Vivisection au ralenti: Don DeLillo's *Point Omega*

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Abstract

Reading a Don DeLillo is like walking on glass, that is, you need hold your breath so that nothing could deter you from focusing on the mission, if you want to keep safe and mostly sound. The writer's latest novel, Point Omega *(2010), is no exception in that its author engages once more in the exercise of stripping away all surfaces so as to let us see into the terror of what he calls "makeshift reality"—his characters' and ours. The claims I advance and substantiate in the essay, refer to (1) how a fluid chronology sustained by framing devices adds to the understanding of the construct of a novel/film in progress; (2) how the shifting narrative perspective ensures a vivisectionist's look into the body of life/death/world. Don DeLillo's novel is another terrifying X-ray of war/life/death as agonizing nothingness which literature in its 'late-phase' is meant to cure.*

Keywords: narrative perspective; film studies; ethics of literature; aesthetics of incompletion

Don DeLillo's stand: "silence, exile, cunning, and so on"

The three fetish words above describe Don DeLillo's relationship to his readers, in the few interviews with journalists. The writer's constant inquiry into the myths, phobias and obsessions of contemporary American culture justifies his posture of a recluse social satirist, a novelist of ideas, and a cultural critic. In DeLillo's fiction, the details of daily life are at once the effect of our institutionalized society and the cause of mysterious plotting.

Fundamental to DeLillo's work is the idea that America (and we should say Europe too) is a locus of a culture so saturated with media-produced images and jargon that the distinction between the real and the imaginary has been lost. Everything in American life seems to possess a dangerous potential of being turned into a media spectacle, having as result the emotional and moral estrangement of people from their own lives. Technologically produced images of people endanger

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the authenticity of self, thus forcing a new rethinking of the old opposition between the 'individual' and 'society'. The term 'individual' becomes more and more an abstraction in the context in which media images, corporate-produced jargon and computer simulations have come to constitute fundamental elements of the psyche. The immediate consequence is that DeLillo's work, as his fellow writers', is permeated with irony and a fascination with secrecy and conspiracy (a most persistent obsession of the Americans). Still, he seems to admit that understanding of the self and history can be gained only through the mass cultural medium in which we grow.

Very much like in Pynchon's world of representation, DeLillo's novels are infused with a constant current of paranoia inasmuch as his characters sense that 'nameless energies' and 'deeper levels' may be determining the course of events, and they are no longer able to tell the difference between whether they are 'outside' or 'inside' one's culture, whether they are projected images enclosed in the camera's eye or living creatures.

The difficulty of living in these meta-times comes, ironically enough, from the inadequacy between desire and expectation, which brings along disconnectedness, communication without communication. If in *Falling Man* (2007), DeLillo manages an iconic representation of the apocalyptic trauma after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which makes people sense the w/hole of existence, in *Point Omega* (2010), the writer, again iconically, prefigures the vanishing out of existence of humanity.

Don DeLillo's *Point Omega:* "an intense form of thought" in a "triptych"

In a chat with journalist Robert McCrum (*The Observer,* 2010), DeLillo calls *Point Omega* "a triptych" whose prologue and unresolved epilogue take place in MoMA (New York's Museum of Modern Art). In the same interview, DeLillo names the novel, "an incentive to deeper thinking," and writing, "an intense form of thought". My subsequent claim is that DeLillo's triptych can generate an intense form of thought in the way the writer plays with narrative and space perspectives in the three panels he deploys in his novella.

The storyline of the novella is endemically condensed in time and, ultimately, in space too: "2006 Late summer/ Early fall". In the first panel of the triptych ("Anonymity"), we are shown into a dark room of The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), wherefrom an unnamed narrator,

"the man at the wall" (p. 4), closely describes his experience of watching "24 Hour Psycho," a video work, which slows down, on a free-standing screen in the middle of a room, every frame of Hitchcock's thriller into a 24-hour cycle. The central piece of the triptych is mainly located in the California desert, where Jim Finley, a film producer, joins Richard Elster, an Iraqi war planner, whom he hopes to talk into making a single take film as memory and documentary history. The arrival of Elster's daughter, Jessica, and her mysterious disappearance shortly after, calls into question the plausibility of any human project/relationship. The third panel of the triptych ("Anonymity 2"), symmetrically enclosing the novel, resumes the encounter with Douglas Gordon's art installation in MoMA as perceived and performed by the anonymous narrator: "standing man participates" (p. 128).

Don DeLillo, at the end of the novel, acknowledges indebtedness to Douglas Gordon's videowork *24 Hour Psycho,* first screened in 1993 in Glasgow and Berlin, and installed at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in the summer of 2006. He genuinely admits being hooked by this art installation when he tells McCrum (2010): "Time and death. It's the ultimate vision of an artist at the end of everything. It's just what's there. It was not something I planned to do." What DeLillo did plan is the game of reflecting mirrors wherein the simple plot reverberates in a myriad of abysmal nuances, questions, and possible answers. The careful narrative planning allows what Lasdun calls (2010), an "object lesson" in the methods of late-phase literature, wherein a "stonier art of suggestion and juxtaposition" replaces a luxurious display of imagination. Or, in DeLillo's own words: "The less there was to see, the harder he looked, the more he saw" (2010: 6).

The "he," in the above sentence, is the "man standing against the north wall, barely visible" who will be frantically watching Gorgon's *Psycho,* slowed down to a 24-hour running time, for six days on end. Just like him, the reader is invited, from the first panel of the triptych, to "engage… at a depth beyond the usual assumptions, the things he supposes and presumes and takes for granted" (p. 8). DeLillo, "a man of frightening perception" himself—Joyce Carol Oates's words (quoted in McCrum, 2010)—, by watching the watcher of Hitchcock's slowed down movie, in the first panel of the triptych, directs the nature of reading he demands for his novel: "The film's [novel's] merciless pacing had no meaning without a corresponding watchfulness, the individual whose absolute alertness did not betray what was demanded" (p. 6). DeLillo's

individual is suspected of "seeing too much," although "it was impossible to see too much" (p. 6), as the whole point was "[t]o see what's here, finally to look and to know you're looking, to feel time passing, to be alive to what is happening in the smallest registers of motion" (p. 7). Later on, in the main panel story, the same idea of deliberate watchfulness is present in Jessica's telling of her experience with an elderly couple, when "she realized that she'd become part of the ritual, one watching the other watch the other" (p. 88).

Jessica's repudiated ritual is in fact what DeLillo has been practising all along the narrative involutions displayed in the three panels. By help of free indirect speech, we connect to the characters' musings on time, death, life, dread, disappearance, final disintegration (point omega) in an intertwined manner that necessitates and "depends on" "total concentration" from the part of the (re)reader. The (re)reader too is absorbed into the novel's scheme in the same way the unnamed watcher/narrator is absorbed into the film's scheme; s/he becomes a presence by default whose role is seeing without being seen or better, without knowing being seen. An illustration of this idea with in-depth effect for the filigree construction of the novel is achieved in the first panel when the unnamed narrator describes "two men enter, the older man using a cane and wearing a suit that looked traveled in, his long white hair braided at the nape, professor emeritus perhaps, film scholar perhaps, and the younger man in a casual shirt, jeans and running shoes, the assistant professor, lean, a little nervous" (p. 9). The descriptive moment is concluded: "Everybody was watching something. He was watching the two men, they were watching the screen, Anthony Perkins at his peephole was watching Janet Leigh undress" (p. 10). The two observed but unobserving presences will later show to be Richard Elster, the aging neo-con intellectual, an Iraqi war councilor for the Bush administration, and Finley, a Deadbeat Films producer, and "confidant by default, the young man entrusted with the details of his makeshift reality" (p. 63)—the two pivotal characters from the central panel of the triptych. In one of the few conversations with Jessica, Elster's daughter, Finley, drops in the subject of the visit to MoMA, with her father; the details are very important: "We were there and gone, ten minutes, he fled and I followed. Didn't talk to me all the way down six flights. *He was using a cane then*. Slow journey down, escalators, crowds, corridors, finally stairs. Not a word" (p. 60; italics mine). The precipitated flight noticed by the anonymous narrator too, explains in the way Richard

Elster perceived the experience of watching *24 Hour Psycho,* this "conceptual art piece" (p. 59), as reported by his daughter: "He told me it was like watching the universe die a period of about seven billion years"; "He said it was like the contraction of the universe" (p. 59); '"The heat death of the universe," she said' (p. 60).

Equally troubling, in hindsight, proves to be the anonymous narrator's musing about his wish for "a woman to arrive, a woman alone, someone he might talk to, here at the wall, in whispers, sparingly of course, or later, somewhere, trading ideas and impressions, what they'd seen and how they felt about it. Wasn't that it?" He even imagines her looks: "a serious person, soft-spoken, wearing a pale summer dress" (p. 18). Unwarrantedly, from the main story, we learn that Jessica went to the Museum the next day after her talk with her father, and spent half an hour there: "I stayed a while. Because even when something happens, you're waiting for it to happen" (p. 60). But it is not until the third panel of the triptych that we fully understand the projective potential of the anonymous narrator's imagining in the first panel: "This woman, the one next to him, as he regarded her, was a shadow unfolding from the wall," (p. 141) with no name or concrete identity for him, but for the reader, already enshrined in grieving contour: "Other times she seemed deadened to anything that might bring response. Her look had an abridged quality, it wasn't reaching the wall or window. I [Finley] found it disturbing to watch her, knowing that she didn't feel watched. Where was she? She wasn't lost in thought or memory, wasn't gauging the course of next hour or minute. She was missing, fixed tightly within" (p. 76). This "abridged" apparition, "imaginary to herself" (p. 89), will soon disappear for good as if she had never existed, leaving behind "lost times and places, the true life, over and over" (p. 110). The activity of watching, so intently performed by the anonymous narrator, raises questions on identity, self, relatedness to others and one's mother; the latter connection—mother-son relationship—bears multiple significance at the level of a text framed by Hitchcock's *Psycho,* wherein the killer, Norman Bates, deviantly relates to his mother, whom he both adores and detests. "Nobody was watching him. This was the ideal world as he might have drawn in his mind. He had no idea what he looked like to others. He wasn't sure what he looked like to himself. *He looked like what his mother saw when she looked at him.* But his mother had passed on. This raised a question for advanced students. What was left of him for others to see?" (p. 10; italics mine)

The advanced students/readers can certainly read into a troubled self, the quarry of his own obsessions, questionings, and doubts, brought forth by the experimental art installation. "Such second thoughts go on and on and the situation intensified the process, being here, watching and thinking for hours, standing and watching, thinking into the film, into himself. Or was the film thinking into him, spilling through him like some kind of runaway brain fluid?" (pp. 138-9) The anonymous watcher's "complete immersion" into the experience of watching means in fact "deeper involvement of eye and mind"; it means "sharing consciousness with him" (p. 146); it means rememorizing "his own mother, how could it not, before she passed on, two of them contained in a small flat being consumed by rising towers" (pp. 147-8). The final image we get of the anonymous watcher is the image of pure grief, benumbed life akin to madness or inertia: his, the film's character, Norman Bates, ours: "Sometimes a wind comes before the rain and sends birds sailing past the window, spirit birds that ride the night, stranger than dreams" (p. 148).

Therefore, the detailed description of watching Gordon's art installation in the first and third panels works as trigger-thoughts anticipating and resuming the worst of human existence, when it gets personal:

> I thought of his remarks about matter and being, those long nights on the deck, half smashed, he and I, transcendence, paroxysm, the end of human consciousness. It seemed so much dead echo now. Point omega. A million years away. The omega point has narrowed, here and now, to the point of a knife as it enters a body. All the man's grand themes funneled down to local grief, one body, out there somewhere, or not (p. 124).

The grand themes—time, extinction, "rendition," paroxysm, Teilhard de Chardin's "point omega," filmmaking/watching, war waging—Finley discards now, have given way to those "whispered at the margins" (p. 90): a father's love for his "otherworldly" (p. 47) daughter, who has simply vanished, "[p]assing into air" (p.101), but "[s]he kept appearing in some inner field of vision, indistinct, like something I'd forgotten to say or do" (p. 96). The central panel of the triptych, in about one hundred pages divided in four sections, describes then what the art installation iconically shows us: "the depths that were possible in the slowing of motion, the things to see, the depths of things so easy to miss

in the shallow habit of seeing" (pp. 16-7), and we should add, in the shallow habit of living. And those things relate to our innermost being which we hide from ourselves lest we should be diverted from the grand lies of existence: "Human perception is a saga of created reality" (p. 36). It is not until Jessica disappears, that Elster, her father, changes from a man who used to think on a cosmic scale (p. 59), "a man who might [not] make space for even the gentlest correction" (p. 28), a war councilor for whom war should be "a haiku war"—"a war in three lines. […] a set of ideas linked to transient things" (p. 37)—, to a man, "inconsolably human" (p. 121), whose gaze is fixed now not on objects but thoughts (p. 112), who "was beginning to resemble an x-ray, all eye sockets and teeth" (p. 120), a man "beyond memory and its skein of regret, a man drawn to sparest outline, weightless" (p. 122). Jim Finley too turns from a man, about whom his wife said, "Film, film, film. If you were any more intense, you'd be a black hole. A singularity. […] "No light escapes" (p. 34) to a man who had forgotten about the film: "I remembered the film. Here it is again, man and wall, face and eyes, but not another talking head" (p. 124). The two characters were indeed "coming out of an empty sky. One man past knowing. The other knowing only that he would carry something with him from this day on, a stillness, a distance […]" (p. 125). Therefore, grief is personal, sorrow is abstract. Grief gives rise to mystery, which has its truth, while sorrow gives rise to statistics.

DeLillo's aesthetics of incompletion is nevertheless an aesthetics of inquiry into how we are making sense of our "makeshift reality," we are piecing together what has been left out. '"There's almost some law of mathematics or physics that we haven't quite hit upon, where the mind transcends all direction inward. The omega point," he said. "Whatever the intended meaning of this term, if it has a meaning, if it's not a case of language that's struggling toward some idea outside experience"' (p. 91).

Concluding remarks

DeLillo, through his almost 'realistic' scenarios certainly manages to enact the coming-into-being of collective human thought/panic/ exhaustion. "When I work," DeLillo tells us, "I'm just translating the world around me in what seems to be straightforward terms. For my readers, this is sometimes a vision that's not familiar. But I'm not trying to manipulate reality. This is just what I see and hear" (in McCrum,

2010). This "poet of entropy," as John Banville describes DeLillo, has set up in *Point Omega,* another tightly wound machine, which is gradually running down, like a time bomb, in the mind of the reader.

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