action to the other. She does this many times, countless times. Then she does it again, half-pirouetting in very slow motion. (106)

Lauren's art could be compared to that of Kafka's protagonist in "The Hunger Artist", whose hunger strike, like the silence of characters like Gary Harkness, becomes an internalisation of power relations. However, as well as revealing the body's susceptibility to power in her act, Lauren's art also demonstrates the potential for resistance in the malleability of the body. Whilst in *Great Jones Street*, DeLillo leaves ambiguous whether it is possible to "hide four inches of muscle bone and tissue" (253), in *The Body Artist* Lauren undergoes an absolute physical transformation during her performance, changing sex, age and size. This art absolutely rejects the notion of the body as singular or fixed, as Lauren's friend Mariella Chapman states in *The Body Artist*:

The power of the piece is Hartke's body. At times she makes femaleness so mysterious and strong that it encompasses both sexes and a number of nameless states. In the past she has inhabited the bodies of adolescents, pentecostal preachers, a one-hundred-and-twenty-year-old woman sustained by yogurt and, most memorably, a pregnant man. (109)

And there is suggestion that Lauren's transformation is more than theatrical illusion:

Then she does something that makes me freeze in my seat. She switches to another voice. It is his voice, the naked man's, spooky as a woodwind in your closet. Not taped by live. Not lip-sync'd by real. It is speaking to me and I search my friend's face but don't quite see her. I'm not sure what she's doing. I can almost believe she is equipped with male genitals, as in the piece, prosthetic of course, and maybe an Ace bandage in flesh-tone to bleep out her breasts, with a sprinkle of chest hair pasted on. Or she has

trained her upper body to deflate and her lower body to sprout. Don't put it past her. (109)

Thus whilst Lauren's performance is tempered by a knowledge of the body's potential for domination, her art also highlights the body's potential for resistance. Hartke's bodily aesthetic disrupts the operation of power relations by successfully replacing a singular, phallic conception of the body with one that is multiple and, to use Kristeva's language, genital. In other words, by making explicit the covert operation of power through surveillance, Lauren is able at once to subvert both the "normalising gaze" and the mechanisms of power relations, and demonstrate the value of the body as a site of resistance.

As outlined in earlier chapters, DeLillo is acutely aware of the difficulties of finding a site of resistance to the dominant culture. He has reiterated time and again in interviews his view that the cultural mainstream will attempt to absorb and defuse any aesthetic statements that threaten it. As he told Margaret Roberts in the *Chicago Tribune*, "Serious writers run the risk of becoming part of the Muzak, the elevator music of American culture because the culture seems to absorb anything that resembles danger, or at least there's mechanism in the culture, that tries to absorb danger ... so that it loses its edge" (1, 5). In *End Zone* and *Americana* (1971) the only means of avoiding incorporation appears to be in a self-eradicating, and hence self-defeating, silence. It is in *Great Jones Street* that DeLillo attempts to "survive this dead idea" (3-4) and restore an active and vocal site of resistance through the idea of a semiotic or bodily art. Such an aesthetic resists absorption because it does not belong entirely to the socio-symbolic order, but is, rather, characterised by individual, unreproducible bodily drives¹. *The Body Artist* replays this

¹ DeLillo's interest in the semiotic can also help us understand why he has chosen to write plays rather than film scripts. Not only does a play, like Lauren's own art, require actual bodily presence of sorts, but the screenwriter is involved in the aesthetic form most irreversibly tied to the culture of late capitalism.

argument through DeLillo's two artistic paradigms. Lauren's art, of course, exemplifies this resistant semiotic or bodily aesthetic. Her art is conflated with her bodily presence and is hence unreproducible by the dominant order. This resistance to the culture of reproduction is exemplified by her decision to perform live and by her refusal to advertise: "The piece, called *Body Time*, sneaked into town for three nights, unadvertised except by word of mouth" (104). Indeed, it is only by "word of mouth", literally a kind of bodily language that her audience find out about her shows at all. What is more Lauren's bodywork is explicitly said to possess a kind of visionary quality "It made her go taut and saucer-eyed, arteries flaring in her neck, these hours of breathing so urgent and absurd that she came out the other end in a kind of pristine light, feeling what it means to be alive" (57-8). Immersion in the mass media leads to a disruption of subjectivity, as Lauren finds reading the newspaper: "you become someone else, one of the people in the story, doing dialogue of your own devising. You become a man at times, living between the lines, doing another version of the story" (20), but bodily experience restores a sense of self. As Lauren discovers on eating "a clam from hell", "There's nothing like a raging crap [...] to make mind and body one" (35). In contrast, Film-maker Rey Robles is an example of an artist whose work belongs entirely to the culture of reproduction of late capitalism. Like DeLillo's other photographers and filmmakers, such as David Bell of *Americana* and Brita Nilson of *Mao II*, his subjectivity is extremely fragile. As his obituary states, "Mr. Robles's accounts of his early life were inconsistent but the most persuasive independent versions suggest he was 64 at his death" (27). He attempts to shore up his sense of self by writing an autobiography, but it is as much fabrication as anything else: "She looked at the pages she'd been working on with Rey, his bullshit autobiography. The hard copy sat there, stark against her sense of his spoken recollections, the tapestried lies and contrivances, stories shaped out of desperations not always clear to her" (32). Furthermore, by constructing an identity in language, Rey is

complicit in his incorporation into the socio-symbolic order. And ultimately, like others subsumed into the dominant order, such as Gary Harkness in *End Zone*, Rey finds his only means of resistance or escape is through silence – in his case the silence of suicide.

These two kinds of artists have always been present in DeLillo's work, but it is in *The Body Artist* that DeLillo offers their clearest juxtaposition. Even more significantly, it is in this novel that DeLillo's artistic project comes full circle. In *Great Jones Street*, the semiotic aesthetic is offered as a means of escaping the endzone of silence and suicide that characterised DeLillo's first two novels. In *The Body Artist*, Lauren Hartke's art is presented as a means of actually re-embodying such self-erasing artistic voices. Lauren Hartke does not just restore herself as a speaking subject, she also presents an opportunity to rescue Rey's self. As Mr Tuttle says to Lauren, uttering Rey's words, "I regain possession of myself through you. I think like myself now, not like the man I became. I eat and sleep like myself, bad, which is bad, but it's like myself and when I was myself and not the other man" (62). Furthermore, interpreting *The Body Artist* in this way also allows us to understand the function of that element of the *unheimlich*, Mr Tuttle.

As stated, Rey represents the classic self-eradicating artistic voice of DeLillo's fiction, much like Brand in *Americana* or Gary Harkness in *End Zone*. Indeed, Rey retreats not only into blank pages or silence, but actually to suicide. Rey recognises that Lauren offers him a means of restoring his self, "he'd told her that she was helping him recover his soul" (61). Their elliptical conversations elide the differences between their selves, for instance, as DeLillo does in the opening chapter of *The Body Artist* what he aimed to do in *Players*, that is "fill the novel with the kind of intimate, casual, off-the-cuff speech between close friends or husbands and wives" (Decurtis, "'An Outside in this Society'" 61). Whilst even before his death Lauren embodies Rey's existence for him: "Every time she had to bend and reach into the lower and remote parts of the refrigerator she let out a groan, but

not really every time, that resembled a life lament. She was too trim and limber to feel the strain and was only echoing Rey, identifyingly, groaning his groan, but in a manner so seamless and deep it was her discomfort too" (9). After Rey's death, Lauren's first impulse is to succumb to his desire for self-eradication, "She wanted to disappear in Rey's smoke, be dead, be him" (34). However, she recovers herself through – significantly – her body: "After the first days back she began to do her breathing exercises. There was bodywork to resume, her regimen of cat stretch and methodical contortion" (37), before finally succeeding in restoring Rey himself for an instant.

It is here that we must consider the function of Mr Tuttle in *The Body Artist*, because it is through this figure that Lauren's re-embodiment of Rey is achieved. Mr Tuttle is a difficult presence to explain in the novel. Critics and reviewers have variously explained him as a ghost, the imaginings of a mentally distressed woman, as a "man who may never have been there at all" (Gorra 21). What is more, *The Body Artist* itself pre-empts our interpretations. We are told: "She knew, she told herself she was not an unstrung woman who encounters a person responsive to psychic forces, able to put her in touch with her late husband" (66) and "If you examine the matter methodically, you realize that he is a retarded man sadly gifted in certain specialized areas, such as memory retention and mimicry, a man who'd been concealed in a large house, listening" (100). DeLillo never settles the matter for us finally, but despite this deliberate ambiguity, one thing seems clear: Mr Tuttle appears in order that Lauren can work through her own grief and trauma. Mr Tuttle not only appears after Rey's death, but he is inextricably and explicitly linked with it: "She began to understand that she could not miss Rey, could not consider his absence, the loss of Rey, without thinking along the margins of Mr. Tuttle" (82). Furthermore, the suggestion of Mr Tuttle's existence before Rey's death can be seen to foreshadow his suicide, because Mr Tuttle is associated with just such self-eradication and lack of presence.

In other words, the juxtaposition of Lauren and Mr Tuttle should be recognised as a more starkly polarised version of the juxtaposition that DeLillo sets up between Lauren and Rey. As Rey is an example of an individual subsumed into the socio-symbolic order, so Mr Tuttle is a man whose subjectivity has been entirely subjugated, for all sense of his body, the site of resistance, has been lost. The noise he makes in the house before his discovery, for example, is that “of a body shedding space” (40), whilst his body is described as machine-like, “He let his body shift, briefly, side to side, a mechanical wag, a tick and a tock, like the first toy ever built with moving parts” (62). As Foucault recognises discourse as a disciplinary mechanism, so Mr Tuttle is completely subjugated by language. Mr Tuttle is repeatedly and deliberately associated with Rey’s tape recorder, a symbol of Rey’s own subjection to the socio-symbolic order, as again Mr Tuttle is presented as a more extreme version of Rey’s own condition. Like the computerised answer machine voice, Mr Tuttle’s words are not “spoken but generated” (67), because he does not speak language, it speaks him. Furthermore, that this complete subjugation is the result of the repression of the body seems clear. His language contains none of the bodily, non-signifying elements we might expect, for example, “She [Lauren] began to understand that their talks had no time sense and that all the references at the unspoken level, the things a man speaking Dutch might share with a man speaking Chinese - all this was missing here” (66). This separation of his language from the body is confirmed by the following description of Mr Tuttle’s speech, where the “old deep meaning” of ecstasy refers to the separation of the soul from the body:

The words ran on, sensuous and empty, and she wanted him to laugh with her, to follow her out of herself. This is the point, yes, this is the stir of true amazement. And some terror at the edge, or fear of believing, some displacement of self, but this is the point, this is the wedge into ecstasy, the old deep meaning of the word, your eyes rolling upward in you skull. (75)

In other words, Mr Tuttle’s language is not that of a speaking subject, capable of critical distance and resistance, because his language lacks any sense of bodily or individual

presence – just as Rey does after his death: “Now he was the smoke, Rey was, the thing in the air, vaporous, drifting into every space sooner or later, unshaped, but with a face that was somehow part of the presence, specific to the prowling man” (32-3). Furthermore, as Kristeva identifies the semiotic with the maternal, so Mr Tuttle has no concept of motherhood: “He knew what a chair is called and a window and a wall but not the tape recorder, although he know how to turn it off, and not, it seemed, who his mother was or where she might be found” (55). It is no coincidence that Lauren “amused herself by thinking he’d come from cyberspace, a man who’d emerged from her computer screen in the dead of night” (45) because Mr. Tuttle, like the internet, lacks both any central presence and generates a number of empty statements that circulate endlessly.

But as Lauren embodied Rey when he was alive, so she attempts to restore a sense of the bodily to Mr Tuttle. She names his bodily parts for him, “she put her hand in the water and eased along the penis, here it is, and cupped and rubbed the testicles, naming and numbering his parts, one and two” (68), and she reads to him from “a book about the human body” (60). Significantly, it is after this episode that Mr Tuttle reproduces Rey’s voice, telling Lauren, “I regain possession of myself through you. I think like myself now, not like the man I became. I eat and sleep like myself, bad, which is bad, but it’s like myself when I was myself and not the other man” (62). Finally, Lauren comes to embody Mr Tuttle as she embodied Rey before his death. She begins to take on his aspect, dying and cutting her hair, until she looks like “a spook in the night state of every public toilet” (84), and she adopts his voice on the telephone, “At first the voice she used on the telephone was nobody’s, a generic neutered human, but then she started using his. It was his voice, a dry piping sound, hollow-bodied, like a bird humming on her tongue” (101). She performs him on stage, presenting Mr Tuttle as the climax of her new show, “The last of her bodies, the naked man, is stripped of recognizable language and culture. He moves in a curious manner, as if in a

dark room, only more slowly and gesturally. He wants to tell us something. His voice is audible, intermittently, on tape, and Hartke lip-syncs the words” (107). And just as Mr Tuttle produces Rey’s voice after listening to Lauren read from a book on the human body, so Lauren’s complete embodiment of Mr Tuttle, the symbol of Rey’s subjugation to the socio-symbolic order, results in the restoration of Rey for an instant (122). This moment presented as actual and play-acting at once, like Lauren’s eerie, impromptu enactment of Mr Tuttle for Mariella Chapman (“It is his voice, the naked man’s, spooky as woodwind in your closet. Not taped but live. Not lip-sync’d by real” (109)), and it clearly belongs to the aesthetic realm, “She knew how it would happen, past the point of playing it through, because she refused to yield to the limits of belief [...] They are two real bodies in a room” (122). But that it has restored Rey as a speaking subject is made clear by the intimate nature of the scene, because the moment that Lauren re-enacts is one of *jouissance*, in which Rey’s bodily presence is vividly present: “This is how she feels them, in the slivered heart of the half second it takes to edge around the doorpost, with hands that touch and rub and mouths that open slowly. His cock rising in her slack pink fist. Their mouths ajar for tongues, nipples, fingers, whatever projections of flesh, and for whispers of was and is, and their eyes come open into the soul of each other” (123). It is here that DeLillo’s artistic project can be seen to have come full circle, as the semiotic aesthetic is presented not just as a means of moving beyond the endzone of silence and suicide, but actually as a means of rescuing the artistic voice – temporarily, at least – from a dead end.

The momentary nature of the restoration of Rey’s bodily presence is key, as DeLillo demonstrates once more that disruptions of the dominant discourse or reality by a semiotic aesthetic are only ever temporary, being quickly reabsorbed or reinscribed into the socio-symbolic order. Furthermore, as Kristeva reminds us that the pure semiotic slips into the chaos of psychosis, so in Rey’s momentary restoration, DeLillo points to the nature of

presence, and crucially, to the way in which the semiotic operates within the symbolic order. In the instant, the notion of presence is uncomplicated. To paraphrase Zeno's paradox, we can identify where an arrow is present at any given moment. However, once time and its correlative motion are added to the equation, presence becomes a complex and difficult issue – we cannot state where an arrow *in flight* is present. Just as Zeno's paradox demonstrates the difficulty of sustaining the notion of presence over any period, so DeLillo argues that a coherent subjectivity is tightly bound up with an ability to name and describe time. As DeLillo writes, "If there is no sequential order except for what we engender to make us safe in the world, then maybe it is possible, what, to cross from one nameless state to another, except that clearly it isn't" (83), before concluding "You are made out of time. This is the force that tells you who you are" (92). This language allows individuals to support the notion of their own presence *over time*, because it creates the illusion of coherence. In other words, in order to restore Rey for more than an instant, as the semiotic allows her to, Lauren also requires a language of *temporality*. This becomes clear when we re-examine the figure of Mr Tuttle. Mr Tuttle is unable to name and describe time, "There is nothing he can do to imagine time existing in reassuring sequence, passing, flaming, happening - the world happens, it has to, we feel it - with names and dates and distinctions" (77). As a result, Mr Tuttle, who is closely associated with Rey and his suicide throughout the novel, lacks any sense of presence. Here DeLillo demonstrates the manner in which discourse actually *produces* presence. This is the paradox at the heart of DeLillo's presentation of the speaking subject, because whilst his subject seems at once to rely on the body to construct a self outside the dominant discourse, it must also rely on this discourse to produce a notion of presence. That the semiotic meets the symbolic in this way in *The Body Artist* is extremely important, reminding us that it is not the operation of the pure semiotic that DeLillo sees the hope for political resistance, but in its operation within the symbolic

order. Whilst the pure semiotic slips into the chaos of psychosis, the potential for political resistance, as Kristeva reminds us, exists in the operation of the semiotic within the symbolic order – and it is such an operation that supports the restoration of the speaking subject. Here we can see the scene in which Myna Corbett and Gary Harkness almost have sex in the college library in *End Zone* as key, being literally an eruption of the semiotic within the symbolic. In other words, DeLillo's political aesthetic produces, not an entirely independent mode of expression, but one that is, in Bakhtin's words, only "half-ours".

As stated earlier in this chapter, *The Body Artist* also brings to the fore the strong modernist impulse in DeLillo's fiction. Long, and sometimes carelessly regarded by critics as a postmodern writer, DeLillo has always resisted the term himself. As he told one interviewer "Postmodern seems to mean different things in regard to different disciplines. In architecture and art it means one or two different things. In fiction it means another. When people call *White Noise* post-modern, I don't really complain. I don't say it myself" (Williams 32). Paul Maltby was amongst the first critics to suggest a re-examination of DeLillo's status was necessary, because "the terms in which he identifies visionary experience in his fiction will be seen to align him so closely with a Romantic sensibility that they must radically qualify any reading of him as a postmodern writer" (260). But we should also recognise that it is not just DeLillo's identification of "visionary experience" that demands this re-examination; DeLillo's very search for a political aesthetic complicates any reading of him as postmodern writer, because as Giddens writes, postmodernity "Theorises powerlessness which individuals feel in the face of globalising tendencies" (150) and "Regards coordinate political engagement as precluded by the primacy of contextuality and dispersal" (150). Instead, DeLillo's search for sites of opposition suggests that it is important to recognise the modernist influences in his work, because his fiction "regards coordinate political engagement as both possible and necessary on a global level as well as

locally” (150), much as Giddens claims modernity does. Furthermore, that the speaking subject is essential to DeLillo’s vision of political resistance also supports this reading of DeLillo, for unlike postmodernism which sees the self as “dissolved or dismembered by the fragmentation of experience” (150), the modernist aesthetic is centred on the experience of a coherent and cognitive subjectivity.

But not only does DeLillo return, though critically and cautiously, to a modernist conception of the self, he also employs tropes in *The Body Artist*, such as the sublime and the epiphany, that are associated with modernist, rather than postmodern art. Kant defines the sublime as an emotion of pleasure and pain arising from the disjunction between what can be conceived and what can be presented. The epiphany should be understood as a manifestation of the sublime, being a revelatory moment when the individual becomes aware of the unrepresentable totality. The epiphany is a “classic” feature of modernist art, employed famously by Joyce in *The Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* and Proust in *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. In traditional Romantic aesthetics, the sublime is associated with the unrepresentable grandeur of nature, *The Body Artist* can be shown to exhibit such sensibilities, as the following illustrates:

Time seems to pass. The world happens, unrolling into moments; and you stop to glance at a spider pressed to its web. There is a quickness of light and a sense of things outlined precisely and streaks of running luster on the bay. You know more surely who you are on a strong bright day after a storm when the smallest falling leaf is stabbed with self-awareness. The wind makes a sound in the pines and the world comes into being, irreversibly, and the spider rides the wind-swayed web. (7)

The connections drawn explicitly with the self (“You know more surely who you are”) are significant, reminding us that the sublime derives from and is a product of subjective experience. However, DeLillo’s epiphanies do not just deal with the sublime in nature, as the following illustrates:

How completely strange it suddenly seemed that major corporations mass-produced bread crumbs and packaged and sold them everywhere in the

world and she looked at the breadcrumbs carton for the first true time, really seeing it and understanding what was in it, and it was breadcrumbs. (34-5)

Indeed, Lauren finds that she no longer experiences the sublime in the natural world at all: “At night the sky was very near, sprawled in star smoke and gamma cataclysm, but she didn’t see it the way she used to, as soul extension, dumb guttural wonder, a thing that lived outside language in the oldest part of her” (37). Instead, she now perceives the sublime in what Jameson calls, the “whole world system of present-day multicapitalism”, as her fascination with a web cam in Kotka, Finland indicates:

She spent hours at the computer screen looking at a live-stream, video feed from the edge of a two-lane road in a city in Finland. It was the middle of the night in Kotka, in Finland, and she watched the screen. It was interesting to her because it was happening now, as she sat here, and because it happened twenty-four hours a day, facelessly, cars entering and leaving Kotka, or just the empty road in the dead times. (38)

The emotion is raised by the webcam is an explicitly sublime one, “She didn’t know the meaning of this feed but took it as fleeting poetry” (38), for what the feed gestures to is the entire, unrepresentable system of present day technology. This sense of an unrepresentable global system is also suggested by Lauren’s experience of the Sunday newspaper:

When you look at the page and distinguish one line from another it begins to gather you into it and there are people being tortured halfway around the world, who speak another language, and you have conversations with them more or less uncontrollably until you become aware you are doing it and then you stop, seeing whatever is in front of you at the time, like half a glass of fruit juice in your husband’s hand. (19)

The newspaper, like the webcam, indicates the existence of the global system without representing it. It is this that Joseph Tabbi, heavily influenced by Jameson, recognises as a peculiarly postmodern sublime. As he writes “Now when literatures fail to present an object for an idea of absolute power, the failure is associated with technological structures and global corporate systems beyond the comprehension of any one mind or imagination” (ix).

Tabbi’s argument allows us to recognise that DeLillo does not merely employ the sublime because it implies the cognitive individual subjectivity central to his conception of

the possibilities of resistance. Instead DeLillo's employment of the sublime should also be seen as a means of charting the culture that his writing is attempting to oppose, because the sublime offers a way in which "the whole new decentred network of the third stage of late capitalism" (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 37-8) can be approached. In this way, the "postmodern sublime" indicates how modernist impulses operate in DeLillo's fiction, providing him with a means to resist and criticise the culture of late capitalism. As stated at several points in this thesis, it is important to make a distinction between a postmodern aesthetic and an aesthetic about postmodernism, and despite its name, the so-called "postmodern sublime" should be recognised as a modernist trope. Not only does Tabbi's definition pertain to content rather than form, which is usually acknowledged as the primary indicator of postmodern status, but the subjectivity implied by the sublime aesthetic can only be supported by modernism, because postmodern subjectivity is too fragmentary and dispersed. In other words, the "postmodern sublime" operates in *The Body Artist* as a modernist trope through which DeLillo charts the culture of late capitalism.

But *The Body Artist's* affinity with modernism does not just extend from its depiction of subjectivity and use of tropes like the sublime and the epiphany. *The Body Artist* is also marked by an acute consciousness of time, which it shares with modernist art, as Jurgen Habermas writes: "Aesthetic modernity is characterised by attitudes which find a common focus in a charged consciousness of time" (99). Moments of individual revelation or understanding are given special emphasis in the *The Body Artist*:

She felt in that small point in time, a flyspeck quarter second or so, that she saw him complete. His life flew open to her passing glance. A lazy and manipulative man, in real estate, in fairview condos by a mosquito lake. She knew him. She saw into him. He was there, divorced and drink-haunted, emotionally distant from his kids, his sons, his two sons, in school blazers, in the barest blink. (70)

Similarly, the novel's extraordinary detailed opening scenes resemble "modernism's 'hyperrealistic' or 'magnifying glass' style of representation which observes the most

minute details of everyday life” (Murphy 252). This time consciousness can be witnessed in the modernist maxim “make it new” and in the special place modernism gives to innovation. But whilst within the high modernism of Eliot and Pound, “[t]he new value placed on the transitory, the elusive and the ephemeral [...] discloses a longing for an undefined, immaculate and stable present” (Habermas, 99), leading Matei Calinescu to write that “[t]he anti-traditionalism of modernism is often subtly traditional” (140), in one particular strand of modernism, the avant-garde, the desire for the new is altogether more radical. And it is with the avant-garde in particular, that the modernist impulse in DeLillo’s own aesthetic should be associated.

As Calinescu reminds us, the avant-garde is often confused with modernism in Anglo-American criticism (96-7). However, whilst it is generally acknowledged that the avant-garde came out of modernism, it is also important to recognise that the avant-garde, and in particular the “historical avant-garde” of the early Twentieth century, was also a *reaction to* modernism, and its increasingly autonomous and hermetic art forms. Whilst modernism became increasingly dominated by the ideology of “l’art pour l’art”, the historical avant-garde hoped to achieve the sublation of art and life through innovations that critiqued the institution of art itself. Like DeLillo’s own aesthetic, this avant-garde was politically motivated. It recognised that the autonomy of modernist art worked in favour of the bourgeois order. The modernist aesthetic could depict change, however, by envisaging a better society only within the confines of a hermetic art form, “it relieves the existing society of the pressure of those forces that make for change. They are assigned to confinement in an ideal sphere” (Calinescu 50). In order therefore to make for a politically effective aesthetic, this historical avant-garde hoped to destroy the distinction between art and life, by questioning art as an institution. In addition, this served to question realism itself, revealing it as “an institutionally-supported code which serves to legitimise only a

certain concept of reality, and which leaves out of account large areas of human experience that fall outside of this sanctional category” (15). In other words, like DeLillo, the avant-gardists were determined to disrupt the dominant discourses and narratives of their culture.

DeLillo’s novels are full of descriptions of avant-garde art from Sullivan’s sculptures and Brand’s novel in *Americana* to Acey Green and Klara Sax’s art in *Underworld*. Lauren Hartke’s art is also clearly an example of the contemporary avant-garde, prompting comparisons with the work of real life artists such as Orlan and Laurie Anderson. And whilst we may want to question whether DeLillo’s work is itself avant-garde, it is certainly driven by the same drive for innovation as the avant-garde: DeLillo’s writing continually strives for new subjects and new modes of expression. His employment of different genres in his early fiction, for instance, is a means of ensuring that his own aesthetic is repeatedly made new. Furthermore, like the avant-garde, DeLillo’s adoption of so many different discourses is politically motivated, a way of revealing the dominant cultural narratives “as a means to deceive, to seduce, and to reassure” (“Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism” 41). But perhaps the most crucial point of comparison between the avant-garde and DeLillo’s own aesthetic project is Julie Kristeva’s assessment of the avant-garde as “the best representative of the repressed, feminine semiotic order” (Sarup 126). In other words, Kristeva recognises the historical avant-garde as the primary example of the very kind of art that DeLillo identifies as our best hope for an effective political aesthetic – that is one characterised by strong semiotic drives.

But there is another important point of comparison between DeLillo’s work and the avant-garde, because, like DeLillo’s own fiction, the avant-garde occupies a position somewhere between postmodernism and modernism. Most commentators agree that the avant-garde came out of modernism. However, as discussed earlier, it was also very much a *reaction* against modernism. And important points of connection have been drawn between

the historical avant-garde of the early twentieth century and postmodernism. Richard Murphy, for example, argues that postmodernism and the avant-garde “*both* represent an ongoing process of defining a critical response to modernity” (265), and points to the way in which both the avant-garde and postmodernism expose the fictionality of dominant conceptions of reality, without offering an authoritative alternative master narrative. But the most extensive exploration of the relationship of the avant-garde and postmodernism is, of course, that by Jean-Francois Lyotard. For Lyotard, the avant-garde is the postmodern impulse in the modern, the moment at which “[t]he artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*” (81). This thesis has restricted its understanding of postmodernism, deliberately, to that proposed by Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard. Lyotard’s definition does, in many ways, contradict this definition, not least in regarding postmodernism as a politically liberating force. And whilst not wanting to confuse the understanding of this term in this thesis, Lyotard’s avowal of the continued existence of the modern, can help us to understand DeLillo’s fundamentally ambiguous and undecided relationship to postmodernity and modernism, where Jameson’s categorial rejection of modernism proves inadequate.

As stated repeatedly in this thesis, DeLillo’s continually shifting aesthetic is a means of eluding incorporation. Just as the protests of historical avant-garde artists, like Marcel Duchamp or the Dadaists, against the institution of art are now accepted as art themselves, so DeLillo recognises the space of resistance is always vulnerable to reabsorption. But for some critics, notably Fredric Jameson, this emphasis on newness or innovation is suspect. Jameson regards such aesthetic innovation as a response to the “repetitive structure” characterising the “commodity production of consumer capitalism” (Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture” 135). Similarly, Peter Burger challenges Adorno’s claims that in submitting to the market’s demands for novelty, art

achieves a dialectical reversal, which allows it to resist the law of commodity culture. Jameson and Burger's scepticism as to the political value of aesthetic innovation is crucial to help us understand DeLillo's own fiction, because their reluctance to ascribe political efficacy to newness stems from their rejection of modernism. For Jameson, modernism has been entirely co-opted, "high modernism can be definitively certified as dead and as a thing of the past; its Utopian ambitions were unrealizable and its formal innovations exhausted" (*Postmodernism* xvii), and all space for aesthetic innovation has been colonised in the culture of postmodernity. Burger, similarly, argues that the historical avant-garde has been entirely absorbed by the dominant culture it railed against, now that "the protest of the historical avant-garde against art as an institution is accepted as *art*" (53). And crucially, he argues that it is only by positing a "critical subject" that Adorno can argue that aesthetic innovation achieves any dialectical reversal: "The resistance that Adorno believes he discovers in art and that is compelled to take on ever new forms can hardly be found here. It remains the positing of a critical subject which, because it thinks dialectically can perceive the positive in the negative" (Burger 61). This critical subject, of course, like the speaking subject of DeLillo's own fiction, belongs to modernism rather than postmodernism. In other words, that DeLillo still ascribes to the political effectiveness – however temporary – of aesthetic innovation signals his residual faith in modernism, entailing as it does a belief in the continued existence uncolonised space for experimentalism and a critical subject able to "perceive the positive in the negative". It is no coincidence that DeLillo has called *Underworld* "maybe the last modernist gasp" (Williams 32), because DeLillo's fiction still exhibits some belief in genuine aesthetic innovation, capable of eluding incorporation at least for a moment.

Like the writer invoked by Mr Tuttle's ramblings, Samuel Beckett, Don DeLillo occupies a position somewhere between modernism and postmodernism. It is crucial to

recognise the modernist impulse in DeLillo's fiction because it both indicates DeLillo's desire to resist the culture of late capitalism, and provides him with a means to do so. Aesthetic resistance in DeLillo's fiction demands the construction of a space for the artistic voice, a project that can only be achieved through modernist sensibilities. DeLillo does not entirely get outside postmodernism, as his difficulties delimiting it as a historical period in novels like *White Noise* illustrates. And DeLillo is always fully aware of the ability of the dominant culture to recolonise spaces of resistance, as his depiction of the susceptibility of the body to subjection in *The Body Artist* demonstrates. Only the avant-garde can hope to avoid this incorporation, because only the avant-garde is defined by its continual questing for new spaces. And only the avant-garde can unsettle the dominant perceptions of reality, because its continual innovations question and remake its rules. The true value of artists and the aesthetic in DeLillo's fiction, in other words, lie not in their revelation of a foundational truth, or reality as it really is, but in their disruption of a dominant cultural narrative through a mode of subjective expression that has not been entirely determined by a larger cultural system.

Conclusion

This thesis opened with a quotation from an magazine interview with Don DeLillo in which he stated that the fiction he admired most was that which is “equal to the complexities and excesses of the culture” (Begley, “The Art of Fiction CXXXV: Don DeLillo” 289). This thesis has attempted to demonstrate that DeLillo’s own fiction comes as close as any other contemporary American writer to achieving this ambition. Rather than exhibiting the regionalism that characterised so much American fiction in the last few decades of the twentieth century, DeLillo’s fiction takes on both the most powerful nation on earth, the United States of America, and its place in geopolitics. His success is indicated both by the startling prescience of much of his fiction and by his employment in the academy and the media as a kind of cultural theorist or guru, with the power to explain us to ourselves.

But DeLillo’s employment of actual historical and political events is never unquestioning or unthinking. His dismantling of logocentrism and phallogentrism in novels like *End Zone*, *Libra* and *Underworld* ensures that DeLillo is acutely aware that the stories we tell ourselves about the world are determined not by some transcendental centre, but by power relations. As such DeLillo’s fiction is not apolitical as some critics have claimed; rather it is characterised by a search for an effective site of political resistance that can escape the politically dominant narrative of late twentieth century America, postmodernism, which DeLillo identifies, like Fredric Jameson, as the superstructural manifestation of late capitalism. Like Jameson, DeLillo politicises this culture, recognising it as the latest form of American imperialism. His own position to this culture is dialectical, as he struggles to find critical distance or resistance from within it. This is exemplified by early novels, like *Americana*, in which he adheres to the spatial logic of postmodernism, whilst he attempting to restore the

individual by mapping the new spaces of capitalism. In later novels, like *Players*, *Running Dog*, *The Names* and *Libra*, DeLillo endeavours to achieve some critical purchase on the age by delimiting its historical boundaries, pointing to the Kennedy assassination as perhaps the key moment in the American century. Unlike *Americana*'s employment of the spatial logic of postmodernism, this constitutes an important attempt to think against the logic of the age, but like DeLillo's cognitive mapping, it does not prove entirely successful as he find the boundaries of postmodernism continually pushed further back.

But whilst DeLillo struggles to place historical boundaries on postmodernism, he does find a more effective site of resistance in the figure of the artist in his fiction. Just as DeLillo's cognitive mapping represents an attempt to use the logic of postmodernity against itself, so DeLillo's artists continually attempt to find something in late capitalism that escapes commodity culture, something that is recuperable. This can be witnessed in the beauty and individual expression that Jack Gladney and Bill Gray observe in advertising slogans, in the importance of waste in DeLillo's fiction, and in the emphasis placed on art that uses the technology of the state against it, like graffiti and Klara Sax's painting of the B-52 bombers. In such art DeLillo locates hope for the construction of alternative narratives that can destabilise dominant cultural discourses. DeLillo plays this out most extensively through the notion of the semiotic aesthetic, an artform that allows some restoration of the speaking subject, because it springs in part from the subject's own body. But crucially, as DeLillo dismantles logocentrism, so he also undermines Romantic conceptions of subjectivity, and the speaking subject of this semiotic aesthetic does not represent an absolute or essential self, but rather a heterogeneous subject, a subject in process.

However, even the semiotic aesthetic can only offer a temporary solution, because, as DeLillo recognises, the dominant culture has the capacity to continually reabsorb any transgression. Indeed, as George Bataille reminds us, transgression by its very nature reinscribes

the law it breaks. Thus, it is only in avant-garde art – one that can continually “make it new” – that DeLillo finally locates any real hope for political resistance. We can witness this in DeLillo’s own aesthetic: in his adoption of numerous different discourses, in his determination to produce obscure and unfriendly texts like *Ratner’s Star* and *The Body Artist*, as well as in the shifting aesthetic of characters like Lauren Hartke. And it is not just art that must continually “make it new”; DeLillo’s recognition of the capacity of the dominant to reabsorb transgression reminds us that only the subject in process can hope to escape the authoritative discourses of the dominant culture.

DeLillo has been deemed an “exemplary postmodernist” (Cowart, “More Advanced the Deeper We Dig’: *Ratner’s Star*” 608; Amis, “Thoroughly post-modern millennium” 29) by a number of critics. DeLillo is certainly caught up in the logic of postmodernity, as his difficulties delimiting it as a historical period demonstrate. However, DeLillo does not embrace this culture; rather his attitude to this culture is dialectical as he struggles to find a place of resistance within it, and it is a mistake to regard DeLillo as thoroughly postmodern. Instead, as his recourse to the avant-garde demonstrates, this exemplary postmodernist’s fiction is also characterised by a strong modernist impulse.

This thesis has argued that DeLillo’s fiction is driven by the search for effective political resistance. That such resistance is found in art in his fiction reminds us that this is an endeavour that DeLillo attempts to enact in his own writing. His work has certainly and inevitably been absorbed to some extent, most notably in the cannibalising of *White Noise* in the academy and the commercial exploitation of the success of *Underworld*. However, DeLillo’s self-proclaimed determination to write “against the age” (LeClair, “An Interview with Don DeLillo” 87) remains as strong as ever, as his most recently published work of fiction, the short story “Baader-Meinhof” (2002) attests. In this story, which describes the real-life paintings of the Baader-Meinhof gang by the German artist Gerhard Richter, DeLillo once more connects terrorists and

artists. But like Gary Harkness, Lyle Wynant and Glen Selvy, the Baader-Meinhof group's attempt to find a place of resistance is ultimately complicit with the dominant culture, leaving their selves eradicated: "They committed suicide. Or the state killed them" (78). Crucially, however, as in the rest of his fiction, it is in the *aesthetic* depiction of their death that DeLillo locates some hope for a more effective political statement. Thirty years on from *Americana*, it seems DeLillo is as serious as ever about using art to appropriate whatever space of critical distance and resistance he can find in late capitalism.

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