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**Wired: Power, paranoia and representation in the novels of Don
Delillo**

Mullen, Bill V., Ph.D.

City University of New York, 1990

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WIRED: POWER, PARANOIA AND REPRESENTATION
IN THE NOVELS OF DON DELILLO

by

BILL MULLEN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty
in English in partial fulfillment of the require-
ments for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The
City University of New York.

1990

c 1990

BILL MULLEN

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Charles Molesworth and Gerhard Joseph for their inspiration and critical spirit. Special thanks to Morris Dickstein, a steadying influence and patient guide.

For their help reading, commenting and stirring ideas, Patti White, Claire Pamplin, Dana Heller and Eric Mendelsohn.

For their generosity and encouragement, Joseph Wittreich and Stuart Curran.

To Mark Dery, Margot Mifflin and Andrew Roth, special thanks for mighty deeds of friendship.

For their constant care and support, John and Lynn Mullen, Jean Mullen and Lucille Wetmore.

For everything else and much more, Elizabeth Petrasovic, whose mark is deepest.

Thanks to all.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements: iv

Introduction 1-20

Chapter I The Power Lines 21-55

Chapter II The Primal Bind: Americana 56-88

Chapter III Literature and Evasion: End Zone 89-114

Chapter IV The Cult of Control: Great Jones Street 115-138

Chapter V The Limits of Abstraction: Ratner's Star 139-166

Chapter VI Frames Within Frames: Players and Running Dog 167-
207

Chapter VII One World, One Madness: The Names 208-236

Chapter VIII Power and Plots: White Noise 238-266

Chapter IX Sacrificial Plots: Libra 267-292

Chapter X Conclusion 293-300

Works Cited 301-304

"We're in the middle ages of a new era, waiting for the renaissance of real power."

The Naked and the Dead Norman Mailer 1948

Introduction:

Anticipation is the muse of this study. In our intensely mediated culture, "antennae," as Ezra Pound once said, are important: electronic, intellectual, perceptual. One is much more likely to feel an idea today than to think it given the rapidity with which thought itself proceeds in the filaments of fiberoptic, laser, digital and analogue networks of information; one literally captures the pulse, or trace of a notion before coralling it into the service of an argument. What, for example, did Mailer mean? The 500 page novel from which the above epigraph is taken delineates no parameters for the "new" or "old" ages into which had been squeezed the "middle" age of the Second World War. But judging from its apocalyptic tenor we can speculate that for Mailer the experience of Fascism--ultimately The Naked and the Dead's subject--forced a re-thinking of the dynamics of power between individuals, nations and institutions. Indeed the novel's depiction of a self-destructive, Machiavellian, paranoid United States Army can be read as a harbinger of Mailer's later paranoid obsessions with manipulative ideologies and technologies in America, culminating in the symbolic weight assigned the Pentagon in Armies of the Night, overtly or covertly threatening to dominate all facets of life.

In this deep suspicion of social, political and military authority Mailer showed a clear affinity with American intellectuals of earlier eras, specifically his naturalist predecessors, Crane, Dreiser and Norris, each of whom juggled the problem of the individual (or what we now call the "subject") battling social currents (what we now call "discursive formations") to pose the question of where, exactly, power lay in the modern world. For each of these writers, the social seemed tending toward closure--a winnowing down of all possible freedoms. Their naturalistic outlooks led inevitably to thoughts of dystopia and shades of impotent despair. Between the lines of a book like Maggie: A Girl of the Streets or Dreiser's Sister Carrie or Norris's The Octopus is the vaguely repressed conviction that American capitalism and its social mechanisms are omnipotent, capable of processing and discarding individuals the way machines turn raw material into pure product, or the way Mailer's fascist army tormented and devoured its own soldiers. In this the naturalists sounded much like the grandfather (or Godfather) of American speculation on power, Henry Adams. In the famous "Virgin and the Dynamo" section of the Education, Adams lay bare what Harold Kaplan has called the "legacy" of late 19th-Century American naturalist philosophy and fiction. For Adams, 19th Century history, industry, biology--the works of Marx, Spencer and Darwin especially--had writ large one overwhelming problem for modern culture: acknowledging that struggle, conflict, control--"power" in one form or another--underlay the essentially Hegelian, teleological order of things. Adams' reaction to this, as Thomas Pynchon would later make much of, was

a deeply phobic one, a paradigm for modern paranoia that assumes a concentrated form of totalized or centralized power. His famous anti-Semitism and fear of a Jewish world takeover is only the most obvious example; more generally, Adams deep intuition that only the "Virgin"--moral rigor and religious decency--could save the country and the culture from succumbing to the omnipotence of the "dynamo" was a way of re-thinking social dialectics as a kind of cosmic allegory: Order vs. Chaos, the sacred vs. the profane, the feminine vs. masculine, the soul vs. the machine. Writing of Adams' dilemma, and that of the naturalists generally, Kaplan speculates on the manner in which power might be considered an integral aspect of philosophical modernity. The italics are mine:

The language of power, whether it forms a myth, a metaphysics, a political ideology, or a broad imaginative tradition, can best be located in the works of an early generation of philosophic naturalists and vitalists, among them Marx, Spencer, Nietzsche, Bergson, Zola, and Sorel, all of whom made partial contributions. Although they did not, of course, share a single system, they illustrate a general process of adapting human values to naturalist realities, a process that resulted in covert forms of a naturalist ethic. The passive tendency of a normative realism...was to submit to whatever has unassailable existence and unmistakable force. The active alternative to this passivity was a cult of power in which the manifestations of energy and force became awesome signs, sources of true revelation. Conflict was the locus of the chief ritual or practical demonstration of power, and conflict therefore became subject to metaphysical and teleological interpretations, such as the Darwinian theme of natural selection or the Marxian theme of political evolution and redemption. Dramatic values were found in apocalyptic crises of ultimate violence or in the fateful cycle of decline and ascent. These ordeals of fate and violence provided the determinant revelations of historic success or failure, and in personal drama they provided revelations of personal worth. But personal values, at least for the first generation of naturalists, were hardly describable except in terms which reflect biological and political values. The overall literary effect was to subordinate the action of individuals to social process

and the character of individuals to the identity of groups.¹

I have chosen to italicize words and ideas here that to my mind reverberate. Power as "myth" suggests so much about modernity: the late writings of that influential pre-modernist Thomas Carlyle, who seized upon the Germanic concept of self-development and eventually transformed it in his later works into a justification for hero worship, absolutist authority, political tyranny; the conflation in Ezra Pound's political philosophy of Confucius and Mussolini, Oriental mysticism and futurist anti-semitism that undergirded a Fascist theology; the modernist poets' obsession with restoring western mythos as an antidote to cultural decline, often taking the ugly form of racial or political chauvinism, and their bleeding over into the formation of the "cult of power" of the Brownshirts, the Vorticists, the cultural "elite." "Dramatic values were found in apocalyptic crises of ultimate violence or in the fateful cycle of decline and ascent" writes Kaplan, evoking Adams' own sketchily informed intuition of physical "entropy," modernity's scientific fable of apocalypse promoted by Norbert Wiener's 1948 The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society as the "downhill" movement of all life, and then dramatized in the novels of late modernists and early postmoderns like Pynchon, Gaddis, Burroughs. Running parallel too to these theories is the vast sweep of twentieth century critical theory, its lineage of obsession with power and social control given birth to with Max Weber's image of modernity as an "iron cage," an overdetermined, bureaucratized arena of constraint, entrapment and bourgeois

convention; Horkheimer and Adorno's attack on "domination" in Dialectics of Enlightenment, and Marcuse's diatribe against "repressive desublimation" in One-Dimensional Man. All of these were concerted attacks on power as myth--on the natural, the institutional, and the metaphysical, hence groundwork for post-structuralists for whom power, authority, transcendentalist centers of signification are the great adversary.

The preceding thumbnail sketch is necessary first to allow consideration of how truly diffuse are the conceptions of power that have circulated since the mid 19th Century. It is also meant to suggest why power has in the past thirty years--the period about which this thesis is ultimately concerned--become a vital topic of political and social critical thought. Indeed it was during the 1960's, when a sea-change occurred in western social dynamics, that philosophy seemed to discover that power was in many ways the latent "subject" of modernism. No writer better demonstrates this than Foucault. It wasn't until the collapse of French Communism in 1968--the failure of the great modernist political dream of utopia--that power became, by virtue of its seeming exhaustion on the left (and apparent monopoly on the right) the avowed subject of his work. Foucault's move toward what he calls a "micro" analysis of social relations reflects the common assumption among postmodernists that authority is no longer centered in traditional modernist ideologies and institutions but instead dispersed into national and international networks of "local" interest. Because it is this assumption that this thesis is in part meant to explore, I want to begin by providing a representative sample of Foucault's discussions of power, taken

from an interview titled "Clarifications on the Question of Power:"

...I would say that power is nothing other than a certain modification, or the form, differing from time to time, of a series of clashes which constitute the social body, clashes of the political, economic type, etc. Power, then, is something like the stratification, the institutionalization, the definition of tactics, of implements and arms which are useful in all these clashes. It is this which can be considered in a given moment as a certain power relationship, a certain exercising of power. As long as it is clear that this exercising (to the degree to which it is, in the end, nothing other than the instant photograph of multiple struggles continuously in transformation)--this power, transforms itself without ceasing. We need not confuse a power situation, a certain distribution or economy of power in a given moment, with the simple power institutions, such as the army, the police, the government, etc.²

Foucault's contribution to our understanding of power and its relations is, as most everyone now knows, to have discovered its invisible, or absent quality. In western society, the police, government, military---traditional sites of authority and control, are for Foucault the old guard preserve of a power that is ultimately less important, less pernicious, than the less visible, more evasive discursive formations of power that, like ice masses, form around a culture's set of shared assumptions, ideas, ideologies. In this Foucault has, like a good poststructuralist, freed power from its traditional referents: it has no single physical source or center in his philosophy, so he claims; it is if anything diffuse, even evanescent, "everywhere and nowhere" as Frank Lentricchia astutely puts it.

Given this, it is safe to say that for Foucault, as opposed to, for example, Henry Adams, or Ezra Pound or even an influential contemporary like Herbert Marcuse, power is never

quite apprehensible since, presumably, we are always discovering and re-discovering it in (in his case) "archeological" methods after the fact of its existence. That is, while we know the police are there, what we don't know is what really can hurt or affect us: who, for example, is responsible for the junk mail that comes into our homes; the commercials that flash across our television screens; the architectural design of the new shopping mall--things which, in Foucault's scheme, we ought to know, or investigate, because each is an example of discursive power that ultimately enacts upon each individual human subject. Indeed the liquidity of Foucault's definition of power gives it currency in innumerable areas. Power is a general field of activity--something like the "cosmic web" of matter in scientific field theory--and as in field theory the "observer" of power, the speaker, is always implicated or entangled in its flow.

Yet just this much comparison yields the idea that in many ways Foucault's ideas on power have important affiliation with earlier modernist ones. To use Kaplan's terms, for example, for Foucault as for the naturalists, "Conflict was the locus of the chief ritual or practical demonstration of power" (even when this conflict was not seen) "and conflict therefore became subject to metaphysical and teleological interpretations: "--metaphysical, in that for Foucault it is Enlightenment Logos--rationality, Truth, Knowledge--that ultimately motivates discursive power; "Teleological" because its formation is all part of a great narrative of western culture beginning, more or less, in the 16th Century when the Baconian quest for hard knowledge about the subject "man" began to take shape.

But far more prominent in comparisons between Foucault and modernist precursors are differences in their theories of power. Primarily this is evident in two facets of Foucault's thought uniquely shared by postmodernism: a concomitant attack on power as "representation" and on representation as a discursive mark of authority. Foucault's emphasis on power's absent quality shares with the contemporary language theory from which it ultimately derives a fascination with how power (like meaning) both signifies in social processes and how it is deferred, diffused, disseminated into other repositories. It forces us to read all social institutions, like all language, as inherently biased either for or against Logos. Foucault's method as he describes it in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" is to consider events not as chronological and discrete but as gaps, fissures, disruptions--sites not previously seen by historians--as the places where power is truly actualized or manifest. Hence the search for what Kaplan calls "awesome signs, sources of true revelation" goes on even in the deconstructive project. Fissures in logic are taken as moments of intense understanding; the gap between sign and signified heralds the emergence of alternative discourses; against the tyranny of the image the anti-image is hallowed art. The farther we step back from the mise en abyme the more clearly we see potential for re-making, from scratch, potentially liberating or original messages and meanings.

It is this hopeful understanding that informs the proliferation of discourses around what Foucault has named the Truth/Power axis: feminist, ethnic, Marxist, deconstructive. All are in some way peering at that troubling, unarticulated spot

in Foucault where "productive" power--not power as hierarchical but power as in circulation may give rise to values that restore even as it is broken down the "agency" of the individual subject. It is a difficult task, complicated by postmodern skepticism that agency itself is determined by omnipresent technologies of representation, and hence of power and image-making to build-- "construct" is the more Foucauldian term--human subjects. Hence for every new deconstructive inroad into establishment authority the establishment, as Western Marxism perhaps best knows, responds with another version of itself: discursively the enemy changes shape, chameleon-like, refusing to stand still long enough to be punched out.

This last is the particular argument about power registered by Foucault's contemporary and in some ways most adamant critic, Jean Baudrillard. His late career, from the publication of Simulations forward has in many ways been directed at answering the Foucauldian sense of how things work. Baudrillard's theory of the simulacrum--by now so familiar as not to require explanation--intervenes into Foucault at precisely the point where the latter insists on the representational quality of discursive power. In the "Generalized Punishment" chapter of Discipline and Punish, for example, Foucault speaks of the shift from "body" to "soul" as locus of penal punishment as a shift from the "ritual play of excessive pains" to "the mind or rather a play of representations and signs circulating discreetly but necessarily and evidently in the minds of all";³ on the very next page, he describes the discourse which results in the "objectification" of bodies "through the control of ideas" as "a

sort of general recipe for the exercise of power over men: the 'mind' as a surface of inscription for power, with semiology as its tool";⁴ shortly thereafter, the chapter "The gentle way in punishment" begins with the thesis-like statement that "The art of punishing, then, must rest on a whole technology of representation."⁵ Speaking of the tactics by which punishment can be "publicized" for the effect of stopping crime, Foucault suggests that the "example is now based on the lesson, the discourse, the decipherable sign, the representation of public morality."⁶

It is this language and its implications around which Baudrillard forms his critique of Foucault, power and representation in Forget Foucault. In a typically reductive reading, Baudrillard counters Foucault by claiming that representation has always been his true subject; that Foucault's conception of power's ability to inscribe, dictate and effect depends upon the efficacy--the literal meaningfulness--of signification. For Baudrillard, these "referents" of disciplinary power held some meaning in previous historical periods, but now, in the postmodern era, subject to the pressures of television, film, Benjamin's "mechanical reproduction" and other simulation-making devices, signs have lost their meaning--"imploded," in the era of hyperreality. Hence the representation of power through semiotic tools becomes for Baudrillard an empty, or at least ambiguous gesture; since the signs themselves are indecipherable or interchangeable, what they mean cannot impact upon us one way or the other. Baudrillard argues indeed that in the contemporary era any sense of determinate power (like Foucault's) "can do

nothing about that indefinite recurrence of simulation, about that weightless nebula no longer obeying the law of the gravitation of the real--power itself eventually breaking apart in this space and becoming a simulation of power disconnected from its aims and objectives, and dedicated to power effects and mass simulation." ⁷ Given this, Baudrillard rejects Foucault's notion that human subjects are in any real way mere objects of study or domination; instead, he argues, they are either doltish, or unknowing, or willing participants in the circulation of consumer codes, computer technologies, information gathering--all of those things Foucault, ironically, might warn us against. For Baudrillard, hierarchy and dialectics of all kinds are replaced by a social model--if that's what it can be called--of an unending network of arbitrary signifiers in which each individual subject is a "terminal." We are beyond the discipline and punish threshold in Baudrillard and into the "ecstasy of communication," his almost dadaist phrase meant to describe the blissed out effects of mediascape culture experienced by everyone from the rock and roll audience to the couch potato.

Clearly, Baudrillard's theory represents a challenge not just to Foucault but to the intellectual history of power discourse. His fin de siecle enthusiasm for the end of traditional western power and representation, and the assumption he shares with Foucault that power no longer operates by a model of repression goes far to undo any dialectic or opposition on which power might be based. And yet between them Foucault and Baudrillard present, I want to argue, a two-sided paradigm (deconstructive at that) for understanding how power

works in postmodern culture. Their work merges, or co-mingles, I want to argue, precisely at the point of representation and its discursive effects. For Foucault, this point is about surveillance: his contention that "technologies of power," or what he at other places calls "micro-physics" of power which represent the human subject--his body, mind and soul--as the "object" of the panoptic gaze is, looked at from a contemporary perspective, an extraordinary statement of the way modern optical technologies work. To wit, by centering power in the look, Foucault allows us to consider how such contemporary commonplaces as the camera, film, video and television represent and represent the human subject. Indeed Foucault's emphasis on the ways in which technologies of power--be it criminal ledgers, detective methods, interrogation etc. define human subjects through the gathering of information provides a natural way to analyse our own information age. Mark Poster has recently argued, for example, that Foucault's analysis of discursive power in carceral systems is well-suited to our computerized era in which human beings are constantly recorded, defined and gathered into data bits, financial statistics, consumers patterns, sexual habits. Poster's descriptive term for these processes is the "mode of information," a post-Marxist coinage after the "mode of production." It is a rich phrase and idea, one that more than he acknowledges is derivative of and suitable to Baudrillard. For Baudrillard's theory of "hyperreality" is no less than a hyper-realized version of the cyberneticist claim that information is the currency of our time. Yet the problem for Baudrillard, and the other half of my

power paradigm, is that none of this information is real. It were as if Foucault's data-gathering sources, the fingerprinting, the surveillance, the attempt to "re-present" were a futile enterprise undermined by the separation of sign from signified. The "soul" that is the production of surveillance in Foucault in Baudrillard is a mere simulacrum of soul; it is a mediated "version" of what soul might have once been but is now merely a trace or notation produced in what he calls the "vertigo" of optic and technological effects. In short, Baudrillardian man feels the encroachment of technologies of simulation and surveillance--the camera eye is the center of his cosmos--and the attempt to have his self inscribed. But at the same time he is numb, unpersuaded, perhaps even ecstatic about its occurrence since he himself senses that the representational void is always already there.

It is here, between surveillance and simulation, then, I want to argue, that discursive effects of power are most prominent in contemporary culture. And it is here that I want to locate my subject: the novels of Don DeLillo, and what I will call the "metaphysics" of power in his fiction. Each of his nine books written to date has been an extended meditation on power, control, agency and representation--the theoretical issues of critical theory. Each has helped to develop a rigorously developed theme that the majority of contemporary experience and epistemological method is mediated, inscribed, manipulated by the discursive effects of modern technologies and methods of representation. In order to give some idea of how these technologies are considered, and what they have to do with both

Foucault and Baudrillard, I offer this passage from his seventh novel, The Names. In it, an American experimental film-maker offers these observations about his medium, and in the process makes a seminal statement about DeLillo's fiction:

Film is more than the twentieth-century art. It's another part of the twentieth-century mind. It's the world seen from inside. We've come to a certain point in the history of film. If a thing can be filmed, film is implied in the thing itself. This is where we are. The twentieth century is on film. It's the filmed century. You have to ask yourself if there's anything about us more important than the fact that we're constantly on film, constantly watching ourselves. The whole world is on film, all the time. Spy satellites, microscopic scanners, pictures of the uterus, embryos, sex, war, assassinations, everything.⁸

The aphorism "If a thing can be filmed, film is implied in the thing itself" is a metonymy for DeLillo's notion that positivist reality is always either observed or observing-- watching or being watched, a representation or in the act of representing. His novels literally mediate two seemingly incompatible lines of postmodern and modernist social critique: they suggest, a la Foucault and Frankfurt School theory, that dominant technological forms function as transparent disciplinary mechanisms suffusing virtually every corner of public domain and private subjectivity. At the same time, they propose that the political and social crises resulting from this situation is primarily, as Baudrillard would have it, an epistemological one. Mediation is here a crucial explanatory term to bridge these two conceptions. It evokes the general Foucauldian process of social construction through and by discourse, and the process by which all signification is for Baudrillard simulational. I would also evoke it however in

recollection of its (and Foucault's and Baudrillard's) Marxist origins. The latent cultural materialist analysis in Foucault and Baudrillard, which I will discuss in my first chapter, is also relevant to DeLillo's fictional social settings. They are relentlessly grounded in the processes and conditions of late capitalism that Marxists have argued is responsible for what Baudrillard terms hyperrealization (Jameson, naming essentially the same thing, calls it just plain postmodernism).

Reductive readings of either Foucault, Baudrillard or DeLillo (and there are plenty around) are those which ignore the ongoing "micro" dialectics, as it were, of class and politics taking place in their work even as the end of modern politics itself is seemingly being pronounced. The best example of this in Baudrillard is perhaps his essay "The Implosion of the Social in the Media." The rather absolutist rhetoric of the title, and the argument within the essay that opinion polls are an example of a desire on the part of the "masses" for the "symbolic murder of the political class, the symbolic murder of political reality"⁹ is negated or certainly made ironic by discussion at other points in the essay about how this very strategy to "murder" may constitute a form of social resistance to conventional sources of power like government. Baudrillard's game, as it were, is to diagnose the postmodern as an irrecoverably lost "real," and yet to situate this diagnosis constantly within the sphere of conventional political struggle. Even America, a book seemingly making a mockery of utilitarian theory and political practice, ends with some of Baudrillard's most savage and explicit analysis

of the Reagan administration. All of the deeply intuitive and theoretical understanding of how mediation and simulacrum overwhelm every facet of American life, it turns out, are meant to prop up an old-fashioned political outrage and despair that only proves the un-death of the political.

It is likewise with DeLillo's novels. They stand on the modified poststructuralist premise that subjectivity is at best a social construction, illusion, or special effect; at worst, like the televisual embryo in the uterus, an almost entirely mediated product of discursive technology. Hence the attendant problem of political and social volition and agency in his fiction, as I shall demonstrate, reflects a deconstructive double-bind: all potential speaking, writing and acting positions mirror or reflect the improbability of determination. The micro-politics and codes of an overdetermined mediascape are components of a brave new world in the novels depicted, as in Foucauldian archaeology, from the "ground-up:" through the diverse subcultures of contemporary life--linguistics, game theory, mathematics, television, espionage, movies. Each is examined as a potentially closed or self-referring system--a systemic simulacrum of communications or coding: each is, in other words, a discourse about itself--the ultimate sign for Foucault of a pure or transparent enactment of power. Hence these systems are often made analogous to other systems of cryptography, duplication and coding that determine and re-present characters' lives. Guinea pigs in a Baudrillardian Hall of Mirrors, a Foucauldian carceral maze, they move with terminal self-

consciousness through networks of power, simulation and abstraction, trying futilely to maintain boundaries of ego and self that are constantly erased, fictionalized.

The psychological coloring of this condition is a radical uncertainty about the source and nature of subjectivity, truth and power. It is an epistemological paranoia about the unreliability of all systems and means of representation and their ability to render the self and world just as those systems and means seem the only ones capable of rendering meaning at all. It is essentially an interpretive paranoia tantamount to the deconstructionist anxiety over signification, or the post-Nietzschean sense that knowledge itself has no finite sources. We might say that DeLillo is the first contemporary American writer then to make anti-representation his subject and theme. Each novel is in one way or another about the de-stabilizing of once-reliable discourses or frames of knowing. The new ones which replace them--such as film and games, computer technology and television, for example, are clearly mediating versions of those earlier frames.

This thesis is the one I hope to bear out in the following pages. In so doing I will be relying not just on recent critical theory but on a range of twentieth-century writings on power, paranoia and representation, including literary works in which these may be considered essential themes. There are two reasons for this. First, one of my objectives is to situate contemporary power discourse especially in a tradition that for me clearly extends back to the early modernists alluded to at the beginning of this section. This is not something I can perhaps

do with any finality, but it is important because of my second goal: to situate DeLillo's own postmodern fiction in the line of modernist thought and literature, and particularly to stress his relation to literary ancestors both modern and postmodern. Such ambitions require, of course, the "historicization" of my themes, and I undertake this with full awareness of the problem historicization itself presents to attempts at understanding and defining power. Nonetheless, the continuity I hope to establish will only deepen, I think, understanding of the contemporary problematic of power. My goal is to suggest affiliations not just between contemporary fiction and theory--a task far too often neglected, I think, and to our severe critical detriment--but to propose lines or at least traces of connections beyond those already discovered between "postmodernism," poststructuralism and the roots of modernism itself. The tendency to "ghettoize" contemporary thought as if it were guilty of the a-historicism we often accuse it of seems to me especially a problem in critical reception thus far of DeLillo. Only Frank Lentricchia and scant few other critics have noticed the rich historical and literary ancestry his novels self-consciously allude to; fewer still have noticed DeLillo's project of rethinking postmodernism in what I will call later archetypal terms. Like Lyotard, he is one of the few contemporary artists or thinkers to dare consider the present epoch both as an end and as a beginning. His books constantly speculate on the possible loopholes in closed systems, cracks in power networks, latent or silenced "discourses" in the general appropriation and commodification of speech, language and writing--all great

modernist themes and projects. Finally, his novels consider politics and aesthetics as a singular, mutually entangled problem: like Swift, Dos Passos, Orwell, Derrida, Foucault, and most recently Thomas Pynchon, DeLillo posits that "discourse" and "discourse" are mutually dependent entities: one cannot shift without serious repercussions for the other. In an age grown accustomed to ready-made responses in politics and literature, one could not ask much more from a writer, and indeed my final strategy is a rather naked and transparent one: I want to argue that DeLillo's represents a critical change in direction in contemporary fiction and fictional thinking about power, paranoia and representation. Clearly, to me, he has surpassed all of his contemporaries in his ability to both render and "theorize" what he often refers to rather cryptically as the "American mystery." It is a phrase both banal and profound, but ultimately one that touches the metaphysical dimensions of contemporary experience--what might be called in old-fashioned terms its "religious" aspect. For DeLillo is that most antique of writers---a fabulist, whose stories always end with a deep twanging of spiritual chords. It is a curious effect considering the truly postmodern character of his fiction, but one which finally reinforces his archetypal ambitions. In this curious and eclectic mix comes forth a most moving, brilliant and at times terrifying portrait of the modern world, to which I hope this study will do some justice, onto which I hope it will shed some much-needed light.

Notes for Introduction:

1. Harold Kaplan. Power and Order: Henry Adams and the Naturalist Tradition in American Fiction. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 4.
2. Michel Foucault. Foucault Live! Trans. John Johnston. Ed. Sylvère Lotringer. (New York: Semiotext (e), 1989), p. 188.
3. Michel Foucault. Discipline and Punish. (New York: Vintage, 1977), p. 101.
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7. Mark Poster. Critical Theory and Poststructuralism: In Search of a Context. (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 179.
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Chapter I The Power Lines

Power, too, for some time now produces nothing but signs of its resemblance. And at the same time, another figure of power comes into play: that of a collective demand for signs of power--a holy union which forms around the disappearance of power. Everybody belongs to it more or less in fear of the collapse of the political. And in the end the game of power comes down to nothing more than the critical obsession with power: an obsession with its death; an obsession with its survival which becomes greater the more it disappears. When it has totally disappeared, logically we will be under the total spell of power--a haunting memory already foreshadowed everywhere, manifesting at one and the same time the satisfaction of having got rid of it...and grieving its loss. Melancholy for societies without power: this has already given rise to fascisms, that overdose of a powerful referential in a society which cannot terminate its mourning.

Jean Baudrillard Simulations

It is only a step from the primitive medicine-man to the paranoiac, and from both of them to the despot of history.

Elias Canetti Crowds and Power

If the world is where we hide from ourselves, what do we do when the world is no longer accessible. We invent a false name, invent a destiny, purchase a firearm through the mail.

Don DeLillo Libra

Richard Hofstadter's 1952 essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," is in some ways the most important and representative statement in contemporary political philosophy about paranoia. "The distinguishing thing about the paranoid style," he writes, "is not that its exponents see conspiracies or plots here and there in history, but that they regard a "vast" or "gigantic" conspiracy as the motive force of historical events. History is a conspiracy, set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power, and what is felt to be needed is not the usual methods of political give-and-take, but an all-out crusade. The paranoid spokesman sees the fate of this conspiracy

in apocalyptic terms--he traffics in the birth and death of whole¹ worlds, whole political orders, whole systems of human values." For the paranoiac, continues Hofstadter, conspiracies provide the comfort of conclusions; the conspiratorial mind is "far more coherent than the real world" in that it provides explanations, ground for knowledge and belief when these seem otherwise not forthcoming.

Hofstadter's definition of the paranoid style rests on several modernist political presumptions that "postmodernism" has somewhat shifted or undermined. First, it presumes that paranoia evolves out of an attempt to understand history. It assumes that the past and its events are (more or less) real, and that the individual exists as a coherent "self" within some historical continuum. Second, it assumes that the paranoid personality remains, even in delusion, an integrated "subject." Hofstadter never questions or interrogates deeply the psychological construction of the paranoid individual, nor does he delve much into the particular epistemological conditions of the period about which he writes--the fifties, for example--which might impact upon the tendency toward conspiratorial belief. Indeed typical of most political thinkers and sociologists of his time, Hofstadter easily presumes that "reality" is essentially a knowable commodity, measurable in traditional ideological and materialist terms, and that paranoia is a kind of deviance that re-writes or re-thinks that norm. Finally, Hofstadter writes with confidence that paranoia creates versions of the real that stand well outside of some unnamed but verifiable interpretation of

history. The liberal social historian must confirm ultimately that events do add up to a coherent whole from within which he himself writes looking "out" at the rather crazed world of the paranoiacs.

Hofstadter's methodology of social history is one that a more postmodern social historian like Foucault would take issue with. To begin with, Foucault's skepticism about psychology and psychological theorizing which presumes a coherent definition of personality would make him uneasy with Hofstadter's clinical concept of paranoia (especially because of its deviant implications). Too, the latter's deconstructive roots would reject the normative biases in Hofstadter which marks as estranged or "other" left and right-wing conspiratorialists and ultimately reconfirm that the liberal agenda is the political narrative true belief validates in order to avoid the fall into conspiratorial delirium. Yet what more decisively distinguishes Foucault from Hofstadter as a social historian is the former's insistence that strategies for the representation of power-- not the weave of historical events per se--determine how we judge or evaluate social formation. Foucault's response to Hofstadter's description of the paranoid style would run something like this: you are right to describe paranoia as a 'reading' of history, but wrong not to notice how reading strategies themselves are determined by complex changes in such things as technological and institutional structuration. Were Foucault to have analyzed the Red Scare and McCarthyism, for example--the events which inspired Hofstadter's essay--he probably would not have concluded that McCarthy was merely an "intensely rationalistic" fanatic on the margin of

culture, as Hofstadter claims, but more probably, as Michael Rogin has read him, a fairly plausible, even normal (and normative) product of the "discourses" of his time.

Indeed for Rogin--whose thinking is situated I think between Foucault's and Baudrillard's, as to some extent mine is--McCarthy and the Cold War were both phenomena determined largely by changing technologies of representation. Specifically for Rogin, the crucial fact in understanding the fifties conspiratorial style, as it were, was the emergence of recording technology and mass media as the "most important agents of social control."² These technologies re-cast the position of the liberal subject by making "seeing and being seen" the key methods by which knowledge or truth (and along with these morality, judgement, political evaluation etc.) were determined. Film, television, photography, surveillance equipment, satellites, sound recording machines, eavesdropping equipment--the newfangled reality-making machines of the war and post-war period, began to shift political analysis onto a new hermeneutic field. McCarthy, Rogin argues, was ripe for this shift. What was really unique about him was not that he needed a coherent explanation of history that would account for and combat Communism, as Hofstadter would have it, but that McCarthy's version of history was a fantasy or fabrication largely attributable to a culture perpetuating false images, representations, stereotypes, "signs" of politics that had behind them both a conservative, deeply anti-communist orientation, and an implicit ethos of simulation: in a growing mass-media culture, with images proliferating at a suddenly

explosive pace, McCarthy, for Rogin, developed a kind of political semiotics. Every American thing began to glow with a special ideological charisma. Grouping these things together made for a kind of political story-telling: string enough signs together and you have a narrative--allegory even--of the decline of America's democratic structure.

In more literary (and postmodern) terms, we might say that the emergence of television, the popular press and film as media for the representation of political events in McCarthy's era created an overdetermination of meaning. Who to believe?--the left or right wing press, the Hollywood or Washington version of the war, the public statements of HUAC or The Hollywood Ten--almost overrode the question of what it might mean to be either a liberal or Communist in the public imagination. Indeed to be even more new critical, we might say that popular representations of the Cold War became the means of containing or framing this overdetermination. McCarthy's press conference stories of subversion, complete with photographs, graphs, charts, secret information and statistics and rumors, became a narrative device, as it were, of modern politics; as Rogin has argued, his polemics were arguably examples of assemblage, pastiche, excess--a blend of fact and hyperbole as story. Viewed this way, the "paranoid style" of McCarthyite politics can be seen as a postmodern subgenre: obsessed with truth and its verifiability, consumed with self-conscious narrative strategies, implicitly intrigued by conspiracy (or "plot") as a reflexive narrative form, intertextual, and absorbed with the ontological grounding of politics, ideology and their relationship to representation.

I have only summarized these two versions of fifties paranoia in part because I think their differences are self-evident. Yet I begin with them because they mark importantly different ways of interpreting social history analogous to the ways contemporary American fiction writers have tried to understand how power and paranoia have become such haunting themes of American life. Indeed numerous American literary critics have identified and discussed these themes in previous studies of the contemporary novel that I would consider precursors to my own. Among the best of them are John Aldridge's The American Novel and the Way We Live Now, Raymond Olderman's Beyond the Wasteland, Tony Tanner's City of Words, and Morris Dickstein's Gates of Eden. These books, which share with Hofstadter's a liberal bias and a general orientation toward modernist politics and thought, concur in an understanding that contemporary novelists up until the early 1970's articulate what Aldridge calls "our feelings of generalized frustration and disappointment, not our need for transcendence but our paranoid fears that some obscure force, some metaphysical CIA has robbed us of the means and the possibility and is bent on manipulating us." ⁴ For Dickstein, American literature of the 1960's in particular shares with the work of social theorists like Marcuse a sense of the American self as trapped in a "Kafkaesque vise." These novelists, write Dickstein, convey a world in which there is "Either no exit, or an exit into rich but unhinging, even appalling realities, or perhaps an exit into madness, clinical ⁵ paranoia, inner space." For Tanner, the modern American novel is marked by an "abiding dream," a "dread that someone else is

patterning your life, that there are all sorts of invisible plots afoot to rob you of your autonomy of thought and action, that coordination is ubiquitous."

These descriptions do brilliant service to the work of a generation of American writers who, like McCarthy and Hofstadter, developed a critical politics out of the Second World War and the Cold War. Immediately the names of Burroughs, Vonnegut, Heller, McElroy, Mailer and Pynchon come to mind. For each, arguably, the calamitous legacy of Nazism and the spread of international "Machiavellianism" in Cold War form afterward were the formative political experiences of their literary careers. Mailer's The Naked and the Dead shares with Burroughs' Naked Lunch or Heller's Catch-22 a by-now familiar critique of social normalization, sadistic power lust, bureaucratic terror and various forms of psychological and sexual repression. They are books driven by a feeling that paranoia is a logical response to a world of irrational rationality, to use Horkheimer and Adorno's terms. Since massive social normalization and bureaucratization seem to have been the obsessive social trauma of most forties and fifties intellectuals, it was only reasonable to expect novels that conveyed feelings of powerlessness, terror, alienation and deep political skepticism. The novels were in a way extensions of Kafka's The Castle, and Orwell's 1984, mixing black humor and dystopic shadings in their portraits of either real or surreal societies closing in on human subjects.

Yet here I would also point out that these writers and books share another aspect (in addition to the fact that they are all white male, a point I will address later in writing

of DeLillo): namely, their originality and popular relevance to the culture diminished or was extinguished in the early 1970's. Re-checking the list of novelists proposed above, the common denominator is that none of them has, arguably, written an important novel for almost twenty years. Indeed the last consensus significant book to appear from any of them was Gravity's Rainbow, which in retrospect looks more and more like an end to a literary era. Since this claim is likely to get anyone who makes it in trouble, let me try and back it up by discussing Gravity's Rainbow as a book in some ways representative of the paranoid style I have attributed to Hofstadter.

An important widely accepted distinction between modernism and postmodernism is that the former holds to certainty that history, ideologies and political narratives are essentially verifiable and "true," and that the latter is skeptical about all of these, emphasizing instead the representational strategies, or discourses, to use Foucault's words, that help construct our understandings of the real. Measured by these standards, Gravity's Rainbow it seems to me is much more modernist than post. For starters, the structure that supports the book's meditations on indeterminacy is history itself: Pynchon insists that the Second World War did happen, that gravity is real, that the V-2 rocket has all of the weight and throwweight of destruction, and then speculates in highly paranoid fashion on the delirium, the absurdity, the perverse fatality--but not, finally, the non-reality, of the real. Our perception of these events as deeply complicated conspiratorial ones too depends upon

a tacit acknowledgement that these events must have happened, a feeling Pynchon tends to confirm by his meticulous care for and treatment of the historical materials he uses in the construction of the novels. Similarly, Pynchon's preoccupation with the difficulty of "knowing" who and what are the controlling agents in history, economy and politics is always predicated on the assumption that these three categories have ontological status, social grounding, authenticity even if their manipulation has clearly made difficult interpreting their movements. To take another example, Oedipa Maas's hunt for the Tristero in The Crying of Lot 49, mainly reflects the ambiguous consciousness of its protagonist who demonstrates that Hofstadterian paranoia cited earlier. Oedipa is after all described as "mothered over" by "Secretaries James and Foster and Senator Joseph," suggesting that her paranoia is the delusion of an historical (hence modernist) sensibility. The parallels drawn between 1960's San Narcisco and Jacobean revenge drama are meant to suggest that Oedipa is up against centuries of real Machiavellianism motivated by some vague but palpable human lust for power and greed. In this, too, Pynchon seems like Burroughs, Vonnegut, Mailer et al. working within a (more or less) humanist understanding of the world. Ultimately Pynchon's novels point to a good old counterculture Eros--"Keep cool but care" says McClintock in V.-- that is meant to provide haven from the conspiracies and paranoias of the world. Put another way, Pynchon never completely loses a romantic sensibility. It is responsible for the ceaseless creative energy in his work, the tragic (and modernist) scale of his stories and the constant sympathy for the

7

marginalized in the culture who remain in many ways his heroes.

Yet what seems most vital and relevant today re-reading Pynchon is not these facets of his work but the postmodern emphasis on representation as a factor in the development of a paranoid sensibility. Oedipa is a paranoiac in part because of her fascination with interpretation, reading signs. She is, writes Pynchon, "a rare creature indeed, unfit perhaps for marches and sit-ins, but just a whiz at pursuing strange words in Jacobean texts." ⁸ The hermeneutic impulse that drives her to find the Tristero is the characteristic that sets her apart from others and gives her the chance to decipher, and perhaps escape the impinging world of floating signifiers in the novel. Pynchon intimates that the crucial political and social experiences of postmodernism will be what we would now call "textual" ones. Oedipa's frustrated quest can obviously be read as demonstrating that nothing is after all not surface, signs, a secondary representation of something. Indeed this turns out to be the case in the novel. The historical evidence never adds up for Oedipa to an answer in part because it is represented as omnipresent detail of the homogeneous environment in which she lives. Put another way, Oedipa's banal, increasingly consumer-driven, increasingly militaristic, corporate world signifies the possibility that her worst fears are true, and these worst fears are in turn exacerbated by her inability to read the "signs" of this development.

Pynchon's work thus represents both a continuity and shift between modernism and postmodernism in its conception of power and paranoia. It substantiates conspiracy in history while

transferring attention to problems of epistemology and representation, underscores the difficulty of historical mastery while attempting it nonetheless, and represents the "discursive" formations that surround us in the modern world as inevitably bound up with power relations and social control. As such it reflects the swing of late twentieth century intellectual thought away from ideological explanation toward what Todd Gitlin calls the "unmasking" function of postmodern and post-structuralist criticism. We re-read Pynchon today struck by the deconstructive urge in each novel to expose the gaps and contradictions in languages and ideology, self and social formation, meaning and "representation." Indeed what distinguishes Pynchon's "paranoid" sensibility from that of other writers aforementioned is his early recognition that "power" and authority had become largely a function of what we now call "discourse." The paradigmatic Pynchonian situation makes this point well: each book demonstrates an economy of power relations that disguises any singular center of source. The Tristero, They and V., the respective figures for control in the novels, are not presences but absences of power. Discursively, they are "floating signifiers," whose meanings are dispersed throughout the field of observation and interpretation in the novels. The epistemological quest at the heart of Pynchon's fictions then is tantamount to a hermeneutic paranoia: that there is either meaning or none, that signs signify or they don't, and that each institution, act or practice in the world does or does not connote some form of domination. "Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the

earth....Another mode of meaning behind the obvious, or none" writes Pynchon of Oedipa in The Crying of Lot 49 as she hovers between "the orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia, or a real Tristero." Oedipa's choices, or lack thereof, indicate her "discursive" formation as a person or subject by a world that no longer clearly means. She stands in the final pages of the novel in the "aporia" of history, between modernist signification and postmodern skepticism, stunned by the possibility that all extant "meanings" may have lost their ability to mean.

It is in part against this configuration of paranoia, and against the case of Thomas Pynchon especially that before considering DeLillo I want to look at the the writings of two of his contemporaries: Foucault and Jean Baudrillard. Like Pynchon, both began began their writing careers in the late 1950's. Both, too, initially reflect the ideological orientation of the post-war left, committed to historical theories of politics and economy that identify major motives (and motifs) in the unfolding of western history. Foucault's early work, The Order of Things for example, labors obviously under the influence and pressures of a French Marxist paradigm. Its archaeological method and its attempt to isolate the implications of social and scientific "disciplines" has about it everything Marxist except the coherent perspective of ideological criticism. It reflects a preoccupation with "alternative" histories and records that was in part an attempt to fill in the areas in the social record that radical and liberal humanism had either forgotten or permanently erased. The "countercultural" urge was thus on display in Foucault early on, as it was in Pynchon;

logically too, Foucault's work bent naturally to a conspiratorial view of history as it attempted to understand the relation between mainstream and marginalized cultures. At the very heart of Discipline and Punish for example is a paradigm of social relations (the carceral) worthy of the most paranoid Pynchonian imaginings. For Foucault, a "mechanism of brutality" is at the center of Enlightenment history. Western civilization is a history of increasing penal restriction, normalization, social bondage and terror: it has the logocentric shape of Gravity's Rainbow, relentlessly pursuing, experimenting, surveilling and ultimately dissolving, a la Tyrone Slothrop, its subject man. The "soul" of the criminal for Foucault is the obsession of western cultures for whom "Knowledge of the offense, knowledge of the offender, knowledge of the law" are preconditions for the establishment of some "truth."¹⁰ Not just science but an entire "discourse" of rationality surrounding definition, modification and control is the culprit in Foucault's historical interpretation, one that is beyond dialectics, and instead more emblematic, I think, of a political orientation that sees information, and not production, as the measure of power relations.¹¹ What one constantly senses reading Foucault is the pressure beneath the text of the historical background to his own work that has begun to track the individual as a commodity, or data bit, or has itself fetishized the taxonomical by bureaucratizing all of life. One is struck, for example, by how much more in common Foucault's social theory in a book like Discipline and Punish has with, say, post-war sociologists like William Whyte or Hannah Arendt than any overtly Marxist readings

of history. The all-important conception of the "Panopticon" in that work seems best understood as a retrospective symbol of the effects of contemporary information and optics technologies on social construction. The notion of the surveillance tower at the center of the social circle--the faceless, anonymous vehicle of control--recalls very closely the general critique of bureaucracy in Whyte, or Arendt's memorable epithet for bureaucracy as "rule by noone," or even more germanely, Pynchon's conception in every novel of a power center that is finally not locatable, that changes shapes and form each time it is approached.

Indeed what all three of these theories share with each other and with Pynchon I would argue is an unease with an emerging information culture. All strenuously object to the increasing ability of cultures and societies to represent individuals as objects of knowledge. This is part of the racist ideology whose history Arendt explores in The Origins of Totalitarianism, the radical "normalization" by questionnaire and enforced conformity in Whyte, the urgency of surveillance, interrogation and classification in Foucault, and the transformation of characters in Pynchon into Pavlovian data. Thus Foucault's insistence on the Power/Knowledge axis sounds a strong note as we examine particularly postmodern social formation. It is virtually impossible in a post-Foucauldian world to view any of the modern agencies and dispatches of information without some skepticism--paranoia is perhaps a better word, about their utility and source.

But daring to turn Foucault into an information theorist is to do what for example Baudrillard has already done to him:

separated his work from a historicist tradition (again the postmodern move) and turned it into a semiotic theory. This separation has indeed characterized the shifts of Baudrillard's own career. His conversion from Marxism to deconstruction entailed first a dismantling of the materialist operations by which we normally design to understand history, economy, politics. His rather brilliant deconstruction of Marxism's own vocabulary in For A Critique of the Economy of the Sign must be seen in retrospect as an important moment in the transition or move into postmodernism, and the point where postmodern theory became heavily invested with a semiotician's skepticism. Indeed Baudrillard was perhaps the first to conceive of political analysis as a fully semiotic act. This led inevitably to his turning of attention away from Marx outward onto the "real," where a world of signs awaited analysis, theorizing and political evaluation.

What that analysis has turned up is at best ambiguous. What seemed interesting and new in deconstructive readings of a Marxist vocabulary became at times obvious and all-too-easy when turned to the less portentous world of television, film, advertising et al. Yet Baudrillard's political lessons about postmodern power and social control are perhaps more instructive than most would give credit, partly because they dovetail so nicely, I want to argue, with Foucault's. What both theories suggest is that the "social" so-called is no longer definable except as a discursive deployment of technologies of representation and information. Here Mark Poster's intelligent application of Foucault to the contemporary (postmodern) social

scene is useful and a bridge onto the sociology of Baudrillard:

What Foucault apparently did not notice is that the same panoptical system (of Discipline and Punish) has been perfectly extended in the second half of the twentieth century by dint of the computer's ability to gather and store information. It is now possible to monitor large populations without the material apparatus of the nineteenth-century prison. Electronic monitoring of the population occurs silently, continuously, and automatically along with the transactions of everyday life. Under the domain of the superpanopticon the population need not be gathered in institutions to be observed. In the mundane affairs of private life as well as in public life the population is under the gaze of the corporate and state bureaucracies. Market behavior, personal preferences, credit status, vacation decisions, health profiles--every conceivable aspect of ordinary activity leaves a trace in the memory banks of machines, and these traces are available instantaneously should the occasion arise. The celebrated distinction, so dear to liberals, between private and public life is being effectively abolished not by a communist revolution but by the extension of the panopticon as a technology of power.¹²

Poster's Foucauldian description of a social world determined largely by technologies of surveillance and simulation depends upon a reading of the prison in Foucault as the broad metaphor it is. Once he has established it, Foucault goes on to show how the carceral model is in effect the western model of organizational and institutional space, production and even habitation. Crucial to this is the division of public space into "units"--cells, carrels, school desks--where the individual's presence, work and name can be permanently recorded, or "inscribed" by the organizational matrix. In short, the self becomes a record of the system's efficiency, a source of information that confirms its operation, and a subject for continued study, observation and eventually translation into the ledger of the social record.

Hence Foucault and Poster reminds us of the Baudillardian premise that 'hyperreal' society depends first of all upon the "coding" or translation of the individual into some other means of identification. Those codes are numerous--biological, televisual, statistical, but they are virtually identical to those in the grid or disciplinary network in Foucault's Panoptic world. One blatant example alluded to in my Introduction to this dissertation is the opinion poll; Baudrillard's sensitivity to the quantification of opinion as the sign of a false politics is rooted in a Foucauldian suspicion that quantification itself is a discursive strategy of manipulation. Other areas where Foucault and Baudrillard share a similar phobia of "inscription" include the popular press, the cinema, fascistic politics. In each of these empirical reality is coded or framed by the capacity of technologies or discourses of surveillance, on one hand, and simulation on the other. Indeed common perception to the contrary, Baudrillard never posits that the simulacrum overwhelms or obviates the empirically real. Rather, more like Foucault (or a reluctant cultural materialist) he sees simulation as a discourse or social category in which power is enacted upon real human agents. Note the similarity between the following passage from Baudrillard and both Poster's on Foucault and Foucault's on the panopticon cited earlier:

This is our destiny, subjected to opinion polls, publicity, statistics: constantly confronted with the anticipated statistical verification of our behavior, absorbed by this permanent refraction of our least movements, we are no longer confronted with our own will. We are no longer even alienated, because for that it is necessary for the subject to be divided in itself, confronted with the other, contradictory. Now, here there is no other, the scene of the other, like that of politics and of

society, has disappeared. Each individual is forced despite himself into the undivided coherency of statistics. There is in this a positive absorption into the transparency of computers, which is something worse than alienation.¹³

Baudrillard here accelerates or almost projects onto a future imaginary the trajectory of Enlightenment history Foucault sets forth. The latter's notion that the discursive effects of technological, medical, carceral development and reform have been to make self-regulation the modus operandi of society (a kind of homeostatic system) becomes what Baudrillard calls a "continual voyeurism of the group in relation to itself; it must at all times know what it wants, know what it thinks, be told about its least needs, its least quivers, see itself continually on the videoscreen of statistics, constantly watch its own temperature chart, in a sort of hypochondriacal madness. The social becomes obsessed with itself; through this autoinformation, this permanent autointoxication, it becomes its own vice, its own perversion."¹⁴

The emphasis here on an involuntary consensus built around consumption shows not only Baudrillard's Foucauldian influence but his Marxist roots. It hints at the semi-autonomy which he affords systems of simulation and their almost total remove from the material base of culture. Yet in no way does this passage abandon a claim on repressive power, just as Foucault, despite his maneuverings, especially in interviews, never successfully persuades us that hierarchy is absent from the social matrix. Instead what both posit is a self-adjusting, homeostatic social system that finds its own balance of power vectors. The "autointoxication" to which Baudrillard refers is also a form of passive resistance to

processes of consumption, just as in Foucault power operates on a "micro" level via its circulation through the system. Ubiquitous coordination brings with it ubiquitous opportunities for new alignments within the matrix that might alter or ameliorate its shape. The radically indeterminate nature of that shape in both Foucault and Baudrillard is part of the reason their work is so tantalizing, and part of the reason it has been blasted by ideologues on either side. It is in effect an imaginary, or what I will call in DeLillo's work "para" conception of social process more like fiction than fact--hyperreal than real--yet which resonates, like a novelistic metaphor, for the condition of contemporary culture. We have entered then a new, postmodern, post-ideological, and post-dystopic dimension in the work of Foucault and Baudrillard. It is a world both all-powerful and transparent, global and microscopic, utilitarian and absurd, pitiless and numb. It is an atmosphere Kafka might have imagined if he knew cybernetics, or Orwell would have described had he been around for the computer age (see Terry Gilliam's Brazil for the cinematic equivalent). Both intensely tangible and impossibly diffuse, it might be best described as a "para-dystopia:" a brave new world of spectacle, advanced international capitalism, widespread consumption and advertising, ubiquitous signs of overdetermination, on one hand, and indeterminacy on the other, all imminent rather than meaningful and a cause for the deepest political and epistemological skepticism. It is, as Baudrillard's epigram would have it, both certain of the end of traditional (modernist) forms of power yet haunted by its positivity of a domination

latent in the "aura" of life that succeeds it. It is, figuratively both pre and post-apocalyptic, latent and imminent, totalitarian and begin.

It is this world that comes full blown alive in the novels of Don DeLillo. DeLillo's represents the purest "next step" in the theorizing of the aforementioned problems of the postmodern which Thomas Pynchon in the novel, and Foucault and Baudrillard in theory, have made a preoccupation. Indeed what DeLillo adds to Pynchon is that which Baudrillard adds to Foucault: a semiotician's sensibility of how new technologies of information and simulation register as psychological and social effects of discursive power. DeLillo begins his critical thinking about postmodernism with the assumption that it is the representational revolution wrought by developments in twentieth century optics and technology that has re-aligned the discourses of social construction, private psychology and political (or post-political) action and agency. All of his novels are preoccupied with power as a discursive aspect of representation. It is this which replaces a purely materialist dialectics, supplants modernist hierarchies of order and domination, and re-inscribes the political subject within a closed field of increasingly interchangeable signs. They describe a social matrix of information manipulation and control that is the logical result of a capitalist economy's drive to create discourses that define, quantify and reproduce the human subject. His novels characterize postmodernism as an epoch shaped by what Lyotard calls the "performativity" of

systems. In Ratner's Star, DeLillo's fifth novel, the modernist technological dream of interminable scientific discovery is parodied by the novel's conception of postmodern science as subject to the same tendency towards self-reproduction, abstraction and social hegemony that the mediascape, as Foucault and Baudrillard both would suggest, has made the norm of modern experience. In other works a similar tenor finds a different narrative vehicle. David Bell, television executive in Americana, is an intensely self-conscious film fan who lives, as he calls it, in the "third person" while trying to understand his own life history, including Oedipal relations to both parents. Bell's cultural schizophrenia is emblematic of a generation of media-age junkies whose mis-perceptions hold him at a permanent Lacanian mirror-phase: Bell's dilemma is to escape a sense of himself as "Other," as an imaginary self made literally realizable through his own fascination with visual technology. His attempt to record his own life story on film is the novel's trope for this, and on a deeper level, for an archetypal social construction: Bell's dreams of living out another life represents for DeLillo the deepest American urge towards self-re-creation and renewal embedded in the country's mythography.

Here, like Pynchon, DeLillo speculates on how the postmodern social sphere has shrunk from one of social engagement and dialectics toward private infatuation with representations of self and the real. This theme comes full circle in Libra, his most recent novel. Lee Harvey Oswald, the book's fictionalized protagonist, is held spellbound by the culture of media charisma DeLillo depicts as the legacy of the Kennedy regime and enters

into the assassination as a kind of postmodern everyman seduced by a sense of his own reflection in the mirror of modern culture. The novel thus carefully posits that Oswald's 'motivation' in his eventual decision to take part in the Kennedy assassination is an inscribed cultural longing produced by exposure to television, film and fantasy life, and a deep need to re-cathect with some social 'real' constantly dissipating in the life of the hero. Oswald can thus be read, as I hope to show, as an embodiment of the theorized subject or self of postmodernism.

These stories are culturally paradigmatic for DeLillo in several other ways. First, they pose white male protagonists, deeply implicated in the history and construction of contemporary networks of social manipulation and control, set upon and made pathological (or paranoid) by the fantasies and technologies of those same networks. Here, DeLillo's work can be aligned, as Frank Lentricchia has noted, with the thematics of the American social novel (Dreiser, Crane and Fitzgerald come especially to mind) preoccupied with how the marketplace mechanisms of American ideology work ironically against its deepest believers. "Third person desire" is Lentricchia's phrase for this; it is the individual's composition of "fabulous selves from the flood of ego ideals represented in movies, TV, popular fiction, and cheaply reproduced classic literature."¹⁵ For DeLillo, the individual's relationship to empirical reality and any sense of self developing out of it is, as in Baudrillard, a matter of consumer and aesthetic choice: object fetish replaces human desire and the self becomes a 'project' akin to an externalized task. The language of self-actualization that has dominated

American culture since the early seventies abounds in DeLillo's fiction as the jargon of self-detachment, seeing the self as in itself it really is through the lens of various discursive versions of the real.

Social reality in DeLillo is the mirror held up to these processes of self-diminition and artifice. Most of the major subjects and settings of DeLillo's novels--television, film, language, games, intelligence networks, surveillance strategies--share properties of abstraction and simulation that make the identification of social cause and effect, and the interpretive capability that normally precedes social action, impossible to locate and define. This explains the importance of the conspiratorial in DeLillo's fiction. One of the side-effects of the "hyperrealization" that makes indeterminacy a norm is a fascination with lies, half-truths, rumors, secrets and, most importantly, "plots." His starting point for consideration of modern social history is not just the Second World War but the sea-change discussed earlier that it arguably wrought in the relationship between optical technologies, simulation, representation and traditional political power. The banal intrigue of Nazi Germany's use of film propoganda, the collusion in America during and after the War of Hollywood and Washington in the war effort, the explosion of intelligence operations and their micro-technologies of surveillance and the simultaneous emergence of television all mark the transitional moment for DeLillo when "ideology" collapsed not under the weight, as fifties liberals had it, of political exhaustion but under the epistemological shift of the political onto a two-dimensional

surface of conveyance. For DeLillo, these events constitute a deconstructive historical epoch when political sovereignty, authority and control became dislocated, dispersed into networks of political representation. Joe McCarthy, the Cold War, the Kennedy assassination, Vietnam, Watergate, Iran-Contra: these events are linked in DeLillo's conception of modern history by the way technologies of representation, including narrative strategies, contribute to their unstable status as epistemological events in the public eye. Thus DeLillo considers these events firstly as information, with a semiotician's sensitivity to signs, images, data, facts. He is in all of his novels a bit like Libra's Nicholas Branch, a CIA scrivener hired to write the "official version" of the Kennedy assassination and to decode the forensic evidence about the event that unceasingly pours into his office. This obsession with the politics of information gathering aligns DeLillo not only with precursors Mailer and Pynchon, whose paranoia was always linked to the dizzying and addictive explosion of pop culture and the mass media, but to the more recent generation of "cybernetic" novelists as named by David Porush in his book The Soft Machine. There, Porush considers DeLillo only briefly as on the margin of a literary movement whose fiction is characterized by a fascination with information theory, feedback loops and the cybernetic proposition that all humans are part-machine: or in Porush's words, that "Technique has become autonomous; it has fashioned an omniverous world which obeys its own laws and which has renounced all tradition."

16

Indeed one of the most compelling and recurring notions in

DeLillo's fiction (one implied, as I have suggested, in the work of both Foucault and Baudrillard) is that the social itself has become a kind of cybernetic loop, an information system that reproduces itself and its subjects and objects for utility, analysis, control. Here I would want to both credit and take issue with Tom LeClair, whose In The Loop is the only full-length study of DeLillo thus far published. LeClair's thesis is that DeLillo's novels can be read as dramatizations of principles of "systems" theory as it has been developed by von Bertalanffy, Bateson and computer scientists since the Second World War. For LeClair, DeLillo's books meditate on the difference between "closed" systems--those which tend entropically toward sameness, reduced choice, 'heat death'--and "open" ones--those which through a constant reinvigoration of variety, difference and play remain alive and self-perpetuating. LeClair's reading rather brilliantly demonstrates how on one metaphorical level DeLillo's story lines frequently push characters and systems to the brink of semiotic, ecological and systemic exhaustion only to re-introduce some element of randomness or chance that proves the inevitable openness of the system. His reading is broad enough so that he even considers, if momentarily, the social and political significance for the novels of a systems conception. Yet he makes scant effort to consider how other contemporary social theory (like Foucault or Baudrillard's, where there is natural affinity) might comment on or reflect a systems analysis, nor how the particular recurring facets of DeLillo's social situations--ambitious white male protagonists, international instability, terrorism, intelligence operations, paranoia--should

be grounded back in the historical situations that each novel strongly evokes. The early books, as I shall show, are preoccupied with the collapse of sixties movements, culture, ideologies; the seventies novels evoke a crisis atmosphere of post-Watergate American decline; the eighties books take on even more specific historical subjects--American imperializing in the Middle East, ecological disaster, the Kennedy assassination. LeClair does not, and cannot with his reductive systems analysis, account for this pattern. I will be less reductive, embracing LeClair's useful argument and using it to open out my thesis that DeLillo's social novels contemplate open versus closed systems as discursive models of domination and liberation. Read this way, the novels take on a light rather different from the one LeClair casts. Specifically, the stories portray a postmodern capitalist culture whose own rationalist (to use a relevant Frankfurtian term) ethos creates social mechanisms--a variety of synthetic systems--that have separated utility from value, agency from subjectivity as the signifier and the signified part company. Here both Jameson's and Baudrillard's critique of postmodern capital and science is useful. For each, postmodern or late capitalism is marked by the substitution of simulated value for use and exchange value. Economic activity exists for example in the postmodern scheme either on paper, in plastic, or in computer terminals that speed currency as information around the globe from one part of a transnational market to another. Finally, for both Jameson and Baudrillard the ceaseless proliferation of signs, images and icons of consumption in capitalist economies implies a mystification of power and

production so profound that the political subject is ultimately blinded by or immunized by the very world he or she passes through, perhaps even seeks to change. Late-capitalism is, in other words, a self-perpetuating landscape of windmills, and we are all Don Quixote.

So we might understand the romantic quest motif that merges with the archetypal social climbing story of DeLillo's bourgeois post-romantics. Each novel, with the possible exception of Running Dog, evokes the naturalistic patterns of the Horatio Alger tale. Even DeLillo's Oswald is a social climber internalizing the pop culture logic of self-improvement and social achievement. This leads to two important conclusions about DeLillo's work generally: first, that it places postmodernism on a social continuum with earlier (modernist) stages of capitalism. Secondly, consistent with this continuum DeLillo proposes that contemporary secular institutions, business, finances, global economy, technology, have preserved rather than effaced remnants of the religious. John McClure, Lentricchia and Charles Molesworth have all written about the substantial parallels in DeLillo's writing between sacred and secular systems. Conspiracy is one; its capacity for endless entanglement, its desire for unified world views and explanatory myths, its fascination with secrecy, mystery and violence make it a true occult fascination for characters in DeLillo's world. It becomes a repository for complexity, a staple of cosmological thinking which, surprisingly, survives in true primitive form in areas like mathematics, sports, even Wall Street.

Consistent with the conspicuous interest in what he calls

"mystery" in American life, DeLillo flirts with a variety of extra-rational problems and modes of thought in his work. Mythology and religion, the conditions of language and silence and the possibility of the artist as cultural prophet and master storyteller all enter into his work. Beckett's landscapes of isolation and attrition recur in DeLillo as oversaturated mediascapes where all possible stories, images and words seem exhausted. (Krapps Last Tape is perhaps an inspiration for The Day Room, DeLillo's recent play). Faulkner's cycles of history seem to shadow DeLillo's notion that America's postmodern fantasy world is an archetypal embodiment of something promised in the nation's founding--a realization of the Mayflower dream of a third-person self. Joyce's concern with language, silence, exile and the artistic function are subtexts to almost every DeLillo novel, yet always linked to the manner in which the appropriation of "discourse" and language by science, mass media and politics has further co-opted the possibilities for articulating the "uncreated conscience" of the country.

The merging of these ambitious formal themes with DeLillo's fast commitment to a socially-engaged fiction aligns him with a handful of truly important American writers: Melville, Ellison and Pynchon come most readily to mind as precursors who have at bottom an encyclopedist's urge to convey the range of modern life. Yet the reasons for his thus far lukewarm reception, while complicated, are deeply embedded in the work itself. I would like to speculate on them here in order to develop ideas later which will support my reading of political dimensions of the books. Each novel has, for starters, been a challenge to the

rules and conventions of both genre writing and the generally dissipated intellectual tenor of mainstream American writing in the last twenty years. Beginning with Americana, a crafty parody of both the bildungsroman and the road novel, and ending with Libra, a complex send-up of and meditation on the historical novel, DeLillo has worked against fictional type partly to debunk the production and reception of popular literatures that are part of the information loops his novels ironize and critique. This manifests itself more specifically in books like Players and Running Dog, where as I shall discuss, DeLillo undermines the generally conservative (paranoid) ideology of the mainstream thriller and espionage novel. His reversals on, for example, the role and function of U.S. intelligence operations in Running Dog explodes the narrative logic of "plots" in American politics and fiction that lead toward the legitimation of a closed political universe. Bestselling pro-American, anti-Communist fiction seemingly written from the knee of government (Robert Ludlum and Tom Clancy, for example) are the implied target of genre satire that questions the complicity of publishers, writers and readers in the promulgation of pleasing political narratives. Hence on the generic level is reflected DeLillo's thematic preoccupation with representation's important role in late-capital and postmodern social construction. Put in terms of my thesis, one of his recurring subjects is the penetration of discursive power and ideology into fiction, and the way fiction reiterates or challenges that ideology. No American writer since Thomas Pynchon has been so deeply aware and sensitive to this, yet DeLillo surpasses and updates Pynchon by showing how the presumed

"neutrality" of modern communications technologies like film and photography complicate any easy political or even paranoid apprehension of their impact. His understanding that, in postmodernism, what mainly counts is representations of the real helps him keep paranoia (like his fiction) at arm's length, to theorize it at remove as a subject for his novels.

Libra, to take one example reviews sixties politics and social discourses as the distant cultural artifacts they have become because of the very strategies of manipulation, control and artifice they engendered. Cynically but perceptively, DeLillo insists that the lasting legacy of the sixties is how in merging politics and culture, violence and propaganda, and in transferring political discourse into the arena of mass communications, the decade is the point where the power to represent events became more or equally important to the power to make them. It is, in other words, the era where deconstruction became the logical philosophy (I will argue later that The Names is essentially driven by a tacit or implicit deconstructive thesis) semiotics the logical tool by which to critique, understand, and ultimately alter the world.

DeLillo's novels thus seem to me not just companion pieces to contemporary sociological theory, not just raw material for interpretation by and through criticism, but original works of cultural criticism that theorize ardently about the work they do. This, too, is another reason his novels have perhaps been poorly received. Many intelligent readers perhaps feel the constructedness of DeLillo's stories, their intentional conceptual gravity. They are too hard, or don't deliver a

coventional narrative, or don't resolve themselves. I would counter by arguing that these characteristics reveal too the manner in which representational and discursive social strategies impinge upon even the writerly venture. The difficult intellectual topics of his stories and the complex discourses that run through them are evidence both of the pervasive abstraction of all things contemporary, including the arts, and the manner in which the artist may turn tables on this process to re-claim some powers of his own. What the contemporary writer must do, DeLillo seems to argue, is confront the discursive power of representation at its own level: where fiction, story and mimesis begin. In his later novels especially this has become a more self-conscious task. The desire for easily assimilable stories, DeLillo argues, is the readerly appetite of a televisual culture. Read Robert Ludlum, vote for Ronald Reagan. Read DeLillo, and understand the manner in which the novel can function as a critique of itself, of other media, and especially of the way literature is always the genre of real cultural analysis. DeLillo undertakes to re-examine not just the nature of the social novel as a literary form, but as a politically-minded postmodernist where that intersection lies between contemporary fiction and the "real world" the social novel would and still does claim to "represent." This is the obvious mission of Libra, which perceives the Kennedy assassination as the event which has already passed into our myth-making imaginations, already become, because of our need to glamorize and sensationalize as a culture, a "novel" waiting to be written. We go back to it in the novel to be reminded of this, of the purpose of fiction, as well as to recover a sense of human

tragedy in the event. Oswald and his mother Marguerite, I will argue in my last chapter, are as moving, pathetic and empathic characters as any American novelist since Faulkner has produced. They are cultural touchstones, archetypes, characters who emerge the old-fashioned (modernist) way: from the inside out, even when the subject of the novel so-called is postmodernism. It is this facet of DeLillo's fiction, particularly in Libra, that I consider in my conclusion, where I want to suggest a possible direction for his fiction and the legacy he has already left behind.

For at stake in all of this, I want to argue, is the heart and mind of the contemporary reader, for whom fiction may have become an experience so familiar that it too induces---through a kind of 'repressive desublimation,' the equivalent of what Todd Gitlin calls the "glazed stare of the total ironist"--that numbed and numbing and defeating posture seemingly shared by writer and reader alike of New Yorker fiction, Jay McInerney, Ann Beattie (at her worst) and a generation of writers inured to the notion of re-thinking representation beyond the rather hollow and shallow attempt to demonstrate how "mediated" our experience often is.

The difficulty of closing a summary discussion of DeLillo's work like this one indicates again the challenge that work represents. Frank Lentricchia has astutely compared DeLillo's characters to Melville's; their ordinary discussions and thoughts are packed with ideas of the most profound philosophical portent, as if the commonplace situations they inhabited were central

mysteries of personal, or national or cultural experience. This is so true. At some point then we must join the ambitious writer and puzzle through the difficulties of seeing, feeling, interpreting, anticipating. We must recall that the stakes remain high for literary critics, whose function, after all, is to re-think representation too if it is what the age demands. Finally, we must decide upon the importance of continuity not just in the literature we study but in the reception, especially the political reception, of the books of our time. Don DeLillo's is a voice that has for reasons I have already tried to suggest and will continue to do so in this dissertation been resisted by an age that has not yet come to know itself, that is still perhaps enamored of its own image as projected back to it by too few writers capable of deep reflection. To succumb to that image is the ultimate in cultural narcissism, an American tendency that every DeLillo novel tells us is already run well into the ground; it is also to miss the opportunity that Foucault, Baudrillard, DeLillo and other rare contemporaries have provided: to really see ourselves as subjects and objects of a discursive power that is most "real" when it is disguised as ourselves.

Notes for Chapter I:

1. Richard Hofstadter. The Paranoid Style in American Politics. (New York: Vintage, 1952), p. 29.
2. Michael Paul Rogin. Ronald Reagan: The Movie. (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1987), p. 296.
3. Rogin's argument, at times profound, at times banal, is bolstered by a reading of Reagan's political career against the ideological biases of the films he appeared in as an actor. It is a form of postmodern scholarship reminiscent of books like Baudrillard's America that read reality as if it really were a simulation of a text. Still, Rogin's is sophisticated cultural analysis that is a serious model of its kind.
4. John W. Aldridge. The American Novel and the Way We Live Now. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 10.
5. Morris Dickstein. Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties. (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1977), p. 123.
6. Tony Tanner. City of Words: American Fiction: 1950-1970. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), p. 15.
7. Pynchon's new novel Vineland is in many ways the most Baudrillardian of his novels, and the one that indulges some of the postmodern fascination with television and representation of DeLillo's work.
8. Thomas Pynchon. The Crying of Lot 49. (New York: Bantam, 1966), p. 76.
9. Ibid., p. 137.
10. Foucault, Discipline and Punish, p. 19.
11. Placing "information" within a Marxist or left-analysis of culture has troubled and befuddled critics of postmodernism since Marcuse and before. One of my contentions in this dissertation is that Foucault's work should also be read as a highly displaced form of information theory. Other more overt contemporary attempts range from Jacques Ellul's The Technological Society (1964) to Mark Poster's Critical Theory and Poststructuralism (1989). Baudrillard, Jameson, Eagleton, Habermas, virtually every postmodern theorist has tried to describe just who controls and decides access to information, whether it is an essentially public or private resource, and where it might be best put to use in the service of oppositional politics. The undecidability of the problem is a central one in ideological readings of the postmodern, many of which give up at one point or another, like exhausted characters in postmodern novels.
12. Poster, Critical Theory and Poststructuralism, p. 122.

13. Baudrillard, "The Masses: The Implosion of the Social in the Media.", p. 580.
14. Ibid., p. 580.
15. Frank Lentricchia. "Don DeLillo" Raritan 4 (Spring 1989), p. 16.
16. Porush, David. The Soft Machine: Cybernetic Fiction. (New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 22.

Ch. II The Primal Bind: Americana

Midway through DeLillo's first novel 28 year-old television executive and protagonist David Bell finds himself in a mid-west American city whose undistinguished features cause him momentary confusion. "It could be Indiana. But it could be Illinois or Kentucky. I'm not sure" (209). Later, stranded in a motel room, one of many he visits whose sameness, like that of the cities, is disorienting--"The room's mood was dead. It was thirty years or more dead and gone"--(216) Bell decides to go for a walk with his 16mm Canon Scoop camera and a late-model Nagra tape recorder. The recording devices he has brought along to make a documentary for his television network about the Navahoe Indians. Yet this moment of solitude and reflection alters his focus. The empty sameness of landscape reminds him of the lack and want in his own life that has inspired this "religious trip" across country. We are led to feel at this point in the novel that his life, like a film or novel, is at the point of rising complication.

"Originally all I had wanted to do on the trip west was shoot some simple film, the white clapboard faces of Mennonite farmers, the spare Kansans in their churchgoing clothes" (210). Now, however, his "plans were a bit more ambitious." He is aware of the camera as a short-cut to self-creation and the shaping of experience. Suddenly he is potential storyteller, actor, director, voyeur, star. And it is as if sensing this latent charisma in him and his adventure that as Bell takes to the street of Our Town (or anytown) U.S.A. in Americana a small crowd of strangers silently begins following this anonymous man with a lens.

In this odd archetypal moment in Americana film becomes a talismanic figure of power, authority, seduction. David Bell, son of an advertising executive, self-described "child of Godard and Coca Cola," film afficianado, becomes the pied piper to America, its faceless citizens adoring--like a camera itself--the blonde, blue-eyed charm of a silent leader. This capacity for magnetism and success is an important "theme" Bell sees as central to his own life. He views his own privileged Connecticut WASP upbringing as a latent cultural myth which his adult life is meant to bring to explication. The medium for this will be, significantly, film itself. What begins as a historical project--a romantic quest to find an American origin and original--the western Navahoes, is usurped by a film he makes about the authentic origins of his own Brahmin family. An archetypal American displacement thus recurs: Bell's self-consciously emblematic bourgeois self becomes the substitute text for American history: the myth of frontier and endless origins is replaced by a story of endless self-improvement and commercial aspiration.

This is the broad frame-work for Americana, DeLillo's important first novel about, significantly, beginnings. Cultural beginnings is one of them; another is the beginnings of an "artist." Calling himself Kinch, after Joyce's Stephen Daedalus, Bell sets out to capture in images, as DeLillo the writer does in words, the "uncreated conscience" of his race. Yet there is apparently no room for personal aesthetics in the culture he sees. Everywhere he turns he finds signs of "Megamerica," the reified super-consumer culture of "neon, fiber, glass,

plexiglass, polyurethane, mylar, acrylite" (119). Indeed American culture is approaching what one character calls "superstate" status. This is reflected both internationally, where America is fighting an imperialist war, and at home, where the artificial artifacts of a booming capitalist culture suggest a consummation of empire. Indeed Megamerica, notes Bell, seems to have realized all of America's "dreams and impulses...After all, it was the true expression of ourselves in the most profound darkness of our beings. We would attain complete self-realization" (120).

Much of the groundwork for Don DeLillo's assessment of America lies here. A man with a camera, a sense of self merging with a culture at boiling point, a book that parodies genre, literature and itself. These are highly idiosyncratic trademarks of DeLillo's work, yet Americana also resembles much late sixties fiction written near it: Pynchon's Crying of Lot 49, Mailer's Why Are We in Vietnam, Gaddis's J.R. Like these novels, Americana is driven by a latent moral outrage that makes this his most expressive and modernist-minded work. Stylistically, it is expansive and eclectic, truly encyclopedic and modernist. It is self-consciously excessive, and sometimes ashamedly "literary." It is also a true "on the road" novel, but one which parodies the conventions of the genre. Bell's "religious trip" for example is one in which experience and transcendence are available primarily through mediated versions of themselves. Bell is auteur as tourist, tourist as auteur for whom the "the road" is either material for manipulation or grist for pleasurable consumption. This makes the double-layered search for

"origins" motif in the novel an extension of the epistemological crisis spectacle culture always presents in DeLillo's novels. Like Murray and Jack later in White Noise, who stand in bemused awe before "The Most Photographed Barn in America"--the historical monument inaccessible except by camera--David cannot get to either a pre-mediated experience of his country or to the heart of psychic crisis in his own mediated life--still another (Oedipal) crisis of origins. Thus Bell, like Daedalus, is aware that the limits of his self and self-discovery are entangled in what his country has already become and still aspires to be:

To achieve an existence almost totally symbolic is less simple than mining the buried metals of other countries or sending the pilots of your squadron to hang their bombs over some illiterate village. And so purity of intention, simplicity and all its harvests, these were the mightiest of the visionaries, those strong enough to confront the larger madness. For the rest of us, the true sons of the dream, there was only complexity. The dream made no allowance for the truth beneath the symbols, for the interlinear notes, the presence of something black (and somehow very funny) at the mirror of one's awareness. This was difficult at times. But as a boy, and even later, quite a bit later, I believed all of it, the institutional messages, the psalms and placards, the pictures, the words. Better living through chemistry. The Sears, Roebuck catalog. Aunt Jemima. All the impulses of the media were fed into the circuitry of my dreams. One thinks of echoes. One thinks of an image made in the image and likeness of images. It was that complex. (emphasis mine) (130)

For Bell, as for DeLillo, to be positioned between "simplicity" and "complexity" is to stand in the paradox of American history. It is to be aware of one's self as a historically constituted discursive object--the by-product of an ideology of consumption, acquisition, and discovery. To work for the television networks, as Bell does,

is to reproduce the same dangerous "impulses" that are the conditioning agent of himself; to drive west to see America is an act of "simplicity" ironically co-equal with the posture of American imperialist adventuring overseas in Vietnam, the television war that is made complex too by its divorce from the "truth" beneath its televisual symbols.

This latter version of complexity is also an aesthetic one. As he will in later novels, DeLillo pushes a language theme through the story that parallels and deepens the social one. Film's capacity to codify experience visually is gradually usurping the role of language and writing. For Bell, Stephen Daedalus with a camera, the desire to photograph and make films is the paradoxical impulse to make things "free of history and death" as he puts it (33), and to find a new subjectivity, a "new language," as he calls it, that may augur some freer possibilities, or total liberation from the mind-numbing conditions of the real. Language itself is at a point of corruption by cliché, commercialism and mediation.

In some ways then Americana is an aesthetic duel between media. The film and television genres and strategies of representation in Americana impinge--as the book's Joycean rewrite suggests--on the novel's form and reveals the pressures against language and referentiality brought on by a culture of simulcarums. The precise manner in which these converging problems of art and self, real and hyperreal, literature and film enfold within the "something black" at the rim of the mirror of American awareness is the great double bind, the primal bind of Americana. DeLillo's first novel signalled the essential

postmodern direction of his career; David Bell's ultimate recognition in Americana that he is both the subject and object of technologies of representation--including language and literature--make him the prototype for a procession of white male bourgeois American protagonists in DeLillo for whom the American myth of self-formation, self-creation and conquest that inspires their pursuits of fame, fortune and celebrity reflects back to them--like a mirror or television screen--the separation of self from essence, like image from referent, that simulacrum-making technologies make their first order of business. As such the search for "origins" in the book is in part, as in all of DeLillo's novels, a kind of anxious post-structuralist quest into the mis en abyme of signification that can only point back to the moment of meaning's disappearance.

An important scene in Americana, one central to DeLillo's work as a whole, is a report by Bell's friend, travelling buddy and sexual partner Sullivan of a conversation she is said to have had with an Oglala Sioux Indian about America. The Sioux, named Black Knife, dates himself to the battle of Little Bighorn. He is that typically complicated phenomenon in DeLillo--Murray in White Noise is another: a bit of a charlatan, a gossipy pedant, and a vessel of deep insights into American life. Black Knife's opinion is that rather than changing over the course of his 100 year life America is "still the same nation of ascetics, efficiency experts, haters of waste" as it was in the industrial boom period of the late 19th Century. Like a cold-blooded

murderer (one of DeLillo's most common characterizations not just of individuals but as here of cultures) the country has been "redesigning our landscape all these years to cut out unneeded objects such as trees, mountains and all those buildings which do not make practical use of every inch of space". "The ascetic hates waste" notes Black Knife. "We plan the destruction of everything which does not serve the cause of efficiency" (118). There is nothing entirely new in this set of observations about American life and culture. It is not hard to imagine Norman Mailer speaking or writing these lines. Yet what separates DeLillo from Mailer and from virtually all other American writers is the complexities and ironies embedded in even the most overt social or cultural commentary. In this scene for example, David Bell plays the gullible American to Sullivan, asking between her telling whether Black Knife's "shack" was "located on a windy mountaintop. And had you gone there to find out the true meaning of life?" (119). Moments later, this pastoral naivete is exploded by the intrusion of philosophical postmodernism (apparently available even on remote, windy mountaintops) when Black Knife describes with savage irony a scenario for the future American university: two TV sets, one with recorded students, one with recorded lectures, facing each other in a "single room.....Eventually the system could be refined so that there would be only one university in the whole country" (120). Black Knife, according to Sullivan, goes on to describe a scenario by which this apex of efficiency would in fact represent "the best thing that could happen. After all, it was the true expression of ourselves in the most profound darkness of our

beings.....We would set forth on the world's longest march of vulgarity, evil and decadence. We would establish the greatest superstate of them all. The world would be on its knees before our crazed power--if it isn't already" (120).

The most disturbing aspect of this passage of course is the speakerly "we." Black Knife's own historical, ethnographic and philosophical "difference" is gradually obliterated as he speaks until his critique seems a amalgam of both left-communal and right-neo-Nazi ambitions complicit with the system he is criticizing. This problem of collapsed and collapsing positions and subjectivities is crucial to DeLillo, but perhaps no more radically or skeptically figured than here. Like the indistinguishable mid-west cities on Bell's trip west, it is a sign of the transparent homogeneity of thought and ideology in modern American culture: the making generic, or interchangeable of all signs of interpretation and experience. Indeed, Black Knife's conclusion--a call for a return to "firm land," a shedding of the "ascetic curse" in order to "let (ting) the buffalo run free" rings with devastatingly hollow irony as a plea for the America "that fulfills all of its possibilities. The America that belongs to the world. That America we thought we lived in when we were children" (121).

Well, whose childhood is this anyway? And what are the implications of Black Knife's description of, in essence, cycles of apocalyptic American history that on another level describe the narrative shape of the novel itself: Bell leaves behind the television world, enters into a search for origins forever lost

and finally visits, as I will discuss later, a western commune where he meets yet again apocalyptic theories of the end of modern life. Americana is so patterned in order to demonstrate the various effects of discursive power in modern America.

Elsewhere in the novel, a character remarks that the dream of what David Bell calls the "third person self," by which he means a projected cinematic, or televisual Other that may become the "I" of the mediascape persona is a modern version of an American archetype: the "founding fathers" vision of a new self which "came over on the Mayflower." Bell's dilemma then truly is apocalyptic, and merged with the question of Black Knife's ambiguous ethnicity: neither is sacred or pristine; both are historical problems of hegemonic power effected by and through American culture and enterprise.

David Bell is made to confront and understand this problem from the position of the bourgeois white male subject largely responsible by implication for Megamerica's legacy. Bell's father Clinton tells him the story of his grandfather Harkavy Clinton Bell who once on a drunken train ride with a pajama salesman named McHenry persuaded him to capitalize on the historical importance of his name--site of the Fort where Francis Scott Key wrote the national anthem--to produce a line of "Star-Spangled Pajamas" by sewing forty-eight stars on every pair. For Clinton the story of the scheming drunken entrepreneurs has a "fine innocence to it...You could afford to be innocent in the old days" (197). This hagiographic impulse characterizes Clinton's and his son's business activities and "self"-formations. It is history as Americana, the in-built

serialization of the past endemic to a soundbyte culture. Bell's father has made his fortune in television advertising and arranged for his son's first job. He keeps reels of TV commercials on hand in a cellar which David and his sisters are shown as children--test-marketing as primal scene. For Clinton, advertising is "a crap game in an alley for six million bucks" (85). The American dream implicates white male authority as the catalyst for a culture of photography, film, commerce and simulation. The camera's "almost religious authority, its hypnotic power to command reverence from subject and bystander alike" is made equal to what Bell calls elsewhere the "nervous motorized genius of....father's eye".

Marking cinema and television as projections of male desire makes the Oedipal situation a logical personal and cultural trope for the construction of family and sexuality in postmodernism. Though female and feminist readers have not yet seized the opportunity, DeLillo clearly concurs with their analyses of gender and semiotics in popular film and advertising photography. Laura Mulvey's important essay on "Narrative Pleasure and Visual Cinema," which proposes movie-viewing as primarily a vehicle for masculine masturbatory fantasy and appropriation of female form, compliments well DeLillo's constant identification of male-centered sexual desire with spectacle culture. Deeply enamored of film stars Kirk Douglass and Burt Lancaster, Bell conceives of himself both as voyeur and actor in his sexual relations. His Oedipal desires take place literally "in the dark"--the book's recurring phrase for the scopophilic associations in the movie-goer's imagination

between image and desire. The frustration of this desire-- Bell's inability to step into the Oedipal movie--is in part what triggers his desire to make his own film. This repressed attachment to the image also causes him to perceive his former marriage and relationship to lovers as male-dominant cinematic scenarios. In these, Bell is often violent, pathological, misogynistic. He displaces the denied "narrative pleasure" as Mulvey calls it of seeing women on film onto woman herself. It is when he sees his mother's foot fall out of her shoe--rendered in his imagination like a freeze frame in a movie, that he simultaneously begins his Oedipal fantasy and realizes the need to visualize the world cinematographically.

Bell's father is the other half of this postmodern Oedipal equation. Emotionally sterile and incapable of providing love for his son, he channels a repressed eros into the realm of advertising production and consumption. The movie-making autobiographical venture which centers on stories of the father thus can be construed as an unresolvable Lacanian trauma--a reenactment of competitive difference with the figure whose image (and images) destroy the union with the mother, and more symbolically, rip Bell from any "original" unmediated relationship of self to self and self to world. For Bell, the "mirror phase" is literally that: a kind of limbo in which he is decathected from all human or wordly relations, forever traumatized by the gaze of self-recognition--the primal act which mediascape culture reinvents over and over through photography, film, television. The camera's "ego" as he calls it is none other than his own. Like mylar America, he is stuck at a scene

of perennial self-formation and gratification; he exists as libidinal surface, eroticizing himself most and enjoying "almost the same kind of relationship with my mirror as that many of my contemporaries had with their analysts" (11).

This last notion also points to the site of epistemological trauma in DeLillo's work. Social relations, information, identity and knowledge in his novels are present literally on the "surface," of character, text, writing. The novel even begins in media res---"Then we came to the end of another dull and lurid year"---announcing a disruption of literary time, narrative continuity and the abrupt flash or opening of the first image of a film on screen. But the year is only "dull and lurid" like a film---predictable, stereotypical, gaudy. Those who go to films, like Bell, to escape seeing the Vietnam War on television are treated to anti-lessons in culture. "We learn nothing from the stereotypes around us," says Bell, "not even that we're all the same" (91). The numbing effect of film, the bleaching of feeling and conviction and the blurring of desire with watching push the response to war into a libidinal zone: Vietnam becomes one of the many eroticized seductions film and image fetish make possible. The dream of a video-ized American culture as "The greatest superstate of them all"--the "America that belongs to the world" is complemented by the eroticization by television of Vietnamese women for American males. Clearly this is a comment on "hegemony," but a hegemony made available only through the globalization of surface. As Frank Lentricchia as noted in his essay on Libra, DeLillo's novels are subtly attuned to how ethnic "difference," like history in

postmodernism, can be effaced by the standardization of
representational models.¹ Americana quietly
signals the coming seventies and eighties culture where
the need to "look" global in a satellite-dish culture will give
plastic surgeons a chance to define the consummate international
self.

This "normalized" world obtains constantly in Americana,
obliterating I and other, self and culture antagonisms that
might constitute old fashioned dialectics or opposition, and
hence the possibility of some sudden shift or challenging of
discursive norms. Most intriguing about Bell's television
company, for example, is its resemblance to a tyrannical clique--a
Bolshevik power group reflecting the larger grid of authority its
product represents (here product and production are inseparable,
a kind of transparent capitalist perfection--pure performativity,
in Lyotard's terms.) Bell vacillates between feeling that each
of his colleagues is like himself some sort of "production,"--
each "sooner or later, became a trend in himself; each had his
week-long cycle of glory" (67) and the sense that all of these
individual trends and cycles are subsumed within a larger
anonymous power structure that in the book's opening pages is
conducting a "purge" of undesirable employees. Within this
setting two simultaneities arise: individuals look more and more
alike, and they become more and more threatening. Office
politics become a theater of war. "...you can't tell the
friendlies from the hostiles" says a character in the book's
opening pages, a theory about bureaucratic paranoia reminiscent
of Arendt's reading of fascist structurations in The Origins of

Totalitarianism. Power within the network is a shell game operated by false and anonymous sources and directives. Bell's colleagues have "code names" (one of them is "Trotsky") for each other and he receives cryptic messages with rumors of firings--purgings that come from no clearly identified hub or head. The television network, like television, successfully separates power from responsibility: it infiltrates the office the way images filter through America in the form of "waves and radiation" in White Noise. "Hidden energies filled the air, small secret currents, as happens in every business which thrives in the heat of the image" (13) Bell's anxious response resembles poststructuralist anxiety about sources of meaning and difference in sign systems. The maze of carrels Bell walks through in his office are like a Borgesian labyrinth shimmering with imminent meanings and discoveries. Such is the condition of a corporate America whose domestic and international machinations, as later DeLillo novels will demonstrate well, maneuver with the stealth, efficiency and killer ethos of guerilla terrorists.

Once this systemic model has been attained--and it is a specifically advanced capitalist one--new codes of consumption and image production are devised to titillate consumer fears, paranoias and powerlusts. DeLillo's critique of these processes comes closest often to Frankfurt Critical Theory. Adorno's blind tirades against cultural barbarism (something like Benjamin's) find echo in bitter satire of decontextualized culture. In an odd foreshadowing of DeLillo's last novel, *Weede Denney*, an executive for Bell's company, ponders the possibility

of televising a man urinating, or just recording the sound of it in order to "expand the consciousness" of the nation. "It would be almost as good as Ruby shooting Oswald" (66). This leveling juxtaposition reflects the radical conflation of high and low "message" in culture. Events and our perceptions of them may become as rapidly interchangeable and shallow as the format in which they are delivered.

As an extension of this problem Bell's fate in the novel is to be placed constantly between a kind of eros and thanatos of mediated desire that is one of DeLillo's darkest configurations. It is the see-saw on which will sit so many of his characters-- Gary Harkness of End Zone, Bucky Wunderlick of Great Jones Street and especially Lee Harvey Oswald in Libra. It is the juxtaposition in consciousness of two entirely contemporary recognitions: that any image or identity is possible (or consumable) for the transient mind of modern self, and that for this very reason none is the existentially "correct" one. "Decentering" is the logical social psychology of an individual wired into a network of illimitable identities and versions of the real. There are then no reliable ways to measure "difference" between self and externality. Hence the statistical fascination with morbidity----"we were all fascinated by the body counts" from the war notes Bell---is a kind of mediated empathy where one's fear of death is realized in its simulation by "others" who are also "none." A motel room becomes the closest approximation to that death experience, its generic sameness approximating the consciousness in space and time of that universal empathy: we are all literally "globalized."

About this universal or generic space of experience Charles Molesworth has commented in an essay on Ratner's Star that it is both a transnational awareness, replete with a superfluity of information, data and capital, and possibly a more benevolent self-sustaining system of flux and equilibrium--- something like a Gaia hypothesis in which every death or loss is reciprocated by a simultaneous addition. In Ratner's Star, the possibility is floated that such a system may deliver a new organon of explanation or belief, or that perhaps a mystic or religious experience can translate it into a benevolent order--a revelation. Americana is also populated with mystics who perceive the ceaseless enlargement and homogeneity of experience as a harbinger of some revelation or apocalypse. Black Knife is one; another is a set of cultural drop-outs Bell meets late in the novel who have adopted a paranoid communal lifestyle removed from the social process. They are a forerunner of later cults in DeLillo's work--the Happy Valley Farm Commune and the murderous sect of The Names, whose response to technological globalization and superflux is to fetishize private experience. Primary among these endeavors is an ethic of simplicity: an ascetic discipline that posits a single code or philosophy as resistance to an infinitude of choice brought on by the expanding spheres of influence: political, philosophical, economic. In Americana, this is a perverse variation, yet a variation nonetheless on Thoreau's Walden, with a dark subtext attached: the zen New Englander, prototype of DeLillo's later anti-technological mystics, is re-configured as the ultimate "efficiency expert," the systems planner in the pines.

Both Black Knife and the desert communists plan for and toward apocalypse with the zeal of businessmen preparing for the consummation of a deal: they are "disaster management" teams. DeLillo re-writes (or re-routes) the American self-sufficiency theme as a neurotic obsession with performance. It is the power of coordination and planning raised to the level of high religion. Both the empire builders of corporate America and its anti-empire drop-outs are pathologically "self-reliant." They aspire to a variation of the "platonic conception" of self from which spring characters like Fitzgerald's Gatsby; in DeLillo's postmodern it is the nightmare of "self"-consciousness (or third-person desire, to use Lentricchia's phrase) from which America is trying to awaken. Compare these two passages, the first describing the commune's platform, the second Bell's self-description:

Anything's better than working for the death machine. We all try to dress the same way here. Simple and beautiful. But it's not like uniforms. It's just part of the single consciousness of the community. It's like everybody is you and you are everybody. Sex is mostly auto. You can watch someone doing something with himself or herself and then they can watch you do it. It's better that way because it's really purer and it's all one thing and you can do it with different people without anybody running for their shotgun like in the death factory out there. Sometimes it's not auto but mostly it is and it's two people mostly because two is still the most beautiful. I don't know what the Indians do. (354)

I was an extremely handsome young man. The objectivity which time slowly fashions, and the self-restraint it demolishes, enabled me to make this statement without recourse to the usual modest disclaimers which give credit to one's parents or grandparents in the manner of sires-and-dams books. I suppose it's true enough that I inherited my mother's fine fair skin and my father's athletic physique, but the family album gives no clue to the curiously Grecian perspective of my face. Physical identity meant a great

deal to me when I was twenty-eight years old. 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 become so clear, so wonderful. I was blue-eyed David Bell. Obviously my life depended on this fact. (11)

The rote simplicity of these self-analyses recur in other DeLillo novels. The "auto" sexuality of self and the voyeuristic relation to ego bespeak a determinism against which every DeLillo character is engaged--Glen Selvy of Running Dog is another exemplar. They are of course extensions of Americana's Mayflower theme: the invention of names and destinies, literally "disciplines" of which the self is subject. Identity achieves full closure as it mimics the performativity of public activities: creating systems, cliques, cults, circles of influence, images of self and regulations of the real. The commune's particular version of this is a countercultural duplication of the paranoid machinations of the "death machine." Fanaticisms meets fanaticism. This "universe of discourse" as Marcuse might call it has been closed.

Americana is in part meant to test this premised "one-dimensionality" against Bell's nascent artistic apprehension that there is perhaps a language or medium available for self-expression that might function as a counter discourse. His journey west is meant to point out both the difficulty of his attaining to any phenomenological experience, and the pathological anxiety that accrues as phenomena recede. His traveling companions on the trip are an assemblage of characters with identities and names that suggest the promise and

impossibility of this task. The beautiful modern sculptress Sullivan, whom Bell considers his one and only savior, is the book's modernist muse; a reader of Yeats, Joyce, Faulkner, she holds forth in a brilliant soliloquy late in the novel (one of the only ones not recorded on film) that proffers experience as the "single unending sentence," the permanently naive and "religious" renewal that Bell ostensibly seeks. Yet her very name is the postmodern undercutting of this renewal: Sullivan's "travels" are, it is suggested, like Bell's (and Sturgeon's) a pretend experience, choreographed and derivative and made, like Sullivan's Travels, to end up on celluloid. The grizzled Air Force colonel Jack Wilson Pike is a parody of the wizened geriatric sage of American "fraternity" literature and film; his obsession with animals, primal contests, "an undefiled life and the purest of deaths" (51) makes him another "living schizogram;" he is a bit player both in the American mythography of the pioneer spirit and in Bell's unfolding cinematic panorama. The writer Brand (the name is almost self-explanatory) is writing the "novel that would detonate in the gut of America like a fiery bombshell" (112) (there is a touch of Norman Mailer about this character and ambition) yet his task is literally eclipsed by Bell's movie project. While Brand contemplates eliminating language entirely from his novel--"It may be possible to find a completely new mode" (287) Bell is removing movement from film "that tells a story or creates a harmony" in order for "language to evolve from static forms" (288). I will have more to say on this juxtaposition of literature and film in a moment, but would emphasize here that Brand's slow fade from the novel speaks for

the first time in DeLillo's fiction of the impact on authorship and language owing to the rise and dominance of new narrative discourses and technologies. The message is that literature, too, is the object of discursive power and must react accordingly. Penetrated by an infinite variety of new codes, abstractions, theorems--those symptoms of what Tom LeClair calls the literature of "excess," it must respond by turning these back into a valuable aesthetic.

In doubly ironic fashion, then, Bell/DeLillo hand control of their stories in the novel's final stages to strangers who Bell randomly chooses to star in his quasi-autobiographical film. These people, extras as it were in the American mediascape, suddenly deliver the book's most revealing lines: their 15 minutes of fame come courtesy of Bell's own documentary life. One performer reads as Bell's father a script describing his war efforts, the writer filling in or inventing gaps in the text. This is on one hand Bell's media-age solution to Oedipal and patriarchal tales: he invents a new father on film. On another it configures perspectival anarchy and loss. Bell is Everyman as long as any man can "play" his life or himself, and his "self" is eminently playable, one of the "archetypes of the dismal mystery" of America, as he himself refers to his studied adventures on the novel's last page. One can only evaluate this in Foucauldian terms as the substitution of self for knowledge object. In the mirror of his own life Bell sees himself as Other. Bell's Kirk Douglas persona is gradually expunged as he recalls the real-life primal scenes that inspire his self-making. The memory of his mother as doting matron, and

father as commercial tycoon render this formula (the home as Americana) the provocative raw material of a boy's escapist or self-mythologizing consciousness. Put another way, DeLillo configures bourgeois modernity as a cycle of generic experiences, a mediated feedback loop in which the mundane is transfigured by and through spectacle into generic representations in television and film. Indeed the book we are reading is a transcription of Bell's autobiographical film which he at the start of the novel interrupts his viewing of to narrate. Bell's life is literally and figuratively emblematic.

This theme is strikingly symbolized, significantly, in the last scene in Part I before Bell packs for his trip west. At home in everytown/hometown Millsgate for the last time, he is shaving his chest (an ascetic ritual of self-beautification) in preparation for his journey when he sees a woman, "close to forty, I guessed, fair-skinned, wearing flat heels" trimming a hedge with a pair of large shears. Bell's mixture of voyeurism, desire, castration anxiety and Oedipal longing all bespeaks his sudden desire to tell stories to someone else; the "strangest, darkest, most horrifying idea of my life"--the idea for the autobiographical film he will make--comes at a moment when his fantasies must become the material of his fantasies. This complex re-reworking of modernist epiphany is a kind of second-order reflection in which the Lacanian "imaginary" replaces Freudian consciousness. Bell's recognition that his bildungsroman will be a film divides the self at its most intense point of self-awareness and coherence. The exposure of his Oedipal desires to himself is like the shedding of light onto

dark film---Bell's own simile for the way thought works. Such a figure of personality provides endless possibilities for post-structuralist interpretations of psychology as a semiotics in DeLillo's fiction--an interpretation I will suggest but not take up. Indeed as Americana winds down Bell enters a "dark space" of impersonality. Just as Brand becomes the novelist of "blank pages" in the end, Bell ends up cutting sound from his film, then underexposing it, "destroying shape and light, attempting to solve the darkness by entering it fully" (345). This leaves Bell in "silence and darkness, sitting still, a maker of objects that imitate my predilection" (345). Here mediation reaches a chilling climax in the novel; the originary quest of an entire culture, predominantly inscribed in the film and literature which are its memory, is in essence reinscribed as the aporia, or trace of history, biography, historiagraphy. Suddenly vast objects large as America are rendered sites of epistemological crisis where indeed the "myth" leaves nothing beneath the symbols. This is postmodern frisson at its most intense; it is also, ironically, modernistically, the starting point of Bell's narrative that is the novel. Having framed the entire story with commentary from a desert island where he watches the film he has made, he remarks near the end that his appearance in the last twenty seconds (his only one) in the mirror holding the camera stands as the "beginning." The beginning of what? I will argue that it is of the new language of the novel itself, the new narrative strategies it employs, the rediscovery of "form" through the formalist consciousness of the narrator/writer/auteur. It is to these formal strategies, and

their relation to the book's vision of subjectivity, power and discourse that I will now turn.

DeLillo's reputation as a postmodern novelist mainly on his interest in topics--television, film, conspiracy--generally associated with the postmodern period. Yet in the few interviews he has granted he constantly cites giants of modernism (Joyce, Beckett and Faulkner, for example) as his literary inspirations. Tom LeClair has taken this to explain DeLillo's predilection for inverting genre convention. DeLillo's "deconstructive" capacity as a writer for LeClair lies in his deliberate flouting and flaunting of various literary discourses, including modernist ones. In large measure I agree with LeClair, but I want to explore DeLillo's aesthetics in a slightly different way. My argument concerns the problem of boundaries in his fiction--of time past and present, genres, selves and "others," writers and, in his case, artists in the plastic arts, including film. I am interested especially in the way DeLillo formally and stylistically reduces his "identity" as a writer so as to try and keep open in modern literature and language--discourses deeply interpenetrated by technologies and systems of power, a reserve, or escape route for the artist.

Like Lyotard, DeLillo's boldest stroke as a critic of the postmodern is choosing to shuffle the deck of historical sequentiality in our consideration of artistic and political movements. For Lyotard the postmodern is merely an extension of earlier modernisms, on one hand, and an anticipation of others. Lyotard is most suspicious of the "post" in post-modern and,

partly by evading a social or economic reading (science is significantly the only social institution with which he has truck) argues against periodization of any kind that affixes boundaries to aesthetic production. For DeLillo this looping, or recurring is also the figurative shape of history. He would like us to start thinking about it as, first, "pre-history," or pre-chronology in order to understand, as someone like Michel Serres, the similarities between ancient and postmodern systems. In Americana, for example, the correlation of "primitive" communal fanaticism (a pre-industrial model for living) with post-industrial disciplinary cadres (systems managers, efficiency experts etc.) gives us the chance to view culture anthropologically: attuned to historical patterns and recurrences. Other DeLillo novels that are adept at this are End Zone, Ratner's Star and White Noise. In each, as we shall see, sacred and secular, primitive and high-tech, early and late stages of capitalism are recontextualized to form a broad viewing frame that reduces or eliminates the singular significance of periodization. Another example from Americana is the Oedipal bind of David Bell, which is re-figured as what Tom LeClair calls the "double-bind" of the schizophrenic trapped in a communications loop. Thus Bell's journey across America offers another version of the male initiation rite resounding throughout American literature, from Twain's Huck Finn, to Hemingway's Nick Adams, to Neihardt's own Black Elk Speaks, to whom DeLillo's Black Knife is clearly an allusion.

Yet DeLillo never leaves originals alone, whether classical or modernist. Like American culture itself his forte is

or modernist. Like American culture itself his forte is duplication, repetition, simulation, variation, and a recognition of the artistic consequences of these strategies of appropriation. One consequence is obsessive eclecticism. The urge to what Tom LeClair calls "excess" in his work--linguistically, stylistically, topically--is a bid for writerly mastery of topic that is part and parcel of the social criticism of the novels. They are grounded in tools, artifacts, specialization in part to recall that film technology and discourse in Americana, for example, is in large measure "about" the measurement, control and quantification of space and time: of how we represent things, ontology. This "mapping," as Foucault might have it, of film makers, viewers, and optical technologies, meets resistance in what LeClair again calls a "re-mapping" of literature and literary form. This is the epiphany that this would-be Stephen Daedalus Bell arrives at near the end of the novel. Writing in exile from his desert island--the "ultimate suburb," he reflects on the film and adventure and his quest for America thusly:

This too, then, moon and painted ponies, seemed the coming and going of time set free from whatever binds it. Literature is what we passed and left behind, that more than men and cactus. For years I had been held fast by the great unwinding mystery of this deep sink of land, the thick paragraphs and imposing photos, the gallop of panting adjectives, prairie truth and the clean kill of eagles, the desert shawled in Navaho paints, images of surreal cinema, of ventricles tied to pumps, Chaco masonry and the slung guitar, of church organ lungs and the slate of empires, of coral in this strange place, suggesting a reliquary sea, and of the blessed semblance of God on the faces of superstitious mountains. 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. To formulate. To seek links. But the wind burned across the creekbeds, barely moving the soil, and there was nothing to announce (sic) to myself in the way of historic revelation. Even now, writing this, I can impart little of what I saw.
(347-348)

The footfalls of literary history cannot be silenced. Bell's motive-seeking consciousness is the prototype in DeLillo's fiction for the "plot-making" instincts of literature writ large. Thus two interwoven dilemmas arise: 1) The desire to write entails complicity in the discursive pattern of "seeing," ordering, regulating--escaping "chaos" and boundary-lessness; 2) This desire recalls the disappearing "ground" of literature's own subject, "reality," or empirical truth largely considered. The question of which of these is a "modernist" dilemma and which is postmodern need not trouble us. For DeLillo they are verities of the writerly made irrevocably complex by the penetration inside and outside of contemporary literature by technologies of simulation and control. Both spaces are saturated by what Bell calls "archetypes of the dismal mystery," the particularly inscribed romantic representations of, in Americana's case, "Megamerica," which Bell thinks he may actually find. In this sense all of literary history is condemnable as a conspiratorial partner in processes of cultural abstraction, myth-making and simulation that are always in the grain of the dominant discourse. Americana's title signifies this double-function: the deconstructive urge that renders up yet another "reconstructive" myth-making voyage of discovery.

Within these parameters of literary space, DeLillo's

subversive energies are directed against all monologic or omnipotent voices. This is the function of polyphonic voicing in his fiction. His is a "catch me if you can" aesthetic that, like Taft Robinson in End Zone, (or the real life of Thomas Pynchon) prizes evasive action. By sitting on the edge of modern and postmodern formalism, of popular and literary genres, of various speciality jargons, argots, "discourses," moving between them, interrogating their boundaries, DeLillo pays allegiance to difference, constant innovation, contingency, and in LeClair's terms, "open" systems of thought and writing. David Bell's journey is literally an arc from primal scene (especially recollections of sexual longings for his mother) to representation of primal scene (Sully's portrayal of his mother on film) to re-viewing of primal scene in the private screening of his autobiographical film, to the "writing down" that Bell does in creating the book. This last jump into the word, the page, is the potentially liberating moment for Bell (and for DeLillo), the "evasive" maneuver that allows him to slip out of the range of the camera "ego," the filmic or scopophilic self. In a 1983 Rolling Stone interview, he describes his work along just these lines as "one of the consolation prizes we receive for having lived in a difficult and sometimes chaotic world. We seek² pattern in art that eludes us in natural experiences. Such a notion suggests DeLillo as modernist postmodern, looking back in anger at the vapidness or drying up of literary possibility and opportunity in the age of mechanical reproduction. This is also why there is no "historic revelation" at book's end. Bell ends up re-living the most perverse of all of the

"archetypes of the dismal mystery" in postmodern America. He rents a car and drives through Dealey Plaza, blaring his horn in some mad empty ritual attempt that foreshadows of course Libra. Oswald and Kennedy in that book are twin sons of mediascape experience whose celebrity is guaranteed by their violent destruction on, and in part through, television. Bell's symbolic re-enactment of the assassination is the final "lesson in the effect of echoes" which Bell describes as his life pattern, and culminates the impossibility of discovering final truths, solutions and origins which the Kennedy assassination--postmodernism's primal scene--always marks in DeLillo's fiction.

In attempting to define, then, the principles of aesthetic formation in DeLillo one must look at what his writing seeks to resist, whether it can ever successfully "evade" the postmodern and poststructuralists nets of self-reflexivity, exhaustion and commodification. For Tom LeClair, DeLillo's literary form can be attributed to his persistent double-bind relation to literature itself: LeClair uses the terms "good company and madness" to describe DeLillo's recurrent use of conventional literary genres and thematics ("good company") and his simultaneous inverting of the principles and comforts of same. Hence for DeLillo, LeClair argues, because the book is "intrinsically a less powerful medium of conditioning and is less dependent on huge financial risks" than other forms of modern communication, like television and film, it represents a richer, deeper, more psychologically complex medium to render the schizophrenic reactions of the individual to a modern culture filled with "double-binds," from those conditioned by childhood

relations to parents to those of an avid consumer of popular
3
culture.

What I would like to add to LeClair's astute notion is the manner in which DeLillo's literary style reflects the deep attenuation of literature and language. This is clearly evident in surface features of the text, where characters names often derive from film, literature and television (David Bell is, for example, representative of the self as "Bell system"), locations are stereotypically cliched or even erased (Bell's hometown of Old Holly, or the hopeless corniness of mid-west America), and language is often so deeply suspended in cliché that it conveys nothing more than the entropic tendency, the 'heat-death' of contemporary communications. On a metalinguistic level, DeLillo's prose reflects the postmodern problem of scale: language in DeLillo is stretched like a string on a pegboard to cover all the coordinates of an increasingly global "discourse." Transnational business and language are partly responsible for the construction of a hyperreality which abstracts language and appropriates it as its own "currency." Against this constant "devaluation" then DeLillo speculates on means to 're-value' linguistic coin. This is a central theme in The Names and Ratner's Star, and in

Americana it is a subtext that climaxes in Sully's long, elegiac remembrance to David about a quasi-mystical sailing adventure with her Scottish Uncle Malcolm. The story functions as a parallel to David's own: Sully has been in "dialogue" with herself about the story, "refining, editing, polishing, getting nearer and nearer the awesome truth" before spilling it to David

(321). The Uncle has left Dublin for Belfast at 18, "renouncing church, state, family," (it is Joyce himself, perhaps!) and settled in Maine, in Bar Harbor. When once her Uncle invited her to go sailing, Sully reports, she accepted, recalling a story her father has told about Malcom unjustly acquiring means to acquire title to a family plot of land on the west coast of Scotland willed to the family "by some distant ancestor who, the story went, had blood connections to ancient clans" (325). Sully's discovery that she has "Some inch of Scotland in my blood" triggers a search for the origins of the land, and simultaneously presents a curse which she renders, importantly, in literary terms: "A speck of the Highlands. And there was the eye of it. All my rich hatreds and comfortable bigotries come to this. Scotch-Irish! American! (Ineluctable, Mr. Faulkner; coeval, Mr. Joyce). Some sudden lurch in the runnings of my blood" (325).

Sully's dilemma then, in relation to literature, is like David's in relation to film a second-order archetype. It is a literary person's crisis of identity rendered as a literary crisis. Hence the only language she has available to her is literature's just as David has had, or for a while, until he began writing, thought he had only film's. In short, both are trying to flee the conscious-forming "net" and network of representational systems which is--even they realize this--ultimately making their experience of the real half-fiction. Completing her tale, Sully then tells David that near the end of her voyage with Malcolm they come upon the vision of a figure on the shore holding a light. Rendered in Biblical cadence, the passage proceeds thusly:

And the light was a lantern and the face was like unto light itself. And in those days men shall seek death, and shall not find it; and they shall desire to die, and death shall fly from them. And Uncle had come to the end of the mystery, which is: that man receives his being as did Christ, in a gentle woman's womb, beyond the massed and silent armies, beyond eroded stone arranged across the lampless past; which is: that all energy runs down, all life expires, all except the force of all in all, or light lighting light; which is: the figure holding the lantern was a child...And then all mysteries were to find their unendingness, and all echoes to be answered only by their own voices... (329)

The rhetorical mastery of this passage is the "all in all" in DeLillo's fiction. The light figuratively upheld here is David Bell's movie camera--the "lantern," and the "echoes" those reproductions, simulations, photographs and words of his own life. DeLillo moves film--the "new language," into the position once occupied by such massive mythical and literary dilemmas as the formation of a divided soul. "And I knew then," proceeds Sully, "that the war is not between North and south, black and white, young and old, rich and poor, crusader and heathen, warhawk and pacifist, God and the devil. The war is between Uncle Malcolm and Uncle Malcolm" (330). History, mythology, literature, film are all peopled with "schizograms," great selves divided representative of larger divisions. So with David Bell and America: both self-divided, the signs and myths set in delirious opposition: all and each living ultimately in the "third person." This is DeLillo's most ambitious figure for postmodernism as an epoch in which archetypal confrontations are embedded in representational crisis: with the word "separated from meaning," the writer's task is a stylistic excess that recovers points of

origin and loss that are themselves indicative of aporias and fissures. This is the ultimate significance of Sully's tale: its archetypal invocations are all about the way we can re-tell or re-claim them through the sheer pretentious excess of creative language; the telling of the tale is all that remains, just as Bell's "writing" from his desert island is the last signifying trace after the chaos of darkness and light intermingled in the film version of his own "reality."

Americana provides this exit from the novel partly to recover the agency of an author whose social fiction must always speak outward against the dominant discourse. It sustains the idea of discursive resistance when most literary options seem closed. Hence "boundaries" reside in DeLillo's fiction as they do in Foucauldian theory as markers of power: the inside of discourse contains the outside in a play of possibilities for speech and act. David Bell, like the real-life author of his tale, navigates these unseen boundaries as he crosses the geographic map of America in Americana. He enacts the "re-mapping" of discourse that empirical ground, subject to unending reification and mediation, can't itself escape. Ultimately his/DeLillo's transgressive formalism conjures up a deeply nostalgic archetype or literary kind: it suggests a muse in exile, delivering from the most remote (seemingly impenetrable) recesses of an overdetermined world deconstructive poetry that overleaps discursive borders.

Notes for Chapter II:

1. Lentricchia, "Don DeLillo."
2. DeCurtis, Anthony. "An Outsider in This Society": An Interview with Don DeLillo." The South Atlantic Quarterly 89 (Spring 1990), p. 304.
3. Tom LeClair. In The Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

Ch. III Literature and Evasion: End Zone

Football is a logical choice of topics for a writer interested in discursive borders and boundaries. The game's existence, after all, depends upon the measurement of space, the regulation of time. Despite the apparent wreak of chaos in every play, order is football's latent task: twenty-two men work to control a spatial plane which defines the functions of both individuals and groups. To be "inbounds" in football is to be part of a coherent communal task and to have identity confirmed in relation to the whole; to be "out of bounds" is to be both inactive, inarticulate and in a sense homeless. It is to have no language, no codes, no utility. Hence "play" is all seriousness in football. As in, say, poststructuralist theory it is the preferred activity that makes "sense." The creative combination of "signs" that have utility only in relation to others within the signifying field of the game (a playbook, for example) is the "all in all" of its performative meaning.

Yet because of the absoluteness of its limitations and boundaries (the field is uniformly 100 yards, no more or less) football also exposes the degree of totality involved in the creation of discursive forms. Its rules and codes expose blatantly the hegemony of power in definition, the authority implicit in structure, the ways in which, as in Foucauldian theory, discipline is a "deployment" of regulatory strategies. Hence football is another example of what David Bell calls "complexity." It promises creativity, self-expression and self-determination, on one hand, and complete inscription by a set of rigidly defined rules and codes. It is this paradox on which

hangs DeLillo's second novel End Zone. Gary Harkness, who narrates the tale, establishes this on the first page of the book:

Football players are simple folk. Whatever complexities, whatever dark politics of the human mind, the heart--these are noted only within the chalked borders of the playing field. At times strange visions ripple across that turf; madness leaks out. But where ever else he goes, the football player travels the straightest of lines. His thoughts are wholesomely commonplace, his actions uncomplicated by history, enigma, holocaust or dream. (3)

Harkness's denial of complexity, coming on the heels of a "double metaphor" allusion to Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, points to a double-consciousness (as in Ellison) in his own narrative voice. Literary "madness" leaks out into the "normalcy" of the sports novel. The self-conscious reference to "leaking" also implies its opposite--containment--an implicit metaphor in the book for the difficulty of preserving "boundaries" in a field. In football, literature and the social sphere leakings, border-crossings are a threat to conventional order. It is the job of the defense on the football field to "contain" the opposition; it is the job of Bible-thumping Logos Coach Emmet Creed in End Zone to make sure players like Harkness don't stray from foundational morals--"origins" and clean living; "keep things simple" is the way Harkness describes his own narratorial task.

These self-conscious turns indicate End Zone's continuity with Americana's self-reflexivity while foregrounding its even deeper preoccupation with discursive social norms. The "containment" theme functions like the "on the road" motif in Americana as a clue to the mapping or spatialization of

discursive power: two vintage American pasttimes suddenly become no exit labyrinths of entrapment. End Zone at first glance gives this scenario a more playful twist than Americana; like the army in Catch-22 football functions as a surreal, often comical systemic authority. Yet where the emphasis in Heller fell, in modernist fifties fashion, on bureaucratic absurdity and the existential comedy of alienation (the same modernist themes of Mailer, Pynchon et al.) DeLillo's in End Zone lies in the systemic abstraction and simulation of rules, conventions and physical ground. More postmodern than Heller's modern, yet indebted to its animated black comic satire, the novel shares a paranoid preoccupation with military and bureaucratic-driven apocalypse but shifts attention from history-specifics (like War) to discursive technologies (like television) as culprits of control.

Yet what partly separates DeLillo from Heller, postmodernist from modernist social fiction, dystopic from 'para-dystopic' literature is the reconfiguration of old-fashioned "alienation" and resistance as political inertia. There is not only no Sweden to escape to in End Zone (it existed only as an imaginary place in Heller too, in fact), there is no area on the map not already saturated with the discursive effects of power and domination. The only realm of retreat is inward,--Gary Harkness, as I will show, experiences a political "implosion" at the end of End Zone suggesting an early postmodern example of what Andrew Ross calls "universal abandon"--a sense of all roads of social agency leading nowhere.

Hence from history to "games," from military-industrial

complexes to modeling and simulation, from the international plane of global politics to a hermetically sealed college in southwest Texas, we have come from historical fable to a parody of pop culture as the vehicle for the "social novel." Yet End Zone is not without hope. Like Americana, it tries to salvage a place for "evasions" of discursive processes. Sprinkled throughout the novel are gestures of deviation which harken to means of communication and expression that preserve the integrity of agency, and psychic flourishes that combat the seemingly limitless reach of co-optation, normalization and control. Its deconstruction of social and especially scientific norms opens up a space like that of Americana beyond the discursive limitations of writing. In particular it is a pre-verbal zone of word and world-lessness. It is less real than a fancied retreat from discourse itself, all forms of which are discounted in the course of the novel. Indeed End Zone is not a novel of "action"--it literally ends at a point of exhaustion that indicates how fragile is the moment about which DeLillo writes, when an appalling silence, an apocalyptic sigh seemed to go up in late sixties' culture as it appraised its successes and defeats. That sigh blows through the desert-like landscape of End Zone as an eerie political wind that contains, literally, no answers.

End Zone takes place in southwest Texas, figuratively at the margin of the American map, to which native northeasterner and prep school grad Gary Harkness has in his own words "lighted out." He has chosen voluntary "exile" over civilization, leaving behind a wealthy family and botched football scholarships at

powerful eastern universities. Like David Bell, Harkness comes from a rugged American capitalist line; his father is a salesman with "a territory and a company car" for whom "it paid...to follow the simplest, most pioneer of rhythms---the eternal work cycle, the blood-hunt for bear and deer...Beyond these honest latitudes lay nothing but chaos" (14). Like Bell, too, Harkness carries the burden of reproducing fatherly successes. Because his dad has had a middling Michigan State football career, he looks to Gary to achieve where he has muddled. "This is the custom among men who have failed to be heroes; their sons must prove that the seed was not impoverished" (14).

Yet Harkness is ambivalent in his loyalties. He plays football but not because it pleases dad, but because he enjoys the discipline the game brings to his sometimes amorphous existence and because it provides him company in his self-described "exile" from mainstream America. The ritual quality of the game suits his ascetic desire for order and his self-described attempt to establish some "lowly form of American sainthood" (16). This ambition is initially little more than a half-baked adolescent rebellion against authority; Harkness is a kind of he-man Holden Caulfield with a free-floating angst contemporary in tone, akin to videotape fiend Graham in Sex, Lies and Videotape. At Penn State, he tells the football coach, there is no reason to practice the plays after they have been learned. Doing so signals to Harkness that "we were becoming a nation devoted to human xerography" (15). He is at once fascinated and repelled by the war and its technology,

mixing a naive boy's admiration with the tenuous doubts of a pseudo-convert to pacifism.

But DeLillo typically frames Harkness' dilemma as a hermeneutic anxiety. Just as Americana uses film-making as a trope for the impossibility of recovered "origins" and the exhaustion of frontier myth, End Zone uses football and by extension game theory to demonstrate the systemic mediation of politics and culture. In a speech late in the novel, Logos football Coach Emmett Creed, the almost mythic patriarch and totalitarian figure of authority, speaks to an anxiety over "origins" that both parallels and deviates in important ways from Harkness's own:

Our inner life is falling apart. We're losing control of things. We need more self-sacrifice, more discipline. Our inner life is crumbling. We need to renounce everything that turns us from the knowledge of ourselves. We're getting too far away from our beginnings. We're roaming all over the landscape. We need to build ourselves up mentally and spiritually....The inner life must be disciplined just as the hand or eye. Loneliness is strength. The Sioux purified themselves by fasting and solitude...Before you went out to lament for your nation, you had to purify yourself....A brave nation needs discipline. Purify the will. Learn humility. Restrict the sense life. Pain is part of the harmony of the nervous system. (164)

The important thing to note about this passage, of course, is its political irony. The authoritarian system's chief "creed" diagrams a politics and political response here that to the letter could be the program for, say, a Marcusean-inspired communal retreat. Simplify. Resist materialism. Redeem the country through spiritual purification. Creed proposes a recovery of pre-modern, primal "origins" and values. Like Harkness, then, Creed too seeks a complicated spiritual order in

football. The game is a way for both to impede personal or cultural chaos. It is a pure performativity as ascetic (and aesthetic) bliss, hence a form of planning and exegesis that has a purity and regulation real life lacks. It is a response to a deeper epistemological anxiety over the disappearance of "signs" beneath the myths of culture, as David Bell puts it. Like an old-fashioned humanist reading Derrida, his metaphysics are upset, and he vigilantly defends language and coding. The "playbook" is a schematic design for an ordered universe which like a conspiratorial plot exhibits coherence and predictability. The vehicle or grammar for this is codes and signals. Creed is the "namer" in the novel for whom play-calling is an act of divination: every end-run is an act of logos, a theological act of cosmos-making.

The site of contestation in the novel--the football field, is thus in a sense the unnamed place (chaos) onto which are mapped identities and meanings. "Here is not just order but civilization" notes Harkness of the meticulously regulated affair of the game (90). It provides the temporary comfort of ritual a metaphysician (or physicist) might need after a bout with quantum physics or black holes:

I went through the motions; the motions seemed to reciprocate. I blocked, I carried the ball, I ran pass patterns. Out on a deep pattern I watched the ball spiral toward me, nose dropping now, laces spinning....The afternoon went by in theoretically measured stages, sliding, and Moved about not as myself but as some sequence from the idea of motion, a brief arrangement of schemes and physical laws abstracted from the whole. Everything was wonderfully automatic, in harmony, dreamed by genius. (49)

Football is a comforting "narrative" that alleviates

paranoid suspicions by framing fear as play. We might even see

football as modernist art: a place like conspiracy where cultural and personal sturm und drang find an intricate harmony and coherence that is aesthetically "perfect." Yet underlying this reading is a serious cultural paradox End Zone also deconstructs. Harkness's bid to flee various symbolic centers of traditional American authority and power only leads him back into the "logos"-centric world (the college name is one of the egregious signs of an early symbolic novel) of a highly regimented, authoritarian culture. The college, for example, is caricatured as racist and militaristic. Its founder, a Mr. Tom, now dead, is represented by his surviving wife who early in the novel speaks in high-tones about the Christian mission of the college to, among other things, enroll blacks in the university (more on this later). One of the most popular courses on campuses, taught by a former military brass, Major Staley, is in History of Military Strategies. The science departments at the college are ably assisting the government in the manufacture of arms. Even football at Logos is partly an extension of these "discourses." The team is funded by Texas oil money and operates along the same performativity curves by which other disciplines are measured.

Thus we may see the American grid-iron of End Zone's world as in part the "discipline" that symbolically defines, appropriates and determines all subject "positions," speaking voices and objects of analysis. Tom LeClair abstracts this problem in End Zone, calling it a a "deconstructive fable" meditating on the differences between open and closed "systems." For LeClair, Creed, Harkness's Protestant-ethic espousing father,

and Major Staley, the military-mad weapons expert at Logos, are perpetrators of "closed systems" in which "words or ideas are reified into scripture, signals, or propoganda; people are objectified; nations are made equivalent to their technologies."¹ Opposition to these closed systems comes, according to LeClair, from DeLillo's understanding of the complementary tendency of all systems toward openness, variety. "In the closed systems," he writes, "the repetition of positive feedback led to entropy. In language, football, and in living systems, variation, increasing complexity and mutation protect and preserve the system."²

LeClair's reading is both typically brilliant within the scope of his applications of system theory, and typically frustrating. The abstraction of his commentary, turning the novel into a juggling act of two huge metaphors (open and closed) obscures the phenomenological criteria by which "complexity" and mutation may be measured. His analysis fails to account sufficiently, for example, for the fact that characters who seem to represent real "variety" in a demographic (or democratic) sense are, alternately, black (Taft Robinson), Jewish (Anatole Bloomberg, Gary's friend) and women (Myna Corbett, Gary's girlfriend). Indeed his systems reading tends to obliterate the social content and context of the novel. Clearly behind the eventual political protests of Taft Robinson, for example, lie allusions to the sixties Black Power movement; clearly informing Gary Harkness's vague anti-authoritarianism is a counter-culture longing for some kind of political difference. The question of how these features relate to "systems" theory is

thus left largely to the imagination by LeClair, a shortcoming his schematic reading can't really get over.

To get over it then, I want to compare DeLillo again with Pynchon. End Zone most resembles The Crying of Lot 49 in its protagonists' shared sense that two worlds exist: one a vast monolith of power and authority--the Trystero and the college itself, where nothing is un-coopted, untainted by the shadow of control; another, vaguely intuited as the seam in the web, or site of political overflow where new discourses of resistance may be found. Like Oedipa Maas, Harkness is torn between contrasting instincts to enjoin institutions of convention and authority his conservative past determines he ought to (like the military studies seminar to which he is drawn) or to explore what End Zone calls "the untellable," Lot 49 the "anarchist's miracle." In the latter, one of the most cryptic and intriguing "alternative" interpretations of historical events is provided by the Mexican anarchist Jesus Arrabal. A member of a clandestine Mexican outfit called the "Conjuracion de los Insurgentes Anarquistas" (or CIA) Arrabal describes the successful revolution to which he aspires as "a miracle...another world's intrusion into this one."³ "Where revolutions break out spontaneous and leaderless and the soul's talent for consensus allows the masses to work together without effort, automatic as the body itself" is Arrabal's definition of the anarchist's epiphany, what Oedipa later calls "a kiss of cosmic pool balls" that might explain the possibility of another "silent, unsuspected world" beyond the borders of San Narcisco (or America). In other words, Arrabal is willing to suspend logos in order to affirm that some randomness

will provide an escape or exit route from the deeply connected rationalized web of power that empirical reality seems to have become.

In End Zone an example of history as "accident," is provided in a brief but emotionally potent flashback to Harkness' playing days at Michigan State when, in a game against the Indiana freshmen, "I was one of three players converging on a safetyman who had just intercepted a pass" (18). The player dies from the collision impact, and Harkness goes home, temporarily, to forget about football and learn to cut cards. His success in the latter, he discovers, depends on his not trying to do it too successfully or too often, not to "abuse the gift, as long as I tried only when I truly felt an emanation from the six, when I knew in my fingers that I could cut to that particular card" (18). This truly complex pairing of incidents is best sorted out, I think, as follows: Harkness' problem like Oedipa's, is being suspended between utility and waste, efficiency and randomness, Logos and anarchy. The chances for fatal "accidents" are enhanced as participation in systematization increases; the Indiana player would not have died without the game, its participants and its rules; its violent "angles" are deadly manifestations of the rationality of the game. Cutting cards meanwhile is an act of divination, at least in its pure state where the "gift" or instinct is not abused. Any attempt to systematize or integrate it as a regularity ruins the virtue of non-utilitarian (and non-threatening) play. A similar recognition in part will motivate Taft Robinson's decision at book's end to retire from football. By refusing to allow "white

father" to watch him run, Taft will not abuse "the mysterious black gift that thrills the millions" (5). By opting out of system entirely Taft expresses the great counterurge in DeLillo to restore some sense of "mystery" to life by refusing allegiance to all that attempts (even if it fails) to de-mystify, that can be clearly "explained," computed, measured in yards, first downs, end zones.

Such a scenario points to the books' concern with how systems of representation do or do not speak the name of freedom, and the correlary issue of how philosophy, science and politics may create self-referential, hence totalized intellectual or intuitive paradigms of thought control. Against the logocentric power of Creed, the "maker of plays, the name-giver" (107) it is necessary to literally find or invent new discourses dedicated to the spirit of counter-culture building. This urge at civilization and communications re-structuring is implied in the metaphor of the "primitive mirror" one player coins to describe football. It is the nostalgic desire to avert contemporary informational (and experiential) overload by returning consciousness to the blank slate. For Harkness this prospect entails an attempt to escape the logic of the "straight line" of Logos by "walking in circles," the solitary activity he takes up by escaping to the desert, an archetypal response to modernity revealing a desire for ritual, mythology, simplicity. Such activity, as in Pynchon, inevitably leads into deep pockets of atavism. On one of his walks Harkness comes upon a pile of shit; in a brilliant disquisition, he sees its futility (as opposed to its utility) as a figure of cyclical return where,

after the accumulation of "meaning" inspiration for new creation lies. "The mind remakes itself. What we must know must be learned from blanked-out pages. To begin to reword the overflowing world. To subtract and disjoin. To re-cite the alphabet" (70).

This return necessarily entails a total immersion in all discourses of contemporaneity (including its "shit"). It is a kind of archaeological imperative to excavate an infinite variety of subjects all of which are necessary to know in order to "re-cite the alphabet." Yet this very central activity in DeLillo is both the result and source of a deeply phobic reaction to modernity: it is not paranoia but the motivation for paranoid analysis. Harkness' infatuation with holocaust is part of an "unintentioned cycle in which pleasure nourished itself off the black bones of revulsion and dread" (34). His obsession with military stratagems, arsenals and news of destruction, while meant to "liberate me from the joy of imagining millions dead," instead feeds a sense that all of history is moving towards apocalypse. This paranoia is one that equates superfluity--of information, of control, of bureaucracy--with disaster. It sees the "age of information" as symptomatic of modernist powerlust and sees in excess both dizzying possibilities for finding materials for new worlds and infinite reasons why it is bound to self-destruct.

How then to respond? As in Americana DeLillo puts this question fully aware of the obstacles to its being answered by the white male writer or literary protagonist. John Kucich, in one of the rare political essays on DeLillo's work, has observed

how it generally problematizes the efficacy of political positioning in contemporary culture and literature. Quite astutely, I think, Kucich notes that the important emergence of political discourse since the sixties of women, peoples of color and other marginalized groups has left white male writers like DeLillo preoccupied with the difficulties of the white male himself formulating "his own" substantial, or creditable political opposition, and of white male resentment of the trend to legitimate all subject positions located in the "margin." Kucich notes, again accurately, that while many of DeLillo's white male protagonists long to take part in some form of social rebellion, their political agency is undermined by their own sense that they are the problem, not the solution, and that they subsequently adopt a kind of ressentiment towards alternative strategies of reform take up by so-called cultural "others."⁴

In End Zone, Harkness is surrounded by marginalized figures whose social resentments indeed ring more urgent than his own noblesse oblige angst. His girlfriend Myna Corbett is an intelligent woman whose self-consciousness about social beauty standards she feels she doesn't meet bespeak an early seventies feminism. Harkness' roommate Bloomberg agonizes (albeit in rather cliched and parodic fashion) over holocaust legacy and his own assimilation. And Robinson is the lone black on campus, increasingly alienated, militant and inaccessible to the experience of the white characters. This social scene of a self-absorbed white bourgeois surrounded by friendly others is in many ways shallowly constructed by DeLillo. It is schematic and not serious compared to, for example, his

consideration of semantics and semiotics. But it undergirds the deepening in his more socially-grounded later books where the white bourgeois male is surrounded by real hostiles, and the psychological pressures endemic to this cause radical, sometimes pathological responses.

Thus Kucich's thesis that DeLillo's novel offer a persistent "whining" about the fact that the "white male is no longer in fashion" ⁴ must be taken seriously, even if it is harshly overextended. Harkness is on one hand admiring of the logocentric authority of his own dad, Coach Creed and Major Staley, three "white fathers" whose own prerogative is to maintain their dominance through, respectively, business, football and militarism. He is intensely aware of the fatal attraction of this position; he courts the guilt it engenders just as his patriarchal dreams of putting his hand between a dead woman's leg titillates by confirming privilege of transgression and propriety. Discursively, then, Harkness sits between self and Other, dominance and alterity, center and margin.

But these oppositional categories are themselves eroded and "difference" obliterated by logocentric codings. Bloomberg and Harkness are more and more the same in their paranoia about world catastrophe; Myna and Harkness fear "responsibilities" that finally have no single name; he and Taft are, figuratively, "brothers" in their rebellion against Logos. Bloomberg even changes his ethnically marked name to "EK-47"---codifying himself in an atemporal, decontextualized language of technocracy.

Bloomberg's re-naming also signifies the notion here and in other DeLillo novels that language has lost its sense of

"difference" and distinction. The jingoism of commerce, militarism and football tend to blur together, creating a kind of postmodern pastiche effect that is more or less decontextualized, dehistoricized and without reference to objects themselves. Team member Norgene Azamian is named after a refrigerator manufacturer, an idea that to Harkness comes to seem "no less plausible" than any other name he hears (54). The language of warfare and destruction takes on ritual or mysterious weight to Harkness. Sports Information Director Wally Pippin coins media-speak terms in order to glamorize the Logos team in the public imagination after it loses its big game to Centrex. Each of these examples of modern language shares one aspect: it is removed from concrete referentiality or origins, or mediated by the presence of an already received function for language. It is language simulating meaning or only understandable in the context of a self-referring syntactical or rhetorical universe. This process is allegorized in a science fiction novel Myna reads in which a creature suddenly emerges in the shape of an "abstract being. It's barren of features or really of any kind of distinguishing elements....It's a mass of equation and formulas rendered into some kind of tangible form" (139). Suddenly the creature doubles and everything around it begins to double:

Within the thing's brain mechanism there are now two landscapes perceived by two mechanisms. The thing sees itself seeing what is outside it, this duplication itself. ...this duplication results in the making of words. Each likeness is a word rather than a thing. When the word is imprinted on the thing's original mechanism, the likeness that was the word's picture instantaneously disappears. The thing's brain keeps on producing likeness and then delivering words into its own circuitry. The thing perceives everything into itself. It duplicates perceptions and then reduplicates the results. The author finally gives the

thing a name. The things becomes monadanom---the thing that's everything. It keeps making likenesses to make words. The words have no meaning. They're just fragments of cosmic language. (139)

The creature here is civilization, and the period it inhabits is that of the novel. The splitting of word from thing, the ascendancy of name and erasure of reference conveys the hyperreality of a system for which the world is a lost place. The palindrome "monadanom" is both a trope for self-reference of words and of "things" themselves: military jargon, scientific discourse, televisual images, game codes, even theological terms--"God"--all subjects of the novel are part of a "monad" from which there is neither, yet, linguistic nor physical escape. Indeed this monad is not "escapable" because it does not refer to anything--including man. Thus fathoming it is like apprehending the reality of staggering numbers in a war-time body count--something Harkness tries but fails to do. Major Staley's war-games and kill-jargon, Bloomberg's "EK-17"--"It's a means of identification. It has no significance beyond that" (154), football signals--"Middle-sift-W, alph-set, lemmys-2" (95)--are "Monadic" expressions with quasi-divine meaning that are the thing they name. These linguistic simulacra, like others in DeLillo's fictions, particularly Ratner's Star, are a measure of the world's violence and instability:

"Major, there's no way to express thirty million dead. No words. So certain men are recruited to reinvent the language."

"I don't make up the words, Gary."

"They don't explain, they don't clarify, they don't express. They're painkillers. Everything becomes abstract." (66).

Harkness' reaction to this political/linguistic dilemma

is, to return to my beginning, evasion. It is the search for a space "off the map" of discourse. These desires converge in the book's final pages. Harkness visits Taft Robinson at season's end after the latter announces his "retirement" from the game. In his room Taft keeps a poster of Wittgenstein taped to the wall. Harkness speculates on the "two parts" of Wittgenstein's work--"What is written. What is not. The man himself seemed to favor the second part. Perhaps Taft was a student of that part" (192). Taft has reduced his life to a small room where he rejects the idea of games, money and social participation: "I'm after small things. Tiny little things. Less of white father watching me run. Prefer to sit still" (192). Taft and Gary's sudden clipped or stunted speech reflects the search for economy in language that is a reaction to its "abstract" excess. This is the heart of Taft's new "literal" philosophy:

"I believe in static forms of beauty," he said. "I like to measure off things and then let them remain. I try to create degrees of silence. Things in this room are simple and static. They're measured off carefully. When I change something slightly, everything changes. The change becomes immense. My life in here almost resembles a certain kind of dream. ... (199)

In his desperate urge to evade reality, Taft must, like all pioneers, re-contain it. His choice is space and "silence." But as in Beckett the empty space beyond language, or the margin at the edge of the page is already occupied by the signs of wordly "excess" that are "unspeakable." Taft likes "to read about atrocities...I like to read about the ovens, the showers, the experiments, the lampshades, the soap....That's a particular interest. Atrocities in general with special emphasis on kids"

(198). The silence modernism once privileged as sacred is already in effect the grammar of atrocity. It is simply another region of terror and fear. Thus Taft's claim that "A new way of life requires a new language" (193) is one that isn't fulfillable. As if struck by the tragic logic of this, Harkness suddenly, without forewarning, pulls out of the novel and the narrative. He begins to fast, and the book ends with shocking abruptness.

This ending would seem to corroborate Kucich's skeptical reading of DeLillo's politics, and I would concur as far as the ending demonstrates the singular ambivalence with which DeLillo ends virtually all of his novels. Yet it is another sign that for DeLillo, as for Lyotard, postmodernism may be something preceding a true modernist renewal: what Harkness "brings back" from his fast may be the something, including a language and a "name" for his politics that will allow him to step out of the monadic world of Logos College and America. "In the end," he writes in the last line of the book, "they had to carry me to the infirmary and feed me through plastic tubes" (200). As Tom LeClair has noted, Harkness/DeLillo's "in the end" is a delightfully open-ended fatalism: "in the end" of what? one may ask. Only "in the end" of the novel, which ends as a survivor's tale written retrospectively "out of" the space outside the narrative Harkness appears to have entered in order to create. It is to the discursive nature of that space that I will now turn.

Americana's metafictional queries were mainly into the relationship

between film and literature. David Bell's artistic mission in the book was to understand how image and word interrelate, and to seek a language--the book's own, that shows the novel as a form growing out of and beyond the representational capacity of film. End Zone is hardly so ebullient about modernism, postmodernism or language. Significantly, there is no "artist" in End Zone puzzling over aesthetic possibilities. Harkness is intrigued by words, as other characters will be, as a citizen of culture whose choices are made alternately clearer, more numerous or obscure by an ever-widening vocabulary with which to frame his options.

But End Zone is concerned with spectacle--football is its primary one. It views it as the equivalent of ancient ritual transformed in American culture into the equivalent of shopping at a mall. The language of "spectatorship" used in Book II to describe the Logos game with Bio Centrex will recur in Murray's ecstatic appreciations of products lined on shelves in White Noise:

The exemplary spectator is the person who understands that sport is a benign illusion, the illusion that order is possible. It's a form of society that is rat-free and without harm to the unborn; that is organized so that everyone follows precisely the same rules; that is electronically controlled, thus reducing human error and benefitting industry; that roots out the inefficient and penalizes the guilty; that tends always to move toward perfection. The exemplary spectator has his occasional lusts, but not for warfare, hardly at all for that. No, it's details he needs--impressions, colors, statistics, patterns, mysteries, numbers, idioms, symbols.....Here is not just order but civilization. (90)

Both portentous and pretentious, this passage justifies football as subject for End Zone as tantamount to other systems that culminate American ingenuity and efficiency. Like

mathematics, or film, or Wall Street trading, football codifies and defines its own Monadic rules and operations. It has the autonomous complexity of a machine and the operating dazzle of a race car. Like Mailer, DeLillo pushes at times a vision of America as essentially an audience waiting for the revelation of either performing genius or flawless execution--both of which sport (like the car crashes Murray describes in White Noise) contain and offer.

Part II (the middle section) of the novel is a linguistic performance of these themes describing Logos big game of the year versus Centrex. The novel aspires metafictionally to become the perfect Monadanom; it "sees" its own activities, reproduces them in language and then invents a language to describe what is taking place. Hence as in the Monadanom the "words" have no meaning unto themselves. Language becomes both imminent phrases, religious in mystery and their ability to describe unknowable systems. "Quick picket left, hook right. Twin option off modified crossbow. Re-T, chuck-and-go" (91). In response to this "master discourse," of the football playbook, private idioms fill the air: "How to hit...Wat to pop, way to go, way to move. How to sting them, big Jerry. Bloomers, Bloomers, Bloomers" (91). "Get fetal, get fetal" (91). This combination of contemporary (written, hence coded) jargon and communal or oral sound returns us to the beginning of our discussion of End Zone's meditation on metaphysics and meaning. Creed's linguistic precision and the ad libs of men in blind physical combat are evolutionary stages of response to chaos. Yet as spectacle, this monadic presentation points out,

football is also like a work of fiction. The book's metafictional ploy of presenting the game transparently, completely "decontextualized," is to demonstrate its capacity to represent not "real life" but an anterior, alternative or "hyper" reality. In addition to being a record of football's "unique organic nature" (90), the middle chapter is "a form of sustenance, a game on paper to be scanned when there are stale days between events; to be propped up and looked at--the book as television set---for whatever is in here of terminology, pattern, numbering" (90). Parallel to the action on the field, then, Part II of the novel is to be a kind of "play" of language--a game version of a code. The "elegant gibberish" of football is the "play" within the play, just as the game embodies the larger gaming of the novel about meaning and language. Metafiction becomes a useful concept to reveal the codings of literature, the relationship between an author (or coach) who calls the "plays" in the text, and the spectacular nature of fiction in an age in which it can jokingly compare itself to television.

Hence as in Americana DeLillo seeks to subsume the discourses of postmodernism into something like a new novel. Harkness notes that in describing the game "it remains the author's permanent duty to unbox the lexicon for all eyes to see--a cryptic ticking mechanism in search of a revolution" (90). This is the anticipated modernist renewal I have been discussing--the pushing of language beyond finite boundaries into areas of re-writing, or re-invention. Harkness's silence and the novel's open-endedness at the end are one last way of marking

that boundary still open--still a "mystery." Put in a larger social and generic context, DeLillo is suggesting that football and fiction both inspire a re-mapping of consciousness associated with madness--that which, according to Owen Brademas in The Names, is the territory of the novelist. Creed's codes and signals, the "plays" he calls and which the players execute inspire a reverence afforded the act of writing itself. "Men followed such words to their death because other men before them had done the same, and perhaps it was easier to die than admit that words could lose their meaning" (42). This statement has a seminal ring for DeLillo's fiction. It evokes the increased regulatory capacity of language in an era in which discursive excess is the norm, and the way that excess takes the place of the sacred. Be it the language of advertising, science, fiction or math--all of them knowledge-bearing "instructional" discourses--people respond to them with the intensified urgency of deconstructivists on the edge of the mise en abyme, true-believers on the verge of abandonment. Gary Harkness's silent withdrawal (and overly hasty retreat) from the narrative alerts the reader to one sign of this: the writerly act of ending too soon. Harkness is removed from our control prematurely, against the grain of narrative convention, plunging us into silence without the satisfaction of having anything "resolved." Through this we come as in White Noise and Libra to fiction's terminal point where narrative (and critical) exhaustion may equal or signal our own. The aborted ending of End Zone, like the Dealey Plaza conclusion in Americana, are talismanic codas to the "grand narratives" of American enterprise,

adventure, conquest, stability. David Bell and Gary Harkness are most prototypical of DeLillo's "Representative Men" in that they either go mad or disappear. Their young-man tales turn sour and old fast; no coming-of-age is "innocent" for them in a culture that has already--in literature and politics and history--used up its originary myths.

This blend of social critique and cultural despair always is necessarily intertwined in a "transparent" novel so highly aware of its own mediation. For if the novel has become "television" it is because the act of writing a novel signifies the problem of signification for the contemporary author also paranoid about the giving of names, the framing of worlds, the constructing of monads. The ecstatic embrace of all discourse by an eclectic novelist like DeLillo is the requisite excessive gesture to push the anxieties and discoveries of representation as far as they can go, to "re-map" the world by both containing and exceeding the language of modern life. This double-take on fiction and representation ultimately reinforces DeLillo's theme that the simultaneous emergence of regressive ritual and postmodern skepticism makes perfect sense: the quest for origins becomes deepest at the point where they seem most irrevocably lost, where simulation is all that we have. In this context small gestures of creative evasion become most promising perhaps of all for the maintenance of order or understanding. Harkness's ritual wandering in the desert, Bloomberg's painting a rock black to mark his mother's grave--"Metaphorist of the desert" (33), Harkness/DeLillo's writing of the novel may not provide successful resistance to processes of dehumanization and

domination. But they do temporarily restore "mystery" to discourse, and hence the counterpoint to Logos. Put another way, these activities may find correlation in the Foucauldian archaeological project. They acknowledge the disparity between things and their origins, words and their meanings, names and the named as a means of constructing new discourses (and new novels) that expose these disparities. This is not a metaphysics but a small gesture beyond the arena of power relations, normative rationality, pre-determined literary responses. It's a move not into the end zone of the football field but out-of-bounds into the margin of subjectivity power always forecloses and opens at once. This contradictory movement is, finally, the deconstructive ebb and flow of End Zone, and the place where language and politics reconvene without daring to speak the name of any brave new world.

Notes for Chapter III:

1. LeClair, In the Loop, p. 78.
2. Ibid., p. 79.
3. Pynchon, The Crying of Lot 49, p. 88.
4. John Kucich. "Postmodern Politics and the Plight of the White Male Writer." Michigan Quarterly Review 27 (Spring 1988), p. 340.

Ch. IV The Cult of Control: Great Jones Street

"Secrecy lies at the very core of power. The act of lying in wait for prey is essentially secret."

Elias Canetti Crowds and Power

"The pure products of America
go crazy---"

William Carlos Williams

People and events in Don DeLillo's fiction are frequently charged with charisma. Either because they are famously recognizable--entertainers, politicians, sensational disasters; or enigmatically remote--scientific riddles, government secrets, murder mysteries; almost every detail in a DeLillo novel holds special curiosity, libidinal interest, or is a magnet for some deep human longing. This owes to DeLillo's insistence that the two most interesting and important aspects of modern American life are its vast, sophisticated public information and entertainment systems, on the one hand i.e. newspapers, television, film and radio, and the equally vast, sophisticated private networks of communications, information and exchange used by individual agencies, from the solitary businessman to organized crime bosses to intelligence agents. Yet because these two ostensibly separate spheres rely on essentially the same technologies and goals--usually some attempt at structure, coding, organization or control, their intersection is inevitable. Sooner or later, agencies merge, identities slip, wires cross. This helps account for the prevalence of conspiratorial plots in DeLillo's fiction. It also explains the particular modern twist he gives to his formulation of dramatic

struggle between individuals and social agencies. Namely, the "social" in DeLillo is often figured as an increasingly synthetic, technologically manufactured realm of "air" space and time, the world of Public Events, Opinions, Polls, Happenings, Celebrity, News, and the private as an increasingly shrinking, remote, reactive realm in which individuality is necessarily defined through and against the mediascape. Thus, characterization in his novels usually looks to the traumas and violences individuals undergo as they experience the increasing "hyperrealization" and mediation of their worlds, with special attention to the manner in which those violences return to the public realm as social behavior.

Americana and End Zone both considered this problem through the family as social microcosm. David Bell and Gary Harkness were forced to contend with the projected "selves" of domineering fathers which threatened the formation of their own private lives. Patriarchal bourgeois values constituted the public network from which these native sons were forced to withdraw. Great Jones Street broadens and grounds this dilemma. It takes place in the high profile world of American early seventies pop music, tracing the attempted withdrawal into private life of rock and roll star Bucky Wunderlick who quests for anonymity after years of fame and political activism. The interpellation, in Althusser's terms, of Wunderlick as pop icon makes him another prototype of DeLillo's white male protagonists through whom the discursive dreams and desires of celebrity culture flow. Wunderlick has attained what Bell and

Harkness crave and fear: "third person" identity. He is the self as national and cultural aspiration, a pure symbol of "Megamerica." Conspicuously drawn to recall both Mick Jagger and Bob Dylan, Wunderlick's is the transparent eyeball of the novel through which commodity culture, rather than nature, freely passes. His self is a repository of contending directions of the 1960's, both mainstream commercial acquisition and left-radical critique. As in Americana and End Zone DeLillo plays ironically off genre conventions appropriate to the novel's themes. Written in the first person, the book partially undermines the conventions and expectation of the rock bio or autobiography. Wunderlick's is a diminishing account of mental defoliation written in an extremely spare, self-conscious style that mocks and parodies not just the lyrical excess of sixties novels and music, but even of DeLillo's debut, Americana. It uses the autobiographical mode as well to present Wunderlick as self-divided: caught in a moment of social transition in the culture--the point of exhaustion of sixties, and modernist political and social energies and the emergence of postmodern discourses. One kindred spiritual text in this sense would be Mailer's Armies of the Night. His preoccupation in that book with the role of media and technology is rooted mainly in the sense of how technology itself divided sixties culture into warring spheres. A bit like Henry Adams, Mailer viewed this cultural divide allegorically as a sign of social and moral schizophrenia. "He had come to decide that the center of American might be insane," he writes:

The average American, striving to do his duty, drove

further every day into working for Christ, and drove equally further each day in the opposite direction--into working for the absolute computer of the corporation. Yes and no, 1 and 0. Every day the average American drove himself further into schizophrenia; the average American believed in two opposites more profoundly apart than any previous schism in the Christian soul...The love of the Mystery of Christ, however, and the love of no Mystery whatsoever, had brought the country to a state of suppressed schizophrenia so deep that the foul brutalities of the war in Vietnam were the only temporary cure possible for the condition--since the expression of brutality offers a definite if temporary relief to the schizophrenic.¹

If we shift Mailer's formulation from the "center" to the "margin," and substitute "spirituality" or "consciousness" for Christianity, we touch down in the realm of Great Jones Street and many DeLillo novels. The book focuses on the pop ritual aspects of rock and roll in order to mark the shift of the "sacred" in American culture from a traditional theologically centered self or "soul" into the public realm of performance, idolatry and mass media hero worship. Protagonist Bucky Wunderlick is a pop culture Christ figure located between two warring tribes Mailer portends: technocratic profit-making mercenaries on the one hand--the record companies and media outlets that thrive on his work and presence--and transcendence-seeking fans who are driven into messianic worship of his charismatic persona. Yet as Mailer also suggests, and the novel confirms, these are not opposing "sides" but two halves of one collective national pathology rigorously scrutinized in Great Jones Street and to a large extent in all of DeLillo's novels. End Zone juxtaposed the technological and primitive features of football to make this point. In Great Jones Street attention is shifted directly onto capitalist processes of production and

consumption and the way their superabundance causes an epistemological crisis tantamount to the one Baudrillard ascribes to late capitalism and hyperreality. The reification of selves, the transformation of objects into fetishes and fetishes into icons of religious meaning and power--in effect the direction of Wunderlick's path to celebrity, is the symbolic arc of the story. Movies are compared to the Egyptian pyramids in Great Jones Street, and Wunderlick's records and tapes are talismanic objects, powerful and mysterious because infinitely reproducible as both shapers of popular consciousness and makers of wealth. Around these consumer objects true "cults" form; as in the mind of Mailer's schizophrenic, technology and commerce is invested with a sacred aura or mystery. Hence violence becomes the necessary catharsis of a pathological culture which can only find and affirm real "value" in destruction of its own objects as a means of temporary relief from their occult hold.

Great Jones Street is thus DeLillo's apocalyptic sixties novel that confirms the closing of the "universe of discourse" of the decade. It extends the worst projected social fears of DeLillo's first two novels into a cynical and bitingly satirical portrait of cultural and political excess. It anticipates the entropy theme in White Noise by suggesting a confluence of destructive social forces that climax in a cultural death wish that Wunderlick, the suicidal character of the novel, ironically survives. But unlike DeLillo's first two novels the possibilities of a discursive resistance to media culture is much less clear, more faint. Even writing is seen as a victim of

irreversible mediation which suffers the same co-opted fate as music, pop modernism's last chance in the novel for continual cultural resistance. It thus anticipates DeLillo's seventies novels, Players and Running Dog especially, where popular culture itself becomes the vehicle for a discursive form of domination.

"Fame requires every kind of excess," begins the first-person narrative of Bucky Wunderlick in Great Jones Street. "I mean true fame, a devouring neon, not the somber renown of waning statesmen or chinless kings. I mean long journeys across gray space. I mean danger, the edge of every void, the circumstance of one man imparting an erotic terror to the dreams of the republic" (1).

The voice here drunk with power is distinctly American, just as its subject is America, signs of whose "fame" and "excess" are also everywhere. In Los Angeles, rumors have it, citizens "eat their offspring. They have multimedia sacrifices" (154). In New York, radio broadcasters are "wild with news of heavy snow," hoarse with "Disaster and its various joys" (46). A New York writer boasts of his successes writing "porno kid fiction" punched up by "Kaleidoscopic sex organs" (50). In Watts, a music industry executive is found stuffed inside a television set, his throat slit. On Great Jones Street, downtown New York, the girlfriend of a rock and roll star dies of massive internal illness "as a result of unrelenting neglect" (122).

Taken together, these signs mark the winding down of the 1960's culture wars that is the setting and subject of Great Jones Street. Written in 1973, it is on one count a sixties

hangover novel obsessed with the devolution of energies of the movements and scenemakers of that decade. Its cast is a spillover from The Crying of Lot 49, to which the book bears some resemblance, a lunatic fringe alternately pacifying and rousing itself while trying to survive the real or imaginary extermination and rip-off attempts of some very nebulous Establishment. Also like Lot 49, one of its functions is to caricature the banalities of the sixties culture circus (where Lot 49 had its Sick Dick and the Volkswagons, Jones has characters named Lycra Spandex, albums called American War Sutra,) while still another is to pay homage to the vital community spirit it temporarily engendered, which in the book's final pages is very briefly and ambiguously kindled like a dying flame.

But Great Jones Street is notably bereft of the wild comic zeal of the sixties (or Pynchon, for that matter). It is delivered in a wry foreboding tone familiar to readers of much American fiction written during and since the 1970's. This is because it cannot shake the overall feeling that the sixties stood not for the liberation but the irreparable constriction of American politics and consciousness. Indeed one difference between Pynchon and DeLillo in this novel and generally is that the former usually assigns its paranoid heroics to the trustworthy hands of good-hearted liberals who confirm "our" sense that even if "They" are out there somewhere "we" are still good people, lovers and poets and (hopefully) survivors. DeLillo writes with much more ironic and skeptical distance on the period--perhaps owing to seven years more hindsight--emphasizing

how thoroughly America engendered then absorbed the paranoid tensions of the decade's social factions to reconstruct after the War a ruthlessly efficient new "version" of itself that foreclosed the possibility of continued challenge. Just what that version is I will hold until later.

Great Jones Street is keyed to a complex metaphor of energy that in itself stands for discursive power. This is symbolized by the novel's plot, a simultaneous two-pronged quest for energy's emblems: music, technology and drugs. In the first, various agents of the music industry that surround him pursue a set of unreleased private sessions recorded by Wunderlick called the "Mountain Tapes" (modeled, as Anthony DeCurtis has noted, after Dylan's 1968 "Basement Tapes"). Quest two is for a potent drug, rumored to be manufactured by the U.S. Government (or "U.S. Gov" as it is referred to in the novel), sought out by numerous agents, including a drop-out society known as the Happy Valley Farm Commune, which hopes to cash in on sales of the drug to finance a return to "privacy" program. Both "products," as the tapes and drugs are referred to, initially pass through the hands of Wunderlick, whose fate it is to be forced to decide whether to help either party to the goods. Their importance is paramount, for each promises a strong measure of control of the anonymous "masses" of the novel whose clamoring to consume, it is suggested, can only be pacified by their delivery.

Still a third "energy" source in the novel is introduced by a character named Dr. Pepper. Like Elux Troxl in Ratner's Star, master manipulator of abstraction, Pepper is the book's Dr. Strangelove, a sinister multiple-presence who is the seeming

agent behind all of the book's various conspiracies and networks of control. An expert in planning, management and coordination, he is a kind of CIA-trained Timothy Leary operating in the wilderness of the book's entangled "underground" economy. Central to his operations is a secret mind-expansion program called "Centrifugalism," a process which seeks to control, he says:

uncharted spaces and territories of the human mind. Energy. I want to tap untapped fields of energy. Dope is okay. Dope is the power of the earth, the use of earth products to dig deeper into the earthen parts of the mind. But energy is the power of the universe. I want to tap that power. I see masses of people changing their energy patterns by controlling biorhythms from the basic frequencies of the universe. (177)

"Centrifugalism" as Pepper describes it is a kind of brainwash technique carried out through "Stereo electrodes. Blood-pressure impactors. What I call the auto-domination of the inner mind" (178). For Pepper, "scientific genius of the underground," technology holds the key to the manipulation of internal human energy. In this he ironically shares something with Wunderlick, who in his stardom phase thrills to the the machine force and mind-bending power of heavy-metal:

It's the sound. Hertz and megahertz. We mash their skulls with a whole lot of watts. Electricity, right. It's a natural force. We're processing a natural force. Electricity is fucking nature every bit as much as sex is nature....Electric current is everywhere. We run it through a system of wires, cables, mikes, amps and so on. It's just nature... Nobody can hear the words because they get drowned out by the noise, which is only natural. (104)

These three crowd control devices---music, drugs and technology, are plugged into a symbolic double-bind at the heart of the novel. Namely, the structures they represent increase in

degree of monopoly and control as they promise either liberation or transcendence. Transparanoia, the international music company Wunderlick represents, is part of the same military-industrial complex he ostensibly opposes that has the United States fighting in Vietnam. Hence his anti-war song lyrics ("You have lost the war/Oh what a bore") are necessarily subsumed in the "noise" of his own amplification--symbolically the incomprehensibility of a liberating political position in the closed "feedback" loop of his life. Thus, guitar in hand, he is himself a kind of death-machine, stirring his audiences craving for "apocalypse": "What I'd like to do really is I'd like to injure people with my sound. Maybe actually kill some of them. People dying from the effects of all this beauty and power. That's art, sweetheart" (105). Pepper's program for "auto-domination" (the word itself signals the double-bind problem) initially eschews both establishment ("U.S. Gov") and resistance (the anti-authoritarian Happy Valley Farm Commune) as groups not to be trusted, as he sets himself up as both a liberator and tyrant with a true "vision" of freedom. Finally, the Commune's commitment to what it calls "non-attachment" and transcendence through drugs is countered by the rigorously structured marketing and intimidation techniques it uses to acquire its product, which by novel's end have achieved paramilitary efficiency.

This plot represents with some degree of cynical historical accuracy the fate of different major modernist aspirations of the 1960's. DeLillo's point in configuring them as such is not however to dismiss the 1960's as an ironic revolutionary hoax, but to illuminate the historical crisis it raised for American

politics and culture: namely, whether the forces and energies of modernity could be harnessed to guarantee or restore some form of autonomy to the individual. One provocative statement of this theme comes from Wunderlick's girlfriend Opel. She tells him that she is attracted to the Happy Valley program for its proposed "return to privacy" in American life:

Happy Valley thinks privacy is the essential freedom this nation, country or republic offered in the beginning... There is no freedom, according to them, without privacy. The return of the private man, according to them, is the only way to destroy the notion of mass man. Mass man ruined our freedoms for us. Turning inward will get them back. Revolutionary solitude. Turn inward one and all. Isolate yourself mentally, spiritually and physically, on and on, world without end. Sustain your privacy with aggressive self-defense. (60)

Numerous characters in DeLillo's fiction share some version of this fatalism about "mass man." David Bell, Gary Harkness, the Happy Valley Commune members in this novel, even Jack Gladney of White Noise and Lee Harvey Oswald have it. It is an overwhelming sense of the despair, confusion, complication, impersonality of the complex structures of modern life; of systems of power and control that have reduced the individual to paralysis or lasting distress. Typically, the condition it brings on, the condition of nearly all DeLillo characters, is an attempt to re-structure personality. Convinced that the tides, energies, powers of the world are set against them, characters militantly adopt strategies of self-reinforcement. These strategies generally take two forms. One is an embrace of or return to the survival instinct often given the name "primitive" in DeLillo's fiction. It is the "old style" turn men make, says Pepper, when they suffer "sensory overload," when there "is too

much technology;" it is related to what the character Lillian Alataki in Great Jones Street says about fire-building and earthquakes: that "The wonder of pre-information is that men perceived the earth and themselves actually in the process of changing" (77) while what characterizes modern life for DeLillo, as he has written in the essay "American Blood," is the problem that "When experience is powerless, all things are the same."² (28). Wunderlick's discovery is that even his rock and roll life is "powerless," that life is a deadening monotony, that he and his language are tools in an closed communications loop. Hence his desire for "privacy" is no less than an existential leap, akin to Gary Harkness's fast in End Zone, to reclaim original potency, force, "energy" by contemplating himself as a pre-historic, pre-communications being. In deciding not to record any longer, to refuse the media access to this life, Wunderlick aspires to become an original being who may rediscover the world. Like Melville's Bartleby he prefers not to take part in commercial modernity. In the midst of Metropolis, he attempts to return to Walden Pond.

A second response derives from similar root anxieties but entails a swimming with rather than against discursive currents, an immersion into rather than withdrawal from the torrents of technocratic capitalism and its simulacra. Simply put, it is the fabrication of alternate realities and second selves. This is the route followed by Pepper, David Bell and other DeLillo protagonists, including Lee Harvey Oswald. Pepper's "comic paranoia," as Wunderlick calls it, takes the form of constant disguise, re-invention. Pepper is the "touring clown doubly

self-effaced" (179); adopting wholesale the strategies of his mediated environment, he takes on the "high gloss common to interchangeable celebrities" in television, embodying sales postures, becoming a living, breathing cartoon of the modern bourgeois merchant. Early on he appears as a traveling salesman peddling art produced by crippled Vietnam vets (a grotesque spoofing requiring no commentary); later he dons a stiff grey suit, comic dark glasses and a "dangerous" look--Willy Loman as the Godfather, and still later, probably, though we are never certain of it, the persona of "theatrical producer" Fred Chess, who blackmails Wunderlicks at novel's end. As such, Pepper's is an exaggerated parody or cartoon of the Emersonian self, filled with contradictions yet ever-changing, expanding, all through the magic of deception endemic to an environment of duplicitous image-making, simulation, merchandising and disguise.

These two seemingly divergent psychic responses to "mass man" are crucial to the obsession in DeLillo's novels with secrecy. The "return to privacy" theorem is in part a phobic response to global village that triggers a quest for untainted, or original psychic and social space. It assumes there are uncoopted channels of power and control not yet determined by "system." In Foucauldian terms it is the search for a crack or hole in the web of power through which alternative discourses may be born. Hence the magnetic draw of crowds--fans, media, the Farm Commune, to Wunderlick and Pepper. They represent the source of the kind of "charisma" I alluded to earlier in this chapter: they are themselves "mysteries," unknowables. "Either I'd return with a new language for them to speak," says Bucky of his adoring

fans, "or they'd seek a divine silence attendant to my own" (3). Wunderlick and Pepper represent the two sides of American cultural schizophrenia: both are potential mystic-saviors and masters of "centrifugal" technology. They are immanent beings awaiting what the novel calls "self-revelation."

But what emerges in Great Jones Street and succeeds Wunderlick's waning glory as modernist hero is the "underground," DeLillo's figure here and in many of his novels for postmodernism. At the risk of sounding prescriptive, and in order to nail down just what this elusive term means, I will offer this passage from Jean Baudrillard. In Symbolic Exchange and Death, a book which like Great Jones Street is in part a deeply skeptical retrospective assessment of the 1960's revolutionary movements, Baudrillard attempts to explain the "historical and social" mutation in the history of capital that brings about the "era of simulation." Essential to his conception is the "interchangeability" of previously contradictory or dialectically opposed terms, and the evolving "genesis of simulacra"--the social manifestation of images, representations, and strategies of techniques of consumption and commodification deriving from a mediated culture. I refer to this specific passage because the landscape it describes bears specific resemblance to a fictional DeLillo world. It is marked, he writes, by

the interchangeability of the beautiful and the ugly in fashion; of the right and the left in politics; of the true and false in every media message; of the useful and the useless at the level of objects; and of nature and culture at every level of meaning. All the great humanist criteria of value, all the values of a civilization of moral, aesthetic, and practical

judgement, vanish in our system of images and signs. Everything becomes undecidable. This is the characteristic effect of the domination of the [simulation] code, which is based everywhere on the principle of neutralization and indifference. This is the generalized brothel of capital: not the brothel of prostitution but the brothel of substitutions and interchangeability.

3

Symbolic Exchange and Death, with its claims that only death itself can resist the "genesis of simulation" alluded to in this passage, is in many ways a ludicrous work. But its dystopic portrait of postmodernism as the tragic birthing of the failures of 1960's modernisms--dialectics, transcendentalisms, arts--these themes of his and of post-structuralism generally, illuminate DeLillo's novel. All of its dramatic currents point to the same "neutralization and indifference" of signs, objects and human feelings alluded to in this passage. 'This is best illustrated by comparing briefly Wunderlick's recollections of the atmosphere of the glory days of his fame, and the domain of his retreat. The former is clearly hierarchichal, production-oriented and tending towards monopoly--hence the sense of suffocation Wunderlick feels under Transparanoia (they even own the apartment he moves into when he goes into hiding). Fueled by expanding sources of energy and power, with the grandiose visions of reform politics and art (Wunderlick's early songs are war protests, for example) his salad days as social rebel are clearly dialectical modernity at its zenith of accelerated growth, expansion and production, action and "heroism." Wunderlick is a Rolling Stone.

But the operative condition of the underground into which he moves is starkness, reduction. It brings on a "demythologizing" of self, the simulation of resources, the neutralization of

energies. A character named Meneffe is said to have been "systematically depersonalized by the whole education apparatus at the University of California at Santa Barbara" (220). After he goes into exile and the heavy rock music scene dies, Wunderlick learns that his old friend and former rock and roller Watney has now "crossed-over" into music management and profit. Azarian, a former member of Wunderlick's band, appears to make an offer on the drug product and claims he represents "certain interests" that go unnamed. As in Pynchon's novels, as Anthony DeCurtis notes, the various undergrounds "begin more and more to resemble flaky, sinister spin-offs on the dominant culture, rather than rebellious or subversive alternatives to it"⁴ The commodity power of late capitalist culture to create infinite varieties on one theme--consumption, infiltrates even the representation of character in the novel: Dr. Pepper is both a man and a soft drink. This is the cultural logic of late-capitalism, as Jameson would have it: a dissolution, or hyperrealization of the social sphere in which, as Stanley Aronowitz has said of Baudrillard, "all that exists is power, which 'casts a shadow' on the masses, creates an imitation of real public life---which at any rate does not exist,⁵ and may never have existed"

Hence the Kafkaesque tone, the menace of financial conspiracies surrounding Wunderlick, the doubling of identities and political affiliations as he moves underground all reflect a representational surface or text in which all features are "interchangeable." Reification means textualization, and both make experience bewildering and undecidable. This postmodern

dystopia closes in on Wunderlick as he navigates through the mirror-like underground labyrinth. It ironically offers the same characteristics and consequences that he recognizes in the government bureaucracy:

I spoke to someone downtown, a bored municipal voice, downtown in the huddled buildings, the record sectors, death and taxes, requisition forms, police recruits taping every emergency, bored, bored, the facsimile of a voice, all walls green halfway up, agencies, bureaus, extensions, downtown where the records are kept, massive, passive, ever distending, the idea of a voice, no one in control. (92)

For DeLillo, the primary failing of the 1960's was capital's ability to institutionalize this atmosphere of dread within both radical and establishment social spheres in part by transforming politics into spectacle. The reproductive devices in the passage just cited--records, tapes and written documents--are symbolically the legacy of opposing discourses--government and rock and roll, drowning or cancelling or subsuming each other in a mass of public-mindedness: Bob Dylan's fall from grace, like Wunderlick's, was an inevitable case of overexposure, "excess," the self becoming "sign" of more meaning than it can bear: indeed all signs fall prey to this in an accelerated consumer market. That a life, a culture, a political system should come down to what is revealed on the "Mountain Tapes" or "Watergate Tapes" signifies how forensic modern life is (hence DeLillo's fascination with Kennedy assassination) and how easy this make hermeneutic paranoia.

This in turn accounts for the formation of systems which attempt to contain and control these conditions of production and production of meaning. They resemble closely the organizational

exemplars of what Horkheimer called the "paranoia" of reason Dr. Pepper represents this strategy best. His exhortation to "minimize" and "pare," is the gospel cry of the ascetic technocrats of industrial power, on the one hand, and radical postmodern gurus of consciousness (and even literary theory!) on the other. Employing DeLillo's own metaphor, Pepper's is the re-routing of energy into optimized systems management, what Lyotard calls performativity, or what Pepper calls "auto-domination." Self-regulation as laissez-faire becomes the managerial norm of both economies, technologies and human lives. This explains Chess's boast at the end of the novel that his control of the Happy Valley group is a system's coup. "The concept of a lunatic fringe within an organization is mine alone, my concept alone, despite what you may heard to the contrary. Irrationality can be managed to great effect" (253)

The displacement of any kind of uncontained or uncontainable political eros, like the confinement of evasion in End Zone, is in Great Jones Street the true closing of the universe of discourse: in Foucault's scheme, it is the creation of a pure power that operates transparently, self-referentially, without regard to ideology, agency, dialectics. It is, too, that "interchangeable" Baudrillardian economy transfiguring the real into an ontologically unstable, or "hyperreal" domain. Bucky's problem, according to Watney, is that he refuses to see himself as something not real, dialectical, artistic: "You have the illusion of power...Nothing truly moves to your sound. Nothing is shaken or bent. You're a bloody artist you are. Less than four ounces on the meat scale. You're soft, not hard. You're

above ground, not under" (231). Thus, Watney advises, an important historical moment (postmodernism, I would argue) has passed him by:

The true underground is the place where power flows. That's the best-kept secret of our time. You're not the underground. Your people aren't underground people. The presidents and prime ministers are the ones who make the underground deals and speak the true underground idiom. The corporations. The military. The banks. This is the underground network. This is where it happens. Power flows under the surface, far beneath the level you and I live on. This is where the laws are broken, way down under, far beneath the speed freaks and cutters of smack. (232)

Watney's world view is a classically coherent paranoid vision. It is an epistemology most of us would immediately recognize in these transnational times of hostage takings, corporate crime, political cover-ups, arms deals, cocaine cartels and intelligence operations. Happy Valley's clear monopoly at the end of the novel indicates the ironic completion of Bucky's passage into this postmodern landscape, the "endland beyond the tropics of fame," where he finds a newer, "minimized" version of the world he has attempted to leave behind. The former retains the structure of the latter while creating a new set of rules, idioms and events that reproduce those of the above ground economy. The increasingly authoritative structure of the Commune takes the place of whatever governmental agency may have existed; drugs replace the Mountain Tapes as the precious cache; silence replaces "noise" as the catalyst of Bucky's commodification. This brave new world is explained to Bucky by Fred Chess:

If I'm Pepper it means 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. Events are delusions. (254)

Pepper's figure of the "circle" of the underground is reminiscent of the writer Fenig's earlier description of the "wheel" of the American economy which always comes back to consume what it has overlooked or discarded. This is the logical cycle of late capitalism and Bucky's career. Indeed the "natural law" of his life holds intact through the novel: his wish for suicide (or silence) is the mark of the triumph of Pepper's "auto-domination" that transforms him simultaneously into a commodity and paranoid mad man unable to think, feel or react. It is when the "'pure products' of America---go crazy" that capital reaches the apotheosis of its control.

What Bucky Wunderlick's ending finally leaves to ponder is also the probability that all that distinguishes postmodern forms of power from modernist ones is what some would cynically say distinguishes modernist and postmodernist art: that is, the latter's sheer absence of motive, the self-perpetuating, brutality of commercial thoughtlessness raised to the level of pure excess. At novel's end the "dog boys," enforcers of the Happy Valley Commune, have become the police of the underground. Adhering to a program of "Mindless mindless violence," they are road warriors of pure commerce, "scrupulous in avoiding any and all implications, political and otherwise" (191). Needing only money to survive, they themselves are "pure product," otherwise stripped, or "minimized" in Pepper's terms of even a vestige of

social significance. "No more abstract thought and no more concrete thought. Violence for nothing" (192). Operating like the Droogs in Burgess's A Clockwork Orange, they are the paramilitary of postmodernity, violent soldiers of fortune whose conspiratorial nihilistic radicalism, submerged in an hyperactive world of simulation and commerce, routes their violence against the very idea of a better, more humanitarian world. Skinheads of our world, they are agents of that postmodernism which, as Terry Eagleton would have it:

is...a grisly parody of socialist utopia, having abolished all alienation at a stroke. By raising alienation to the second power, alienating us even from our own alienation, it persuades us to recognize that utopia not as some remote telos but, amazingly, as nothing less than the present itself, replete as it is in its own brute positivity and scarred through with not the slightest trace of lack.⁷

In retrospect, Great Jones Street must be considered one of DeLillo's most ambitious novels, and one of the most prophetic of the contemporary period. The arid postmodern dystopia it draws looks far too much like the reality that has trailed behind it not to be taken as a work of great anticipation. The entropic blazing out of sixties energy into the meek exhaustion of social minimalism is present in fragments of observation by passing characters lamenting that "There's nothing to paint and nothing to write and nothing to film and nothing to sing about and nothing to make love to" (80). The concomitant shift of revolutionary energies into international marketing strategies (I am thinking of projects like "We Are the World") are foreseen in the savvy of political avant-gardes with "vision:" "Cargo

ships full of underwear plying the trade routes....Underwear chain letters. World peace through underwear" (81). New Agers of the nineties, free-floating in Colorado pyramids, Oregon ashrams, downtown New York crystal shops are glimpsed as the burgeoning psychobabble acolytes of the Happy Valley Farm Commune, devotees of "non-attachment" for whom "The body is an illusion...Free of fear and desire, we find our true nature. Good. Goodness. God. Godhead" (237).

For DeLillo, these are all the new citizens of a new Oceania, those who have made the choice Bucky, like Winston Smith, faces from the start: "Maybe that was the answer I needed, the one route back. So simple. To decide to love the age. To stencil myself in its meager design" (emphasis mine) (67). This is the death sigh of Great Jones Street anticipating an age that up until now fostered mainly a nostalgic hope (not certainty) that the 1960's provided a legacy of "privacy" that rolled the wheel of democracy further forward.

Given this, not much should be made of Bucky's vow to return above ground at the end of the novel. "Let history suck me down a bit. When the season is right I'll return to whatever is out there. It's just a question of what sound to make or fake" (265). The calculated indecision here is important. Wunderlick has realized that regardless of his or anyone else's strategy for privacy and re-invention he will become the "epoch's barren hero." In short, there are no exits: Like Oedipa Maas, Wunderlick is left waiting for a "symmetry of choices to break down, to go skew...." and left to ponder the question "...how had it ever happened here, with the chances once so good for

8

diversity?"

DeLillo's answer, like Pynchon's, is that the chances have in a sense always been overrated, that always implicit in the idea of America are both its fame and its excess, its gothic showmanship and violent denouements. Like the market, as Fenig says, it both "loves and kills." This is the "secret" of American life in Great Jones Street. Its carnivorous consumer appetite is constantly lying in wait.

Notes for Chapter IV:

1. Norman Mailer. Armies of the Night. (New York: New American Library, 1968), p. 212.
2. DeLillo, Don. "American Blood." Rolling Stone. (December 1983), p. 28.
3. Jean Baudrillard. "Symbolic Exchange and Death" (portion reprinted in) Selected Writings of Jean Baudrillard. Ed. Mark Poster. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 128.
4. Anthony DeCurtis. "The Product: Bucky Wunderlick, Rock 'n Roll, and Don DeLillo's Great Jones Street." South Atlantic Quarterly 89 (Spring 1990), p. 374.
5. Stanley Aronowitz. "Postmodernism and Politics." Social Text 18 (Winter 1987/88), p. 106.
6. This is the general term used by Horkheimer and Adorno in Dialectic of Enlightenment to describe the psychological correlary to rationality.
7. Terry Eagleton. "Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism" in Against the Grain. (London: Verso Books, 1984), p. 132.
8. Pynchon, The Crying of Lot 49, p. 136.

Ch. V The Limits of Abstraction: Ratner's Star

In End Zone and Great Jones Street the problem of putting words into actions, actions into thought, self into world was particularly haunting. Gary Harkness and Bucky Wunderlick fail, if they fail as social agents, because they come to learn that anything they say and do has either already been said or done, or has been said or done by someone to whom they set themselves in opposition. As I have demonstrated, this represents the closing of the universe of discourse in these early seventies novels after the kind of free-fall multiplicity and plurality of the sixties. Indeed one of DeLillo's more persistent notions is that the politicization of all segments of life in the sixties decade created a problem of overdetermination. When suspicions run high, as Pynchon noted, everything matters. Game signals, codes, acronyms, agency names, song lyrics, corporate titles--all of these have both alternately an overabundance of and absence of meaning in these early novels; they represent at times everything the world can mean to characters, while alternately demonstrating that ultimately signs are just that: signs.

Another way to characterize this problem in DeLillo is as an ongoing meditation on the relationship between the concrete and the abstract: the signifier and the referent. Language becomes a danger to Gary Harkness when it becomes euphemistic for the purposes of hiding or disguising horrors and refers to nothing except its own function. Language becomes meaningless to Bucky Wunderlick when every word he writes becomes communal or common property of interpretation. Song lyrics lose their integrity (their relationship to their creator) when they are suddenly

assumed to speak to and for literally millions of people. Thus the sheer size and scope of culture determines the efficacy of concretization. The broader the arena, the wider the field of reception, the bigger the "room" (one of DeLillo's favorite settings is blank or empty rooms for just this reason) the more there is a craving not just to "fill" these spaces but to in a sense to saturate them with "meaning."

This process is of course much like making a map. Language and naming are ways of containing and designating space. The broader the space, the more names are required. Too, maps challenge us perhaps more than any other 'genre' of naming to be universally accessible. Place names are transnational, translingual. Maps make space the property of language, language the property of space. In so doing, they give to the name frightening, complex, imperial power. To place a name on a map is to fix a variable meaning forever. It is also to fill up a formerly empty space--a literal "blank," with digital designation. Words are perfect mediators between abstraction and concretization, in this sense. Inseparable and useless without definition, they are synthesizing tools, hence gorgeous appliances for writing.

Numbers present a slightly different problem. They have a dual purpose: both to designate fixed value and to measure quantities. Unlike words, which particularize and define, they are signifiers of abstraction. The best we can do to "represent" their meaning is to point to a physical manifestation of it, something that becomes an increasingly difficult task as value (or size) increases. How to represent infinity? "The square

root of minus one," as the first paragraph of Ratner's Star alludes to. The answer (as the last example indicates) is we can't. Numbers overthrow our attempts at representation by literally overflowing its boundaries. Where words may successfully define infinity (perhaps the greatest of all abstractions, like the limits of space) numbers ultimately rebound against our attempt to represent "truth" and "value." They leave us with, well, numbers, definable (or dividable) only by and through themselves. As a system numbers are monadic.

The problematic relationship between words, numbers and representation is at the heart of Ratner's Star. The gothic madhouse of DeLillo's novels, it is probably his most profound book (if we measure its depth of thought) and certainly his least readable. This is because it formally enacts what his first three novels merely "thematized:" namely that representation in the contemporary world in literature, science and language has reached a crisis stage. The culprit in each case is the tendency of these very discourses to follow numbers towards abstraction and away from a finite representation or description of the world. What film, war games and sound technology do in his first three novels, namely re-code phenomena according to their own self-referring, self-sustaining logic of representation, mathematicians in Ratner's Star turns into an apocalyptic mission. The assembled scientists gathered in the novel to decode a series of signals believed to be emanating from outer space are each and every one a subject and object of the powerful, messianic spell of quantifying, evaluating and most

importantly "naming" that mathematical work entails.

Tom LeClair has done us all a great explicatory service in In the Loop unpacking the numerous mathematical puns, anecdotes and secrets in this most allusive of DeLillo novels. He has smartly, I think, aligned it with other contemporary, postmodern novels--Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow and Gaddis's JR, to take two examples, which enact the historical or scientific "excess" they are about. LeClair brilliantly shows how the relentlessly diffuse, abstract style, structure and speculation of Ratner's Star, modeled after such difficult mathematical conceptions as binaries, progressive loops, recurring regressive patterns opens up wonderfully the mathematical themes of the novel. LeClair even uncharacteristically extends his analysis into speculation about the social and even authorial intentions of the book. Its preoccupation with fear and dread, and its rather apocalyptic undertones are for LeClair evidence that the fear of knowing and not-knowing, mastering and not mastering empirical reality is the obsessive motivation not just for characters in the novel but for an author whose ambition is self-admittedly to "re-map" the world through dramatization of its new, varied and exceedingly¹ difficult "discourses."

LeClair is thus a tough act to follow on Ratner's Star. Yet my purpose in discussing the novel will be to argue that consistent with his other novels DeLillo's primary concern is to examine how systems of representation reflect or promote widely discursive forms of power. Indeed in many ways Ratner's Star, like Gravity's Rainbow, implies precisely the major critical themes of left twentieth century sociology's assessment

of science. It sees the creations of contemporary forms of "knowledge" as the all-consuming strategy of western physics and metaphysics. From Pythagoras to Goedel, both of whom are either alluded to or whose work is alluded to, mathematical theoretics is rendered as the world's most enduring totalizing narrative or explanatory myth: it is the logos of logocentrism. "It was Aristotle who maintained that man's rationality is based on his ability to count" (53) remarks one character in the novel. As the science which seeks no less than a universal representation of the real--space and time in numbers, mathematics is the discourse most aggressive about its potential for cross-cultural and global application. "It's the object of your labor, lad," Robert Softly tells protagonist Billy Twillig, a brilliant young mathematician, "to join the hemispheres. Bring logical sequence to the delirium, reason to the forager squatting, language and meaning to the wild child's dream" (195).

DeLillo thus wants us to see mathematics in Ratner's Star as symbolic of several primary urges of contemporary western culture: to continue the tasks of understanding central to western science and metaphysics; to join reason and imagination, intuition and deduction (and to assume logocentrically that they are separate); to carry the ideological agenda of science further---"reason to the forager squatting;" to find a "language" to express the wildest, deepest aspects of self; to translate reality into a comforting formula we can apprehend. Indeed so crucial is the self-defined task of mathematics by its practitioners in Ratner's Star that it becomes a metonymy for what contemporary bumper stickers sometimes say: "Think Globally."

"Single planetary consciousness. Rational approach. World View" (21). This is the self-stated goal of math researcher Byron Dyne, who has behind him, too, global currency. The Field Experiment Number One he is part of is financed by international corporations and cartels---"One hundred nations sharing the cost" of the attempt to determine the signal sequence from space. Hence the sources of abstraction in Ratner's Star are multifold: the interrelation of global life, the confluence of various languages, the mingling of currencies are all subsumed and within a larger narrative drive towards a formulaic "final solution." This pun is not cheap but earned in the novel; as the story progresses, as I shall demonstrate, human life becomes less and less a real value and more an expression of a universal "program." Men become the numbers they are in mass movements, armies, crowds. Gary Harkness's fear that language betrays us when we try to tally body counts is the subtext of Ratner's Star's increasingly dark meditation on the existential impasse to which pure science, rationality and one-world strategies bring us. As if it were a machine, or a fascist army, or a movie, the Field Experiment in the novel becomes a discrete, rather than continuous or open entity unto itself. The attempt to decode signals in order to make friendly contact with another world becomes a self-absorbing, hermetic quest to find a language with which to describe the project itself. Hence when representation becomes "about" representation, abstraction about "abstraction," DeLillo suggests, we reach the dangerous culmination of postmodern and late capital culture. In lieu of world, formula; in place of man, text; where culture was, now shall

theorem be. This gloomy, apocalyptic novel is thus a satire, on Swiftian scale, of the deadly dangers of knowledge and science, and the "fatal strategies," in Baudrillard's words, of sciences and technologies of simulation. The attempt to quantify the world, make the world a knowable quantity is the dangerous dream that is always intruding at the edges of the real.

Chapter Eight of Part I of Ratner's Star, "Segmentation," begins with its protagonist, young mathematical genius Billy Twillig, discovering a cryptic message, one of dozens upon dozens delivered in this deeply cryptic novel. DeLillo describes the finding this way:

The note said only that representatives of the Honduran cartel wanted to see him. Time and place were not given. The words were written in singular idiot script on the back of a manuscript page that he himself had misplaced earlier in the day when he'd taken Softly's work-in-progress to the dining unit to read while he picked at his shrimp analogue.

"The shadow of the modern age of mathematics began to rise on whitewashed walls about the time that the spirit of the guillotine made itself known, deranging the dreams of one slight child who later made his mark through exactitude, ably dispelling much uncertainty from the fluid patterns of analysis." (144)

The Softly named here is Robert Hopper Softly, a rigid logician and colleague of Billy's in Field Experiment Number One, the international team of mathematicians that have assembled in a vague "Chinese desert" to research the outer space code. The Honduran cartel alluded to is an international economic conglomerate, the brainchild of one Elux Troxl, an entrepreneur in the fields of computer time sharing and the "world-market money curve." The "slight child" whose dreams are deranged by the appearance of mathematics is Billy himself,

and the "guillotine" a marker of Billy's nightmarish phobias in the "black box" of his childhood bedroom that his parents meant to kill him; the "guillotine," broadly then, is death.

Yet a closer look at this passage reveals disparities, or gaps in this interpretation. The author of the note Billy discovers is unsigned. It is written in something called "idiot script," a hand the text does not explain. The note's directions are terribly ambiguous. The cartel representatives have significantly (in a novel about math and outer space) left vague the "time and place" (or time and space) of the meeting. Too, there is a problem of textual boundaries here. The words in quotation marks are not identified as being "from" the Softly manuscript--we must assume that they are, though if we read the passage "continuously" rather than "discretely," we might infer that instead they are part of the cartel message. Finally, there is an overall authorial/perspectival problem. If the allusion to the guillotine does refer as I have interpreted to Billy's childhood, how does its author (Softly) have access to Billy's primal fears, to which we the reader are privy only through nightmares and flashbacks?

Stepping back then from this vertigo of speculation, we can see clearly that what this passage, and what Ratner's Star are "about" is terror--the terror of writing and reading, coding and deciphering, or, to borrow from literary theory, text and interpretation. For implicit here are several theoretical (or poststructural dilemmas: 1) that authorship is a tricky question, one problematized, not clarified, by close reading; 2) that the center of a text or a system, is difficult to discover, and is

perhaps not there at all; 3) that meaning is not only relative but on a slippery sliding scale; 4) that modes of "discourse," notes for example, often originate from conspiratorial sources, webs of power and domination--such as international cartels; 5) finally, that one's interpretation of a message is often a determined rather than a free activity, just as one's important life decisions--like becoming a mathematician, may originate in dark suspicions, phobias, paranoias, about the intentions of authority.

In just this obtuse manner Ratner's Star, invites us, the reader, to interpret like Billy Twillig the origins of a code; my set of defining understandings, postulates, axioms of interpretation will function, like his, as "meta-statements" on another discourse, another set of signs. My need in approaching the text is, as Softly says of Billy's work on the signals, to "unify and explain it....The task is to attempt a logical design that may or may not duplicate the structure of the thing itself" (327)--a task fraught with dark anxieties, profound doubts, cryptic fears given the foreknowledge of my position as a pre-determined (post-structuralist?) reader. As such, I am invariably suspended between opposing poles: the will to truth and complete ignorance; certainty and dread; pattern and chaos; hermeneutics and paranoia.

Such is an overly simplified, but useful schematic of the interpretive situation evoked by Ratner's Star, a book which must be read, as this passage suggests, against the backdrop of twentieth century science's obsession with uncertainty in the fields of quantum physics, relativity theory and cosmology.

The book takes place in the very contemporary world of global political scale (it is in fact the year 1979).

This world is drawn as a kind of caricature of late capitalism as it has been theorized by, among others, Mandel,² Baudrillard and Jameson. Its numerous postmodern features include massive links between international business and science, runaway economic venturing, seemingly transglobal marketing and advertising and radical disparity between first and third world economies. One catalyst for these developments is the transmutation of capital into a kind of pure abstraction or simulated form of itself. The special talent of the Honduran Cartel alluded to earlier is not just for international monopoly of capital but its conceptual reformation. Elux Troxl, head of the Honduran Cartel, has turned space and time into "air" space and time by creating a global media market. Master manipulator of the "world-market money curve," Troxl remarks, "...we either buy, sell, retain or incite revolution, all totally nonprofitless, done merely to flux the curve our way" (147). Other economic powers, for example makers of "health mechanisms," are equally if not more amorphous and identified in the text only through their slogans and brand names:

STERILMASTER PEERLESS AIR CURTAINING

"The breath you take is the life we save"

BIZENE POLYTHENE COATING

UDGA inspected and approved

WALKER-ATKINSON METALIED UNDERSURFACES

From the folks at Uniplex Syntel

DREAMAWAY

Bed linen, mattress and frame

A division of OmCo Research
"Building a model world" (214)

Neither the products, companies or acronyms named here are mimetically "represented" in the novel. They are pure "signs" of an economy whose productive capacity seemingly lies in its absence, as if advertising were all that were left, or required, for consumer exchange. This impression of materiality giving way to pure mediation is reinforced by the relationship between the Field Experiment and external reality.

The action of the book is intentionally confined to the Cycloid, mimicking and mocking the hermetically sealed atmosphere of the proverbial "think tank" or research lab. Characters inside have no experience of events outside, dramatizing the shrinking of their reality to a purely conceptual one: the enclosed space to which Taft Robinson, Bucky and later Lee Oswald will withdraw to formulate theories of life. Thus their imagination of the "real" as grotesquely abstract mirrors their achievements within the rarified research domain. "We can measure the gravity of events by tracing the increasingly abstract nature of the terminology. One more level of vagueness and that could be it...We're dealing with global euphemisms now" (281).

This is one of the most important passages in Ratner's Star, and in all of DeLillo. Like Pynchon's allegorization of World War II as "War" in Gravity's Rainbow, or his construction of a narrative shaped like a falling rocket, Softly's notion of "global euphemisms" signals the metaphysical re-mapping implicit in Ratner's Star's conception of discursive power. It indicates the need to re-think literary representation--character, place,

event, to reflect the shifting scale of human place and relationship in the world: from local to global, discrete to universal. It invokes the Lukascian claim on realist fiction which does or does not provide a comforting agent/scene ratio, does or does not give character a transcendental "home" in the world.

In Pynchon and DeLillo, clearly neither occurs.

Abstraction, like rationality in Gravity's Rainbow is in Ratner's Star power's currency which determines and undermines most all of the subjective thoughts, positions, even feelings of characters in the novel. This displacement suggests metonymically a transition from one era to another in western capitalist cultures. I have been discussing this transition in this dissertation so far as one from modernism to postmodernism, hierarchical to discursive power. Science in Ratner's Star is a measurement and marker of this transition. As in postmodern theory, it is the discipline which measures most precisely the cognitive shifts in representational strategies categories of knowledge. While it is difficult to summarize these shifts briefly, I would propose Donna Haraway's distinctions between "organic, industrial society" and a "polymorphous, information system" in her her essay "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" as a useful paradigm in which to situate the novel:

Representation
Bourgeois novel, realism

Organism
Depth, integrity
Heat
Small group
Perfection
Functional specialization

Simulation
Science fiction, postmodernism
Biotic component
Surface, boundary
Noise
Subsystem
Optimization
Modular construction

Reproduction
Racial chain of being
Scientific management in
home/factory
Sex
Mind
World War II
White Capitalist Patriarchy

Replication
Neo-imperialism
Global factory

Genetic engineering
Artificial Intelligence
Star Wars
Informatics of Domination

Haraway's list is premised on the supposition that modernism is the end of organic models of thought and social construction, while in the postmodern no objects can be coded as "natural." It insists that the transition from a thermodynamic to a cybernetic model of production (machine to computer) has changed not just the physical relationship of man to world but the metaphors we use to describe it. One of those is "informatics:" the term implies a systemic or regulatory control of information. Up close, it looks precisely like the theory of power I have tried to elicit in the work of Foucault and Baudrillard, emphasizing networks over hierarchies, discourse over monopoly and the re-codification of the individual by technology or science into other vocabularies. "Any objects or persons can be reasonably thought of in terms of disassembly and reassembly; no "natural" architectures constrain system design,"³ writes Haraway. Her chart also re-confirms the centrality of what Lyotard calls 'performativity' in the postmodern (optimization is her parallel term); it is the systemic perfection of operationalism abstracted from external cause and effect.

Ratner's Star can be measured in several interesting ways as a register of the shifts Haraway points to. Generically, at the level of "representation," the book consciously mocks the

bourgeois novel prototype (Dickens and Fielding respectively) in its parody of a bildungsroman and sets in opposition the self-deconstructing formalist work it is as literal product of a cybernetic culture. What begins as the naive tale of Billy Twillig's growth and discovery becomes a meditation on formalism (the latter half of the book openly parodies this by using Dickensian chapter headings--'I Take a Scary Ride;' 'I Get a Little Background;'). Its concentration on abstraction as theme suggests how informatics culture re-models the novel as a "space" or "structure," (a text with textual boundaries, as it were) not, as in the bourgeois novel, a hearth or home. The Cycloid which houses the Field Experiment is first described as "a formulation, an expression in systematic terms of a fifty-story machine or educational toy or two-dimensional decorative object" (14). Its rooms are compared to "canisters" (one thinks here of Foucault's "cells"), in which "The optical effect was such that the room seemed at first to be largely devoid of vertical and horizontal reference points" (17). Searching for a real-world model of this, we might consider places like the World Trade Center, the structure in Players whose ambition to literalize through architecture global power (embodied in its name) becomes for Pammy a measure of her degree of displacement from a "natural" environment. The Cycloid's form also parallels the function of Troxl's cartel and mocks the notion of any comforting, human agent/scene ratio we might expect in a realistic novel: just as the latter may "manipulate abstract levels of all theoretical monies in the world today" (145), all of the mathematical models adopted and tested by the field

scientists are exercises in the utility of abstraction: "Form, it's nothing but form. It stands on thin air. The symbols we use are everything. What they represent we discard without the slightest misgiving. The focus of our thought, the object of our examination, our analysis, our passion, if you will, is the notation itself" (286).

Such a schema leads to the inevitable conclusion that one of Ratner's Star subjects is the collapse of difference between science and ideology. As Stanley Aronowitz, Lyotard and Haraway among others have observed, the performativity or "Optimization" ethos that characterizes postmodern economies is in fact derivative of scientific methodologies that via induction, deduction or cybernetic means of experimentation isolate productivity and achievement.⁴ What Marcuse long ago called "functionalism" prevails in the refinement of exploratory methods. In Ratner's Star the emphasis on "notation" and symbols devoid of any cognitive context indicate the desire on one level to separate sign from its meaning, on another to remove thought and analysis from the world. The utter physical remoteness of the Field Experiment signifies this: it takes place literally nowhere. DeLillo's criticism, as in End Zone and Great Jones Street, is of systems that refuse what Tom LeClair calls a reciprocal relationship with the world.⁵ The military, industry, capital, science share an operational logocentricity that determines or "interpellates," in Althusserian terms humans subjects. The characters in the Field Experiment become more and more abstract and self-reflexive, more conceptual as the novel proceeds. They represent

intellectual ideas or principles; they are fictional "formulae" identifiable mainly as aspects of their theories.

Psychologically, this condition is a variation on the self-reflexivity and schizophrenia DeLillo develops in his first three novels. Like Bucky Wunderlick seeing himself through the lens of media culture, or David Bell making himself the subject of his own film, the mathematicians in Ratner's Star come to see themselves as self-created subjects (and objects) of their own discursive practices. The novel's "double-sided" figure for this process is the "inward fall." It appears at least twice in the book, once to describe the "inward fall at the apex of the twilligon," the triangular shape conceived by Billy to describe the form of the universe. Its second usage is as metaphor to describe Billy's mind at work, appropriately provided in a chapter entitled "Convergence Inward:"

There came a time in every prolonged effort when he had a moment of near panic, or "terror in a lonely place," the original semantic content of that word. The lonely place was his own mind. As a mathematician he was free from subjection to reality, free to impose his ideas and designs on his own test environment. The only valid standard for his work, its critical point (zero or infinity), was the beauty it possessed, the deft strength of his mathematical reasoning. The work's ultimate values simply what it revealed about the nature of his intellect. What was at stake, in effect, was his own principle of intelligence or individual consciousness; his identity, in short. This was the infalling trap.... (119)

Charles Molesworth has interpreted this passage as a trope for the creative process scientists, like writers, undergo as they test their transient formulas and fictions on the world.

Indeed Henrik Endor, a prize-winning mathematician who has since gone into seclusion, tells young Billy that "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). Without question we are to take Endor's (and Molesworth's) claims seriously, for they open up yet another dimension of DeLillo's work--the search for artistic mystery in secular modern disciplines. Yet Endor's total withdrawal from the scene of discovery in the novel (he lives, Beckett-like, in a hole) suggests also that formalistic extremes or excesses of "Art, science and language) can cause each to lose its relationship to the "real"--a point Ratner's Star's meant to demonstrate. In interviews DeLillo has said he sacrificed character, plot and conventional forms of dialogue and narrative in order to present a book that, like mathematics, was "all structure." Part of this attempt stems from the desire to demonstrate that modernism's obsession with formal complexity and mythic scale can be found in various post-modern (non-art) systems: science and television, games and espionage, even politics itself. Yet gone from any of these is a sense of social or cultural criticism or opposition. They are instead apparatuses of the state or majority. Hence the "avant-garde" to which Endor refers (Murray in White Noise will call cereal-box readers the "only avant-garde we've got") are parodies of their original precursors. Rather than epate le bourgeoisie, Robert Hopper Softly intones to Billy:

History is full of interesting things. It has no worthwhile statement to make to us, however, in our current preoccupation. We're permitted to deduce, at least at the outset, that everything is either a or non-a. (287)

Thus part of the "infalling" process is the fall out of

history or at least historical dialectics. Events in the Cycloid take place not only out of recognizable place but in a reverse or ahistorical time that, as Tom LeClair points out, duplicate theoretical developments in the history of mathematics. Part I, "Adventures," presents mathematical experimentation as a kind of mock-heroic endeavor that is comprised of non-events. Young Billy Twillig begins the novel in flight to the Field Experiment. Though he is very young, his childhood is a lost experience that his adventures partly recover; that is, rather than progress and develop "naturally," Twillig undergoes a psychological "regression" (the pun is intentional). Pure logic gives way to "Number as primitive intuition. Number self-generated. Number developing in the child's mind spontaneously and non-verbally" (8). Like Oskar the boy-dwarf of Grass's Tin Drum, Billy stops growing, in fact regresses to demonstrate the "ratiocination" of logic put to the continual reduction of the experiential to quantified abstractions. At novel's end Billy has experienced virtually nothing of life. Hence the pun Tom LeClair has noted in Ratner's Star: the "ergo" between "Cogito" and "sum" in Descartes' famous sentences becomes anagrammized by DeLillo as "OGRE" (130).

The Cartesian pun is one clue to the book's assertion that truth has changed its shape and nature from forms of classical mimesis to those of modern simulation. Classical mathematics, like Greek myth, are contemplated as essentially first-order mimetic systems that give tangible, concretized shape and "order" to the real. Modern mathematics has moved into what Baudrillard

might call a "third-order" system of representation: it conceptualizes or abstracts real into possible knowledge. Analogously, the difference is between sculpture and photography (a juxtaposition The Names will make for similar affect): the former represents mimetically the physical world; the latter reproduces it in simulated form. The Pythagorean triangle is the re-presentable totem of a manageable classical space. The global, intergalactic cosmos of Ratner's Star can only be spatially abstracted: Billy's most famous formulation is the "Twilligon," a hypothetical triangle that is not a form but a "model" of the universe. In as sense the problem is again of one scale, cartography, accumulative knowledge. As the capacity for knowledge grows, so grows the pressure to represent it. When this capacity reaches what appears to be physical limits--infinity, the edge of space, zero--knowledge can only re-present or abstract itself. This is life at the "meta" level.

This problem is rendered as shared property of science and religion, two systems set in dyadic opposition in the novel. The Leibniz-Newton connection alluded to (like the reminder that Kafka and Einstein once met) recall that stories, myths, legends, like theories of gravitation and relativity, salve or complicate anxiety about the world by the models they create. Both are on a quest for what Wu calls a "universal harmony" and provides an explanatory paradigm (or plot). "Newton resorting to the idea of God as an absolute encompassing structure in his theory of mechanics. Leibnitz in the heyday of his mysticism using binary arithmetic to try to convert the Emperor of China to Christianity (387). Robert Softly describes the mock battles

that were fought in old Egypt and Mesopotamia to accompany the conflict suggested by various celestial events:

In this way the crisis of time (of light that fades and seasons that end) was made specific and personal, detached from abstraction. People translated the event into the sweating arcs of their own bodies, perhaps trying to act beyond their fear, inventing games to fill this crevice in the heavens. (436)

Myth is the abstract made concrete; math is its opposite.

Their parallel function is to explain or decode "mystery," "fill this crevice" in knowledge. The mathematicians in the novel must interpret "blank spaces" in the coded messages--like white spaces in a Morris Code. Scientific systems, like religions, art and language constantly define voids, empty spaces, chaos, *mis en abymes* in order to define the value of signs, presences.

Ratner's Star is said to lie in a "value-dark dimension, or mohole totality"; this is "part of a theoretical dimension lacking spatial extent and devoid of time value. Value-dark in other words" (181). Yet the mohole theory remains central to all forms of knowledge in the Field Experiment. It is the darkness against which light (or reason) is defined. DeLillo's point may be related to Foucault's in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History": "What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissection of other things. It is disparity."⁸ The "descent" into history and speculation to which characters are ruthlessly drawn opens constantly onto the discovery that behind facts, things, numbers are not original things but the "secret that they have no⁹ essence." In mathematics this is indicated by the infinity sign; in astronomy by the mohole; in language by the discovery by

linguist Edna Lowen that even babble is a "metalanguage." Built into every system or arrangement or code is the "interbreak" or gap that signals both its openness and its resistance to total understanding.

This explains the importance in Ratner's Star and DeLillo's work generally of the cabalistic. Primal fear of the unknown or unknowable is both salved and deepened in attachment to "secret." In the throes of permanent panic about the bottomless origins of existence and knowledge, characters seek out private codes, language games, space signals, oral cultures all of which exist, as Ratner says, "beneath the main body of thought and writing" (219). The Sisyphean task of modern man then, what becomes a mythic situation in DeLillo, is to endure the coming "Twilight of the Gods" while knowing that death itself is, as Jean Venable says, "creeping logic"--the "sum" of all his investigations. The novelist, reader and mathematician of an information-excess culture may come to share the obsession with signs and symbols that characterize the cultist or paranoiac. As one character notes in Ratner's Star, "No writing that touches on the life of a secret subject can itself escape secrecy and in time culthood is conferred on document as well as primary figure" (38).

At this point we are not far from, say, Libra, with mathematics standing in for assassination as a cryptic "plot" magnetically drawing acolytes into a conspiracy; or of White Noise where where the sense of an ending, narrative resolution is the counterpart to fear of death. Not just Endor but numerous characters in the novel, Softly, Wu, linguist Edna Lowen see in systemic indeterminacy the reflection of their own

mortality. The recognition that these systems are merely projections of rational ability--literally shadows on the cave walls, is the "boomerang" effect of representation. Hence the novel's plot devolves into the discovery that the radio signals believed to be emitting from outer space are in fact originating somewhere on earth. "We've reconstructed the ARS extant and it turns out to be us" (405). This discovery signifies the limits of rationality: literally self-consuming madness. Like Beckett's Watt or Molloy, characters are reduced to regressive or reductive actions that indicate the self-referring nature of their endeavors: the writing that is about writing. The discovery that "we are in the mohole...We are part of the value-dark dimension" is the existential discovery that all we have are words, signs, symbols with which to, in Oedipa Maas's words, "project a world." "Death is creeping logic. It is creepingly logical. Death and something else. SYNONYMS she thought: insanity, lunacy, madness, mania, demenstia" (414). Here the "synonym" is the endless chain not of similarities but of differences possible in a discursive field. It is evidence of the in-falling nature of language itself in which circles and cycles of meaning--like the boomeranging singals, are never finite or complete. We are always on the threshold of signification, never quite there.

At least this is true while we remain inside the Cycloid, for Ratner's Star ends with an astonishing disruption of its action, literally a displacement of the quest for meaning it has documented for 400 plus pages. The novel's (self-conscious) term for it is a "system interbreak." It arrives as an unexpected eclipse meant to demonstrate the upsetting of the predidctive

mathematical balance, the astronomical calculations of ancients and moderns. Like Wilder's bike ride across the six-lane highway in White Noise, it is the intrusion of sheer randomness, or mystery onto a quantified human landscape. Something like this perspective suddenly opens up on the novel. The eclipse allows the reader and author (designated "we" in the text) a "nonquantum state" or release into an "omnidirectional viewpoint." Escaping the hermetic self-reflexivity of the Field Experiment logos, we see for the first time in the novel the phenomenological world. Somewhere in Asia, we observe a "charred immensity, children with begging bowls, men surrendered to meditation" (430). The scene is a carnival of third-world despair, graphically rendered:

You read the grieving man's belief in the everydayness of the absolute. Families set down their mats and prepare to sleep on pavement, the empirical source, children stealing to live. To be Outside is to know an environment infinitely less complex than the one you left. Far from wishing to revisit misery, you are nonetheless able to experience once again some of the richness of inborn limits. You see our rapt entanglement in all around us, the press to measure and to delve. There, see, in annotated ivory tools, lengths of notched wood, in the wave-guide manipulation of light and our nosings into the choreography of protons, we implicate ourselves in endless uncertainty. This is the ethic you've rejected. Inside our desolation, however, you come upon the reinforcing grid of words and minds that extend themselves against whatever lonely spaces account for our hollow moods, the woe incoming. Why are you here? To unsnarl us from our delimiting senses? To offer protective cladding against our cruelty and fear? The pain, the life-cry speak our most candid wonders. To out-premise these, by whatever tetrakite whirl you've mastered, would be to make us hypothetical, a creature of our own pretending, as you are. Geometric space of any number of dimensions. Awareness of not being self-aware. The metaphysical release at the center of the value-dark dimension. (433)

The challenge of this passage, to reader, scientist, interpreter, is to accept the "delimiting senses" that is

integral to the empirical real. The quantification or coding or hyperrealization of matter defies the "inborn limits" of things themselves. Here we re-acquaint ourselves with what DeLillo calls in The Names the "fallen wonder of the world," the brittle, mutable, transient center of existence. To deny this is to suffer tragic modern overreach--the imperialistic dream of a single system that blurs difference, extracts essence and abstracts from the world a theory of the world; a language from a language; a map of a map. Finally Ratner's Star returns us to earth as the unnamed and unnameable place anterior to language, science or art: before "representation." The book evokes terrifying nostalgia for an unmediated relationship to life and form. It is in a sense the classical American move, to "light out for the whole," as Endor ironically puts it. Disentangled from our "theoretical" selves, we may transcend the dyadic opposition of thought and feeling, reason and emotion, circle and square and sense "interlocking opposites, the paradox, the comedy, the fool's rule of total radiance" (436). Put in other terms, we step into the phenomenological world purged of consideration, reveling absent and absent-mindedly in the "reproductive dust of existence" (438).

The discovery of irrational numbers in Platonic Greece, according to Michel Serres, "touched the logos. If logos means proportion, measured relation, the irrational or alogon is the impossibility of measuring. If logos means discourse, the alogon prohibits speaking. Thus exactitude crumbles reason is mute." ¹⁰

Ratner's Star tells us that the crisis of the irrational is still

with us in exacerbated (poststructuralist) form. A small digression in the novel points this out nicely. Billy Twillig can recall from his childhood the "screaming woman," a neighbor visited by political paranoias of various stripe who, speechless with terror, scrawls on the wall apocalyptic warnings in an indecipherable code comprised of words and numbers. Such a code is to be taken as an emblem of coding, expression, communication and community in a world whose traditional political, scientific and epistemological narratives have run into self-made opposition. For every first world there is a third world; for every thesis an antithesis; for every sign an erasure. This is the state or meaning of "global knowledge" in Ratner's Star, the superflux of meanings that is a form of madness.

What then of language in this state? Clearly DeLillo's preoccupation with this problem stems in part from his own intensified "global knowledge." Ratner's Star like all of his novels tends toward polyphony and glossolalia. The former is the necessary breadth of linguistic play necessary to a writer stretching to accommodate the new languages of science, information and communications. The latter is, as in The Names, a nostalgic desire born of a sense of linguistic overstretch and exhaustion to return to something like a pre-verbal state. These are two options poised against a third in Ratner's Star, the symbolic pursuit of a "metalanguage" by its mathematicians. Gradually the Field Experiment shifts from a search to decode interplanetary signals to the attempt to find a language by which to describe the processes of decoding itself, a reversal which signifies the futility (and non-utility) of the project and in

part leads directly to its failure. Clearly this is DeLillo's warning against any attempt at a "one world" language or hegemony. Any such attempt, as in the novel, requires a blinding degree of abstraction and uniformity that eliminates "difference," linguistic, cultural, scientific. It threatens not just ethno but "genero"-centrism--the mediation of all experience by a common coin.

Thus polyglot fiction, like genre-jumping, is a means of maintaining literary and linguistic "difference" in the face of the demands of both writers and readers for a uniform "discourse." Difficulty--no less than the theme and trademark of Ratner's Star, is taken up again as a modernist challenge not just to bourgeois modes of consumption and production (and mathematical science is nothing, with its attempted remove from historical events, if not bourgeois) but to the consumable literary text. One way of introducing difficulty into literature of course is to leave gaps or blank spaces in the text: problems or conflicts unresolved, characters ill-defined, motives murky, settings obtuse, dialogue undigestable, terms unexplained, authorial intentions diffuse. Nothing better describes Ratner's Star as a novel; no one better describes himself than DeLillo in this thinly-veiled self-reference to the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature:

LITERATURE--Chester Greylag Dent, unaffiliated and stateless; for what the Swedish Academy described in its original announcement of the award as "recognition of a near century of epic, piquant disquisitions on the philosophy of logic, the logic of games, the gamesmanship of fiction and prehistory, these early efforts preparing the way for speculative meditations on 'the unsolvable knot' of science and mysticism, which in turn led to his famous 'afterthoughts' on the ethereally

select realms of abstract mathematics and the more palpable subheights of history and biography, every published work of this humanist and polymath reflective of an incessant concern for man's standing in the biosphere and handblocked in a style best characterized as undiscouragably diffuse. (307)

Notes for Chapter V:

1. See Tom LeClair's chapter on Ratner's Star in In the Loop. In addition to illuminating many of its mathematical notes and allusions, LeClair situates the book into his larger systems analysis.
2. I make this generalization based on the preference in all three for the idea of "late-capitalism" and the emphasis in Baudrillard and Jameson especially on the role of the media in the "one world" or hyperrealism of the global economy.
3. Donna Haraway. "A Manifesto for Cyborgs." Socialist Review (Spring 85), p. 81.
4. Stanley Aronowitz's Science as Power, a book which is a continuation of the Critical Theory and Marxist attack on science, makes this claim most explicitly of the three books here named. Aronowitz's argument is both theoretical and pragmatic. It supposes that the logocentrism of political planners has borrowed its research and development strategies from the hard sciences, and that the close ties between, for example, the defense department and the university systems means that the state and mainstream science are partners in hegemonic scientific progress. Ratner's Star, which proposes an international network of money backers for the Field Experiment project, is a good fictional example of this.
5. See Ratner's Star chapter in LeClair, In the Loop.
6. Charles Molesworth. "Don DeLillo's Perfect Starry Night." The South Atlantic Quarterly 89 (Spring 1990), 381-394.
7. Molesworth in the aforementioned essay uses Jameson's term "theological science fiction" first applied to Wyndham Lewis's childermass trilogy to describe Ratner's Star. This idea emphasizes the book as a theodicy in which a Supreme Being renders final judgement on the world, and suggests the "gnostic truth" that though the search for meaning in the world is essentially futile, the possibility of transcendence or redemption carries on in the energy of this search.
8. Michel Foucault. "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" in The Foucault Reader. Ed. Paul Rabinow. (New York: Pantheon, 1984), p. 79.
9. Ibid., p. 79.
10. Michel Serres. Literature, Science, Philosophy. Ed. Josue V. Harari and David F. Bell. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), p. 129.

Ch. 6 Frames Within Frames: Players and Running Dog

"If you study the history of reform," Percival said, "you'll see there's always a counteraction built in. A low-lying surly passion. Always people ready to invent new secrets, new bureaucracies of terror."

Running Dog

Players (1977) and Running Dog (1978) represent a turning point and solidifying moment in DeLillo's writing career. After the excessive formal experimentation of Ratner's Star he turned back to themes of earlier novels, refining them according to the shifts in the social climate of the mid-seventies. Watergate, the end of Vietnam, the oil crisis, the power struggles in the Middle East and the atmosphere of apathy and disengagement characterizing the political majority in the middle of the decade are the almost exclusive focus of these books. These events exist on a kind of continuum for DeLillo with earlier political crises--the Bay of Pigs and the Kennedy assassination in particular, as moments when America suddenly discovered itself as either an international heavy, a deceiver, or a ruthless paranoid nation. All of them too, and as importantly, were knowledge products or cultural events produced by an increasingly alert mass media that began to examine the "private life" of a country never before exposed. The Zapruder film and The Washington Post stories, to take two examples that are subtexts for Players and Running Dog, created a political semiotics for understanding national politics and political realities. Suddenly reliance on the press, stories, pictures seemed the means by which all political understanding was formed. The Nixon tapes took on the awesome prescience of the Dead Sea Scrolls; television footage of

the Vietnam War became a fulcrum for policy debate. Textual representations and forensic evidence of political events became fetishized objects of consumption and knowledge. Information acquired a truly libidinal glow. In Simulations, Baudrillard remarked how Watergate taught us that both Nixon's plumbers and the Washington Post relied on the same evidence-gathering strategies to make their case, both intended to manipulate mass opinion, ultimately, and legitimate one version, ideological or reportorial, of political events. For Baudrillard, it became impossible to separate the players, their strategies, or their audience in the mediascape age. Everybody seemed to be watching everyone else. No one seemed to be above or beyond the drama of surveillance and conspiracy. The decade itself played out like a spy story or thriller in which everyone had an intriguing role.

Running Dog and Players may be read as commentaries on these general processes. As if responding to the generic shape of seventies' public events, DeLillo's produced two novels that interrogate not only the conventions of the thriller genre, but various related forms of popular narrative and story-telling such as the journalistic, the novelistic and especially the cinematic. Thus far, only John Frow in Marxism and Literary History has come close to fully appreciating this aspect of the books. Frow notes, for example, that Running Dog's plot, a multi-pronged quest by an assorted cast of American military heads, political officials and journalists for a rumored pornographic film of Hitler reveling in the Reich Chancellery, consciously re-writes the formula for such popular Robert Ludlum novels as The Scarlatti Inheritance, The Rhineman Exchange and

The Holcroft Covenant. In these novels, Frow notes, plot centers on the struggle for a lost object connected to a fascist past. In each, too, an American hero forces a narrative resolution by identifying the origin of the lost object, simultaneously preserving the integrity of a threatened democratic social order and republican heroism which the fascist mystery overtly threatens. Analyzing the political thematics of Ludlum's novels, Frow notes that they enact "an ideology of individual action and control, of the rediscovery of individual identity at the end of a process of alienation, and of the ultimate, regulated¹ meaningfulness of history as the vehicle of American destiny."

Frow's analysis underscores that Players and Running Dog are absorbed with the way popular versions of events in film, literature and television either anticipate, occlude or affect our interpretation both of "stories" and the real world to which they refer. The novels' "metafictional" impulse, unlike say in Barthe or Borges, is a reaction to the manner in which a mass media culture sustains its own metafictional atmosphere of twice-told stories and commentaries. Accordingly, various popular media in the novels, cinema especially, are made interpretive "frames" for contemporary experience. The seventies are rendered as the decade of a paradigmatic shift from word to image in the conveyance of information and knowledge, and consciously duplicate film form and technique in language to mark this shift. Confronted with this paradigm in the fictional realities of the novels, characters become both functions of image replication and an interpretive adjunct to the process. John Johnston's words describing Deleuze's treatment of the image are apropos to this:

"....meaning becomes a movement through various representations, images, and metaphors, with a continuing shift in the ground or frame of reference. Subjectivity is accounted for as a "subtractive" moment, the image or thing (they are ultimately the same) minus that which does not interest us as a function or our needs. In other words, one image is framed by another, and "subjectivity" is simply the relationship between the two."²

In Players, DeLillo foregrounds this "subjectivity" problem by emphasizing how the lives of its protagonists, urban yuppies Pammy and Lyle Wynant, are mediated by everything from consumer processes, advertising and pop psychology to the allure of all varieties of narrative adventure fantasies. Each of these is presented as a means of "self-realization" that is a self-parodying version of liberal humanist cultural aspiration. In Running Dog this theme is nationalized. A confluence of prestigious American patriots, professionals and public servants converge on a rumored pornographic film that comes to represent the culmination of bourgeois can-do spirit, materialistic desire and even sexual reward. The mediation problem in both novels also demonstrates how conspiracy itself is a pre-fabricated subject for the metafictional novel. It begins to theorize more deeply the latent suggestion in Great Jones Street and Ratner's Star that conspiratorial thought is endemic to information cultures which proliferate their own "stories within" larger stories, plots within larger cultural plots. Indeed as he will in Libra and White Noise, DeLillo in Players and Running Dog considers "plot" and plotting as the coercive enterprise of a

consumerist culture whose favorite stories--like paperback thrillers--are always about culmination, resolution, and consummation: the fulfillment as Frow notes of American "destiny." Not surprisingly, DeLillo rejects that destiny and in tandem deconstructs the conventions of its fulfillment. Both Players and Running Dog instead form critical counter-narratives to readerly and generic expectations. They push toward narrative irresolution that frustrates the desire for convention and consumption. They mark closure itself as one of the signs discursive power leaves on narrative. Others, such as abstraction, simulation and the pornographic, call attention to the writer's own inevitable participation in, or co-optation by the economics of literary production. Thus perhaps the most interesting aspect of the novels is how DeLillo works to detach himself from the indulgence in what Baudrillard calls the "fatal strategies" of hyperreality. I will argue that in both books he concludes with intentional evasions of narrative resolutions to posit resistance strategies for readers. The books significantly leave closure out of the narrative frame, holding it literally "open" to escape. In this way DeLillo points to places beyond practices of fiction-making and simulation (beyond the story, as it were) where an oppositional critical consciousness can be re-formed.

Players begins with a prologue self-consciously modeled after a cinematic scene. Entitled "The Movie," it takes place aboard a 747 jetliner, one of the numerous enclosed hurtling spaces that Charles Molesworth has noted is the opening setting

3

of many DeLillo novels. It briefly describes seven characters, none named, as they watch an in-flight movie. They include: a bored young male-female couple; a gay male couple; a piano player; a stewardess; a barely described woman who sits alone off to the side of the scene, or as the narrative construction suggests at the edge of its "frame." We do not know on first reading of this prologue that these seven are the main players in the narrative proper. Here, they sit as audience to a film, as we are audience to them. The narrator reveals to us none of their inner thoughts (as if they had none). The film itself, mirroring them, is all gesture, without sound, pure image.

The film: a trio of white businessmen (or more accurately business-types) play at a round of golf. Their game is suddenly interrupted by the appearance of armed terrorists whose presence, as noted by the narrator, cues the audience to the conventions of film suspense-building. The appearance of the first terrorist "downscreen" (or "foreground"), reveals the "vigilant hidden thing, the special consciousness implicit in a long lens" (7)-- the consciousness of watching from afar, or surveying, on the one hand, and the simultaneous awareness of being watched. The scene is ironically framed by the piano player's response to it. As if cued by the terrorist menace, he strikes up a bouncy silent film track score: while the terrorists bloodily shoot down the golfers, "Buster Keaton, says the piano." The music undermines the "photogenic terror," reducing it to "empty swirl." Its effect is as of forcing the audience to recall a "spool of Biograph dreams....Heart-throbbing romance and knockabout comedy and nerve-racking suspense." The macabre disparity between the

comic score and the film leaves both audience and reader "steeped in gruesomely humorous ambiguity, a spectacle of ridiculous people doing awful things to total fools" (9).

Of this prologue, DeLillo has remarked in an interview that it is the "novel in miniature," its seven characters "isolated, waiting to be named. It's a kind of novel-building," a "pure fiction."⁴ Indeed by separating the act of narrative from narrative, framing the frame of a film inside a novel, abandoning the latter's conventional referents (i.e. plot, characterization, naming) DeLillo indicates that Players is to measure the boundaries between writerly production and readerly reception, fiction and itself, the real and the hyperreal. Here, "pure fiction" is a trope for the metafictional recognition that all stories are doubled: representations of a referential "real," and of the authorial imagination. The novel is but a fictional frame for another fictional frame. This process constitutes the subjectivity of writers, readers and characters in Players : every story and its interpretation can be defined only in relation to another, just as we can only identify these characters from the prologue by very close reading of the narrative proper.

This framing strategy in Players is likewise an extended pun on the novel and the thriller genre. The in-flight movie epitomizes the way DeLillo re-presents the thriller and parodies its sensational conventions of caricatured terrorism, violence and political melodrama. In the scene, for example, the "player" of the piano providing the theatrical score is the writer of the tale. The movie is also about about games,

"players"--not real people: a conscious fiction. Finally, the movie is a miniature or frame of the story to come: a tale about white middle class Americans whose rules or boundaries are intruded upon by menacing but mysterious agents. The story is thus over, explained, before it begins: every gesture in it will be a burlesque or simulation of another, a simulation or secondary account, always already emptied of original significance.

Thus narrative ratiocination or regression are to mark the entire novel. It's narrative mode is not addition but subtraction, not evolution but devolution. The authorial role is in effect diminished from the start by the inevitable self-reproducing nature of story. Hence the tone of Players as in this scene is detached, the action almost purely "descriptive," or filmic. The plot is the most economical of any DeLillo novel. It is comprised of short, gesture-filled scenes, spare of dialogue, each one almost isolated from the next like a single frame of film on a reel. Internal motivation is almost never described: we know mainly the surface of characters and their lives, which are in effect almost all surface. The following passage conveys some of this:

Lyle walked crosstown to busier areas. It was getting dark. He moved to one side to avoid some people stepping off a bus. One of them made momentary contact, putting an arm out to ward off a collision, a man with a mustache and wiry hair, muttering something, his head large and squarish. Keep yer distance, mon. Lyle looked for a public phone as he walked on. It started raining hard and the streets gradually emptied out....He found a bar, ordered a drink and went back to the phone booth. One of McKechnie's daughters answered, saying she's get her father.

"That friends of yours."

"What about him?"

"Burks," Lyle said. "Is that his name?"
"No." (130).

This passage is action almost devoid of context. Speakers of lines are not identified. Places are barely represented, never named. The passage is all movement, no thought. We are seeing film transformed into literature. Information is low, ambiguity high. We are reminded how mysterious and regressive film as a medium is. It implies more than it can ever say; it crops out the real in order to lend a reality effect to what is a fragmented manipulation of space, time and human life.

This ambiguous space is the symbolic home for the lives of protagonists Lyle and Pammy Wynant in the novel. Like movie characters, they have no pasts; nothing is told to us about their childhood, family or adolescence. They are introduced to us in medias res. This is also likely an interesting trope for their Yuppie lives: to be conceived instantly, inorganically, like a character in a cultural script. Lyle works on the Wall Street Trading floor; Pammy is a brochure writer for the Grief Management Council, a small business located in the World Trade Center. Both in public and private (the two realms are virtually interchangeable, as we shall see) their movements and range of expression is minimal, diagrammatic. They eat, shop, watch TV and go to movies together as two halves of an emotionally dysfunctional soul. At home, they speak a coded, minimalist language that is a mix of corporate-speak, lover's idiom and the pseudo-literate dialogue of television. The result is something like soundbites:

"There she is."
"Hi, you're home."

"What's in that big wet funny bag?"
 "I may not show you."
 "Fruit."
 "I got you some cantaloupe."
 "Do I like cantaloupe, he asked," Lyle said.
 "And these plums, can you believe them?"
 "Who'll eat all that? You never eat any. You eat a little bit when you take it out of the bag and then that's it, Chiquita. In the fruit thing to shrivel."
 (33).

This conversation both recalls the "double-quotation" effect of Ratner's Star, where characters speak in "metalanguage," and anticipates the free-floating media-speak drifting through the Gladney home in White Noise. It is private language from public space, already used. It marks Lyle and Pammy as not just ordinary but in effect generic people (not stereotypes, for DeLillo is much too particular in describing the commonplace). Put another way, they are the conceptual selves conceived by the public discourses of consumerism, business and bourgeois norms. Pammy thinks of herself as a pompom girl and Lyle as an engineer--which they are not, groping for an identity that completes the type. The more "intimate" or private the act and conversation, the more it is mediated by these norms:

Pammy and Lyle began to touch. They knew the shifting images of physical similarity. It was an unspoken bond, part of their shared consciousness, the mined silence between people who live together. Curling across each other's limbs and silhouettes they seemed repeatable, daughter cells of some precise division.

They lost contact for a moment. She brought him back, needing that conflict of surfaces, the palpable logic of his cock inside her.....

It's time to "perform," he thought. She would have to be "satisfied." He would have to "service" her. They would make efforts to "interact." (35)

The point is over-made: this is pornography as intimacy: a mass-mediated version of sex that happens to "others" when it

happens to the self. It is generic, "repeatable," a consumer good with a "palpable logic" of consumption and desire. Lyle's self-consciousness is like David Bell's "third person self" bound up with literal images and representations of the sexual act that constitute his 'subjectivity.'

This minimal movement is meant to mimic and mock the performative efficiency and emotional restrictiveness of the bourgeois world it depicts. Pammy's need for but inability to escape her middle class existence reflects the privatization of her functional identity. As brochure writer for Grief Management, her job is to produce the "clerical" structures of a business whose function is to contain with the prevailing market ideology the emotional deviations or excesses of the populace. Her "management" of other people's grief finds parallel in her own addictions to television, junk food and other diversions which counteract the dullness of marriage. The marriage itself is an institutional bracket containing and repressing feeling and sexual desire. The contact of sexual "surfaces" in coitus is the novel's figure for the one-dimensional plane of existence of modern life. Lyle by illuminating comparison is the prototypical male adolescent for whom the artificial reality of stock figures functions like Pammy's boredom as a "shield for deeper feeling" (51). There is in them "no intimation of lives defined by the objects around them, morbid tiers of immortality" (70). Lyle's immersion in codes, surfaces, a digital existence is complimented by his emotional immersion in television. It is his "zen" or mathematics, a "discipline" burning fresh images into his brain and entering him into the "mesh effect of

television, the electrostatic glow that seemed a privileged state between wave and visual frame, a secret celestial energy" (17). In the vernacular, we might say Lyle is "wired," his mind a vessel or container mimicking the frenetic structure of information-loaded circuits and networks from which he draws or earns his essential needs. He even compares his own innermost thoughts to the "electric cross-potential...in the air" on the stock trading room floor (22).

Hence rather than agents in contradistinction to their social environments, Pammy and Lyle should be read, the novel's language and tone suggests, as conceptual embodiments or figurative simulacra of their exterior worlds. This rather savage portrait complements in large measure the book's deracinated visions of financial power and money culture that constitutes a militant tradition of American fiction. Pammy and Lyle live the meager existential lives of Melville's Bartleby or Nathanael West's Hollywood characters. Their worlds are wasteland landscapes terrifyingly immaterial and remote as the souls of characters themselves. Wall Street is described as a "locked sector" which "grew repeatedly more inward, more secret, an occult theology of money, extending ever deeper into its own veined marble...At the inmost crypt might be heard the amplitude pulse of history, a system and rite to outshadow the evidence of men's senses" (132). Pammy feels "dwarved" by the massive interiors of the World Trade Center buildings--conceptual twins in which elevators are "places." Classically postmodern in their inversion of inside and outside (World and Center) the twin buildings iconographically embody the self-reproducing (or

doubling) capacities of capital. Abstracting even paper currency and natural space, the financial district is to Players what San Narcisco or Los Angeles is to The Crying of Lot 49: a malignant personification or projection of the world's desires. Hence, Lyle senses in the financial district "an endless sense of repetition. The district repeated itself in blocks of monochromatic stone. He was present in things. There was more of him here through the nights than he took home with him to vent and liberate" (49).

The generic standards of Lyle and Pammy's life are meant to highlight both the boundaries of their own normalized routines and the expectations of readers accommodated either to this style of living or the fiction that in the seventies especially began to portray it to great critical acclaim. The parodic exaggeration of normalcy winks at readerly disengagement and ennui and at other literary accounts of domestic dullness that remain unswervingly dedicated to routine (White Noise masters this form of parody outright). The story itself is a mark of other stories repressed within the imagination of both characters and readers: of alternatives to standardized "texts." Hence the event which reverses or alters this course is literally an example of narrative and cultural taboo. The plot reverses course when Pammy and Lyle coincidentally pass a man exposing himself in a car.

Pammy sees the man first. She feels "violated" by his exposure, a metaphor DeLillo puns to suggest the dialectical relationship of viewer to viewed, reader to text operating in the novel and in the spectacle culture it describes. "Seeing"

sexual fantasy, violence and taboo is the transgression the movie-going and by implication readerly self desires, as in the opening airliner scene. Yet outside cinema, without the mediation of "spools of biograph" or a comic score, this activity can only recall for Pammy and the reader normalized regrets and guilt that accompany the psychologically unmediated exposure of transgressive desire. The point is made more explicitly in a scene made deliberately analogous to this one describing Pammy's reaction to entering a bank: "It was her money she wanted to draw out obviously, but there was still this bubble of nervousness and guilt, there was still this profound anxiety over her name, her handwriting, there was still this feeling that the core content of her personality was about to be revealed, and she would stand on line with two dozen others, roped in, yawning decorously, a suspect" (52).

The conjunction of anxieties attached to this moment of identification is crucial. Sexual desire, like material need, constantly puts the self at risk of either committing or being witness to a "crime" where the "criminal" is the desire to transgress the boundaries of the bourgeois self. Pammy's flash of recognition is onto the arbitrary yet fixed lines of discursive engagement of her own life that separates guilt and innocence according to propriety and possession. In the prologue scene, this was the "message" of the movie. But it went unlearned there because of the illusionary distance (psychologically) between spectators and film. The fiction remained a fiction; the spectator a spectator. Here, however, Pammy's feeling of being monitored (undoubtedly by the presence

of bank cameras that record each "suspect" in line) exposes the discursive double-bind of optical technology. The presence of a camera in both scenes emphasizes that it is in seeing the self from the "other" side of the discursive line that mediation becomes a source of anxiety. Pammy's life and marital history as products of mediation subconsciously recur as a form of self-division: the self feels itself separate from the world--becomes a 'suspect' under the surveillance of cultural norms. Pammy's bank angst is like David Bell's moment of decision to make a movie about his life, the point where he realizes mediation is all and seeks to leap into the breach by making his self film. Here, Pammy's "schizophrenia" includes the realization that her money is literally not hers: it belongs to the anonymous source of power on the other side of the surveillant camera that now monitors her desire for access. This epiphany exposes the double bind of discursive power in the novel. Suddenly Pammy feels herself both "inside" and "outside" of normalized social process: both constrained and liberated, criminal and free, guilty and innocent as the lamb by the discourses that, in Johnson's formulation earlier, mediate her "subjectivity."

This theme emerges more explicitly in Lyle's response to the same deviant figure in the car. Unlike Pammy, he represses the desire to look and instead peers "as if at some compelling sight in a third-story window across the street" (161). The elided object here is of course Lee Harvey Oswald, who returns again and again in DeLillo as the prototype for the schizophrenic postmodern self. In Libra, DeLillo presents Oswald as the victim of a massive displacement of libidinal energies from the "real"

world to the fantasy realm of movies, television, historical heroism. Something latent but identical occurs for Lyle. Like Pammy, he has repressed thus far his own "criminal" status, his complicity in the discursive power of the Wall Street operations the terrorists will undermine. Lyle is the bank, the surveillant other to Pammy monitoring from within their bourgeois progress. The novel's single clue to this is the recurring presence on the street outside his office of an anonymous elderly man protesting Wall Street greed who carries signs with socialist slogans and remembrances of the Haymarket Riots. Lyle is drawn to the man but constantly ignores him. He is thus like Pammy self-divided by late-capital discursive norms. "It's not an easy matter, being the oppressor" says Lyle early in the novel, in a speech anticipating his later participation in the conspiracy. The bourgeois rules are made by "well-meaning white folks who have taken up the struggle against the struggle, not knowing...that the capitalist system and the power structure and the pattern of repression are themselves a struggle" (34.)

Lyle's decision to join with the terrorists thus must be seen as the gradual coming to the fore, jolted by his brush with sexual transgression, of the fantasy of "risk." His move into "terrorism," DeLillo suggests, is merely the mirror or duplicate of his risk-taking Wall Street position. The struggle between "inside" and "outside" Wall Street is itself a metaphor for the self-divisions of the ideologically complicitous subject and system. Socially and historically, it is a figure for domestic terrorism a la the White House Watergate plumbers: the American self versus its own fantasized "other." The irony of

Lyle's turn is the same as that of the patriot Lee Oswald's shooting of Kennedy. Both Lyle and Oswald are decentered Everymen for whom identity is a pure product (like Bucky Wunderlick's) of discursive technologies and systems around him.

This is the clear theme of Lyle's relationship with the terrorist organization leader J. Kinnear. He is a shadowy figure in the novel, evil and ambiguous. He has connections to both South American drug trades, the C.I.A. and possibly the Kennedy Assassination. Kinnear is literally the "double agent" in the novel Lyle becomes: bourgeois operator and terrorist. He functions "simultaneously on two levels. Counterpoise. His life was based on forces tending to produce equilibrium. Everything had a delayed effect...Collapsed inward" (145). Kinnear's Kennedy link is important to his mysterious configuration. The assassination and Watergate are the powerful (especially for the metafictional novelist) cultural and historical contexts for events in Players. DeLillo would like us to see virtually everyone in his fiction after Nixon as a conspirator or paranoid in one fashion or another. Kinnear realizes and speaks this legacy:

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 improbable 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 face we encounter, layers of ambiguity. This is all so alien to the liberal spirit...This haze of conspiracies and multiple interpretations. So much for the great instructing vision of

the federal government. (104)

Kinnear's cynical assessment provides the framework for Lyle and Pammy's "criminal" longings. They literally are complicit, as is a culture whose love of games, violence, double-lives, intrigues--"thrillers," has been reflected back to itself by the moves of government. The catalytic event that draws Lyle into the conspiracy is the the shooting of his colleague George Sedbauer on the Stock Exchange Floor. It creates a flurry of speculation and theories reminiscent of the various interpretations of the Kennedy assassination, which allusions elsewhere in the novel help evoke. Sedbauer's double-connection to Wall Street and the conspiracy and his rumored homosexuality recall the transgressive desires of the two protagonists and the transparent nature of their enslavement within the social formation that makes all of its subject "suspects." Rather crudely, DeLillo uses homosexuality as yet another metaphor of doubling--the acting out of a secret or closet life. Repression gives rise to fantasy, fantasy to violent desire, desire to 'exposure' and another round of repression. Thus Sedbauer's killing, the Kennedy assassination, defines conspiracy as bourgeois repression doubling back against itself. The "anal round of petty griefs" that characterizes Lyle and Pammy's life, Sedbauer's secret homosexuality, the game of golf must necessarily erupt in the violent "transgression" of these same norms.

This notion also explains Kinnear's role as surrogate author of the novel. In the opening scene he "scores" the viewing of the in-flight movie--he is the anonymous piano player king.

In the story proper this role is literally reprised. Kinnear's mysterious identity and connections to virtually every named organization and event in the story makes him the omniscient "plotter" in the tale. He masterminds the conspiracy, explains to Lyle in the aforecited passage the themes of the novel and Lyle's own involvement and constantly keeps Lyle on the verge of disclosure about events. Thus John Aldridge notes that Kinnear's terrorist group "offer (s) a promise of order and intelligible, if misdirected purpose in an environment in which the sources of power seem mysterious and unreachable, and the consequences of individual action exist without relation to any context of judgement that might give them emotional or moral meaning."⁵ Kinnear's surrogate role as conspirator/author also duplicates DeLillo's relation to us. "Plotting" on the political and narrative level are inherently seductive acts to the citizen produced by the republican intrigue Kinnear describes. Lyle's search for closure, like ours, is a search for positivist liberal solutions to our own political mysteries from the Bay of Pigs forward.

Yet this resolution is gradually effaced from the latter stages of the novel as representational ambiguity signifies epistemological crisis. Action and agency undergo an evisceration that is the absolute negativity of "meanings" or signification. The "pure fiction" of the opening scene of the novel which is without context for interpretation--all image and gesture, returns as the mode narrative action in the closing stages of the novel. This process, one I would call anti-representation, Tom LeClair has astutely compared to the

overexposure of a photograph to light. Jack, who has "crossed-over" into heterosexuality and betrayed Ethan, kills himself by without comment or explanation setting himself on fire. Lyle is set upon in a hotel room by Rosemary who appears inexplicably wearing a plastic phallus presumably to use upon him. These scenes function like movie climaxes: they are all gesture, high in ambiguity, low in resolution. Lyle's pornographic moment in the hotel provides, like visual pornography, a "blank autonomy" of human interaction, "an exemption from some vague imperative, perhaps the need to verify one's status" (197). Jack's cross-legged self-immolation--an image in a seventies novel linked inextricably perhaps to that of Vietnamese monks protesting war, provides the smoking heap of "resistance" to all forms of discursive mediation. His body is a self-consumed "stump" sitting, appropriately, amidst icons of American consumption: cans of Ajax and Campbell's soup, Maxwell House, Pepsi-Cola, Budweiser. The soup can is Warhol's, no doubt, and the scene is consciously about meaningless reproductions. Jack's protest is about finally nothing explainable: like a consumer good it is overburdened with meaning to the point of total ambiguity: like the in-flight movie it is both a metonymy for the novel at large and an empty signifier, without context for interpretation.

With this in mind we can read the ending of Players to see how the prologue and epilogue underscore the boundaries of doublings and simulations in literary texts. Lyle's voice anonymously opens the novel in the dark room of the airliner in the former: "Someone says: "Motels. I like motels. I wish I owned a chain, worldwide. I'd like to go from one to another.

There's something self-realizing about that" (4). The "epilogue" of the novel is called "The Motel." It describes Lyle with a sleeping Rosemary awaiting the phone call from Kinnear that will give him information about himself and his connection to Oswald, thus by implication fulfilling what remains of Lyle's own "heroic" fantasies through a pure vicariousness. The novel brings Lyle and the reader to this point to explode the possibility that his story (and by implication ours) have any self-evident or "self-realizing" meaning. The hotel room is suddenly filled with the "luminous cleansing" of bright light which "absolve (s) us of our secret knowledge:"

Spaces and what they contain no longer account for, mean, serve as examples of, or represent.

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 far. We know nothing else about him. (212)

The end of the novel is the end of "representation." The space of the text itself, this frame which contains the story proper, empties of meaning for "we" the reader just as Lyle evaporates in the last lines of the text. Lyle's dissipation and the novelist's mock-forfeiting of descriptive or interpretive power culminates what is called elsewhere the "reduced sensibility" of contemporary living. It implies that the artist, like the bourgeois subject, operates in an area resembling the airline lounge and the Motel, what DeLillo calls "pure fiction." In this fiction without referent--with characters divorced of names, identities, plot, convention DeLillo marks the natural empty space, the blank page, as it were, where fiction and the fantasy or double life of

mediascape meet. It is that pure hyperreality producing all of the discourses the novel documents, including itself: its secret desires, second selves, surveillances, paranoias---the world of seeing and being seen that the narrative "frame" foregrounds.

Lyle's final anonymity is likewise the novel's final enclosing loop that undermines generic expectations about everything from character development (again LeClair's image of the overexposed image seems resonant), to story climax and resolution. Lyle's disappearance disappoints our expected hopes of seeing the terrorist mission end with the bloodbath we as cultural readers are trained and titillated to expect. Lyle's sado-masochistic punishment in the hotel scene may be DeLillo's own nasty joke on his and our desire for the satisfaction of this pleasure. Likewise, Lyle remains waiting for the resolution of the mystery of the Kennedy assassination that is broadly a metaphor for the absence of political certitude at the center of his own life.

Hence the ending denies too the sympathetic longings of the liberal reader who by implication has his or her identity deconfirmed, defamiliarized through the dissipation and irresolution of the "mystery" or thriller story.

Here David Miller, in his Foucauldian analysis of the Victorian novel, speaks of its narrative strategies in words applicable to Players and DeLillo's fiction generally. Their point, he argues, is to examine the "private and domestic sphere on which the very identity of the liberal subject depends." They appeal to the "fictional" identity of that reader "who seems to recognize himself most fully only when he forgets or disavows his

functional implication in a system of carceral restraints as disciplinary injunctions." ⁷ Likewise, DeLillo's framing self-consciously refers us only to another series of frames--movies, pictures, television, which are for us as for Lyle the vehicles of cultural "discipline:" the prisonhouse of images. Players ends like a TV set turned off, or a movie where the opening of theater doors obscure the image before the eye. The "we" addressed in the scene (like the "you" addressed in the prologue) are continued or verified by it, the book itself: it is as it were the projector, we the image. Thus Tom LeClair notes that the "The ultimate complicity in the novel is.... not the reader's identification with a character who is fascinated by secret sex or violence, but the complicity of the author in writing and the reader in reading." ⁸ Indeed writing and reading are both submissions to and admissions of the fictional processes of self-realization. We make ourselves through the empathic processes of fiction that Players is about. The novel is in this sense the scene or site of postmodern crimes. It is for both reader and writer the "hotel" where self-actualizing begins in the form of the suspended disbelief of the liberal subject in the realities of boundaries, the boundaries of realities.

Players refuses, or tries to refuse us that suspension through its very self-conscious representational strategies. The mirror up to nature of Lyle and Pammy's prototypical bourgeois lives is the book's reflection back to us or our own defamiliarized image. Our attempted "transgression" into the realm of fiction can only return us to ourselves. The final

clue as to how we might understand or think about this comes when Pammy passes a flophouse marquee and sees the word "Transients" there.

Something about the word confused her. It took on an abstract tone, as words had done before in her experience (although rarely), subsisting in her mind as language units that had mysteriously evaded the responsibilities of content. Tran-zhents. What it conveyed could not itself be put into words. The functional value had slipped out of its brk somehow and vanished. Pammy stopped walking, turned her body completely and looked once more at the sign. Second passed before she grasped its meaning. (207).

We never learn what Pammy has grasped. The multiple suspension of signification here, delayed even as it is delivered points to the impasse of interpretation in the novel. Meaning and explanation is here both transient and immanent: eternally fleeting but always present. Narratologically, this is the "meaning" of the withholding of meaning: we must infer from our reading that not being told the word's meaning is the book's meaning. "Mystery" may be finally the release of character and reader from the expectations of logic and resolution, but it exists beyond or in textual futures as yet unnamed. It is in this sense that we may be considered "absolved" of our secret knowledge in the final disappearance of Lyle: the transient's hotel transience is our imminent warning. Thus Players moves itself to a point of total negation, or no-return to mark the possibility, always elided, of a real "revelation" about the hyperreality it is about. It is this moment, erased as soon as it is presented, that remains when the book is completed and which brings us face to face with the "transience" of our own intensely mediated lives.

Players ends on a note of linguistic and political deracination. The reduction of Lyle Wynant's bourgeois revolt to an obscene sado-masochistic moment makes the book one of DeLillo's most cryptic. It is a relentlessly analytical novel that sees explication as a mode of existence by which its characters are made to live. The implicitness of style, tone and plot signifies the spiritual deprivation of its postmodern scene, the parodic quality of its culture and the problem of materiality erasing viable subjectivities and meanings. Like Ratner's Star it is also "undiscouragably diffuse," as if the point were again the degree to which systemic systems of abstraction mediate even the novel-writing process. By book's end our desire for referentiality is meant with a snide joke about desire itself.

Running Dog is the second-half of Players, but its obverse and very different half. Set in a less abstract, more earthy and sultry New York, it flits through realistically rendered settings like the New York art world, the United States chambers of government, the insides of magazines offices, Times Square. This realism is in part an overcompensation for the hyperreal (and hyperspace) of Players. It deliberately extends and reverses DeLillo's consideration of the abstract/concrete, frame/reality problem in Players by making presence rather than absence the focus of story. Where all signs of materiality were fading in the latter, they flood the former, saturating the book's "field" with cultural and historical meaning. Its central plot prop, a rumored pornographic film of Adolf Hitler under the Reich Chancellery, is literally a floating signifier to

which all varieties of messages and explanations attach. Hence semiotic overdetermination is again an important theme: film's hold over viewers in contemporary culture is linked to the power of mass movements, reification, media manipulation, ego-formation and the social pathologies of declining bourgeois cultures. Its capacity to simulate events and personalities is itself a metonymy for personality for characters in Running Dog who like Lyle and Pammy in Players and David Bell in Americana seek out and possess "double lives." Images are authority, literally and figuratively in the novel. They create a discourse of consumer and political desire that as in Players controls the lives of virtually all major characters.

Around this problem recurs the theme of criminality in the book. The representatives of mainstream and marginal culture share a perverse fascination with "risk" and transgression that intensifies the object fetish theme in Players. The conspiratorial hunt for the Hitler film involves overlapping discursive strands of government, mass media, the criminal underworld, big business, pornography markets. Each of these constitutes a realm of "self-actualization" related to the psychology of a spectacle culture which pours out or displaces "value" with sheer images of value--advertising, propoganda, information, celebrity--all of which are implied elements in the historical footage of Hitler that is pursued. The film is also a clue to the novel's genre parody, which examines the function of story-telling as it relates to the multiple media at the center of the story. In part the book is a Pynchonesque re-writing of the detective story,

particularly the ideological thriller, as Frow notes, that emphasizes the metaphysical hermeneutic problems inherent in the form. That level of reading in the book however is one I will eschew. I am more interested in how it considers the form and ideology of popular fiction, film and journalism as narrative types and how they have shaped both historical events of the contemporary period (from World War II to Watergate) and our responses to them. I will argue that Running Dog is a metafictional critique of these popular narrative forms, which it shows working independently and in conjunction to displace oppositional, particularly Marxist political narratives, including literary ones. It proposes the Second World War as the point at which the confluence of popular culture and politics began to make plausible and efficacious political resistance impossible. DeLillo offers Charlie Chaplin as something like the prototype of the postmodern political "subject" for whom the attempt to resist fascism in film underscores the difficulties of counter-politics in an era of media and film saturation. The Great Dictator becomes a paradigmatic case study of illegibility—a foreshadow of the Zapruder Film in Libra which both frames and determines what is "real" while it resists a final reading. Thus the book pushes its plot toward the same general point as Players whereby the story itself comes to represent the impossibly mediated relationship of viewer to film, reader to book, self to world.

Yet just as in Players DeLillo holds to a vaguely modernist faith that this postmodern impasse can be resolved, or may itself contain possibilities for political restitution.

It challenges left critics of popular culture such as Adorno, Eagleton and Jameson, each of whom has argued that postmodernism and popular culture's most pernicious influence on alternative politics has been the nostalgification of "truth, meaning and history," in Eagleton's words, against and outside of which Marxism and other oppositional politics stand as the uninvited guest at capitalism's late, if not last picture show.⁹ Sticking with this metaphor to the end, I will argue that it is precisely the picture show which climaxes the narrative of Running Dog which deconstructs any purely ideological reading of narrative form and argues instead for an oppositional epistemology to popular vehicles of representation. Reversing, that is, both the standard left critique of pop culture and the thriller ideology Frow notes, Running Dog finally "shows" us how to see and read popular narratives as a means of salvaging itself as a "true" and truly "alternative" oppositional critique of late, or postmodern capital and cultural production.

Running Dog's plot is woven from two strands. The first involves the quest for the aforementioned pornographic film of Hitler reveling in the Reich Chancellery in the hours before Germany's surrender and is participated in by all the book's main characters. They include Senator Lloyd Percival, an erotica-collecting U.S. Senator; Gleny Selvy, an aide to Percival, pornography buyer and former U.S. special forces agent in Vietnam; Lightborne (no first name) a dealer of erotic memorabilia; and Moll Robbins, investigative reporter for Running Dog magazine, a one-time radical journal now turned scandal

sheet, whose initial task in the novel is to investigate Percival's connections to PAC/ORD, a government organization created to investigate funding abuses by its own intelligence agencies. The second "plot" concerns Earl Mudger, another U.S. special forces vet and Selvy's former trainer, who now heads the mysterious Radial Matrix organization, a spin-off of U.S. intelligence forces that is allegedly "out of control" as a profiteering arms sale and terrorist outfit. Mudger's function, aside from controlling through Radial Matrix a wide network of pornography and arms markets, is to see carried out his own order for Selvy's execution when he perceives the latter as having double-crossed him in Radial Matrix's quest to control the Hitler film.

This "double-narrative" movement is a formal representation of Running Dog's primary themes: burlesque, doubling and mistaken identity. Each plot sheds some lights on these. The primary quest for the Hitler film reveals that all of the characters in the search are leading "double" political or sexual lives, revealed as a variety of object and erotic obsessions, and that the Hitler film is not pornographic but instead footage presumed to be shot by Eva Braun of Hitler (or at least a "representation" of Hitler on film) imitating Charlie Chaplin (about which more later). The film's disappointment thus ironically doubles back on the lives of its pursuants: they, Senators, reporters, special forces agents and erotica-collectors, are the "deviant;" Hitler is "humanized," in the words of Lightborne, in the film. Read politically, this doubling back marks the Hitler film as the quintessential

commercial and sexual object of bourgeois desire and its sadistic urge for domination and control. It is the "dirty little secret" of a public longing for violence and sacrificial excess around a public figure whose private life acquires the luster of capital, or religious mystery. The allusion to Hitler precedes but parallels Jack Gladney's infatuation in White Noise which is the political scientist's equivalent of Elvis-mania. The point for DeLillo is that these figures are embodied projections of repressed cultural longings. Like Bucky Wunderlick's "Mountain Tapes," the Hitler film is an emblem of the nostalgia for lost "private life" in a mediascape culture (and hence a variation on Baudrillard's nostalgia for the "real.")

This loss, the catalyst for which is ironically a commodity, is as in Players a sign of the complete hegemony of discursive power. The "cultural" doubling of authority and anti-authority, criminal and police recurs again as a sign that all subject positions are in effect interchangeable or representable as popular icons of consumer desire. The book opens with an extended scene or tableau that like the in-flight film in Players encapsulates and frames the action to follow. Christoph Ludecke, the son of a German Nazi officer, cruises the New York warehouse district in drag looking to make a contact with the buyer of the Hitler film which has come into his possession. He is under surveillance in the scene by two police officers who are voyeurs unto the action, which is a deliberate sexual and commercial titillation: a sexy stroller, a dark street, a deal to be done. A double desire operates on the reader: both toward the scene and toward the promise of a good generic mystery on the horizon. But

the scene, as it turns out, is in and about "disguise:"

Ludecke is found dead and in drag by the cops, who lament that

"These days...Everybody's in disguise:"

"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," Del Bravo told him.

This scene, rich in detective novel resonance and parody, in cultural decadence and political futility (Del Bravo is "Of the Brave", as in *Home*), marks the paranoid atmosphere of Running Dog and DeLillo generally as one of hermeneutic uncertainty. One result of the proliferation of false signs (costumes) is the eroticization of everything else; pornography, obscenity are the logical extensions of an image-culture that in its search for the "real" conceives it as sex. Hence Lightborne's art dealership "Cosmic Erotics" which peddles phallic statues as original art; Percival's art collection is entirely erotic. These trends are traced in the novel back to the eroticization of pure power in fascist hands. Ludecke recalls his father's "explanation" Alles nach Gottes Willen: "All according to God's will. The God of Body. The God of Lipstick and Silk. The God of Nylon, Scent and Shadow" (4). The proliferation of pornography, the worship of the body, the conspiracy, the paranoia, the menace and dread, the eroticization of power: these are the bracketed or elided symptoms of Nazi Germany that predominate in DeLillo's 1970's America. Bruce Bawer's angry assessment of this situation--DeLillo's message is that "We are all Hitler!" he screams¹⁰ mockingly, is a caricature as wide as DeLillo's own. The

satirical point is a cultural identification with a grotesque or cartoonish form and period of power that cartoon culture itself produces. If Hitler lives as a role model for personal desire, it is not in DeLillo's fictions but in the gross exploitation novels (the Ludlums and others) DeLillo is parodying.

The second plot complements the first by presenting Selvy ("selfish") as the self who resists any deviance or deviation by sticking exclusively to his military "routine." He disavows interest in the Hitler film as a distraction or "choice" that is in his mind a "subtle form of disease." Yet this "self-repression" is only the most extreme version of that which plagues all the characters in the novel.

His "routine" includes sado-masochistic fetish with weapons and women's bodies (interchangeable parts in the story's ideological economy) and is an ascetic version of the double life that all the characters lead. Stuart Johnson has pointed out that Selvy's "refusal to speculate" or see beyond his routine

"illustrates the denial of the general or transcendent, and the consequent demand for immediate context....routine has for Selvy¹¹ no content at all." Selvy is pure function, in other words.

His training as a soldier at Marathon Mines, a secret military camp, makes him a model of the authoritarian personality for whom power comes through efficiency, unfailing or unswerving devotion and ritual worship of programmatic living.

One point of this plot is clearly to parody and revive the themes of vintage thrillers; the search for the fetishized object recalls especially The Maltese Falcon, and the novel moves through layers of revelation each one of which reveals either

decadence, or greed or deception. We might speculate here too on the extent to which the hard-boiled novel and film noir are always about the self-divisions within the authoritarian personality; almost any real Chandler or Hammett gunshoe begins with paranoid assumptions about power and ultimately must cross the line into "criminal" territory (indeed because they exist outside of the police ranks and constantly challenge them they are figuratively already there). Sadism, that fascist mood, permeates virtually every faithful noir tale, as it does many DeLillo novels but most particularly Running Dog. Indeed as the genre parody deepens, sadism emerges through it as a mode of discourse: watching things move. Earl Mudger recounts to Moll having seen her "in motion, physically, only once" (171). The image stays with him like an cinematic or pictorial icon--a cliché, but a tantalizing one. "Long legs. Longs legs kill me. I'd did for long lengs" (171). Seeing and describing movement arouses Earl precisely, as Laura Mulvey might predict, toward a form of narrative pleasure:

Woman like you. Long legs like yours. You don't mind a little rough language, a touch of the unrefined... This is number two. Second time I'm watching. Only this time you're walking away. Cunt. Aren't you? Only this time you're leaving, not arriving. Aren't you? Cunt. Bitch. Cunt."

He spoke softly all the way through, almost wistfully, even to the very end, so that his words were touched with a curious melancholy, a tone of longing. This was strange, of course, the voice he'd chosen, considering what he had to say. It was like a formal recital. Something learned for school. Yes, a recitation. A factual and rather pretty narrative. A calm and beautifully detached and rather touching enumeration of small truths. (172)

From watcher, to teller, to creator of "detached" stories:

Mudger here identifies the vicarious pleasure not just of

narrative cinema but of all moving images. Film in the novel becomes a trope itself for pleasure, violence and the satiation of all varieties of insatiable pleasures. It is a constant form of displacement, just as the novel as parody, and the Hitler film as prized icon shifts desire and gratification onto vehicles of representation. Selvy denotes this when he tells Moll that the period in which they live (the mid-70s) is one in which everyone "sleeps with their enemies." On the story level this refers to Moll's own ongoing affair with him, expose journalist bedding down with Vietnam assassin; on the formal level, however, Selvy's comment is a metonymy for the substitution of Moll's writerly critical narrative as investigative journalist by the "story" of the Hitler film she now pursues. As both the would-be discoverer of the secret workings of Radial Matrix (hence the reader's single hope for convention-satisfying resolution) and as protagonist Moll's entrance into the film plot signals her and our entrapment in a "radial" tale of consumption and reification. Running Dog magazine, her employer, and Running Dog the novel are narrative "matrixes" geared for and to bourgeois "convention" in the most plural reading of that word. The Hitler film which would offer closure to the story becomes the "climax" of sexual, consumer, novelistic and political narratives which will by implication relieve the unspent energies of an incestuous and repressed--"All conspiracies begin with self repression" notes Glen Selvy--body politic. Hence Running Dog suggests that as readers (and voyeurs into reading), ideological subjects of the thriller and the state, consumers of narrative and of paperbacks, we are all "Molls" waiting for what I call consu (mm)er mation.

Surely this is not The Maltese Falcon now, and surely John Frow is correct that the formal structures of the thriller are "eroded" by Running Dog's metafictional imagination. Yet Running Dog pushes its ideological inquiry into narrative into the category of "history" in order to double back again on the problem of apprehending the past through simulations of it. Its vehicle for this is again film. Midway through the novel Moll attends with Selvy a screening of Chaplin's The Great Dictator. The film is "narrated" transparently, in movie-like fashion similar to the opening of Players to simulate as it were the novel's frame-within-a-frame, story-within story motif. The Chaplin film pre-views, like a kind of novelistic trailer, Hitler's later impersonation of him, and becomes for Moll and for the reader an emblem of twentieth-century fantasy play: the barber as dictator and dictator as barber/actor as fascist and fascist as actor mimics the "sleeping with your enemies" psychology of narrative which by implication encloses every character, story teller and reader. The Chaplin/Hitler "double" can thus be read as the prototype of what Baudrillard and Jameson have separately termed postmodern "schizophrenia," that psychic slavery to hype and hyperreality represented, for example, by Travis Bickle in Martin Scorsese's Taxi Driver and DeLillo's character of Lee Harvey Oswald in Libra. Like The Great Dictator these stories offer individuals who step inside the role of cultural hero in order to exterminate, with crusading speeches or small fire arms, popular narratives and protagonists who have successfully achieved or unrepressed the "double life" fantasy others crave.

Thus Running Dog can be read as a kind of political allegory naturally consumed by the problem of history and historical agency. We are reminded by Moll, for example, that Chaplin later remorse'd that he had made his "burlesque" dictator film once he had witnessed the full exploits of the Third Reich. Having too "slept with his enemies," Chaplin's regrets about his inability to deter fascism parallels Moll's own yuppiefied nostalgia for the revolutionary sixties--when Running Dog was an ideological slogan and not a journalistic brand name. Both Moll and Chaplin are revolutionaries manqué whose good intentions succumb to their own (and their culture's) consumer fetish, the triumph of the pop culture will.

Yet this reading is one Running Dog itself erodes to affirm, if subtly, the possibility of a counter-narrative or reading of itself and history. Skeptical of any binary opposition of real/fantasy which it has marked as the the very logos of narrative desire, DeLillo inverts and levels the terms in the novel's final pages. This is first signalled when Lightborne expresses doubt to Moll during the screening of the Hitler film that the figure impersonating Chaplin is really Hitler. The screen figure with the "world's most famous mustache" is representationally eclipsed for them by his and the film's own self-consciousness. Hitler's Chaplin pantomime is marred by gestures of "authenticity" and excess. He is briefly "flooded in light--the bleached and toneless effect of overexposure" (236). The camera catches in his eye "a trace of flame, the smallest luster. A professional effect." He "produces" an expression--- "Charlie's smile. An accurate reproduction." These signs of

imitation and parody force Lightborne and Moll to acknowledge the crisis of representational "truth" the film itself simulates, and suddenly they turn to discussing history:

"They were born the same week of the same month of the same year."

"Is that a point?"

"Within days of each other."

"But is that a point?"

"It's a fact. A truth. It's history."

Film becomes here the medium that abolishes its own representational capacity. The desire contained within the frame for the perfect "burlesque" undoes itself. Now the camera faces the audience (and the reader of the text who "sits" with the audience reading the transparent description of the film) who are "attempting to pretend that the Chaplinesque figure is still performing at a point directly behind the camera" (237). We too are trying in reading this scene to "remember" the narrative illusion that is the novel. But the narrative symbolically refuses this, intercutting descriptions of the film with lines of dialogue from the "audience." The last lines of the scene are ambiguous according to just this logic: "Silently they applaud the masquerade." No context is provided for this they: it may be the Reich Chancellery crowd, the New York audience or by implication the reader. "They" are all "we" at the point where the narrative and the film disavow or undermine fiction-making by acknowledging that all identity is an indeterminable fiction--that fantasy is ontologically the same as the "real." Suddenly, then, the Hitler film and the book demand another kind of reading, what Stuart Johnson and Tom LeClair suggest is a "transcontextual" one that will force another means of

interpretation.

Naturally, this proves too much for the star-gazed moviegoers. Moll and Lightborne (the latter who has himself earlier been compared to Chaplin, carrying a cane for effect) leave before the second reel. Their disenchantment and interpretive bewilderment with the Hitler film are meant to demonstrate precisely what he and Moll have missed: how to read, oppositionally, history as "text." This would mean, first of all, seeing that the ambiguity of identity in the film signals the psychological fantasy life both characters are subject to. It would mean recognizing, in Stuart Johnson's words, that "If identities are unstable, then that must mean, the film decides, that the representation is purely a function of what the audience sees...we have seen a process of shifting identities that requires multiple contexts and referents in order to function."¹² Put in other words, it would mean recognizing that neither film nor fantasy are absolute versions of the real. But the overwhelming desire for story, its fetishization, the Oswald-like attachment to imaginary history obviates this insight for the viewers, who cannot step outside of the larger frame of "desire"--late-capital desire, that has brought them to this movie in the first place. "Lightborne wondered if they'd blame him for what was on the film. All he could do was suggest possible outlets. They could sell it to one of the networks as a news special. They could sell it to the Whitney Museum or the Canadian Film Board. He'd come up with a list of suggestions. What else could he do? Could he tell them people like to dress up? Could he tell them history is true?" (244).

This last phrase, "History is true," is Running Dog's deconstructive double-entendre on representation. In seeing "through" the mirage of film construction (or representation) in the novel we are meant to see through, too, to the (barely) visible strings of historical power: we may as readers recuperate critical consciousness through recognizing ideology's inherent structural, representational and narratological similarities to simulacra. Both, like pornography, are comprised of what Moll recognizes on the streets of New York as "the hard surfaces, the blatant flesh of things" (244). Hitler is indeed "humanized" by the fact of his coincidental parallel birth to Chaplin, their physical resemblance, their rise from penury to international charismatic celebrity. In Running Dog, film does eventually restore the possibility of our understanding "private life," and thus to see in relation, rather than in separation, the real and fantastic. Hence to recognize that "History is true" is to learn that "History is false" and vice-versa. In spelling out this aporia Running Dog hopes to re-construct the agency of both postmodern author and reader who share in a small joke from the novel's other "plot," one that Moll and Lightborne, significantly, can't see or know. In the desert simultaneous to the screening of the Hitler film *Levi Blackwater* is preparing a funereal sky burial for his long-time friend Glen Selvy. Mudger's assassination contract has finally been made good. Preparing for the ritual burial Levi "wasn't sure he knew how to do this. But he believed he would feel something; something would tell him whether he was on the right path. He knew for certain how you started. You started by plucking a few

strands of hair from the top of the dead man's head" (246). The joke is that Selvy has been decapitated--his head carried off pages earlier by his assassin. Since this is the novel's last line, we must "complete" the narrative in our own heads--keep ours as readers, by recalling through the fiction that "History is true." In so doing, we re-member Selvy, and by extension the violence that precedes all death. In this way we complete DeLillo's re-writing of the Nazi mystery thriller. Marginalized by its popular culture versions and simulacra--all and each of which the Hitler film ultimately represents, the Holocaust is restored to memory by the novel's own last "seduction" which confirms that History is true. The book thus ends by demonstrating its own dialectic critique of the ideologies and narratives of popular culture and literature: Running Dog restores what it itself as fiction has displaced--the oppositional historical consciousness its title has all along named as its subject.

Notes for Chapter VI:

1. John Frow. Marxism and Literary History. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 141.
2. John Johnston. "Generic Difficulties in the Novels of Don DeLillo." Studies in Modern Fiction 30 (Summer 1989), p. 269.
3. Molesworth, "A Perfect Starry Night," p. 381.
4. Don DeLillo and Tom LeClair, "An Interview with Don DeLillo," Anything Can Happen: Interviews with American Novelists, Ed. Tom LeClair and Larry McCaffery (Urbana, Chicago, and London: University of Illinois Press, 1983), p. 152.
5. Aldridge, The American Novel and the Way We Live Now, p. 58.
6. See chapter on Players in LeClair, In the Loop.
7. D.A. Miller. The Novel and the Police. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 18.
8. LeClair, In The Loop, p. 155.
9. Eagleton, "Capitalism, Modernism, and Postmodernism."
10. Bruce Bawer. "Don DeLillo's America." New Criterion. (April 1985), 34-42. Bawer's is the most comprehensive case by a conservative made against DeLillo's work.
11. Stuart Johnson. "Extraphilosophical Instigations in Don DeLillo's Running Dog." Contemporary Literature, 1 (XXVI 1985), p. 79.
12. Ibid., p. 89.

Ch. VII One World, One Madness: The Names

The world has become self-referring...The world for thousands of years was our escape, was our refuge. Men hid from themselves in the world. We hid from God or death. The world was where we lived, the self was where we went mad and died. But now the world has made a self of its own...What happens to us now that the world has a self? How do we say the simplest thing without falling into a trap? Where do we go, how do we live, who do we believe? This is my vision, a self-referring world, a world in which there is no escape.

The Names

Modernism's preoccupation was with time; postmodernism's is with space. The former affirmed the coherence of narrative and linguistic representation; the latter is timid about "monological" forms. Writing was comfortably in the physical world in great modernist stories; postmodern fiction finds this relationship deeply troubled by the radical changes in language to world relationships since, roughly, de Saussure. Keeping in mind these differences helps illuminate DeLillo's seventh novel, The Names. His only book set outside of America, it in fact roams across global space. It opens in Greece, in the early 1980's, where protagonist James Axton, a risk analyst for insurance companies advising American investors, has been sent by his 'parent' company. It follows him on business to India and the Middle East, returns via memory to Canada, where he once lived with his ex-wife Kathryn and nine year-old son Tap, and recalls his American upbringing in the mid-west as a boy. Axton also island-hops. He is based in Athens, spends much time on the fictitious island Kouros, named for ancient sculpted male figures, and ventures into more remote Greek places on periodic excursions.

As protagonist then, Axton is a self-acknowledged tourist, a

looker, whose role is to read and know a world in which he feels constantly exiled, linguistically limited (he understands only English) and perennially adrift. Indeed like a tourist Axton is ever-conscious of being "seen" by others as alien. He concocts a list of "27 Depravities" which he is sure his ex-wife associates with him, one of which is "We make you wonder if you are the outsider in this group" (17). He lies to his concierge, afraid to tell him names of places he is going that he can't pronounce for fear of looking ignorant. His ignorance of culture and history he uses as a shield to ignore the political instabilities of the regions in which he works to avoid having to defend his country from angry criticism from hostiles.

Hence The Names makes explicit through its tourism theme what other DeLillo novels have inferred: that Americans in the network of global communications culture inevitably feel isolation from any tactile comforting world, any cozy epistemological home. Like David Bell, Bucky Wunderlick and Lyle Wynant, Axton is suspended, psychologically, in intense self-awareness and withdrawal from intimacy with place or people. Like those other characters, too, Axton senses his own complicity in powerful systems of money and control of whose motives he is vaguely disapproving. He is forever unsure where his responsibilities lay: his 'loyalties' are divided between his ex-wife and son, his company, his friends and a few non-Americans who demand sympathy. Thus his very Americanness becomes a metaphor for a kind of radical self-division: "This is our (America's) function," he thinks, "to be character types, to embody recurring themes that people can use to comfort themselves

and so on. We're here to accomodate. Whatever people need, we provide....People expect us to absorb the impact of their grievances" (114).

The American myth of self-formation has become, as in earlier DeLillo novels, an ironic metaphor for what postmodernism calls the "decentered" subject. In the international setting of the novel Axton's status speaks of the sudden powerlessness and ambivalence of America in global movement and politics.

Americans in the novel doing business in the Middle East are on the run: The story is set in late 1979, the summer before crowds will attack US embassies in Islamabad and Tripoli, before the assassination of American technicians in Turkey, the summer before the Shah leaves Iran and the hostages will be taken, when

"The price of oil was an index to the Western world's anxiety" (66). The anxiety of his implication in these problems spurs Axton's attempts to un-write himself, remain as he puts it "politically neuter." Yet everywhere he turns the world he sees reflected onto himself is a world like himself deeply divided, paranoid, bitter at his own meddling presence. He encounters religious wars, terrorist groups, violent cults, nationalist movements all directed at the systems of stability, comfort and interpretation on which his life is based. The "tour" Axton takes in The Names is of a world postmodern primarily in the myriad ways it fragments or challenges a model of American capitalist international hegemony. Put in other terms, the de-centered world Axton increasingly encounters is his "self" made large, and in it he is becoming, like the ultimate tourist, homeless.

Such is the primary thematic thrust of The Names, but this summary does not do justice to the depth, scope and imagination of DeLillo's seventh novel. The book began the last third of DeLillo's writing career to date and serves as a swing text of sorts: as the epigraph to this chapter suggests it shares with books like Ratner's Star a preoccupation with global systems of language, politics and power, and a keen awareness of how the contemporary postmodern world has scrambled the lines of former orders. In part this is because the novel understands postmodern politics to be a true re-mapping of power--the one Axton travels and lives. Athens, one-time cradle of western hegemony, is a repository of international exodus and uprooting. It is a city of exiles, drifters, terrorists, businessmen, Christians, Muslims, artists and agents--literally a global village. Its 'discourse' is polyglot, combative and thus deeply inhospitable to any single-minded, single-tongued representative like Axton.

By emphasizing the linguistic chaos of Athens of course DeLillo is marking a historical theme. Greek, the "Master Tongue" of logocentric western culture is turned into just one of many tongues spoken "at home." The western world has become a tourist to itself. Thus The Names sends persons in all directions in search of transcendental centers--of nationality, identity, language. The agents of this task, both western and non-western, seek to "frame" the disparate political and economic movements of the world with interpretive or modeled systems of observation, thought, analysis, each a kind of Foucauldian "discourse" seeking to create ordered grids of experience and understanding (or in Foucault's own terms, truth

and power). For one character this system is film; for another archaeology; for another industry; for still another linguistic analysis and semiotics; for still others it is violent hermetic acts of destruction.

That each of these systems is preoccupied with coding and representation, rather than possession and property, for example, indicates the post-colonial and postmodern revisions of the romance genre at work in The Names. As its title suggests, semiotic systems are its real subjects. The desire for representational mastery, the need for international communication, the fascination with post and pre-modern linguistic systems are all integral components of the modern world's desire to explain itself to itself. Cultural production is a historical loop continuing the language and sign-making of ancient empire confronted with the exacerbated and rapid tendencies in modern production towards abstraction and simulation which strips culture from its referents, the world, the concrete. The Names considers this as in part facilitating a cultural fall in which words and our use of them become signs of our own decadence, brutality and desperation. Individuals in the novel undergo or enact the same processes of quantification, reification and coding which, like the mathematicians' in Ratner's Star, aspire toward a "universal theory" in language and symbols of the real. When experience reaches the level of "global euphemism," as in does for Gary Harkness and Billy Twillig, distinction of experience becomes lost.

That The Names demonstrates these points in a story about geography reflects what Jameson, inspired by Foucault's own

analysis of socially coordinated terrain, has called postmodernism's preoccupation with "spatial" power. Each section heading of the novel, significantly, is geographic: Part I, the Island; Part II, "The Mountain;" Part III, "The Desert;" Part IV, "The Prarie." These four areas correspond roughly, as Tom LeClair has noted, to North America, Europe, the Middle East and the Mid-West. Each also corresponds to a system of representation, or language: the first is monolingualistic English; the second polyglot European; the third hieroglyphic Sanskrit; the fourth religious or ecstatic glossolalia. Each of these different language codes is constantly threatened by the "one world" ambitions of imperializing cultures. Pervading the text as a "network" of capital, intelligence operations and coordination, they threaten to efface all linguistic discrimination. In Lyotard's terms, they reflect the performative logic of systems that create their own master narratives. This tendency ultimately penetrates all corners of the global map: an esoteric primitive Greek cult, on one hand, and the CIA on the other are the twin agents of blind or "transparent" power that literally threaten to destroy difference and subjectivity through strategies of textual manipulation: they literally use language to create and describe a world of violence and intrigue that sustains their own functions.

Thus The Names is consistent with other DeLillo novels that have as their focus representation as power. World-speak, like newsspeak in Orwell's 1984, itself enhances and conceals the atmosphere of power, brutality and fear in the world, and leaves individual speakers without a language, resistance or even self-

identification. Hence the "one world, one madness" motif of The Names, articulated by its prophet and seer, Avtar Singh, is the book's gloomy trope for an almost reactionary evaluation of the postmodern condition. Even the recognition that language itself is still a revitalizing agent of change--DeLillo's recurring modernist theme, does not offset earned knowledge of a more frightening kind: that power in the postmodern epoch finally is its own self-sustaining, and self-destroying vehicle beyond the critical reach of words.

The Names opens with an image of classical order, beauty and proportion against which it measures the horizons of power and representation in a post-classical era. The Acropolis looms over the Island setting of Part I as the symbolic fortress of static authority and finite meanings that everything surrounding it now contravenes. Athens itself is a "featureless zone" in which tourists, the "philhellenes," come with self-importance and self-indifference to watch, record, analyze, photograph and venture rather than adventure. Americans, note Axton, used to come to Lycabettus Hill to paint and study; "Now we do business" (6). The shift is significant, for The Names will record like a camera onto reality the gradual but irreversible re-coding of culture. This is figured in many ways in the novel: the proliferation of western-style buildings around the ancient Greek village centers; the excavation of Greek ruins by James' archaeologist wife Kathryn; the invention of private languages among foreigners, like the "coded-jargon" OB that James' wife and son use as a "kind of substitute Greek or counter-Greek" (11). Each of these

modern incursions, like the sound of airplanes over the still island, is external "noise" entering a once meticulously pronounced and pronounceable culture. They are each "a derangement of nature, some onrushing nameless event" foreboding the disintegration of the "artless" Greek way of life into something more systemic, ordered, determinate and, subsequently, as we shall see, destructive.

James Axton's domestic situation in The Names is, like that of Jack Gladney in White Noise, a reflection of this larger cultural derangement: it is a metonymy for cultural coding and mapping, an example of DeLillo's systemic imagination. James has come to Athens in part to be near Kathryn and Tap. Divorced because of his own infidelities, James compares his former marriage to a travel experience: "We hadn't entered a state at all. If anything, we'd broken out of states and nations and firm designs...She used to say this marriage is a movie...I thought if you didn't want anything, your marriage was bound to work" (39). The analogy of marriage to movie and tourism is apt; James has with Kathryn the intimacy of a voyeur--a tourist. The relationship has the same defamiliarizing distance of his to Greece. He can only appreciate Kathryn from a distance, out of a nostalgia for an earlier, happier time when his (like America's) ascendancy was clear. This archaic power has the mark of mock-heroics, of earlier "romances," what James calls, thinking perhaps of Helen of Troy, a "parody of ancient abduction." Watching her undress, he realizes the limitations of his ineffectual detachment: "This knowing was contained in the structure of my own seeing. We both knew" (29).

If Kathryn represents the inaccessibility of romance to this American abroad (and hence a quick undermining of that convention of the genre) his son Tap represents the initial retardation in James of anything deeper than a performative understanding of life and language. A former technical writer, James is well-versed in the "hard-edged and aggressive" language of business" and how it provides a "bleeding of the gray-suited, the pale, the corporate man"--in short himself. He at one time penned "institutional litter" for government and industry and once ghost-wrote a book on global conflict for an Air Force General. These "connections" have led to James' job; the language of his profession, and his sterilized conception of writing is one way DeLillo implicates him in the imperialistic re-structuring of the non-western world. "If you think the name of the weapon is beautiful," thinks James, "are you implicated in the crime" (118). One of those weapons is James' business itself--Risk Analysis and economic advisement to American corporations doing business in the Middle East.

Tap, by contrast, is the language-learning innocent James cannot be. He writes fact-based fiction and appreciates the free play of words and meaning and the possibility of his not fully possessing their definition. Early in the novel James corrects Tap's mis-stating the brand name of a raincoat in a piece of fiction; the limiting and limited knowledge of James' precision is the culture-bound one of his staid western maturity. It is Tap's margin for error, as opposed to James' rigorous performative use of language that makes his work, as we shall later see, the closest to a non-dominant and unmediated

"discourse" in the novel--akin to the pre-verbal Wilder's emotional wailing in White Noise.

This difficulty of attaining an unmediated relationship to words and the world is in The Names representative of the dilemma I have been discussing in this dissertation: of being both subject and object of discursive processes of simulation and abstraction. There are numerous examples of this in the novel. One frequently alluded to is travel itself--the activity that allows and makes a global network possible. Flying is a metaphor for the decathected postmodern detachment of self from experience. Airports and airplanes in the novel are spatial containers of "white noise," controlled, homogeneous environments that dilute the possibility of experiencing geographic "difference" even as it is pursued. This need to manipulate environment and movement, to monitor order and superimpose safety onto danger is the sign of a metadiscourse (flying as naming) that turns all subjects indiscriminately into quantifiable information, just as the streets of Istanbul are for Axton and his colleagues "raw data." Hence to travel in The Names is to move deeper into self-codification, hermeneutic examination. Flying, Axton senses the "categories of inspection to which we must submit, impelling us toward a sense of inwardness, a sense of smallness, a self-exposure we are never prepared for no matter how often we take this journey, the buried journey through categories and definitions and foreign languages, not the other, the sunlit trip to the east which we thought we'd decided to make" (253). As in Players, where the World Trade Center is for Pammy a spatial

metaphor for self-consciousness, airports are Foucauldian grids of surveillant power. "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. This vast terminal has been erected to examine souls" (254).

The airport then is, in contrast to the Indian desert--a "container for emptiness," a spatial microcosm of western institutional authority, intelligence and business regimes that "frame" each contact with the object world. It represents a "blind" discourse as well in which all subjects become invisible. Andreas Eliades, the Greek radical who speaks in the novel against imperialist intrusions, calls this "the final humiliation. The occupiers fail to see the people they control" (237). But "occupation" is a term from a colonial era that is less and less apt to describe the discursive deployment of power in the novel. This is signalled by the doubling motif used in Players and Running Dog which is here internationalized; nations, peoples, cults, tribes, not just selves or individuals, fall in to epistemological paranoia under the pressures of a postmodern hegemony. They respond to processes of globalization, abstraction and language loss as do DeLillo protagonists: either drawing inward into hermetic strategies of self-preservation or resistance, or indulging freely in the play of significations. The book's primary example of this is the parallel operations of the Central Intelligence Agency and the esoteric unnamed murder cult that drifts through Greece. The latter's method of operation is to choose and kill a victim by matching the person's

name with the place of the crime. This method of textual-matching marks on one hand an attempt to return physical prowess or "naming" power to language; offering words in sacrifice re-animates them with sacred meaning. It is an essential culture-making step. Yet it also--and this is the paradox of the novel, a signs of meaningless destruction. It is equivalent to James attempt to put the "voice" back inside the body of a woman who arouses him while belly-dancing by physically assaulting her. Both are brutal acts impelled by a pathological need to re-cathect with or master a world that forces an abstraction of the world itself. Brademas describes the cult killers' motivation:

They are engaged in a painstaking denial. We can see them as people intent on ritualizing a denial of our elemental nature. To eat, to expel waste, to sense things, to survive. To do what is necessary, to satisfy what is animal in us, to be organic, meat-eating, all blood-sense and digestion.

Why would a denial of these things have to end in murder?

We know we will die. This is our saving grace in a sense. No animal knows this but us. It is one of the things that sets us apart. It is our special sadness, this knowledge, and therefore a richness, a sanctification. The final denial of our base reality, in this schematic, is to produce a death. Here is the stark drama of our separateness. A needless death. A death by system, by machine-intellect. (175)

Tom LeClair has rightly analyzed the systems motif in The Names to argue that the violent and dangerous activities in the novel are inevitably those which "seek to create a closed...system ruled by positive feedback, by constant growth." In these terms, the cult is a perfect example of a "self-referring" entity for whom each act is both performance and self-legitimation. Like Gladney's attempt to canonize Hitleriana, or

Oswald's fascination with a Marxist history, the cult is intrigued by acts that attempt to re-cathect self with world by creating a meta-theory that will give absolute order and meaning to random events. They are, like these other DeLillo characters, nostalgic modernists responding to a postmodern world. For Emmerich, the leader of the cult, "Everything he reads and learns is made to serve as a personal philosophy, an explanation, an enlargement of that brilliant single moment, a moment he has reworked, re-explained to himself, made use of. The murder has by this time become part of the dream pool of his self-analysis. The victim and the act are theory now. They form the philosophical base he relies on for his sense of self. They are what he uses to live" (291).

The sheer utility of the cult's violence, plotting and planning reminds us of the efficiency of our own industrial businesses, especially the most famous American "company," the CIA. Like the cult, the Company (and Axton's own insurance company) create an atmosphere of terror and death which is both horrifying and titillating. The object of each is not to stop terror, but to find its "cost-effectiveness." Thus, Dennis Foster notes, "Terrorism.... is not the enemy of international, or specifically American, business, but a component of it, and a "risk analysis" is the silent partner of terrorism, without whom² the meaning of terror would be incalculable." The CIA, like the cult, represents the realm of intrigue and uncharted behavior where language can serve barbaric purposes: designating names and codes for horrific acts and ambitions. The revelation in the book's pages that all of James' Risk Analysis gathering has been

forwarded unbeknownst to him to the CIA completes this loop: all of his data-gathering, name collecting, numbers crunching, arbitrary as it is to himself, has in fact been deployed to single out nations, selves and peoples for the violent reprisals of the world's largest and most sophisticated cult.

This political process reflects postmodern frisson over systemic leakage--sliding meaning, anxiety of interpretation, hermeneutic menopause. For James, the cult becomes the single most-intriguing aspect of his life because of his voyeuristic separation from his family, home and self. The cult "is the only thing I seem to connect with, it's the only thing I've been right about" (300). Like them, he begins to see himself geographically: the initials of his name, he notices, correspond to the desert mountain Jebel Amam. Unable to fix meanings to words, James finds patterning rather than reading an attractive and comforting release. This transfer, as Dennis Foster notes, overtakes many of the western characters of the novel. It is a substitution of logical sense for a more tactile or pre-linguistic knowledge, one that sustains patterns of meaning when language baffles. It is the maniacal desire for new codes--films, sciences, mathematics--that impels DeLillo characters to "one world, one madness" theories or systems of representation. This "projection" or meaning making is tantamount to the act of "plotting" as we have seen in DeLillo's earlier books and a metaphor for his own metafictional strategies, since each novel is conceived as its own linguistic or generic re-ordering of a primary postmodern system or genre.

Hence the language or "discourse" theme merges with the

political problematic, as illustrated through characters who benignly try to separate language study from other activities only to have them re-converge. Archaeologist Owen Brademas and film-maker Frank Volterra are the most representative figures of this in The Names. The former is a long-time friend of Kathryn and James whose interest in epigraphy is an attempt to isolate or textualize culture. Owen indicates this early in the book when he compares Europe to a hardcover book and America to the "paperback version" (23). This observation points back to the literary strategies of the aestheticized "reader" of culture--the Jamesian interpreter of foreign codes and the adventure romances those interpreters produced. Indeed Owen's search for the "figure in the carpet" is a literal theme of the novel: Americans Dot and Dick Borden are collectors of prayer rugs whose patterns suggest "Geometry, nature and God" (219). These artful expressions of cultural order are visual analogues to the language and communications systems ancient and modern. But the American touristic interest suggests an equivalent of purchasing and interpretive power for the foreigner. "Artifacts" of culture in the novel, like lost historical objects in Running Dog, are repositories for lost or displaced bourgeois value. Speaking of Kathryn's digging, James notes that for her a trench is "Sequence, order, information" (133). "Maybe objects are consoling. Old ones in particular, earth-textured, made by other-minded men. Objects are what we aren't, what we can't extend ourselves to be...They show us where we end. They dispel sadness temporarily" (133). Archaeology is thus like shopping in White Noise, or watching movies in Americana. It

provides vatic familiarity with the object world, a narrative of coherence based on acquisition. Yet to give too much credibility to any of these narratives is to experience the "infallen world" of self-reflection. It is to believe in the "projected" or shadow world systemic ordering provides. Hence it is important that the further Owen immerses himself in transcription and relies on his mastery of other tongues, the more he learns about the need to "unlearn" or escape the literal tyranny of signs which leads into the closed off, self-referring world of hermeneutic "cults" like the CIA. "He saw the madness, even, the scriptural rage that was present in the lettering, the madness of priests who ruled that members of the menial caste were to have their ears filled with molten lead if they listened to a recitation of the Veads. It was in these shapes, the secret aspects, the priestly, the aloof, the cruel" (264).

Here The Names most resembles Pynchon's V. Herbert Stencil's mesmeric infatuation with the sign of V. signals the fetishization of icons and imagery used in systemic manipulation. Botticelli's Venus and the fascist swastika in V. and lettering systems in The Names are icons or ironic systems that project overdetermined meanings onto objects in an attempt to restore metaphysical meaning to the world. Yet where Stencil falls into interpretive delirium Brademas partly succeeds, or escapes. His ultimate recognition is that one possible release from self-referentiality is blankness, the mise en abyme of inarticulation, pre-language. This means a retreat into objects, and a separation of self from "character," that word that Owen knows means inscription, representation of

self in "name" and in story. He wonders: "Is it the language of innocence these people spoke, words flying out of them like spat stones? The deep past of men, the transparent word" (307).

Another word for what Owen seeks is glossolalia, speaking in tongues, a pre-language the is before the sign, before writing: "This speech is beautiful in its way, inverted, indivisible, absent" (307).

This negation of inscription should remind us again of Gary Harkness' fast, Taft Robinson's retirement, Bucky Wunderlick's silent retreat, or Billy Twillig's crawl into the whole. It is a spasm of representational anti-logic rendered as negative deconstructive wisdom. In the case of Brademas, it can suggest the possible re-configuration of discourse--the language Bucky Wunderlick may bring back after his silence or which Gary Harkness may still learn. It is a nostalgia for pure gesture without mediation. Its opposite, as always in DeLillo, is the immersion into linguistic "play," which produces higher forms of ambiguity. The fanciful re-combination of letters into non-meaning that literally "signifies" the cult's murder activities is an absolutist detachment or self-referring move: it can be likened to Terry Eagleton's claim against high theory in which analysis itself becomes a rarified performativity that duplicates the logic of, for example, business and imperialistic empires. It is a cynical countering of epistemological skepticism with hermetic ritual. "The means to contend with death has become death" notes Owen of the cult's linguistic games. The killers have literally "meant nothing" in their actions. They are like American lunatics who, according to James, "do the wrong kind of

killing...It's a form of consumerism. it's the logical extension of consumer fantasy. People shooting from overpasses, barricaded houses. Pure image" (115). Pure image: all sign, no meaning; as Andahl says of the Mani cult, "No gods, no history....Only what is here. The rocks, the towers. A dead silence. A place where it is possible for men to stop making history. We are inventing a way out" (209).

Responsibility for this state of affairs in The Names is not easily assignable. Like Foucault, Baudrillard and other theorists of the postmodern, DeLillo often abstracts conventions like motivation and cause and effect in his plots in part to reflect the general discursive patterning of ideas in his work. Yet the character who comes closest to representing the motive force behind representation as a discursive power is, not surprisingly, a filmmaker. Frank Volterra appears about a third of the way through the novel. He has come to Greece to find a subject for his next film. In this he functions as a double of characters like Brademas, Kathryn and James, each of whom comes to re-present the world in terms they can understand. We are told that Volterra's first job was as a private detective (the interrogating voyeur a la Running Dog) who was a member of a film-making collective and once did a documentary on war protests and another about a society matron having an affair with a lover (himself). This dramatic self-consciousness makes Frank "not your everyday tourist" in the words of Axton. Indeed the difference between Frank and Axton is that the former conceives of the world not as a reflection of himself but as already "on film". Calling the twentieth century the "filmed century," Frank

delivers a seminal critical commentary on representation in the novel and on DeLillo's fiction generally. Film, for Volterra, is "another part of the twentieth-century mind. It's the world seen from inside....If a thing can be filmed, film is implied in the thing itself" (11). For Frank, reality is literally a "frame" or space for re-presenting the potential of film. It is the language into which reality has always already been translated. This "pure fiction" is in Frank's mind the condition to which the cult aspires. Their secret plot is already an intriguing fiction, "something outside the range of expectations"--a pure spectacle. He plans to convince the cult to appear on film and to perform a ritual slaying for the camera, promising to choreograph the action only up until the point of execution. For him, the cult's wish to "vault into eternity" is ready-made for film which is "not part of the real world. This is why people will have sex on film, commit suicide on film, die of some wasting disease on film, commit murder on film. They're adding material to the public dream" (203)

We might call Volterra's the world according to Hollywood. This is the cultural attitude exported most in The Names. Ultimately imperialism in the novel is not a physical aggression but a coding. This is James's single greatest revelation when he discovers that his insurance data-gathering is being funneled to the CIA. The creation of artificial selves and realities, he learns, is what America has always done best:

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 silence, 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. It gives a classical tone to our commonly felt emotions. (317)

As in Americana, and later in Libra, The Names finally considers the triumph of hyperreality (and postmodernism) as a by-product of America's mythic imagination. The national "self" that underwrites America's ambitions is in The Names the name for the "world" that has become in Andahl's world a "self." The desire to "subdue and codify" into systems of thought that embody "whatever we need at a given time to know ourselves or unburden ourselves" is the desire that returns as ironic revenge on James Axton. Axton is literally not who he thinks he is, and neither is his country: they are both "invisible" subjects in the matrix of their own deluded myth-making. Axton's worst nightmare (the betrayal of the American populus after Watergate and through the seventies) is confirmed: he has been the object of a conspiratorial manipulation but it his self, not the 'other' that is responsible. This is the impasse to which virtually all of DeLillo's white male protagonists are carried. It is the point at which western romantic ideology and power implode and leave a residue of ambiguity and exhaustion. At this point of course one would want a "next-step" political scenario or critique, but it is not forthcoming in The Names. Instead the book retreats into a consideration of language--a move which I will discuss momentarily, and pulls back from the political thematics per se.

Truly this is DeLillo's frustrating horizon or limit point as a writer. It is evidence of the modernist author seeking relief from the debilitations of the postmodernism he describes so well. The Names explains to us precisely how America in the

late 1970's and early 1980's met the match it had created in the Middle East; how Islamic fundamentalism was not the antithesis of but a complement to the tendency toward global hegemony on a variety of levels--a fanatical religious performativity meeting a secular, technological one; how American culture's discovery of the role of intelligence and covert operations in this merely confirmed the unsettling suspicion that American ideology had reached a point where its inherent contradictions would become its covert means of operation. Too, the novel explains that America's ideological "exposure" after Watergate and Vietnam made it that much easier for the country to be taken down: James Axton is mistaken for American banker David Keller near novel's end and shot at by a Greek nationalist group for financing Turkey. James at first considers the shooting a case of mistaken identity, but his discovery that he is also CIA makes it possible that it was not. This ambiguity is the lasting mark of western power's own discursive domination in the novel: Axton has become the generic American to the world just as the world has become generic to America. As Andreas Eliades the Greek national puts it, "My boss once said to me in his nervous raspy way, 'Power works best when it doesn't distinguish friends from enemies'" (236). Indeed James Axton is both inside and outside of the "loop" of control at novel's end, the subject and object of the American "myth" of the self-actualizing world, and like the Gladney family in White Noise, DeLillo's next novel, both a sitting and a lame duck in the future of global power.

Tom LeClair has used Walter Ong's distinctions between oral

and literate cultures to analyze The Names as a book about, in part, the threat of systemic closure in verbal culture.

Ong's distinction between oral culture as continuous, repetitive, concrete and systemic is contrasted by LeClair with literacy which brings a "technology" (writing and print) that allows and encourages opposite qualities: "discreteness and analysis, originality, abstraction, detachment, absolutism, and possible self-destructiveness."³ After these Ongian premises, LeClair notes that the etymological searches in The Names undertaken by characters like Brademas underscore how the creation of alphabets marked a shift in representation from "pictographic or cuneiform" to a uniform and abstract codification of human noise.⁴

Writing itself in the novel is a form of "absolutism" in the case of Risk Analysts or intelligence gatherers who come to "subdue and codify," just as inscription is the modus operandi of sacrifice for the cult killers.

These themes complement the problem of reading in the novel. One measure of the futility of western attempts to interpret and decode Indian, Greek and other "cuneiform" cultures is western inability to read (or write) without relying on standardized contexts of communication and understanding. This is shown partly through DeLillo's use of lists in the novel. James's self-descriptive list of the 27 Depravities that he imagines Kathryn sees in him marks both the horizons and limitations of his way of knowing. It is his "alphabet" as Dennis Foster notes. Its finitude is as mockish and ill-fitted for total description as the "Chinese Encyclopedia" in Borges, and at that it is a mediated description of what Axton thinks his wife thinks are his

faults.

The list, then, is self-negating: a meaningless language game like the cult's murder method. It is meant to be juxtaposed in the novel to the lists Owen discovers in his language explorations in India. In the countryside he encounters an epic poem engraved on panels in classical Sanskrit. The panels "were accompanied, as almost everything seemed to be, almost everywhere, by carved images of elephants, horses, dancers, warriors, lovers. Everything in India was a list. Nothing was alone, itself, unattended by images from the pantheon" (282). The poem he reads, a young boy guide explains, is of the Meward kingdom. It is history as catalogue: "the childlike history of Mewar, terrible and fierce, and the text fairly sang of sages, maidens, caliph invaders. It seemed childlike at any rate to Owen, the child again, made to learn a language, to think in lists" (284).

Owen has already learned that even earliest writing systems were meant to keep inventory, accounts and banking transactions, and that language constitutes both sacred and secular systems of order. The word, the sentence, the page are all integral to organizing diversity into the "one madness" of an epic poem or list. Yet the difference between the epic poem and Axton's list is key: the former is self-descriptive, abstract, analytical—written, in Ong's verbal system; the latter is continuous, infinite, 'oral' ('the text fairly sang') and describes "the world." To move beyond the former means to re-learn language itself and to return to the source of written language: speech. Yet it is this activity, as I have shown, that

mediation in The Names makes impossible at least for writing-based westerners. Axton frequently compares the rich, dramatic, spontaneous spoken language of Greek villagers with the staid, self-referential and self-conscious cafe talk of American business people. The former is a means of lived performance and theater; it is both expansive, modernist; the latter is hermetic, cryptic, wounding, allusive, redundant. This becomes the "point" of language itself for foreigners, as in this argument between James and Kathryn:

"You have that, you know. A sense of personal destiny, like some German in the movies."
"What's that mean?"
"I don't know."
"What movie, ass?"
"Come to my room. Come on, let's go to the hotel, right now."
"Whisper," she said.
"Dont' make me hate myself, Kathryn."
"You'll wake him up. Whisper."
"I'm fucking pissed off. How can I whisper?"
"We've had that argument." Bored.
"You make me hate us both."
"That's an old tired argument." Bored. The worst remarks were bored ones. The best weapons. Bored sarcasm, bored wit, bored tones." (125)

The word "argument" recurs many times in The Names, in part to signal the international atmosphere of the the late 1970's, in part to convey real political fights between Greeks and Americans, and in part to question whether this Greek rhetorical form can be resuscitated or made original, or whether modern culture has deteriorated both the language and the possibility for new ideas about itself. As this passage demonstrates this problem bears heavily on aesthetic considerations of style and writing in The Names. The early sections describing Greek village life are rendered with

painterly precision; in Owen's words "even random things take ideal shapes and come to us in painterly forms...moments in the flow" (19). The opening passages have a clarity and lucidity of detail that are an example of what Brademas calls the "Greek specific"--the artless art of the concrete. "All is foreground, wordless and bright" in James' words. Yet this pristine method of inscription grows murkier, more abstract and less beautiful as the novel progresses and events themselves grow increasingly abstract, ambiguous. Typical of DeLillo, the title is significant to this: the novel bears the same "name" as the murderous cult--"Ta Onomata" in Greek. As in Running Dog, this matching of title and "text" within the text stresses the affiliation between reader and character as interpreter. Through Brademas' decodings we discover that the Sanskrit word for "knot" eventually became book--Grantha. This book, says Emmerich, can be seen as a "box that you open," and inside the box is puxos, in Greek: "Box-tree. This suggests wood, of course, and it's interesting that the word 'book' in English can be traced to the Middle Dutch boek, or beech, and to the Germanic boko, a beech staff on which runes were carved. What do we have? Book, box, alphabetic symbols incised in wood. The wooden ax shaft or knife handle on which was carved the owner's name in runic letters" (291).

Like a "box-tree," the novel The Names is a text with alphabetic symbols incised, the owner's name inscribed. It is a box too filled with various voices, dialogues, speeches, rhetorics, languages: a talking book. This becomes important always in DeLillo when we consider the political implications of

the tale. The English alphabet we and Axton are familiar with is in fact a distillation of languages, objects and meanings all of which are excluded from consciousness by the "list" of 26 letters which we use to write. The artifice of "matching" these back to objects is both the interpretive activity that motivates violent and meaningless appropriation in the novel and the urgent task human beings undertake from their births. Hence Axton's realization that his own initials correspond to a mountain site in India—like our ability to figure out that the initials OB correspond to Owen Brademas, underscores the radically random, yet necessary act of interpretation: putting meaning to letters, identifying "characters" through "character." The cult's random matching of victims to place names can thus be seen as a figure for reading and interpretation in social and cultural organization. To form a culture is to speak its name: to write it. To "read" a culture is to read its name first, and to feel either propriety (understanding) or rejection (confusion); to read a book is to either know or remain mystified. All of these acts, however, entail mastery and demand an appropriation of the "text" to our own ritual purposes.

James, who is sensitive to own deficiencies as a reader, laments the "linguistic arrogance" of "re-speak"—countries which change their names after gaining political autonomy. What were once Persia and Rhodesia--colonial names--have become "Ethnic designations. Sets of initials. The work of bureaucrats, narrow minds....Every time another people's republic emerges from the dust, I have the feeling someone has tampered with my childhood" (240). DeLillo's point is, again, that the re-learning of

languages always means an uprooting, a tearing away of the familiar. James's nostalgia for earlier 'names' is of course a nostalgia for a western mastery slipping away in the novel. It also however suggests the crucial political importance of naming either for or against cultural hegemony. That Zimbabwe means literally "a drum beat," as a character points out, is an identification of place to name that denies understanding out of context. It is a matching or bonding of script to sound, sign to presence in the world. It is the equivalent of babble, glossolalia, unmediated sound, and hence incomprehensible to Axton's mediated mind. The murderous cult's "The Names" (Ta Onomata) by contrast is a name meaning already appropriated: it is the name about language and the self-referential hegemonic world. It is the phrase meaning composite, generic, textual, perhaps even "postmodern." Thus The Names (the cult and the text) may be literally descriptive of ourselves. Both are signs of the "self-referring world," the postmodern condition that makes us murderous interpreters, acolytes of meaning, lonely readers in a room with words that refer to the process of decoding at hand.

But as in Great Jones Street and his other works DeLillo tries to release us, or show us the way out of, at least, the prison-house of language. There is always, after all, the existence of texts to give voice to the condition the novel describes: they remain inscribed artifacts that testify to agony, like the Parthenon that James finally approaches at novel's end after 300 pages of unreasonable fear. In the presence of art, he recognizes that language is the

"cry for pity" heard in the Greek air, the "voice we know as our own" (330). It is writing itself, of course, and near novel's end Axton suddenly asserts a novelist's prerogative: he observes a camera box unattended focused on the Acropolis and notes that he could "know or can invent" a man to stand at it. It is the writer always who returns in DeLillo to as it were inscribe himself on the name of the tale. It is this role, it turns out, for which Axton, like Gary Harkness, David Bell and Bucky Wunderlick have been prepared. The book, like these others, is written retrospectively, and concludes with James reading a portion of the manuscript Tap has been writing, the fictionalized account of Owen Brademas' life. The passage is written in childish, clumsy but eloquent English--a bit like a Joycean stream of consciousness, crude, half-formed, pre-grammatical. It describes Brademas (named Orville Benton--the OB initials matched, like the cult killers, to the subject they inscribe) standing in the middle of a church crowd, tongue-tied as he attempts glossolalia. Next to him is his father, already speaking in tongues, "bursting forth in secret languages which the boy could not decipher in the least...." (335). For all four--the fictional character Benton, the writer Tap, the character Owen and the reader James--as for the reader of The Names,--the difficulty is the same: "to free himself from this dreadful woe of incomprehension" (338). For all four this is the impasse of words separated from things, the knowledge that the "fallen wonder of the world" is language operative as communication even after its invasion by film, commerce, simulation, religion, science,

military jargon--the list of institutions that are DeLillo's varied subjects, each of which is both creator and destroyer of The Word. Ultimately then we must look beyond the narrative proper of The Names, step outside of "narrative time" (as Axton names it on page two) to the place where text does serve to function as pure language and memory, identification and ritual, "learning" of words and their creation: this is where we find Tap's "book." As the literal and figurative "coda" to the postmodernist nightmare of The Names there stands, oddly, shining--like a monument itself--modernism's wildest dream: a sign of a continually renewing source of language, speech and experience that the narrative proper can't contain.

Notes for Chapter VII:

1. LeClair, In The Loop, p. 198.
2. Dennis A. Foster. "Alphabetic Pleasures: The Names." The South Atlantic Quarterly 89 (Spring 1990), p. 399.
3. LeClair, In the Loop, p. 191.
4. Ibid., p. 191.

Ch. VIII Power and Plots; White Noise

Just as a sequence of images is set in motion inside a man as his life comes to an end--unfolding the views of himself under which he has encountered himself without being aware of it--suddenly in his expressions and looks the unforgettable emerges and imparts to everything that concerned him the authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possess for the living around him. This authority is at the very source of the story.

Walter Benjamin "The Storyteller"

Death must be played against death...The only strategy of opposition to hyperrealist system is parapsychical, a 'science of imaginary solutions;' in other words, a science fiction about the system returning to destroy itself, at the extreme limit of simulation, a reversible simulation in a hyperlogic of destruction and death

Jean Baudrillard Simulations

The critical and popular success of DeLillo's eighth novel White Noise is evidence of both how well and how poorly his work has been understood thus far. Critics, including those who awarded him the National Book Award for the novel, generally praised DeLillo for coming around to writing an "accessible" novel about easily distinguishable characters and social situations after the highly conceptual earlier works. Certainly they were right insofar as White Noise more than any other DeLillo novel presents full-blooded characters, a recognizable suburban setting and the only depiction of a stable family in DeLillo's fiction. Yet ironically these familiar features blinded many critics to the generic satire and metafictional strategies operating in the novel; in an interview DeLillo has said he wrote White Noise in part to parody the "white picket fence" books of suburban living that have proliferated in the American canon, from the dark yet

forgiving versions of Updike and Cheever to, more recently, the minimalist domestic yarns of seventies' and eighties' writers like Raymond Carver, Bobbie Ann Mason, Ann Beattie and Anne Tyler. Frank Lentricchia was the first to note this oversight in his important Raritan essay on Libra, charging both the critics and the novelists DeLillo set out to tweak as having become victims of the apolitical disengagement much of this suburban fiction has made its imaginary home. Lentricchia rightly I think argued that the majority of the minimalist domestic fiction especially could be seen as a kind of retreat, symptomatic of both post-1960's politics and the Reagan years, into anti-intellectualism, a smug privileging of private over public experience and a general diminution of the "social" to the residential lots of a politically and emotionally deracinated¹ culture.

In this chapter I want to discuss how White Noise both participates in and stands apart from the aforementioned literary politics. In particular I want to show how the novel, unlike those with which it has been unfortunately lumped, goes well beyond its self-acknowledged satire into an historicized account of political and industrial formation, and how it undoes especially the prevailing ideological codes of the Reagan era. Indeed while the Great Communicator is mentioned by name only once in the novel, and the book is totally bereft of Realpolitik thought, the legacy of Reagan's depoliticization, or hyperrealization of American political and social life, as it is in Libra, is the transparent context of the novel. This implication through elision is in keeping with earlier novels

like Running Dog and Players where stories themselves supplant or re-present contemporary social events, a literary strategy that encourages us to read social formation in mediascape culture as a transparent metadiscourse most visible when not seen or represented.

White Noise is a conflation of many of DeLillo's earlier interests and themes: technology, television, Nazism, sexuality, intelligence work, communications. This eclecticism is on one hand a sign of the cultural and informational excess that is a constant threat to agency in DeLillo's novels, and particularly in White Noise. One direct sign of this is the provenance of the individual's relationship to history in the book. Baudrillard's claim that "When the real is no longer what it used to be,
2
nostalgia assumes its full meaning" can be said to be a defining claim on the life of Hitler Studies professor Jack Gladney, his wife Babette, Gladney's colleagues in the American environment department of the novel, and most importantly and complexly, Gladney's Socratic gadfly Murray Jay Suskind--the adult characters on whom I will concentrate. For Baudrillard, this "nostalgia" is a longing for referents, origins, signifiers lost to processes of simulation: it is a desire to recuperate something like the Freudian or Jamesian "real," a postmodern typological search for the hand of meaning. In the novel, this search takes the specific form of a desire for narrative: literally for originary and explanatory "stories" of mythical pasts, explanatory plots, miracles, fables of survival. Yet this desire for an originary text is constantly mediated, typically in DeLillo novels, by the doubly mediated nature of all experience. Like Baudrillard's theoretical conception of the

circular relationship of the real and the hyperreal, every mode of experience can be seen as figuratively having always already happened, hence no salve in the quest for "meanings." Liberal myths of self-actualization and the generic frames that once embodied these myths (like the autobiography or bourgeois novel, to take two examples relevant to White Noise I will discuss) are implied to be the very forms of nostalgia to and against which the modern writer and his characters must respond.

This explains DeLillo's "white picket fence" comment cited above. It also illuminates the book's urgent, central, yet for some readers irritating and misunderstood preoccupation with death, or as some might call it "the death theme." The first thing to note in light of it is that as in Great Jones Street and Running Dog most notably, DeLillo tropes in White Noise on "plot" as a figure for late capital consumer and technological culture. Where magazines, pornography and rock and roll were all considered metaphors of consumption and simulation in previous novels, White Noise turns mind and memory functions themselves into metonyms for these same processes. This configuration lends itself to analysis which like the novel considers representation, or in particular narrative formation in relation to psychology.

A brilliant example of this mode of analysis with which I will begin lies already at hand in Peter Brooks' essay "Freud's Masterplot." In it, Brooks considers Benjamin's notion in "The Storyteller" that narrative and plot itself is an act of repetition-compulsion in the service of the death instinct. Citing Freud's analysis of the importance of trauma repetition in

the dreams of neurotics and the Thanatos theory --"The aim of all life is death," Brooks notes how plot and story represent for readers and writers a narrative shape of lived experience: the recurrence of birth and death (origins and endings,) inception and terminus, life as eternal cycles. For Brooks, human desire for narrative may suggest that "What operates in the text through repetition is the death instinct, the drive toward the end...Repetition can take us both backwards and forwards because these terms have become reversible: the end is a time before the beginning."⁴ The desire (of the child, for example) to repeat an unpleasurable experience may for Brooks be likened to the resolution of a recurring conflict within the narrative. Brooks parallels this to Benjamin's claim in "The Storyteller" that "life assumes transmissible form only at the moment of death. For Benjamin, this death is the very 'authority' of narrative: we seek in fictions the knowledge of death, which in our own lives is denied to us."⁵ This is most apparent for Brooks in what Freud calls literature of "The Uncanny," where "The compulsion to repeat provides readers a sense of being fatefully subject to a 'perpetual recurrence of the same thing'; it suggests to them pursuit by a daemonic power."⁵ Thus fear of death, enacted as literal repetition of incident in narrative, is both postponed and "mastered" for Brooks by the truly vicarious nature of narrative experience. Every time we write or finish a story we literally die a little, while we simultaneously have confirmed an irrational confidence of our immortality.

In White Noise the "uncanny" aspect of bourgeois psychic

life is a repetition of exposure to an endless chain of simulations and mechanical reproductions. These repetitions, what the book uncannily calls "deja vu," acquire narrative force and shape in the minds of characters. Seemingly unrelated events all prompting fears of ill health, or death and dying acquire through repetition and mediation the status of a conspiracy—a plot discernable through the repetition of features—and hence represent the Freudian "master-plot" of the novel. "All plots tend to move deathward," Jack Gladney tells his students. "This is the nature of plots. Political plots, terrorist plots, lovers' plots, narrative plots, plots that are part of children's games. We edge nearer death every time we plot..." (26). In White Noise pop culture, religion, politics, science are perceived from the reading or viewing perspective of the Gladney family as contributing different "plots" or stories to contemporary life that incite fears about the deaths of individuals, nations, planets. These form a metanarrative or "master-plot" that function as the modern day equivalent of myth (which Brooks unfortunately doesn't discuss but which clearly represent his thesis explicitly). Unexplained and unexplainable events take emblematic form: Elvis sightings recall the resurrection; diet fads conjure miracle healings; millennial hopes and fears are couched in stories of extraterrestrial life. Basic human curiosity and the desire for narrative closure itself (the bedtime story instinct Jack and Babette preserve in the novel well into adulthood) can only be satiated through the provision of stories that intensify or help master cultural fears of dying. The "sense of an ending" becomes, as in The Crying of Lot 49 and

Gravity's Rainbow most notably, a literal trope for death-wish and apocalypse.

This problem is exacerbated by the impression characters in the novel's mediascape culture carry of being suspended between the surveillance and simulation capacities of contemporary science and technology. Fear is described as "intense self-awareness" in the novel: it is the phobia of an information, cybernetic and televisual culture which allows each individual to conceive himself as the protagonist in the aforementioned cultural "plots." Empathic identification with strangers to whom real disasters occur, or actual mediated experience of tragic events place the self symbolically inside the larger cultural "plots" that lead toward death. Television functions in the novel as the omniscient narrative eye constantly demonstrating this aspect. Gradually neither the Gladney family (nor the reader) can psychologically separate themselves from the represented reality of the deathward plot played out regularly, in excruciating titillating (i.e. serial) detail on the nightly news.

Formally, White Noise is strictly modeled to represent this theme, its tone, style and structure approximating conventions of non-literary media. This metafictional strategy has the particular purpose, as in Running Dog, of showing how widely interpenetrated different narrative genres (including the novel, of course) are by both "plot" as convention and "plot" as death obsession. The story has the mock-melodrama, easy paranoia and calamitous scope of a television drama. It presents itself in relation to us as television to viewer, proposing outrageous

actions and violent deeds whose reality is either faint, questionable or ridiculous. Characters have the palpable half-reality of the most "intimate" serial personalities on TV and yet remain enigmatic, part of what the book calls the deepening "American mystery." The narrative is partly comprised of free-floating soundbytes from newspapers, television and radio. The narrative voice of protagonist Gladney is itself, as Tom LeClair has noted, imitative of the somber disaster tones of the nightly news.⁶ Its sense of foreboding, suspense and intrigue relies largely on the pathos of the disaster film genre; it titillates with snippets of true and false information like a radio talk show and provides rumor and gossip about its characters like the tabloids that is one of its obsessions.

Viewed as a piece, this portrait of mass culture combines a neo-Marxist disdain for the effects of postmodernism with a Frankfurtian understanding of the sublimations effected by trash. Consistent with these themes, the metafictional character and characteristics of White Noise challenge the political literacy of both high and low cultural forms. Its own acute portraits of banality and indifference, its boring fixation with products and consumption, viewing and spectacle test our own political response to cultural glut. Facing an overwhelming surfeit of information and interpretive methods, we must make the same choices as the characters: to believe in them out of hand; question some, accept others; create interpretive intellectual myths (like Murray Jay Suskind); or react, like Jack, by recognizing our own implicit role as makers in the creation of these plots. Too, we may take the high or low cultural road with

the book: like the popular films and programs it quotes and describes, it may either be only a distracting bit of literary "noise" disrupting the flow of our daily lives or, as I would prefer to see it, a deeply encoded text difficult to decipher because of its barrage of signals--a kind of modernist postmodern, akin to Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow, that articulates a lasting myth of cultural and political entropy. Finally, by presenting a Hitler Studies scholar as protagonist, a charismatic leader for our time, DeLillo captures the mood and dynamics of the decade just passed when nostalgia for hegemonic domination Reagan-style marked for many the triumph of the pop culture will. Baudrillard's apocalyptic suggestion that Reagan marked the "end of power" in America, its reduction to a "special effect" in the serialization of American politics also haunts the ending of the White Noise.⁷ Life winnows down to a death-in-life by novel's end, and a complete closing down of all "universes of discourse," even those artistic and linguistic avenues earlier novels had left faintly, teasingly agape. DeLillo's most sinister, satiric and despairing novel, White Noise is American postmodernism's Brave New World or 1984: the dystopia as situation comedy.

White Noise is set in Blacksmith, America, a non-located city whose name evokes an ironic nostalgia in a novel about, among other things, the hegemony of post-industrial, cybernetic culture and technology. Its archaic rusticity, like that of Jack Gladney's employer College-on-the-Hill, is ostensibly a buffer from these for its citizens, who think of Blacksmith as a place

shielded from time, reform and change. Jack and Babette Gladney and their children (all from other marriages except the youngest, Wilder) live at the end of a quiet street "in what was once a wooded area with deep ravines," where from their beds they hear expressway traffic, "a remote and steady murmur around our sleep, as of dead souls babbling at the edge of a dream" (4). Jack is head of the Hitler Studies department at the college which dates to March of 1968, when he "invented" the discipline. "It was an immediate and electrifying event" he notes, that instantly catapulted him to national and international renown. As a father, Jack is competent but remote. His children, Denise, Steffie, Heinrich and Wilder, are closer to Babette, and Heinrich intimidates Jack with his eclectic knowledge and erudition. Babette herself is the nurturer to Jack's officious role-playing dad. We know her mainly through his own perceptions as a protectiver layer between himself and what Jack perceives as a harsh, complex, entangled outer reality. Babette,

whatever she is doing, makes me feel sweetly rewarded, bound up with a full-souled woman, a lover of daylight and dense life, the cellaneous swarming air of families. I watch her all the time doing things in measured sequence, skillfully, with seeming ease, unlike 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)

Jack and Babette's sense of themselves as protectors reflects the fragility of the family's historical bonds. Their personal pasts are filled with the anonymous entanglements of broken marriages, a situation symbolically reflective of the larger social and political world as in the above passage. Indeed Gladney relationships tend to mimic external cultural bonds and

arrangements. The family, for example, behaves like both an information and intelligence network. Steffie and Denise hover over their mother like nurses over a fragile patient vulnerable to numerous public menaces: skin cancer, weight gain, pill addiction. Babette loosely fears that the reclusive Heinrich, whose hobbies include playing chess with a convicted killer, will become a public menace, or a serial murderer. Jack is intimidated and bemused by Heinrich's scientific knowledge. He is more like a too-bright student who intimidates a professor than a beloved son. Only Wilder gives Jack and Babette a feeling of parental responsibility and control—a role so intimate that it confounds them. Wilder's primal need for affection and attention (he is the only child who, significantly, can't be entertained by television yet) makes him as mysterious to them as an alien from another world.

The Gladneys are by virtue of this schooled socialization for DeLillo "representative." Theirs is not a lived experience but a "lifestyle." Each facet of their domestic life represents the trained response of the American target audience. This is most clearly signalled by the omnipresence in their daily lives of radio and television. A palpable presence in the novel, always on in the "background" of events, it interrupts the narrative (as of their own volition or subjectivity) at random delivering soundbytes of information about science, biology, commerce and the like. This information is itself a source of paranoid discomfort. It provides both protective distance for citizens from calamities and disaster constantly taking place "out there," while its very presence reminds them of their

general vulnerability. It is both a buffer and infringement, and reverses the inside/outside dynamic of their lives. The family internalizes television fears and instruction the way they consume advertised foodstuffs. Their conversations often reproduce the rhetorical structure of television's incessant information deluge and debate. Pictures and images of catastrophes miles away make them worry about the possibility of them happening next door. Even the television set becomes a possible source of electro-magnetic radiation, or at least a theory is floated by Heinrich to that effect.

Hence the cybernetic information loop of mass media culture functions as a source of deep ontological questioning in the novel. A non-stop source of stimulation, information, consumption and message, it creates its own artificial reality of people, places and things. Its real-world emblem or totem is the supermarket. It is the town's symbolic center functioning as both a communal consumer data base and site of intensive ideational speculation--the "marketplace of ideas." Gladney's friend and colleague, ex-sportswriter turned pop culture critic Murray Jay Suskind is our interpretive window onto this world. Trained in coverage and analysis of spectacle and titillation, Suskind sees the market as a kind of cultural epicenter or showcase. The sensubus superfluity of the market, its endless variety of colors, sights and sounds make it (like television) an invigorating source of "psychic data....Energy waves, incident radiation..." (38). It is "awash in noise...And over it all, or under it all, a dull and unlocatable roar, as of some form of swarming life just outside the range of human apprehension"

(36). Murray's supermarket ruminations and its prominence in the lives of Blacksmith residents indicates two central things about White Noise: that its setting is symbolically generic--conceivably anytown U.S.A., and that consumerism has already become an aestheticized postmodern effect. Like other members of the pop culture department, Murray attempts to build beautiful intellectual paradigms out of the dross of consumer life. We are invited casually by DeLillo into an analysis of the experiential and theoretical world of pop culture to get a sense of ourselves as late-capitalism's subjects. This relationship mirrors our own to the novel: we are all "Murrays" to the text deciphering the cryptograms of pop culture. DeLillo's point is that any attempt at cultural criticism is inherently self-parodying (or requiring parody) since it requires implication in the processes it critiques. This is another subtle variation on the double-agent or identity theme from earlier novels. Murray is like Dr. Pepper in Great Jones Street or J. Kinnear in Players the figure whose seeming mastery of cultural information makes him an oracle or mastermind.

By logical extension we empathize and identify with Jack, Murray's colleague and "ear," and share with him the task of deciding the validity of his interpretations and the plots he devises. By this identification, similar to the reader's with Oedipa Maas in The Crying of Lot 49, DeLillo can test our own reading of signs and symptoms in the modern world. As in Running Dog, we are by proxy acolytes of fanatical idolatry should we side with Jack (as with Moll) in the intrigue around Hitler. The psychological reassurance of story operates

on Jack as on us: as a displacement of fears about real menace and threat. Secretly Jack overcomes a nagging fear of death and impotence by rallying undergraduates to Hitler in order to preserve his own "aura," standing inside the professorial persona so that death remained "strictly a professional matter. I was comfortable with it, I was on top of it" (74). Like Pammy's work in Grief Management in Players, Jack feels his function will better the form of his life: that power lies literally in the institutionalization of private feelings.

The combination of remote, placid community life and Jack's insular role as specialist in the small college makes his a doll's house existence on a scale suitable to his pre-modern sensibility. He is convinced that his own life and death will inevitably be "nonviolent, small-town, thoughtful" (76). Jack's desire for this normalized life story can be read as the satirical locus of DeLillo's subversion of "safe" domestic fiction and its bestselling popularity. Jack's self-promotion, his smug anti-intellectualism (he has no interest in anything but Hitler, and no knowledge) and his endeavor to build a protective wall around his family are the creature comforts of bourgeois domestic literature: the illusion that the private realm is truly private. White Noise floats this illusion in the early stages of the novel, eroding it with the seepage of 'external' news of disaster into the Gladney home that culminates in the industrial accident that is given the generic name Airborn Toxic Event. A mysterious toxic spill that releases invisible toxins into the atmosphere, the "ATE" functions like the V-2 rocket in Gravity's Rainbow, as DeLillo's master metaphor for physical and

informational entropy. As its name suggests, it is "act" and "news" at once, already experienced through numerous television and radio reports before it impacts.

As such it has metafictional importance: like the Hitler film in Running Dog it is symbolically a "climactic" event of late-capitalist development, of the novel itself and of the mediascape story of America's apocalyptic decline. It is the promised narrative tragedy of newspaper headlines delivered, the American Masterplot actualized:

The enormous dark mass moved like some death ship in a Norse legend, escorted across the night by armored creatures with spiral wings. We weren't sure how to react. It was a terrible thing to see, so close, so low, packed with chlorides, benzines, phenols, hydrocarbons, or whatever the precise toxic content. But it was also spectacular, part of the grandness of a sweeping event....Our fear was accompanied by a sense of awe that bordered on the religious. It is surely possible to be awed by the thing that threatens your life, to see it as a cosmic force, so much larger than yourself, more powerful, created by elemental and willful rhythms. This was a death made in the laboratory, defined and measurable, but we thought of it at the time in a simple and primitive way, as some seasonal perversity of the earth like a flood or tornado, something not subject to control. Our helplessness did not seem compatible with the idea of a man-made event. (128).

As nature, science, religion, myth, the Airborn Toxic Event (its very name suggests this) is "epic" to Jack's mind. The responses it elicits are those of a reader to story, or viewer to film or theater: the cloud strikes Jack as a "sweeping event." It immediately becomes a source of story-telling. "The toxic event had released a spirit of imagination. People spun tales, others listened spellbound. There was a growing respect for the vivid rumor, the most chilling tale. We were no closer to believing or disbelieving a given story than we had been earlier. But there

was a greater appreciation now. We began to marvel at our own ability to manufacture awe" (153).

Jack's representative reaction to the event is framed entirely either by his previous narrative experiences or the "conventions" of narrative (even if its the cycles of the season) with which he is familiar: even nature is "plotting." This most unnatural conception points out the postmodern and "meta" nature of Jack's world experience. Repetition, ambiguity, apocalypse, paranoia, mystery, an obsession with power (the favorite topics of DeLillo's own fiction) constitute his own "narrative" expectations: his obsession with death internalizes the logic of story, as Benjamin and Brooks would have it, and now he enters the story of his own death as protagonist and narrator.

White Noise, like Libra, foregrounds this plot and narrative problem in order to provide a political accounting for them (Indeed the two books are as closely related as Players and Running Dog; Oswald will emerge clearly as the prototype DeLillo half-had in mind for Gladney). In the former the context is a rather transparent version of eighties politics at large. Jack's slow, incredulous reaction to the ATE is important to this. He initially assumes his WASP difference naturally excludes him from acts of social or natural disaster. "These things happen to poor people who live in exposed areas. Society is set up in such a way that it's the poor and the uneducated who suffer the main impact of natural and man-made disasters. People in low-lying areas get the floods, people in shanties get the hurricanes and tornados. I'm a college professor...We live in a neat and pleasant town near a college with a quaint name. These things

don't happens in places like Blacksmith" (114).

Jack's misreading of the event, his place in it and the larger social frame reflect the mediation of each. Yet this blindness ironically gives Jack his first insight into himself as a social "subject." His moment of recognition, like David Bell's decision to make a movie, Pammy's criminal sense of self in the bank, Bucky's confrontation with Dr. Pepper, James Axton's discovery that he is linked to the CIA, is that moment in White Noise when discursive power makes itself present. It occurs as an epiphany when surveillance and simulation are no longer transparent social processes and the self suddenly "sees" itself complicit in discursive manipulation and mediation.

For Jack, this recognition triggers a deepened concern with the narrative destiny or "plot" of his own life. The discovery that he has been poisoned and may in fact die begins Jack's effort to "write" a different story for himself, one that will explain or contain the ending feels himself destined for. This is the heart of the novel. The key to it, one not fully understood by critics of White Noise thus far, is Gladney's Hitler obsession. In Running Dog, as I discussed in an earlier chapter, DeLillo considered Hitler and Chaplin as prototypes for the postmodern schizophrenic impelled to self-enlargement and power through the creation of a "second" or simulated identity. Fascism in the novel was construed, as Baudrillard would have it, as a parody of power achieved through special effects of propoganda, theater and impersonation: sheer camp. It is this model of a nostalgia for power always already

lost--a version or story of power available only as burlesque, the power, as it were, of Ronald Reagan, that we must think of in Jack Gladney.

In order to understand this analogy some examination of important discursive patterns in the novel is needed. One of them involves DeLillo's use of the word "aura" to describe Jack's psychic identification with Hitler Studies as a discipline. It is the same word Murray uses to describe the aesthetic integrity of The Most Photographed Barn in America, a place to which he takes Jack as an example of the definitive American landmark. The barn, like the tree through the forests, is accessible only as a simulation. "We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one," he tells Jack. "Every photograph reinforces the aura...An accumulation of nameless energies" (12). "We can't get outside the aura," he continues. "We're part of the aura" (13).

Murray's "aura" can be seen, of course, as an inversion or parody of that which Benjamin describes as the essence or integrity of an art "original" in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Where for the latter the intimate experience of the work itself was obviated by mechanical (what we now realize as essentially postmodern) culture is for Murray a new form of "religious experience"--life as tourism, mediation, ecstatic attachment. It is his own strategy for giving coherence, pattern and form to experience.

Murray's aesthetics, I would argue, finds parallel in Jack's politics. Traumatized by the absence of "origins" and authenticity in their own lives, they appropriate

representational or simulational strategies themselves as a strategy for recuperating spiritual or transcendental meanings. The Most Photographed Barn for Murray is to Hitler for Jack: an easily appropriatable icon of archaic or "nostalgic," to use Baudrillard's terms, authenticity. As Realpolitik, we may compare this to the Reagan "New Morning" strategies of the 1984 campaign, the elided but, as noted earlier, clearly impinging backdrop of the novel. Mein Kampf, Gladney's personal Bible and seminal text which he can't read in the original can be said to represent the anecdotal quality of Reagan politics: its political illiteracy and charisma are meant to re-animate the republican "subject" that has already been radically de-centered by the culture at large. Indeed Jack's response to social tragedy in the novel is a self-parodying combination of conservative "blame-the-victim" strategies and a retrenchment into ethnic defensiveness, class privilege and callousness none of which he feels fully entitled to or embodying. Like Gary Harkness and Lyle Wynant, any political stance he takes is "reactionary" insofar as it represents a nostalgic conception of what a stance might be. Thus Hitler is the consummate identification for Jack: a self-parodying model of white male power that can be recovered only as a story or simulation or what that power once was. Like the Most Photographed Barn in America, he retains an "aura" of authenticity in books, films and television that

John Kucich, cited in the earlier End Zone chapter and Gregory Tate have put forth variations of this political reading in their like-minded but differing appraisals of DeLillo's white

male protagonists. For Tate, DeLillo's novels including White Noise are "inward surveys of the white supremacist soul--on the run from mounting evidence that its day are numbered. The suspicion that history, the Hegelian version with a capital H, is about to revoke their membership privileges rears up in these protagonists as neuroses, superstitions, and full consciousness⁸ that they're strutting around in the emperor's new clothes."

For Gladney, those clothes are the academic black robes--the uniform of his "discipline" out of which Gladney is helpless father, cuckold, intimidated by the presence of Iranian delivery boys driving Nissan cars, foreign languages at the supermarket, Asian-looking men who supply drugs to his wife. Part of the "noise" of White Noise is thus the fragmenting social hegemony in which, in Tate's words, the white male-supremacist becomes "Other...the savage with the heart of darkness whose civilization has become his jungle" (39).

Tate is also not the first to see a Conradian parallel in DeLillo's writing. In his essay "Postmodern Romance: Don DeLillo and the Age of Conspiracy," John McClure proposes that we see DeLillo's configuration of conspiracy and intelligence in the modern era as a reformed social site of romance adventure, a substitution in the western imagination of "Conrad's labyrinthine Congo" with the secret government.⁹ McClure's argument that secret or covert operations vitalizes the bourgeois bureaucrat in the manner imperial politicking once did the British envoy draws affinities between the romantic mystery in the western imagination of the unknown "other," and the secret or disguised realm of shifting identities of intelligence and covert

operations. Indeed Lyle Wynant's mock-terrorist role in Players is an example both of Tate's white "Other" in the bureaucratic jungle and McClure's romantic voyager. He is one of many DeLillo protagonists to go "underground," that metaphorical space which since Great Jones Street I have argued is DeLillo's figure for postmodern politics.

White Noise's version of this scenario, viewed from the angle of postmodern theory, recalls that the "jungle" or labyrinth to which Tate and McClure refer is remarkably like the landscape of "indeterminacy" Baudrillard calls hyperreality. Indeed what both Tate and McClure fail to acknowledge in their political accounts is the degree of postmodern self-parody DeLillo inscribes into the "heart of darkness" motif itself. Gladney's discovery that Babette has been secretly involved in drug experiments with Dylar and indulged an unfulfilling affair with a shadowy figure named by her Mr. Gray inspires his conversion into a covert assassin--figuratively, the equivalent of a Watergate plumber or intelligence operative. He undergoes the self-division of other DeLillo protagonists--Lyle Wynant and Oswald most noticeably, adopting the pose of jilted lover as if he were putting on another set of gowns. The point is not that Jack is Marlowe but, for us, a mock-Marlowe, a postmodern simulacrum of the morally divided soul. Jack is spurred into revenge not by deep consideration of his own complicity in cultural or racial crimes but by Murray's banal suggestion that "To plot is to live." The advice functions as a rebuttal to Jack's Freudian sense of narrative as death--"To plot is to die." In Baudrillard's term, Jack seeks a substitute "narrative" of

another's dying to take the place of his own. Thus after Murray's speech, he returns home and attempts to disassociate himself with "things" once and for all: "I threw away picture-frame wire, metal book ends, cord coasters, plastic key tags, dusty bottles of Mercurochrome and Vaseline, crushed paintbrushes, caked shoe brushes...I threw away diplomas, certificates, awards and citations..." (294) Jack jettisons what has made "escape impossible" in ritual preparation for escape in the role of "enraged husband." The meta-character of Jack's endeavor is underscored by the mock-melodrama of his "plot:" he "steals" his neighbor's car left in the driveway with the keys in it only to return it after the "crime." Driving toward Iron City, he mentally rehearses his scheme, which reads like a television script:

Here is my plan. Drive past the scene several times, park some distance from the scene, go back on foot, locate Mr. Gray under his real name or an alias, shoot him three times in the viscera for maximum pain, clear the weapon of prints, place the weapon in the victim's staticky hand, find a crayon or lipstick tube and scrawl a cryptic suicide note on the full-length mirror.. slip back to the car...walk home in the rain and the fog. (304)

The film noir touch to Jack's denouement will become, significantly, a motif in Libra, where Oswald's assassination plans are colored by his imagination's saturation by fifties Cold War melodrama (the genre that for McClure substitutes the romance adventure). As I have shown in previous chapters the genre is important for DeLillo as the home of both hermeneutic paranoia and the nostalgia it evokes for the heroic judicial self. Jack's noir memory is thus a kind of cultural "flashback," a lingering symptom of "deja vu"

which is a side effect of exposure to the Airborne Toxic Event. In this scene, it suggests that the heroic/romantic role is "always already" an illusion, or a hallucination--a simulacrum in mediascape culture. "The more you practice something," he tells himself, "the less likely it is to actually happen" (207). White Noise prepares us for a generic "climax" of all American romantic "plots:" political, cinematic, historical, televisual. It is the archetypal act latent in the cultural psyche that craves "resolution" in story as a means of satiating but postponing its own fear of dying. It could be the last scene of a film noir or a soap opera, a television movie or an assassination: it is the signal event of hyperreal culture.

The "space" that White Noise chooses for this might be called the realm of hyperfiction, a "meta" realm like the opening sequence of Players where popular forms of representation and its conventions becomes the "subject" of the writing. Significantly, Jack calls it a place "beyond words," a "network of meaning" (312). Literally, it is an enclosed room where a television drones soundlessly--like the in-flight movie in Players it is all image. Sitting before the television feeding himself Dylar is the mysterious Mr. Gray, who calls himself Willie Mink. He is dark-skinned, Asian in appearance, but significantly Jack can't identity his nationality. He is the ethnic "other" to Jack's WASP Everyman, both entirely mediated souls (hence indistinguishable) strung out on the "eerie brain-sucking power" of the media. They have come to this place to share a secret:

I sensed I was part of a network of structures and

channels. I knew the precise nature of events. I was moving closer to things in their actual state as I approached a violence, a smashing intensity... Information rushed toward me, rushed slowly, incrementally." (305).

The air was rich with extrasensory material. Nearer to death, nearer to second sight. (309)

Death equals second "sight" when one enters the logic of hyperreality: when words and events, signs and objects, become permanently separated in consciousness. This is Dylar's single recognizable side-effect, and here Jack uses it to avenge Mink. Speaking the words "hail of bullets" he causes Mink to crouch cowering to the floor. Simultaneously, Jack is "seeing myself from Mink's viewpoint, magnified threatening" (311). Like a postmodern Lady from Shanghai White Noise fires its fatal shot in a panoptic house of mirrors: Jack shoots Mink, watches him fall, but feels himself wounded. The self he watches and extinguishes is the subject of discursive American power. Here is the Conradian moment in DeLillo (Bell, Wunderlick, Wynant all have them, as will Oswald) where self-division and self-recognition signals and marks an implosion of empirical meanings:

The world collapses inward, all those vivid textures and connections buried in mounds of ordinary stuff...What had happened to the higher plane of energy in which I'd carried out my scheme....Colored dots appeared at the edge of my field of vision...The extra dimensions, the super perceptions, were reduce to visual clutter, a whirling miscellany, meaningless" (313).

Like the climax of David Cronenberg's Videodrome, where James Woods is shot by the television set, Gladney is here symbolically the "hero" and "victim" of a non-event that is the climax of his mediated life:

It is when death is rendered graphically, is televised, so to speak, that you sense an eerie separation between

your condition and yourself. A network of symbols has been introduced, an entire awesome technology wrested from the gods. It makes you feel like a stranger in your own dying" (142)

Jack's multiple perspectives on the event, seeing himself from Mink's point of view, are equivalent to the way a camera films an object from many sides (a tactic DeLillo will reprise in two key scenes in Libra). The reader experiences these perspectival shifts like a television watcher at home. Indeed the scene is as contrived and artificial as the climax to a television movie. Like television, it has the effect of neutralizing response to events, rendering events and judgements on them indistinguishable. The final pages of White Noise are narrated by Jack in a sedate but slightly shifted voice. He describes Wilder's miraculous bicycle trip, the family's newfound "awe" at the event, which they celebrate with ritual returns to the highway. There follows a description of a small panic at the supermarket when all of the products except the generic food is rearranged. "But in the end it doesn't matter what they see or think they see," says Jack. "The terminals are equipped with holographic scanners, which decode the binary secret of every time, infallibly. This is the language of waves and radiation, or how the dead speak to the living" (326).

Jack seems to have fallen into a Murray-like ecstasy, to have realized the psychic potential of the supermarket. If this is so, we must regard his shift in character, from bewildered humanist to postmodern shaman as, at best, the universal abandon, to use Andrew Ross's term, of a critical discourse around and about postmodernism itself. Jack has shifted his secular

megomania and nostalgia into what Baudrillard calls the "ecstasy of communication"--consumer bliss. The emphasis at book's end is on Jack's change from producer, actor, charismatic to consumer, object, true-believer. If there is a possibly favorable weakening of Jack's patriarchal authoritarianism and paranoia at the end, there is also the flaccid lassitude of postmodern nihilism. We have passed through the history of white male ascendancy on the stage of world power, mediated versions of that ascendancy and mediated versions of those versions in the climax of the novel. The climax is literally tragedy replayed as farce. But for DeLillo farce (like satire) is also tragedy. The book ends with one certainty--that death is absolute and imminent, and all other questions unresolved. Who will die first, Jack or Babette? What will happen to the Gladney children? Who was Mink and what will he do after his release from the hospital? Will Jack go back to Hitler Studies? These mysteries function like the open-endedness of The Crying of Lot 49 to mark ambiguity as a precedent postmodern narrative mode. Yet as I have been arguing throughout this dissertation, DeLillo's is a second-stage examination of what Pynchon began. *Oedipa Maas* ends poised ambiguously on the still-possible existence of an alternative universe, an "anarchist's miracle," a Trystero that will intrude on this world and perhaps re-configure its social, political and sexual alternatives. White Noise poses that the only real variety available is consumer choice; that politics and agency have become static figures on a white screen; that at least for the bourgeois liberal human and humanist the only reality is a

hyperreality. One could and should point out how narrow DeLillo's social portrait finally is. Nowhere but in caricature and the mean-spirited observations of its protagonists do we get a hint of what the "margin" of American culture looks like. Mink never becomes more than an Asian "other" even to the novelist. That said, perhaps DeLillo's shrewdest skill as a social critic in the novel is his insight into white male consciousness turned against itself. Like Conrad's Marlowe, Jack Gladney is a character at the end of a political tradition--post-American rather than post-imperialist. Willie Mink, the anonymous Asian who will not die and in Jack's own words has him "beat" may represent the supercession by the east of precisely the western mystique White Noise so brilliantly deconstructs. Indeed DeLillo considered two others titles for the novel before choosing White Noise: The American Book of the Dead and Panasonic. Conflating the two, we have an apt caption for the "sunsets" that linger at the end of White Noise, drawing the sick and ill and elderly from their houses, and "a man with a camera and long lens, waiting for his moment" (325). That moment, elided and postponed in White Noise, is the terminal point in the progressive death of Gladney and his family, and by extension a culture at large which in the American tradition consumes its own myths in the attempt to revive or re-live them, effaces its origins and originals in the name of preserving them. Like Fitzgerald's own blighted crew, inventing identities and destinies to avoid the results of (and the responsibilities for) fatal accidents, the Gladneys in White Noise represent America itself, "borne...ceaselessly" not into the past, but into a future that has already in effect

erased them.

Notes for Chapter VIII:

1. Lentricchia's essay in Raritan, re-published in the Spring 1990 South Atlantic Quarterly, finds there a chorus of agreement on this point by other contributors, including Daniel Aaron and Hal Crowther.
2. Baudrillard, Simulations, p. 171.
3. Peter Brooks. "Freud's Masterplot." Yale French Studies 55/56. (1977), p. 291.
4. Ibid., p. 291.
5. Ibid., p. 291.
6. See chapter on White Noise in LeClair, In the Loop.
7. Jean Baudrillard. America. Trans. Chris Turner. (London: Verso, 1988), p. 107.
8. Greg Tate. "White Magic" (Review of Libra). The Village Voice VLS, (December 1988), p. 19.
9. John A. McClure. "Postmodern Romance: Don DeLillo and the Age of Conspiracy." South Atlantic Quarterly 89 (Spring 1990), p. 341.

Chapter X Sacrificial Plots: Libra

Libra is the novel toward which DeLillo's career has logically and inexorably moved. Its climactic event, the Kennedy assassination, is alluded to in several of his early books, including Running Dog and Americana, whose ultimate scene takes place in Dealey Plaza. In 1983 one of DeLillo's few published non-fiction pieces appeared in Rolling Stone entitled "American Blood," a somewhat cryptic meditation on the assassination based on research he had begun while writing White Noise. What emerges from the article, and from the novel, is a fairly clear thesis: all of the problems of representation, epistemological certainty, political stability and agency that characterize his fiction and which I have been discussing in this dissertation are epitomized by the assassination. It is for him the "Ur-event" in modern American history. In a curious way every DeLillo novel is a re-writing of it. The atmosphere of menace and dread permeating his books, the conspiratorial nature of plots, the pathological white male protagonists, the momentum of events toward violence: these are the ingredients persisting in the cultural memory of the assassination that make it for DeLillo (as was perhaps the Civil War for Twain, or World War II for Mailer and Pynchon) the "seminal" event against which to write fiction.

Indeed Libra asks to be read in just this way. DeLillo chooses the "historical novel" mode for the novel to foreground or make literal the assassination "metaphors" of his other books. At the same time this literalization is mediated by

the ficticity of DeLillo's version. It is a sign that DeLillo does not take it for granted that the Kennedy Assassination is, for many Americans, "grounded" in history. Indeed the fact that it remains in the minds of many unresolved, that it generates still endless speculation about its details, that it has constructed around it perhaps the most elaborate edifice of information and data of any single event in American history makes it a natural choice for a postmodern novel. It pre-exists for the writer in the realm of theory or "story" by dint of its representational instability, or put in more mundane terms its undecidability. It is the most entangled "plot" we have in the culture, and the story we can't seem to stop telling.

From these observations DeLillo proceeds in Libra to construct more successfully and fully than any of his other novels a social theory and psychology of the postmodern, and his most politically trenchant work of fiction. Attention to both these tasks is signalled in DeLillo's choice not of the Kennedy assassination itself but the life in entirety of Lee Harvey Oswald as its subject. In a markedly contemporary way the book evokes the naturalistic strategies of writers like Dreiser and Crane, examining the groping forward of an American youth through the vicissitudes of external events which shape and control private "destiny." Every detail and incident of Oswald's boyhood in the Bronx, his stint in the U.S. Marine Corps, his manipulation by FBI, CIA and anti-Castro forces is representative of larger currents spread across the book's surface: the Cold War, the growth of post-World War II intelligence operations and the tendency named by Foucault and Baudrillard toward discursive

domination in both local and global life by technologies of information. More specifically, Libra imagines post-war America as an experiential hall of mirrors for Lee Oswald almost entirely mediated by developments in communications. The social context from which the Kennedy assassination emerges and which is made to account for the conspiracy that destroys him is rendered as a chiaroscuro world in which "real" life and fantasy are mutually defining illusions perpetuated directly and indirectly through television, cinema and popular culture. Oswald's childhood, for example, is shaped by fables of heroism real and imaginary. His rapt attention to TV detective programs of the 1950s as a boy is purposefully set against fleeting political impressions gathered via fliers to "Save the Rosenbergs" that fall into his yawning consciousness. DeLillo follows with cunning interest the potential logic of this schizophrenic formation to unsettling conclusions in the novel; later, even as he enters his Marxist phase Oswald is still awe-struck by the appearance of John Wayne on a Marine Corps ship as the Duke takes a break from filming Red River, a scene that functions as a haunting harbinger of the assassination and its aftermath. As crewman snaps photos of Wayne, Oswald strains to make himself part of the background, to record himself in tandem with a cultural hero. Later in his cell after having taken two shots at Kennedy, Oswald will gloat privately that "He and Kennedy were partners. The figure of the gunman in the window was inextricable from the victim and his history. This sustained Oswald in his cell. It gave him what he needed to live" (435). Juxtapositions like these give Libra one of its most profound

overall effects: gradually, Lee Harvey Oswald becomes a kind of postmodern American Everyman whose libidinal dreams of power and celebrity are shaped by the unlimited world of images and consumption in which he lives.

This is the first of many ways in which Libra upsets stereotypes and preconceptions about the assassination, an important task for a writer trying to rescue its own subject from the deviant sensationalism that conveniently dismisses Oswald as a radical kook—the preferred version of right-wing and mainstream America. DeLillo's concentration on culturally produced longing eclipses what we as readers might come to expect as "motivation" in any plot to kill Kennedy, something most notable in his rendering of the conspirators. Both the key players in the anti-Castro plot to shoot at Kennedy and the conspiracy itself are "productions," to use an implicit and explicit pun from the novel, of the comingling of politics and spectacle which perhaps is the Kennedy White Houses's own greatest legacy. Taking archetypal account of cultural form in its modern manifestations, DeLillo conceives of postmodernism as the historical epoch that has made artifice available as sanctuary against distorting effects of the media itself. Here he continues the White Noise theme concerning narrative. A complex statement of this comes from conspirator Win Everett:

Plots carry their own logic. There is a tendency of plots to move toward death. He believed that the idea of death is woven into the nature of every plot. A narrative plot no less than a conspiracy of armed men. The tighter the plot of a story, the more likely it will come to death. A plot in fiction, he believed, is the way we localize the force of the death outside the book,

play it off, contain it. (221)

Despite the seeming open-endedness of this meditation, DeLillo is careful in Libra to bracket off the social context in which characters like Win Everett develop such thoughts. Namely, he and his fellow conspirators are, like Oswald himself, products of a paranoid plot-making epoch anchored in a Cold War world of espionage and surveillance in which the conspiratorial sensibility is itself a mediated fiction or fiction-making desire. Libra discretely points to the cooperation of Hollywood and Washington in Second World War propaganda efforts to underscore the subtly constructed nature of political and social realities in modern day America. Michael Rogin, among others, has suggested how this Hollywood-Washington alliance was rooted in two simultaneous "substitutions" of the 1940's post-war period: namely, the "political replacement of Nazism by Communism, from which the national-security state was born, and the psychological shift from an embodied self to its¹ simulacrum on film." For Rogin, the fact that movies came along just in time to join the battle for world democracy underwrites the Manichean melodrama of Cold War anti-communist cinema, which in turn informed, as Presidential history has made clear, the political experience of some 50's conservatives (and liberals) whose own political sensibilities acquired the luster of the movies.

A similar thematic operates in Libra. One of DeLillo's recurring tropes for the right-wing conspiracy first to undermine Castro, then to kill Kennedy is cinematic production. A conspirator describes the function of their

"undercover work" in Cuba as the attempt "to invent a society where it's always wartime" (64). Surveillance photos of U-2 planes are deemed "pornography;" "cryptic messages from spy movies of the forties" are used in U.S. radio propaganda missions in Cuba; a mercenary drawn into the conspiracy, like Oswald a tremendous movie fan, fancies himself a Seven-Samurai type warrior. Even the mock hard-boiled style sometimes employed in Libra, whose mob bosses, as Frank Lentricchia has noted, eerily sound and swagger like dons from The Godfather is meant to suggest the melodramatic intrigue and shadow of film noir and the world of modern intelligence operations that seem at times their comic, real-life "double."²

Such a gloss on film and film history is not unusual for DeLillo, who in Running Dog and Players especially turns conventions of the espionage and spy genre inside out to profound political effect. The novel's single allusion to the Kennedy fictional film hagiography PT 109, for example, comes when conspirator David Ferrie passes a southern drive-in. The marquee come-on for audiences in Brahmin-hating Dixie is "See How the Japs Almost Got Kennedy;" the reference is enough to suggest the complex ironies involved in the Kennedy Camelot mystique and the intensity of suprarational passions it aroused in history, and arouses in the novel. Win Everett's part in the conspiracy, for example, is motivated in large part by his disdain for the Kennedy media charisma. J.F.K.'s omnipresent televisual image convinces him that Kennedy now holds all the "secrets" that properly belong to his former employer the CIA. Everett's response, in turn, is to construct his own conspiratorial fiction

that both duplicates strategies of propoganda, image-making and deceptions similar to those that constitute the Camelot myth. Here, DeLillo verges on constructing a social matrix of power as surveillance, information and control that by virtue of its efficiency doubles back on itself ('implodes' is Baudrillard's sexier term). Social dialectics are transferred into a a kind of image duplication and imitation making origins of power, final sources of authority impossible to find. Indeed in Libra novelistic, conspiratorial and historical "plots" criss-cross so many ways that chance, coincidence and even astrology (the book's title is important as I shall discuss momentarily) become plausible relief explanations for spiralling events.

In this sense Libra reiterates White Noise's theme that spectacle and mass media culture lead invariably into mythic accounting. Their contribution to epistemological uncertainty is the principle motive for public construction of cultural myths that consolidate skepticism into fairy tales of the ordinary. Kennedy's own elevation into the canon of American pop and folklore culture is another subtext in Libra posited as the logical place where interpretive problems surrounding the assassination may be "resolved" or postponed. Rumors about the Kennedy life and death, from tabloid curiosities about love lives to the gamut of both banal and highly plausible conspiracy theories about the assassination are stories we tell ourselves (just as DeLillo has told this one) to defer or contain the force of the death "outside the book," as Win Everett says, in Dallas, November 22, 1963.

The occult nature of conspiracy is related in Libra to

the capabilities of technology, government and media to create or reveal "secrets." Since the Kennedy Assassination, it insists, the White House has become a chamber of uncertainty in the public imagination, the branches of government runic cults, politics a theater of mystery. One reason for this is the melodramatic frame that television and newspapers have built around the goings on in these places. Cameras and plots have become important to the making of both political and journalistic narratives. The Moviegoer and the CIA man (Oswald will become both) share the conviction that film and photography provide an initiate experience into "secrecy," special knowledge and surveillant power, as well as a means of manipulating and controlling events. This idea is suggested in the novel's opening, a breathtaking metonymic description of young Oswald at the front of a subway car, nose to the glass, thrilling to the cinema-like experience of rushing sight, speed, sound. "There is a world inside the world....The noise has a power and a human force. The dark had a power. It was a secret and a power" (12-13).

DeLillo here "frames" Oswald's experience as essentially framed by his encounters with visual medium. Watching a film is for him, as in this subway scene, both an isolating experience and a way of cathecting to a twilit reality. Hence the "world inside the world" becomes the book's dominant trope for processes of fiction-making, duplication and deception. The intelligence agencies that conspire against Kennedy define problems and solutions from within their own prescribed set of needs and beliefs, codes and languages, like the "cult" of The Names. "They were five men who could not let go of Cuba" writes DeLillo

of the Kennedy conspirators. "But they were also an outlawed group. Things turned inward. There was only one secret that mattered now and that was the group itself" (23). This self-reflexivity, the "inward fall" of Ratner's Star, is the mark of discursive power in which the self becomes the subject of a surveillant "gaze," an abstraction of the tendency to "model" or simulate realities. "Secrets are an exalted state, almost a dream state," notes Win. "They're a way of arresting motion, stopping the world so we can see ourselves in it" (26).

Libra also shares with Great Jones Street the notion that technology's infiltration of nearly all arenas of public life has turned individuals into "pure products" of mediated desire. However it moves well beyond the problem of alienation that coheres even at the end for Bucky Wunderlick into a more deeply drawn, deeply felt sense of schizophrenia as a cultural condition. For Frank Lentricchia, as cited earlier, it is the idea that modern individuals "compose...fabulous selves from the flood of ego ideals represented in movies, TV, popular fiction, and cheaply reproduced classic literature." No single character in DeLillo's fiction represents this better than Oswald. While planning the assassination, writes DeLillo, Oswald "wrote speeches he might one day deliver as a man who'd lived for extended periods under the capitalist and communist systems" (213). Before the assassination he insists that his wife take a photograph of him equipped with rifles and radical literature (the now infamous snapshot that fortuitously appears on the book's cover after DeLillo suggested they use it) and then imagines it appearing one day in the pages of Time. In Russia,

he compares himself to Trotsky in exile, while a conspirator describes him as in awe of the Kennedy "magic." These external images of self from books, magazines, screens operate on Oswald in the manner in which stage and storefront windows stir Dreiser's Carrie Meeber; they pour into his empty soul until he is literally made into something, in his case a "dispersed, decentered network of libidinal attachments, emptied of ethical substance and psychical interiority, the ephemeral function of this or that act of consumption, media experience, sexual relationship, trend of fashion" as Terry Eagleton has described postmodern man.⁴

Yet DeLillo's insight into contemporary social psychology does not merely duplicate the ordinary run of left-based ideas about reification and commodification. Oswald's alienation is so extreme, both detached from and identical with the zeitgeist of his culture that he becomes, in John Aldridge's words about subjects of other contemporary fictions, "lost in the void of narcissism in which freedom and imprisonment becomes confused."⁵ Isolation and community are coequal for Oswald. His vision of the "social," like Jack Gladney's, is a parody of modernist (and socialist) political energies: "What a sense of destiny he had, locked in the miniature room, creating a design, a network of connections. It was a second existence, the private world floating out to three dimensions" (277). Like the conspirators, Oswald interiorizes a model of social space in which the isolation cell becomes a metonymy of human community—a perfect achievement of a disciplinary Foucauldian grid. It speaks to the substitution of private for public spheres brought about by an

awareness of how public, or discursive his identity is: that like Jack Gladney he is the "sum total of....data." Reactions to this condition, as in postmodern theory (or White Noise) bring extreme measures and strategies for recuperating self and "meaning." His attempt to "re-cathect" in Freudian terms to an increasingly mediated imaginary social is in the invention of a second-self that will live in some public record beyond the diary sphere (DeLillo quotes Oswald's diary to good use in the novel to show him clawing towards the assassin identity, the hero of history). Put another way, Oswald's own "plot" is, like Win Everett's, a means of fending off the sense that his own life has no meaning at all.

This wavering between a kind of existential nihilism to pathological aggression is rooted in extreme and opposing stances of philosophical and literary modernism: it recalls Kafka and Beckett's and Melville's haunted "isolatos," on one hand, and Orwell's and Mailer's Fascist men. DeLillo's Oswald vacillates between these two conditions, or more accurately wears them as partial personalities, costumes. Part of him seeks a completely anonymous and remote withdrawal, the other seeks to construct an ego or public "I" that will merge with History. (This is one meaning of the book's title: David Ferrie says Oswald, like the Libra sign, is "sitting in the scales, waiting to go either way"). His pathology is thus representative for DeLillo of a cultural zeitgeist of the contemporary period. His essay "American Blood" gives some flavor of this. "What has become unraveled since that afternoon in Dallas," he writes of the assassination, is "the sense of a

coherent reality most of us shared. 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. A European body of work, largely."⁶

Oswald is, among other things, the bringer of existential awareness into American culture. Rendering this atmosphere of religious crisis is a primary aim of Libra. In "American Blood" again, writing of the sixties, DeLillo observed that "A George Wallace speech on the radio--in the atmosphere of civil rights, Vietnam, police attacks on demonstrators--was the sound of a McLuhan tribal drum. There was a primitive fury emerging from the little lighted box, a compressed and implosive power..."⁷

This intuitive account of the apocalyptic feeling of media messages invites a reading of power as a kind of "metaphysic" or cultural imperative that becomes dominant in periods of extreme social stress, tension, change or upheaval. This is for DeLillo a side-effect of technologies whose creation of a global village has likewise created a charged ritual air in the public space of communications transmission. Such an atmosphere, pervading the whole of Libra, provides clues to still another level--the most speculative and subjective one for him as a writer, I think, at which to consider the Kennedy assassination. Following is a continuation of Win Everett's speech on "plots:"

A plot in fiction, he believed, is the way we localize the force of the death outside the book, play it off, contain it. The ancients staged mock battles to parallel

the tempests in nature and reduce their fear of gods who warred across the sky. He worried about the deathward logic of his plot. There was something more insidious. He had a foreboding that the plot would move to a limit, develop a logical end.

Lancer (Kennedy) is going to Miami. (221)

The cultural logic of Libra's supra-violent Machiavellian world puts on an inevitable collision course the seemingly most divergent of personal destinies. Everett's original plan to "miss" Kennedy and blame the shooting on Castro agents, for example, is placed under the pressure of criss-crossing motives and coincidences so that, like Oswald's own life, it ultimately must be revised to include the killing of Kennedy. Both are examples of what Libra calls the "plot coming to the plotter," a phrase that resonates to the same sort of vatic postmodern truth as Warhol's "In the future, everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes." The conditions for celebrity and conspiracy culture are the same: both require exhaustive manipulation and coordination and the willingness of individuals to try and master opportunism. Thus the assassination in Libra is drawn as the inevitable end point of a hall-of-mirrors culture where sooner or later everyone's experience may seem to merge or meet. This is the effect that Libra dramatizes in the last half of the novel especially. In the months before the assassination, for example, Marie, Oswald's Russian wife, feels both an ironic twinge and a buzz of self-notoriety when she learns that she and Jackie Kennedy are both expecting. Such a confusion of cause and effect, private and public is one symptom of the "third person" crisis of self and self-awareness I have discussed earlier, but it is also a sign that cultural and personal difference is

effectively effaced, washed away.

If, then, we have truly ventured into the realm of occult explanation in Libra, and both Frank Lentricchia and John McClure, sober-minded men indeed, think we have, we might speculate further on parallels, antecedents, causes. I have already argued as far back as Americana that DeLillo, unlike most modernists, sees sacramental qualities in secular institutions and technologies. Their complexity and explanatory capability, like Wall Street's money computers, make them sizable mysteries, even if devoid of real "spiritual" substance. Something similar might be said of the enclosed conspiratorial world of Libra. It is its own Kosmos of happenstance, miracle and repentance. Paranoia in the novel, as in Pynchon, is a typological response to interpretive dilemmas with an essentially secular mechanism of justice--the conspirators function as minor Gods determining who shall live, who die. Conspiracy is the "new faith," DeLillo writes in "American Blood," and it determines the hearts and minds of Libra's acolytes. "The deeper the ambiguity, the more we believe, the more we trust, the more we band together," muses Larry Parmenter of his CIA colleagues. "He believed that nothing can be finally known that involves human motive and deed. There is always another level, another secret, a way in which the heart breeds a deception so mysterious and complex it can only be taken for a deeper kind of truth" (260).

If the conspirators are a religious cult, then Oswald is the novel's pharmakos, the cultural scapegoat offered for sacrifice to a cult-culture succumbing to ritual violence. He is a random victim, like those in The Names, chosen for coincidental

detail that suits the paranoid "world view" of its participants. That world view is shaped by a broader social and political imperative toward violence that is the underlying ethos of a Kennedy regime which, after all, planned and failed to have Fidel Castro put "on a slab." Its plots are a consistent response to a popular culture which desires violent conclusions to violent narratives. Hence like White Noise Libra considers its primary story fully archetypally. Oswald's life story is as culturally determined and mythically resonant as Horatio Algiers, or Jay Gatsby's or Carrie Meeber's. But where the controlling metaphors for these were the ladder of success, or the throwing of parties or theater, Libra's is television. Oswald's demise, one of the most brilliant scenes in all of DeLillo, is a meta-moment akin to the climax of White Noise where Oswald's interiorized sense of self-destiny is shifted ironically onto the plane of televisual theater. Oswald literally enters the stage or public arena that has inspired his inner life to discover that this form of desire demands violent ends. "All plots lead towards death." As he lies in the ambulance after his shooting by Ruby, Oswald reflects on the moment:

He could see himself shot as the camera caught it. Through the pain he watched TV. The siren made that panicky sound of high speed in the streets, although he had no sense of movement...Through the pain, through the losing of sensation except where it hurt, Lee watched himself react to the augering heat of the bullet. (439)

Oswald's death and dying come as his second "self" is given televisual birth. This "new" Oswald is the one of our collective memory--our first "impression" of the man, which announces for DeLillo the origin of a secondary history that has been his

destiny all along. Having begun the story in the "underground" in the place of secrets and power (the pathology of his own mediated desires), Oswald stands before the cameras just long enough to signal the advent of a postmodernism that will become obsessed with charisma and secrecy, celebrity and privacy, the public eye and the underground. This "looping" of Oswald's life, what might be called garbage in, garbage out, completes the legacy of his public career toward which the novel has always pointed. On the night of Oswald's birthday a month before the Kennedy shooting Oswald watches two films at home on television: Suddenly with Frank Sinatra and We Were Strangers. Assassination plots are central to both. DeLillo writes of Oswald as he tunes in:

He felt connected to the events on the screen. It was like secret instructions entering the network of signals and broadcast bands, the whole busy air of transmission....They were running a message through the night into his skin. (370)

Oswald is figuratively and literally "wired." His secret communion with the screen simultaneously touches the would-be assassin's impulse and foreshadows the Everyman longing in which the voyeur becomes actor, the self Other, the consumer the producer of escape fantasy. Television is thus, appropriately, symbol of a last suggestive doubling in the novel: J.F.K. and Lee Harvey Oswald are to be made American twins: paranoids, murderers, superstars.

Libra is DeLillo's most intriguingly structured novel. It is in essence two narratives that intersect or merge. One is Oswald's life story in all its fragmented, chaotic detail. That

narrative opens the book, dominates the first half more or less and then in cunning, almost conspiratorial fashion merges via accident, coincidence, chance with the conspirators' plan. For Frank Lentricchia, this double narrative strategy "implicitly directs us to read in order to give Oswald's life everything that it lacks and that the conspirator's plot has: the literary wholeness of a beginning, middle, and end." It suggests that Oswald "materializes as the real life counterpart of a fictional lone gunman whose appearance almost turns history into designed narrative, almost makes believers of us all in astrology."⁹

Lentricchia's reading recalls us to the principle of the "uncanny" operating as narrative theme in White Noise. Libra's formal arrangement plays with and against stereotypes of the paranoid or apocalyptic mindset in order to force deeper consideration of what motivates desire for plots, conspiracies and their resolutions. As in Running Dog, this is a way to test ideological theories of "reading" both history and fiction. For starters, the unfolding of a right-wing government-business-Mafia conspiracy in the novel both salves and complicates would-be (leftist) paranoia about sources of control in America. Kennedy's plans to assassinate Castro are likened by a conspirator to mob boss rub-outs in a comically offhand fashion meant to explode the integrity of any documentary, or non-parodic account of the assassination. Other conspirators, like Wayne Elko, exhibit a kind of non-motivational energy in the conspiracy, seemingly caught up, like Oswald himself, in violence-fetish derived in part from the movies. For still

others like Win Everett, conspiracies are aesthetically pleasing things, narratives that provide "deep chronos," modernist intricacies of coherence and order.

These examples underscore that what interests DeLillo more largely in Libra is a paranoid style which, according to Richard Hofstadter, "is far more coherent than the real world" in that it insists on explanatory myths and narratives that articulate a deep psychic longing for power and control.¹⁰ But DeLillo largely supercedes and surpasses this formulation of the problem of power and paranoia, as I have suggested all along, by re-problematizing them as aspects of postmodern representation. In Libra this is most profoundly signalled by the double narrative. Beyond the level of incidental coincidence alluded to by Lentricchia is the suggestion that what connects Oswald to the conspirators is their shared urge to fictionalize. Immersed in the "heat and light" of mediascape culture, main characters in the novel, like the crowd that greets the Kennedys at Love Field the morning of the assassination, are prisoners of an intense self-awareness that inspires not just dreams of a third-person existence but of stories ("plots") in which to cast themselves. The "history" of revolutionary struggle with which Oswald wishes to merge, for example, is compiled from textual sources (like DeLillo's account of the assassination): from his early, naive readings of Marxism, film noir, radical propoganda. This leads us to Libra's deepest irony and most disturbing metafictional proposition: that Oswald's "meta-historical" imagination is made available to him as a real life story by the intelligence activities of the assassins. Where conspirators in Pynchon were fascists and

revolutionaries, those in DeLillo are more like surrogate novelists and moviemakers: they build coherent narratives from popular narrative convention and 'cast' Oswald as protagonist. Once pulled into the conspiracy Oswald becomes a "bodily frame they [the conspirators] might use to extend their fiction into the world" (50); the conspirators create of and for him aliases, false addresses and "doubles" to create a complex trail of evidence after the assassination; David Ferrie describes Oswald as the "cardboard cutout they've been shaping all alone" (330). Even Oswald's role in the conspiracy is a ruse as DeLillo concocts it. "As a shooter," he writes, "Oswald was redundant, strictly backup. His role was to provide artifacts of historical interest, a traceable weapon. All the cutting and hoardings of his Cuban career" (386).

Jack Ruby's role in the conspiracy is an illuminating companion to Oswald's. Like Oswald, he is a victim of social displacement looking for his vehicle or opportunity. He is one of the most pathetic characters in DeLillo, a drifter into the book from a Nelson Algren story. But it is his own version of celebrity, not class status or social good or even, as Frank Lentricchia notes, a sense of ethnic identity that the scorned Jew desires. Recalling the days of his truancy in foster homes as a boy, "being fed the message of your nothingness every day for all your days, down and down the years," (444) Ruby is ripe for the argument of Mafia big Jack Karlinsky, who visits him after the Kennedy shooting, that "The man who gets Oswald, people will say that's the bravest man in America....The people want a blank space where he's standing. This act, they'll build

a monument, whoever does it. it's the shorest road to hero I ever saw" (431). And like Oswald, once his celebrity is guaranteed Ruby sees his "self" reflected in a new-found belief in larger historical destiny, his own merging with the past. Believing suddenly that he has been "miscast" in the conspiracy, he fantasizes that he "begins to merge with Oswald. He can't tell the difference between them...Jack Ruby has stopped being the man who killed the President's assassin. He is the man who killed the President" (445). Ruby's projected heroic "self" verifies that alterior realities can and do exist, that there are "worlds within worlds." History becomes everything "they aren't telling us," one character's definition of what modern history is.

But the character who most conspicuously tests the theory of social determination in Libra, and the limits of discursive power, is Oswald's mother Marguerite. Early in the novel her earthy, compassionate concern for Oswald and her meditative, nearly stream-of-consciousness voice provides what seems to be a point of coherent subjective "ground" against his mediated life. This suffocating attachment also posits a possible Oedipal reading of the book that might offer some humane counterweight to the delirium of Oswald's fragmented experiences. Her insistent plea to the courts to let her find out what really happened to Oswald is premised on the argument that rather than being the social tool the world tells him he is, Lee was in fact her harmless baby boy.

But Marguerite is also susceptible to the "uncanny." The mother-turned-detective who promises to deliver the "true story"

of Oswald's life to the authorities after his death is re-inventing another Oswald, the innocent, ineffectual maternal one ripped untimely from her control by his larger social destiny. Her plea for a reconsideration of Oswald's life--"There are stories inside stories," echoes the "world with worlds" trope on the paranoia of the conspirators. We recall too that much of Oswald's time with her was spent watching television, feeding social desire at home, re-writing the Oedipal script: Oswald will subject himself to no one but Mother America whose dreams, stories and desires foster an assassin's revenge that parodies the primal bond it shatters.

Marguerite's voice is one of many examples of a stylistic adroitness in Libra which enhances its representational theme. Like Dos Passos, DeLillo conveys the eerie discursive power of the press by creating a la White Noise a collage narrative that erases textual boundaries between the novel and other media. Perhaps the most striking example of this is one that foreshadows the narrative entrapment of the reader Libra eventually builds to. Early in the story Oswald meditates alone in his room on the possible purchase of a firearm. "Robert Sproul knew about a gun for sale," writes DeLillo, "a bolt action .22, a varmint gun, or we'll plink tin cans and they went on Lee's lunch hour to a cheap hotel above the business district, among muffler shops and discount furniture, in the January chill" (42). Unreliability of narrative perspective is just one question this passage raises; another is the pressure DeLillo puts on the extent to which Oswald may stand in for or represent "others," including himself and the reader. The dislocated voice of Oswald is

dislocated out to the world "we" live in.

To similar effect, constantly DeLillo intrudes voices, sounds, television jingles to interrupt or interpenetrate narrative flow like radio static or crossed signals. This technique reaches frenzy pitch in the description of the assassinaton: the event is "wired" to pick up every tick in the mediascape sensorium. It is an attempt at "panoramic" prose and to re-create at once the multiplicity of perspectives recorded by optical and sound equipment and eyewitness. "There was a white burst in the middle of the frame. A terrible splash, a burst. He was slammed back, surrounded all in dust and haze. Then suddenly clear again, down and still in the seat. Oh he's dead he's dead" (400). A moment later a new paragraph, offset from the other, still describing the moment that (in narrative time) has just passed:

The fender sirens opened up, the guns started coming out.

The girl stopped running toward the car. She stood and looked without expression.

A woman with a camera turned and saw that she was being photographed. A woman in a dark coat was aiming a Polaroid right at her. It was only then she realized she'd just seen someone in her own viewfinder. There was bloodspray on her face and arms. She thought, how strange, that the woman in the coat was her and she was the person who was shot. She felt so dazed and strange, with pale spray all over her. She sat down carefully on the grass. Just let herself down and sat there. The woman with the Polaroid didn't move. The first woman sat on the grass, put her own camera down, looked at the colorless stuff on her arms. Pigeons spinning at the treetops. If she was shot, she thought, she ought to be sitting down. (401)

This passage provides a kind of seal or coda to the novel.

The anonymous spectator/photographer/victim here is by diversity of her roles anyone; the formal confusion of the passage--its

imprecise pronoun references and disjunctive sentence sequence-- is itself an attempt to render a historical description of our collective historical consciousness of the event shaped by the forensic evidence that has become a part of common lore. We were all, Libra, seems to say, on the grassy knoll. So too it is that DeLillo "gives no quarter" in Frank Lentricchia's words on allowing the reader a "comfortable place outside of Lee Harvey Oswald."¹¹ DeLillo's offering us Oswald's own perspective on the shooting climaxes our subtle camera-eye involvement in the making of this self-made man. This identification or empathy tactic bores in on the reader of Libra like the steadfast uncertainty of Melville's Captain Delano in Benito Cereno, or the problematic vision of signs in The Scarlet Letter, or the interpretive attempts by Oedipa Maas in The Crying of Lot 49, books which like Libra derive from their social and philosophical themes the deepest epistemological puzzling. This is the point of the televised re-running of his shooting by Ruby, which DeLillo insists on as an organic part of Libra's narrative. On the Sunday after the shooting Beryl Parmenter, wife of conspirator Larry, watches images of Ruby firing at Oswald again and again. For Beryl, the horror of the image is the transmission through the screen of the self-awareness that blankets modern existence in the novel:

There was something in Oswald's face, a glance at the camera before he was shot, that put him here in the audience, among the rest of us, sleepless in our homes---a glance, a way of telling us that he knows who we are and how we feel, that he has brought our perceptions and interpretations not his sense of the crime...he is outside the moment, watching with the rest of us...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)

The "knowledge" Oswald brings is, again, the Conradian one that America's secret sharer is precisely its fantastic third-person "self," bearer of "plots" of universal desire, self-creation and conquest from John Smith to John Poindexter. Indeed Libra drops us off at the most disturbing of places, contemporary history, where its anachronistic effects are most profoundly felt. The re-running of Ruby's shooting of Oswald, Oswald's of Kennedy reminds us of John Hinckley Jr.'s videocammed shooting of Ronald Reagan, for example, inspired by Robert DeNiro's Taxi Driver heroics, just as the Kennedy conspirators ultimately recall the off-the-shelf government cast of Iran-Contra, some of whose players indeed have roots in the same Bay of Pigs operation whose failure is a prime motivator in the decision to kill the President.

Libra points to and conflates all of these recent American moments, rendering them finally problems of power, paranoia and representation. This explains the sense not of déjà-vu but déjà-déjà vu one experiences reading the novel. It is not simply that the Kennedy assassination, or Colonel Oliver North, for that matter, exist for many as a mere simulation or cartoon in the cultural memory--as incidents and figures whose images literally will not go away, but that history itself in media-consumer society is a "representation" whose origins and truth claims we continually distance by reproducing. It is this problem that Libra worries most, and which leads me to these two postscripts on the novel: 1) That for DeLillo anxiety to recover the "real" may be said to be precisely the paranoia--what Elias Canetti

calls the "pathology of power" of postmodernity; and 2) That DeLillo's understanding of the Kennedy assassination Who-Done-It as perhaps the consummate symbol of this anxiety is his masterstroke.

Notes for Chapter IX:

1. Rogin, Reagan, the Movie, p. 3.
2. Lentricchia, "Don DeLillo."
3. Ibid., p. 28.
4. Eagleton, "Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism", p. 145.
5. Aldridge, The American Novel and the Way We Live Now, p. 17.
6. Don DeLillo. "American Blood." Rolling Stone. (December 1983), p. 22.
7. Ibid., p. 27.
8. Lentricchia, "Don DeLillo."
9. Ibid., p. 18.
10. Hofstadter, The Paranoid Style in American Politics.
11. Lentricchia, "Don DeLillo," p. 17.

Ch,X Conclusion

In the course of a long project like a dissertation, especially one on a living author, the writer is never without fear of sudden events impinging upon the work at hand. I have been lucky in that DeLillo has chosen not to publish another novel while I've been at work, so at least not yet can its fragile intellectual armor be penetrated by that particular arrow. On the other hand, several books and essays relevant to my study were published during its composition, and I am happy to have them at hand to begin my temporary final assessment and re-assessment of DeLillo unto himself and in relation to the contemporary scene in theory and literature that I have been writing about.

The first I want to discuss is Alec McHoul and David Wills' Writing Pynchon, Strategies in Fictional Analysis (University of Illinois Press, 1990). A little too self-congratulatorily, this book claims to be the first study to use Contemporary Literary Theory (or CLT, as the authors call it) to unpack Pynchon's work. It proposes that Pynchon's writing has remarkably close affinities and parallels with Derrida's, and begins with an assumption this dissertation in part shares that Pynchon's subject as a writer is in fact writing, hermeneutics and representation. McHoul and Wills argue, for example, that Oedipa's search to interpret the text of The Courier's Tragedy and the parallel problems in The Crying of Lot 49 of decoding, reading and deciphering can be read examples of what Derrida has theorized as "adestination" in The Postcard. The incomplete or interrupted messages that neither Oedipa nor the reader can

decode is what the author's call the "post-rhetorical" moment in the novel in which the ability of language and linguistic system to create or pass meaning is invalidated, constantly and literally deferred, made perpetually contingent. This is the limbo that McHoul and Wills ascribe to Oedipa at book's end:

we could say that Oedipa has to exist uncertainly between signifier and signified, between, for example, the signifying post-horns and their meaning, the Trystero. If she veers too closely to the signifier alone, she is left with a meaningless array of figures. On the other hand, to veer the other way--towards meaning--induces paranoia. She lives in a world where there is no longer any clear correspondence between Sr and Sd--and so she can't take the option of bringing the two together; it's not there for the taking.¹ (p. 88)

For McHoul and Wills, this linguistic dilemma in Pynchon parallels the underpinnings of moral and metaphysical foundations and origins: "...signifying practice implicates itself in the questions of morality and ethics inasmuch as notions of identity and good are always, perhaps primarily, problems of signification and representation."² Oedipa's inability to judge the validity and merit of the Trystero, they argue, is evidence of the total collapse of right reason and conventional ethics in the novel; the shifting identities of characters, the veiled allegiances, the innumerable conspiracies and sources of menace are signs that Oedipa's problem are formulated "'semio-ethically'": that absences of semiotic certainty mean absences of meaning elsewhere and everywhere. This leads the authors to ask the trenchant question this dissertation has also put: "What form of moral/ethical position could we formulate for the postmodern world which Lot 49, at the very least, anticipates?"³ (p. 90)

McHoul and Wills try to answer their own

question by and through close readings of Pynchon and Derrida. It is the right question but the wrong approach. Derrida is the post-structuralist least overtly concerned with how moral/ethical questions get resolved in the social sphere where even the authors acknowledge Pynchon configures them. I have by contrast used Baudrillard and Foucault extensively precisely because their post-structuralist premises are starting points for their thinking about representation "semio-ethically." I have cited both authors on the topic of power to make this point, since it is implicitly an issue inseparable from considerations of morals and ethics (this is true anyway at least since Machiavelli). They both point out what Derrida (and McHoul and Wills) miss, namely that representation is a manipulable social strategy and is so perceived by most writers on the postmodern, many of those I have cited herein and including Pynchon. Who has access to and controls means of representation is the primary semio-ethic question in Pynchon: They in Gravity's Rainbow, Inverarity and the Trystero in Crying and, of course, the V-maker behind V in V are semiotic Makers--the equivalent indeed, as has often been noted, of the Invisible Hand of Puritan theology invested in all "wonders of the visible world." The cosmic joke then of Pynchon's work is that the signs don't lead to either revelation or Transcendental Signification. They are often there to mock either possibility, and to hint at the devious intentions of a laughing poststructuralist author-ity.

We know this now better than ever from Pynchon himself after Vineland, the second important book to appear during the

composition period of this dissertation. My introductory remarks linking Pynchon to the poststructuralist sociology of Foucault and Baudrillard seem more apropos than ever reading the new novel. The book's single most obsessive idea is that the sixties gave birth to an era of political manipulation by images and mediation. The climactic moment of the novel, for me anyway, comes when Prarie realizes while watching television that surveillance agents are inside of the box. It is the literalization of the surveillance/simulation trope I have been discussing throughout this dissertation, the one that always operates but never so explicitly in DeLillo. Vineland thus looks and feels a lot like DeLillo's novels, Great Jones Street and Running Dog most prominently. It locates both historical and political consciousness inside the consumer consciousness formed by and through film and television--"mediascape" culture. It complains that the spectacularization of politics in the public domain was paralleled in the area of government by increasing reliance on recording technologies (Watergate quite present as the seminal event of this development), permanently distorting ideological lines and allegiances. Curious too, like DeLillo's Libra, Vineland's central parent-child relationship is mediated by the child Prarie's memory of her mother on film. The Lacanian re-writing of Oedipal relationship (i.e. David Bell in Americana) is made another prominent motif for the essentially "semio-ethic" problem in Pynchon's work.

If this Pynchon/DeLillo parallel and my reading of it is then accurate, it suggests I think a different site for discussion of the American social novel. In the novels of both

Pynchon and DeLillo there is no chance for a substantial or even minor shift in discursive power until some shift in what we might call (after Marx, of course) the "means of representation." Until then postmodern society is best describable through their fictions as a para-dystopia. It is where mediation is so thorough as to constantly defer the site of social action. It implies that all of the criteria by which social categories, and hence social tensions or resistance might be defined are subsumed with a field of indistinguishable signs. Class, race, cultural and historical difference are nullified by the logic of postmodernism's discursive power. Again Pynchon's Vineland and DeLillo's Libra make this point in precisely similar fashions, re-viewing the apex of these differences, the sixties, through the lens of a contemporary mediascape. Through it, America is a rather homogeneous field where the movements and dialectics that mattered most to mainstream American cultural criticism have been absorbed.

This makes all the more noticeable and important the emergence in their most recent books of a feminine (feminist is too strong a word I think) critical perspective. What Kucich, Tate and myself have pointed to as essentially a critical psychology of the bourgeois white male in DeLillo's fiction also applies, I would argue, to Pynchon's novels up to Vineland. No one has better documented the dangers of "phallogentric" thinking than Pynchon in Gravity's Rainbow, or the misogynistic impulse behind imperialism in V. better than Pynchon, but until Vineland one felt the constant absence of a serious consideration of non-male, non-masculine forms of thinking and writing. The

same is obviously true of DeLillo. I have tried to account for this as both emblematic of, and a limitation of the general postmodern sensibility. In this I am supported all around by feminist critics who in one measure or another have argued that what postmodernism has tended to overlook are how gender differences are effected by or take part in the acts and practices of the postmodern. This becomes especially important when one encounters a critical theory or portrait of social dysfunctionism. Any potential for a comprehensive theory obviously must take into account the place of the feminine in the 'para-dystopia' of the postmodern.

Libra and Vineland are the two novels that make this move, and thus indicate a possible shift of direction away from the para-dystopic track I have layed out in this dissertation. The extended monologue of Marguerite Oswald's that is in effect Lee's elegy is the discursive counterweight to virtually all of his limited discourse on postmodernism to date. The modernist inflection of tone and the rhetoric of pathos in Marguerite address is the "mother-tongue" which mediation in DeLillo's universe has heretofore silenced. Mother Marguerite is of course that metaphysical center or origin of lived experience. She is the 'signified' returned at the end of a novel and a writing career thus far about irrecoverable origins. Her maternal voice echoes back to the absence of voice and presence in the life of Americana's David Bell, the loss of which begins his Oedipal/experiential search for lost origins. She is the ur mother of DeLillo's fiction who binds together his lost bourgeois males, grounding them in a discursive place before

their re-birth at the hands of mediascape culture.

Indeed Libra is also the book about the beginning, the moment of conception of DeLillo's career; the assassination stands, as I have argued, as the emblematic moment when hermeneutic paranoia and the discursive power of media became predominant motifs of the postmodern and his thinking about representation. By ending Libra with the voice of Marguerite, the burial of Oswald, and the final declaration that the latter now belongs "to history," DeLillo may, may be announcing for himself something like the end of postmodern history in his own work. In the most conservative way possible, it would represent a revolt against the 'para-dystopic' by feminine beginnings: original myths of origins recovered. It may be the author signalling that one loop of his own career is complete, and at the same time another is being born. What that next loop is even anticipation, the muse of this study, can't fathom. It would rather pause expectantly and wait for the next book.

Notes for Chapter X:

1. Alec McHoul and David Wills. Writing Pynchon: Strategies in Fictional Analysis. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), p. 88

2. Ibid., p. 88.

3. Ibid., p. 90.

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