

**QUOTIDIAN THINGS:  
DON DELILLO AND THE  
EVERYDAY**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the politics of the everyday in Don DeLillo's novels from 1982 to present. It contends that DeLillo's canonization as an exemplar of postmodern depthlessness and ahistoricity has occluded his interest in mapping the connections between the particularity of daily life and the capitalist world-system. I position the theoretical framework of the everyday as a corrective to these readings, and seek to recover and foreground its Marxist orientation, whilst envisioning the everyday as a way of negotiating between deterministic applications of Marxist theory and the uncritical celebration of individualized resistance endorsed by the cultural turn. Drawing on the French sociologists Michel De Certeau and Henri Lefebvre's theories of the everyday, the thesis extends De Certeau's conception of the everyday as resisting the 'grid of discipline' and Lefebvre's characterization of it as eluding the 'grip of forms' to attend to the intersection of politics and form. I conceptualise the everyday as operating at the nexus of plot and detail, digression and generic suspense, world-systemic totality and quotidian singularity. To examine the everyday is to turn to the overlooked and undervalued; DeLillo's surpluses of quotidian detail pose a challenge to the value-logic of capital, its uneven manifestations, its invisibilized surplus populations and labour, as well as literary-critical systems of value. This thesis advances this theory of the everyday through explorations of DeLillo's representations of waste, crowds, and terrorism, and traces lines of continuity rather than rupture between DeLillo's work and supposedly 'postpostmodern' texts by David Foster Wallace and Jennifer Egan. My coda examines DeLillo's move from digression to contraction in his 'late style,' arguing that this stylistic shift registers financialized exhaustion. Ultimately, this thesis pursues the claim that DeLillo's everyday opens up utopian possibilities by challenging the value relations underlying everyday life, thereby allowing us to imagine its transformation.

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## **AUTHOR'S DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that this thesis is entirely my own work and has not been submitted for another degree, nor has any part of it been published or submitted for publication. All sources are acknowledged as references.

## INTRODUCTION

### 'Sex, weather and food'

#### Don DeLillo and the problem of the everyday

In his 1997 essay 'The Power of History,' Don DeLillo declares: 'There is pleasure to be found, the writer's, the reader's, in a version of the past that escapes the coils of established history and biography and that finds a language, scented, dripping, detailed, for such routine realities as sex, weather and food, for the ravel of a red thread on a woman's velvet sleeve.'<sup>1</sup> Though the essay functions as a statement of intent for DeLillo's magnum opus, *Underworld* (1997), a preoccupation with sensuous and concrete details pervades his work. In a 1988 interview with Anthony DeCurtis, he identifies 'a sense of the importance of daily life and of ordinary moments' in his novels, and acknowledges that 'in *White Noise*, in particular, I tried to find a kind of radiance in dailiness.'<sup>2</sup> Yet this radiance has been dulled by DeLillo's critical categorization as a postmodernist, most clearly manifested in repeated assertions that *White Noise* 'epitomizes' the postmodern condition. While Jeremy Green notes it is now a commonplace to assert that postmodernism never existed at all, postmodern analyses of DeLillo persist.<sup>3</sup> Such readings propound the version of

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<sup>1</sup> Don DeLillo, 'The Power of History,' *The New York Times*, 7 September, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> DeLillo, interview with Anthony DeCurtis, "'An Outsider in This Society": An Interview with Don DeLillo,' in *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, ed. Thomas DePietro (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 52-71, 70.

<sup>3</sup> Jeremy Green, *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 1. Green's study describes DeLillo as a 'late postmodernist.' See also: Ralph Clare, 'A Capital Death: Medicine, Technology, and the Care of the Self in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*,' in *Fictions Inc.: The Corporation in Postmodern Fiction, Film, and Popular Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 115-135, which declares *White Noise* to be 'a perfect primer on postmodern American life' (115).

For more recent readings of DeLillo that position him as postmodernist, see: Sarah L. Wasserman, 'Ephemeral Gods and Billboard Saints: Don DeLillo's *Underworld* and Urban Apparitions,' *Journal of American Studies* 48.4 (2014): 1041-67; Katrina Harack, 'Embedded and Embodied Memories: Body, Space, and Time in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and *Falling Man*,' *Contemporary Literature* 54.2 (2013): 303-37; Martina Sciolino, 'The Contemporary American Novel as World Literature: The Neoliberal Antihero in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*,' *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 57.2 (2015): 210-41.

postmodernism inflected by pop-philosopher Jean Baudrillard's writings on simulacra and hyperreality, as well as Fredric Jameson's famous anatomization of the disappearance of history, the disappearance of the subject, and, most importantly, 'a new kind of flatness or depthlessness' in contemporary art and literature.<sup>4</sup> For Jameson, Andy Warhol's 'Diamond Dust Shoes' epitomize postmodern depthlessness, in contrast to Van Gogh's vividly material paintings of peasants' boots. He quotes Heidegger, who assumed the boots to belong to a peasant woman. Heidegger claims that in the 'stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lie the dampness and richness of the soil.'<sup>5</sup> Jameson's salient scorn for Heidegger's romanticism aside, he protests that 'Andy Warhol's Diamond Dust Shoes evidently no longer speaks to us with any of the immediacy of Van Gogh's footgear; indeed, I am tempted to say that it does not really speak to us at all.'<sup>6</sup> In contrast, in *Underworld*, Father Paulus names the parts of Nick Shay's 'plain black everyday clerical shoe': cuff, counter, quarter, welt, vamp, eyelet, aglet, grommet, and tells Nick: 'Everyday things represent the most overlooked knowledge. These names are vital to your progress. Quotidian things. If they weren't important, we wouldn't use such a gorgeous Latinate word. [...] An

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Similarly, recent studies of other authors have defined them against DeLillo's putative postmodernism. See: Jeffrey Severs, 'Collision, Illinois: David Foster Wallace and the Value of Insurance,' *MFS* 62.1 (2016), 136-56; Jeffrey J. Williams, 'Generation Jones and Contemporary US Fiction,' *American Literary History* 28.1 (2016): 94-122; Stephen J. Burn, *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011)

Frank Lentricchia, amongst others, has tried to position DeLillo as 'the last of the modernists [who] takes for his critical object of aesthetic concern the postmodern situation.' Lentricchia, 'Introduction,' in *New Essays on White Noise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 1-14, 14. But this does not provide us with a valuable distinction: postmodernism was theorised as the deployment of modernist techniques in a postmodern world.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso Books, 1992), 33; 24; 9.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art,' trans. Albert Hofstadter, in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty: Selected Readings in Aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 649-701, 663.

<sup>6</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 8.



extraordinary word that suggests the depth and reach of the commonplace.<sup>7</sup> Father Paulus imbues the trivial with importance, but an earlier reference to shoes in *Underworld* detracts from the immediacy of the image. After disclosing that his wife has recently had a cancerous lump removed from her arm, Nick's brother Matt reminds him of the use of fluoroscopes (X-ray imaging machines) to check the fit of shoes, and posits 'did you do this enough times to suffer bone damage because the machine was basically spraying your feet with radiation[?]'<sup>8</sup> A ghostly shadow of World War II thus undercuts this ostensibly nostalgic image of American manufacturing, and gestures towards the military-industrial complex's stabilizing effect on the American postwar economy. The image resurfaces towards the end of the novel, when Nick visits the former atomic testing site in Kazakhstan, sees radiation-damaged children playing, and observes that one has a 'hole in the welt above each shoe.'<sup>9</sup> This is not to say, however, that *Underworld's* attention to shoes confirms its paranoid mantra that 'everything is connected,' or suggests a simple relation of causality between the three images. As Emily Apter has argued, to assert this would be to reify the relationships between the local and the global, to impose a 'delirious aesthetics of [world] systematicity,' and to promulgate the distinctly 'American paradigm of oneworldedness hatched in the 1960s at the zenith of Cold War paranoia.'<sup>10</sup> DeLillo's shoes retain both the insistent materiality and inherent mystery of the everyday, whilst gesturing towards the costs at which the American 'ordinary' in the 1950s has been attained. Rather than overdetermining or reifying the everyday, DeLillo stages the shifting relation between its slipperiness and systematicity that pervades and distinguishes his work.

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<sup>7</sup> DeLillo, *Underworld* (New York: Scribner, 1997), 542.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 802.

<sup>10</sup> Emily Apter, 'On Oneworldedness: Or Paranoia as a World System,' *American Literary History* 18.2 (2006): 364-389, 366.

### ‘A science of singularity’

DeLillo’s interest in the ‘most overlooked forms of knowledge’ shares affinities with the field of everyday life theory, which encompasses a set of theories that seek to ‘rescue the everyday from the neglect and oblivion to which it is customarily consigned.’<sup>11</sup> Recent studies by Ben Highmore and Michael Sheringham have constructed genealogies of everyday life theory, bringing into their analyses figures as diverse as Freud, Bréton, Benjamin, Perec, Barthes, Williams, Hall, and Baudrillard. However, the French sociologists and philosophers Michel de De Certeau and Henri Lefebvre stand at the forefront of this tradition, as represented in Lefebvre’s three-volume *Critique of Everyday Life* (1946; 1961; 1981) and its abridged version, *Everyday Life and the Modern World* (1968), and De Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980).<sup>12</sup> Lefebvre and De Certeau’s theories display obvious contiguity with a series of methodological approaches to history: *microhistoria*, *Alltagsgeschichte*, and history from below. Though these interventions were intended to rescue history from the inflated importance of Great Men in favour of ordinary people and culture, and to add notions of agency to these discussions, they tended to treat the everyday as a self-evident category.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, these approaches generally constructed a masculinist conception of the ordinary, binding it to white working-class male identity and labour.<sup>14</sup> However, any attempt to construct a theory

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1-2.

<sup>12</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, i., trans. John Moore (London: Verso, 1991); Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life: Foundations for a Sociology of the Everyday*, ii., trans. John Moore (London: Verso, 1991); Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life: From Modernity to Modernism (Towards a Metaphilosophy of Daily Life)*, iii., trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2006); Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000); Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> See: Frank Trentmann, ‘The Politics of Everyday Life,’ in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption*, ed. Frank Trentmann (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 521-547.

<sup>14</sup> See Joan Wallach Scott, ‘Women in *The Making of the English Working Class*,’ in *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 69-90, which critiques E.P. Thompson’s masculinist version of ‘history from below,’ and Mark Bevir and Frank Trentmann, ‘Critique within Capitalism: Historiographical Problems, Theoretical Perspectives,’ in *Critiques of Capital in Modern*

of everyday life must grapple with a series of paradoxes: the everyday seems self-evident, but is simultaneously ‘what is most difficult to discover’; it not only appears to evade ‘the coils of established history,’ but eludes, circumvents, and frustrates representation itself.<sup>15</sup> For, how can we talk about the everyday without elevating it to the extraordinary? How can one capture ‘radiance in dailiness’ without denuding its dailiness? Equally, attempts to curb the unwieldiness of the concept by pinning it down as specific content (repetition, daily routines, work, etc.) seem to rob the everyday of its essential indeterminacy and ambiguity. As Maurice Blanchot evinces, ‘the everyday escapes. This is its definition.’<sup>16</sup>

De Certeau and Lefebvre’s work operates on the premise that the category of the everyday is itself problematic. De Certeau’s work carries with methodological concerns regarding representation: he aligns the epistemological claims of history and anthropology with colonial ethnography, and posits a ‘science of singularity’ as a corrective—‘a method that values the singularity of close attention to the specific, located object,’ without imagining the act of observing as ‘free from centuries of philosophical problems and debates.’<sup>17</sup> De Certeau positions his work as a critique of contemporary sociological approaches to consumption:

consumption, organized by this expansionist grid takes on the appearance of something done by sheep progressively immobilized and “handled” [...] The only freedom supposed to be left to the masses is that of grazing on the ration of simulacra that the system distributes to each individual.

That is precisely the idea I oppose: such an image of consumers is unacceptable<sup>18</sup>

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*Britain and America: Transatlantic Exchanges 1800 to Present Day*, ed. Mark Bevir and Frank Trentmann (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 1-25.

<sup>15</sup> Maurice Blanchot, ‘Everyday Speech,’ trans. Susan Hanson, *Yale French Studies* 73 (1987): 12-20, 12.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>17</sup> Certeau, *Practice*, ix. Ben Highmore, *Michel De Certeau: Analysing Culture* (London: A&C Black, 2006), 7.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

Resistant to ‘large scale theoretical schema,’ De Certeau emphasizes the residual and elusive qualities of the everyday. Using Foucault’s concept of disciplinary grids, he argues:

If it is true that the grid of “discipline” is everywhere becoming clearer and more extensive, it is all the more urgent to discover how an entire society resists being reduced to it, what popular procedures (also “miniscule” and quotidian) manipulate the mechanisms of discipline and conform to them only in order to evade them.<sup>19</sup>

Everyday practices such as walking, shopping, cooking, and watching television are recast as resisting the iron cage of rationalization. De Certeau envisions consumption—including literary consumption—as an active process, whereby the consumer reshapes intended meanings. ‘Whether it is a question of newspapers or Proust,’ he asserts, ‘the text has a meaning only through its readers.’ Readers take ‘detours’ from the texts, ‘drifts across the page [...] imaginary or meditative flights taking off from a few words, overlappings of spaces on the militarily organized surfaces of the text.’<sup>20</sup>

Henri Lefebvre also emphasizes the elusive and residual qualities of the everyday. For him, the everyday is what remains when the layers of mystification are stripped away: ‘everyday life,’ he writes, is ‘defined by “what is left over” after all distinct, superior, specialized, structured activities have been singled out by analysis.’<sup>21</sup> Whereas De Certeau remodels consumption as an act of production, Lefebvre’s project is fiercely Marxist, and inveighs against modernity and commodity culture, claiming they have ‘colonized’ the everyday.<sup>22</sup> The everyday is understood dialectically as the site where alienation and commodification are most tangible, but

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>20</sup> Certeau, *Practice*, 170.

<sup>21</sup> Lefebvre, *Critique*, i., 97.

<sup>22</sup> Lefebvre, *Critique*, ii., 11. Here, Lefebvre is borrowing Guy Debord’s phrase. It is important to acknowledge that Lefebvre’s hostility to consumerism registers the rapid pace of change in post-war France, in which modernization ushered in ‘an almost cargo-cult-like, sudden descent of large appliances into war-torn French households and streets in the wake of the Marshall Plan.’ Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 4. This thesis does not identify such virulent anti-consumerism in DeLillo, but instead a systemic critique of the Marshall Plan from the perspective of the U.S. economic core-hegemon.

also as imbued with its ‘own spontaneous critique of the everyday’ and thus the potential for demystification and transformation.<sup>23</sup> Elsewhere, Lefebvre writes: ‘forms simultaneously organize [the everyday] and are projected upon it, but their concerted efforts cannot reduce it; residual and irreducible, it eludes all attempts at institutionalization, it evades the grip of forms.’<sup>24</sup> For both theorists, then, the everyday is defined in opposition to regulatory ‘forms’ and ‘grid[s].’ For Lefebvre, however, it is crucial to connect the specificity of the quotidian to the general: ‘the simplest event—a woman buying a pound of sugar, for example—must be analysed,’ he asserts, arguing for the conception of ‘the humble events of everyday life as having two sides: a little, individual, chance event—and at the same time an infinitely complex social event, richer than the many “essences” it contains within itself.’<sup>25</sup> The complexity of this event is attested to by studies such as Sidney W. Mintz’s *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (1985), which tracks sugar’s dynamic cultural associations, showing that it is simultaneously mundane and world-historical, tied to daily routine *and* a history of colonial violence, plantations, and slave labour.<sup>26</sup> But this does not fully account for the complexities of sugar; as well as embodying the ordinary, products like sugar invisibly support everyday life, as Edward Said insists when he writes that the luxurious insularity of the property in *Mansfield Park* would ‘have had to be [supported by] a sugar plantation maintained by slave labour.’<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Lefebvre, *Critique*, i., 40.

<sup>24</sup> Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, 182.

<sup>25</sup> Lefebvre, *Critique*, i., 57. It is worth noting that this Lefebvre passage bears resemblance to Jameson’s concept of ‘cognitive mapping’—that is, the method literature must find to negotiate and represent the idea that the ‘limited daily experience of London lies, rather, in India or Jamaica or Hong Kong; it is bound up with the whole colonial system of the British Empire that determines the very quality of the individual’s subjective life. Yet those structural coordinates are no longer accessible to immediate lived experience and are often not even conceptualizable for most people.’ Jameson, ‘Cognitive Mapping,’ in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 347-60. Jameson, however, believes that postmodern literature has failed to achieve this.

<sup>26</sup> Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (London: Penguin, 1986).

<sup>27</sup> Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Random House, 1994), 107.

In a similar vein, recent work on petrofiction has confronted the difficulties of singling out oil as a unit of analysis when its entanglement in quotidian experience renders it virtually invisible. As Stephanie LeMenager writes, ‘the category confusion of life or oil powerfully disarranges the historic role of petroleum in the material economy.’ She adds: ‘it might seem that [the task of the critic] would be one of unconcealment in such cases. But often I find the confusion of oil and life more interesting than their segregation.’<sup>28</sup> Similarly, this thesis recognises that trivial and routine events do not take place in a vacuum, and are connected to invisible webs of power, history, and commerce, but that to propose and hypostatize neat links between the quotidian and the world-historical artificially separates the two, and denudes the everyday of its essential indeterminacy.

On the one hand, then, we are confronted with De Certeau’s insistence on the particularity of lived experience and, on the other, Lefebvre’s attention to abstract systems. This opposition emblematises seismic shifts in Western intellectual history. As John Roberts notes,

the central concern of *The Practice of Everyday Life* embraces what is to define the development of cultural studies proper in the Anglophone world in the 1970s and 1980s: the critique of the notion of the passive consumer of culture, a notion which was the mainstay of both 1950s sociologies of mass culture, and the Frankfurt School. [...] But if this locates de Certeau’s theory of the everyday within the immediate political context of Lefebvre, [...] his work disconnects the philosophy of praxis from any explicit totalizing critique of capitalism<sup>29</sup>

Broadly speaking, we can locate De Certeau and Lefebvre on opposite sides of the clash between the cultural turn and a continuing commitment to Marxist materialist analysis. The former, as Roberts argues, ‘disaggregates the collective claims of working-class agency itself in the name of an individuated cultural resistance to

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<sup>28</sup> Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 7.

<sup>29</sup> John Roberts, *Philosophizing the Everyday: Revolutionary Praxis and the Fate of Cultural Theory* (London: Pluto Press, 2006), 87.

reification and “dominant ideology” and ‘a micrology of dissent.’<sup>30</sup> In order to delimit my theory of the everyday, it is necessary to rehearse some of the details of this clash. As the story goes: in the late 1970s and early 1980s, academics began to assume the mantle of postmodern or postcolonial theorist, renouncing the holistic interpretations of Western Marxism as a meta-narrative contaminated by the logic of imperialism.<sup>31</sup> Social movements of the 1960s that linked identity to the class struggle were consequently washed away by a sea of indeterminacy and discourse surrounding ‘difference,’ along with the postcolonialist assertion of the ‘irreducibility and autonomy of experience’ and the postmodern project of destabilizing knowledge and subjects.<sup>32</sup>

Meanwhile, the field of world-systems theory emerged, announcing its aim to redress the cultural turn’s focus on superstructure. Immanuel Wallerstein’s seminal writings on the world-system staunchly declare: ‘to be against scientism is not to be against science,’ and advocates for an emphasis on the economic base that *controls* social relations.<sup>33</sup> World-systems analysis holds that ‘inequality is produced relationally, in the gap between metropole and periphery,’ and advances a ‘methodological principle for the study of such networks: that such inequalities can only be seen if one treats the capitalist world economy as a single unit of analysis.’<sup>34</sup> World-systems theory attained scant academic traction until recently, with Franco Moretti’s influential deployment of Wallerstein to reconfigure literary studies along world-systemic lines. Responding to Moretti’s intervention, Benita Parry and Mike Niblett, for example, seek to elaborate the systematicity of literature, break away from postcolonialism’s pointillism, and restore the backbone of Marxist critique to literary studies. Parry upbraids Robert Young for his commitment to hidden and

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<sup>30</sup> Roberts, *Everyday*, 92; 96.

<sup>31</sup> See: Benita Parry, ‘What is Left in Postcolonial Studies?’ *New Literary History* 43.2 (2012): 341-58; Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>32</sup> Timothy Brennan, *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 242, qtd. in Parry, ‘What is Left,’ 349.

<sup>33</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012) 20-21.

<sup>34</sup> Matthew Eatough, ‘The Literary History of World-Systems, I: Marxist Lineages,’ *Literature Compass* 12/11 (2015): 591-602, 593.

unreadable lived experience, and ‘the ongoing psychic life of residues, living remains, lingering legacies’ in non-secular societies on the grounds that it fails to locate the grounds that it simplistically (and condescendingly) places Africa, Asia, and South America as ‘outside’ modernity, rather than regarding ‘modernity as coextensive with capitalism’s worldwide and violent consolidation, and thus as the temporal condition of populations everywhere.’<sup>35</sup>

Though the object of world-systems theory is to examine capitalist totality through its constitutive differences and combined and uneven heterogeneity, world-systemic literary analysis has thus far offered little more than materialist steamrollering. In doing so, they not only squash the intricacies of literature, but also elide capitalism’s incorrigibly elastic and protean nature. Certainly, my conception of the everyday and world-systems analysis share the premise that ‘capitalist development does not smooth away but rather produces unevenness, systematically and as a matter of course,’ and that this radical unevenness impresses itself upon the minutiae of daily life and the formal features of texts.<sup>36</sup> But world-systems literary studies rarely deliver on their self-proclaimed dedication to examining form, and either flatten out the particularities of the text (as in Moretti’s *Modern Epic: The World-System from Goethe to García Márquez* (1996)) or merely announce a renewed focus on form, apparently yet to arrive (*Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (2015)). Can we dispense with the exoticism of Young’s gesture, whilst avoiding the determinism of world-systems analysis? This thesis contends that the everyday can negotiate these constitutive connections and contradictions between lived experience and global capitalism, without resorting to an uncritical celebration of individualized resistance or crushing the nuances of literature in the drive for totality. Though my project will uphold the Marxist underpinnings of Lefebvre’s conception of the everyday, it attempts to reconfigure these apparently opposed positions within the academy. By

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<sup>35</sup> Parry, ‘What is Left,’ 354.

<sup>36</sup> Warwick Research Collective (WReC), *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 12.



paying closer attention to the granularity of everyday life—and of the formal features of the text—my theory of the everyday proposes a way of mapping the totality of the world-system that redresses the Marxist overcompensation against the cultural turn. To echo De Certeau, if postcolonialism and postmodernism are concerned with singularity, and world-systems theory is concerned with science, the everyday is a methodology that can fuse the two into a ‘science of singularity.’ In DeLillo, the everyday appears as a way of mediating between the concrete and the abstract, of posing the particularity of the quotidian against the totality of the capitalist world-system whilst demonstrating their systemic imbrication.<sup>37</sup>

As I am positioning the everyday as a means to map the totality of the capitalist *world-system*, the question may arise: why, then, is DeLillo the focus of my thesis, instead of a postcolonial author, or fiction from the economic peripheries of that system? The reader will note that the critiques of the cultural turn I bring into my analysis indict postcolonialism. This is not to say that Marxist critiques of postmodern theory don’t exist. David Harvey, for example, famously decries postmodernism’s uncritical embrace of ‘ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity, and the chaotic,’ and its assumption that it is ‘only through [...] a multifaceted and pluralistic attack upon localized practices of repression that any global challenge to capitalism might be mounted without replicating all the multiple repressions of capitalism in a new form.’ For Harvey, postmodernism ‘leaves open, particularly so in the deliberate rejection of any holistic theory of capitalism, the question of the path whereby such localized struggles might add up to a progressive, rather than regressive, attack upon the central forms of capitalist exploitation and repression.’<sup>38</sup> However, scant scholarship has reassessed supposedly postmodern literature in light

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<sup>37</sup> My analysis bears affinities with Tom LeClair’s illuminating study of DeLillo, *In the Loop: DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), which reads DeLillo’s novels in relation to the biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy’s ‘General System Theory,’ and is deeply concerned with cybernetics. I instead probe DeLillo’s novels approach to the *capitalist* world-system.

<sup>38</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 45; 46.

of this revelation.<sup>39</sup> As a canonical postmodern author, championed within the American academy on which postmodern theory most decisively impressed itself, DeLillo provides an instructive case for a revisionary reading that examines his attempts to map and resist the world-system within which he is writing. American literature has long been obscured by the Baudrillardian image of the U.S. as a ‘desert of the real,’—which, as Alex Callinicos notes, arises from a Eurocentric anti-Americanism—evident in Jameson’s accusation that we need only survey ‘the gasoline stations along American superhighways, the glossy photographs in the magazines, or the cellophane paradise of an American drugstore, in order to realize that the objects of Surrealism are gone without a trace.’<sup>40</sup> What would be gained if we looked at the social realities elided by theories of postmodernism and re-examined the work of a writer who, throughout his career, has lovingly documented the vivid materiality of American everyday life?

### **Grids, plotting, mapping**

So far, everyday life theories have only been imported to *modernist* literary criticism. The foremost studies in this vein are Liesl Olson’s *Modernism and the Ordinary* (2009), Bryony Randall’s *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life* (2007), and Michael Sayeau’s *Against the Event: The Everyday and the Evolution of Modernist Narrative* (2013). What these studies share is their project of redressing modernist criticism’s emphasis on interiority and exceptional moments, and recasting the material and mundane as central to the modernist project, as epitomized by *Ulysses*.

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<sup>39</sup> For historicizing approaches to postmodernism, see: Rachel Adams, ‘The Ends of America, the Ends of Postmodernism,’ *Twentieth Century Literature* 53.3 (2007): 248-272; Andrew Hoberek, ‘Foreign Objects, or, DeLillo Minimalist,’ *Studies in American Fiction* 37.1 (2010): 101–25; Hoberek, *The Twilight of the Middle Class: Post-World War II American Fiction and White-Collar Work* (Princeton University Press, 2009); Sean McCann and Michael Szalay, ‘Do You Believe in Magic? Literary Thinking after the New Left,’ *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 18.2 (2005): 435-468, 449.

<sup>40</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1; Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 105, qtd. in Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 147.

Though they engage with Lefebvre and De Certeau to varying degrees, implicit in these analyses is a metaphorical move whereby De Certeau and Lefebvre's regulatory grids figure the confines of plot conventions. The unruliness of the everyday and ordinary details is often contrasted with the 'militarily organized' demands of plot progression. For example, Olson contends that:

The desire to impose meaning, to give everyday life a narrative structure, or to give significance to banal moments, is a desire that often gives rise to complex works of art. But *Ulysses* also suggests that this desire cannot always be fulfilled; the everyday is often a foil to the very act of interpretation itself.<sup>41</sup>

The everyday is therefore defined as the formal excess that overflows the narrative structure, just as De Certeau's active consumers 'circulate, come and go, overflow and drift over an imposed terrain, like the snowy waves of the sea slipping in among the rocks and defiles of an established order.'<sup>42</sup> Roland Barthes defined surplus description as 'reality effects,' a device that appears in the nineteenth-century realist novel when a descriptive detail cannot be explained away as 'index of character or atmosphere.' Though 'obsessive reference to the "concrete" [...] is always brandished like a weapon against meaning,' he continues, the superfluous detail becomes 'the very signifier of realism,' and thus the reality effect.<sup>43</sup> In Victorian realism, the details of everyday life are purposeful, bolstering the plot through their symbolic value or the verisimilitude they confer upon it. As Cynthia Wall observes, the narrative axes of plot and description are collapsible, but 'in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a division entered between description and narration that would become outright opposition,' with detail-oriented description becoming 'a matter for stylistic wariness,'

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<sup>41</sup> Liesl Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009), 35.

<sup>42</sup> Certeau, *Practice*, 34.

<sup>43</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Reality Effect,' in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 141-8, 141. Throughout this thesis, I use the term 'realism' to refer to the arsenal of literary conventions used to confer verisimilitude that are associated with the Victorian novel, such as reality effects. Though these conventions are obviously dynamic and elastic, the Victorian novel often becomes the straw-man against which literature defines itself.

and devalued as interrupting the narrative and burdening it with surplus.<sup>44</sup> However, by the nineteenth century, description ‘found itself transformed from something obstructing narrative and refrigerating thought into something absorbed into narrative.’<sup>45</sup> We can see this in the Victorian novel, which, as Elaine Freedgood writes, ‘describes, catalogs, quantifies, and in general showers us with things.’<sup>46</sup> Freedgood’s project attempts to reverse the neglect of Victorian objects; she argues that, although ‘these objects are largely inconsequential in the rhetorical hierarchy of the texts [...] they suggest, or reinforce, something we already know about the subjects who use them’ and are thus ‘highly consequential.’<sup>47</sup> One might, however, argue that the sheer excess of detail in the Victorian novel must preclude its all being purposeful. Though the idea of ‘purposeful detail’ may be an illusory version of the Victorian novel, it is nevertheless one that literature has defined itself against.

Olson differentiates modernist literature from the realist novel on the basis that, ‘diminishing the importance of plot, literary modernism privileges the ordinary first and foremost. The ordinary serves not merely as a backdrop to represent an objective reality, what Barthes calls “the reality effect,” but as the central subject of the work itself.’<sup>48</sup> However, the claim Olson makes for modernism is problematic: to privilege the ordinary would and define it as ‘content’ would be to endow it with significance. As Bryony Randall has recently written, ‘if work on literature and the everyday is to remain in good faith with theories of the everyday it must focus on form.’<sup>49</sup> Olson’s version of the everyday reifies it by locating it in quotidian details in the text.

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<sup>44</sup> Cynthia Wall, ‘Description,’ in *The Encyclopedia of the Novel*, ed. Peter Meville Logan (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 233-241, 234-5

<sup>45</sup> Cynthia Wall, *The Prose of Things: Transformations of Description in the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006), 11.

<sup>46</sup> Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 1.

<sup>47</sup> Freedgood, *Ideas in Things*, 1-2. See also: Victoria Coulson, *Henry James, Women and Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>48</sup> Olson, *Ordinary*, 21.

<sup>49</sup> Bryony Randall, ‘Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* and the Everyday,’ *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 26.3 (2015): 173-193, 172.

Sayeau's intervention is more attuned to this issue. Though he agrees with Olson that modernism represents a departure from 'purposeful realism,' he argues that

the modernist novel is not so much *uneventful* as *anti-evental*. Rather than simply abandoning evental forms in favor of unmediated, arhythmical content, modernism productively if subversively reinhabits them. The evental structures are maintained in place, but are at the same time ironically undercut, eroded from within, and/or exposed as reflexive tropes through thematic and formal innovations.<sup>50</sup>

One way in which it maintains these 'evental' structures is by exploiting the conventions of popular forms, he argues. By creating and then refusing to fulfil generic expectations, the modernist novel provides access to the everyday, as opposed to a fully experimental novel that dispensed with plot, which would defamiliarize and transfigure the everyday. The strength of Sayeau's study lies in this recognition that the everyday is to be discovered at the intersection of the mundane and the exciting, operating within and exploding generic conventions. My discussion of DeLillo's everyday maintains this sense of the everyday as coming to the fore through generic unevenness, but via a dialectic of significance and insignificance.

Randall further problematizes the binary between plot and description in her discussion of *Ulysses*, in which she posits the everyday as a corrective to the strand of modernist criticism that adheres to Eliot's model for understanding the everyday in *Ulysses*, whereby myth orders the chaos of everyday life. She suggests that, 'rather than seeing mythic, philosophical depth overlaid with daily surface, we should rather see Joyce trying to make sense of daily depth by overlaying a variety of mythic and philosophical structures.' Instead, she foregrounds the 'constant dialogue in these modernist texts between surface and depth.'<sup>51</sup> Randall's analysis is grounded in a feminist adaptation of Marx's critique of value, and therefore argues for 'an

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<sup>50</sup> Michael Sayeau, *Against the Event: The Everyday and the Evolution of Modernist Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 39.

<sup>51</sup> Bryony Randall, *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 9.

interrogation of the terms “dailiness” and “everyday,” and the gendered associations they hold,’ that addresses ‘activities which are usually devalued.’<sup>52</sup> Whilst maintaining a sense of the inseparability of form and content, or plot and description, this thesis will also probe the politics of form in relation to the concept of value. To attend to description over plot is to attend to the devalued, as we shall see in my reading of *White Noise* in Chapter One, in which DeLillo’s digressive descriptions figure the devalued labour of women entrenched in everyday life.

DeLillo’s texts often define the meandering qualities of daily life in opposition to the linear advancement of a plot. In *White Noise*, Jack Gladney, visits a graveyard and thinks: ‘May the days be aimless. Let the seasons drift. Do not advance the action according to a plan.’<sup>53</sup> Earlier in the novel, he finds himself telling his college students: ‘All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots. Political plots, terrorist plots, lovers’ plots, narrative plots, plots that are part of children’s games.’<sup>54</sup> When Jack decides to ‘advance the action according to a plan’ and murder the man who has had sex with his wife, he obsessively tells us: ‘Here is my plan,’ ‘my plan was this,’ ‘this was my plan.’ Yet his plans break down and have to be reformulated again and again to adapt to the contingencies of daily life, leading him to wonder: ‘How was my plan progressing?’<sup>55</sup> The idea resurfaces in *Libra*, DeLillo’s novel about the assassination of John F. Kennedy, in which Win Everett muses: ‘Plots carry their own logic. There is a tendency of plots to move towards 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 the story, the more likely it will come to death.’<sup>56</sup> DeLillo’s response to 9/11, ‘In the Ruins of the Future,’ betrays his suspicion towards the neatly shaped narrative. It opens with the words: ‘In the past

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 12; 18.

<sup>53</sup> DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York: Picador, 2011), 98.

<sup>54</sup> *WN*, 26. This maxim has been elaborated upon by various critics. See: Paula Martín Sálvan, ‘Terror, Asceticism, and Epigrammatic Writing in Don DeLillo’s Fiction,’ in *Terrorism, Media, and the Ethics of Fiction*, ed. Philipp Schweighauser and Peter Schneck (London; New York: Continuum Publishing, 2010), 145-157; Leonard Wilcox, ‘Baudrillard, DeLillo’s *White Noise*, and the End of Heroic Narrative,’ in *Don DeLillo’s White Noise*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 2003) 97-116.

<sup>55</sup> *WN*, 304; 305; 306; 307.

<sup>56</sup> Don DeLillo, *Libra* (London: Penguin, 1998), 221.

decade the surge of capital markets has dominated discourse and shaped global consciousness. Multinational corporations have come to seem more vital and influential than governments.' Later, he asseverates: 'Plots reduce the world.'<sup>57</sup> He has also written that 'For me, well-behaved books with neat plots and worked-out endings seem somewhat quaint in the face of the largely incoherent reality of modern life.'<sup>58</sup> However, in accordance with my dialectical conception of the everyday, I contend that DeLillo's texts in fact challenge the distinction between plot and digression that he, his characters, (and I, for that matter) appear to construct.

### The list

After generating moments of excitement through suspense and generic expectations, DeLillo's novels often halt the plot progression with digressions and excessive quotidian details. These often appear in the form of lists; the listing of concrete objects has been described as DeLillo's 'aesthetic and stylistic imprimatur.'<sup>59</sup> The list is a fitting device for breaking down the categories of plot and detail, as literary lists 'mark the limits of literature as a whole,' testing 'what minimal level of syntactical organization qualifies as a text.'<sup>60</sup> We are reminded here of Lefebvre's conception of the everyday as 'evad[ing] the grip of forms.'<sup>61</sup> Indeed, this is the way the literary list has often been conceptualised. Robert E. Belknap's *The List: the Uses and Pleasures of Cataloguing* constructs a genealogy of the list, noting its origin in account-keeping and citing the 'roll call of leaders in epic poetry' as an early example.<sup>62</sup> He differentiates literary lists from the utilitarianism of, say, the shopping list, on the basis that they impede the progress of the plot: the list 'interrupts the forward drive

<sup>57</sup> DeLillo, 'In the Ruins of the Future,' *Guardian*, 22 December, 2001.

<sup>58</sup> DeLillo, Letter to Jon Jackson, 23 October, 1995: <http://www.perival.com/delillo/ddwriting.html>

<sup>59</sup> Tim Jelfs, "Something deeper than things": Some Artistic Influences on the Writing of Objects in the Fiction of Don DeLillo,' *Comparative American Studies* 9.2 (2011): 146-60. 149-50.

<sup>60</sup> Benjamin Madden, 'The Rhetoric of the Ordinary: Modernism and the Limits of Literature' (PhD diss, University of York, 2013), 228.

<sup>61</sup> Lefebvre, *ELMW*, 182.

<sup>62</sup> Robert E. Belknap, *The List: the Uses and Pleasures of Cataloguing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 7.

of the text, and for a moment we are invited to dance.<sup>63</sup> However, it is clear that the literary list—like the ‘reality effect’—does hold use-value, even if it symbolises uselessness itself. Belknap acknowledges this, conceding that lists often ‘simultaneously suspend and advance the narrative,’ and that Mark Twain’s inventory of the ‘contents of Tom Sawyer’s pockets [...] reveals [his] love of collecting,’ thus functioning as an index of character.<sup>64</sup> Yet Belknap cautions against the ‘danger of interpretive overdetermination,’ drawing on Stephen Barney’s assertion that literary lists often sprawl ‘beyond the minimum requirements of listing into ornament.’<sup>65</sup> Goethe’s *Faust* provides us with a paradigmatic conception of art as ornament, when a charioteer proclaims:

I am Profusion, I am Poetry,  
The poet who perfects himself the more  
He spends from his most precious store  
I too am rich like Plutus, and I hold  
Myself his peer in wealth untold.<sup>66</sup>

We are then presented with a demonstration of poetry’s prodigality through a profusion of signifiers:

Here’s a pearl necklace—out it jumps; and here  
Are clasps of gold for neck and ear;  
[He continues to snap his fingers in all directions.]  
And combs, of course, and diadems,  
And gold rings set with priceless gems.  
Sometimes I offer flames as well  
Where they may kindle, who can tell!<sup>67</sup>

*Verschwendung*, or ‘Profusion,’ as it appears above, could also be translated as ‘wastefulness’ or ‘extravagance.’<sup>68</sup> Benjamin Madden writes that these verses define

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<sup>63</sup> Belknap, *The List*, xiii.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 4; 5. Stephen Barney, qtd. in Belknap, *The List*, 7.

<sup>66</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, 5573-9.

<sup>67</sup> Goethe, *Faust*, 5584-89.

<sup>68</sup> ‘*Verschwendung*,’ in *The Oxford Duden German Dictionary*, ed. Werner Scholze-Stubenrecht and John Sykes (New York: Oxford University Press), 1990.



art as the aesthetic itself, 'a form of pure surplus, [...] valuable precisely because it is useless.'<sup>69</sup> Yet uselessness itself is destined for symbolic recuperation: the enumerative qualities of the passage place it in the Renaissance tradition of the triumph, an artistic depiction of a victory procession in which the spoils of war were flaunted.<sup>70</sup> We can consider this a form of literary *potlatch*, a gift-giving ritual practiced by North-western American native tribes, which the anthropologist Marcel Mauss and Georges Bataille have extended to exchange economies. Bataille avers that, in *potlatch*, the

considerable gift of riches [is] offered openly and with the goal of humiliating, defying, and obligating a rival. The exchange value of the gift results from the fact that the donee, in order to efface the humiliation and respond to the challenge, must satisfy the obligation (incurred by him at the time of acceptance) to respond later with a more valuable gift, in other words, to return with interest. But the gift is not the only form of potlatch; it is equally possible to defy rivals through the spectacular destruction of wealth.<sup>71</sup>

Goethe's charioteer thus allegorises how what we consider the 'aesthetic' is culturally contingent and always-already symbolic. This is the principle on which the everyday operates: what may seem irreducibly quotidian is inescapably anchored in the capitalist world-system.

To skip forward a great deal in literary history, let us consider the Joycean list. In the 'Ithaca' section of *Ulysses*, a series of questions are followed by lavish lists. After Leopold Bloom turns on the faucet to fill the kettle, the inquisitor asks: 'Did it flow?' and what follows is a lengthy list of the processes of how water travels from a

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<sup>69</sup> Benjamin Madden, 'What's so Ordinary about Stevens' "The Ordinary Women"?' *Wallace Stevens Journal* 26.1 (2012): 9-22, 20.

<sup>70</sup> See: Margaret Ann Zaho, 'The Evolution of the Triumph in Literature and Art,' in *Imago Triumphalis: The Function and Significance of Triumphal Imagery for Italian Renaissance Rulers* (New York: Peter Lang: 2004), 26-45.

<sup>71</sup> Georges Bataille, 'The Notion of Expenditure,' in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 116-29, 121. Bataille's notion of *potlatch* is taken from Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (New York: Norton, 1967). See Chapter One for a fuller engagement with Bataille's ideas concerning expenditure.

reservoir in county Wicklow to Bloom's tap in Dublin.<sup>72</sup> We are then presented with a compilation of water's virtues:

What in water did Bloom, waterlover, drawer of water, watercarrier, returning to the range, admire?

Its universality: its democratic equality and constancy to its nature in seeking its own level: its vastness in the ocean of Mercator's projection: its unplumbed profundity in the Sundam trench of the Pacific exceeding 8000 fathoms: the restlessness of its waves and surface particles visiting in turn all points of its seaboard: [...] its violence in seaquakes, waterspouts, Artesian wells, eruptions, torrents, eddies, freshets, spates, groundswells, watersheds, waterpartings, geysers, cataracts, whirlpools, maelstroms, inundations, deluges, cloudbursts: [...] its properties for cleansing, quenching thirst and fire, nourishing vegetation: its infallibility as paradigm and paragon: its metamorphoses as vapour, mist, cloud, rain, sleet, snow, hail: its strength in rigid hydrants: its variety of forms in loughs and bays and gulfs and bights and guts and lagoons and atolls and archipelagos and sounds and fjords and minches and tidal estuaries and arms of sea: its solidity in glaciers, icebergs, icefloes: its docility in working hydraulic millwheels, turbines, dynamos, electric power stations, bleachworks, tanneries, scutchmills: its utility in canals, rivers, if navigable, floating and graving docks: its potentiality derivable from harnessed tides or watercourses falling from level to level<sup>73</sup>

Olson regards Joycean lists as a form of textual overflow, contending that 'lists in *Ulysses* attempt to register and record the variety of ordinary moments that flood experience, while gleefully acknowledging realism's defeat.'<sup>74</sup> This accords with early accounts of *Ulysses* as a form of 'hyperbolic realism,' which opposed mythic/symbolic readings, in which 'every detail of the novel contributed to make up a fictional world of extraordinary symbolic density, and the Homeric parallels or correspondences were the gateway to exploring that world.'<sup>75</sup> But the deluge of details revels in the interplay between water's aesthetic and utilitarian qualities. The fluidity of water is offset by its 'infallibility as paradigm and paragon,' 'strength in rigid hydrants,' and

<sup>72</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses: the Corrected Text*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler (London: Bodley Head, 1986), 548.

<sup>73</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, 549.

<sup>74</sup> Olson, *Ordinary*, 45.

<sup>75</sup> Lawrence Rainey, *Modernism: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell-Wiley, 2005), 223-4.

‘solidity in glaciers, icebergs, icefloes.’ If water’s liquidity figures cascades of textual detail, and its formal solidity figures the strictures of plot progression, the watery list in *Ulysses* exposes the inseparability of plot and detail. What appears as surplus to realism’s remit can also be read as a form of cognitive mapping, as shown by analyses that examine the significance of water to colonial rule and imperial capital. For instance, Jon Hegglund surmises that water ‘serves as a convenient symbol for the tendency of facts to overflow their disciplinary boundaries,’ and poses the list as a form of opposition to the disciplinary structures it evokes, such as territorial mapping.<sup>76</sup> However, although the list cannot be dismissed as the purely aesthetic or as surplus to plot, it pushes against such deterministic interpretations. It is this sense of the indeterminacy of the everyday that I wish to maintain in my analysis of DeLillo, whilst acknowledging that the everyday can resist but not elude the ‘grip of forms’—that is, the uneven, flexible totality of the capitalist world-system.

The concept of artistic convention as a totalizing grid has long structured aesthetic debates about modernism and the historical avant-garde. For critics such as Adorno, radical aesthetics are aligned with radical politics, whereas adherence to formal conventions and aspirations of aesthetic unity are tantamount to the ‘total organization’ of rationalized society, or totalitarianism.<sup>77</sup> Modernist art, as Adorno famously held, aims to contradict ‘enchained society through unchained art,’ hence his celebration of works such as Cubist montage in which ‘the negation of synthesis becomes a principle of form.’<sup>78</sup> For Adorno, art can resist recuperation through the refusal of meaning and aesthetic unity, to which he ascribed revolutionary potential: ‘art wants to admit its powerlessness vis-à-vis late-capitalist totality and to initiate its

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<sup>76</sup> Jon Hegglund, ‘Hard Facts and Fluid Spaces’: ‘Ithaca’ and the Imperial Archive,’ in *Joyce, Imperialism, and Postcolonialism*, ed. Leonard Orr (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 58-74, 67-68.

<sup>77</sup> Though operating with a different theoretical framework, D.A. Miller’s *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), also conceives of plot as a figure for totalizing impulses. Deploying Foucault’s concept of disciplinary grids, Miller likens the generic strictures of the nineteenth-century novel to the carceral system. (See in particular: ‘Discipline in Different Voices: Bureaucracy, Police, Family, and Bleak House,’ 58-106.)

<sup>78</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 82; Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 211.

abrogation.’<sup>79</sup> Similarly, Benjamin championed ‘the art of interruption’ that fragments totality, and believed Brechtian alienation to be imbued with the radical power to ‘uncover’ bourgeois reality.<sup>80</sup> The historical avant-garde conceptualized itself as performing ‘attacks’ on convention through its disjunctive art. In Peter Bürger’s influential formulation, ‘the refusal to provide meaning is experienced as shock by the recipient. [...] Shock is aimed for as a stimulus to change one’s conduct of life; it is the means to break through aesthetic immanence and to usher in (initiate) a change in the recipient’s life praxis.’<sup>81</sup> Though a chorus of critical voices have denounced the reductivism of Bürger’s account, the concept of shock as the defining weapon in the avant-gardiste’s arsenal has endured, and its osmotic impact in 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century American culture is glaring, from the work of Nathanael West, to John Cage, to Dr. Seuss. Like the straw-man image of the Victorian novel, this is the legacy of the avant-garde to which writers such as DeLillo are responding. Along with Brechtian interruption, the Dadaist sound poem, the Surrealist juxtaposition, and the Situationist prank, were conceived as methods of transforming everyday life. For example, the latter conceived of interventions into the everyday, ‘constructed Situations,’ which would disrupt ‘alienated and heteronomous realm of the everyday in order to link its moment of negation to the imaginary horizon of revolutionary praxis.’<sup>82</sup> However, as Bürger points out, ‘nothing loses its effectiveness more quickly than shock,’ an idea that is now commonplace.<sup>83</sup> The avant-garde tactics of exploding the disciplinary grid of convention were inherently vulnerable to recuperation and domestication.

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 2003), 32.

See also: Bertolt Brecht, ‘On Chinese Acting,’ trans. Eric Bentley, ed. Barnard Hewitt, *The Tulane Drama Review* 6.1 (1961): 130-136; Viktor Shklovsky’s theory of defamiliarisation, the literary equivalent of alienation, explained in: ‘Art as Technique,’ in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 3-24.

<sup>81</sup> Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 80.

<sup>82</sup> Roberts, *Philosophizing*, 80.

<sup>83</sup> Bürger, *Avant-Garde*, 81.

Although, *contra* Adorno and Benjamin, I believe that artistic innovation cannot evade world-systemic totality, we can see how writing in the wake of modernism and the avant-garde self-consciously mobilises the idea of textual 'surplus' acting in opposition to totalising forms. In Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), the protagonist Oedipa Maas prepares for 'Strip Botticelli,' a game in which she must divest herself of her clothes in front of her ex-lover's lawyer:

Oedipa skipped into the bathroom, which happened also to have a walk-in closet, quickly undressed and began putting on as much as she could of the clothing she'd brought with her: six pairs of panties in assorted colors, girdle, three pairs of nylons, three brassieres, two pairs stretch slacks, four half-slips, one black sheath, two summer dresses, half dozen A-line skirts, three sweaters, two blouses, quilted wrapper, baby blue peignoir and old Orlon muu-muu. Bracelets then, scatter pins, earrings, a pendant.<sup>84</sup>

In the process, she knocks over an aerosol can: 'the can hit the floor, something broke, and with a great out surge of pressure the stuff commenced atomizing, propelling the can swiftly about the bathroom.' Amidst the 'slow, deep crescendo of naval bombardment, machine-gun, howitzer and small-arms fire, screams and chopped-off prayers of dying infantry' emanating from the war movie on television, the can wildly ricochets around the room. Oedipa believes 'the can knew where it was going, she sensed, or something fast enough, God or a digital machine, might have computed in advance the complex web of its travel; but she wasn't fast enough, and knew only that it might hit them at any moment, at whatever clip it was doing, a hundred miles an hour.'<sup>85</sup> Such references to overarching systems that defy comprehension litter the novel, and have often been considered as embodying its postmodern resistance to meaning. However, recent Pynchon scholarship has adopted a historicizing approach. Rachel Adams attributes the references to complex systems to:

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<sup>84</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (London: Picador, 1979), 23.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-4.

the sense of civic disempowerment and insecurity associated with the early Cold War period, in which nuclear apocalypse could just as plausibly come about from a mistake made by one's own government as an enemy attack. [...] The novel's emphasis on texts and close reading, its thematization of paranoia and conspiracy, and its pessimism about the possibility of political resistance all might be understood as reflections on a geopolitical context in which ordinary citizens feel alienated and disempowered by the political process.<sup>86</sup>

The rebounding canister therefore mimics the unpredictability of an atomic missile, and the reference to 'a digital machine [that] might have computed in advance the complex web of its travels' evokes the intricate machinery of nuclear war. I disagree, however, with Adams' assertion that *The Crying of Lot 49* exhibits 'pessimism about the possibility of political resistance.' Though the novel does not wholly endorse the student activism that forms the backdrop to the detective structure, it is my contention that the list of clothing items figures the explosive energies of sixties counterculture.<sup>87</sup> Though clothes are tied to the quotidian, the zaniness of the list (the absurd quantities Oedipa has packed for her trip, the 'old Orlon muu-muu') militates against the inscrutability of abstract systems, as well as the sexualized imperative to undress.<sup>88</sup> However, the scene also *replicates* the inscrutability of the all-encompassing systems it opposes, adding more layers of mystification to the commodity fetish, here represented by clothes. Sianne Ngai cites the novels of Pynchon as instantiations of the zany, a frenetic aesthetic characterised 'an incessant flow or stream of activity,' in which the playful verges on sinister: 'although zaniness is playful in all its manifestations across genres,' she writes, 'it is an aesthetic of action pushed to strenuous and precarious extremes.'<sup>89</sup> Imputing zaniness to *Don Quixote*

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<sup>86</sup> Adams, 'Ends of Postmodernism,' 256.

<sup>87</sup> For accounts of Pynchon's relationship with sixties counterculture, see: Joanna Freer, *Thomas Pynchon and American Counterculture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); David Cowart, *Thomas Pynchon and the Dark Passages of History* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

<sup>88</sup> 'An acrylic fiber usually used to emulate cashmere and thus [...] hardly the kind of yarn that a muu-muu (a loose-fitting, brightly colored garment usually associated with Hawaii) would be made of,' J. Kerry Grant, *A Companion to The Crying of Lot 49* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 48.

<sup>89</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 9; 185

and *commedia dell'arte*, Ngai argues that zaniness now appears as a response to the boundless energy and flexibility required of the worker to produce surplus under neoliberalism.<sup>90</sup> In the Strip Botticelli scene, however, zaniness acquires slightly different valences. The list and its scattershot energies of the zany correspond to the scattershot acts of resistance the American New Left posed to the vaguely-defined, mystified system, and their antagonism towards organisational structures.

Linking avant-gardist experiments with the everyday to the New Left provides a way into a recent efflorescence of scholarship that has critiqued the movement's alignment of radical aesthetics and politics, and its reverberations in DeLillo and other 'postmodern' writers' work. Rather than launching a nuanced critique of capitalist totality, the argument goes, student radicals opposed 'the system' and, consequently, programmatic political ideas.<sup>91</sup> The movement's hostility to the programmatic in favour of aesthetic rebellion has caused it to be labelled as 'a new avant-garde.'<sup>92</sup> Indeed, the aim of disrupting everyday life to awaken political consciousness lay behind the street theatre and stunts of the Yippies, for instance: in 1967, Abbie Hoffman and others threw dollar bills onto the floor of the New York Stock Exchange; most famously, they released a pig presidential candidate in the Civic Center Plaza during the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. They drew inspiration from American cultural influences such as the aestheticized violence in *Bonnie and Clyde* and the slapstick of the Marx brothers, but also Situationist pranks, and the spirit of the Surrealists.<sup>93</sup>

Like the avant-garde aesthetics of shock, what Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello term the 'artistic critique' of the sixties was vulnerable to commodification and absorption into 'the system' the activists opposed. Boltanski and Chiapello argue

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 188-9.

<sup>91</sup> McCann and Szalay, 'Magic,' 453.

<sup>92</sup> Paul Breines, 'Marcuse and the New Left in America,' in *Antworten auf Herbert Marcuse*, ed. Jurgen Habermas (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1968), 137; 148, qtd. in McCann and Szalay, 'Magic,' 437.

<sup>93</sup> Peter Braunstein, 'Insurgent Youth and the Sixties Culture of Rejuvenation,' in *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and '70s*, ed. Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 243-73, 265; Benjamin Shepard, *Play, Creativity, and Social Movements: If I Can't Dance, It's Not My Revolution* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 42; 35; 36.

that the New Left's anti-hierarchical ethos and prioritization of aesthetics and play over a political programme legitimated the 'disorganized capitalism' that would follow, specifically the neoliberal 'reformulation of capitalism in terms of what was exciting, creative, protean, innovative and "liberating."<sup>94</sup> Sean McCann and Michael Szalay's influential essay, 'Do You Believe in Magic? Literary Thinking after the New Left,' similarly urges us to consider synergies between the New Left and the New Right, and between the student revolutionaries' emphasis on freedom and the free market. 'If, like the earlier avant-gardes they imitated,' they write, 'American cultural radicals sometimes cast their aims as a joyous destruction of the boundaries between art and everyday life, Foucault similarly celebrated the new movements of the sixties and seventies for the way they realized in action attitudes tolerated once "only within literature."<sup>95</sup> Further, they charge DeLillo with wholeheartedly endorsing New Leftist attitudes, and castigate *The Names* for its supposed New Leftist tendency of making an 'appeal to the ineffable and irrational [as] an indispensable escape route from the imperial extension of state power.' They charge DeLillo with portraying 'reason [as] the language of clandestine state domination and Western imperialism.'<sup>95</sup>

I firmly disagree with this characterisation of DeLillo's relationship with sixties radicalism, and would contrast his attitude with that of Pynchon. A 2007 interview with *Guernica* is instructive:

**Guernica:** What were your feelings about some of the more extreme radical groups in the Sixties, like the Weather Underground? [...] What were your feelings about those sorts of violent radical acts at the time?

**Don DeLillo:** With that kind of radicalism, on the one hand, one understood the roots of it. On the other hand, much of it seemed mindless and obscured by elements of the lifestyle of that era. You know, I marched and I protested against the war in Vietnam, along with many, many thousands of others. But I never quite understood the bombs that were placed in science labs or office buildings.

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<sup>94</sup> Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2005), 324.

<sup>95</sup> McCann and Szalay, 'Magic,' 449.



**Guernica:** What kind of affinity did you feel, if any, towards the Sixties counterculture?

**Don DeLillo:** Well, I was never either pro-culture or counter-culture.<sup>96</sup>

For DeLillo, however, the aesthetics of shock have been domesticated, and drained of revolutionary power. In fact, DeLillo's work frequently satirises 'aesthetic rebellion.' (In Chapter One, I turn to the scene in *White Noise* in which Murray Siskind declares food packaging to be the 'last avant-garde,' possessing as it does 'bold new forms. The power to shock.'<sup>97</sup>) *Players* (1977) follows a Yippie-esque cell of terrorists who plan to blow up the Stock Exchange, one of whom retains a stash of 'riot shields, tear gas,' etc. from 'all that anti-crowd business in the sixties.' He declares: 'These are artifacts. This stuff is memorabilia.'<sup>98</sup> *The Names* (1982) features a hip experimental filmmaker, Frank Volterra, who is fascinated by a terrorist cult. Drafts of the novel explicitly connect the cult to Volterra: the cult leader is described as resembling a 'campus radical' and the narrator explains his and Volterra's tendency as students to visit 'the Bay Area to see movies and march against the war. The two things were connected.'<sup>99</sup> More recently, DeLillo has become interested in European political movements, though their avant-garde tactics are always featured at a remove, at the level of content instead of form. In DeLillo's short story, 'Baader-Meinhof' (2002), the protagonist scrutinises Gerhard Richter's paintings of photographs of the eponymous German terrorist cell. *Cosmopolis* (2003) features a 'pastry assassin, a man who stalked corporate directors, military commanders, soccer stars and politicians' and hits them in the face with pies, recalling the radical German group Kommune 1's attempted 'pudding assassination' of the U.S. Vice-President, Hubert Humphrey.<sup>100</sup> DeLillo has also cited the works of Joyce, Stein, and Pound as influences, as well as

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<sup>96</sup> DeLillo, interview with Mark Binelli, 'Intensity of a Plot,' *Guernica*, 17 July, 2007: [https://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/intensity\\_of\\_a\\_plot/](https://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/intensity_of_a_plot/)

<sup>97</sup> *WN*, 18.

<sup>98</sup> DeLillo, *Players* (London: Picador, 2016), 103.

<sup>99</sup> DeLillo, 'The Names: First draft, Part one (2),' *Container* 44.5, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas.

<sup>100</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* (New York: Scribner, 2004), 142.

the jazz concerts, arthouse films (especially Godard), and paintings at the Museum of Modern Art he saw in the sixties. During this time, MoMA frequently exhibited works of the European avant-garde, with a roster that included Picasso, Ernst, Duchamp, Matisse, Derain, Léger, Magritte, Kandinsky, as well as a comprehensive survey of Futurism (1961) and a major exhibition 'Dada, Surrealism and their Heritage' (1968).<sup>101</sup>

With this in mind, I will now turn to a DeLilloan list. *White Noise* opens with students arriving at the university where Jack Gladney works:

The station wagons arrived at noon, a long shining line that coursed through the west campus. In single file they eased around the orange I-beam sculpture and moved toward the dormitories. The roofs of the station wagons were loaded down with carefully secured suitcases full of light and heavy clothing; with boxes of blankets, boots, and shoes, stationery and books, sheets, pillows, quilts; with rolled-up rugs and sleeping bags; with bicycles, skis, rucksacks, English and Western saddles, inflated rafts. As cars slowed to a crawl and stopped, students sprang out and raced to the rear doors to begin removing the objects inside; the stereo sets, radios, personal computers; small refrigerators and table ranges; the cartons of phonograph records and cassettes; the hairdryers and styling irons; the tennis rackets, soccer balls, hockey and lacrosse sticks, bows and arrows; the controlled substances, the birth control pills and devices; the junk food still in shopping bags—onion-and-garlic chips, nacho thins, peanut creme patties, Waffelos and Kabooms, fruit chews and toffee popcorn; the Dum-Dum pops, the Mystic Mints.<sup>102</sup>

With its reference to station wagons circling at noon, 'the prototypical hour of conflict between hero(es) and villain(s) most famously enacted in *High Noon*,' the list is structured by the generic conventions of the American Western.<sup>103</sup> Peter Boxall has deemed the list plotless, claiming: 'despite the faint historical call to the U.S. frontier held in the image of circling wagons that the opening chapter goes on to

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<sup>101</sup> MoMa Exhibition History List:

[https://moma.org/learn/resources/archives/archives\\_exhibition\\_history\\_list](https://moma.org/learn/resources/archives/archives_exhibition_history_list)

<sup>102</sup> *WN*, 3.

<sup>103</sup> Laura Barrett, "How the dead speak to the living": Intertextuality and the Postmodern Sublime in *White Noise*, *Journal of Modern Literature* 25.2 (2001/2002): 97-113, 100.

evoke, the noon in question remains suspended, historically and temporally. It is never brought into a historical or narrative plot.’<sup>104</sup> But the list holds the heterogeneity of quotidian objects in tension with the structuring drive of the Western. Our attempts to divine taxonomical logic are thwarted: why are books bracketed in the clothing and bedding ‘section’? Why are illegal drugs and birth control grouped together? Nonetheless, the seemingly random content of the list does not connote depthlessness: *White Noise’s* evocation of the Western genre should be regarded as a culturally loaded move during the tenure of the ‘cowboy president,’ Reagan. It is also worth noting that the second Cold War ‘resonated with references to American manifest destiny, moral certainty and redemptive violence.’<sup>105</sup> Further, the surplus of food signifiers has specific resonances in the 1980s, in which the U.S.’ ability to produce cheap ‘food, energy, and raw materials with less and less labor,’ which Jason W. Moore identifies as crucial to capitalist accumulation, necessitated its drive for new commodity frontiers. Once these have been exhausted, as in the beginning of the 1980s, new technologies and rampant financialisation must create surplus.<sup>106</sup> Ironically, though, just as financial speculation crashes, agricultural technology (such as Nyodene D., the combined byproducts of pesticide, which precipitates the Airborne Toxic Event) results in diminishing returns and resource depletion.<sup>107</sup> Seen in this light, the cavalcade of commodities’ juxtaposition with the Western genre is highly significant.

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<sup>104</sup> Peter Boxall, *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 110.

<sup>105</sup> Karen Jones and John Wills, *The American West: Competing Visions* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 107.

<sup>106</sup> Jason W. Moore, ‘Cheap Food and Bad Money: Food, Frontiers, and Financialization in the Rise and Demise of Neoliberalism,’ *Review: A Journal of the Fernand Braudel Center* 33.2/3 (2012): 225-261, 226; 227-9.

<sup>107</sup> As Moore writes, ‘In addition to the tendencies for soil exhaustion and resource depletion to fetter labor productivity and drive up costs—as in eighteenth-century England—today the hegemony of finance capital has led to a massive flow of capital into commodity markets, African “land grabs,” and a mosaic of obscure financial instruments. This effectively mimics, amplifies, and diffuses across all sectors of the world-system the inflationary impact of the slowdown in labor productivity growth, in agriculture especially.’ Moore, ‘Cheap Food,’ 226.

Obviously, genres are flexible frameworks rather than fixed systems—as Morretti observes, they are ‘temporary structures.’<sup>108</sup> For Derrida, too, adherence to genre conventions is impossible: ‘lodged within the heart’ of the ‘law of genre’ is a ‘principle of contamination.’<sup>109</sup> Genre thus ‘always potentially exceeds the boundaries that bring it into being.’<sup>110</sup> Similarly, the metaphorical link between the confines of plot progression and generic convention and capitalism sits uneasily: as we have seen, capitalism is infinitely flexible and creates economic unevenness rather than homogeneity across the world. But, as I have demonstrated in my discussion of Adorno and Benjamin, DeLillo is capitalising on a familiar metaphor.

However, rather than considering the passage in terms of the Cold War clash between capitalism and Communism, critics have considered it a clear-cut critique of American consumerism. One critic reads DeLillo’s use of the list in *White Noise* as ‘defying interpretation [...] because it retains the features of the postmodern consumer world from which it derives [in which] the surface is the meaning.’<sup>111</sup> Laura Barrett reads the station wagon scene alongside the Baudrillardian simulacrum, proclaiming that it portrays the ‘surrender[ing] [of] particularities,’ the loss of identity and individuality inflicted by consumerism.<sup>112</sup> These deadening critiques of consumerism overlook the liveliness and excessiveness of the list, but also the fact that, with its reference to the Western, it is projecting outwards to the U.S.’ place in the world. Rather than a simplistic indictment of consumer culture, the list maps the totality of the capitalist world-system, and the high cost of America’s economic surplus, whilst providing an account of the heterogeneity and pleasures of the consumerism it fuels. DeLillo’s list embodies my conception of the everyday by

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<sup>108</sup> Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (London: Verso, 2005), 14.

<sup>109</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘The Law of Genre,’ in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge, trans. Avital Ronnell (New York: Routledge, 1992), 221-252, 225.

<sup>110</sup> Attridge, 221.

<sup>111</sup> Christoph Lindner, *Fictions of Commodity Culture: from the Victorian to the Postmodern* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), 166. For another reading in this vein, see: John Frow, ‘The Last Things Before the Last: Notes on *White Noise*.’ Frank Lentricchia, ed., *Introducing Don DeLillo* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 175-92, 190.

<sup>112</sup> Barrett, ‘“How the dead speak to the living”’, 101.

linking the particularity of the mundane with the abstract systems that permeate its texture and uneven manifestations.

Though, as I have discussed, DeLillo's work exhibits suspicion towards plotting, it neither negates totality or eschews meaning, nor espouses a radical transformation of everyday life. Rather than mobilising the Adornian refusal of totality, DeLillo's work is more akin to jazz as Adorno scathingly conceives of it, as 'music which fuses the most rudimentary melodic, harmonic, metric, and formal structure with the ostensibly disruptive principle of syncopation, yet without ever really disturbing the crude unity of the basic rhythm, the identically sustained metre, the quarter note.'<sup>113</sup> It is evident that DeLillo's work is deeply concerned with the quotidian, but he has consciously sought to distance his work from other writing that deals with daily life:

I do try to confront realities [...] But people would rather read about their own marriages and separations and trips to Tanglewood. There's an entire school of American fiction which might be called around-the-house-and-in-the-yard. And I think people like to read this kind of work because it adds a certain luster, a certain significance to their own lives.<sup>114</sup>

The crucial point here is that fiction that takes everyday life as its central concern *elevates* it, adds 'a certain significance.' For DeLillo, the everyday is always-already political and mediated, appearing in relation to world-systemic forces rather than when it is divorced from them. It maps rather than poses revolutionary resistance to capitalist totality.

DeLillo's everyday operates dialectically: maintaining pendulous movements between narrative structure and textual recalcitrance, he deploys digressive tactics to map *and* push back against the capitalist world-system. Consequently, genre experiments have pervaded DeLillo's work: his first novel, *Americana* is a strangely peripatetic Bildungsroman/road trip narrative (1971); *End Zone* (1972) infects the

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<sup>113</sup> Adorno, 'Perennial Fashion--Jazz,' in *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*, ed. Stephen Bronner and Douglas Kellner (New York: Routledge, 1989), 199-212, 199.

<sup>114</sup> DeLillo, interview with Robert Harris, 'A Talk with Don DeLillo,' in *Conversations*, 16-19, 18.

sports novel with nuclear anxiety; *Great Jones Street* (1973) divests the rock novel of glamour; *Ratner's Star* (1976) imitates and parodies science-fiction; *Players* (1977) and *Running Dog* (1978) deflate the thriller genre; his pseudonymously published *Amazons* (1980), parodies the sex comedy/sports novel.<sup>115</sup> As various critics have remarked, DeLillo habitually combines genre conventions with curiously plotless stretches and seemingly superfluous details. But as of *The Names* (1982), he began to knit together suspense and the mundane in a more purposeful way, and continued this project in *White Noise* (1985), *Mao II* (1991), *Underworld* (1997). These are DeLillo's fictions of the everyday, in which the tension between narrative suspense and digressive description and listing serves to map and critique the capitalist world-system.<sup>116</sup> Accordingly, the majority of this thesis traverses the 'Himalayas' of DeLillo's middle period. As of *The Body Artist* (2001), DeLillo's novels have become slimmer and sparser. In contrast to the clutter of quotidian things in the 'middle period novels,' DeLillo's twenty-first-century work—as represented by *Cosmopolis* (2003), *Falling Man* (2007), *Point Omega* (2010), and *Zero K* (2016). In addition to this body of work, DeLillo has produced numerous short stories, plays, and the screenplay for a film, *Game6*, which was released in 2005. Some of DeLillo's short stories and plays enter this analysis, but DeLillo's middle-period novels form the focus.

Chapter One examines the significance of waste in *White Noise*, *Mao II*, and *Underworld*, positing that waste, like the everyday, poses a radical challenge to systems of value. It links DeLillo's representations of physical waste to the 'wasteful,' digressive passages in his novels, arguing that the everyday appears at the nexus of plot and (wasteful, devalued) detail. I contend that *White Noise's* textual waste

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<sup>115</sup> Other critics have remarked upon this: John McClure asserts that he 'crafts his fictions out of the forms of popular romance: the espionage thriller, the imperial adventure novel.' See: John A. McClure, 'Postmodern Romance: Don DeLillo and the Age of Conspiracy,' in *Introducing Don DeLillo*, ed. Frank Lentricchia (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 99-116, 99. See also: Ann Longmuir, 'Genre and Gender in Don DeLillo's *Players* and *Running Dog*,' *Narrative Theory* 37.1 (2007): 128-45; John Johnston, 'Generic Difficulties in the Novels of Don DeLillo,' *Critique* 30.4 (1989): 261-75; Mark Osteen's *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000) is attentive to genre throughout.

<sup>116</sup> Though *Libra* (1988) fits into this middle period and its concerned with Cold War politics, it is absent from my analysis as I regard it as a genre experiment with the historical novel, more akin to DeLillo's earlier fiction.

gestures towards the seemingly ‘unproductive’ labour of housework, and redress the critical value-logic that has neglected the significance of Babette, the protagonist’s wife, to the text. My analysis of *Mao II* argues that the ‘New York’ passages’ descriptive and linguistic surpluses figure the structural issues of capitalism’s unevenness and its surplus unemployed population. Finally, I examine waste and abundance in the context of the Cold War in *Underworld*, and demonstrate how DeLillo tracks the seemingly abstract machinery of the military-industrial complex’s imbrication in the materiality of the quotidian.

Chapter Two deepens the link between the everyday and the Cold War by examining *Mao II* and *Underworld*’s representations of the crowd. It posits that DeLillo attempts to restore the ordinariness of crowds to collapse binaries between Communism and capitalism, and that the everyday opens up a space to imagine forms of collectivity that negotiate between these political polarities. I show how *Mao II* obliquely satirises Western intellectuals’ flirtation with Maoism, and argue that DeLillo’s representation of an everyday crowd in Lebanon allows for an admixture of American individualism and Communist collectivity. I elaborate on this claim by looking at *Underworld*, and reading baseball crowds alongside the novel’s fictional Eisenstein film and the accompanying observations on Soviet aesthetics, demonstrating how DeLillo collapses the binaries of American formalism and Soviet conformity. Ultimately, I argue that the everyday allows *Mao II* to oscillate between what Jean-Luc Nancy terms ‘the exposure of singularities’ and the world-systemic connections between massing bodies.<sup>117</sup>

Chapter Three pursues my exploration of the everyday through the topic of terrorism in *The Names* and *Falling Man*. My reading of *The Names* explicates how the novel’s engagement with terror makes visible the permeation of neoliberalism into the reaches of daily life. The everyday dialectic of instrumentality and anti-instrumentality in *The Names*’ digressive passages illuminate how daily rhythms pose resistance to the logic of imperial capital. *Falling Man*, however, signals a shift

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<sup>117</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor, trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 30.

away from DeLillo's radical engagement with the everyday, moving to allegorical representations of the interpenetrations of the financialisation-driven military-industrial complex into the domestic sphere. The novel ultimately rests on a problematic construction of the ordinary that locates it in American affluence rather than intensely tracking the connections between the U.S. quotidian and economic (semi-)peripheries.

In Chapter Four, I consider two writers that have been influenced by DeLillo, focusing on David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King* (2011) and Jennifer Egan's *Look at Me* (2001). I trace lines of continuity rather than rupture between DeLillo's work and that which has been labeled 'post-postmodern' or 'New Sincerity,' arguing that Wallace and Egan are concerned with representing the ordinary. I position *The Pale King* as an attempt to formally track between the the quotidian and the world-capitalist system. My analysis of *Look at Me* argues that Egan twists the gender critique of *White Noise*, demonstrating how the desire to penetrate the ordinary that lies beneath 'postmodern surface' is often undergirded by misogyny and exoticism.

I conclude by turning to the period known as 'late DeLillo,' and, through a reading of *The Body Artist*, situate DeLillo's leaner, less 'everyday' texts as responses to the signal crises of the financialised capitalist phase of neoliberalism, which occurs when the bodies, commodity frontiers, and labour on which it depends are exhausted. I argue that situating *The Body Artist* this way allows us to construct a model for reading *Point Omega*, and *Zero K*. As I have argued, the DeLilloean everyday maps the totality of the capitalist world-system, but positions the constitutive indeterminacy of the quotidian as a form of resistance to its structuring logics. In doing so, it opens up utopian horizons, enabling us to imagine a transformation of everyday life.



## CHAPTER ONE

## 'Living trivia':

Waste and excess in *White Noise*, *Mao II*, and *Underworld*

Detritus litters the pages of DeLillo's novels, appearing in trash compactors, landfill sites, deluges of diarrhoea and issues of ejaculate, toxic clouds, and nuclear fallout. Like the everyday, it is both grossly material and nebulously abstract; when discussing *Underworld* in an interview, DeLillo explained: 'I began to think of waste as a stream of history that has not quite been examined, at least not to my knowledge. And as a stream that runs parallel, as a kind of underground history that runs parallel to the development of weapons.'<sup>1</sup> To attend to waste is to illuminate the secret and concealed, what is marginal and devalued in economics, culture, and literary criticism. Mary Douglas' seminal anthropological study, *Purity and Danger*, avers: 'where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the *by-product* of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements.' Elsewhere, Douglas suggests that waste functions 'as an apt symbol of creative formlessness.'<sup>2</sup> Douglas' formulation has resonances with that of Jesse Detwiler, *Underworlds* 'garbage guerilla':

Consume or die. That's the mandate of the culture. And it all ends up in the dump. We make stupendous amounts of garbage, and then we react to it, not only technologically but in our hearts and minds. We let it shape us. We let it control our thinking. Garbage comes first, then we build a system to deal with it.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter insists that waste is inherent to the capitalist world-system, rather than a byproduct. It extends Douglas' metaphor of 'creative formlessness' to account for the

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<sup>1</sup> Don DeLillo, interview with Marc Chénétier and François Happe, 'An Interview with Don DeLillo,' *Revue française d'études américaines* 1.87 (2001): 102-11, 109.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), 44; 199.

<sup>3</sup> DeLillo, *Underworld* (New York: Scribner, 1997), 288.

ways waste encompasses both systemic order and textual digressiveness within DeLillo's novels, and regards DeLillo's dilatory and excessive descriptions as textual waste and formal surplus. Rather than preceding the systems that attempt to contain it, as Detwiler avers, waste encapsulates the uneven value-logic of the capitalist world-system, and the invisible labour and socio-ecological exploitation that supports it. The aesthetics of waste rest, like the everyday, on a dialectic of significance and insignificance, utility and uselessness, form and formlessness, registering in turn the dialectic of value and devaluation underpinning capitalist production. What appears as valueless or textually marginal in literature is thus always subject to the logic of recuperation, just as novelistic detail and plot dissolve into one another and dance around narrative periphery and centre. In the frame of artistic representation, textual trash becomes textual treasure.

Because waste presents a challenge to hierarchies of value, critical engagements with waste often simplistically 'align trash aesthetics with radical politics.'<sup>4</sup> *Underworld's* waste theorist, Detwiler, is certainly tarnished with an element of radical chic. Most likely based on A. J. Weberman, the Yippie journalist who coined the term 'garbology' and sifted through Bob Dylan, Abbie Hoffman, and Muhammad Ali's trash, Detwiler is described as 'a fringe figure in the sixties, a garbage guerilla who stole and analyzed the household trash of a number of famous people,' who now proselytizes about waste at UCLA and at the conference Nick Shay attends, 'The Future of Waste.'<sup>5</sup> Nick dismissively recalls him as earning 'brief feverish fame in the chronicles of the time, [as] part of the strolling band of tambourine girls and bomb makers, levitators and acid droppers and lost children.'<sup>6</sup> Detwiler's theorizing about waste is regarded as being detached from the realities of life at the margins; Nick discusses food waste with a colleague, and ponders: 'this business of picking through garbage, old winos and runaway kids slipping into an

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<sup>4</sup> Stephanie Lambert, 'The Poetics of Waste: Queer Excess in Stein, Ashbery, Schuyler, and Goldsmith (review),' *Modernism/modernity* 23.1 (2016): 263-265, 263.

<sup>5</sup> William L. Rathje and Cullen Murphy, *Rubbish!: The Archaeology of Garbage* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001), 17; *U*, 286.

<sup>6</sup> *U*, 287.

alley to get at broken bread chunks and slivers of veiny beef—later, with Detwiler, the subject would reoccur, but differently, with a touch of the renegade theater of the sixties.<sup>7</sup>

Georges Bataille has most vividly exalted the subversive capacities of waste, positioning profligate squandering as operating outside Weberian capitalism and its principles of rationality, productivity, and utility. Bataille vaunts ‘unproductive expenditures: luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity.’<sup>8</sup> Though generative, Bataille’s conception of surplus has propagated some work that has presented a picture of waste’s relationship with capitalism that is lacking in nuance. For example, Maurizia Boscagli’s recent study of ‘stuff’ in fiction, films, and photography emphasises junk’s disruptive and unruly qualities, declaiming that artistic representations of waste enact ‘a radical critique of the myths of pleasure and progress of industrial and consumer society.’<sup>9</sup> Writing in a similar vein, Bill Brown inaugurates Thing Theory as an opportunity to grasp the quiddity of ‘waste objects’ in literature:

We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily.<sup>10</sup>

The premise that commodities can be severed from the systemic is naïve at best, and reactionary at worst. Brown appears to give the critic a stay of execution from demystification, and licence to revel in ‘thingness’ rather than probing how objects give physical form to a node of economic and social relations. In this mode of critique, when literary texts stack up textual waste through excessive quotidian detail,

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 284; 287.

<sup>8</sup> Georges Bataille, ‘The Notion of Expenditure,’ in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 116-29, 118.

<sup>9</sup> Maurizia Boscagli, *Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 230.

<sup>10</sup> Bill Brown, ‘Thing Theory,’ *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2001): 4-5.

they arrest the flows of capitalism and function as a riposte to its imperatives of productivity and inefficiency. Digressive texts would then be akin to De Certeau's resistant consumers who 'circulate, come and go, overflow and drift over an imposed terrain, like the snowy waves of the sea slipping in among the rocks and defiles of an established order.'<sup>11</sup> But, as I have argued, these oppositions between capitalist order and revolutionary chaos are not only reductive, but also unable to account for the inherent instability and contradictions of capital. Studies that uphold these oppositions therefore risk overstating the revolutionary power of waste at the cost of examining its class politics and its embeddedness in the systemic logic of surplus creation.

Writing on the decadent and wasteful pacing of arthouse cinema, Karl Schoonover asks: 'do slow cinema's scandalous disruptions constitute a politically subversive practice? Or are they evidence of a reactionary bourgeois culture taking hold and driving Bataille's potlatch underground?'<sup>12</sup> In this reading, the metaphor of textual waste is extended to time-wasting, and is thus a product of the pools of *ennui* and leisure that accompany modernization and affluence rather than a radical aesthetic.<sup>13</sup> But time-wasting is not the preserve of the elite: it can arise from the sense that one's time is meaningless, as 'a consequence of a perceived non-modernity and the temporal disenchantment that follows the failed arrival of progress,' as Saikat Majumdar writes, citing recent anthropological work such as Michael Ralph's (2008) study of time-killing and tea-drinking amongst unemployed young men in Senegal. Majumdar therefore announces his intention to reclaim textual waste as a 'radically innovative aesthetic.'<sup>14</sup> It is clear, however, that waste does not exist in opposition to capitalism; rather, it exists in a relationship of immanence. In what follows I resist

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<sup>11</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 34.

<sup>12</sup> Karl Schoonover, 'Wastrels of Time: Slow Cinema's Laboring Body, the Political Spectator, and the Queer,' *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 53.1 (2012): 65-78, 73.

<sup>13</sup> See: Elizabeth S. Goodstein, *Experience Without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), especially 123-4.

<sup>14</sup> Saikat Majumdar, *Prose of the World: Modernism and the Banality of Empire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 23; 7; Michael Ralph, 'Killing Time,' *Social Text* 26.4 (2008): 1-29.

the reductive alignment of waste with radical politics, instead examining how DeLillo attempts to remobilize waste aesthetics as a form of resistance to the capitalist world-system. I trace how the visibility of trash in *White Noise* gives representation to the invisibility of domestic labour; how *Mao II*'s junk and 'rag-speak' registers the surplus population and socio-economic unevenness; and how *Underworld*'s radioactive consumerist waste encapsulates the nexus of environmental and economic exploitation undergirding and fueling the Cold War. (In Chapter Two, I turn to the specific valences textual waste acquires in the Cold War context, and the Soviet denunciation of formalist excess.) Retaining a sense of the slippery, enigmatic quality of waste, a quality that cleaves it to the everyday, I argue that DeLillo's textual discards oscillate between insignificance and significance, narrative periphery and centre, emphasizing both the lurid specificity of matter *and* its imbrication in abstract systems, and in doing so reveal 'the depth and reach of the commonplace.'<sup>15</sup>

### **Glowing at the core: the trash compactor in *White Noise***

Detwiler's claim that 'garbage comes first, then we build a system to deal with it' anticipates the critical response to DeLillo's waste. Many critics have made recourse to formulaic ecological or psychoanalytic readings to deal with the 'stupendous amounts of garbage' in *White Noise*, *Mao II*, and *Underworld*. This is not to overlook the novels' trenchant critical baiting—indeed, the famous scene in *White Noise* in which Jack sifts through the contents of the trash compactor invites such readings. Jack is searching for Dylar, an experimental drug that his wife has been taking to neutralize her fear of death. In so doing, he casts himself in the role of ethnographer, or detective: 'I felt like an archaeologist about to sift through a finding of tool fragments and assorted cave trash.'<sup>16</sup> Correspondingly, the reader/critic is enlisted as detective, invited to try to decipher the signs that lie before Jack. However, the novel deflates any readerly excitement that this pulp fiction gesture may generate by

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<sup>15</sup> *U*, 542.

<sup>16</sup> *WN*, 258.

presenting us with an excessive, seemingly inscrutable list. ‘Is garbage so private?’ Jack wonders:

Does it glow at the core with a personal heat, with signs of one’s deepest nature, clues to secret yearnings, humiliating flaws? What habits, fetishes, addictions, inclinations? What solitary acts, behavioral ruts? I found crayon drawings of a figure with full breasts and male genitals. There was a long piece of twine that contained a series of knots and loops. It seemed at first a random construction. Looking more closely I thought I detected a complex relationship between the size of the loops, the degree of the knots (single or double) and the intervals between knots with loops and freestanding knots. Some kind of occult geometry or symbolic festoon of obsessions. I found a banana skin with a tampon inside. Was this the dark underside of consumer consciousness? I came across a horrible clotted mass of hair, soap, ear swabs, crushed roaches, flip-top rings, sterile pads smeared with pus and bacon fat, strands of decayed dental floss, fragments of ballpoint refills, toothpicks still displaying bits of impaled food. There was a pair of shredded undershorts with lipstick markings, perhaps a memento of the Grayview Motel.<sup>17</sup>

Jack’s sleuthing is thwarted; we have not gleaned further information about the whereabouts of the Dylar, or the sexual labour carried out by Babette to secure it. The passage exemplifies the disruptive quality Belknap locates in the list, as it ‘interrupts the forward drive of the text,’ and serves no obvious purpose.<sup>18</sup> It is inevitably tempting to impose order upon lists, however: the parodic pairing of the banana—a widespread symbol of male fertility—with a tampon seems designed to lure the critic into Freudian clichés. Equally, by electing to feature the most-traded fruit, the novel could be gesturing towards inequities in the supply-chain, and inserting economic peripheries into this image of American abundance. The list proposes various models for reading *White Noise* itself (‘some kind of occult geometry or symbolic festoon of obsessions’? ‘Was this the dark underside of

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<sup>17</sup> *WN*, 259.

<sup>18</sup> Robert E. Belknap, *The List: the Uses and Pleasures of Cataloguing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), xi-xiii.

consumer consciousness?'), and therefore should assume great importance in any reading of the novel.

Despite *White Noise's* satirical skewering of 'Semiotics 101' readings of popular culture, critics have seized upon the opportunity to decipher DeLillo's representations of waste as clear-cut commentaries on consumerist excess, the environment, or the workings of the unconscious. As David H. Evans notes, such critical efforts 'recycle the material reality of trash, converting it into a useful abstraction or meaningful symbol, and in doing so sacrifice its stubbornly senseless singularity.' Consequently, they refuse 'to allow anything to be useless'—or, to put it another way, to be wasteful. Instead, according to Evans, DeLillo insists upon the 'material immediacy, the concrete and sensuous, oleaginous and viscid substance of garbage itself.' In so doing, his work strives for 'a restoration of access to the real.'<sup>19</sup> Though Evans' analysis presents a welcome corrective to the turgid postmodern readings that *White Noise* has inspired, his claims concerning the 'real' are problematic. As I have argued, nothing within the charmed circle of art escapes symbolic recuperation, or, to put it another way, textual waste always has some utility. Moreover, Evans overlooks the point that sensuousness itself assumes political significance amidst the financialized culture of the eighties. Rather than offering us 'the real,' the insistent materiality of the 'oozing cube of garbage' offsets the increasing abstraction of money and re-ascension of fictitious capital.<sup>20</sup> Materiality itself is incredibly overdetermined, and inevitably becomes a symbol of the refusal to symbolize. Moreover, to take the bait of Jack's question 'what fetishes?', the commodity fetish is both material and abstract, congealing labour power 'without regard to its expenditure,' and thus attaining an uncanny quality, as Marx demonstrates in *Das Kapital*:

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<sup>19</sup> David H. Evans, 'Taking Out the Trash: Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, Liquid Modernity, and the End of Garbage,' *The Cambridge Quarterly* 35.2 (2006): 103-132, 111, 116-7.

<sup>20</sup> *WN*, 258. See: Leigh Claire La Berge, 'Personal Banking and Depersonalization in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*,' in *Scandals and Abstraction: Financial Fiction of the Long 1980s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 37-72, which reads the representation of the ATM in *WN* as critiquing the notion of abstract labour and financialization.

A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. [...] The form of wood, for instance, is altered, by making a table out of it. Yet, for all that, the table continues to be that common, every-day thing, wood. But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than 'table-turning' ever was.<sup>21</sup>

Marx's financial Gothic mode seems particularly apposite to a novel set during Reagan's implementation of 'voodoo economics,' premised on the mystical idea that greater economic surplus could be attained from cutting taxes. It is my contention that *White Noise* uses the flow of waste that American abundance produces to foreground the labour congealed in the sterile pads smeared with pus and bacon fat' and so on. DeLillo is mapping capitalism rather than engaging in facile invective against consumerism. With its dour focus on consumer culture, DeLillo scholarship is lacking a slant that retains the indeterminacy of the everyday, but does not reduce the waste to a clear-cut critique of consumerism or consign it to uninterpretability.

### Avant-garde cereal boxes

Before I advance my own reading of the waste in *White Noise*, I will argue that the novel itself satirises postmodern theories rather than endorsing them, as many critics have claimed. Though the waste products invite recuperation as symbols, they resist easy interpretations. The list calls to mind surrealist aesthetics, encapsulated by the Comte de Lautréamont's famous definition of beauty as 'the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table'—in other words, a strange juxtaposition designed to short-circuit conventional interpretative strategies and offer a multiplicity of possible meanings, an excess of signification.<sup>22</sup> These gestures

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<sup>21</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: An Abridged Edition*, ed. David McLellan, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 42.

<sup>22</sup> Comte de Lautréamont (Isodore Ducasse), *Maldoror and the Complete Works of the Comte de Lautréamont*, trans. Alexis Lykiard (Cambridge: Exact Change, 1994), canto 6, 193.



towards the historical avant-garde are prefigured in an early exchange between Murray and Jack, when the former is bemused by the members of the ‘American environments’ department:

‘I understand the music, I understand the movies, I even understand how comic books can tell us things. But there are full professors in this place who read nothing but cereal boxes.’  
 ‘It’s the only avant-garde we’ve got.’<sup>23</sup>

Jack describes the faculty as ‘New York émigrés [...] here to decipher the natural language of the culture, to make a formal method of the shiny pleasures they’d known in their Europe-shadowed childhoods—an Aristotelianism of bubble gum wrappers and detergent jingles.’<sup>24</sup> Zadie Smith has labeled *White Noise* as a ‘Frankfurt School comedy,’ and, indeed, the spectre of Europe calls to mind Adorno and Kracauer’s pessimistic critiques of mass culture, as well as Barthes’ *Mythologies* (1957), especially its anatomization of soap-powders and detergents.<sup>25</sup> By Murray’s second appearance in the novel, however, he has been converted into a semiotician. Rather than undertaking the political work of demystification, though, he advances a postmodern reading of supermarket products. Babette and Jack encounter him examining unbranded items at the supermarket, and marveling at the plain packaging:

‘This is the new austerity,’ he said. ‘Flavorless packaging. It appeals to me. I feel I’m not only saving money but contributing to some kind of spiritual consensus. It’s like World War III. Everything is white. They’ll take our bright colors away and use them in the war effort. [...] You were right, Jack. This is the last avant-garde. Bold new forms. The power to shock.’<sup>26</sup>

Instead of posing the avant-garde as the antidote to capitalist culture, and a way of shocking people into awareness of capitalist reification, Murray declares the

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<sup>23</sup> *WN*, 10.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>25</sup> Zadie Smith, ‘This is how it feels to me,’ *Guardian*, 13 October, 2001.

<sup>26</sup> *WN*, 18.

commodity form itself to be avant-garde. The project of critical unmasking and demystification appears to have been exhausted, and the satire is aimed at both artists and theorists, and their failure to expose the bourgeois reifications of everyday life. The avant-garde aesthetic of shock has been replaced by shockingly good packaging for peanuts. Furthermore, Murray fails to provide a class-based analysis of the product that might explain why people are buying cheaper off-brand goods in spite of the plenitude that Reaganomics has supposedly achieved. Rather than endorsing Murray's commitment to surface and representation, the novel appears to be pointing to what a postmodern reading of the product would occlude. For both Jack and Murray, the endpoint of analysis is surface. We are repeatedly informed that it was in 1968 that Jack invented Hitler Studies, but the revolutionary energy of '68 is absent; with its 'special emphasis on parades, rallies and uniforms,' Jack's sole class performs what Benjamin famously identified as the fascistic manoeuvre of aestheticizing politics.<sup>27</sup>

However, *White Noise* does not depict a world in which 'the avant-gardist urge towards critical resistance to commodified culture is recognisable only in the throes of its disappearance,' as Peter Boxall argues. Instead, the novel demonstrates that the postmodern *premise* that all is surface and history has disappeared is what precludes resistance, as it denudes events and objects of historical significance, and relegates issues of class, gender, labour, and race.<sup>28</sup> The radical ambitions of the Frankfurt School and Barthes have given way to an academy that analyses consumer culture in terms of Baudrillardian 'simulacra,' floating signifiers, Jamesonian 'depthlessness,' and the 'death of the subject.' My point is not so much to pinpoint exact targets for DeLillo's satire, but rather that, as David Cowart observes, *White Noise* 'parod[ies] the glib cultural analyses already, by the mid-eighties, making their way into scholarly discourse'—cultural analyses that we would now understand as postmodern. Though

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<sup>27</sup> *WN*, 25.

<sup>28</sup> Peter Boxall, *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 125. For an analysis of *White Noise's* racial politics, see: Tim Engles, "'Who are You, Literally?': Fantasies of the White Self in *White Noise*," *MFS* 45.3 (1999): 755-787.

he warns against treating Murray as a ‘sage,’ as many critics have done, Cowart indulges in a few Siskindisms, such as: ‘the supermarket, a place where all is surface, where substance remains endlessly deferred, exemplifies postmodern reality.’<sup>29</sup> On the contrary, *White Noise* indicts the reactionary nature of the Baudrillardian belief in surface and spectacle, and has affinities with Susan Sontag’s combative critique of postmodernism: ‘to speak of reality becoming a spectacle is a breathtaking provincialism,’ she asserts. ‘It universalises the viewing habits of a small educated population living in the rich part of the world, where news has been converted into entertainment.’<sup>30</sup> *White Noise* repeatedly skewers postmodern theories, and the novel even demonstrates that they are inadequate for understanding the way many people in the U.S. live. When ordered to evacuate Blacksmith, Jack protests: ‘I’m not just a college professor. I’m the head of a department. I don’t see myself fleeing an airborne toxic event. That’s for people who live in mobile homes out in the scrubby parts of the country, where the fish hatcheries are.’<sup>31</sup> Though Jack doesn’t expound a fully postmodern perception of the events, he locates the real as outside the purview and experience of white, well-educated, middle-class men. Andrew Hoberek has argued for an understanding of postmodernism ‘not as an external, reified phenomenon but rather as the universalized worldview of the new white-collar middle class.’<sup>32</sup> Though Jack does not project his experience of postmodern hyperreality onto economic peripheries, he does not do the necessary political work to unpick the exclusionary nature of postmodern theory. The job, then, is left up to the critic. It is surprising that a novel that so vehemently urges us to look beyond surface to social and economic relations has been canonised as an illustration of postmodern principles.

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<sup>29</sup> David Cowart, *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 88.

<sup>30</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2003), 98.

<sup>31</sup> *WN*, 117.

<sup>32</sup> Andrew Hoberek, *The Twilight of the Middle Class: Post-World War II American Fiction and White-Collar Work* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 120; 117.

### 'Too obvious and nebulous and generalized': Babette's domestic labour

Now that I have cleared some space for my own interpretation of waste in *White Noise*, the question arises: what is to be gained from digging beneath the layers of postmodern surface? And how can this be achieved without sacrificing the indeterminacy of the everyday? Whilst acknowledging that the list of waste encourages a multiplicity of readings, and resists us settling upon one, I want to pursue the idea that such lists register the invisible and indeterminate role of women's domestic labour. Postmodern readings of *White Noise* have overlooked the significance of gender to the novel.<sup>33</sup> Yet, with its references to full breasts, tampons, and lipstick, the waste products on the list configure an absent female body, abstracted from the list just as capitalism abstracts bodies into labour-power.<sup>34</sup> It is a reverse blazon, resembling Jonathan Swift's 'A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed,' in which the poetic image of the female body is constituted through the discarding of the products that manufacture the illusion of youth and beauty:

Then, seated on a three-legged chair,  
Takes off her artificial hair:  
Now, picking out a crystal eye,  
She wipes it clean, and lays it by.  
Her eye-brows from a mouse's hide,  
Stuck on with art on either side,  
Pulls off with care, and first displays 'em,  
Then in a play-book smoothly lays 'em.

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<sup>33</sup> Sally Robinson has argued that *White Noise* stages a confrontation between American ideals of masculinity and individuality, and the threat of homogenizing consumer culture. Though her claim that consumer culture is coded as feminine in the novel is productive, I wish to redress the myopic focus on consumerism DeLillo criticism and call for a rigorously systemic critique of the capitalist world-system. Nevertheless, the article presents a refreshingly nuanced account of *White Noise* and consumer culture, and one of the few engagements of gender dynamics in DeLillo's work. See: Sally Robinson, 'Shopping for the Real: Gender and Consumption in the Critical Reception of DeLillo's *White Noise*,' *Postmodern Culture* 23.2 (2013). See also: Leigh Claire La Berge, 'Personal Banking and Depersonalization in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*,' in *Scandals and Abstraction: Financial Fiction of the Long 1980s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 37-72, which argues that 'the opposition between the surety of personal banking and the capriciousness of feminine comportment is crucial to Jack's ability to undertake a plot.' (54)

<sup>34</sup> 'The value of commodities more and more expands into an embodiment of human labour in the abstract.' Marx, *Capital*, 55.

Now dexterously her plumpers draws,  
 That serve to fill her hollow jaws.  
 Untwists a wire; and from her gums  
 A set of teeth completely comes.  
 Pulls out the rags contrived to prop  
 Her flabby dugs and down they drop.<sup>35</sup>

Irvin Ehrenpreis describes this grossly material detail in Swift's work as 'negative particularity,' which Cynthia Wall glosses as corresponding with 'the contemporary literary suspicion of the ordinary, the everyday, the accidental,' which is 'throw[n] into dark relief' by Swift's female grotesques.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the feminine has conventionally been considered as both embodiment and victim of the everyday.<sup>37</sup> The items from the trash compactor summon maleness as well as the female body, through the list's ambiguous convergences of female and male body parts—the 'crayon drawings of a figure with full breasts and male genitals,' the 'banana skin with a tampon inside,' and the 'pair of shredded undershorts with lipstick markings.' Obviously the trash is replete with gestures towards Babette's sexual encounters with Willie Mink, the creator of Dylar. But these hermaphroditic convergences are emblematic of the novel's clear tension between thriller-like narrative efficiency and a commitment to teleological progression that is coded as toxically masculine, and a wasteful, meandering lack of narrative drive that is coded as domestic and conventionally female. By thriller-like efficiency, I am referring to the conventional image of popular entertainment as embodying capitalist logics of linearity, progress, and efficiency, enshrined by Adorno's characterisation of Hollywood films as proceeding with Fordist productivity, and devaluing anything considered inefficient or in excess of the main plot. Jack's investment in 'great' subjects means he dismisses the trash as

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<sup>35</sup> Jonathan Swift, 'A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed,' 9-22.

<sup>36</sup> Irvin Ehrenpreis, *Literary Meaning and Augustan Values* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1974), 45-835, qtd. in Cynthia Wall, *The Prose of Things: Transformations of Description in the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006), 35.

<sup>37</sup> Henri Lefebvre claims everyday life 'weights heaviest on women [...] they are the subject of everyday life and its victims or objects,' but, 'because of their ambiguous position in everyday life [...] they are incapable of understanding it.' *Critique of Everyday Life*, i., trans. John Moore (London: Verso, 1991); 73. However, as Rita Felski points out:

useless, just as detail is considered peripheral to plot development. The waste is feminized and evocative of the female body, but Jack does not reconstruct an image of Babette from this junk anatomy—he is interested in the mystery of Dylar rather than the unknowability of his own wife.

At the beginning of *White Noise*, Jack is content to lead a mundane, plotless existence. An early chapter opens with the words: ‘Let’s enjoy these aimless days while we can, I told myself, fearing some deft acceleration.’<sup>38</sup> Similarly, he warns his students: ‘All plots tend to move deathward,’ and elsewhere states: ‘in the commonplace I find unexpected themes and intensities.’<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, as DeLillo has admitted: ‘*White Noise* develops a trite adultery plot that enmeshes the hero, justifying his fears about the death energies contained in plots.’<sup>40</sup> The plot accelerates when Murray suggests that Jack should kill someone, averring ‘to plot is to live [...] to plot is to affirm life, to seek shape and control.’<sup>41</sup> Jack draws on what Murray labels a ‘reservoir of potential violence in the male psyche’ and what Babette refers to as men’s aptitude for ‘insane and violent jealousy’ and stages an abortive attempt to murder Mink.<sup>42</sup>

Babette, on the other hand, is anchored to the formless, meandering qualities of the everyday, in contrast to Jack’s previous wives, who are associated with espionage and intrigue. Dana Breedlove is a fiction reviewer for the CIA and part-time spy, Tweedy Browner comes from a family with a ‘long tradition of spying and counterspying’ and is now married to a ‘high-level jungle operative,’ and, before joining a sinister ashram, Janet Savory ‘was a foreign-currency analyst who did research for a secret group of advanced theorists connected to some controversial think-tank,’ who, she tells Jack, never meet in the same place twice.<sup>43</sup> Whereas Jack describes Babette as not ‘a keeper of secrets’ or ‘a gift bearer of great things as the

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<sup>38</sup> *WN*, 18.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 25; 184.

<sup>40</sup> DeLillo, interview with Adam Begley, ‘The Art of Fiction CXXXV: Don DeLillo,’ in *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, ed. Thomas DePietro (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 86-108, 102.

<sup>41</sup> *WN*, 291-2.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 292; 225.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

world generally reckons them,' and regards her 'as a 'full-souled woman, a lover of daylight and dense life, the miscellaneous swarming air of families.' He professes to watching 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.'<sup>44</sup> When Jack learns that Babette has secretly been taking Dylar, an unlisted drug, he notices that she has become unmoored from the everyday: 'in the middle of conversations she turned to gaze at snowfalls, sunsets or parked cars in a sculptured or eternal way. These contemplations began to worry me,' Jack admits. To him, Babette has 'always been an outward-looking woman with a bracing sense of particularity, a trust in the tangible and real. This private gazing was a form of estrangement not only from those of us around her but from the very things she watched so endlessly.'<sup>45</sup> Babette has transgressed by severing her naturalised connection with the everyday and seemingly insignificant.

Waste disturbs hierarchies of significance and value; so, too, I want to argue, does *White Noise*, even though critics have ignored the invitation to examine Babette's storyline in favour of the murder plot that it triggers. This invitation is explicitly issued when Babette tells Jack: 'this is not a story about your disappointment at my silence. The theme of this story is my pain and my attempts to end it.'<sup>46</sup> By thwarting our attempts to separate the textually useful from the textually wasteful, the list of waste establishes a radical textual economy that redefines what constitutes productive labour. Whilst Andrew Hoberk has commented on how *White Noise* registers the shift from manufacturing to information economies by foregrounding the intellectual labour of its protagonist in 'translating Hitler into a commodity,' this analysis misses the ways in which DeLillo highlights Babette's 'invisible' and affective domestic work.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *WN*, 23; 6-7.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>47</sup> *The Twilight of the Middle Class: Post-World War II American Fiction and White-Collar Work* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 119-20.

Though I am not arguing for their influence on DeLillo's work, *White Noise* appears when feminist theorists were reconfiguring debates surrounding labour and housework. Functioning as a vituperative corrective to Marx's emphasis on the factory and Marxist characterisations of housework as unproductive labour, the Wages for Housework movement called attention to the way women's unpaid work facilitated male labour-power.<sup>48</sup> The Wages for Housework 1974 manifesto declaims:

In the same way as god created Eve to give pleasure to Adam, so did capital create the housewife to service the male worker physically, emotionally and sexually—to raise *his* children, mend his socks, patch up his ego when it is crushed by the work and the social relations (which are relations of loneliness) that capital has reserved for him. It is precisely this peculiar combination of physical, emotional and sexual services that are involved in the role women must perform for capital that creates the specific character of that servant which is the housewife, that makes her work so burdensome and at the same time invisible.<sup>49</sup>

The concealed labour in Marx's aforementioned uncanny wooden table, then, is also that of the domestic and emotional toil that has enabled its production. So, too, is Jack's intellectual labour supported by Babette, who cooks, irons, and takes care of her and Jack's children. In his quest to find Willie Mink, Jack derides Babette for ironing ('how smug, ironing handkerchiefs') and sneers: 'the eternal wisdom of those who iron and sew.'<sup>50</sup> A surplus of signifiers thus comes to figure the devalued work that is necessary for economic surplus, dragging to the foreground the necessity of what is dismissed as waste. By rendering this labour visible, *White Noise* takes its place alongside artistic works that have revealed and rejected 'the naturalizing of

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<sup>48</sup> See Wally Secombe, who, using Marx's definition of productive labour as that which directly 'produces surplus value for the capitalist,' asserts: 'domestic labour is unproductive.' Wally Secombe, 'The Housewife and Her Labour under Capitalism,' *New Left Review* 83.1 (1974): 3-23, 11. NB: Though I quote from Silvia Federici in what follows, Selma James is recognized as the founder of the movement.

<sup>49</sup> Silvia Federici, 'Wages against Housework,' in *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012), 15-22, 17.

<sup>50</sup> *WN*, 269.



unpaid and underpaid domestic labor.’<sup>51</sup> For example, critics have regarded Chantal Akerman’s film *Jeanne Dielman, 24, quai du commerce, 1080 bruxelles* (1975) as an artistic analogue to the Wages for Housework movement, as it languidly depicts the eponymous housewife’s travails, as she dusts, makes beds, washes the dishes, cooks veal cutlets, and so on, reversing the marginalization of housework and foregrounding its repetitive, tedious, (and sometimes even pleasurable) nature. Similarly, Mierle Ukeles Laderman’s ‘maintenance art’ pieces, one of which involved her cleaning the floor of an art gallery for four hours, enacts her insistence that ‘ideals of modernity (progress, change, individual creation) are dependent on the denigrated and boring labor of maintenance (activities that make things possible—cooking, cleaning, shopping, child rearing and so forth).’<sup>52</sup> With their luxuriant pacing, these works create an aesthetic of waste, or artistic time-wasting; by appearing to squander time, they prompt us to re-evaluate what is designated useful and socially necessary labour-time, and what is assigned as waste. When encountering such artworks, we are forced to labour to divine the meaning of apparently inconsequential activities, objects, and details. Ukeles Laderman’s performances and Akerman’s film thus alternate between foregrounding the unproductive nature of housework and exposing its indirect productivity, thus subverting its status as hidden, marginalised, and trivial labour. Babette’s parodic role as the teacher of an adult education course entitled ‘Eating and Drinking: Basic Parameters’ (a title she concedes ‘is a little more stupid than it absolutely has to be’) pivots on this logic, too.<sup>53</sup> She later explains to Jack:

You know how I am. I think everything is correctible. Given the right attitude and the proper effort, a person can change a harmful condition by reducing it to its simplest parts. You can make lists, invent categories, devise charts and graphs. This is how I am able to teach my students how to stand, sit and walk, even though I know you think these subjects are too obvious and nebulous and generalized to be reduced to component parts. I’m not a very ingenious person but I know how to

<sup>51</sup> Helen Molesworth, ‘House Work and Art Work,’ *October* 92 (2000): 71-97, 77.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>53</sup> *WN*, 171.

break things down, how to separate and classify. We can analyze posture, we can analyze eating, drinking, and even breathing. How else do you understand the world, is my way of looking at it.<sup>54</sup>

Babette's class operates as synecdoche for the workings of *White Noise's* narrative, and the ways in which it reverses the invisibility of the everyday. This is also evident in the pronouncements from the television, which interrupt dialogue and description with commands to improve one's body, finances, and home:

'Let's sit half-lotus and think about our spines.'

'And other trends that could dramatically impact your portfolio.'

'Now we will put the little feelers on the butterfly.'

'Meanwhile here is a quick and attractive lemon garnish suitable for any sea food.'

'If you keep misplacing your ball of string, cage it in a Barney basket, attach some organizer clips to your kitchen corkboard, fasten the basket to the clips. Simple.'<sup>55</sup>

These intrusions infuse *White Noise* with an avant-garde quality akin to Gertrude Stein's language games in *Tender Buttons* (1914), such as the entry on roastbeef, which counsels:

To bury a slender chicken, to raise an old feather, to surround a garland and to bake a pole splinter, to suggest a repose and to settle simply, to surrender one another, to succeed saving simpler, to satisfy a singularity and not to be blinder, to sugar nothing darker and to read redder, to have the color better, to sort out dinner, to remain together, to surprise no sinner, to curve nothing sweeter, to continue thinner, to increase in resting recreation to design string not dimmer.<sup>56</sup>

Kathryn R. Kent has proposed that these 'opaque yet resonant statements and injunctions [...] imitate and exaggerate the often seemingly random jumble of advice'

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 18; 14; 296.

<sup>56</sup> Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons* (Mineola: Dover, 1997), 24.

in domestic handbooks. In doing so, Kent argues, Stein ‘takes on the economic values of bourgeois culture, in particular the emphasis placed on thrift [...] as well as conservation and cleanliness.’ The poem therefore ‘deconstructs these values’ distance from their supposed opposites (profligacy, waste, and dirt).<sup>57</sup> Similarly, *White Noise* parodies the principles of capitalist efficiency we are encouraged to apply to the domestic sphere, with its wasteful and inefficient sidetracking from the more ‘valuable’ murder plot. Just as pointless detail always betrays itself as integral to plot, *White Noise* exposes the non-productive labour that is integral to capitalist productivity. As Ross Chambers notes, ‘criticism depends, like the social order itself, on the possibility of discriminating and hierarchizing, determining what’s peripheral.’<sup>58</sup> *White Noise*’s intractable waste products pose a challenge to systems of value that structure daily life, and with which we read literary texts. The list demands a dialectical mode of reading that oscillates between everyday and extraordinary, depth and surface, centre and periphery, totality and play, and locates the everyday at the intersections.

### **Ragspeak: *Mao II***

In *Mao II*, Bill Gray’s novel-in-progress is described in terms of its wastefulness: in Scott’s words, ‘The book is a grossity. We have to invent words to describe the corpulence, the top-heaviness, the lack of discernment, pace and energy.’ He dreams of Bill electing to ‘cut it back, gut it, strip it six ways to Sunday.’ In contrast with his ‘lean’ published novels, Bill imagines his work-in-progress to be ‘water-bloated, slobbering, incontinent.’ He comes to consider the novel as a character following him around:

Bill thought he saw his book across the room, obese and lye-splashed, the face an acid spatter, zipped up and decolorated, with broken teeth glinting out of the pulp. It was so true and real it briefly cleared his

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<sup>57</sup> Kathryn R. Kent, *Making Girls into Women: American Women’s Writing and the Rise of Lesbian Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 141.

<sup>58</sup> Ross Chambers, *Loiterature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 9.

muzziness. Couples stood clinging on the dance floor and a champagne bottle exploded in someone's face, the man standing in a creamy flash of blood and foam and looking down at the damage to his suit. There were fashion references everywhere, women wearing skull jewelry and several young bravos in camouflage sunglasses and pieces of militia gear.<sup>59</sup>

The 'radical chic' imagery on display suggests that radical aesthetics have now been completely severed from radical politics. Bill's perceived opposition between his 'true and real' book and the manifestations of radical chic is telling, and is consistent with his assertion that terrorism has triumphed over avant-garde writing: 'Beckett is the last writer to shape the way we think and see. After him, the major work involves midair explosions and crumbled buildings. This is the new tragic narrative.'<sup>60</sup> It is ironic that Bill's approach to his novel is reducing waste; though Beckett, the writer Bill idolises, systematically stripped his texts 'six ways to Sunday,' the image of Beckett as minimalist obscures his abiding interest in detritus and waste, as the rubbish dumps in 'Breath' and *Molloy*, the bins in *Endgame*, and shit in 'First Love,' illustrate. George Haddad, a spokesperson for the Lebanese Marxist terrorists who take writers as hostages, claims that terrorism is a way of cutting through the threatening excesses of contemporary capitalism:

The coherence of their lives. The way they excite, they excite admiration. In societies reduced to blur and glut, terrorism is the only meaningful act. There's too much everything, more things and messages and meanings than we can use in ten thousand lifetimes. Inertia-hysteria. Is history possible? Is anyone serious? Who do we take seriously? Only the lethal believer, the person who kills and dies for faith [...] It's confusing when they kill the innocent. But this is precisely the language of being noticed, the only language the West understands. The way they determine how we see them. The way they dominate the rush of endless streaming images.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> *MII*, 210-11.

<sup>60</sup> *MII*, 157.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 157-8.

Unlike George and Bill, *Mao II* revels in the production of waste; the terrorist plot is interspersed with Karen's journeys around Reagan-era New York. A partially deprogrammed Moonie, Karen goes to stay with Brita, the photographer who captured Bill's image at the beginning of the book. The flow of the thriller form is stemmed by a deluge of detail, or 'living trivia': people living in plastic bags; women who dispose of their babies in the trash; 'soot-faced people pushing shopping carts filled with bundled things.'<sup>62</sup> The quotidian and grossly material nature of the New York sections serves as a counterpoint to Bill and Haddad's abstract theorizing about terrorism and grand statements about art. To help the homeless, Karen collects waste, which is listed at length:

she began to forage for redeemable bottles and cans, anything she could find in trash baskets or curbside, in garbage bags massed in restaurant alleyways. Bottles, matchbooks, swayback shoes, whatever usable cultural deposit might be shut away in the dark. [...] She slipped into those stinking alleyways and undid the twists on garbage bags and dumped out the garbage and took the bag [...] She stood on garbage cans and went through dumpsters at demolition sites, salvaging plasterboard and nails, strips of plywood. Bottles and cans were her main mission, things that could be turned into money. [...] She found broken umbrellas, bruised fruit that was edible when washed.<sup>63</sup>

Karen embodies the figure of the ragpicker, as described by Baudelaire thus: 'he sorts things out and selects judiciously; he collects, like a miser guarding a treasure, refuse which will assume the shape of useful or gratifying objects.' Benjamin conceives of Baudelaire's ragpicker as 'one extended metaphor for the poetic method,' asserting: 'ragpicker and poet: both are concerned with refuse.'<sup>64</sup> This is mirrored in the way Karen speaks, too, in what DeLillo has called 'a free-flowing, non-sequitur ramble' and what Amy Hungerford designates as an attempt to recycle the 'discarded language' of religion.

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 148; 152.

<sup>63</sup> *MII*, 152-3.

<sup>64</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, i, 1938-1940, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003) 3-92, 48.

It is tempting to read her ragpicking as a metaphor for DeLillo's writing process, especially as this section is littered with recycled phrases and images from the novel. In this sense, *Mao II* bears illuminating affinities with Paul Auster's highly allusive 1985 novella, 'City of Glass,' another text that has been regarded as quintessentially postmodern.<sup>65</sup> Frequently described as an 'anti-detective' story, the plot follows Daniel Quinn, a writer of detective fiction who assumes the role of an actual detective and must track down a man called Peter Stillman. But when Quinn locates Stillman, he finds him ragpicking, and his quarry does not provide clues to his intentions:

As far as Quinn could tell, the objects Stillman collected were valueless. They seemed to be no more than broken things, discarded things, stray bits of junk. Over the days that passed, Quinn noted a collapsible umbrella shorn of its material, the severed head of a rubber doll, a black glove, the bottom of a shattered light bulb, several pieces of printed matter (soggy magazines, shredded newspapers), a torn photograph, anonymous machinery parts, and sundry other clumps of flotsam he could not identify.<sup>66</sup>

As in *White Noise*, the detective manqué is flummoxed by the opacity of ordinary objects. Rather than providing us with a list of clear-cut signifiers, 'City of Glass' presents a list of incongruous juxtapositions. Once again, we are reminded of 'the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table'—perhaps unsurprisingly, given Auster's tenure as a translator of Surrealist poetry, as reflected in *The New York Trilogy's* concern with chance and language games. Quinn discovers that Stillman is striving to reverse the Fall—specifically, the postlapsarian rift between signifier and signified—by creating a new, perfectly referential language. New York provides fertile ground for this mission because, for Stillman, it is the most 'abject' of places: 'the broken people, the broken things, the broken thoughts. The whole city is a junk heap,' he avers.<sup>67</sup> The novella's concerns

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<sup>65</sup> For example, see: Jeffrey T. Nealon, 'Work of the Detective, Work of the Writer: Paul Auster's *City of Glass*,' *MFS* 42.1 (1996): 91-107.

<sup>66</sup> Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), 3-113, 59.

<sup>67</sup> Auster, 'City,' 78.

are not merely abstract, however; rather than pointing to postmodern predicaments surrounding language, 'City of Glass' directs our gaze to the historical context in which it was written, and the real problems of homelessness and cuts to mental health facilities that led to the release of mentally ill people onto the streets.

*Mao II* continually calls our attention to the gritty utility of the trash, rather than apotheosizing it to the realm of poetry or Surrealist object: we witness Karen redeem the bottles for cash, and shift plasterboard to a shantytown in Tompkins Park for construction. Rather than arresting the flow of capitalism, the informal economy of gleaning constitutes the invisible labour concealed by the formal economy. Just as the trash in *White Noise* makes manifest concealed domestic labour, *Mao II's* waste reveals the labour of the relative surplus population, described by Marx as 'a necessary product of accumulation':

if a surplus labouring population is a necessary product of accumulation or of the development of wealth on a capitalist basis, this surplus population becomes, conversely, the lever of capitalistic accumulation, nay, a condition of existence of the capitalist mode of production. It forms a disposable industrial reserve army, that belongs to capital quite as absolutely as if the latter had bred it at its own cost. Independently of the limits of the actual increase of population, it creates, for the changing needs of the self-expansion of capital, a mass of human material always ready for exploitation.<sup>68</sup>

Again, we see that waste and surplus are immanent to capital, the very conditions of its endless expansion, rather than its contradiction, shadow, or Other. Zygmunt Bauman has also employed the metaphors of waste to discuss the relative surplus population. Discussing the 'wasted humans' rendered 'excessive' and 'redundant' by the capitalist world-system, he argues that human waste is 'an inescapable side-effect of *order-building*; (each order casts some parts of the extant population as "out of place," "unfit" or "undesirable") and of *economic progress*.'<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 352.

<sup>69</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 5.

We could apply the concept of ‘order-building’ to the waves of gentrification that swept New York, to which *Mao II* is clearly responding. In fact, earlier in the novel, DeLillo gestures towards the gentrification of London, when Bill’s editor is forced to change the venue for Bill’s poetry reading to a grain warehouse near Saint Saviour’s Dock best known as the setting for Bill Sykes’ demise in *Oliver Twist*. The wider area, Jacob’s Island, was described thus in the novel:

Crazy wooden galleries common to the backs of half a dozen houses, with holes from which to look upon the slime beneath; windows, broken and patched, with poles thrust out, on which to dry the linen that is never there; rooms so small, so filthy, so confined, that the air would seem to be too tainted even for the dirt and squalor which they shelter; wooden chambers thrusting themselves out above the mud and threatening to fall into it—as some have done; dirt-besmeared walls and decaying foundations, every repulsive lineament of poverty, every loathsome indication of filth, rot, and garbage: all these ornament the banks of Jacob’s Island.<sup>70</sup>

By the 1980s, the area was undergoing redevelopment, with abandoned buildings being recycled into glossy commercial and residential buildings.

The passages in New York engage directly with the gentrification of the East Village. In the 1960s and ‘70s, the area was a locus for underground artists and groups, but, in the 1980s, a new wave of artists capitalised on the countercultural mood of the area and marketed their artworks in hitherto subcultural spaces. The area attracted real-estate developers, aided by the Koch administration’s support schemes for middle-class artist renters and regeneration initiatives, and the selling of city-owned vacant lots and buildings. Buildings deemed as waste were thus reassigned value as glossy residential developments, displacing low-income tenants and squatters. Such individuals and communities were, in other words, the waste products of gentrification. The conflict arising from the desire for gentrification and the influx of homeless people came to a head when the NYPD inflicted a violent riot upon the inhabitants of the ‘Tent City’ in Tompkins Square Park, the shantytown

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<sup>70</sup> Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (London: Penguin, 2003), 417.



Karen visits, in order to enforce a curfew. When Karen first discovers Tompkins Square Park, she is shocked:

It was something you come upon and then stop in your tracks. A tent city. Huts and shacks, she was thinking of the word; lean-tos; blue plastic sheeting covering the lean-tos and the networks of boxes and shipping containers that people lived in. A refugee camp or the rattiest edge of some dusty township. [...] There were bodies shrouded on benches [...] It was a world apart but powerfully here, a set of milling images [...] And from the spot where she stood now, a distance from the bandshell, she could see more bodies stirring, hear the coughing, and she realized the whole deep stage was spread with bedding and there were people moving everywhere, a slowly spreading ripple<sup>71</sup>

The racialized language of ‘township’ and ‘refugee camp’ suggests how the economic core must have both peripheral countries (the ‘Third World’) and peripheries within. The ‘slowly spreading ripple’ of economic growth across New York is enabled by the surplus population—or waste—it leaves in its wake. Karen sees a ‘black cube sculpture that was balanced on a point’ with ‘ten sleeping beneath it with their shopping bags and shopping carts alongside, with crutches lying beside some of them, some arms and legs in casts.’<sup>72</sup> The sculpture is ‘The Alamo,’ a piece of public art located on Astor Place, named after the Alamo Mission in San Antonio, but its description also evokes the Kaaba or ‘Cube,’ located at the centre of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, connecting the homeless of New York to the Muslim mourners at Ayatollah Khomeini’s funeral that Karen and Brita watch on television. As Karen moves through New York, she sees ‘water-main breaks and steam-pipe explosions, asbestos flying everywhere, mud propelled from caved-in pavement, and people stood around saying, “It’s just like Beirut, it looks like Beirut.”’<sup>73</sup> Through its representations of literal and human waste, the novel registers the unevenness of the economic core, as well as pointing to how the systemic dynamic of combined and uneven development plays out on multiple uneven scales, levels, and temporalities.

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<sup>71</sup> *MII*, 149-50.

<sup>72</sup> *MII*, 179.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

By exploding the formal purity and progression of the thriller with 'wasteful' passages, *Mao II* resists the order-building impulse underlying capitalism in its global and local manifestations.

DeLillo uses the artistic gentrification of the East Village as a lens through which to consider the politics of art mobilising waste. This comes to the fore when Karen and Omar, a fourteen-year-old drug dealer that she has befriended, visit an East Village art gallery where they encounter an avant-garde assemblage composed of waste:

Once they went to an art gallery and stood looking at a large construction that meandered along a wall. She counted metal, burlap, glass, there was clotted paint on the glass, a ledge of weathered wood, there were flashlight batteries and postcards of Greece. Karen looked at a food-crusting spoon that was stuck to the burlap.<sup>74</sup>

Transfixed by the spoon, Karen accidentally detaches the found object from the assemblage and takes it home, captivated by its perverse 'realness' and the lingering smell of the food residues on its surface. The spoon is a 'recycled' image that recurs several times in the novel. For Brita, the spoon is comfortingly tangible; on returning home, she slowly removes household objects from a drawer: 'these cups and spoons made her feel intact again, reclaimed her from the jet trails, the physics of being in transit.'<sup>75</sup> (Interestingly, one draft of *Mao II* contains a line in which Brita reflects that air travel 'has a narrative pull, the arching trajectory of classic plot design,' thus defining it in opposition to the everyday.)<sup>76</sup> Bill, on the other hand, seeks to elevate the commonplace when he tries to imagine the hostage in order to write about him: 'he pictured precise objects, he made them briefly shine with immanence, a bowl for food, a spoon constructed out of thought, perception, memory, feeling, will and imagination.'<sup>77</sup> For Karen, too, the spoon is extraordinary: 'she stood just looking at the spoon sometimes. She told Brita she didn't want to take it with her when she left.

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 172-3.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>76</sup> DeLillo, 'Mao II: First draft, Chapter 11,' *Container* 40.3, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas.

<sup>77</sup> *III*, 154.

It had a new setting now, detached from the burlap, and she was afraid that moving the spoon again might damage it in some mysterious inner way.<sup>78</sup> As the spoon has undergone the ‘transfiguration of the commonplace,’ Karen deems it too special for base utility.<sup>79</sup> Inevitably, though, the spoon therefore becomes freighted with meaning, emblemizing the gap between those who ragpick to survive (the relative surplus population) and those who do so to continue the legacy of Duchamp and the Surrealists.

The spoon adumbrates art’s failure to represent the ‘structure that makes the problem,’ to use Walter Benn Michaels’ expression. In *The Beauty of a Social Problem*, Michaels examines Viktoria Binshtok’s photographs of the wall of a Berlin unemployment centre, marked and scuffed by the bodies of people waiting to be seen. He argues that the abstract nature of the work allows it to represent the structural problem of the relative surplus population:

Although “represent” is a problematic term here, the scuffs and stains on the wall aren’t representations of the people who leaned against it; they’re traces left by their bodies. Nor is the photograph of the scuffs and stains a representation of them; it too is a trace—a trace of their traces. [The photograph] turns the traces of the unemployed bodies into a kind of painterly abstraction (with a particular nod toward Cy Twombly). And this gesture toward abstraction—to something made by the artist rather than recorded by her—is another way of insisting on the function of unemployment rather than on the plight of its victims. It redescribes the bodies created by a capitalist economy as the structural principle that makes capitalism work. Principles are themselves abstractions; they leave no traces; they must be represented not recorded.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>79</sup> See: Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

<sup>80</sup> Walter Benn Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem: Photography, Autonomy, Economy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 39-40. NB. I would also disagree with the wider arguments Michaels is making about racism and sexism not being structural issues.

Michaels' idea is generative. Karen's ragpicking arises from her empathy with others, which is exhibited when she is anguished by footage of Khomeini's funeral on television:

Karen found she could go back into the slums of south Teheran, backwards into people's lives, and hear them saying, We have lost our father. All the dispossessed waking to the morning call. Sorrow, sorrow is this day. [...] She went backwards into their lives, into the hovels and unpaved streets<sup>81</sup>

Whether we are to take Karen's feelings as patronising or sincere, or both, Michaels would argue that they are politically useless. Though the passages in which Karen traverses New York feature individualised people, *Mao II's* emphasis on rubbish objects gestures to art's potential to depict the structural problems of capitalism. Unlike Michaels, I read formal waste as indexing the *material* effects of capitalist abstraction, thus exemplifying the dialectical nature of the everyday.

DeLillo's inclusion of found object art indexes anxieties concerning art's potential to reify junk and imbue it with creative value and utility. The avant-garde has been savaged for mystifying waste: Benjamin famously charged Surrealism with reifying the everyday, claiming that its 'histrionic or fanatical stress on the mysterious side of the mysterious takes us no further; we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday.'<sup>82</sup> Lefebvre, too, indicted Surrealism for its fetishization of the everyday and political toothlessness, declaring their emphasis on the marvellous as a 'concerted attack against everyday life and human reality.'<sup>83</sup> DeLillo's waste products are not reified, and instead retain their essential everydayness and indeterminacy. However, the indeterminacy of the everyday leaves it vulnerable to Lefebvorean critique that it is impossible to extract a cogent political programme from the detritus of the everyday.

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<sup>81</sup> *MLI*, 189.

<sup>82</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism,' *Selected Writings* vol. 2, part 1 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 207-221. 216.

<sup>83</sup> Lefebvre, *Critique*, i., 115.

As I have demonstrated in my introduction, DeLillo's work is marked by its resistance to the programmatic. Indeed, *Mao II* neither endorses its Marxist terrorists or the programmatic assertions of Mao; nor does the novel appear to locate any hope in Sendero Luminoso, which Karen sees written on 'half-demolished walls and boarded storefronts. Sendero Luminoso on the cinder-block windows of abandoned tenements. Beautiful words.'<sup>84</sup> Set in 1989, and published in 1991, *Mao II*'s everyday aesthetics could consequently be accused of propounding 'a neoliberal end-of-history perspective in which taking a major ideological stand is represented as unnecessary, hysterical, or thoughtlessly utopian.'<sup>85</sup> However, I want to conclude by turning to the language in Karen's passages, and argue for their utopian potential.

DeLillo entertained the idea of Karen discovering 'schizograms' in either Little Tokyo or Times Square—electronic scrolling text that would either address the viewer with statements like 'YOU OVERSTATE EVERYTHING TO KEEP FROM DYING' and 'YOU HAVE STOPPED SMOKING SO MANY TIMES THAT YOU HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO JOKE ABOUT IT'—or would disclose confessions such as 'I DON'T KNOW WHO LIVES IN MY BODY.' These were inspired by Jenny Holzer's 1984 installation at the Guggenheim, in which words from her *Truisms* series were displayed as electronic scrolling text: 'YOU ARE A VICTIM OF THE RULES YOU LIVE BY,' 'EATING TOO MUCH IS CRIMINAL,' 'YOU HAVE TO HURT OTHERS TO BE EXTRAORDINARY,' etc.<sup>86</sup> Like the domestic commandments in *White Noise*, these strange aphorisms undo their implied efficiency and utility, instead bringing about 'a language that is free-floating, polysemous and inherently ambiguous.'<sup>87</sup> They are what De Certeau would label 'something postlinguistic, made from the excesses, the overflows, and the wastes of

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<sup>84</sup> *MII*, 175. Sendero Luminoso was a militant Communist movement in Peru that aimed to use a guerilla army to instate a dictatorship of the proletariat and, ultimately, a Communist world system.

<sup>85</sup> Rachel Greenwald Smith, 'Six Propositions on Compromise Aesthetics,' *The Account* (2014), <http://theaccountmagazine.com/?article=six-propositions-on-compromise-aesthetics>

<sup>86</sup> DeLillo, 'Mao II: Legal pads with rough draft notes,' *Container* 38.2, Pad 2, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas. (Though it is not mentioned in DeLillo's research materials, the idea was most likely also inspired by Holzer's similar installation on the Spectacolor board at Times Square.)

<sup>87</sup> Gordon Hughes, 'Power's Script: or, Jenny Holzer's Art after "Art after Philosophy,"' *Oxford Art Journal* 29.3 (2006): 419-440, 426.

language.’<sup>88</sup> DeLillo evidently deemed these scenes to be waste products of the creative process, and they were excluded from the final draft. But the passages in the final text are a patchwork of broken language; Karen realizes ‘she understood almost no one here, no one spoke in ways she’d ever heard before [...] It was a different language completely, unwritable and interior, the rag-speak of shopping carts and plastic bags, the language of soot.’<sup>89</sup> At the Tent City she hears ‘a constant rolling drone, statements and set responses that made Karen think of formal prayers, a protocol of half words, dream cries, bursts and murmurs.’<sup>90</sup> Some of the rag-speak is as follows:

‘I have holes in my sides.’

‘It’s just like Beirut, it looks like Beirut.’

Bring hurry-up time to all man.

Sony, Mita, Kirin, Magno, Midori.

*Grass grass grass grass.*

*Dime bag dime bag dime bag.*

‘What a lovely spring night.’

Only those sealed by the messiah will survive.

‘Beirut, Beirut, it’s just like Beirut.’

‘Spare a little change, still love you.’

They went by. Still love you. Went by. Still love you.

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<sup>88</sup> Michael de Certeau, ‘Vocal Utopias: Glossolalias,’ ed. Luce Giard, trans. Daniel Rosenberg, *Representations* 56 (1996): 29-47, 33.

<sup>89</sup> *MII*, 180.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

The woman seemed to be saying: 'They have buses in this city that they crouch for wheelchairs. Give us ramps for people living in the street. I want buses that crouch for us.'

She seemed to say, 'I want my own blind dog that it's allowed in the movies.'

She said, 'Let me into vibration' or 'Get me annihilation'

She thought, Hailstones the size of hailstones.

The voice said, Weeping chanting mourners.

Karen said, 'We will all be a single family soon. Because the day is coming. Because the total vision is being seen.'

She said, 'Prepare the day. Be ready in your mind and heart. There is plan for all mankind.'

She said, 'Heart of God is only homeland. Pali-pali. Total children of the world.'

She said, 'For there is single vision now. Man come to us from far away. God all minute every day. Hurry-up time comes soon.'

She had Master's total voice in her head.<sup>91</sup>

Karen slips into the reduced, programmatic language of the Moonies; the chiliastic mantra 'hurry-up time comes soon' evokes the 'HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME' interruptions in the pub scene in 'The Waste Land.' But whilst Eliot's linguistic 'waste product' is polyvalent, ambiguously holding the potential to function as 'apocalyptic warning' or the 'everyday routine' of closing time at the pub, Karen's condensed language indicates a slip into totalizing beliefs.<sup>92</sup> Regardless, it is my contention that the accumulated rag-speak in Karen's passage opens up utopian possibilities. Despite

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<sup>91</sup> *MII*, 145; 146; 148; 150; 151; *ibid.*; 153; 173; 173-4; 175; 180; *ibid.*; 185; *ibid.*; 188; 193; *ibid.*; *ibid.*; *ibid.*; 194.

<sup>92</sup> Lawrence Rainey, *Revisiting 'The Waste Land'* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 109. For an analysis of 'The Waste Land' in relation to waste, see: Tim Armstrong, 'Waste products,' in *Modernism, Technology, and the Body: A Cultural Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 70-4.

issuing the aforementioned criticisms of Surrealism, Benjamin defends it on the grounds of its revolutionary aesthetics: 'it is as magical experiments with words, not as artistic dabbling,' he writes, 'that we must understand the passionate phonetic and graphic transformational games that have run through the whole literature of the avant-garde for the past fifteen years, whether it is called Futurism, Dadaism, or Surrealism.'<sup>93</sup> The strange juxtapositions and nonsense language of Surrealism 'attempts to name that which has lost its linguistic code in the formalization of language within bourgeois thought and capitalist society.'<sup>94</sup> DeLillo's waste is suggestive of the undervalued labour and surplus population created by capitalism. The wasteful language of *Mao II* can also be regarded as a way to sift through the wreckage of the Cold War, mobilizing a strategy that Lauren Berlant advocates, of confronting 'in the mode of a powerful ambivalence, the centrality of waste, failure, loss, pain, and chagrin to the project of inciting transformation itself.' In doing so, she argues, we are 'engaging the impossible, ambitious, and always failing activity that Marx describes enigmatically as "the poetry of the future."<sup>95</sup>

### **Fabulously material: nuclear waste in *Underworld***

Like *White Noise* and *Mao II*, *Underworld* also links waste and literary signification. When Nick Shay's colleague Brian Glassic visits the Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island, the mountainous heap of trash prompts the realisation that:

he dealt in human behavior, people's habits and impulses, their uncontrollable needs and innocent wishes, maybe their passions, certainly their excesses and indulgences but their kindness too, their generosity [...] The landfill showed him smack-on how the waste stream ended, where all the appetites and hankerings, the sodden second

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<sup>93</sup> Benjamin, 'Surrealism,' 212.

<sup>94</sup> Kathy Kiloh, 'The Linguistic Image: Mediation and Immediacy in Adorno and Benjamin,' in *Adorno and the Need in Thinking: New Critical Essays*, ed. Donald A. Burke (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 103-130. 120.

<sup>95</sup> Lauren Berlant, '68, or Something,' *Critical Inquiry*, 21.1 (1994), 124-155, 127; 132.



thoughts came runneling out, the things you wanted ardently and then did not.<sup>96</sup>

This mirrors the garbologist William Rathje's assertions that rubbish 'exposes the routine perversity of human ways,' and that 'garbage archaeologists [...] can reconstruct the community from which [garbage] came from with a degree of accuracy that the Census Bureau might in some neighbourhoods be unable to match.'<sup>97</sup> As Benjamin Madden writes, *Underworld* positions narrative as a form of waste management: 'narrative, we might say with only a hint of metaphorical overreach, serves a similar purpose: to organize the detritus of experience and establish out of it a manageable order.'<sup>98</sup> As numerous critics have noted, *Underworld* presents artistic creation as the recycling and redeeming of waste through various artist figures.<sup>99</sup> One of these is Simon Rodia, who built the Watts Towers, a series of monumental sculptures assembled from junk in Watts, Los Angeles. When Nick Shay views the Watts Towers, he organises the chaos into what Mark Osteen terms an 'emblem of his father,' Jimmy, perceiving:

an idiosyncrasy built out of someone's innocent anarchist visions, and the more I looked, the more I thought of Jimmy. The towers and birdbaths and fountains and decorated pots and bright oddments and household colors, the green of 7-Up bottles and blue of Milk of Magnesia, all the vivid tile embedded in cement, the whole complex of structures and gates and panels that were built, hand-built, by one man,

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<sup>96</sup> *U*, 184-5.

<sup>97</sup> William L. Rathje and Cullen Murphy, *Rubbish!: The Archaeology of Garbage* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001), 24. (DeLillo's research materials for *Underworld* contain a clipping from a *Newsweek* article that quoted Rathje. 'Buried Alive,' *Newsweek*, 27 November, 1989. DeLillo, 'Underworld: Research materials, clippings, "Garbage,"' Container 58.6, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas.

<sup>98</sup> Benjamin Madden, 'The Rhetoric of the Ordinary: Modernism and the Limits of Literature' (PhD diss, University of York, 2013), 391.

<sup>99</sup> Mark Osteen's *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 245. Chief among these are Klara Sax and Ismael Muñoz. Klara starts her career experimenting with found art objects, earning her the sobriquet the 'Bag Lady.' She explains: 'We took junk and saved it for art. Which sounds far nobler than it was. It was just a way of looking at something more carefully. And I'm still doing it, only deeper maybe.' (*U*, 393). In the 1990s, she embarks on a project of spray-painting decommissioned B-52s in rainbow colours. Ismael and his group of graffiti artists adorn the garbage-strewn, dilapidated lots of the Bronx in the mid-1980s/early 1990s in memory of children that have died in the neighbourhood.

alone, an immigrant from somewhere near Naples, probably illiterate, who left his wife and family, or maybe they left him, I wasn't sure, a man whose narrative is mostly blank spaces, date of birth uncertain, until he ends up spending thirty-three years building this thing out of steel rods and broken crockery and pebbles and seashells and soda bottles and wire mesh, all hand-mortared, three thousand sacks of sand and cement, and who spends these years with glass specks crusting his hands and arms and glass dust in his eyes as he hangs from a window-washer's belt high on the towers, in torn overalls and a dusty fedora, face burnt brown, with lights strung on the radial spokes so he could work at night, maybe ninety feet up, and Caruso on the gramophone below.

He thinks of his father, and reflects: 'I could imagine him rising this high, soaring out of himself to produce a rambling art that has no category, with cement and chicken wire.'<sup>100</sup> The Watts Towers became a locus for debates regarding cultural value, and what constituted fine art versus trash.<sup>101</sup> In *Underworld* they illustrate our tendency to wrest the everyday into webs of significance, a tendency emblematised by Nick's childhood conviction that his father was killed by mobsters, rather than having abandoned the family under the guise of going out to buy Lucky Strike cigarettes. But the aleatory 'lucky strikes' that are discarded in the process of narrativization are inexorably political, too—as the nuclear weapons buried in silos and glossed over in public history demonstrate. As Viktor Maltsev, a Russian nuclear weapons expert claims, 'waste is the secret history, the underhistory, the way archaeologists dig out the history of early cultures, every sort of bone heap and broken tool, literally from under the ground.'<sup>102</sup> Explaining the rationale for her project of recycling decommissioned weapons as art, Klara says:

they had brought something into the world that out-imagined the mind. They didn't even know what to call the early bomb. The thing or the gadget or something. And Oppenheimer said, It is merde. I will use the French. J. Robert Oppenheimer. It is merde. He meant something that eludes naming is automatically relegated, he is saying, to the status

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<sup>100</sup> *U*, 276.

<sup>101</sup> See: Sarah Schrank, 'Imagining the Watts Towers,' in *Art and the City: Civic Imagination and Cultural Authority in Los Angeles* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), 135-64.

<sup>102</sup> *U*, 791.

of shit. You can't name it. It's too big or evil or outside your experience. It's also shit because it's garbage, it's waste material. But I'm making a whole big megillah out of this. What I really want to get at is the ordinary thing, the ordinary life behind the thing. Because that's the heart and soul of what we're doing here.<sup>103</sup>

Rather than mere metaphor or sheer materiality, I argue that the waste in *Underworld* illuminates the abstract and material qualities of nuclear waste, its dialectic of ordinariness and extraordinariness, and imbrication in daily life.

Part Five of *Underworld*, 'Better Things for Better Living Through Chemistry: Selected Fragments Public and Private in the 1950s and 1960s,' has a fragment from October 8, 1957, in which the housewife Erica Deming prepares Jell-O desserts in the kitchen whilst her son, Eric, masturbates into a condom in his bedroom. The domestic scene is infected by nuclear anxiety; the vignette takes place four days after the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik, and Erica is in a 'Sputnik funk.'<sup>104</sup> She feels disappointed by the Soviets' leading position in the Space Race: 'it was theirs,. Not ours. [...] Were there other surprises coming, things we haven't been told about them? Did they have crispers and breezeways?'<sup>105</sup> Erica's 'sort of guided missile-like' Jell-O mould has always discomfited her, but now even her beloved satellite-shaped vacuum cleaner has become a sorrowful sight.<sup>106</sup> Eric, on the other hand, who will later become Matt's colleague, is masturbating into a condom because it has 'a sleek metallic shimmer, like his favorite weapons system, the Honest John, a surface-to-surface missile with a warhead that carried yields of up to forty kilotons.'<sup>107</sup> Erica's husband observes a loaf-shaped dish that is suffused with a radioactive 'strontium white' glow, and Erica explains that it is her Jell-O chicken mousse: 'sometimes she called it her Jell-O chicken mousse and sometimes she called it her chicken mousse Jell-O.' She internally marvels at Jell-O: 'The word went anywhere, front or back or in

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 76-77.

<sup>104</sup> *U*, 519.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 518-9.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 515; 520.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 514.

the middle. It was a push-button word, the way so many things were push-button now, the way the whole world opened behind a button that you pushed.<sup>108</sup>

There is a basis for these seemingly paranoid connections. The realm of the domestic was an explicitly ideologically charged site during the Cold War. The American National Exhibition, held in Sokol'niki Park, Moscow in the summer of 1959 displayed 'home appliances, fashions, television and hi-fi sets, a model house priced to sell [to] an "average" family, farm equipment, 1959 automobiles, boats, sporting equipment and a children's playground.'<sup>109</sup> The exhibition also provided the arena for the Kitchen Debate between Nixon and Khrushchev in 1959, in which Nixon flaunted the domestic bounties enabled by American capitalism. (The model-esque home of the Demings also tenebrously recalls the model houses that were used in nuclear tests, as with the Manhattan Project—in Kazakhstan Viktor discloses that 'this was a point of pride for the KGB, to assemble a faithful domestic setting.'<sup>110</sup>) The 'push-button' nature of the Cold War household also mirrored the nuclear technologies of the period, with which the world could be ended with the push of a button. Indeed, the reshapable qualities of the physical and semantic form of Jell-O figure the repurposing of nuclear technologies for domestic technologies, and vice versa. 'Better Things for Better Living Through Chemistry' was the advertising slogan of DuPont, the chemical company famous for developing Nylon stockings, Kevlar, Teflon, and Freon for use in refrigerators and as an aerosol propellant, amongst an array of other household products. DuPont also made crucial contributions to the creation of the first atomic bombs as part of the Manhattan Project by building and operating plutonium and uranium production complexes.<sup>111</sup> Throughout the fragment, the narrative is interrupted with a series of consumer safety guidelines for an aerosol product, either issuing from the narrator or Erica's internal monologue, encapsulating a presence that is simultaneously mundane and

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 516; 517.

<sup>109</sup> 'The Russian People Can Take a Peek at U.S. Civilization,' *Saturday Evening Post*, 1 August, 1959.

<sup>110</sup> *U*, 793.

<sup>111</sup> Pap Ndiaye, *Nylon and Bombs: DuPont and the March of Modern America*, trans. Elborg Forster (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 2007), 142.

malign: ‘Do not reuse this bottle for storing liquids’; ‘Danger. Contents under pressure’; ‘To avoid suffocation keep out of reach of small children’; ‘May cause discoloration of urine or feces’; ‘Do not puncture or incinerate’; ‘Avoid contact with eyes, open cuts or running sores,’ and so on.<sup>112</sup> As Mark Osteen acknowledges, Jell-O itself had acquired sinister connotations during the Red Scare: the claim that Ethel and Julius Rosenberg had used a cut-up Jell-O box to transmit secret messages as part of a conspiracy to steal atomic secrets for the Soviets, providing the ‘necessary link’ to prove their guilt, in the words of the prosecutor.<sup>113</sup> As a gelatin product, though, Jell-O has always shared its chemical make-up with gelatin bombs. When Eric opens the Kelvinator fridge he is disconcerted by the striped Jell-O desserts inside: ‘he got disoriented sometimes by the tilted Jell-O desserts. It was as if a science-fiction force had entered the house and made some things askew while sparing others.’<sup>114</sup> His reaction to the fridge presages his love of conspiracy theories as an adult (of which we are already aware):

The bright colors, the product names and logos, the array of familiar shapes, the tinsel glitter of things in foil wrap, the general sense of benevolent gleam, of eyeball surprise, the sense of a tiny holiday taking place on the shelves and in the slots, a world unspoiled and ever renewable. But there was something else as well, faintly unnerving. The throb perhaps. Maybe it was the informational flow contained in that endless motorized throb. Open the great white vaultlike door and feel the cool breezelet of systems at work, converting current into power, talking to each other day and night across superhuman spaces, a thing he felt outside of, not yet attuned to, and it confused him just a bit.<sup>115</sup>

The fridge is an illustration of the peculiar systematicity that the passage presents, but the links in the passage seem rigid and opaque rather than suggestive. Osteen proffers: ‘What unites these disparate events and strands is capitalism [...] Capitalism permits the illusion of individual preference, but only as part of a larger jellified

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<sup>112</sup> *U*, 513; 516; 517; *ibid.*; 519; 514.

<sup>113</sup> Osteen, *American Magic*, 242. Marjorie B. Garber, *Symptoms of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 141.

<sup>114</sup> *U*, 518.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 517-8.

mass.<sup>116</sup> On the contrary, *Underworld* does examine the homogenizing effects of capitalism, but also demonstrates its heterogeneity. The scene registers the unevenness of capitalism through its formal excesses, and demonstrates the *direct* relationship between surplus and scarcity, abundance and poverty, and between wasting commodities and laying waste to communities. The science-fiction uncanniness of the jelly and the fridge arises from the capitalist fantasy of a ‘world unspoiled and ever renewable,’ in its terminal quest for resource extraction. As in *Jeanne Dielman*, we are introduced to a deluge of domestic detail—a level of detail that is somehow both tedious and uncanny:

Erica was in the kitchen making Jell-O chicken mousse for dinner. Three cups chicken broth or three chicken bouillon cubes dissolved in three cups boiling water. Two packages Jell-O lemon gelatin. One teaspoon salt. One-eighth teaspoon cayenne. Three tablespoons vinegar. One and a third cups whipped topping mix. Two-thirds cup mayonnaise. Two cups finely diced cooked chicken. Two cups finely chopped celery. Two tablespoons chopped pimiento.

Then boil and pour and stir and blend. Fold spiced and chilled gelatin into chicken thing. Spoon into 9/5-inch loaf pan. Chill until firm. Unmold. Garnish with crisp lettuce and stuffed olives (if desired). Makes six entree salads.

Do not reuse this bottle for storing liquids.<sup>117</sup>

This was dessert for the next three evenings. Each glass was tilted at a forty-five-degree angle either against the wall of the refrigerator or against another object. This tilting method, handed down from her grandmother and her mother, allowed Erica to do Jell-O desserts in a number of colorful diagonal stripes, working the combinations among half a dozen flavors. She puts the glass in the fridge, tilting it at forty-five degrees. After the gelatin fully folds and thickens she folds in a swathe of lime Jell-O, and then maybe orange, and then strawberry or strawberry-banana. At the end of this process she has nine multistriped desserts, all different, so vividly attractive.<sup>118</sup>

She would prepare half a dozen serving bowls of her Jell-O antipasto salad. Six packages Jell-O lemon gelatin. Six teaspoons salt. Six cups

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<sup>116</sup> Osteen, *American Magic*, 243.

<sup>117</sup> *U*, 513.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 514.

boiling water. Six tablespoons vinegar. Twelve cups ice cubes. Three cups finely cut salami. Two cups finely cut Swiss cheese. One and a half cups chopped celery. One and a half cups chopped onion. Twelve tablespoons sliced ripe olives.<sup>119</sup>

In contrast to *White Noise*, these lists take stock of consumerist abundance rather than waste. But abundance is in itself wasteful, and is always haunted by the threat of becoming waste. Boxall is attentive to this quality, asserting in his suggestive article on *Underworld*: ‘waste spreads virally through the novel, reaching tentacularly into all the forms of plenty—economic, cultural, aesthetic and political—that the novel charts and performs.’<sup>120</sup> Once again, the detail seems narratively ‘unproductive,’ but a different politics of textual waste are at play here to those in *White Noise*. What we are confronted with is what Thorstein Veblen characterised as the ‘non-productive consumption of time’ and ‘conspicuous waste of time and goods.’<sup>121</sup> Congealed in the jelly is the unpaid labour-time that sustains capitalism. Some of the Jell-O dishes will feed Erica’s family, but her creations are so excessive in quantity that she will also donate some to the church social.<sup>122</sup> As unproductive excess, Erica’s obsessive Jell-O creations and the textual excess with which they are described form a curious analogue with Eric’s ejaculatory expenditure from his missile-like sheathed penis, which in turn figures the unproductive (and destructive) excesses of the U.S.’ bountiful arsenal of nuclear arms. Bataille conceives of war as a ‘catastrophic expenditure of excess energy,’ stipulating that affluent societies must instead ‘divert the surplus production [...] into unproductive works.’<sup>123</sup> For him, the exemplary case of unproductive expenditure is the Marshall Plan. On the contrary, the Marshall Plan was ‘a crucial aspect of American foreign policy,’ as Harriet Friedmann writes, allowing the U.S. to offload food surpluses abroad in order to maintain competitive

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 520.

<sup>120</sup> Peter Boxall, “‘There’s no Lack of Void’: Waste and Abundance in Beckett and DeLillo,” *SubStance* 37.2 (2008): 56-70, 65.

<sup>121</sup> Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1992), 46; 224.

<sup>122</sup> *U*, 256.

<sup>123</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy, i: Consumption* (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 23; 25.

prices domestically, and to create a regime of food dependence abroad, prying open new foreign markets, and thus exerting ‘downward pressure on world prices and, therefore, on grain production in other export and import countries.’<sup>124</sup> Furthermore, the Marshall Plan exemplifies the impoverishment that surplus creates: indeed, ‘the huge expenditures for the Marshall Plan ruled out any major increases in domestic social spending’ in the late 1940s. Though defence spending tapered off, money spent on Vietnam, the Arms and Space Races, for example, diverted funds from welfare.<sup>125</sup>

We must consider DeLillo’s textual decadence in light of this. Though Marx and Veblen’s theories of value differ, their affinities are pertinent here. Veblen’s definition of wastefulness is compatible with the Marxist conception of surplus and luxury as sustained by economic inequality. The economic surplus that funds the machinery of nuclear destruction is built upon unevenness within the U.S.. This point is thrown into sharp relief in the vignette that follows Erica Deming’s story, in which Rosie Martin takes part in a civil rights march in 1964. The potentially hazardous household products mutate into tear gas: ‘the gas, called CS, made people dizzy almost at once and caused a stinging on the body where the skin was moist.’ It ‘roll[s] through the streets scorching people’s eyeballs,’ and causing victims to cough spasmodically.<sup>126</sup> Like the jellies, the gas has an atomic luminosity: ‘The gas had a radiance, a night glow, and the men in insect masks came walking up out of the cloud, alive and bright.’<sup>127</sup>

The narrative wastefulness of the Demings’ fragment forces us into a strange encounter with the ordinary yet irradiated gelatinous matter. It encourages us to think of it not as descriptive junk, but as what Jane Bennett would term ‘vibrant matter,’ a mode of thinking about waste not as “away” in landfills but generating

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<sup>124</sup> Harriet Friedmann, ‘The Political Economy of Food: The Rise and Fall of the Postwar International Food Order,’ *American Journal of Sociology* 88 (1982): 48-286, 260; 251.

<sup>125</sup> Bruce S. Jansson, *Brooks/Cole Empowerment Series: The Reluctant Welfare State*, 8th ed. (London: Cengage, 2014), 264.

<sup>126</sup> *U*, 525.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 526.



lively streams of chemicals and volatile winds of methane as we speak.<sup>128</sup> Bennett argues that:

the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption. It does so by preventing us from detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies. These material powers, which can aid or destroy, enrich or disable, ennoble or degrade us, in any case call for our attentiveness, or even “respect”<sup>129</sup>

The destructive powers of waste are horrifyingly literalized when Nick visits the former Kazakh Test Site in Semipalatinsk, after the Cold War has drawn to a close, and is confronted with the effects of radiation poisoning on generations of people from the surrounding villages. There he sees a two-headed body, a one-eyed head, and malformed fetuses preserved in Heinz pickling jars at the Museum of Misshapens, and victims at a radiation clinic, including ‘a boy with skin where his eyes ought to be, a bolus of spongy flesh, oddly like a mushroom cap, springing from each brow.’<sup>130</sup> Nick realizes that ‘all the banned words, the secrets kept in white-washed vaults, the half-forgotten plots—they’re all out there now, seeping invisibly into the land and air, into the marrowed folds of the bone.’<sup>131</sup> The fruits of radioactive fallout were also deposited on the bones and teeth of Americans: strontium pervaded American air, soil, water, and food, as ‘fallout in the soil was picked up by plants, further concentrated in herbivorous animals, and eventually consumed by humans.’<sup>132</sup> It is appropriate, then, that gelatin, the product of water and ground animal bones, appears to have a ‘strontium white’ glow.

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<sup>128</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), vii.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>130</sup> *U*, 799; 800.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 803.

<sup>132</sup> Ralph H. Lutts, ‘Chemical Fallout: *Silent Spring*, Radioactive Fallout, and the Environmental Movement,’ ed. Craig Waddell (Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 17-41, 24.

*Underworld* demonstrates how the socio-ecological costs of waste are registered unevenly on a global and local scale.<sup>133</sup> In 1974, Nick's brother, Matt, works with Eric Deming in New Mexico, in an underground lab for nuclear weapons research. Now a bomb designer, Eric tells Matt about 'Downwinders'—people who lived near the Nevada Test Site, in Nevada, Arizona, and Utah, virtually all of whom are undergoing chemotherapy, having developed 'multiple myelomas,' and have given birth to children with missing limbs.<sup>134</sup> Indeed, 'Downwinders' suffered various forms of cancer, and the use of the desert for nuclear testing rendered it unviable for the Native American populations it had hitherto sustained. Valerie Kuletz elucidates how the U.S. government legitimated its use of the desert as an 'outdoor laboratory' on the basis that:

the land was *already* a wasteland. As one Department of Defense representative put it: 'The land was cheap because it really wasn't much good for anything but gunnery practice—you could bomb it into oblivion and never notice the difference.' Bolstering this assumption is the environmental science classification of the desert as low on the 'productivity' register of ecosystems.

In addition, a government document designated the inhabitants of the area as a 'low-use segment of the population,' lowering them to the status of human waste.<sup>135</sup> These literal sections of *Underworld* expose the secret human waste that the military-industrial complex has exploited and *created* with nuclear waste. *Underworld* also

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<sup>133</sup> Indeed, the bulk of the U.S.' nuclear testing was executed in the Marshall Islands, Pacific Islands, and Hawaii.

<sup>134</sup> *U*, 405-6.

<sup>135</sup> It is clear that DeLillo has engaged with how the environmentalism of the poor and environmental racism unfold in the U.S.; his research materials for *Underworld* contain a Greenpeace pamphlet entitled 'PVC: The Poison Plastic,' which explains:

'Many vinyl facilities are located in poor communities with little political clout. Government policies sanction and encourage this practice. In the U.S., poor African-American communities are disproportionately impacted.

This is a classic case of environmental racism. In the most severe cases, entire communities have been literally wiped off the map. In 1987, the town of Reveilletown, Louisiana became so contaminated that all 106 residents were relocated and every structure torn down, even the church. Management of the nearby Dow Chemical factory followed suit soon after, buying out the entire town of Morrisonville, Louisiana.' DeLillo, 'Underworld: Research materials, clippings, "Garbage,"' Container 58.6, Harry Ransom Center.

explicitly engages with environmental racism on a global scale, when Nick and Sims discuss a rumour concerning a ship with cargo so toxic that no country will allow it to embark:

‘I hear rumors,’ he said. ‘This isn’t my area of course. Happens in some back room in our New York office. It’s a folk tale about a spectral ship. The Flying Liberian.’

‘I thought terrible substances were dumped routinely in LDCs.’

An LDC, I’d just found out, was a less developed country in the language of banks and other global entities.

‘Those little dark-skinned countries. Yes, it’s a nasty business that’s getting bigger all the time. A country will take a fee amounting to four times its gross national product to accept a shipment of toxic waste.’<sup>136</sup>

Dow appears in a fragment from ‘Better Things for Better Living Through Chemistry’ that is set on 18 October, 1967. It depicts the soon-to-be Marian Shay pondering over her relationship with Nick against the backdrop of student demonstrations against Dow Chemical Company recruiters on campus, ‘whose products included a new and improved form of napalm with a polystyrene additive that made jellied matter cling more firmly to human flesh.’<sup>137</sup> The image draws together Erica’s jellies with Lenny Bruce’s earlier mention of Saran Wrap, a household item also manufactured by Dow, demonstrating again the imbrication of the everyday with the violence of the Cold War. Meanwhile, a voice on the radio highlights the intersection of agriculture and warfare: ‘yes, we are talking about waste, we are talking about fertilizer, we are talking about waste and weapons, we are talking about ANFO, the bomb that begins in the asshole of a barnyard pig.’<sup>138</sup> However, in the same manner that *White Noise* uses interruptions to call attention to the marginality of the domestic, these mappings of capital, war, and waste function as interruptions to the ‘main plot’ of the fragment: Marian’s relationship with Nick. She allows herself to ‘[tune] out intermittently’ and, when telling Nick about her day,

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<sup>136</sup> *U*, 278.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 599.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

does not mention the demonstration as she doesn't 'want distractions,' and instead tells Nick she wants to marry him.<sup>139</sup> The textual waste of the radio interruptions figures what is marginalised by individualistic narratives, as well as the concealed eco-sociological violence that capitalism emplots and exploits.

David Noon has criticised DeLillo on the grounds that he is 'unable to fully imagine the domestic consequences of the cold war for other communities,' arguing that 'although the fate of the Kazakhs in *Underworld* parallels that of indigenous North Americans, it does not adequately substitute for it.'<sup>140</sup> Though it is true that *Underworld* gives environmental racism relatively short shrift in terms of content, I believe that it is registered at the level of form. DeLillo's languid listing of Jell-O recipe instructions gives formal representation to the 'layered invisibility' and 'temporal protractedness' of socio-ecological damage, maintaining a sense of the simultaneously ordinary and sinister nature of waste and thus its everydayness.<sup>141</sup> DeLillo's textual wastes do not merely represent damage, then, but draw direct connections, demonstrating how economic unevenness is congealed in physical waste. Our encounter with the curiously abstract *and* overtly material Jell-O figures the inherent but invisible and incremental socio-ecological costs of American abundance. Derrida famously designated the bomb 'fabulously textual' because nuclear annihilation has not taken place; *Underworld*, however, nebulously reveals the violently material consequences of the Cold War's spectacular excesses.

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 600; 604.

<sup>140</sup> David Noon, 'The Triumph of Death: National Security and Imperial Erasures in DeLillo's *Underworld*,' *Canadian Review of American Studies* 37.1 (2007): 82-100, 86; 104.

<sup>141</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 16.

## CHAPTER TWO

### 'Children of Marx and Coca-Cola'

#### The crowd in *Mao II* and *Underworld*

'The future belongs to crowds,' *Mao II* ominously prophesies. Early in the novel, Bill's assistant, Scott views Andy Warhol's 1963 photomontage, *Crowd*: 'the image was irregular, and it seemed to him that the crowd itself, the vast mesh of people, was being riven by some fleeting media catastrophe.'<sup>1</sup> *Crowd* is composed of a detail from a photograph of crowds gathering in Rome for the Pope's blessing in 1955, repeated four times (see fig. 1). The image *is* riven: the seams between the repeated images are emphasised by Warhol filling in a gap with pencil scribbles, and showing the detail at different levels of magnification.<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey T. Schnapp regards *Crowd* as a parodic heir to the grand tradition of mass panoramas of 'oceanic multitudes' of the people, emblematic of the belief in 'a model of politics based on the physical massing of bodies in public places.' For Schnapp, the crowd has no future, and now appears 'under an ever-deepening patina of otherness and anachronism,' corroded by its association with the 'East' and Communism, and denatured by the triumph of American individualism.<sup>3</sup> Warhol's fascination with seriality, the American masses, and mass-market commodities, however, 'call[s] attention to the convergence of Soviet and American ideologies.'<sup>4</sup> This subversive tactic is redeployed in Warhol's autobiography, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol* (1975), in which he writes:

What's great about this country is that America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest. You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you can know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think,

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<sup>1</sup> *MII*, 16.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey T. Schnapp, 'Mob Porn,' in *Crowds*, ed. Jeffrey T. Schnapp and Matthew Tiews (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 1-45, 41; 42-5.

<sup>3</sup> Schnapp and Tiews, 'Introduction: A Book of Crowds,' in *Crowds*, ix-xx, xi.

<sup>4</sup> Christine Poggi, 'Mass, Pack, and Mob: Art in the Age of the Crowd,' in *Crowds*, 159-202, 187.

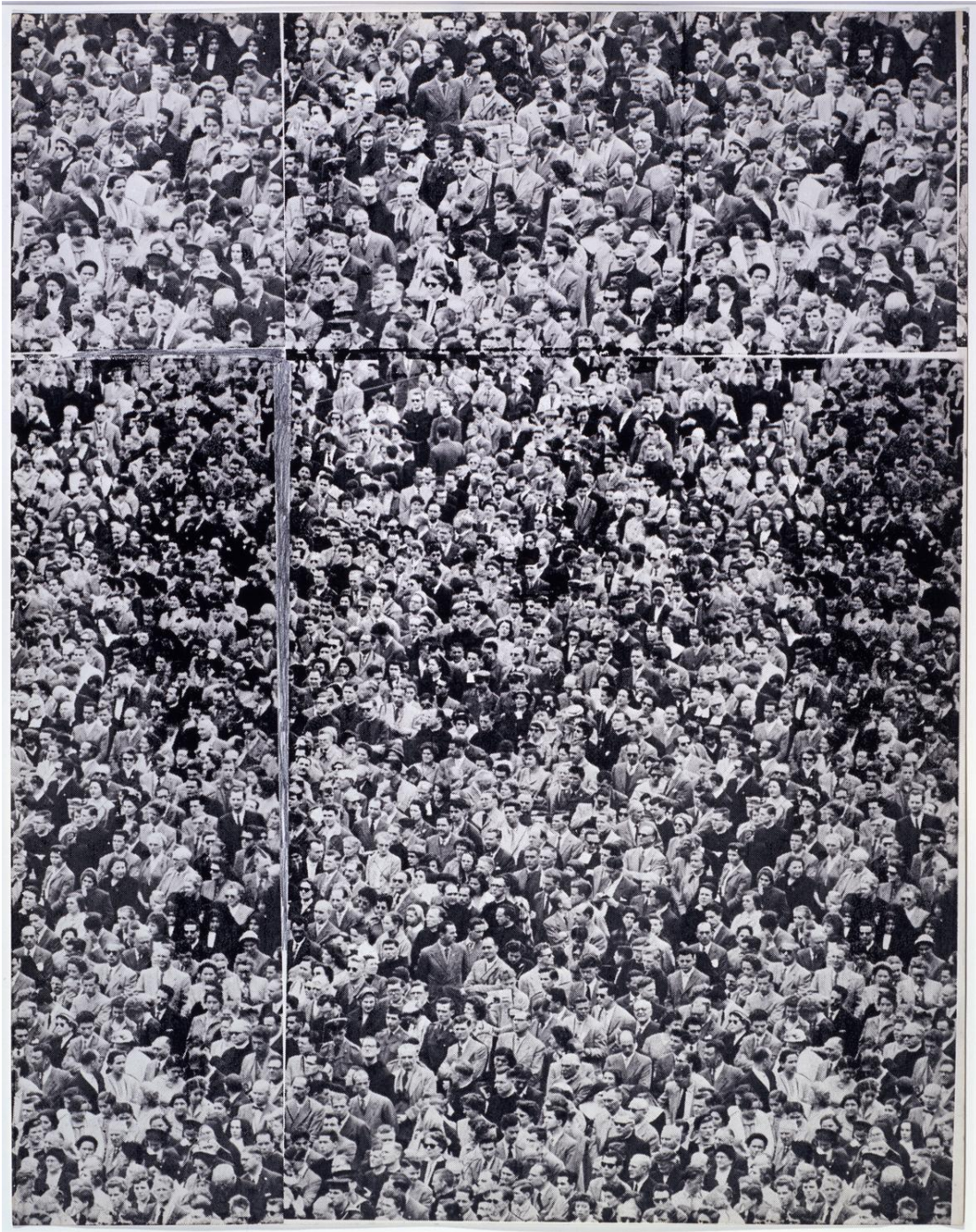


Figure 1 Andy Warhol, *Crowd* (1963)

you can drink Coke, too. A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking.<sup>5</sup>

In this egalitarian vision of the U.S. as democratic paradise, American individualism and republicanism collapse into Communist mass identity and collective comradeship via consumptive participation. *Mao II* similarly juxtaposes the American crowd with the Communist mass. After viewing Warhol's *Crowd*, Scott enters a room featuring

Photocopy Mao, silk-screen Mao, wallpaper Mao, synthetic-polymer Mao. A series of silk screens was installed over a broader surface of wallpaper serigraphs, the Chairman's face a pansy purple here, floating nearly free of its photographic source.<sup>6</sup>

It is my contention that, rather than asserting the primacy of American individualism in the face of the foreign mass, DeLillo attempts to restore the ordinariness and value of crowds in *Mao II* and *Underworld* through the formal strategies of the everyday, in turn undoing crude capitalist/Communist binaries.

This reading goes somewhat against the grain of DeLillo's own claims about his writing, in which he portrays the crowd as a negative force. In an interview with Maria Nardotti in 1993, he explains that *Mao II* was inspired by a photograph of 'one of those mass weddings of the Unification Church, an organized, orderly crowd. From that point,' he continues, 'I began thinking about the psychology of the crowd, the obliteration of distinctions, of how people lose themselves in the multitude, of the need to belong to the multitude.'<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere, he opines:

There's something about a crowd which suggests a sort of implicit panic, even when it's a friendly crowd. There's something menacing and violent about a mass of people which makes us think of the end of individuality, whether they are gathered around a military leader or around a holy man.

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<sup>5</sup> Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again* (London: Penguin, 2007) 100-1.

<sup>6</sup> *MII*, 21.

<sup>7</sup> DeLillo, interview with Maria Nardotti, 'An Interview with Don DeLillo,' in *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, ed. Thomas DePietro (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 109-118, 111.

Significantly, though, with characteristic obliqueness, DeLillo adds: 'I don't think that the writer can allow himself the luxury of separating himself from the crowd.' He avers: 'it is indispensable to be fully involved in contemporary life, to be part of the crowd, of the clash of voices.'<sup>8</sup> In another interview, he performs the Warholian move of conflating 'the arch individualist and the mass mind,' claiming, 'in both cases, it's the death of the individual that has to be accomplished before their aims can be realized.' However, he maintains that the mass and the arch individualist are the 'polar extremes of *Mao II*.'<sup>9</sup> This chapter will demonstrate how, in *Mao II* as in *Underworld*, the everyday as it is imagined allows DeLillo to negotiate the multiple uneven scales of the individual and the world-system, and to challenge the bourgeois individualism associated with the novel form. The everyday therefore opens up a space to imagine new forms of collectivity that mediate between the demands of global capitalism and historical Communism, their interlocking narratives and cultural forms, and their respective political fictions.

### **'The drama of mechanical routine played out with living figures'**

*Mao II* brings the othered mass in collision with American individualism. In the opening, Sun Myung Moon presides over a mass wedding for followers of the Unification Church, colloquially known as Moonies. The section is preceded by a photograph of such a wedding taking place in Seoul, but DeLillo shifts this foreign crowd to Yankee Stadium. The setting is symbolically charged; baseball has long operated as an emblem for American democracy, and has been treated as a 'repository of national ideals,' with its egalitarian approach to participation, the image of 'bleacher harmony and on-field diversity,' abetted when the colour line was broken, and it being inexpensive to play.<sup>10</sup> Baseball's commercially-imposed

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>9</sup> DeLillo, interview with Vince Passaro, 'Dangerous Don DeLillo,' in *Conversations*, 75-85, 81.

<sup>10</sup> John Thorn, *Baseball in the Garden of Eden: The Secret History of the Early Game* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012), 195. This symbolism, as Harold Seymour and Dorothy Seymour Mills note, was imposed by spokesmen for the game, and belies its elitist roots and the fact that baseball's



democratic symbolism has been enshrined by the ceremonial tradition of U.S. presidents throwing the first pitch to open the season. One of the brides, Karen, tries to explain to her husband that they are in baseball stadium:

‘Baseball,’ she says, using the word to sum up a hundred happy abstractions, themes that flare to life in the crowd shout and diamond symmetry, in the details of a dusty slide. The word has resonance if you’re American, a sense of shared heart and untranslatable lore. But she only means to suggest the democratic clamor, a history of sweat and play on sun-dazed afternoons, an openness of form that makes the game a kind of welcome to my country.<sup>11</sup>

With the clamor, sweat, and play of massed bodies, the American crowd is portrayed as a mingling of individuals, an ‘openness of form’ rather than a rigidly organized, homogenous mass. It is harmonious with John Dewey’s conception of individuals in communion as a ‘social whole’ rather than a mass created by ‘artificially induced uniformity of thought and sentiment.’<sup>12</sup> But the Moonie mass does not present any conception of collectivity that could be assimilated into liberal democracy and economic individualism. The bodies of the Moonies are represented as mechanical and inhuman; Karen’s father, watching from the stand, regards the crowd as resembling a ‘toy with thirteen thousand parts, just tootling along, an innocent and menacing thing.’<sup>13</sup> He reflects: “‘crowd’ is not the right word. He doesn’t know what to call them. He imagines they are uniformly smiling, showing the face they squeeze

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‘restrictive labor practices and its monopolistic division and control of consumer markets are hardly in keeping with traditional American belief in freedom of individual opportunity, free enterprise, and competition.’ Harold Seymour and Dorothy Seymour Mills, *Baseball: The Early Years* (Oxford University Press, 1989), 83.

<sup>11</sup> *MII*, 9.

<sup>12</sup> Dewey is specifically critiquing rugged individualism, and the history of American individualism stretches back much further. See: Eric Daniels, ‘A Brief History of Individualism in American Thought,’ in *For the Greater Good of All: Perspectives on Individualism, Society, and Leadership*, ed. Donelson R. Forsyth and Crystal L. Holt (New York: Palgrave, 2011), 69-84. One could, of course, construct a European genealogy of the crowd, including Baudelaire, Benjamin, and Simmel. Andrew V. Uroskie provides one such account, in ‘Far Above the Madding Crowd: The Spatial Rhetoric of Mass Representation,’ in *Crowds*, 307-334. Of particular interest is his tracing of an ‘anticommunal’ strand in Western philosophy, as represented by Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Ortega y Gasset, in which the intellectual is defined in opposition to the ‘herd.’ (350-4).

<sup>13</sup> *MII*, 7.

out with the toothpaste every morning.’<sup>14</sup> These are not the diverse, democratic crowds of America, but instead the kind of collective described in Gustave Le Bon’s *The Crowd* (1895), a text that inspired Mussolini, in which ‘the heterogeneous is swamped by the homogenous, and the unconscious qualities obtain the upper hand.’<sup>15</sup> DeLillo draws on metaphors of structuring, likely informed by his reading Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which explicates how an ‘unorganized, structureless mass’ is transformed into a homogeneous mass, which destroys ‘the infinite plurality and differentiation of human beings as if all of humanity were just one individual,’ and people become ‘ghastly marionettes with human faces.’<sup>16</sup> *Mao II* mirrors Arendt’s language, deploying metaphors of shaping, sculpting, and mechanical reproduction:

Here they come, marching into American sunlight. They are grouped in twos, eternal boy-girl, stepping out of the runway beyond the fence in left-center field. The music draws them across the grass, dozens, hundreds, already too many to count. They assemble themselves so tightly, crossing the vast arc of the outfield, that the effect is one of transformation. From a series of linked couples they become one continuous wave, larger all the time, covering the open spaces in navy and white.

Karen’s daddy, watching from the grandstand, can’t help thinking this is the point. They’re one body now, an undifferentiated mass [...] They take a time-honoured event and repeat it, repeat it until something new enters the world.<sup>17</sup>

Throughout the novel, the conflict between American individualism and Communist collectivism is staged through the clash between the individual writer and the foreign mass mind. The former is represented by Bill Gray, who believes that the novel is ‘a democratic shout,’ containing ‘one thing unlike another, one voice unlike the next. Ambiguities, contradictions, whispers, hints.’<sup>18</sup> Communist collectivism’s

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Georgia: Cherokee, 1982), 8.

<sup>16</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1973), 315; 438; 455.

<sup>17</sup> *MII*, 3-4.

<sup>18</sup> *MII*, 159.

primary emblem in the text is the Marxist terrorist cell in Lebanon, although the homogenized racialized mass also appears in the form of the Moonies, and mourners at Ayatollah Khomeini's funeral, which Karen watches on television, as well as protesters at Tiananmen Square and football supporters at the Hillsborough disaster. Like Warhol, DeLillo dissolves the binary between American individualism and the foreign mass: Reverend Moon embodies American myths of rugged individualism, rising from 'a hut made of U.S. Army ration tins' to the status of successful entrepreneur, leading Mark Osteen to remark upon his debt to 'American consumerism' as well as its 'fetishization of images.'<sup>19</sup> The terrorists, too, exploit the culture of consumerist media spectacles. Richard Hardack also notes that 'DeLillo sets up an opposition between the Western writer/individual and the Eastern/mass terrorist only to collapse it,' and demonstrates how repetition is both associated with the othered mass *and* American mass production.<sup>20</sup> Though they are incredibly generative, these critiques overemphasize consumption at the cost of examining how *Mao II* registers the so-called 'End of History,' and apparent collapse of alternatives to global capitalism.

Bill becomes entangled in the terrorist plot when he meets with his editor, Charlie, who is the chairman of a committee for free expression. The terrorists have taken a UN worker and minor poet hostage, and have contacted the committee through an intermediary, who has organised a news conference, during which the hostage, Jean-Claude Julien, will be freed on live television in Beirut. Charlie requests that Bill reads Julien's poems at the conference and Bill accepts. However, the event is called off when its intended location is bombed. Charlie informs Bill of the terrorists' motives:

'Are they a new fundamentalist element?'

'They're a new communist element.'

'Are we surprised?' Bill said.

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<sup>19</sup> Mark Osteen, *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 196.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Hardack, 'Two's a Crowd: *Mao II*, Coke II, and the Politics of Terrorism in Don DeLillo,' *Studies in the Novel* 36.2 (2004): 374-92, 374.

‘There’s a Lebanese Communist Party. There are leftist elements, I understand, aligned with Syria. The PLO has always had a Marxist component and they’re active again in Lebanon.’

‘So we’re not surprised.’

‘We’re not unduly surprised.’

‘I depend on you to tell me when we’re surprised.’<sup>21</sup>

Underlying this wry exchange is the knowledge of Western intellectual sympathies for Communism, sympathies that George Haddad, a Lebanese academic and spokesman for the terrorists, tries to play on in a discussion with Bill. When George connects the individual writer to the terrorist mass, Bill emphatically rejects the comparison, and instead equates terrorism with totalitarianism, designating hostage-taking as the ‘miniaturized form,’ the ‘first tentative rehearsal for mass terror’:<sup>22</sup>

‘No. It’s pure myth, the terrorist as solitary outlaw. These groups are backed by repressive governments. They’re perfect little totalitarian states. They carry the old wild-eyed vision, total destruction and total order.’

‘Terror is the force that begins with a handful of people in a back room. [...] Take up the case of the downtrodden, the spat-upon. Do these people feel a yearning for order? Who will give it to them? Think of Chairman Mao. Order is consistent with permanent revolution.’

[...]

‘Is it a little Maoist band you’re speaking for, George?’

‘It’s an idea. It’s a picture of Lebanon without the Syrians, Palestinians and Israelis, without the Iranian volunteers, the religious wars. We need a model that transcends all the bitter history. Something enormous and commanding. A figure of absolute being. This is crucial, Bill. In societies struggling to remake themselves, total politics, total authority, total being.’<sup>23</sup>

Accordingly, the terrorist foot-soldiers wear hoods with photographs of their leader, Abu Rashid, pinned to their chests. Rashid emphasises that his followers are not interested in martyrdom or paradise, reflecting the fact that martyrdom was not integral to terrorist operations at the time, but *Mao II* also seems at pains here to

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<sup>21</sup> *MII*, 123-4.

<sup>22</sup> *MII*, 163.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

divest the terrorists of the Muslim identity that their being a faction of the PLO suggests. This points to DeLillo's wider concern with Cold War polarities between Communism and capitalism, and how these map onto collectivistic and individualist conceptions of identity. Though *Mao II* depicts a Communist world revolution as inherently dehumanising, it also demonstrates how capitalism decimates individuality as well as the more democratic forms of political collectivity and commonality underlying American republicanism. It is not only Bill who condemns revolutionary politics; Brita, a Swedish photographer, internally dismisses Abu's Maoist ideologuing as 'eloquent macho bullshit.'<sup>24</sup> In Beirut, Brita is exasperated by 'stories about terror groups that issue press credentials.'<sup>25</sup> There she sees: 'boys



Figure 2 A stylish terrorist in Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend* (1967)

wearing skull T-shirts with illustrated skulls, serial grids of blue skulls'; 'posters of bare-chested men with oversized weapons, grenades lashed to their belts and cities burning in the background'; and 'boys tattooed with skulls who work the checkpoints wearing pieces of Syrian, American, Lebanese, French, and Israeli uniforms and toting automatic rifles with banana clips.'<sup>26</sup> Brita has to 'resist the totally stupid

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 236.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>26</sup> *MII*, 229.

impulse to offer [one of them] money for his cap. He wears a great-looking cap with a bent blue peak that she would love to give to a friend in New York.<sup>27</sup> Rather than simply representing cosmopolitan style convergences, and the legacy of decades of conflict in Lebanon, these invocations of terrorist aesthetics function as an oblique satire of fashionable Maoism. They echo DeLillo's early short story, 'The Uniforms' (1970), which reworks Jean-Luc Godard's 1967 film *Weekend*, in which a bourgeois couple is terrorized by a group of stylish Yippie guerrillas (see fig. 2). In 'The Uniforms,' the revolutionaries are more likely to select a target based on his 'boring uniform' and 'totally fascist baroque cap' than his political affiliations.<sup>28</sup> I therefore venture that DeLillo selects a fictional *Maoist* element of the PLO to satirise the Western intellectual infatuation with Maoism, as exemplified by Godard's Maoist phase, as well as Sartre, Foucault, and *Tel Quel's* flirtations with Maoism, as anatomised in Richard Wolin's *The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s*. Wolin demonstrates how, for theorists such as Foucault, Mao's conception of mass identity represented the death of the subject, the coming of which he presaged in the closing pages of *The Order of Things* (1966):

As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end.  
If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if some event [...] were to cause them to crumble [...] then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.<sup>29</sup>

In the U.S., Maoist ideology gained influence amongst the Black Panthers and various members of the Black Power movement, as well as the more radical elements

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> DeLillo, 'The Uniforms,' in *Cutting Edges: Young American Fiction for the '70s*, ed. Jack Hicks (Austin: Holt Rinehart & Winston, 1973), 451-9, 452. In the appendix to the story, DeLillo explains that the story was intended as a literary adaptation of *Weekend*, 'Appendix,' in *Cutting Edges*, 519-52.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Wolin, *The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 422.

of the New Left, such as the Bay Area Revolutionary Unit, which eventually became the Revolutionary Communist Party, U.S.A. The BARU was perhaps best known for organising the 1970 Vietnam war protest in San Jose, in which Nixon's car was pelted with eggs and rocks.<sup>30</sup> *Mao II* literalizes the deleterious effects of the 'death of the individual.' At the moment Bill decides to trade himself for the hostage, he loses his individuality, joining 'the surge of the noontime crowd.'<sup>31</sup> But he dies on a ferry to Junieh, and is discovered by a cleaning crew member:

'He said a prayer, and went through the man's belongings, leaving the significant cash, the good shoes, the things in the bag, the bag itself, but feeling it was not a crime against the dead to take the man's passport and other forms of identification, anything with a name and number, which he could sell to some militia in Beirut.'<sup>32</sup>

If the New York sections of *Mao II* that I discussed in Chapter One demonstrate the disastrous effects of capitalism on economic peripheries, the Beirut section of the novel condemns the destructive nature of both American capitalism and Soviet Communism.

In DeLillo's Beirut, the aesthetics of Communism and America collide:

Now there are signs for a new soft drink, Coke II, signs slapped on cement-block walls, and she has a crazy idea that these advertising placards herald the presence of the Maoist group [...] Brita gets another crazy idea, that these are like the big character posters of the Cultural Revolution in China—warnings and threats, calls for self-correction. Because there is a certain physical resemblance. The placards are stacked ten high in some places, up past the second storey, and they crowd with each other, they edge over and proclaim, thousands of Arabic words weaving between the letters and Roman numerals of the Coke II logo<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Aaron J. Leonard and Conor A. Gallagher, *Heavy Radicals: The FBI's Secret War on America's Maoists: The Revolutionary Union/Revolutionary Communist Party 1968-1980* (London: Zero Books, 2014), 1.

<sup>31</sup> *MII*, 103.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 216-7.

<sup>33</sup> *MII*, 230.

Rather than purely encapsulating Beirut's cosmopolitan 'global village' status, as it has been understood by critics, this convergence of Arabic and American script points to Lebanon's symbolic status in the Cold War. Though DeLillo uses Beirut as a lens through which to consider the clash between the U.S. and the Soviets, Lebanon itself was reduced to an avatar and proxy for the clash of the superpowers.

As Fawaz A. Gerges notes, 'since it achieved independence in the 1940s, Lebanon has had a pro-Western orientation, espousing a capitalist system and free-market economy and maintaining extensive political, diplomatic, and military relations with the West.'<sup>34</sup> In *Mao II*, Abu gestures towards the West's influence in Lebanon when he explains to Brita: 'I will tell you why we put Westerners in locked rooms. So we don't have to look at them. They remind us of the way we tried to mimic the West. The way we put up the pretense, the terrible veneer. Which you now see exploded all around you.'<sup>35</sup> However, despite the novel's fictional Maoist movement, Lebanon was never 'threatened by either local or international communism.'<sup>36</sup> The Lebanese Communist Party failed to exert a great deal of influence, and the Soviets never gained traction in Lebanon.

Instead, Lebanon was riven by internal factions between its culturally and politically pro-Western Maronite Christians and its Arab-nationalist and pan-Arabist contingent, who were inspired by Nasserism.<sup>37</sup> These factions were exacerbated by the creation of an independent 'Greater Lebanon,' as the French colonists acceded to the Maronite elite's demand for the borders of Lebanon to extend to Muslim-majority coastal settlements (such as Tripoli and Beirut) and the Bekaa valley.<sup>38</sup> During the Cold War, the Lebanese government portrayed this internal conflict 'as a struggle between pro-Western Lebanon and radical Arab nationalism, which was allied with international communism' in order to request U.S. military and economic

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<sup>34</sup> Fawaz A. Gerges, 'Lebanon,' in *The Cold War and the Middle East*, ed. Yezid Sayigh and Avi Shlaim (Clarendon: Oxford, 2003), 77-101, 100.

<sup>35</sup> *III*, 235.

<sup>36</sup> Gerges, 'Lebanon,' 79.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>38</sup> Martin Sicker, *The Middle East in the Twentieth Century* (Westport: Greenwood, 2001), 69.



assistance.<sup>39</sup> However, this radicalized and mobilized the Arab-nationalist elements, who felt that the government had allowed Lebanon to ‘become an outpost of “American imperialism.”’<sup>40</sup> Consequently, these divisions came to serve ‘as a conduit and mirror to other policies, such as those of Nasserism, the PLO, Syria, Israel, and the Islamic Republic of Iran.’<sup>41</sup> When tensions between these factions culminated in the Lebanese Civil War (1975-90), Lebanon became the proxy battleground for the Cold War and the Israel-Palestinian conflict, and the arena for fighting between the PLO, the Syrian Army, and the IDF.<sup>42</sup> Despite intervening in the Lebanon Crisis of 1958, the U.S. government and Soviet Union began to recognise that the conflict was a regional rather than superpower clash, and neither power intervened.<sup>43</sup> The ‘major opposition figures’ in Lebanon were Arab nationalists rather than communists’; Lebanon was a casualty of the East—West clash and its reverberations in Arab states.<sup>44</sup> As in Chapter One, the mundane registers the brutal materiality of the supposedly ‘discursive’ Cold War, but registers the destructive impact of Communism as well as capitalism.

This image of Arabic graffiti defiling the Coke logo performs a reversal of Warhol’s portraits of Mao (see fig. 3), which resemble his deathly celebrity portraits of Marilyn Monroe, and undercut his authority. As Thomas Crow suggests, Warhol’s embalmed celebrity silkscreens’ ‘vandalism’ jolts the viewer into an awareness of the gulf between the subject and what they symbolise.<sup>45</sup> In this reading, the portraits are akin to Situationist *détournement*, disrupting images that permeate daily life with the ‘small tactics’ that DeLillo espouses in ‘The Power of History.’ The Arabicized and Communized Coke logo also serves as a counterpoint to the Soviet Pop artist Alexander Kosolapov’s portrait of Gorbachev, *Gorby* (1989) (see fig. 4), which Brita

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<sup>39</sup> Gerges, ‘Lebanon,’ 87.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>41</sup> Gerges, ‘Lebanon,’ 100.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 89-93.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Crow, ‘Saturday Disasters: Trace and Reference in Early Warhol,’ in *Andy Warhol*, ed. Annette Michelson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 49-66, 61-2.

sees exhibited in New York. Whether inadvertently or not, Kosolapov's homage to Warhol's Maos and *Gold Marilyn* demonstrates the exhaustion of such tactics.



Figure 3 Andy Warhol, *Mao Tse Tung* (1972)

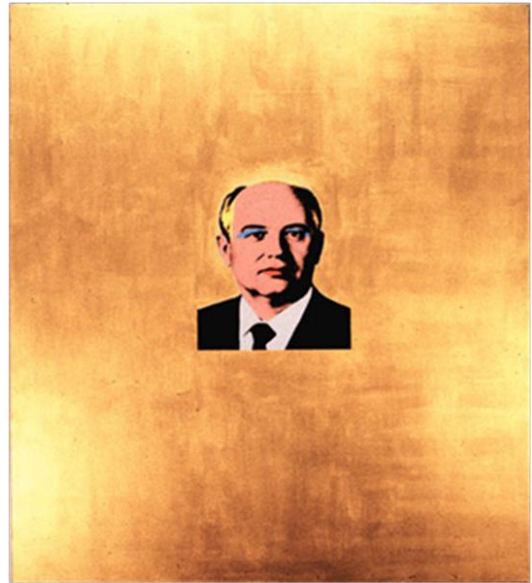


Figure 4 Alexander Kosolapov, *Gorby* (1989)

However, the situation in Beirut is represented as beyond small tactics, or individualized acts of everyday resistance. Brita searches for 'a sense of the peculiar human insistence on seeing past the larger madness into small and skewed practicalities, into off-shaded moments that help us consider a narrow hope,' but finds none.<sup>46</sup> The conflict imprints the quotidian: she sees 'street life, as well, vendors, wooden carts,' but one of the vendors has constructed a 'little homemade city of Marlboro cartons, the neat stacks of cigarettes a wistful urban grid of order and deployment.'<sup>47</sup> We are in Warhol's wheelhouse again: given Marlboro's iconic red and white design, stacks of cigarette boxes recall Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, an artwork that combines Warhol's fascination with American consumerism with his Mao-like zest for repetition. By again juxtaposing a quintessentially American commodity with Communist imagery, *Mao II* compares American mass-production with Communist mass identity.

The utopian potential of the everyday appears to arrive, however, at the end of the novel, when Brita sees a wedding party escorted by a tank:

<sup>46</sup> *MII*, 227.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

The tank moves up the street and she hears voices, sees people walking behind it. Civilians talking and laughing and well dressed, twenty adults and half as many children, mostly girls in pretty dresses and white knee-stockings and patent-leather shoes. And here is the stunning thing that takes her a moment to understand, that this is a wedding party going by. The bride and groom carry champagne glasses and some of the girls hold sparklers that send off showers of excited light. A guest in a pastel tuxedo smokes a long cigar and does a dance around a shell hole, delighting the kids. The bride's gown is beautiful, with lacy appliqué at the bodice, and she looks surpassingly alive, they all look transcendent, free of limits and unsurprised to be here. They make it seem only natural that a wedding might advance its resplendence with a free-lance tank as escort. Sparklers going. Other children holding roses tissueed in fern.<sup>48</sup>

Michael Rothberg has proposed that 'what is particularly striking about this wedding is the way it combines the traditional components of the ritual of marriage' with the militarization of daily life designated by the cannon-mounted tank. It thus, in his view, 'celebrates a new beginning in close proximity to mass destruction.'<sup>49</sup> Here, the use of the word 'traditional' is performing glaring ideological work: the wedding's Western signifiers of champagne and the 'pastel tuxedo' evoke Beirut's glossy Westernized Golden Age. The kind of new beginning the image appears to herald is the triumph of American individualism at the close of the Cold War, or what Francis Fukuyama referred to as the 'End of History,' and attendant 'total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism,' by which he means neoliberalism.<sup>50</sup>

However, with its partially differentiated figures, the scene seems to operate somewhere between bourgeois individualism and the foreign, Soviet-inflected mass. The tank itself is a polyvalent image—Klara thinks it is 'an old Soviet T-34, some scarred and cruddy ancient, sold and stolen two dozen times, changing sides and

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>49</sup> Michael Rothberg, 'Seeing Terror, Feeling Art: Public and Private in Post-9/11 Literature,' in *Literature After 9/11*, ed. Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 123-42, 128.

<sup>50</sup> Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History?' *The National Interest* 16 (1989): 3-18, 3.

systems and religions.<sup>51</sup> The wedding sits uneasily with the literary convention of marriage as comic plot resolution, or with Moretti's conception of marriage signifying a compromise between individualism and the norms of the bourgeois social order.<sup>52</sup> Though *Mao II* cannot imagine an alternative to the terrifying mass identity of the Maoist group except a bourgeois Western marriage, the crowd scene suggests that we must imagine an ideology that mediates between capitalism and Communism, that creates a *détente* between individualism and collectivism. With the image of the palimpsestic tank, the novel suggests that historicizing the Cold War will be crucial to this endeavour. This is *Underworld's* project.

### ***Unterwelt* and Soviet crowd aesthetics**

*Underworld* puts the convergence of Soviet and American crowd aesthetics under pressure, and does so explicitly in the passage in which the artist Klara Sax attends a Radio City screening of a fictional underground film, Sergei Eisenstein's *Unterwelt*. The passage meditates on Eisenstein's famous montage aesthetic: 'the juxtaposed shots, the sense of rhythmic contradiction, it was all spaces and volumes, it was tempo, mass and stress.'<sup>53</sup> The second-person narration raises the possibility that a plurality of people are being addressed, deindividuating the reader(s). It is unclear whether we are experiencing narration focalized through Klara or perhaps even the crowd of viewers at Radio City as the observations continue: 'in Eisenstein you note that the camera angle is a kind of dialectic. Arguments are raised and made, theories drift across the screen and instantly shatter—there's a lot of opposition and conflict.'<sup>54</sup> The narrator is already reading Eisenstein against the grain: montage is commonly regarded as a 'means of *resolving* [...] conflict' through what Richard Taylor describes as a functionalist conception of the dialectic 'thesis—antithesis—synthesis,'

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<sup>51</sup> *MII*, 239.

<sup>52</sup> Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, trans. Albert Sbragia (London: Verso, 2000), 22-4.

<sup>53</sup> *U*, 429.

<sup>54</sup> *U*, 249.

placing emphasis on the synthesis of signifier and signified.<sup>55</sup> Eisenstein's theoretical writings make clear the utilitarian purpose of the montage; in his famous declaration of intent, 'The Montage of Attractions' (1922), he defines an 'attraction' as

any aggressive moment in theatre, i.e. any element of it that subjects the audience to emotional or psychological influence, verified by experience and mathematically calculated to produce specific emotional shocks in the spectator in their proper order within the whole. These shocks provide the only opportunity of perceiving the ideological aspect of what is being shown, the final ideological conclusion.<sup>56</sup>

The cinematic attraction derives its importance when *combined* with other attractions that focus 'the audience's emotions in any direction dictated by the production's purpose,' forcing them to apprehend the rigid symbolic and ideological connections between disparate images.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, in *Strike!* (1925), Eisenstein intercuts footage of the strike being violently quashed with scenes of cattle being killed at a slaughterhouse. Quotidian objects are laden with overdetermined symbolism: earlier in the film, a shot of a factory shareholder operating a lemon squeezer is juxtaposed with mounted policemen breaking up the strike. As Eisenstein stipulates elsewhere: 'the object is not just an illustration acting as an object (an accordion, a toilet); the object is psychologised both by way of its positioning and in its very presentation.'<sup>58</sup> Eisenstein thus deploys the Marxian notion of conception of the object transformed into use-value and marries it with Hegelian notions of unity and synthesis rather than mysterious correspondences between signifier and signified.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Bruce Elder tells a more complex story regarding Eisenstein's shift from the Marxist materialist dialectic to the Hegelian emphasis on unity and synthesis. See: Elder, 'Eisenstein, My Contemporary,' *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 4.2 (1995): 33-50, 45.

<sup>56</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, 'The Montage of Attractions,' in *The Eisenstein Reader*, ed. Richard Taylor, trans. Richard Taylor and William Powell (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 29-34, 30.

<sup>57</sup> Eisenstein, 'The Montage of Film Attractions,' in *Eisenstein Reader*, 35-52, 35-6.

<sup>58</sup> Eisenstein, 'Constanta (Whither *The Battleship Potemkin*),' in *Eisenstein Reader*, 60-72, 62.

<sup>59</sup> Elder, 'Eisenstein,' 39.

Another crucial facet of Eisensteinian montage is its tendency to cut between crowds and individual faces. However, Eisenstein's principle of typage dictates that the faces' socioeconomic standing must be immediately apprehensible, as they merely stand in for the whole: 'down with individual figures (heroes isolated from the mass),' Eisenstein commanded, 'down with the individual chain of events (the plot intrigue)— let us have neither personal stories nor those of people "personally" isolated from the mass.'<sup>60</sup>

Eisenstein's cinematic injunctions conform to the principles of Soviet Realism, propounded in party functionary Andrei Zhdanov's opening address to the 1934 Soviet Writers' Congress. The speech critiqued the 'decadence and disintegration of bourgeois literature,' and specified that, in Soviet Realism, 'the truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic portrayal should be combined with the ideological remoulding and education of the toiling people in the spirit of socialism.'<sup>61</sup> Meanwhile, the U.S. canonization of modernism commenced, and, as Greg Barnhisel documents, 'modernism became a weapon in [...] the "cultural Cold War,"' and was presented as 'a pro-Western, pro-"freedom," and probourgeois movement, evidence of the superiority of the Western way of life.'<sup>62</sup> Barnhisel demonstrates how these recastings of modernism 'dispensed with the more revolutionary or reactionary political associations' and treated its formal features (digression, fragmentation, allusiveness) as expressions of democracy, liberty, and the sovereignty of the individual.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, writers conceived of as 'proto-modernist' such as Whitman and Melville were brought into the fray, and their politics ironed out in order to 'shape an American past that would serve postwar

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<sup>60</sup> Eisenstein, 'Béla Forgets the Scissors,' in *Eisenstein Reader*, 67-72, 69.

<sup>61</sup> Andrei Zhdanov, 'Soviet Literature: The Richest in Ideas, the Most Advanced Literature,' in *Soviet Writer's Congress*, ed. Maksim Gorky, trans. H.G. Scott, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977), 15-26, 19; 21.

<sup>62</sup> Greg Barnhisel, *Cold War Modernists: Art, Literature, and American Cultural Diplomacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 2.

<sup>63</sup> Barnhisel, *Cold War*, 3.

liberalism.’<sup>64</sup> Whitman’s poetry was mobilised to ‘salvage a national spirit of *communitas* and its democratic ideals of diversity [and] difference,’ and for the New Critics’ project of canonizing poetry that could be reshaped as embodying Cold War America’s emphasis on the unifying power of poetry.<sup>65</sup> In this formulation, Whitman’s free verse and catalogues of individual Americans provided the basis for a link between unruly aesthetics and liberal democracy, and an analogue between Whitman’s interest in unifying heterogeneous peoples and voices and Cold War America’s globalizing project.<sup>66</sup> Critical attention was lavished upon *Moby Dick*; Ishmael’s digressive narration was co-opted as representing American democratic and individualistic ideals, whereas Ahab’s monomaniacal, propulsive chivalric narrative became a figure for Soviet totalitarianism.<sup>67</sup> Accordingly, Soviet ideologues’ target for decadence shifted to modernist formal experimentation. By 1950, the Soviet Union’s All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Nations was railing against “art for art’s sake,” “art for the few: the elect,” cubism, surrealism,’ claiming that ‘by their endless and empty formalistic trickery, their decadent content, they seek to conceal from the toiling masses their class interests.’<sup>68</sup>

But DeLillo’s fictional *Underwelt* flaunts Soviet stylistic principles, revelling in ‘precisely the kind of formalist excess that got the director in trouble with the apparat,’ as the narrator notes.<sup>69</sup> Klara entertains the thought that the ‘film might be a protest against social realism, against the party-minded mandate to produce art that

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<sup>64</sup> Jonathan Arc, ‘Whitman and the Problems of the Vernacular,’ in *Breaking Bounds: Whitman and American Cultural Studies*, ed. Betsy Erkkila and Jay Grossman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 44-61, 46.

<sup>65</sup> Eric Keenaghan, *Queering Cold War Poetry: Ethics of Vulnerability in Cuba and the United States* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2009), 95. Regarding the New Critics, see: *Cold War Criticism and the Politics of Skepticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>66</sup> Scott McPhail, ‘Lyric Nationalism: Whitman, American Studies, and the New Criticism,’ *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 44.2 (2002): 133-160. For an early piece of criticism that associates catalogues with democracy, see: Mattie Swayne, ‘Whitman’s Catalogue Rhetoric,’ *Studies in English* 21 (1941): 162-78.

<sup>67</sup> Donald E. Pease, ‘Melville and Cultural Persuasion,’ in *Visionary Compacts: American Renaissance Writings in Cultural Context* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 235-275.

<sup>68</sup> ‘Cultural Relations between the Soviet People and Foreign Countries,’ *VOKS Bulletin* 64 (1950): 22, qtd. in Barnhisel, *Cold War*, 50.

<sup>69</sup> *U*, 443.

advanced the Soviet cause.’ She wonders: ‘Was he in secret rebellion?’<sup>70</sup> The film adopts the mode of a camp B-movie caper, depicting a mad scientist assailing prisoners with an atomic ray gun. The victims are individualized, ‘fully human,’ and as the narrator notes, ‘this complicated the fun,’ as the camera zooms in on their irradiated and deformed faces.<sup>71</sup> Rather than the film presenting heroic crowds, we are informed: ‘Eisenstein’s method of immediate characterization, called *typage*, seemed self-parodied and shattered here, intentionally.’<sup>72</sup> The narrator adds:

There was none of the cross-class solidarity of the Soviet tradition. No crowd scenes or sense of social motive—the masses as hero, colossal crowd movements painstakingly organized and framed, and this was disappointing to Klara.<sup>73</sup>

Capitalising upon montage’s Soviet *and* American associations (via Dos Passos’ *USA*, for example), *Underwelt* problematizes the distinctions between Soviet crowd aesthetics and American individualism. Klara’s friend Jack informs her that the score is Prokofiev’s *The Love for Three Oranges*, a surreal satirical opera that debuted in Chicago in 1921, before Prokofiev’s Soviet career, during which he was censured for his ‘formalistic distortions’ and ‘anti-democratic tendencies.’<sup>74</sup> The opera is familiar to Klara and Jack because of its use in the Lava Soap jingle, played before the show it sponsored, the radio crime drama *The FBI in Peace and War*.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 431.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 430.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 443.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 430-1.

<sup>74</sup> Qtd. In Boris Schwarz, ‘Soviet Music Since the Second World War,’ *Music Quarterly* 51.1 (1965): 59-281, 259.



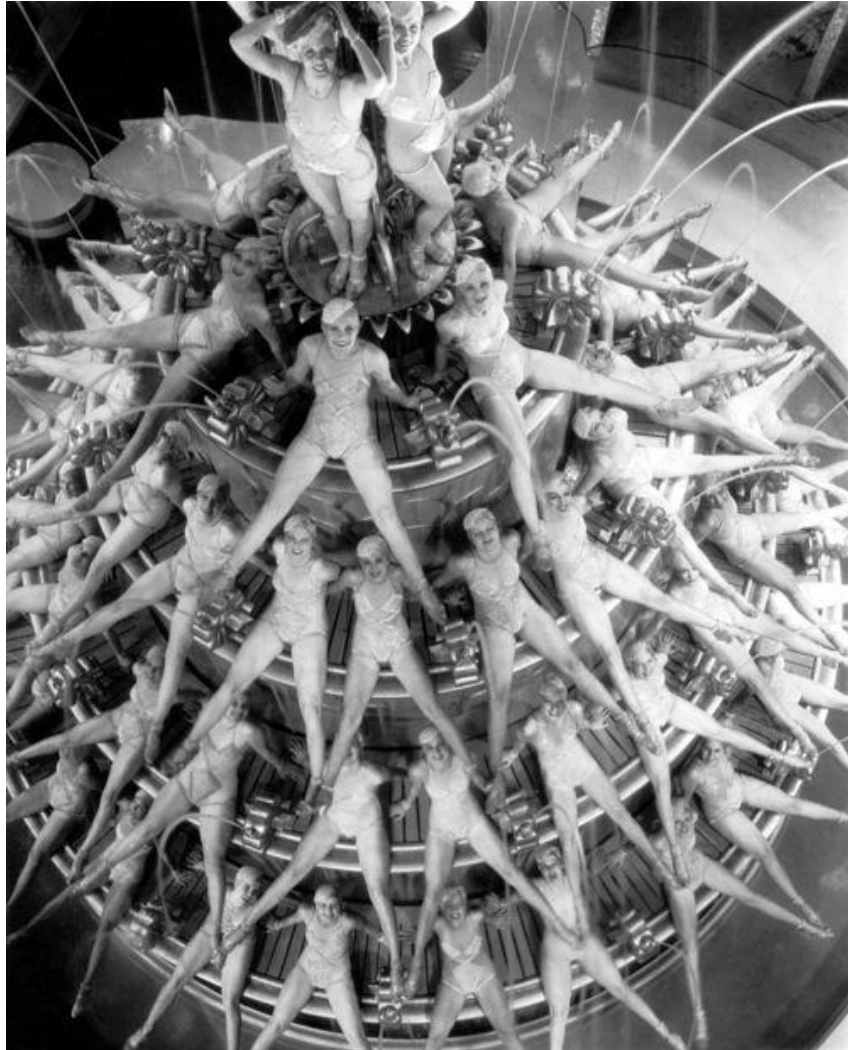


Figure 5 Busby Berkeley choreography in Lloyd Bacon's *Footlight Parade* (1933)

A nebulous link is drawn between Soviet artistic repression and the flattening effects of capitalist co-option.

Indeed, when the second act of the film begins, the narration turns to thoughts of artistic repression, asserting: ‘if there was a politics of montage, it was more intimate here—not the themes of atomic radiation or irresponsible science and not state terror either, the independent artist who is disciplined and sovietized.’<sup>75</sup> It prompts the reader: ‘this is a film about Us, and Them, isn’t it?’ It is my contention that the Us and Them binary does not refer to the usual Cold War polarities of West and Soviet, but to the individual versus the capitalist/Communist state: ‘They can say who they are, you have to lie. They control the language, you have to improve and dissemble. They establish the limits of your existence. And the camp elements of the program, the choreography and some of the music, now tended to resemble sneak attacks on the dominant culture.’<sup>76</sup>

It is worth dwelling upon the campness of the Radio City event, which begins with a performance by the Rockettes, uncharacteristically clad in ‘West Point gray’ and ‘bondage collars.’ Klara asks Miles: ‘How do we know it’s really the Rockettes and not a troupe of female impersonators?’<sup>77</sup> Illuminated by red footlights, the dancers adopt a Red Star formation, but the Communist iconography is subverted by its resemblance to the American director and choreographer Busby Berkeley’s human kaleidoscopes (see fig. 5). In DeLillo’s drafts, the narrator directly alludes to Berkeley, but in the final version, he is more subtly evoked through description: ‘snapping into close formation, tap-dancing in a wash of iridescent arcs, all symmetry and drill precision, then fanning open in kaleidoscopic bursts’; ‘she understood, you all did, how a crowd is reconfigured, teased into methodological geometry, into slipknots and serpentines. [...] the routines were so impeccably smooth and serious, so

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<sup>75</sup> *U*, 443.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 444.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 428.

nineteen-thirties in their dynamic alignments, and wasn't that when [*Underwelt*] was made?<sup>78</sup>

The geometrically structured bodies of DeLillo's Rockettes and Busby Berkeley's chorus lines call to mind Kracauer's reading of the Tiller Girls kickline as a 'mass ornament,' aesthetically registering capitalist rationalization, specifically Taylorized efficiency and the Fordist assembly line. For Kracauer, 'the hands in the factory correspond to the legs of the Tiller Girls,' and 'the legs of the Tiller Girls are an abstract designation of their bodies.'<sup>79</sup> In Kracauer's reading, the Tiller Girls thus allegorise the way capitalism abstracts bodies into labour-power, manipulating and mobilising specific body parts and movements according to their designated function, and capitalizing on their collective simplification. This analysis has clear affinities with the writing of Kracauer's fellow traveler, Adorno, particularly his famous characterization of the Hollywood system as operating according to a Fordist model of production. The Taylorized aesthetics and peculiarly sexualized allure of Berkeley's human kaleidoscopes might, from this perspective, point towards the mass-cultural endorsement of capitalistic excess that is both masked and glamourized by Hollywood flamboyance. Equally, the campness of the Rockettes in *Underworld* could be read as a form of resistance to Soviet sexual repression:

You try to imagine Eisenstein in the underground of bisexual Berlin. [...] here he is in the Kit Kat or the Bow Wow, seamy heated cellars unthinkable in Moscow, and he's dishing Hollywood gossip with men in drag.

I'm terribly fond of Judy Garland, he once said.

But you don't want to be too modishly knowing, do you? He was a dynamo of ideas and ambitious projects but it isn't clear that he had the sexual resolve to realize actual contact with men and women.<sup>80</sup>

But by queering the Rockettes, the passage simultaneously gestures towards what is repressed and obliterated by global capitalism in its Cold War ascension. With

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, 'The Mass Ornament,' in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. and trans. Thomas Y Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 75-89, 79; 84.

<sup>80</sup> *U*, 444.

‘muscles and bones reshaped, slits for eyes, shuffling on stump legs,’ the mutilated characters in *Unterwelt* prefigure nuclear fall-out and, in the process, anticipate the scene in *Underworld’s* epilogue in which Nick Shay sees children suffering from irradiation-related illnesses and deformities at the Soviets’ former test site in Kazakhstan. On the other hand, the image evokes the language Joseph McCarthy used shortly after instigating the Red Scare in 1950, in which he linked homosexuality to Communism, denouncing two gay federal officials. McCarthy explained the importance of these cases thus: ‘I think this will be of interest to the committee, in that it gives a rather interesting picture of some rather unusual mental twists of these gentlemen who are tied up with some of the Communist organizations.’<sup>81</sup> He digressed from the details to quote a U.S. intelligence official as saying: ‘You will find that practically every active Communist is twisted mentally or physically in some way.’<sup>82</sup> As David K. Johnson argues, ‘homosexuality, McCarthy asserted, was the psychological maladjustment that led people toward Communism. The Red Scare now had a tinge of lavender.’<sup>83</sup> The queer dimensions of the *Unterwelt* passage thus collapses simple distinctions between the American capitalist ‘Free World’ and Soviet uniformity, and announces *Underworld’s* intention to strike a compromise between their ideologies and to include in its narrative that which they mutually repress. Accordingly,

Klara [...] felt she was in some ambiguous filmscape somewhere between the Soviet model and Hollywood’s vaulted heaven of love, sex, crime and individual heroism, of scenery and luxury and gorgeous toilets.<sup>84</sup>

This aesthetic compromise, I will argue, characterises *Underworld* itself. I will do so by turning to the Prologue and considering it in light of DeLillo’s engagement with American bourgeois individualism versus Soviet collectivist aesthetics.

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<sup>81</sup> Qtd. David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 16.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare*, 16.

<sup>84</sup> *U*, 430-1.

### 'He speaks in your voice, American'

*Underworlds* prologue strikes a compromise between Soviet and American crowd aesthetics. The long section, originally published as a standalone story, 'Pakfo at the Wall' (1992), depicts the 1951 pennant, in which Bobby Thomson's home run secured the Giants' victory against the Dodgers. As I have stated in my discussion of *Mao II's* Moonie wedding, baseball functions as a symbol of liberal democracy in the American national imaginary. The baseball field thus provides the stage for the specifically American romanticization of the crowd, based on an egalitarian vision in which each member is individualized and understood as having 'freely' associated with the crowd rather than represented as an enforced Sovietized mass. To put it another way: rather than positing the crowd *as* hero, the American mass is a crowd *of* heroes. In its infancy, baseball teams were composed of immigrants, working-class craftsmen, and middle-class clerks; Ed Folsom posits: 'the occupations listed on early team rosters often read like a Whitmanesque catalog of working-class America [...] the teams were emblems of highly individualized workmen united for a common cause.'<sup>85</sup> Baseball acquires additional symbolic weight owing to its use to further imperialist and expansionist ends, one notable example being Albert Goodwill Spalding's world tour of 1888-9, which farmed out American 'baseball missionaries' with the aim of civilizing the populaces of countries such as Hawaii, then on the brink of its annexation by the U.S.<sup>86</sup> It has been observed that the orderliness of the baseball game was conceptualized as promoting the values of industrial capitalism and Taylorized efficiency—indeed, Taylor's *The Principles of Scientific Management* (1911), uses a baseball team as an illustration for an organized and efficient

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<sup>85</sup> Ed Folsom, *Walt Whitman's Native Representations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 36.

<sup>86</sup> Bill Brown, 'Waging Baseball, Playing War: Games of American Imperialism,' *Cultural Critique* 17 (1990/1991): 51-78, 63.

workforce.<sup>87</sup> But here I want to demonstrate how DeLillo posits the baseball *crowd* as a site of resistance and a non-hierarchical vision of community.

'He speaks in your voice, American, and there's a shine in his eye that's halfway hopeful.'<sup>88</sup> The second-person address of the prologue conjures the romance of the egalitarian crowd, in which difference dissolves and bonds of commonality ossify. Radio connects spectators at the Polo Grounds to a dispersed crowd of listeners:

There's a man in the upper deck leafing through a copy of the current issue of *Life*. There's a man on 12th Street in Brooklyn who has attached a tape machine to his radio so he can record the voice of Russ Hodges broadcasting the game [...] The woman cooking cabbage. The man who wishes he could be done with drink. These are the game's remoter soul. Connected by the pulsing voice on the radio, joined to the word-of-mouth that passes the score along the street and the crowd at the ballpark that becomes the picture on television, people the size of minute rice, and the game as rumor and conjecture and inner history.<sup>89</sup>

Here, the Prologue turns to Whitmanesque enumeration, as epitomized in 'Song of Myself's inventories of people:

The pure contralto sings in the organ loft,  
The carpenter dresses his plank, the tongue of his foreplane whistles its  
wild ascending lisp,  
The married and unmarried children ride home to their Thanksgiving  
dinner,  
The pilot seizes the king-pin, he heaves down with a strong arm,  
The mate stands braced in the whale-boat, lance and harpoon are ready,  
The duck-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches,  
The deacons are ordain'd with cross'd hands at the altar,  
The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the hum of the big wheel,  
The farmer stops by the bars as he walks on a  
First-day loafe and looks at the oats and rye<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> F.W. Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1911), 12-13, cited in Bill Brown, 'Waging Baseball,' 61.

<sup>88</sup> *U*, 11.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>90</sup> Walt Whitman, 'Song of Myself (1881-2 text),' canto 15, 164-72.

These catalogues are commonly understood as the manifestation of Whitman's project of 'creating a new poetics, championing an inclusive, democratic quality'; Lawrence Buell writes that the catalogues amount to 'prosodic equalitarianism: each line or image is of equal weight in the ensemble: each is a unit unto itself.'<sup>91</sup> Equality and individuality thus remain intact. Similarly, rather than moulding the viewers and listeners into a homogeneous mass, the baseball game is shaped and reshaped by those who experience it. Like De Certeau's readers who recontextualize texts and produce their meaning, the crowd is not passive. (As if to reinforce this point, the man in possession of the *Life* magazine begins to rip its pages and throw them into the crowds and onto the pitch—I will turn to this passage shortly.) The spectators at the Polo Ground are transformed on television into 'minute rice,' pointing to the granular level of the everyday, the 'inner history' that is ignored, but also its capacity to contain multitudes, to allow us to 'see the world in a grain of sand.'<sup>92</sup> The people on television metonymically stand for the whole of American life. At the actual stadium, a model of homosociality based on an aggregation of bodies massing is presented by

Men passing in and out of the toilets, men zipping their flies as they turn from the trough and the other men approaching the long receptacle, thinking where they want to stand and next to whom and not next to whom, and the old ballpark's reek and mold are consolidated here, generational tides of beer and shit and cigarettes and peanut shells and disinfectants and pisses in the untold millions, and they are thinking in the ordinary way that helps a person glide through a life, thinking thoughts unconnected to events, the dusty hum of who you are, men shouldering through the traffic in the men's room as the game goes on, the coming and going, the lifting out of dicks and the meditative pissing.<sup>93</sup>

Though the men are 'thinking in an ordinary way,' the prologue exposes how exclusionary a construction of the ordinary reigns in the bleachers. The predominantly male crowd are aware of the 'genderness of what they share in their

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<sup>91</sup> Lawrence Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 94; 167.

<sup>92</sup> William Blake, 'Auguries of Innocence,' 1.

<sup>93</sup> *U*, 21.

experience of the game, how a man will scratch his wrist or shape a line of swearwords.<sup>94</sup>

Furthermore, the American speaker that the opening line of the prologue refers to is Cotter, an African-American teenager, whose race precludes him integrating with the crowd. Cotter jumps the turnstile to get into the game, evading the stadium cops; once he finds a seat and ‘walks down into the heat and smell of massed fans,’ the narrator informs us ‘then you lose him in the crowd.’<sup>95</sup> On the contrary, the colour line renders it impossible for Cotter to merge with the crowd. When a black peanut vendor moves through the aisles and Cotter feels an ‘obscure danger’—their common blackness renders Cotter ‘visible, shaming him.’<sup>96</sup> But the vendor throws him peanuts, and Cotter shares them with a friendly white man, Bill Waterson, who owns a construction company and embodies all-American ordinariness, exuding ‘a casual quality, a free-and-easy manner that Cotter links to small-town life in the movies.’<sup>97</sup> They bond over their shared love of baseball and support for the Giants, and the feeling of dissimilitude dissipates. However, when a tussle breaks out over the winning baseball, Cotter wrests it from Bill’s grasp. The racial hierarchy that has hitherto been concealed by the bonds of baseball reasserts itself: Bill follows Cotter out of the stadium and tries to attack him, but realizes they have crossed into ‘unmixed Harlem’ and the signification of a white man chasing a black child has been altered. Cotter escapes with the ball.<sup>98</sup>

### *The Triumph of Death*

The Prologue to *Underworld* was inspired by the New York Times’ front page on 4 October, 1951, and its juxtaposition of the headline ‘GIANTS CAPTURE PENNANT, BEATING DODGERS 5-4 IN 5TH ON THOMSON’S RUN HOMER’ with ‘SOVIET’S

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>97</sup> *U*, 20.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 57.



SECOND ATOM BLAST IN TWO YEARS REVEALED BY U.S.: DETAILS ARE KEPT A SECRET.<sup>99</sup> Capitalising on a (false) rumour that J. Edgar Hoover attended the game, DeLillo imagines him being informed at the game that the Soviet Union has completed its second nuclear test in Kazakhstan. A spectator tears pages from a copy of *Life* magazine and throws them into the stands, and a reproduction of Brueghel's *The Triumph of Death* (1562) falls onto Hoover's shoulder. Observing Brueghel's apocalyptic vision, 'crowded with medieval figures who are dying or dead,' Hoover thinks of the Kazakh test site, and projects the 'meatblood colors and massed bodies' onto the celebrating baseball crowds he sees before him. The prospect of nuclear extinction overlays the celebratory baseball crowds, contaminating their euphoria, but also undermining the romantic American crowd by connecting 'the mass hysteria which motivates witch-hunts, in both the religious and the anti-communist sense, and the hysteria which animates crowds of people at a ball game.'<sup>100</sup> The quotidian nature of the scene is drained and deformed; after learning of the atomic test, Hoover recalls the news of Pearl Harbor breaking: 'the news seemed to shimmer in the air, everything in photoflash, plain objects hot and charged':<sup>101</sup>

Edgar looks at the faces around him, open and hopeful. He wants to feel a compatriot's nearness and affinity. All these people formed by language and climate and popular songs and breakfast foods and the jokes they tell and the cars they drive have never had anything in common so much as this, that they are sitting in the furrow of destruction. He tries to feel a belonging, an opening of his old stop-cocked soul. But there is some bitter condition he has never been able to name and when he encounters a threat from outside [...] he finds it is a balance to this state, a restoring force.<sup>102</sup>

As Catherine Morley and Philip Nel have observed, this rapid-cutting from *The Triumph of Death* to the baseball stadium capitalizes upon Eisenstein's montage techniques. The clash of the Brueghel painting and the baseball crowds pouring onto

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<sup>99</sup> DeLillo, 'The Power of History,' *The New York Times*, 7 September, 1997.

<sup>100</sup> Philip Nel, *The Avant-garde and American Postmodernity* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 105.

<sup>101</sup> *U*, 24.

<sup>102</sup> *U*, 28.

the pitch functions in a similar way to Eisenstein's juxtaposition of striking workers with a slaughterhouse, exposing how power impresses itself on ordinary people.

However, the perversely quotidian details of the crowds resist the clear-cut symbolic overlays of Eisensteinian montage. When the game is won, the crowd showers Pafko with paper:

Pafko is out of paper range by now, jogging toward the clubhouse. But the paper keeps falling. If the early paper waves were slightly hostile and mocking, and the middle waves a form of fan commonality, then this last demonstration has a softness, a selfness. It is coming down from all points, laundry tickets, envelopes swiped from the office, there are crushed cigarette packs and sticky wrap from ice-cream sandwiches, pages from memo pads and pocket calendars, they are throwing faded dollar bills, snapshots torn to pieces, ruffled paper swaddles for cupcakes, they are tearing up letters they've been carrying around for years pressed into their wallets, the residue of love affairs and college friendships, it is happy garbage now, the fans' intimate wish to be connected to the event, unendably, in the form of pocket litter, personal waste, a thing that carries a shadow identity—rolls of toilet tissue unbolting lyrically in streamers.<sup>103</sup>

Contrary to accounts that have proposed that *Underworld's* prologue merely emphasizes dividedness, it is my contention that these sprawling paper lists point to a utopian vision of the crowd. The pages of the magazine that reproduce *The Triumph of Death* and the primacy of geopolitical forces is overwhelmed by resolutely quotidian material, 'pocket litter.' These fragments are juxtaposed with the threat of nuclear war in a manner that borrows from the principles of Eisensteinian montage, but without its rigid symbolism and determinism. The patchwork of torn paper resembles the avant-garde collages of Kurt Schwitters, Pablo Picasso, and Hannah Höch, for example, and in which, as Marjorie Perloff writes, 'hierarchy gives way to parataxis [...] there is no longer a central ordering system.'<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 44-5.

<sup>104</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (University of Chicago Press, 1986), 75.

In the onslaught of paper we see a microcosm for DeLillo's formal strategy, and how the everyday opens up a site for imagining forms of collectivity not based upon massing bodies, or a Foucauldian erasure of difference or 'death of the subject,' but the 'exposure of singularities,' to borrow from Jean-Luc Nancy.<sup>105</sup> This phrase refers to Nancy's conception of community as constitutive of singularity, rather than a 'laceration of a singular being,' which would presuppose a non-relational subject *joining* a crowd.<sup>106</sup> Also drawing on Nancy, Matthew Mullins proposes that, by tracking how the baseball passes through different owners, *Underworld* constructs a form of community 'based on the togetherness of those connected by the object and not on any organized or operative principle' and thus embodies Nancy's idea of the inoperative community.<sup>107</sup> I argue that this extends to ordinary objects in general in the narrative, and can be detected at the formal level. The lists of paper appear to defy narrative organization, and, by virtue of their plenitude, resist performing salient narrative work. As Nancy writes in *The Inoperative Community*:

community cannot arise from the domain of *work*. [...] Community necessarily takes place in what Blanchot has called 'unworking,' referring to that which, before or beyond the work, withdraws from the work, and which, no longer having to do either with production or with completion, encounters interruption, fragmentation, suspension. Community is made up of the interruption of singularities<sup>108</sup>

Published in the twilight years of the Cold War, *The Inoperative Community* represents an attempt to think beyond capitalist and Soviet constructions of community: Nancy criticizes bourgeois individualism's 'inconsequential atomism,' which impedes possibilities for sociality and solidarity, but he is also critical of the Soviet application of Marx, which, as Ignaas Devisch's gloss of Nancy claims,

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<sup>105</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor, trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 30.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Matthew Mullins, 'Objects & Outliers: Narrative Community in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*,' *Critique* 51.3 (2010): 276-92, 283.

<sup>108</sup> Nancy, *Inoperative*, 31.

'postulates the fusion of the individual with a pure collective identity.'<sup>109</sup> To think beyond these iterations and their instrumentality, Nancy draws on Bataille's interest in excess, surplus, and unproductive expenditure. The paper lists in *Underworlds* prologue constitute surpluses of signification, and in doing so carve space for a construction of the crowd that neither embodies American capitalism or Soviet Communism.

However, the utopian potential of the paper lists is marred by a suspicion towards the valences attached to the aesthetics of excess during the Cold War. The excess of the list is intercut with tableaux of Jackie Gleason vomiting: 'Frank looks at his own trouser cuffs flaked an intimate beige and the splatter across his shoe tops in a strafing pattern and the gumbo puddle nearby that contains a few laggard gobs of pinkoid stuff from deep in Gleason's gastric sac.'<sup>110</sup> The excesses of Jackie's vomit would be considered, in Bataillean terms, an act of sacrifice, which Bataille regards as expenditure, a non-instrumental rejection of social unity and collective norms, a way of marking oneself as marginal and wasteful. Imbued with the power 'to liberate heterogeneous elements and to break the habitual homogeneity of the individual,' sacrifice operates 'in the same way that vomiting would be opposed to its opposite, the communal eating of food.' A figure of disintegration, vomiting represents the 'disgorging of a force that threatens to consume,' and therefore the violent unassimilability of an individual into a crowd.<sup>111</sup> This point is underwritten by Jackie expelling a 'puddle' of 'gumbo,' the quintessential American 'melting pot' dish, and Southern Creole staple, created from the mingling of cultural difference commonly described as 'creolization.' Jackie's vomit signifies the failures of the U.S.' supposed egalitarianism, but by splattering Frank's shoes with 'a strafing pattern,' it also evokes

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<sup>109</sup> Ignaas Devisch, *Jean-Luc Nancy and the Question of Community* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 60.

<sup>110</sup> *U*, 46.

<sup>111</sup> Georges Bataille, 'Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh,' in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 61-72, 70.

See Chapter One for a more detailed engagement with Bataille's concept of expenditure.

war. So, too, do the showers of paper, albeit to the U.S.' cultural rather than military arsenal.

The paper scenes appear to embody the everyday's resistance to forms through excess, and the tactics of interruption and fragmentation that Nancy extols. However, as I have demonstrated in my reading of the *Unterwelt* scene, formal excess is politicized in the Cold War context, and stands in for the heterogeneity and freedom represented by the capitalist U.S.. As Jane Elliott writes, Cold War intellectual culture's celebration of digression and formal discontinuities 'tend[s] to promote the salutary chaos of human life (read: capitalism) over and against the unification and control associated with social planning (read: communism.)'<sup>112</sup> DeLillo's surplus of signifiers also acquires specific freight when we consider the U.S.' strategies in the Cold War, through the cavalcade of consumerist abundance it inflicted to flaunt the merits of capitalism. The material of American everyday life became a weapon for anticommunist propagandists. Regarded as potential Communist threats, Italy and Yugoslavia were presented with the American Way Supermarket, in 1956 and 1957 respectively, a model store replete with mountainous displays of packaged food and household items, and designed to contrast with Soviet scarcity.<sup>113</sup> As early as 1951, the sociologist David Riesman parodied America's soft power assaults on the Soviets by publishing 'a fictitious account of an American bombing campaign involving consumer goods rather than explosives,' earning it the sobriquets 'Operation Abundance' and 'The Nylon War' (as it opened with a bombardment of nylon stockings).<sup>114</sup> The satirical rationale was that, 'if allowed to sample the riches of America, the Russian people would not long tolerate masters who gave them tanks and spies instead of vacuum cleaners and beauty products.'<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Jane Elliott, *Popular Feminist Fiction as American Allegory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 28.

<sup>113</sup> Tracey Deutsch, *Building a Housewife's Paradise: Gender, Politics, and American Grocery Stores in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 192.

<sup>114</sup> Greg Castillo, *Cold War on the Home Front: The Soft Power of Midcentury Design* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), vii. Castillo is referring to David Riesman's 'The Nylon War,' in *Abundance for What?* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1993), 67-79.

<sup>115</sup> Riesman, 'Nylon,' 67.

Though, as discussed in Chapter One, Bataille considers the Marshall Plan as ‘expenditures without return,’ an act of generous squandering with no need for reciprocation, American excess is patently an exercise in soft power.

The ‘softness’ and ‘selfness’ of the paper litter thrown onto the pitch is alloyed. By decorating the pitch with ‘laundry tickets,’ ‘snapshots torn to pieces,’ ‘rolls of toilet tissue,’ etc., the fans open up a space for a kind a commonality arising from the ‘exposure of singularities.’ But the ‘narrative luxury’ and lavish lists presage the American War of Abundance, and the promotion of capitalism as guaranteeing individualism and freedom. Even as *Underworld* attempts to mobilise the everyday and its formal strategies of excess and interruption, it gestures to their role in the problematic construction of American democratic ideals. We are placed, as Klara is during *Unterwelt*, ‘in some ambiguous filmscape somewhere between the Soviet model and Hollywood’s vaulted heaven of love, sex, crime and individual heroism, of scenery and luxury and gorgeous toilets.’<sup>116</sup> Russ Hodges, the commentator, believes the game to be democratically inclusive, perhaps issuing a statement of intent for *Underworld*:

Russ thinks this is another kind of history. He thinks they will carry something out of here that joins them all in a rare way [...] Isn’t it possible that this midcentury moment enters the skin more lastingly than the vast shaping strategies of eminent leaders, generals steely in their sunglasses—the mapped visions that pierce our dreams? [...] Shouts, bat-cracks, full bladders and stray yawns, the sand-grain manyness of things that can’t be counted. It is all falling indelibly into the past.<sup>117</sup>

### **‘Things that can’t be counted’**

Does *Underworld* succeed in striking a compromise between bourgeois individualism and Soviet typage? The novel has been considered an inappropriate form for the

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<sup>116</sup> *U*, 431.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-60.

representation of types: Ian Watt's influential account of the novel, for example, pegs its rise to the emergence of bourgeois individualism. He notes the sea change that took place in the eighteenth century, during which storytelling was reoriented towards the particularity of individual experience, and 'the plot had to be acted out by particular people in particular circumstances, rather than, as had been common in the past, by general human types.'<sup>118</sup> To reformulate this: literature no longer represented the crowd. In one view, this would inaugurate a medium perfectly habituated to representing the everyday. However, Michael Sheringham claims that 'the novel has proved a poor conductor of everydayness [...] because of its tendency to abstraction'; in his view, the unwieldy stuff of everyday life inescapably performs a metonymic function in the novel. Aligning himself with Benjamin's 'The Storyteller,' which critiques the individualism of the novel, Sheringham defines his account of the novel and the everyday against Lukács':

Lukács's theory of the novel consistently pits the novel against the formlessness of the everyday. His key concepts—'totality', 'typicality', the 'world-historical'—underline the need to go beyond surfaces in order to grasp the complexity of social processes; [...] For Lukács the great novel represents the triumph of form over the mess of the everyday.<sup>119</sup>

For Sheringham, the everyday must resist ordering tendencies, as represented in the novel's 'habitual bent [...] towards abstraction and linear coherence.'<sup>120</sup> On the contrary, as I have argued, the everyday cannot be cut adrift from totality, and though the capitalist world-system is a totality, it is a messy one. A focus on the particularity of everyday experience elevates individuals to heroes, and so a novel that truly engages with the everyday must erode and resist the bourgeois individualism of the novel, and depict a crowd. I want to consider how far *Underworld* gives space to the crowd, and thus, the everyday.

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<sup>118</sup> Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 15.

<sup>119</sup> Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 41.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

Rachel Greenwald Smith tracks the shift from the economic liberalism that is central to Watt's analysis to neoliberalism, with its 'inclusivity of the very forms of collective attachment that liberal individualism eschewed.'<sup>121</sup> In the neoliberal novel, there is a move away from interiority to networks of characters, she explains:

there is a general movement away from the individual protagonist and toward the construction of emotionally bound groups. Characters that appear round persist; yet today what makes them seem real is not their capacity to surprise from the depths of their interiors but their capacity to grow and develop through their connections with others<sup>122</sup>

But *Underworld* embodies a different kind of network narrative. For example, in Part Five, entitled 'Better Things For Better Living Through Chemistry: Selected Fragments Public and Private in the 1950s and 1960s,' the individual sections feature: Nick Shay at the correctional facility and, later, with his girlfriend, Amy; Lenny Bruce doing stand-up in various locations; a suburban family called the Demings; Cotter's sister Rosie at a civil rights protest in Jackson; Charles Wainwright, the advertising executive who purchases the baseball from Cotter's father, Manx Martin; J. Edgar Hoover being assailed by 'garbage guerillas' and attending Truman Capote's Black and White masked ball; Janet, Matt Shay's eventual wife, sprinting from her work at a hospital to avoid being attacked; Marian, Nick's eventual wife, listening to Vietnam protests and thinking of Nick; Matt Shay in the Bronx as a child; and Chuckie, Charles Wainwright's son, fighting in Vietnam. Though these characters are all connected in the novel's web (though Lenny Bruce only tenuously), marital links aside, they are not drawn together through the affective connections against which Greenwald Smith fulminates. What links most of the characters together is the baseball, as Mullins has pointed out.

Part Five of *Underworld* would appear, then, to represent a crowd and take in a sweep of history, the 'secret history' as well as the respectable public one, 'the sand-

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<sup>121</sup> Rachel Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 40.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.



grain manyness of things that can't be counted,' to use Russ Hodge's phrase. The problematics of 'counting' arise in a conversation between Nick and his African-American colleague Sims, who tells Nick that his mother told him to hide when the census-takers visited his house in St. Louis, and is offended to discover that Nick believes the census to be accurate.<sup>123</sup>

'You believe the numbers. You believe there's only twenty-five million, for example, black people in America.'

'Why shouldn't I believe it?'

'You believe it then.'

'If that's the number, that's the number.'

'And you don't think they might be underplaying the true number. [...] You don't think somebody's afraid that if the real number is reported, white people gonna go weak in the knees and black people gonna get all pumped up with, Hey we oughta be gettin' more of this and more of that and more of the other.'<sup>124</sup>

In *The Rise of Statistical Thinking, 1820-1900*, Theodore M. Porter links demography to essentially egalitarian impulses: 'implicitly, at least, statistics tended to equalize subjects. It makes no sense to count people if their common personhood is not seen as somehow more significant than their difference.'<sup>125</sup> Sam Alexander has proposed that *Ulysses*, a similarly overpopulated novel, 'extends the census's egalitarian logic beyond the quantifying unit of the household to survey those not usually accounted for by demographers.'<sup>126</sup> *Underworld* also attempts this inclusive programme, with its homeless characters, for example, positioning the novel as the force to fill the lacunae in the census and public records. But, despite its integrative underpinnings, the novel also reproduces erasures of 'official histories': one of the 'things that can't be counted' is Cotter's ownership of the baseball. Cotter disappears from the novel after his father, Manx, steals the baseball, and, despite his dogged efforts to

<sup>123</sup> *U*, 60. I am indebted to Kasia Boddy for this point, which was made in her paper at the Post45 gathering at the University of York, 6-7 July, 2016.

<sup>124</sup> *U*, 335.

<sup>125</sup> Theodore M. Porter, *The Rise of Statistical Thinking, 1820-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 25.

<sup>126</sup> Sam Alexander, 'Joyce's Census: Character, Demography, and the Problem of Population in *Ulysses*,' *Novel* 45.3 (2012): 433-54. 436.

reconstruct the history of the ball, Marvin Lundy never connects the baseball back to Manx or Cotter.

Furthermore, Nick Shay presents issues for a consideration of *Underworld* as a novel of the crowd, as the only character who is focalized through first-person narration, and therefore the strongest candidate for protagonist status. Nick is something of a 'type': a 'dumbmuscle and angry and real' boy from the Bronx, he is sent to a correctional facility after shooting a man from his neighbourhood. However, many years on, Nick routinely tells people: 'I live a quiet life in an unassuming house in a suburb of Phoenix. Pause. Like someone in the Witness Protection Program.'<sup>127</sup> He disappears from the narrative entirely, albeit in the final section, 'Das Kapital':

I drink aged grappa and listen to jazz [...] I stand helpless in this desert place looking at the books.

I long for the days of disorder. [...] I was dumb-muscle and angry and real. This is what I long for, the breach of peace, the days of disarray when I walked real streets and did things slap-bang and felt angry and ready all the time, a danger to others and a distant mystery to myself.<sup>128</sup>

As in *White Noise*, *Underworld* identifies a masculine logic in narrative progression and individualization. This point is underscored when Nick is at the correctional facility for killing a man, and Father Paulus tells him: 'Rage and violence can be elements of productive tension [...] One way a man untrivializes himself is to punch another man in the mouth.'<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> In a way, *Underworld* is straining against problems we might consider to be inherent to the novel. In his study of minor characters, Alex Woloch identifies in the nineteenth-century realist novel 'dual impulses to bring in a multitude of characters and to bring out the interiority of a singular protagonist.' Woloch attributes this balancing act between heroes and minor characters—or the individual and the crowd—to economic and political realities of the nineteenth-century. He asserts: 'the asymmetric structure of realist characterization—which rounds out one or several characters while flattening, and distorting, a manifold assortment of characters—reflects actual structures of inequitable distribution.' The unevenness of the character system therefore mirrors the unevenness of capitalism. Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 30; 32.

<sup>128</sup> *U*, 810.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 538.

*Underworld* rejects this individualistic logic with its final sections, which follow Nick's disappearance from the text. Sister Grace and Sister Edgar visit the Bronx in an abortive mission to find and help a homeless child called Esmeralda; three weeks later, they find out that a man has raped and killed her. People begin to gather around a Minute Maid advertisement in the Bronx: 'when the train lights hit the dimmest part of the billboard a face appears above the misty lake and it belongs to the murdered girl.'<sup>130</sup> Despite Grace's scepticism, Edgar insists they view the miracle. Minute Maid appears earlier in the novel when the 1950s ad-man Charles Wainwright thinks about how to advertise Minute Maid, envisioning an ad with 'a glass of real juice, a goblet brimming with particulate matter, like wondrous orange smog.'<sup>131</sup> Smog is apposite, as earlier in the narrative, Matt Shay sees quantities of Agent Orange whilst serving in Vietnam: 'the drums resembled cans of frozen Minute Maid enlarged by a crazed strain of DNA.'<sup>132</sup> When working at the nuclear research facility, he thinks, 'how can you tell the difference between orange juice and agent orange if the same massive system connects them at levels outside your comprehension?'<sup>133</sup> As I have argued in Chapter One, *Underworld* maps the 'massive system' that connects Agent Orange and orange juice, but the billboard crowd remains unaware, perceiving what Grace suggests is an image from an old poster beneath the Minute Maid ad as a miracle. Edgar aestheticizes the ad, divining in the pouring of orange juice 'a lavishment of effort and technique, no refinement spared—the equivalent, Edgar thinks, of medieval church architecture.'<sup>134</sup>

Despite evoking the lavish formalism Soviet ideologues detested, the crowd seems to combine the threats of both Communist and capitalist sameness: 'the six-ounce cans of Minute Maid arrayed across the bottom of the board, a hundred identical cans so familiar in design and color and typeface that they have personality,

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 821.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 533.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 463.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 465.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 820.

the convivial cuteness of little orange-and-black people.’<sup>135</sup> Sister Edgar feels as though she is at one with the crowd—‘this is how a crowd brings things to single consciousness.’<sup>136</sup> Curiously, when she immerses herself in the crowd, she ‘pours into the crowd’ like the orange juice, feeling ‘inseparable from the shakers and mourners, the awestruck who stand in tidal traffic—she is nameless for a moment, lost to the details of personal history, a disembodied fact in liquid form, pouring into the crowd.’<sup>137</sup> Afterwards, ‘there is nothing left to do but die and this is precisely what she does, Sister Alma Edgar, bride of Christ,’ and, strangely, drifts into cyberspace.<sup>138</sup> The numinous glow of the billboard is replaced by the systematic: ‘she is in cyberspace, not heaven, and she feels the grip of systems. There is a presence here, a thing implied, something vast and bright. [...] it’s a glow, a lustrous rushing force that seems to flow from a billion distant net nodes.’<sup>139</sup>

Though the crowd does not apprehend the web of connections that link the quotidian to the military-industrial-complex, DeLillo posits the novel as a corrective, and as site to imagine global commonality that breaks down Cold War polarities. The ending of *Underworld* also suggests that the internet will provide access to a global ‘exposure of singularities.’ The narration switches to the second-person (plural?) narration with which it opens, and that features in the *Unterwelt* scene:

When you decide on a whim to visit the H-bomb home page, she begins to understand. Everything in your computer, the plastic, silicon and mylar, every logical operation and processing function, the memory, the hardware, the software, the ones and zeroes, the triads inside the pixels that form the on-screen image—it all culminates here.<sup>140</sup>

There is deindividuation here, but rather than tracing mystical resonances, the internet is portrayed as a tool for connecting singularities and mapping the capitalist world-system in its totality:

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<sup>135</sup> *U*, 820.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 821.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 823.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 824.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

First a dawnlight, a great aurora glory massing on the color monitor. Every thermonuclear bomb ever tested, all the data gathered from each shot, code name, yield, test site, Eniwetok, Lop Nor, Novaya Zemlya, the foreignness, the otherness of remote populations implied in the place names, Mururoa, Kazakhstan, Siberia, and the wreathwork of extraordinary detail, firing systems and delivery systems, equations and graphs and schematic cross sections, shot after shot summoned at a click, a hit, Bravo, Romeo, Greenhouse Dog—and Sister Edgar is basically in it. [...] Sister Edgar begins to sense the byshadows that stretch from the awe of a central event. How the intersecting systems help pull us apart, leaving us vague, drained, docile, soft in our inner discourse, willing to be shaped, to be overwhelmed—easy retreats, half beliefs<sup>141</sup>

Here, *Underworld* seems to presage the radical possibilities of the internet, and what Paul Mason has referred to as ‘a revolution in technology,’ citing the Arab Spring as examples of the internet bringing about an age in which ‘horizontal networks [are] the default mode of activism and protest.’<sup>142</sup> The ‘killer application of all these new technologies,’ he argues, ‘is to empower human beings: to think what they want, to act more autonomously, and to get knowledge they need.’<sup>143</sup> But the apparent techno-utopianism is vitiated when Sister Edgar conjoins with J. Edgar Hoover:

A click, a hit and Sister joins the other Edgar. [...] J. Edgar Hoover, the Law’s debased saint, hyperlinked at last to Sister Edgar—a single fluctuating impulse now, a piece of coded information. Everything is connected in the end. Sister and Brother. A fantasy in cyberspace and a way of seeing the other side and a settling of differences that have less to do with gender than with difference itself, all argument, all conflict programmed out.<sup>144</sup>

Again, we are confronted with a sinister image of deindividuation. If *Underworld* presents us with a fantasy of the cyber-crowd, it also augurs the way that such a non-hierarchical collective abets the logic of neoliberalism, in which ‘governance vanishes the vocabularies of power and collective responsibility from political life,’

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<sup>141</sup> *U*, 824.

<sup>142</sup> Paul Mason, ‘Why it’s still kicking off everywhere,’ *Soundings* 53 (2013): 44-55, 44.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>144</sup> *U*, 826.

instead offering ‘the fantasy of horizontalism without conflict.’<sup>145</sup> The sinister sameness of the merged Edgars delivers on the first line of the Epilogue, ‘Das Kapital’: ‘Capital burns off the nuance in a culture.’<sup>146</sup> Though the internet promises the potential for collective resistance at the micro-level, it is unclear if it will create a radical global collective:

A word appears in the lunar milk of the data stream. [...] you look at the things in the room, offscreen, unwebbed, the tissued grain of the deskwood alive in light, the thick lived tenor of things, the argument of things to be seen and eaten, the apple core going sepia in the lunch tray, and the dense measures of experience in a random glance, the monk’s candle reflected in the slope of the phone, hours marked in Roman numerals, and the glaze of the wax, and the curl of the braided wick, and the chipped rim of the mug that holds your yellow pencils, skewed all crazy, and the plied lives of the simplest surface, the slabbed butter melting on the crumbled bun, and the yellow of the yellow of the pencils, and you try to imagine the word on the screen becoming a thing in the world, taking all its meanings, its sense of serenities and contentments out into the streets somehow, its whisper of reconciliation, a word extending itself ever outward [...] but it’s only a sequence of pulses on a dullish screen and all it can do it make you pensive—a word that spreads a longing through the raw sprawl of the city and out across the dreaming bourns and orchards to the solitary hills.

Peace.<sup>147</sup>

Can the internet create new forms of collectivity, or will it replicate the abstractions of capital? The ‘tissued grain of the deskwood alive in light’ is reminiscent of Marx’s aforementioned table in *Capital*, which, when it becomes a commodity, ‘stands with its feet on the ground’ and ‘evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas.’<sup>148</sup> The materiality of quotidian things is shored up against the abstraction of the internet. Despite mediating a space between capitalism and Communism, and straining

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<sup>145</sup> Laura Grattan, *Populism’s Power: Radical Grassroots Democracy in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 106.

<sup>146</sup> *U*, 785.

<sup>147</sup> *U*, 827.

<sup>148</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: An Abridged Edition*, ed. David McLellan, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 42.

against the individualism of the novel, *Underworld* cannot relinquish the need for hierarchy that the everyday has the potential to overturn.

## CHAPTER THREE

## Domesticating Terror

Terrorism and the ordinary in *The Names* and *Falling Man*

‘When reality elevates itself to spectacular levels,’ DeLillo wrote in 2005, ‘people tend to say, “It was like a movie.” *Wanda* takes the movie sensation and denatures it, turns it into dullish daily life, with the jerky gait of a woman walking a dog.’ He was preparing his introduction to a screening of Barbara Loden’s 1970 film *Wanda*, a peripatetic arthouse film shot in cinema-verité style about an alienated housewife who becomes involved in a bank heist. DeLillo writes: ‘There is no mingling of atmospheric suspense and fateful resolution. The bank robbery is not paced differently from the rest of the film. It is ordinary, with guns.’<sup>1</sup> This ethos infuses DeLillo’s writing on terrorism: the spectacle of terrorism is often counterweighted by the ordinary.<sup>2</sup> Shocking acts of violence might seem like a perverse topic for an exploration of the everyday; the extraordinariness of terrorism shatters the assumption that we are safe in our daily routines, and legitimises state-imposed ‘emergency measures that will impinge on everyday life.’<sup>3</sup> But, as I have argued, we cannot regard the everyday as an isolated sphere or retreat from the capitalist world-system or its endemic geopolitical conflicts. Moreover, terrorist attacks such as 9/11 are frequently conceived as an attack on the target culture’s ‘way of life’ that must be fiercely defended in response, without any consideration of how military retaliation—as in the invasion of Iraq, for example—would impinge on everyday life there. Accordingly, in the wake of 9/11, newspapers brimmed with ‘ordinary stories’

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<sup>1</sup> DeLillo, ‘Woman in the Distance,’ *Black Clock* 4, 2005: 56-59, 56; 58.

<sup>2</sup> Though I engage with the concept of state terror in my discussion of Shock and Awe, I am, for the most part, defining terrorism as ‘a revolutionary or anti-government activity undertaken by nonstate or subnational entities.’ Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Peter R. Neumann and M.L.R. Smith, *The Strategy of Terrorism: How it Works, and Why it Fails* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 40.



concerning the event. As Frank Trentmann writes, we cannot regard ‘the quotidian as a self-contained sphere [...] moments of breakdown and disruption allow us to see what is needed to keep ordinary consumption practices going.’<sup>4</sup> Terrorism brings the banality of that which it has disrupted into focus, unveiling the dialectic of ordinariness and extraordinariness, the involution of local and global, and the concealed violence that sustains and saturates ostensibly mundane aspects of life in the economic cores.

In this chapter, I contend that DeLillo uses the figure of the Middle-Eastern terrorist in order to stress terrorism’s inseparability from ordinary life, and to draw connections between the world-systemic economic core (as represented by the U.S. core-hegemon) and the (semi-)peripheries (India and the Middle-East, in this case). To do so, he turns to the mundane, diverging from a long tradition of associating the shock of terror with the shock of artistic innovation. In *Crimes of Art + Terror*, Frank Lentricchia and Jody McAuliffe construct a genealogy of this tradition, averring that ‘the impulse to create transgressive art and the impulse to commit violence lie [...] perilously close to each other’ and that the literary desire for ‘a terrifying awakening that would undo the West’s economic and cultural order [...] is also the desire, of course, of what is called terrorism.’ ‘From romanticism to modernism,’ they contend, artistic movements ‘consciously presented themselves as revolutionary and sought to shake up—and even overturn—the order of the West.’<sup>5</sup> As I have argued, for DeLillo, the aesthetics of shock have been domesticated, and drained of revolutionary power. Moreover, as we shall see, shock is now the preserve of military strategy, following the formulation of the Shock and Awe doctrine. Whilst political unrest enters *The Names* in a somewhat nebulous fashion, DeLillo’s archives are strewn with newspaper cuttings that reveal how the novel was informed by DeLillo’s comprehensive research on Turkey and Greece, as well as contemporary terrorism

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<sup>4</sup> Frank Trentmann, ‘The Politics of Everyday Life,’ in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption*, ed. Frank Trentmann (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 521-547, 524.

<sup>5</sup> Frank Lentricchia and Jody McAuliffe, *Crimes of Art + Terror* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 167; 2; 4.

beyond Europe.<sup>6</sup> I turn to *The Names* and *Falling Man* in this chapter as they represent DeLillo's deepest engagements with terrorism.<sup>7</sup>

### **The domination of everyday life**

*The Names* is a generic hybrid: an international thriller; a detective plot; a *Bildungsroman*; a Jamesian tale of the American ingénue abroad. It follows James Axton, an American analyst for a political risk insurance company that protects multinational corporations with assets abroad, and his pursuit of a murderous cult, *Ta Onómata* (The Names). The depiction of the East becomes a vexed question in genres that travel abroad—such narratives often exemplify the issues pinpointed by Edward Said's vivid skewering of Western culture, with the East becoming 'a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences,' relegated to a literary backdrop, an 'exotic locale in which [the Western characters'] spiritual problems [...] can be addressed and therapeutically treated.'<sup>8</sup> When ordinary life in the East is dragged to the foreground, the results can be equally exoticizing, as anatomized by Said and the seam of postcolonial scholarship that connects the rise of the realist novel to the imperialist project of cataloguing, classifying, and thus colonizing the 'Orient.'<sup>9</sup> Homi K. Bhabha has written that colonial discourse 'resembles a form of narrative whereby the productivity and circulation of subjects and signs are bound in a reformed and recognizable totality. It employs a system of representation, a regime of truth, that is structurally similar to realism.'<sup>10</sup> Colonial discourse thus binds subjects and signs together in a false totality, 'in an attempt to produce a sense of wholeness and containment associated with

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<sup>6</sup> Cornelius Collins, "Gathering Facts for the End of the World": Don DeLillo's Archive of Global Turbulence,' *Orbit* 4.2 (2016): <http://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.177>

<sup>7</sup> *Mao II* is absent from my analysis of terrorism in DeLillo, because, as I have argued in Chapter Two, the Lebanese Maoist faction operate mainly as a figure for Western Communists.

<sup>9</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 72.

<sup>10</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2012), 101.

narrative and ideological closure.<sup>11</sup> This comparison, we might surmise, extends the metaphor of narrative as representing the rationalizing, future-oriented drive of imperial capital and the claims of linear advancement or ‘progress’ with which it is accompanied. If *The Names* challenges the imperialism of neat narratives through quotidian divagations, thereby precluding any sense of wholeness or ideological closure, it nevertheless connects the intricacies of ordinary life to the totality of the capitalist world-system within which such imperial narratives unfold.

*The Names* could be accused of relegating the East to the narrative periphery. The terrorists DeLillo focuses on depart from the Orientalist imaginaries that inform the popular image of the terrorist as radically Other, disenfranchised, Middle-Eastern and ‘ineluctably political.’<sup>12</sup> They are educated young people, ‘blondish, some of them blue eyed,’ (one character describes them as ‘Nazi backpackers’).<sup>13</sup> Moreover, in James’ retelling, terrorism is subjugated to the background of his personal story, becoming a vehicle for his epiphany about his emotional detachment and his naïveté about the tentacles of American power that culminates in him discovering that the company he works for is a front for the CIA. This realisation is followed by an assassination attempt on James’ banker friend David Keller. The motives of the terrorist group responsible for the attack are left murky, and it is unclear whether or not the intended target was, in fact, James. Political terrorism primarily enters *The Names* as backdrop; sections of the novel begin with temporal markers such as: ‘This was the summer before crowds attacked the U.S. embassies in Islamabad and Tripoli, before the assassinations of American technicians in Turkey, before Liberia, the executioners on the beach, the stoning of dead bodies, the evacuation of personnel

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<sup>11</sup> Deborah Shapple Spillman, *British Colonial Realism in Africa: Inalienable Objects, Contested Domains* (London: Palgrave, 2012), 9. This gloss does not capture the nuances of Bhabha’s ideas, advancing as it does a simplistic account of realism: naturally, there are forms of ‘realism’ that [‘do] not register the smoothly commodified and rationalised surfaces of capitalist modernity [...but instead register] the manifest incongruities, dislocations and forms of unevenness’ of capitalism. WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 62.

<sup>12</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 40.

<sup>13</sup> DeLillo, *The Names* (London: Picador, 1987), 150; 245.

from the Mainland Bank.’<sup>14</sup> Rather than functioning as exotic window-dressing, these contextualizing gestures point to the novel’s overarching theme of the colonial ‘subdue and codify’ impulse that undergirds the U.S.’ wielding of its core-hegemonic power. This impulse is explicated early in the novel, in a conversation between James, his ex-wife Kathryn, and her boss, the archaeologist Owen Brademas. Owen discusses Henry Rawlinson, the officer of the East India Company who deciphered the Behistun Inscription in Iran, a cliff face that had the same words carved in Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian and is thus considered the Rosetta Stone for cuneiform script. Owen relates how Rawlinson enlisted a Kurdish child to carry out the dangerous task of scaling the cliff face and copying the words from the rock:

‘What kind of story is this and why have I been thinking about it lately?’  
‘It’s a political allegory,’ Kathryn said.

‘Is that what it is? I think it’s a story about how far men will go to satisfy a pattern, or find a pattern, or fit together the elements of a pattern. [...] All the noise and babble and spit of three spoken languages had been subdued and codified, broken down to these wedge-shaped marks. With his grids and lists the decipherer searches out relationships, parallel structures. [...] Is this the scientific face of imperialism? The humane face?’

‘Subdue and codify,’ Kathryn said. ‘How many times have we seen it?’<sup>15</sup>

For Owen, this pattern is apolitical, but Kathryn locates the story in a long tradition of mapping, surveying, excavating, and deciphering other cultures to consolidate power. Elsewhere, *The Names* exposes the continuance of the imperialist project under global capitalism, strikingly evident in U.S.-led oil imperialism, and the U.S.’ neoliberal economic strategies and military interventions in oil-rich peripheries. Sean McCann writes that in *The Names* ‘the overseas projection of American power becomes an extension of the rational “exactitudes” Axton [...] engages in as an underwriter.’<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Anne Longmuir has unpacked the novel’s dialogue with the

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<sup>14</sup> *TN*, 67.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>16</sup> Sean McCann, ‘Training and Vision: Roth, Delillo, Banks, Peck, and the Postmodern Aesthetics of Vocation,’ *Twentieth Century Literature* 53.3 (2007): 298-326, 310.

Iran Hostage Crisis (1979-82), a catastrophic foreign policy failure for the U.S..<sup>17</sup> Andrew Hoberek has argued that *The Names* (along with *White Noise*) can be regarded as ‘a formal response to the failure of the systematic abstractions that governed U.S. foreign policy in the era of modernization theory.’<sup>18</sup> Hoberek deploys Nils Gilman’s conception of modernization as entailing ‘an exaltation of rationalism, science, and expertise as the guide for democratic institutions.’<sup>19</sup> Despite this, Hoberek’s argument is focused on the U.S. *military* strategies, as is the case with McCann and Longmuir. To these interventions, I would add that *The Names* is concerned with giving form to the more nebulous aspects of the U.S.’ expansion of its global power, including structural adjustment programmes, and other trade, investment, and fiscal policies, as carried out through the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organisation, and, from 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement. These ineluctably neoliberal strategies, institutions, and practices represent and enable a continuation of imperial capitalist resource extraction. As Anne McClintock writes, the condition of U.S. foreign aid was that poorer countries ‘export their way to “progress,” cut government spending on education and social services, [...] devalue their currencies, remove trade barriers, and raze their forests to pay their debts.’<sup>20</sup> As always, the interminable drive for capitalist expansion is couched in the language of economic ‘progress.’

James’ expatriate community in Athens epitomises colonialist ‘subdue and codify’ attitudes, participating in what Graham Huggan describes as the ‘systematic assimilation of cultural difference’ that renders ‘people, objects, and places strange even as it domesticates them.’<sup>21</sup> Ann Maitland collects a sexual partner in each country, leading James to venture that hers are ‘love affairs as functions of

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<sup>17</sup> Anne Longmuir, ‘The Language of History: Don DeLillo’s *The Names* and the Iranian Hostage Crisis,’ *Critique* 46.2 (2005): 105-22.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Hoberek, ‘Foreign Objects, or, DeLillo Minimalist,’ *Studies in American Fiction* 37.1 (2010): 101–25, 102.

<sup>19</sup> Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 2-3, qtd. in Hoberek, ‘Foreign,’ 102.

<sup>20</sup> Anne McClintock, “The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term “Post-Colonialism,”” *Social Text* 31/32 (1992): 84-98, 95.

<sup>21</sup> Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001), 13.

geography,' telling her: 'you want to keep something for yourself that isn't a tribal mask or figurine'—of course, such objects constitute exemplary 'exotic' merchandise for Westerners to consume, in the process converting cultural difference into commodities.<sup>22</sup> When Janet Ruffing, a banker's wife, dances in a Greek restaurant in Middle-Eastern belly dancer regalia, James is aroused by the interplay of foreignness and familiarity: 'you were imperfect,' he tells her before coercing her into having sex, 'even deeply flawed, but what a heartrending American body.'<sup>23</sup> The disturbing encounter mirrors the predatory impulse underlying Western powers' twin appetites for foreignness (entering and appropriating 'virgin' territories ripe for resource extraction and labour exploitation) and familiarity (converting 'exotic' spaces into 'modern' free-markets in service of global capital and its need for endless, ever more vampiric expansion). Maitland exhibits a curiously cinematic brand of imperial nostalgia, reveling in the group's constant exchange of anecdotes about conflict-riven, oil-rich countries:

We knew where martial law was in force, where body searches were made, where they engaged in systematic torture, or fired assault rifles into the air at weddings, or abducted and ransomed executives. [...]  
 'It is like the Empire,' said Charles Maitland more than once.  
 'Opportunity, adventure, sunsets, dusty death.'<sup>24</sup>

Charles also bemoans Persia becoming known as Iran (its native name since approximately 1000 BC): 'We grew up with Persia. What a vast picture that name evoked. A vast carpet of sand, a thousand turquoise mosques. A vastness, a cruel glory extending back centuries.'<sup>25</sup> Dot and Dick Borden collect rugs from around the world; the rugs' appeal lies in the geometrically organised 'otherness,' flaunting 'contained and intricate rapture, the desert universe made shapely and complete.'<sup>26</sup> Andreas Eliades, a Greek demagogue who is incensed by the U.S.' financial and

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<sup>22</sup> *TN*, 161.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>24</sup> *TN*, 7.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

strategic support of Turkey, denounces this appropriation of the quotidian as a form of cultural imperialism:

it's only in a crisis that Americans see other people. It has to be an American crisis of course [...] when the dictator falls, when the oil is threatened, then you turn on the television and they tell you where the country is, what the language is, how to pronounce the names of the leaders, what the religion is all about, and maybe you can cut out recipes in the newspaper of Persian dishes<sup>27</sup>

The subdue and codify impulse is also executed through James' work, which facilitates the consolidation of U.S. global power. Responsible for providing reports and analysis about 'turbulent' countries, he begins to think of himself as imposing structure on the unwieldiness of the everyday: 'the streets of Istanbul were data in their own right, the raw force, the unraveling. The rest came from our contacts at the World Bank and various research institutes.'<sup>28</sup> Axton admires his boss Rowser's aptitude for ratiocination: 'Rowser had a gift for numbers and a temperament that enabled him to separate mathematical techniques and actuarial science from the terrifying events he culled from his figures.'<sup>29</sup> Both Axton and Rowser's talents lie in reducing messy, complex data into a coherent narrative, just as generic form organises unevenness and heterogeneity into an efficient narrative line. *The Names* uses generic form, with its capacity to contain and structure, as a figure for U.S. imperialism. Narrative is linked to cultural domination throughout the novel: casting himself in the role of detective, James surmises that the terrorist cult is fascinated by 'the alphabet itself. They were interested in letters, written symbols, fixed in sequence.'<sup>30</sup> James links the murders to the sequential progression of narrative itself, and contains the mystery with the 'highly structured [genre]' of the detective story, which aims 'to reduce the uncanniness of bodily harm to the soothing neutrality of

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 45-6.

<sup>30</sup> *TN*, 30.

rational explanation.<sup>31</sup> James' revelatory moment arrives when he realizes that the cult chooses victims whose initials match those of the settlement in which they will be murdered. 'Initials, names, places. In the emptiness of these moments, in the reason and ease of these sweeping curves, I realized I'd been approaching this point all morning long [...] Jebel Amman / James Axton.'<sup>32</sup> It is significant that James discovers this by studying his map of Amman whilst sitting 'one row from the top' of a Roman theatre in Amman, a product of conquest that provides a view of the entire city.<sup>33</sup> De Certeau depicts the map itself as imperial theatre, as a 'totalizing stage' on which to 'exhibit the products of knowledge, [to] form tables of legible results.'<sup>34</sup> He contends that the fantasy of 'seeing the whole' is bound up with 'the erotics of knowledge,' and affords the 'of totalizing this vastest of human texts.'<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, postcolonial scholars have drawn attention to mapping's use as a colonial tool and text: 'the "reality" represented mimetically by the map not only conforms to a particular version of the world but to a version that is specifically designed to empower its makers.'<sup>36</sup> This notion is reinforced by the fact that James' map transliterates the name of the mountain to 'Jebel Amman', as opposed to the standard transliteration, Jabal Amman. *The Names* is structured by metaphorical connections between the ordering effects of narrative and imperialism.

The opening lines of the novel express the gulf between James' job and his personal ambivalence towards order:

For a long time I stayed away from the Acropolis. It daunted me, that somber rock. I preferred to wander in the modern city, imperfect, blaring. The weight and moment of those worked stones promised to make the business of seeing them a complicated one. So much

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<sup>31</sup> Elana Gomel, 'Written in Blood: Serial Killing and Narratives of Identity,' *Postidentity* 2.1 (1999): 24-71, 25-6.

<sup>32</sup> *TN*, 158.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 157. For writing on how America has modelled itself on the Roman Empire, and imagery evoking the Roman Empire is used to legitimise U.S. soft power and empire-building, see: Niall Ferguson, "An Empire in Denial," *Harvard International Review* 25.3 (2003): 64-69.

<sup>34</sup> Certeau, *Practice*, 121.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>36</sup> Huggan, *Interdisciplinary Measures: Literature and the Future of Postcolonial Studies* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 23.



converges there. It's what we've rescued from the madness. Beauty, dignity, order, proportion.<sup>37</sup>

Whereas James is daunted by the ordering principles that shape the Acropolis, *Ta Onómata's* killings express a wish for fixity. They select a victim based on her/his initials, and wait until that person enters a location with matching letters—for example, Michaelis Kalliambetsos is killed in Mikro Kamini. The murders are an intensification of the symbolic nature of terrorism; like most terrorist attacks, they are 'intended to illustrate or refer to something beyond their immediate target'—in this case, their target being the self-referential nature of language, the arbitrary connection between symbol and meaning.<sup>38</sup> Singh, the leader of the cell, spouts post-structuralist/postmodern clichés when he announces that 'the world has become self-referring.'<sup>39</sup> To rescue language from its post-lapsarian state, the death cult matches the victim's initials and location and carve the letters into the murder weapon, in a misguided attempt to violently reunite signifier and signified. James Berger conceives of the desire 'to reestablish what is imagined to be a perfect language without ambiguity' as being emblematic of terrorism, finding within its 'rigidity and its determination to rediscover and impose a set of single, absolute signifiers [...] a logic of terror and terrorism.'<sup>40</sup>

The project of recovering Eden has also been crucial to conceptions of empire-building, encapsulating the contradictory desires for the aesthetic (finding an untamed wilderness) and instrumental (exploiting its resources).<sup>41</sup> Sharae Deckard's world-ecological study highlights how paradise was 'implicated in the discourses of material exploitation and colonization that originated in the fifteenth century and developed throughout the Enlightenment into the present.' She demonstrates how

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<sup>37</sup> *TN*, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 133.

<sup>39</sup> *TN*, 297.

<sup>40</sup> James Berger, 'Falling Towers and Postmodern Wild Children: Oliver Sacks, Don DeLillo, and Turns Against Language,' *PMLA* 120.2 (2005): 341-361, 342.

<sup>41</sup> See Ian G. Strachan, *Paradise and Plantation: Tourism and Culture in the Anglophone Caribbean* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), particularly Chapter one, 'Paradise and Imperialism,' 17-50.

‘paradisaal topoi’ justified colonial expansion and operated as a structuring metaphor, with literary representations of the East couching images of newly-charted territory in the ‘unfamiliar [...] language of the marvelous [...] to differentiate and organize’ the exotic.<sup>42</sup> Though the terrorist group’s name, *Ta Onómata*, contains an echo of *omertà*, the Mafia code of silence when confronted with the authorities, *Ta Onómata* figure the hegemonic power of imperial capital, which must continually expand its borders and rationalize nature. Their project of limiting the freeplay of the signifier and reinstating language’s referentiality mimics the rationalising logic of imperialism—or state terrorism.

As Tom LeClair has noted, the murders the terrorists carry out are intimately connected with the act of writing: they use ‘the implements of early writers—sharp blades and hammers.’<sup>43</sup> With their connections to the ‘artistic critique’ of 1960s radicalism and writing, the terrorists suggest the capacity of art to rationalize and contain. This point is thrown into sharper relief by Frank Volterra, the novel’s cynical experimental filmmaker. Frank expresses a desire to direct an artistic film about the cult, which will be ‘an essay on film, on what film is, what it means.’<sup>44</sup> But in doing so he will assimilate the mystery of the terrorists into the Western genre, using the desert as a tabula rasa onto which he can inscribe his own narrative about the group:

People talk about classic westerns. The classic thing has always been the space, the emptiness. The lines are drawn for us. All we have to do is insert the figures, men in dusty boots, certain faces [...] The space is the desert, the movie screen, the strip of film, however you see it.<sup>45</sup>

Frank’s remarks accord with Jane P. Tompkins’ positioning of the desert in the Western as a colonial wilderness to be tamed: ‘the apparent emptiness of the desert makes the land desirable not only as a space to be filled but also as a stage on which

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<sup>42</sup> Sharae Deckard, *Paradise Discourse, Imperialism, and Globalization: Exploiting Eden* (London: Routledge, 2009) 6.

<sup>43</sup> Tom LeClair, *In the Loop: DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 192.

<sup>44</sup> *TN*, 199.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

to perform and as a territory to master.’<sup>46</sup> For Frank, the desert is coded as paradigmatically American, the domain of ‘classic westerns.’ But this coding is problematic, not least because in 1980 the Iranian desert provided the arena for the U.S.’ abortive mission to resolve the Iranian hostage crisis, Operation Eagle Claw, a devastating setback in the frontier fantasy of oil imperialism. The deterministic reading of the Western as imperialist allegory has calcified into cliché, but Frank appears unaware of the connection between the ideology of the Western and Frank’s film’s domestication of the Other.

**‘The grand ordering imperial vision overrun by the surge and pelt of daily life’**

*The Names’* interest in deforming the conventions of genre fiction and refusing the separation between imperialism and the ordinary comes to the fore in its penultimate chapter. As the novel approaches its denouement, James meets with Owen Brademas, who has been pursuing *Ta Onómata*. Before he found the cult in the Thar desert, Owen’s travels in India have taken him to the outskirts of various Indian settlements: Poona; Surat; Mysore; Madras; Sarnath; Udaipur; Rajsamand; Kurukshetra. We have reason to suspect that Owen is going to offer us crucial insights into the terrorist cell, but the story he tells takes a long time to approach its climax, and is fraught with interruptions, digressions, and superfluous details. As Owen begins his narrative, he tells James that a professor has informed him that, in India, ‘if he asked someone for details of his life, the man might automatically include details from the lives of dead relatives.’<sup>47</sup> This framing is interesting; DeLillo’s research notes for *The Names* feature a clipping of a newspaper article on Indian perceptions about time, in which the psychologist Sudhir Kakar explains that ‘ostensibly chronological, factual personal accounts often include details from the lives of long deceased but memorable relatives revered aloud by the family during the person’s own youth.’ The

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<sup>46</sup> Jane P. Tompkins, *West of Everything: the Inner Life of Westerns* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 74.

<sup>47</sup> Tompkins, *West of Everything*, 279.

article adds that ‘Mr. Kakar noted that there is less of the driving, coercive quality to time for the Hindu than for a Westerner,’ and elsewhere claims that ‘much of Indian life, even in large cities, reflects a lack of awareness that time even exists.’<sup>48</sup> The essentialising impulses of the article aside, it may have inspired DeLillo to set the temporal logic of digression against the forward thrust of the thriller. Rather than depicting Indian temporality as separated from capitalist time, however, *The Names* challenges capitalism’s supposed efficiency and narratives of linearity and development through endless expansion.

The anthropological insight of the professor Owen meets immediately calls to mind *Tristram Shandy*, with its ludic disorderliness and refusal of neat realist conventions, and, of course, the narrator beginning his account of his life before he is born. The exactitudes of conventional realism are, in both texts, exploded: Owen’s narrative, as focalized through and ‘remembered’ by James, is unrealistically and excessively detailed, vastly beyond the remit of the Barthesian reality effect that signifies reality itself. The passage is replete with tableaux of daily life in various parts of India, many of which appear in the form of lengthy lists; at one point Owen observes ‘everything in India was a list’:<sup>49</sup>

The cows had painted horns. Blue horns in one part of the countryside, red or yellow or green in another. People who painted cows’ horns had something to say to him, Owen felt. There were cows with tricolor horns. There was a woman in a magenta sari who carried a brass water pot on her head, the garment and the container being the precise colors of the mingled bougainvillea that covered the wall behind her, the dark reddish purple, the tainted gold. He would reflect. These moments were a “control” – a design at the edge of the human surge. The white-clad men with black umbrellas, the women at the river beating clothes in accidental rhythms, hillsides of saris drying in the sun. The epic material had to refine itself in these delicate aquarelles. Or he needed to see it as such. The mind’s little infinite. India made him feel like a child. He was a child again, maneuvering for a window seat on the crowded

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<sup>48</sup> DeLillo, ‘The Names: Research,’ *Container* 43.1, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas; Tyler Marshall, ‘For India’s Hindus, Time Still Is Not Money,’ *International Herald Tribune*, 30 January, 1981, 6.

<sup>49</sup> *TN*, 282.

bus. A dead camel, stiff legs jutting. Women in a road crew wearing wide cotton skirts, nose rings, hair ornaments, heavy jewelry dangling from their ears, repairing broken asphalt by hand.<sup>50</sup>

Rather than exhibiting clear utility, as in a thriller, the details in the list are semiotically opaque. Owen seeks to impose a ‘control’ upon the bougainvillea, but the plant evades clear symbolism. Named after the colonial explorer Louis Antoine de Bougainville, who discovered it in Brazil in 1768, it was introduced to India by Kew Gardens in 1860.<sup>51</sup> Richard Drayton’s compelling history of Kew outlines how it came to function as ‘a great botanical exchange house for the empire,’ facilitating the ‘movement of economic plants between the Eastern and Western hemispheres, and of ornamental plants between the North and South.’<sup>52</sup> It thus formed a crucial part of the wider enterprise of codifying, dominating, and systematizing nature through the production of cash-crops (cinchona in India, for example) and transplanting lucrative crops to the colonies (such as the East India Company transferring Chinese tea to Darjeeling and Assam to circumvent the Chinese export monopoly).<sup>53</sup> However, bougainvillea is an imperfect symbol for the imperial instrumentalization of nature, as it is an *ornamental* rather than economic plant that was transported to the colonies. It therefore flouts the principles of instrumentalism that *The Names* indicts as embodying imperial-capitalist logic. Even if we dismiss the above as a semiotic stretch, bougainvillea nevertheless encapsulates the passage’s curious dialectic of significance and insignificance, instrumentality and ornamentality, utility and uselessness.

Similarly, the lavish colour imagery of the list resists symbolic recuperation. World literature and cinema has a tendency to depict peripheral countries as colourful, vibrant, and disorganised, thus romanticizing and othering them. Cultural

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<sup>50</sup> *TN*, 278.

<sup>51</sup> Richa Srivastava, Sudhir Shukla, Arvind Son, and Anil Kumar, ‘RAPD-based genetic relationships in different Bougainvillea cultivars,’ *Crop Breeding and Applied Biotechnology* 9 (2009): 154-163, 154.

<sup>52</sup> Richard Drayton, *Nature’s Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the “Improvement” of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), xiii.

<sup>53</sup> Drayton, *Nature’s Government*, 207-21; Jayeeta Sharma, ‘British science, Chinese skill and Assam tea: Making empire’s garden,’ *Indian Economic Social History Review* 43.4 (2006): 429-455.

representations of India are often marketed to Western audiences in a way that portrays India as replete with ‘magic, mysteries, and wonders.’<sup>54</sup> However, here, colour is held in a tight relationship with mundanity, and is mobilised to resist imperializing discourse. Our perceptions of the sensory data of colour are both individualized and culturally contingent—as Natasha Eaton writes, colour possesses ‘blurry indexicality.’<sup>55</sup> The passage’s emphasis on colour thus poses a challenge to the instrumentality of imperial domination. For colonial administrators and scholars, empirical studies of colour symbolism were considered ‘a useful tool for organising what otherwise might be seen as the infinite complexities of Indian life,’ but such attempts posed difficulties owing to colour’s inconsistent symbolism and multivalency.<sup>56</sup> Though he senses ‘a control’ or ‘design at the edge of the human surge’ in the coincidence of a woman’s sari matching the bougainvillea, Owen cannot decipher the colours. He wishes to neutralise the bewildering spectrum that lies before him by conceptualizing the ‘epic material’ before him as ‘delicate aquarelles’—that is, watercolour paintings. The indeterminacy of the quotidian militates against what Lefebvre terms ‘the colonization of the everyday.’<sup>57</sup>

This digressive moment in *The Names* should not be regarded as portraying the everyday as an isolated realm that slips through the net of institutions. To do so would be to exoticize everyday life in India, and represent it as separated from the capitalist world-system, thus enacting what Benita Parry terms ‘a regressive search for an aboriginal and intact condition/tradition from which a proper sense of historicity is occluded.’<sup>58</sup> Huggan defines exoticism as a ‘semiotic circuit that oscillates between the opposite poles of strangeness and familiarity,’ retaining enough mystery not to be totally domesticated—this would be an apt description of my conception of the everyday, and would seem to condemn *The Names*

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<sup>54</sup> Huggan, *Postcolonial Exotic*, 81.

<sup>55</sup> Natasha Eaton, *Colour, Art and Empire: Visual Culture and the Nomadism of Representation* (New York: Palgrave, 2013), 2.

<sup>56</sup> Eaton, *Colour*, 116.

<sup>57</sup> Lefebvre, *Critique*, ii., 11.

<sup>58</sup> Benita Parry, *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (London: Routledge, 2004), 38.

representation of India. However, I believe that *The Names* maintains a sense of the dialectical interrelatedness of the abstract world-system and the particularity of the everyday, therefore avoiding homogenizing, domesticating or romanticizing the parts of India it depicts. McCann and Szalay have identified a recourse to magic, mystery, and irrationality in *The Names*, which they argue is posed as a form of resistance to instrumental reason.<sup>59</sup> Such a move would be reactionary, of course, as it would advocate individualized acts of resistance that would be meaningless in the larger framework of the capitalist world-system, and would find its analogue in the celebration of hybridity and resistant differences that once dominated postcolonial studies, as discussed in the introduction.

Instead of resorting to Orientalist mystification, *The Names* registers the friction *between* the capitalist world-system and ordinary life by depicting the daily rhythms that unsettle the temporal logic of capitalism. As Lefebvre writes in his study of rhythms and the everyday:

rhythm seems natural, spontaneous, with no law other than its unfurling. Yet rhythm, always particular, (music, poetry, dance, gymnastics, work, etc.) always implies a measure. Everywhere where there is rhythm there is *measure*, which is to say law, calculated and expected obligation, a project.<sup>60</sup>

The ritual of ‘women at the river beating clothes in accidental rhythms’ moves pendulously between the temporal logic of capitalism (as embodied by rhythm) and digression (the accidental). Though the ritual most likely constitutes unpaid domestic labour, and thus cannot be severed from capitalism, the aleatory processes of the body rub up against it. The quotidian routine recalls earlier scenes in the novel in which men in Greece beat octopuses against a wall, and women beat rugs:

The women were in red and parrot green, beating in a single motion. [...] The repeated stroke reminded him of something, the Greek fisherman he’d seen a dozen times walloping an octopus on a rock to

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<sup>59</sup> 451.

<sup>60</sup> Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, and Everyday Life*, trans. Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 18.

make the flesh tender. A stroke that denoted endless toil, the upthrust arm, the regulated violence of the blow. What else did it remind him of? Not something he'd seen. Something else, something he'd kept at the predawn edge.<sup>61</sup>

Kate Soper identifies a fear of ethnocentrism that precipitates 'a refusal of the "we" which lurks in the unifying discourse of the dialectic: a rejection of all attempts to find a sameness in otherness.'<sup>62</sup> *The Names* does not fall prey to this: it depicts sameness *and* difference. With its repeated depiction of manual labour, *The Names* registers the constitutive unevenness of capitalism by connecting peripheral economies to peripheries within the economic core. It thereby circumnavigates what Soper terms 'resistance to all synthesizing discourse,' and does not endorse 'an assertion of an indefinite and multiplying plurality of particulars and specificities.'<sup>63</sup> Just as the everyday operates as a dialectic, the digression in *The Names* maintains a sense of the specificity of daily life in India, whilst connecting the local to global capitalism through the echoed ritual. As I have argued in Chapter Two, DeLillo's use of the everyday enables what Jean-Luc Nancy terms the 'exposure of singularities, in which both sameness and singularity are maintained. The everyday's oscillations between the local and global allow *The Names* to stage an encounter with alterity that does not amount to a form of colonization.

### **The Parthenon**

As *The Names* draws to a close, James finally visits the Parthenon, and relishes his discovery of 'a human feeling [...] deeper than the art and mathematics embodied in the structure,' manifested in the heteroglossic clash of conversations.<sup>64</sup> The Parthenon has operated as an enduring symbol of democracy, with obvious echoes in the neoclassical government buildings and monuments in Washington, D.C., but

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<sup>61</sup> *TN*, 283.

<sup>62</sup> Kate Soper, 'Feminism, Humanism, Postmodernism,' in *Troubled Pleasures: Writings on Politics, Gender and Hedonism* (London: Verso, 1990), 228-245, 229.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *TN*, 369.



here the geometric precision provides a figure for the violent, concrete rationality that the novel's digressions and ordinary language push against. McCann and Szalay charge this moment with performing a New Leftist celebration of irrationality and individualized resistance. 'Language,' they surmise, 'assumes a magical and anti-authoritarian power only to degree that it has nothing to say.'<sup>65</sup> David Harvey's critique of postmodernism can also be read as a critique of heteroglossia:

postmodernist thinking immediately shuts off those other voices from access to more universal sources of power by ghettoizing them within an opaque otherness, the specificity of this or that language game. It thereby disempowers those voices (of women, ethnic and racial minorities, colonized peoples, the unemployed, youth, etc.) in a world of lop-sided power relations. The language game of a cabal of international bankers may be impenetrable to us, but that does not put it on a par with the equally impenetrable language of inner-city blacks from the standpoint of power relations<sup>66</sup>

However, I would urge a reading of the Parthenon scene that is framed by James' previous observations about ordinary language:

Conversation is life, language is the deepest being. We see the patterns repeat, the gestures drive the words. [...] Every conversation is a shared narrative, a thing that surges forward [...] This is a way of speaking that takes such pure joy in its own openness and ardor that we begin to feel these people are discussing language itself. What pleasure in the simplest greeting. It's as though one friend says to one another, 'How good it is to say "How are you."' The other replying, 'When I answer "I am well and how are you," what I really mean is that I'm delighted to have a chance to say these familiar things—they bridge the lonely distances.'<sup>67</sup>

Amy Hungerford has written that DeLillo posits small talk as a kind of 'mystical language beneficial to human life rather than destructive of it,' a way language 'can

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<sup>65</sup> Sean McCann and Michael Szalay, 'Do You Believe in Magic? Literary Thinking after the New Left,' *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 18.2 (2005): 435-468, 451.

<sup>66</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 117.

<sup>67</sup> *TN*, 52-3.

remain beyond reason and yet respect—even celebrate—human life.’<sup>68</sup> Whilst it is true that DeLillo is fascinated by the aesthetics of unintelligible language—that of the Latin Mass, speaking in tongues, insular slang—conversation is not portrayed as being ‘beyond reason’ here. The ordinary conversations are intelligible, but they exemplify the inherently polysemic and bifurcating nature of language. They thus exemplify Bakhtin’s influential conception of dialogism, of which conversation is the paradigmatic form:

no living word relates to its object in a singular way: between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object [...] The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue.<sup>69</sup>

Bakhtin contrasts dialogism with totalitarian, ‘unitary’ language, or monologism, which operates as a

force for overcoming [the living word’s] heteroglossia, imposing specific limits to it, guaranteeing a certain maximum of mutual understanding and crystalizing into a real, although still relative, unity—the unity of the reigning conversational (everyday) and literary language, “correct language.” A common unitary language is a system of linguistic norms.

However, Bakhtin collapses the binary between dialogism and monologism, positing that this system of norms are ‘the generative forces of linguistic life, forces that struggle to overcome the heteroglossia of language.’<sup>70</sup> As in *The Names*, language encapsulates the dialectic of the systemic and resistance to it. As James notes, conversation is a ‘shared narrative’—one that digresses and diverges from the actual signification of the words—just as the India passage disrupts the thriller narrative.

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<sup>68</sup> Amy Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 68.

<sup>69</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, ‘Discourse in the Novel,’ in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 259-422. 276.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 270; 305.

The Parthenon, too, functions as a symbol of ordering, or what De Certeau would call the ‘grid of discipline’:

The temple is cordoned by ropes but this mingled debris is all over the ground [...] I stop often, listening to the guides speak German, French, Japanese, accented English. This is the peristyle, that is the architrave, those are the triglyphs [...] Beyond the retaining wall the great city spreads, ringed by mountains, heat struck, steeped in calamity. The smoke of small fires hangs on the hills, motionless, fixed there. The breathless rim, cinders falling from the sky. Paralysis [...] Bombings will become commonplace, car bombings, firebombings of offices and department stores.<sup>71</sup>

Apocalyptic flourishes and heteroglossia conjure the Tower of Babel, but James takes pleasure in the interplay of different voices, concluding ‘our offering is language.’<sup>72</sup> Rather than extolling the imperialist drive towards fixity, or positing an uncritical celebration of difference, *The Names* revels in the interplay between the two, thereby exposing and exploiting the inherent contradictions of capital. Although James seems to be indirectly quoting the architectural information that the guides provide, the phrase ‘this is the peristyle, that is the architrave, those are the triglyphs’ describes not merely the Parthenon but language as well. Like the Parthenon, language is not ‘aloof, rational, timeless, pure’—the word architrave, a ‘barbarous compound’ of Greek and Latin hints at language’s hybridity and reshapable qualities.<sup>73</sup> These qualities are embodied in James’ son Tap’s non-fiction novel about Owen, which James rereads after his meeting with Owen:

They were full of small incidents, moments of discovery, things the young hero sees and wonders about. But nothing mattered so much on this second reading as a number of spirited misspellings. I found these mangled words exhilarating. He’d made them new again, made me see

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<sup>71</sup> *TN*, 330.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 331.

<sup>73</sup> Walter W. Skeat, *The Concise Dictionary of English Etymology* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1993), 16.

how they worked, what they really were. They were ancient things, secret, reshapable.<sup>74</sup>

We can see these ‘spirited misspellings’ for ourselves in the excerpt that appears at the end of the novel. Focalised through ‘Orville Benton,’ it reimagines Owen’s failure to speak in tongues. Glossolalia becomes ‘glossylalya’; terror is ‘terroure’; ‘the gift was not his, the whole language of the spirit which was greater than Latin or French was not to be seized in his pityfull mouth.’<sup>75</sup> The phonetic spellings, as well as the concretization of pity, or the notion of being pitiable—it literally *fills* Orville’s mouth—emphasise the materiality of the words, allowing them to recall the immediacy of conversation.

Though Tap’s Faulknerian text would appear to embody Kristeva’s conception of revolutionary avant-garde art, which shatters the ‘stases of the signifying process’ and therefore allows us to imagine radically different possibilities, its inclusion is gestural, and it cannot be considered as an artistic statement of intent.<sup>76</sup> The Parthenon itself provides the model for DeLillo’s formal strategies: wary of revolutionary politics, DeLillo does not explode the grid of discipline, but instead he uses ‘small tactics’ to resist it. Describing his process of writing *Underworld*, he ruminates:

Small tactics, minor maneuvers. I used lowercase letters for such trademarked terms as Styrofoam, Velcro, Plexiglas—but why? I didn’t realize until the book was nearly done that I wanted to unincorporate these words, subvert their official status. In a novel about conflict on many levels, this was the primal clash—the tendency of the language to work in opposition to the enormous technology of war that dominated the era and shaped the book’s themes.

The writer sets his pleasure, his eros, his creative delight in language and his sense of self-preservation against the vast and uniform Death that history tends to fashion as its most enduring work.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> *TN*, 313.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 336; 338.

<sup>76</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 150.

<sup>77</sup> DeLillo, ‘The Power of History,’ *The New York Times*, 7 September, 1997.

*The Names* poses the dialectical qualities of the everyday as a form of resistance to the ‘enormous technology of war,’ the ‘cinders falling from the sky’ behind the Parthenon. With its commitment to a dialectic of structure and digression, *The Names* is unable to imagine radical resistance to the capitalist world-system, but it nevertheless locates rich utopian potential in the everyday.

### 9/11 and ordinary life

The everyday has become a vexed category in critical commentary on 9/11 literature. American ‘9/11 novels’ frequently come under fire for neglecting geopolitical context in favour of realist narratives centering on the domestic sphere and the endurance of mundane family life in the wake of the event. Richard Gray has indicted the politics of novels that turn to the domestic, arguing that:

Many of the texts that try to bear witness to contemporary events vacillate [...] between large rhetorical gestures acknowledging trauma and retreat into domestic detail. The link between the two is tenuous, reducing a turning point in national and international history to little more than a stage in a sentimental education.<sup>78</sup>

*Falling Man*, Gray argues, ‘simply assimilate[s] the unfamiliar into familiar structures. Consequently, for him, ‘the crisis is, in every sense of the word, domesticated.’<sup>79</sup> Gray’s argument rests on the assumption that the realm of the domestic can be separated from geopolitics. As Jason W. Moore has written, ‘finance capital in the neoliberal era has penetrated everyday life as never before and, in so doing, has sought to remake human and extra-human nature in its own image.’<sup>80</sup> As I shall demonstrate, *Falling Man* gestures towards the ways in which neoliberal financialisation contributed to the conditions of possibility for 9/11, and motivated the invasion of Iraq that followed. Accordingly, *Falling Man*’s domesticity registers

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<sup>78</sup> Richard Gray, *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2011), 30.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Moore, interview with Tom Keefer, ‘Wall Street is a Way of Organizing Nature,’ *Upping the Anti: A Journal of Theory and Action*, 12 (2011): 39-53, 44.

how the reascendence of financialisation during the neoliberal era has ‘extended into the very heart of productive capital and household reproduction in North American and other core zones.’<sup>81</sup>

Rachel Greenwald Smith has more incisively critiqued what she perceives as the conservatism of literary responses to 9/11. Her analysis attends to the intersection of form and politics, and examines responses to 9/11 that she considers creatively innovative but ideologically reactionary. Unsurprisingly, Jonathan Safran Foer’s mawkish *Incredibly Loud and Extremely Close* (2005) is in her crosshair: despite its ‘experimental’ use of photographs, the novel’s innovations are all geared towards representing the traumatized consciousness of a child whose father was killed by the attack on the World Trade Center. For Greenwald Smith, this ‘leads to a reading of the event that is compatible only with a highly limited historical outlook, one that sees the events of September 11 as isolated from any larger geopolitical frame.’<sup>82</sup> Indeed, so-called ‘trauma narratives’ are decidedly individualistic—the representational challenge is positioned as the pain of the individual rather than the conditions of possibility that led to the attacks.

For Greenwald Smith, Foer’s novel is one of many 9/11 novels that substitute ‘formal novelty for conceptual novelty’ and therefore embody market logic.<sup>83</sup> Curiously, *Falling Man* appears only fleetingly in her analysis, and even though it is one of the novels she cites as experimental, there is insufficient discussion to substantiate this claim. On the contrary, American responses to 9/11 have been marked by their reluctance to experiment; I would point to the conventional realism of Ken Kalfus’ *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* (2006), Claire Messud’s *The Emperor’s Children* (2006), Jay McInerney’s *The Good Life* (2006), and Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland* (2008). All of these writers were condemned for their lack of ambition and overriding focus on ‘ordinary’ themes, and charged with using the

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<sup>81</sup> Moore, ‘Cheap Food and Bad Money: Food, Frontiers, and Financialization in the Rise and Demise of Neoliberalism,’ *Review: A Journal of the Fernand Braudel Center* 33.2/3 (2012): 225-261, 226; 234.

<sup>82</sup> Rachel Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 65.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

event as a backdrop for anatomies of the ailing marriages and careers of middle-class New Yorkers. In the sections that follow, I will unpick the politics of *Falling Man's* turn to the ordinary, arguing that DeLillo's decision to oppose the shock of Islamic terrorism but not the Shock and Awe measures implemented by the U.S. marks a departure from the bracingly political use of the everyday in *The Names*.

Why was 9/11 met with such safe literary responses? To clarify this, it is necessary to rehearse debates surrounding 9/11 and postmodernism. For some commentators, 9/11 was the epitome of postmodernism, an unreal restaging of a Hollywood disaster film, experienced by most as a symbolic media spectacle, through endlessly looped television footage of the towers collapsing. With grinding predictability, Baudrillard designated the event as hyperreal:

The terrorist violence here is not, then, a blowback of reality, any more than it is a blowback of history. It is not 'real.' In a sense, it is worse: it is symbolic. Violence in itself may be perfectly banal and inoffensive. Only symbolic violence is generative of singularity. And in this singular event, in this Manhattan disaster movie, the twentieth century's two elements of mass fascination are combined: the white magic of the cinema and the black magic of terrorism; the white light of the image and the black light of terrorism.<sup>84</sup>

Žižek, too, commented on the cinematic nature of the attacks, noting their resemblance to visions of destruction in *Escape from New York* and *Independence Day*: 'the unthinkable which happened was the object of fantasy, so that, in a way, America got what it fantasized about, and that was the biggest surprise.' He warns, however, against 'play[ing] a pseudo-postmodern game of reducing the WTC collapse to just another media spectacle.'<sup>85</sup> In fact, some commentators were not only hostile to postmodern readings of the event, but believed that 9/11 signaled the death of postmodernism. Writing for the *New York Times*, Edward Rothstein claimed that the terrorist attacks pose a 'challenge' to postmodernism's relativism: 'this destruction

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<sup>84</sup> Jean Baudrillard, 'The Spirit of Terrorism,' in *The Spirit of Terrorism and Other Essays*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2003), 1-34, 30.

<sup>85</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (London: Verso, 2002), 17.

seems to cry out for a transcendent ethical perspective.<sup>86</sup> Similarly, a *TIME* journalist suggested that ‘one good thing’ could be salvaged from the rubble: postmodernists could no longer proclaim that ‘nothing was real.’<sup>87</sup> Such views indicate that 9/11 was an event that violently disabused us of postmodern notions by being undeniably, ‘obscenely real.’<sup>88</sup> Though such critiques underscore what Susan Sontag vituperatively calls the ‘breathtaking provincialism’ of speaking ‘of reality becoming a spectacle,’ or of postmodern spectacle suddenly ‘becoming’ material reality, they are equally complicit in this provincialism.<sup>89</sup> One has to wonder why no suffering that occurred before 9/11 was so decidedly ‘real.’ Similarly, novelists and literary critics sounded the death knell for postmodern *literature* as well as interpretation; James Wood expressed a hope that 9/11 would signal the end of ludic postmodern play and experimentation, and usher in an age of novels that tell us not “how the world works” but “how somebody felt about something.”<sup>90</sup> Of course, despite abandoning formal innovation, such insular novels would inevitably retreat into what Greenwald describes as ‘sentiments that support the emotional and political status quo.’<sup>91</sup>

### Thinking in straight lines

I wish to posit that *Falling Man*'s turn to the ordinary betrays a politically-motivated impulse to divorce the novel from the avant-garde aesthetics of shock, which have been co-opted by the spectacle of terrorism. As I have shown, the ramifications of ‘terrorist chic’ resound throughout DeLillo’s work, from the aforementioned hipster militants in ‘The Uniforms,’ to the ‘Nazi backpackers’ in *The Names*, to a Lebanese nightclub in *Mao II* in which ‘a champagne cork shot out of a bottle about every forty

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<sup>86</sup> Edward Rothstein, ‘Connections: Attacks on U.S. Challenge the Perspectives of Postmodern True Believers,’ *New York Times*, 22 September 2001.

<sup>87</sup> Philip Hammond, *Media, War and Postmodernity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 1.

<sup>88</sup> Qtd. in Alex Houen, *Terrorism and Modern Literature, from Joseph Conrad to Ciaran Carson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 2.

<sup>89</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2004), 98.

<sup>90</sup> James Wood, ‘Tell me how does it feel?’ *Guardian*, 6 October 2001.

<sup>91</sup> Greenwald Smith, 67.



seconds' and 'there were fashion references everywhere, women wearing skull jewelry and several young bravos in camouflage sunglasses and pieces of militia gear.'<sup>92</sup> But *Falling Man* domesticates the shocking spectacle, wielding the mundane as a weapon against media-friendly terrorism.

However, it is worth pointing out that the attacks served as legitimatization for Western military forces' use of shock in Iraq. Though the campaign was presented as a democracy-building exercise, it was, as Naomi Klein shows, a continuation of the U.S.' use of economic shocks across the neoliberal era, specifically (and most spectacularly) via the IMF's structural adjustment programmes. Klein contends that the 2003 invasion of Iraq by forces from the U.S., UK, Australia, Spain, and Poland 'marked the ferocious return to the early techniques of the free-market crusade—the use of ultimate shock to forcibly wipe out and erase all obstacles to the construction of model corporatist states free from all interference.'<sup>93</sup> It was, of course, Shock and Awe that informed the strategy for the invasion, a military doctrine that employed spectacular and overwhelming displays of force to decimate enemies' resolve. The 'genuine quest for innovation has the potential for revolutionary change,' wrote its military strategist authors in 1996, echoing the language of avant-garde experimentalists. They described Shock and Awe as the non-nuclear equivalent of the impact that the atomic weapons dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki had on the Japanese.' They explain:

the impact of [nuclear] weapons was sufficient to transform both the mindset of the average Japanese citizen and the outlook of the leadership through this condition of Shock and Awe. The Japanese simply could not comprehend the destructive power carried by a single airplane. This incomprehension produced a state of awe.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> *MII*, 210-11.

<sup>93</sup> Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine* (London: Penguin, 2008), 331.

<sup>94</sup>Greenwald Smith also connects the shock doctrine to artistic innovation: 'our present moment is therefore characterized by a surprising intimacy between seemingly world-changing catastrophes and the expansion of existing political policies. This historical condition runs parallel to the intimacy we see in Foer's work between seemingly innovative formal experimentation and the creation of sentiments that support the emotional and political status quo.' (67)

In contrast, DeLillo's responses to the attacks turn our attention to the quotidian and unspectacular. 'In the Ruins of the Future,' an essay originally published in *Harper's Magazine's* December 2001 issue, juxtaposes macro-level with the micro-level; DeLillo asserts the need for the '100,000 stories crisscrossing New York, Washington, and the world.' As with counterhistory in his earlier essay 'The Power of History,' DeLillo defines a 'counternarrative' composed of 'the smaller objects and more marginal stories in the sifted ruins of the day.' He asserts the need to set these 'against the massive spectacle' of terror. The essay is replete with DeLillo's characteristic lists, as he depicts Canal Street before the attacks as a joyful mingling of difference:

the panethnic swarm of shoppers, merchants, residents, and passers-by, and the man at the kerbstone doing acupoint massage, and the dreadlocked kid riding his bike on the sidewalk. [...] Here were hardware bargains, car stereos, foam rubber and industrial plastics, the tattoo parlour and the pizza parlour.<sup>95</sup>

However, rather than mediating on the relationship between American everyday life and, say, the geopolitical relations in which 'industrial plastics' are enmeshed, the essay wields the unruliness of the quotidian as a weapon against the reductive, spectacular logic of terror. Terrorism is defined in opposition to the heterogeneity of the ordinary: 'In the Ruins of the Future' echoes DeLillo's famous phrase from *White Noise* and *Libra*: 'the terrorist, planted in a Florida town, pushing his supermarket trolley, nodding to his neighbour, lives in a far narrower format. This is his edge, his strength. Plots reduce the world. He builds a plot around his anger and our indifference.'<sup>96</sup> Terrorism is represented as an assault on the American ordinary.

In its depictions of the figure of the terrorist, *Falling Man*, too, upholds this binary, rather than entertaining the notion that the capitalist abundance on which the American ordinary depends has created the conditions of possibility for Islamic terrorism. DeLillo returns to the scene of the supermarket when portraying

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<sup>95</sup> DeLillo, 'In the Ruins of the Future,' *Guardian*, Saturday, 22 December 2001.

<sup>96</sup> DeLillo, 'Ruins.'

Hammad, a fictional member of the Hamburg Cell, the terrorist group that carried out 9/11, residing in Nokomis, Florida, before the hijackings. The suburban imagery is overlain with eschatological gloom; whilst driving a street, Hammad recalls lines from the Koran:

*Never have We destroyed a nation whose term of life was not ordained beforehand.*

This entire life, this world of lawns to water and hardware stacked on endless shelves was total, forever, illusion. In the camp on the windy plain they were shaped into men. They fired weapons and set off explosives. They received instruction in the highest jihad, which is to make blood flow, their blood and that of others.<sup>97</sup>

The American quotidian is juxtaposed with the ancient and brutal material realities of jihad in order to set up an opposition between inauthenticity and authenticity that indicates Hammad's estrangement from the everyday. The flat descriptions of the everyday are reminiscent of Baudrillard's *America*, especially its survey of the 'ravishing hyperrealism' of Santa Barbara, where supermarkets, house plants, and soft furnishings all somehow signify death: 'the microwave, the waste disposal, the orgasmic elasticity of the carpets: this soft, resort-style civilization irresistibly evokes the end of the world.'<sup>98</sup> As we have seen, a postmodernist reading of the ordinary as sheer surface is frequently associated with violence in DeLillo. By satirising Hammad's estrangement from *American* daily life, however, *Falling Man* propounds a normative conception of the ordinary.

Whereas in *The Names* DeLillo gestures towards the complex webs of relations connecting the particular and general, the links Hammad draws are parodically deterministic and hyperbolic, rendering DeLillo's representation reactionary. Hammad sees: 'wrong-eyed men and women laughing on TV, their military forces defiling the Land of the Two Holy Places'; 'these people jogging in the park, world domination. These old men who sit in beach chairs, veined white

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<sup>97</sup> *FM*, 173.

<sup>98</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London: Verso, 1989), 31.

bodies and baseball caps, they control our world. He wonders if they think of this, ever. He wonders if they see him standing here, clean-shaven, in tennis sneakers.<sup>99</sup> As in 'In the Ruins of the Future,' the terrorist's life narrows: 'Plot closed the world to the slenderest line of sight, where everything converges to a point.'<sup>100</sup> Peter Brooks has characterized the literary plot as 'the very organizing line, the thread of design, that makes narrative possible because [it is] finite and comprehensible.'<sup>101</sup> As in *The Names*, the formulaic narrative that neatly connects points is coded as totalitarian. To restate this in Deleuzeian terms: what we have here is the 'molar line,' which organizes, stratifies and fixes subjects in relation to space and power—as opposed to the logic of the line of flight, on which *The Names* operates, which undoes and 'explodes' fixity, forming semiotic chains and webs of power, extending political possibilities rather than delimiting them.<sup>102</sup>

This is underwritten by the terrorists' monologic conception of language and text. Hammad's initial ambivalence towards the attacks is quashed by the devoutly religious Amir, who is based on Mohamed Mohamed el-Amir Awad el-Sayed Atta (more widely known as Mohammed Atta), the leader of the Hamburg Cell and hijacker-pilot of the plane that crashed into the North Tower:

Amir thought clearly, in straight lines, direct and systematic.

Amir spoke in his face.

[...] There is no sacred law against what we are going to do. This is not suicide in any meaning or interpretation of the word. It is only something long written. We are finding the way already chosen for us.<sup>103</sup>

In DeLillo's responses to 9/11, terrorist logic adopts straight lines, rather than the lines of flight of the '100,000 stories crisscrossing New York, Washington, and the

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<sup>99</sup> *FM*, 175; 173.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>101</sup> Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 4.

<sup>102</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 221-4.

<sup>103</sup> *FM*, 175.

world.’<sup>104</sup> Matters of interpretation are foregrounded earlier in the novel, when the cell read the infamous Sword Verses of the Koran, with intent to ‘become one mind.’<sup>105</sup> With their injunction to ‘fight those who do not believe in Allah,’ the verses have been regarded as a justification for jihadism—in bin Laden’s last will and testament, he declared: ‘the verses of the sword permeated every cell in my heart.’<sup>106</sup> Yet the Sword Verses are emblematic of polyvalence: Koranic exegesis scholars have argued that they are abrogated by the 116 peaceful verses in the Koran, that they argue for *defensive* jihad rather than offensive, and that the injunction refers only to its specific context and Muhammad’s battles to seize control of the Arabian peninsula.<sup>107</sup> DeLillo represents Islamism as supremely reductive, flattening out the polysemy of the Koran, which is later mirrored in Hammad’s reduction of the heterogeneity of the everyday to a single signification. It is not unimaginable that Islamist terrorist ideology would hinge on narrow understandings of the Koran and elide its ambiguity. However, in order to indict the reductivism of Islamism, DeLillo poses an American national ordinary as its foil. Rather than exposing the interplay of the ordinary and abstract through formal strategies associated with the everyday elsewhere in DeLillo’s work, such as listing and excessive description, *Falling Man* establishes a false dichotomy between the democratic West and oppressive Islam. Again, we could clarify this opposition by formulating it in Bakhtinian terms, with the ordinary standing in for dialogism—subversive, polyphonic, polysemic, democratic—and Islamism figured as monologic, ‘single and unitary,’ and totalitarian.

### **‘Empty, self-involved, bourgeois’**

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<sup>104</sup> DeLillo, ‘Ruins.’

<sup>105</sup> *FM*, 83.

<sup>106</sup> Osama bin Laden, ‘Bin Laden’s Supplication (14 December 2001),’ in *Jihad: Bin Laden in His Own Words: Declarations, Interviews, and Speeches*, ed. Brad K. Berner (New Delhi: Atlantic, 2007), 133-6, 133.

<sup>107</sup> Liyakat Takim, ‘Holy Peace or Holy War: Tolerance and Co-Existence in the Islamic Juridical Tradition,’ *Islam and Muslim Societies* 3.2 (2007): 159-71, 165.

Though *Falling Man*'s 'terrorist sections' fail to fully entertain or elaborate upon the notion that Western interference was embedded in the rise of Islamic terrorism, the domestic scenes in New York adumbrate the links between the Western ordinary and international terror. If the artistic model for *Underworld* is Brueghel's *The Triumph of Death* (c. 1562), with its terrifyingly vivid and detailed depiction of grand historical forces triumphing over mundane things and rituals, then *Falling Man*'s analogue is to be found in the muted still lifes of the Italian painter Giorgio Morandi. The female



Figure 6 Giorgio Morandi, *Natura mortura* (1956)

protagonist, Lianne, repeatedly looks at her mother Nina's two still lifes, and attends a Morandi exhibition in Chelsea towards the end of the novel. Following a debate regarding the attacks, Lianne and Nina's lover, Martin, discuss one of Morandi's paintings

(most likely one of his 1956 series, see fig. 6), and Martin observes: ‘I’m looking at these objects, kitchen objects but removed from the kitchen, free of the kitchen, the house, everything practical and functioning. [...] I keep seeing the towers in this still life.’<sup>108</sup> Martin perceiving the World Trade Center in Morandi is frequently explained through trauma theory platitudes such as David Brauner’s contention that the shadow of the terrorist event is reflected in ordinary objects ‘to those whose minds are engraved with the experience of 9/11,’ as with Holocaust survivors.<sup>109</sup> Such readings assume that all formal features of the novel can be explained as acting in the service of psychological realism. In doing so, they not only simplify and reify the connections between politics and form, but reduce the novel’s agenda to finding representation for individual trauma rather than connecting the individual’s lived reality to its involution with global politics. Instead, we can read the painting as an aesthetic allegory for the novel’s agenda. Morandi’s arrangement of ordinary objects is ascetic, and, unlike Brueghel’s *The Triumph of Death*, freezes time rather than engaging in narration. Correspondingly, DeLillo’s torrential lists dwindle after *Underworld*, to be replaced by sparser prose and the fixation on arresting and slowing down time seen in *Falling Man*.<sup>110</sup> Later in the novel, Nina explains the mode of attention she believes must be trained upon the paintings:

“When we first knew each other I talked to [Martin] about Giorgio Morandi. Showed him a book. Beautiful still lifes. Form, color, depth. He was just getting started in the business and barely knew Morandi’s name. Went to Bologna to see the work firsthand. Came back saying no, no, no, no. Minor artist. Empty, self-involved, bourgeois. Basically a Marxist critique, this is what Martin delivered.”

“Twenty years later.”

“He sees form, color, depth, beauty.”<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> *FM*, 49.

<sup>109</sup> David Brauner, “‘The days after’ and ‘the ordinary run of hours’: Counternarratives and Double Vision in Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*,” *Review of International American Studies* 3.3-4.1 (2008/9): 72-81, 75.

<sup>110</sup> This interest in freezing time is also evident in also evident in *The Body Artist*, *Cosmopolis*, and *Point Omega*, as we will see in the conclusion.

<sup>111</sup> *FM*, 145.

Here, DeLillo anticipates the critiques that *Falling Man* would be subject to—Michiko Kakutani, for example, rebuked DeLillo for making ‘no effort to situate these two very self-absorbed characters [Keith and Lianne] within a larger mosaic of what happened that September morning.’<sup>112</sup> I would argue, however, that a critique of apolitical readings of the attacks is figured through Nina’s attitude to the paintings. She rejects Martin’s anachronistic reading of the paintings as reflecting the towers:

Architecture, yes, maybe, but coming out of another time entirely, another century, office towers, no. These shapes are not translatable to modern towers, twin towers. It’s work that rejects that kind of extension or projection. It takes you inward, down and in. That’s what I see there, half buried, something deeper than things or the shapes of things.<sup>113</sup>

This attitude is mirrored in her reading of the attacks when she argues with Martin:

“God is great,” she said.

“Forget God. These are matters of history. This is politics and economics. All the things that shape lives, millions of people, dispossessed, their lives, their consciousness.”

“It’s not the history of Western interference that pulls down these societies. It’s their own history, their mentality. They live in a closed world, of choice, of necessity. They haven’t advanced because they haven’t wanted or tried to.”

“They use the language of religion, okay, but this is not what drives them.”<sup>114</sup>

For Nina, both the still life and terrorism operate in a ‘closed world,’ abstracted from geopolitics. The still life genre (or rhopography, from the word *rhopos*, which denotes petty wares or trifles) has been traditionally maligned for ‘its inability to abstract itself from sensuous particulars and attain the level of general ideas,’ and ‘of those things which lack importance, the unassuming material base of life that

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<sup>112</sup> Michiko Kakutani, ‘A Man, a Woman and a Day of Terror,’ *New York Times*, 9 May, 2007.

<sup>113</sup> *FM*, 111.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.



“importance” constantly overlooks.’<sup>115</sup> But Morandi’s *natura mortura* epitomize the interconnectedness of ‘importance’ and *rhopos*. As Siri Hustvedt observes:

This is not an imitation of sensory experience. The diffuse gray light that illuminates these paintings would never produce such blackness. Morandi has invented it, and the recurring black and deep gray places in the paintings accentuate what the artist is after, which is not only to render the things themselves but the spaces between them—the drama of their relations.<sup>116</sup>

If we extend Hustvedt’s formulation, we can regard the still lifes as meditations on the drama of the relations between the particular and general. Critics have perceived the crowded cityscape of Bologna in the paintings and deemed them ‘wholly architectural, so much so that it should prompt us to think of cathedrals rather than of bottles.’<sup>117</sup> Morandi’s remarks on the matter were ambiguous: ‘For me nothing is abstract,’ he declared. ‘In fact, I believe there is nothing more surreal, more abstract than reality.’<sup>118</sup> However, Morandi’s still lifes are an exemplary case of how the ordinary is always an exclusionary construction: his paintings were endorsed by the *Strapaese*, or ‘supercountry’ Fascist movement, that extolled the ‘purity of regional traditions,’ with which they associated Morandi’s still lifes. So much for Nina’s theory that the paintings resist projection, then.<sup>119</sup> The paintings endorse *and* problematize the concept of projecting structures on the ordinary, just as *Falling Man* does. We are invited to look closely at the quotidian scenes of the novel and perform a microcosmic reading of capitalist systemicity.

If we subject *Falling Man* to this kind of reading, Keith and Lianne’s six-year-old son’s reaction to 9/11 becomes freighted with meaning. After the attacks, Justin and his friends begin to watch the skies for a mysterious figure named Bill Lawton.

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<sup>115</sup> Norman Bryson, ‘Rhopography,’ in *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion, 1990), 60-95, 61.

<sup>116</sup> Siri Hustvedt, ‘Giorgio Morandi: Not Just Bottles,’ in *Mysteries of the Rectangle: Siri Hustvedt* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005), 121-34, 123.

<sup>117</sup> Ludovico Ragghianti, qtd. in Hustvedt, 126.

<sup>118</sup> Giorgio Morandi, qtd. in Hustvedt, 125.

<sup>119</sup> Emily Braun, ‘Speaking Volumes: Giorgio Morandi’s Still Lifes and the Cultural Politics of *Strapaese*,’ *Modernism/modernity* 2.3 (1995): 89-109, 92.

They believe that the towers were not destroyed on September 11, but that Bill Lawton's second attack is imminent, and 'this time the towers will fall.'<sup>120</sup> Lianne and Keith discover that 'Bill Lawton' is a bastardization of bin Laden. As well as satirizing the conspiracy theories that proliferated in the wake of 9/11, the Anglicized name indicates 'the impossibility of maintaining a neat, clear-cut division between victim and perpetrator,' and creates 'an Americanized version of someone usually constructed as radically Other.'<sup>121</sup> By formally domesticating bin Laden, the novel alludes to the entangled nature of U.S. foreign policy and Islamic terrorism, as glaringly demonstrated by the U.S. funding bin Laden and his fighters during the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989). As Lianne and Keith question Justin about Bill Lawton, he merely stares at the wild salmon on his plate that he has been instructed to eat. Lianne thinks she senses Justin's objections:

He looked into his plate. How different is a fish from a bird? One flies, the other swims. Maybe this is what he was thinking. He wouldn't eat a bird, would he, a goldfinch or a blue jay. Why should he eat a fish swimming wild in the ocean, caught with ten thousand other fish in a giant net on Channel 27?<sup>122</sup>

The reference to 'Channel 27' seems to refer to the Fisheries and Agriculture Department's Major Fishing Area 27, the Northeast Atlantic.<sup>123</sup> The passage suggests an equivalence between different lives that is erased in the conception of 9/11 as a singular, epoch-making event, a conception that relies on the premise that Western lives are the most valuable, as reinforced by the luxurious 'wild salmon' on Justin's plate. It poses a corrective to the state of affairs DeLillo describes in 'In the Ruins of the Future,' when he pronounces: 'The sense of disarticulation we hear in the term

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<sup>120</sup> *FM*, 102.

<sup>121</sup> Sascha Pöhlmann, 'Collapsing Identities: The Representation and Imagination of the Terrorist in *Falling Man*,' in *Terrorism, Media, and the Ethics of Fiction*, ed. Philipp Schweighauser and Peter Schneck (London; New York: Continuum Publishing, 2010), 51-64. 56.56

<sup>122</sup> *FM*, 102.

<sup>123</sup> Strangely, Greenwald Smith also analyses a scene involving fish that appears to be operating as an allegory for 9/11. See: Greenwald Smith, *Affect*, 71-5.

“Us and Them” has never been so striking, at either end.’<sup>124</sup> The passage also breaks down the distinctions between different forms of violence and exploitation and links Justin’s moneyed life in New York to the ecological damage of the global fishing industry. As with the Anglicization of Bin Laden, the collapsing of the East/West, global capitalism/terrorist violence binary gestures towards the imbrication of finance capital and terrorism, and Western structural adjustment policies that created the conditions of possibility for Islamic terrorism.

Indeed, Hammad, the terrorist that *Falling Man* follows, conceptualises the World Trade Center attacks as a critique of U.S. foreign policy, bemoaning the U.S. military presence in the ‘Land of the Two Holy Places.’ This echoes the title of Bin Laden’s 1996 *fatwā* entitled ‘Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places.’ However, alluding to the occupation of Mecca and Medina alone evacuates economics from the equation, instead reductively applying the ‘Clash of Civilizations’ hypothesis to explain the attacks. Bin Laden’s *fatwā* itself links the U.S. military presence in Mecca to its economic interests and foregrounds its impact on Saudi Arabian citizens: ‘the crusader forces became the main cause of our disastrous condition, [...] especially in the field of oil industry where production is restricted or expanded and prices are fixed to suit the American economy.’<sup>125</sup> U.S. incursions and ‘crusades’ into commodity frontiers are explicitly cited as the rationale for the attacks. Peter Bergen, an academic and CNN terrorism correspondent—and the holder of the dubious honour of producing bin Laden’s first U.S. television interview—emphasizes the simplifications in bin Laden’s narratives:

bin Laden tells a simple story about the world that is easy to grasp [...] In bin Laden’s telling there is a global conspiracy by the West and its puppet allies in the Muslim world to destroy true Islam, a conspiracy that is led by the United States. This single narrative purports to explain all the problems of the Muslim world [...] This narrative is silent, of

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<sup>124</sup> DeLillo, ‘Ruins.’

<sup>125</sup> Bin Laden, ‘Declaration of Jihad Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Sacred Mosques,’ in *Jihad*, 30-61, 34.

course, about the well-documented cases when the United States had provided large-scale help to Muslims<sup>126</sup>

But narratives propounded by the Western media omit the way that Western powers' policies and 'soft power' interventions in the Middle East have contributed to the conditions that encourage disenfranchised Muslims to join terrorist organizations. Here, I am not only referring to measures such as crippling UN economic sanctions on Iraq in the 1990s that are estimated to have doubled childhood mortality rates (to which bin Laden alludes), but also to the subtler violence of structural adjustment. Economic programmes imposed by the IMF and World Bank in Muslim states were crucial to the efflorescence of Islamist terrorism beginning in the 1980s. As Paul M. Lubeck elucidates:

By emasculating state capacities, structural adjustment provided a windfall of new political opportunities for Islamist movements as well as an infusion of insurgent consciousness, enabling Islamists to don the mantle of nationalist resistance to foreign domination without rival, thanks to the suppression of the secular left. The social disruption caused by structural adjustment cannot be overstated. As a result of structural adjustment, state capacity to co-opt oppositional movements declined and services were increasingly restricted to urban middle-class and elite areas. Income distributions polarized. [...] States were unable to provide previously established levels of services or to ensure adequate supplies of commodities to all sectors of their territory and population [...] [Islamist insurgents] linked the corruption, authoritarianism, human rights abuses and moral degeneracy (associated with the importation of Western cultural commodities such as television serials) of the existing state elites to their inability to provide adequate social services and economic opportunities<sup>127</sup>

Justin's conspiracy theory therefore indicts the conception that the American national ordinary is diametrically opposed to Islamic terror, destabilizing simplistic

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<sup>126</sup> Peter L. Bergen, *The Longest War: The Enduring Conflict Between America and Al-Qaeda* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 26.

<sup>127</sup> Paul M. Lubeck, 'The Islamic Revival: Antinomies of Islamic Movements under Globalization,' in *Global Social Movements*, ed. Robin Cohen and Shirin M. Rai (New Brunswick: Athlone Press, 2000), 146-64, 78; 121

connections between the attacker and what is purportedly being attacked—namely, the material comfort and security of American everyday life.

When Lianne and Keith discuss the Bill Lawton myth, Lianne says ‘This is what we get for putting a protective distance between children and news events.’<sup>128</sup> Coupled with her annoyance at what she presumes to be Justin’s burgeoning awareness of the world-ecological impact of fish, Lianne suggests that the family should be insulated from global concerns. *Falling Man* posits the domestic as a site where these connections can be denaturalized and resisted. Here, DeLillo highlights the way the family operates as a cultural fix for capitalism, by veiling its tentacular reach into all aspects of everyday life across the world. I am using the term ‘cultural fix’ in the sense theorised by Stephen Shapiro, who presents it as an analogue to capitalism’s spatial fix:

Just as the spatial fix ensures the continued production of social capital by creating a longer lasting reserve, so, too, is a cultural fix necessary to establish durable class relations and a longer-lasting reserve of identities and subjectivities wherein capitalism can ensure that subjects will present themselves as proletarians beyond the isolated moment of the exchange of labour power for wages. Just as the spatial fix involves opening new geographies, the cultural fix, likewise, looks to establish new identities for control.<sup>129</sup>

My notion of the nuclear family as a cultural fix, in this case for post 9/11 U.S. capital, has affinities with a glut of critical writing unmasking the heterosexism entangled in core-capitalist nationalism, such as Lauren Berlant’s conception of heterosexuality as ‘the mechanism by which a core national culture can be imagined as a sanitized space of sentimental feeling and immaculate behavior, a space of pure citizenship.’ As she recognises, ‘a familial model of society displaces the recognition of structural racism and other systemic inequalities.’<sup>130</sup> As well as operating in

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<sup>128</sup> *FM*, 74.

<sup>129</sup> Stephen Shapiro, ‘From capitalist to communist abstraction: *The Pale King*’s cultural fix,’ *Textual Practice* 28.7 (2014): 1249-71, 1262.

<sup>130</sup> For an analysis of ‘homonationalism,’ and how purported LGBT-friendliness is incorporated into the American national imaginary to assert its contrast with Muslim countries and therefore provide a

accordance with the economic demands of the state through procreation, the family conceals and naturalizes the violence wrought by capitalism.<sup>131</sup> The exclusionary nature of this family-values-oriented vision of the ordinary is underscored when Lianne takes exception to her neighbour:

Things were ordinary in all the ways they were always ordinary.

A woman named Elena lived in that apartment. Maybe Elena was Greek, she thought. But the music wasn't Greek. She was hearing another set of traditions, Middle Eastern, North African, Bedouin songs perhaps or Sufi dances, music located in the Islamic tradition.<sup>132</sup>

The songs disturb Lianne's monocultural sense of ordinariness, which allows for 'safe' European and/or Southern Mediterranean cultural difference, but not putatively 'Islamic' music. Ironically, she homogenizes Muslim culture in order to convince herself that it is incompatible with cultural pluralism: 'They're the ones who think alike, talk alike, eat the same food at the same time. She knew this wasn't true. Say the same prayers, word for word, in the same prayer stance, day and night.'<sup>133</sup> Lianne rebukes Elena for playing the music 'under these circumstances,' and attacks her when she refuses to acknowledge that 'there are circumstances.'<sup>134</sup> The passage critiques the ways in which the American national imaginary came to rest on a pernicious polarity between plural, democratically inclusive American citizens and homogenized Muslim others. As Leti Volpp writes, 'September 11 facilitated the consolidation of a new identity category that groups together persons who appear "Middle Eastern, Arab, or Muslim."' She contends that 'this consolidation reflects a racialization wherein members of this group are identified as terrorists, and are dis-

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moral justification for neoimperialist interventions, see Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007)

<sup>131</sup> See: M. Jacqui Alexander, 'Not Just (Any) Body Can Be a Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality and Postcoloniality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas,' *Feminist Review* 48 (1994): 5-23.

<sup>132</sup> *EM*, 67.

<sup>133</sup> *EM*, 68.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

identified as citizens.<sup>135</sup> Lianne leaves, slamming the door behind her, and hears the 'dog bark over the sound of a solo lute from Turkey or Egypt or Kurdistan.'<sup>136</sup>

As a juvenile version of the conspiracy theories that proliferated in the wake of 9/11, the fantasy of Bill Lawton rejects the sense of closure that was attributed to 9/11, as encapsulated in the maxim: 'the day that changed everything.' Lianne regards her son's version of events as 'a failed fairy tale, eerie enough but without coherence.'<sup>137</sup> Peter Knight has written that the view that 'conspiracy theories provide a consoling sense of closure, gravity and coherence' merely amounts to a 'pop-psychological explanation,' and instead demonstrates scepticism towards narrative closure.<sup>138</sup> Rather than exhibiting the repetition compulsion that is often associated with the ramifications of a singular, traumatic event, the repetitive nature of Justin's conspiracy theory undoes any conception of the event as isolated and singular, and instead locates it within the interminable cycles of violence and exploitation that characterise the capitalist world-system.

*Falling Man* thus not only critiques the logic of Western economic interventions that encouraged Islamic radicalization, but poses a challenge to the illusion of futurity on which capitalism depends, a Deleuzian molar line. This futurity is maintained by the cultural fix of the family unit, which, as the queer theorist Lee Edelman has compellingly written, hypostatizes 'futurity's unquestioned value' and the conception of 'history as linear narrative' of capitalist progress. As well as operating as a site for social reproduction, the family naturalizes the future-oriented drive of capitalist accumulation.<sup>139</sup> For Edelman it is the heteronormative family's investment in the child that traps politics in a logic of futurity; Jack

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<sup>135</sup> Leti Volpp, 'The citizen and the terrorist,' *UCTA Law Review* 49 (2002): 1575-1600, 1584.

<sup>136</sup> *FM*, 120.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>138</sup> Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: from the Kennedy Assassination to the X-Files* (London: Routledge, 2000), 78.

<sup>139</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 4. Edelman's framework is psychoanalytical, and the rich potential his theory holds for a Marxist-oriented reading remains unexplored in the text. However, he constructs a suggestive analogy when he calls for us to 'withdraw our allegiance, however compulsory, from a reality based on the Ponzi scheme of reproductive futurism.' Edelman, *No Future*, 4.

Halberstam has described the family as a ‘social script’ endowed with the linear ‘narrative coherence’ of marriage and reproduction, etc.<sup>140</sup> *Falling Man* does not, however, dispense with the family. Significantly, the novel draws an analogy between Islamic and Western terrorism with its references to Martin’s activities in Kommune One, a German radical commune who opposed the model of the nuclear family, which they associated with the repressive state.<sup>141</sup> Nina tells Lianne: ‘He thinks these people, these jihadists, he thinks they have something in common with the radicals of the sixties and seventies. He thinks they’re all part of the same classical pattern. They have their theorists. They have their visions of world brotherhood.’<sup>142</sup> Lianne later reflects: ‘Maybe he was a terrorist but he was one of ours, she thought, and the thought chilled her, shamed her—one of ours, which meant godless, Western, white.’<sup>143</sup> Nevertheless, *Falling Man*’s strange disjunctive representations of the ordinary disrupt the linear logic of capitalism as enabled by and enabling of the nuclear family. Instead of using the radically digressive passages of his earlier work, *Falling Man* forces us to train an intense gaze upon the mundane, and upon the violent narratives of progress underlying American ordinariness.

Though *Falling Man* does not reject the familial ordinary, it is telling that Keith feels estranged from family life. He eventually absconds to the poker tournament circuit: ‘He was also going home periodically, three or four days, love, sex, fatherhood, home-cooked food, but was lost at times for something to say.’<sup>144</sup> But DeLillo does not locate any utopian possibility in the break-up of the nuclear family. Keith relishes poker because ‘these were the times when there was nothing outside, no flash of history or memory that he might unknowingly summon in the routine

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<sup>140</sup> Judith Halberstam, “Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion,” ed. Elizabeth Freeman, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13.2–3 (2007): 182. Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>141</sup> Kristina Schulz, ‘Feminist Echoes of 1968: Women’s Movements in Europe and the United States,’ in *A Revolution of Perception? Consequences and Echoes of 1968*, ed. Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2014), 124–147, 129.

<sup>142</sup> *FM*, 147.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.



run of cards.’<sup>145</sup> Poker allegorises the way that the dazzling fictitiousness of finance capital obscures the violently material consequences of financial speculation on economic peripheries, such as the damage structural adjustment wrought on Gulf countries. Significantly, Lianne suggests it serves as a sublimation of Keith’s desire to kill somebody arising from his experience in the Towers.<sup>146</sup> This point is registered more starkly in DeLillo’s earlier novel *Cosmopolis* (2003), in which, as Paul Crosthwaite writes, DeLillo’s investment banker protagonist repeatedly muses on ‘his ownership of a decommissioned Soviet nuclear bomber, as if his wilful destruction of market value were a displacement of his desire, frustrated by the U.S. authorities, to fly this plane “armed.”’<sup>147</sup> DeLillo suggests that a microcosmic reading of the ordinary will reveal this hidden violence, as in the Morandi painting.

By way of closing, I will turn to the Falling Man himself, a performance artist, probably inspired by Kerry Skarbakka, who orchestrates falls from buildings in New York with a harness. The performances reenact Richard Drew’s infamous photograph of a man who jumped from the burning North Tower, entitled ‘Falling Man.’ When she discovers the inspiration for the performances, Lianne is distressed: ‘this picture burned a hole in her mind and heart, dear God, he was a falling angel and his beauty was horrific.’<sup>148</sup> Similarly, when she witnesses one of the falls she wishes that ‘she could believe this was some kind of antic street theater, an absurdist drama that provokes onlookers to share a comic understanding of what is irrational in the great schemes of being.’ But she cannot: ‘this was too near and deep, too personal.’<sup>149</sup> Numerous critics have also read the performances as ‘personal,’ explaining their significance in terms of the traumatized consciousness, and the way events replay. However, if we depart from these readings, we can regard the Falling Man’s daring jumps as resisting any conception of the event as isolated and temporally-bounded,

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>147</sup> Paul Crosthwaite, ‘The Accident of Finance,’ in *Virilio Now: Current Perspectives in Virilio Studies*, ed. John Armitage (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 177-99. 183.

<sup>148</sup> *FM*, 222.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 163.

and instead allegorizing the risky and increasingly destructive cycles of capitalist history. In doing so, it rejects what Jasbir K. Puar describes as ‘the binary point of watershed moment,’ and instead offers ‘an intensification of more of the same,’ rather than 9/11 as epochal event.<sup>150</sup> *Falling Man*’s microcosmic approach to the ordinary critiques the ways we are ‘held in thrall by a future [...] luring us into, ensnaring us in, reality’s gossamer web.’<sup>151</sup> The novel thereby unmasks the violence on which comfortable domesticity feeds, but it cannot imagine a radical transformation of the everyday that would think beyond this gossamer web, and escape what ‘The Ruins of the Future’ describes as ‘the utopian glow of cyber-capital,’ which has ‘summoned us all to live permanently in the future.’<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, xviii.

<sup>151</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 30.

<sup>152</sup> DeLillo, ‘Ruins.’

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Ordinary People

#### David Foster Wallace and Jennifer Egan's dialogues with the everyday

David Foster Wallace's often-cited essay, 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction' (1993), revisits the famous moment in *White Noise* when Jack and Murray visit the supposed 'most photographed barn in America.'<sup>1</sup> Observing the camera-wielding crowds and the man selling postcards and pictures of the barn, Murray declaims: 'no-one sees the barn.' He continues,

'What was the barn like before it was photographed?' he said. 'What did it look like, how was it different from other barns, how was it similar to other barns? We can't answer these questions because we've read the signs, seen the people snapping the pictures. We can't get outside the aura. We're part of the aura. We're here, we're now.'

He seemed immensely pleased by this.<sup>2</sup>

Predictably, this scene is commonly read as an illustration of the Baudrillardian simulacrum and the hyperreal. Leonard Wilcox's 1991 article is the cardinal example, in which he asserts 'rather than conjuring up associations with a pioneering past or an authentic rural life, the barn has been subsumed into the process of image replication,' and approvingly notes that Murray describes 'the unfolding of a new order where the distinction between reality and representation, sign and referent, collapses.'<sup>3</sup> As should be clear by now, this thesis empathically rejects such interpretations; I read the scene as a critique of Murray's postmodern pontifications.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Foster Wallace, 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,' in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (London: Abacus, 1998), 21-82, 69; *WN*, 12.

<sup>2</sup> *WN*, 13.

<sup>3</sup> Leonard Wilcox, 'Baudrillard, DeLillo's *White Noise*, and the End of Heroic Narrative,' *Contemporary Literature* 32.3 (1991): 346-65, 350.

<sup>4</sup> Critics have only just begun to probe the barn behind the spectacle, with analyses such as Rocco Marinaccio's, which claims: 'adrift in the precession of simulacra, the novel's most oft-cited image suggests not only the increasing disappearance of traditional agricultural products and practices from the industrial food chain and from the industrial eater's consciousness, but also the centrality of contemporary foodways to DeLillo's critical exploration of postmodern American culture. Rocco

Instead of considering the barn as a mere simulacrum, we see the farm's conversion to tourist trap as an index of intensified financialisation. Wallace clearly admires DeLillo, and concedes that 'most of the writing's parodic force is directed at Murray,' but his reading does not investigate beyond what he calls the 'regress of recordings of barn and barn-watching,' except to comment that:

The authorial tone throughout is a kind of deadpan sneer. Jack himself is utterly mute—since to speak out loud in the scene would render the narrator *part* of the farce [...] and so vulnerable to ridicule himself. With his silence, DeLillo's alter ego Jack eloquently diagnoses the very disease from which he, Murray, barn-watchers, and readers all suffer.<sup>5</sup>

In Wallace's reading, all *White Noise* can do is *diagnose* rather than critique postmodern thought. Wallace uses the scene as a platform to critique the 'irony, poker-faced silence, and fear of ridicule' that he sees as contaminating American culture.<sup>6</sup> Though Wallace counts DeLillo amongst 'the best postmodern fiction,' in which 'rebellious irony [...] seemed downright useful,' he claims that 'the assumptions behind this early postmodern irony, on the other hand, were still frankly idealistic: that etiology and diagnosis pointed toward cure; that revelation of imprisonment yielded freedom.'<sup>7</sup> Wallace calls for a kind of writing that, in contrast to postmodern literature, will deal with 'plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction' and thus risk being dismissed as 'too sincere.'<sup>8</sup>

This opposition between supposedly postmodern writing (as represented by DeLillo) and literature that ventures an encounter with the ordinary, untrendy, and real, has endured in contemporary writers' conceptions of their work. For example, writing to DeLillo in 1995, Jonathan Franzen informs him that he has talked to 'well-connected ephebes' who talked 'incessant[ly] of "the human heart"' and demonstrated

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Marinaccio, 'Slow Food/White Noise: Food and Eating in Don DeLillo's Postmodern America,' *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 26:1 (2015): 62-84, 69.

<sup>5</sup> Wallace, 'E Unibus Pluram,' 49.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 81.

'hostility towards you and the great sixties postmoderns. (The rap: by neglecting the human heart you scared away a mainstream audience that by rights they ought to have inherited.)'<sup>9</sup> Zadie Smith critiques this notion, noting that 'the American metafiction that stood in opposition to realism has been relegated to a safe corner of literary history, to be studied in postmodernity modules, and dismissed, by our most prominent public critics, as a fascinating failure, intellectual brinkmanship that lacked heart.'<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, an opposition between DeLillo and a group of writers that have been labeled 'post-postmodern' has attained critical currency. Over the course of the preceding chapters, I have refuted this conception of DeLillo's work as depthless postmodernism; I will now trace continuities between DeLillo and two writers he has inspired, David Foster Wallace and Jennifer Egan, and explore their engagements with the politics of the everyday.<sup>11</sup> I demonstrate how the desire to confront the 'human heart' beneath postmodern surface is problematically constructed as a quest to represent the ordinary—and yet more problematically, the 'Real.' The endeavour of restoring the realities of daily life and 'the human heart' to literature has been variously branded as post-postmodernism, post-irony, New Sincerity, and compromise aesthetics.<sup>12</sup> These critical terms all identify a strand of contemporary literature that seeks to move beyond the anti-foundationalism and hall of mirrors approach to reality associated with postmodernism, and instead confront the

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<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Franzen, Letter to DeLillo, 'Franzen, Jonathan, with replies from DeLillo, 1995-2003,' Container 95.4, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas.

<sup>10</sup> Zadie Smith, 'Two Directions for the Novel,' in *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (London: Penguin, 2009), 71-96, 73.

<sup>11</sup> See: Jennifer Egan, 'Introduction of Don DeLillo,' at the 2015 National Book Awards, where he received the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters: <http://lithub.com/fiction-can-still-do-anything-it-wants-jennifer-egan-on-don-delillo/>

<sup>12</sup> See respectively: Robert McLauglin, 'Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World,' *symploke* 12.1-2 (2004): 53-68; Lee Konstantinou, 'No Bull: David Foster Wallace and Postironic Belief,' in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), 85-112; Adam Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction,' in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. David Hering (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), 131-46; Rachel Greenwald Smith, 'Six Propositions on Compromise Aesthetics,' *The Account* (2014), <http://theaccountmagazine.com/?article=six-propositions-on-compromise-aesthetics>

ordinariness beneath the simulacrum. For Wallace, often considered the exemplar of New Sincerity, writing must reverse ‘the intellectualization and aestheticizing of principles and values’ wrought by the formal experimentation of modernism and postmodernism. Aiming to write fiction that does not ‘lie’ is paramount:

The idea that something so simple and, really, so aesthetically uninteresting—which for me meant you pass over it for the interesting, complex stuff—can actually be nourishing in a way that arch, meta, ironic, pomo stuff can’t, that seems to me to be important. That seems to me like something our generation needs to feel.<sup>13</sup>

Accordingly, in Wallace’s short story/novella ‘Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way,’ a creative writing student wishes ‘to write something that stabs you in the heart,’ something that will move beyond postmodern games by [using] metafiction as a bright smiling disguise, a harmless floppy-shoed costume.’<sup>14</sup> Dave Eggers has also been considered a writer that blended sincerity with playful experimentalism, as in *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, a memoir that calls attention to its artifice; so, too, have Jeffrey Eugenides, Jennifer Egan, Dana Spiotta, and Colson Whitehead.<sup>15</sup>

Rachel Greenwald Smith has fervently criticised this move to sincerity, labeling it as ‘compromise aesthetics,’ which she regards as being exemplified by Jonathan Franzen’s much-trumpeted return to the social novel, and critics’ praising his work as having ‘cracked open the opaque shell of postmodernism, tweezed out its

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<sup>13</sup> David Foster Wallace, interview with Laura Miller, ‘The Salon Interview: David Foster Wallace,’ *Salon*, 9 March, 1996. Also quoting from this interview, Adam Kelly, the originator of the term ‘New Sincerity,’ points out that Wallace’s conception of truth was complex and evolved over the course of his career: ‘In one of his last interviews, he claimed that while terms like “moral” and “ethical”—concepts that have to do, like sincerity, with not being false to others—might be apt for describing the era of Dostoevsky or the European Romantics, these terms had become thorny and problematic for those born in the age of television.’ Kelly, ‘New Sincerity in American Fiction,’ 134.

<sup>14</sup> David Foster Wallace, ‘Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way,’ in *Girl With Curious Hair*, (London: Abacus, 1997), 231-384, 332-3.

<sup>15</sup> Kelly, ‘Dialectic of Sincerity: Lionel Trilling and David Foster Wallace,’ *Post45*, 17 October, 2014: <http://post45.research.yale.edu/2014/10/dialectic-of-sincerity-lionel-trilling-and-david-foster-wallace/> See also: Kelly, ‘The New Sincerity,’ in *Postmodern/Postwar and After: Rethinking American Literature*, ed. Jason Gladstone, Andrew Hoberek, and Daniel Worden (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016), 197-208.

tangled circuitry and inserted in its place the warm, beating heart of an authentic humanism.<sup>16</sup> This literary and critical trend, Greenwald warns, imagines the future of the novel to be ‘vastly improved by a renewed focus on the personal.’ Scenting the whiff of identity politics, she connects the rise of compromise aesthetics to Third Way politics: ‘both positions,’ she argues, (as we have seen),

are consistent with a neoliberal end-of-history perspective in which taking an ideological stand is represented as unnecessary, hysterical, or thoughtlessly utopian, and that the need for such positions is rendered moot by the availability of tactical interventions that are essentially not challenging to the status quo.<sup>17</sup>

Whilst maintaining Greenwald’s political objections to this perspective, I want to propose that Wallace’s fictions move from a conservatively narrow definition of ordinariness to an attempt to depict how the world-system permeates ordinary experience. In order to do so, I will provide a necessarily brief sketch of Wallace’s thoughts on the connections between postmodernism, sincerity, and the ordinary, before focusing on *The Pale King* (2011), in which Wallace presents a more DeLilloean version of the everyday. I will then turn to Jennifer Egan, and argue that she problematises anti-postmodernist constructions of the ordinary. Egan has been characterised as ‘forg[ing] a compromise between innovation and tradition’; Maggie Doherty groups her with Eugenides, Wallace, and Franzen, indicting the authors on the grounds that ‘even when Egan and her peers offer critiques of global capitalism, they rarely suggest that this new economic order should be dismantled entirely. They stage political conflicts, but they often avoid taking sides.’<sup>18</sup> I recast Egan’s novel *Look at Me* (2001) as offering a critique of the New Sincerity’s claims to authenticity and representing ordinary lives, and show how Egan exposes the neoliberal ideology undergirding this aesthetic trend. Egan, as we shall see, deforms

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<sup>16</sup> Smith, ‘Compromise Aesthetics.’

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Maggie Doherty, ‘Who Pays Writers?’ *Dissent Magazine* 62.1 (2016): 77-87, 84.

realism from within its conventions and satirizes the violent misogyny of writers who want to dissect the 'human heart.'

**'Oh how banal.'**

In 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,' Wallace narrowly defines postmodern literature as characterized by reflexivity, self-consciousness, and irony, historicizing postmodernism as an 'intellectual expression of the "rebellious youth culture" of the '60s and '70s.'<sup>19</sup> This 'radical aesthetic' once advanced social critique through shocking ironic juxtapositions, Wallace explains, but it has been denatured by television and advertising's co-option of self-reflexivity and rebellious irony. Wallace connects aesthetic and political radicalism, evincing that postmodernism 'was hailed by academic critics as a radical aesthetic,' but undercuts its subversiveness: 'thinking that postmodern Metafiction evolved unconscious of prior changes in readerly taste is about as innocent as thinking that all those college students we saw on television protesting the Vietnam war were protesting only because they hated the Vietnam war.' He adds: 'They may have hated the war, but they also wanted to be seen protesting on television.'<sup>20</sup> Reading 'E Unibus Pluram' alongside the accompanying interview with Larry McCaffrey reinforces the impression that Wallace believes that the avant-garde aesthetic of shock has been exhausted by sixties radicalism. In the interview, Wallace refers to a long genealogy of aesthetic radicalism, criticizing the use of 'formal ingenuity as an end in itself':

The modernists and early postmodernists—all the way from Mallarmé to Coover, I guess—broke most of the rules for us, but we tend to forget what they were forced to remember: the rule-breaking has got to be for the "sake" of something. When rule-breaking, the mere "form" of renegade avant-gardism, becomes an end in itself, you end up with bad language poetry and *American Psycho's* nipple-shocks and Alice

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<sup>19</sup> Wallace, 'E Unibus Pluram,' 65.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 34.



Cooper eating shit on stage. Shock stops being a by-product of progress and becomes an end in itself.<sup>21</sup>

Wallace is scathing of aesthetic and political rebellion, entreating the reader to ‘think, for a moment, of Third World rebels and coups. Third World rebels are great at exposing and overthrowing corrupt hypocritical regimes, but they seem noticeably less great at the mundane, non-negative task of then establishing a superior governing alternative.’<sup>22</sup> Wallace’s contempt for the aesthetic rebellion of the New Left recalls DeLillo’s radical chic terrorists in ‘The Uniforms (see page 93). To move beyond shock and postmodernism, ‘E Unibus Pluram’ issues a mundane call-to-arms:

Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk disapproval. The old postmodern insurgents risked the gasp and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism. To-day’s risks are different. The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the “Oh how banal.” To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness. Of willingness to be suckered by a world of lurkers and starers who fear gaze and ridicule above imprisonment without law. Who knows. Today’s most engaged young fiction does seem like some kind of line’s end’s end. I guess that means we all get to draw our own conclusions. Have to. Are you immensely pleased.<sup>23</sup>

Literature that turns to banality is directly contrasted with DeLillo’s writing; the final line alludes to the line in *White Noise*’s barn scene, in which Murray seems ‘immensely pleased’ by his postmodern conclusions. How can one engage with everyday life through banality rather than formal innovation?

This formal dilemma unfolds in Wallace’s short story ‘Octet,’ which appears in his 1997 collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*.<sup>24</sup> It is structured as a series of pop quizzes for the reader, but the final Pop Quiz opens thus: ‘You are, unfortunately,

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<sup>21</sup> Interview with Larry McCaffrey, ‘An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace,’ *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: Mississippi University Press, 2012), 21-55. 29; 27-28.

<sup>22</sup> ‘E Unibus Pluram,’ 67.

<sup>23</sup> ‘E Unibus Pluram,’ 81-2.

<sup>24</sup> Wallace, ‘Octet,’ in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (London: Abacus, 2001), 111-136.

a fiction writer,' and explanatory footnotes begin to overtake the story. One footnote explains: 'part of what you want these little Pop Quizzes to do is break the textual fourth wall and kind of address (or "interrogate") the reader directly.'<sup>25</sup> Like DeLillo's lists, Wallace's footnotes paradoxically demand and repel our attention, overturning textual hierarchies but in doing so rendering the textual peripheries central, if only transiently. Footnotes thus embody the Derridean logic of the supplement, 'a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence,' whose 'place is' paradoxically 'assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness,' and thus the oscillations from insignificance to significance that are crucial to the everyday.<sup>26</sup> It is at the nexus of textual centre and periphery that Wallace locates the possibility of the text reaching beyond postmodern *mise-en-abyme* into the life of its reader.<sup>27</sup>

As it draws to a close, 'Octet' agonises over whether or not to 'address the reader directly and ask her straight out whether she's feeling anything like you feel' to bridge the gap between narrator and reader. 'The trick to this solution,' Wallace ruminates, 'is that you'd have to be 100% honest. Meaning not just sincere but almost

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 145; 147.

<sup>26</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1976), 144; 145.

<sup>27</sup> I treat 'Octet' as emblematic of Wallace's early approach to the ordinary because it explicitly engages with the formal dilemma Wallace wrestled with in this period, and avoid *Infinite Jest* for reasons of scope. It is my contention, however, that the endnotes in *Infinite Jest* work in a similar way to the footnotes in 'Octet,' issuing a challenge to hierarchies of value. The critical emphasis on Wallace's attempts to connect with the reader *through* metafictional irony has obscured some of the novel's overt political engagements. The footnotes function as a kind of surplus; in Wallace as in DeLillo, textual excess is figured and mirrored in representations of waste. *Infinite Jest* is directly concerned with the U.S.' wastes, and is set in a future united North America, in which the U.S. has mastered 'a type of [annular] fusion that can produce waste that's fuel for a process whose waste is fuel for the fusion,' achieved by 'bombarding highly toxic particles with massive doses of stuff even more toxic than the radioactive particles.' (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (London: Abacus, 1997), 572.) Under the agreement, the waste is dumped in Canada. As Heather Houser writes: 'rather than pillage other nations' resources to meet its own industrial demands, as in imperialism, the U.S. banishes the by-products of capitalism under experialism.' (Heather Houser, *Ecosickness in Contemporary U.S. Fiction: Environment and Affect* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 131.) By capitalizing upon the paradoxical nature of waste, *Infinite Jest* shifts the seemingly marginal to the centre, if only transiently: it registers combined and uneven development on a thematic level through the grotesque *reductio ad absurdum* of the futuristic waste management strategy, and critiques it on a formal level through endnotes.

naked.<sup>28</sup> The story concludes: ‘So decide.’<sup>29</sup> It is ambiguous as to whether or not this is addressed to the reader, or to Wallace himself, the ‘fiction writer’ invoked by the address to ‘you’ that opens the Pop Quiz. Does the lack of the direct address open up and imaginative space for the reader to fill? Or does the story become a narcissistic Mobius-strip, referring back to Wallace? Wallace scholars have surmised that the story ‘remind[s] the reader at every turn that she and the fiction are constructing empathy together through language’ and ‘travel[s] via technique the gulf between selves.’<sup>30</sup> My concern here is not to answer these questions so much as to trace lines of continuity between ‘Octet’ and DeLillo’s digressive tactics, which, in *The Names*, facilitate an encounter with alterity that maintains singularity. However, Wallace’s mission to engage directly with the reader is inherently individualistic. With its attempt to ‘dissolv[e] the difference between’ reader and author, it risks what Carolyn J. Dean describes as ‘a lazy and false empathy in which we simply take the other’s place,’ as opposed to systemic thinking.<sup>31</sup> DeLillo’s work connects the particular to the general, whereas ‘Octet’ limits its purview to reaching out into the lived experience of the individual reader, thus departing from DeLillo’s use of the everyday to register world-systemicity and imagine forms of collectivity.

### Shopping for images

Wallace’s concerns surrounding the everyday began to crystallise in his 2005 commencement address at Kenyon College, ‘This is Water,’ and his introduction to the 2007 edition of Houghton Mifflin’s *Best American Essays*. ‘This is Water’ urges the audience of graduands to ‘bracket for just a few minutes your skepticism about the value of the totally obvious,’ and asks them to imagine themselves in a

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<sup>28</sup> Wallace, ‘Octet,’ 154.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>30</sup> Mary K. Holland, ‘Mediated Immediacy in Brief Interviews with Hideous Men,’ in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (New York: Palgrave, 2013), 107-130, 108.

<sup>31</sup> Carolyn Janice Dean, *The Fragility of Empathy After the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 9.

supermarket scene. The *mise-en-scène* is decidedly DeLilloesque, minus the wonder of the ordinary: the supermarket is ‘hideously lit’ and ‘infused with soul-killing muzak,’ with long checkout lines presided over by employees whose jobs entail levels of ‘daily tedium and meaninglessness’ unimaginable to the audience.<sup>32</sup> But Wallace urges the listener to situate this routine annoyance within wider economic networks:

if you’re aware enough to give yourself a choice, you can choose to look differently at this fat, dead-eyed, over-made-up lady who just screamed at her kid in the checkout line. [...] maybe this very lady is the low-wage clerk at the motor vehicle department, who just yesterday helped your spouse resolve a horrific, infuriating, red-tape problem through some small act of bureaucratic kindness. Of course, none of this is likely, but it’s also not impossible. It just depends what you want to consider. [...] if you really learn how to pay attention, then [...] it will be within your power to experience a crowded, loud, slow, consumer-hell-type situation as not only meaningful but sacred, on fire with the same force that lit the stars—compassion, love, the sub-surface unity of all things.<sup>33</sup>

Apprehending the ‘sub-surface’ beneath the everyday weave is, according to Wallace, ‘the real value of a real education’: ‘awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, all the time.’<sup>34</sup> This speech represents an advance in Wallace’s thought about the everyday; he is now considering how to represent the hidden economic structures entangled with quotidian life. I want to leave the individualistic, syrupy aspects of this vision of the everyday aside for now, and briefly turn to the links with DeLillo’s work. The concept of something mystical lying beneath the surface of the everyday calls to mind Murray Siskind’s pronouncements about the supermarket in *White Noise*, and his comparison between shopping and the spiritual transformation Tibetan Buddhism holds to take place between death and rebirth. He declares: ‘everything is concealed in symbolism, hidden by veils of mystery and layers of cultural material. But it is psychic data, absolutely.’<sup>35</sup> This

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<sup>32</sup> ‘This is Water,’ published as ‘Plain old untrendy troubles and emotions,’ *Guardian*, 20 September 2008.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *WN*, 38.

apparent opacity is mirrored in DeLillo's inscrutable lists of supermarket signifiers—the polar opposite to Barthes' idea of the readerly, closed text, which resembles 'a cupboard where meanings are shelves, stacked, safeguarded,' to be easily recuperated as meaning.<sup>36</sup> However, Murray believes that cultural semiotics can illuminate all the signifiers: 'it is just a question,' he continues, 'of deciphering, rearranging, peeling off the layers of unspeakability. Not that we would want to, not that any useful purpose would be served. This is not Tibet. Even Tibet is not Tibet anymore.'<sup>37</sup> Undoubtedly, the novel comically undercuts Siskind's proselytizing; so, too, does DeLillo, explaining in an interview:

I don't believe as Murray Jay Siskind does [...] that the supermarket is a form of Tibetan Lamasery. But there is something there that we tend to miss.

Imagine someone from the third world who has never set foot in a place like that suddenly transported to an A&P in Chagrin Falls, Ohio. Wouldn't he be elated or frightened? Wouldn't he sense that something transcending is about to happen to him in the midst of all this brightness? So I think that's something that has been in the background of my work: a sense of something extraordinary hovering just beyond our touch and just beyond our vision.<sup>38</sup>

Yet, DeLillo's concerns are more radical than Wallace's. By juxtaposing what is 'just beyond our touch and just beyond our vision' in the supermarket produce with 'someone from the third world' (from which much of it would be imported), his statement gestures towards the congealed labour-time in the consumerist bounty, and connects quotidian *things* to their places within the world-capitalist system, whilst retaining their essential mystery. 'This is Water,' on the other hand, is concerned with how training our attention on the banal can engender empathy for other Americans.

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<sup>36</sup> Barthes, Roland. *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 200.

<sup>37</sup> *WN*, 38.

<sup>38</sup> DeLillo, interview with Anthony De Curtis, "An Outsider in This Society": An Interview with Don DeLillo, in *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, ed. Thomas DePietro (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 52-71, 70-71.

The significance of ‘This is Water’ to Wallace’s overall oeuvre has, however, been overstated. As Marshall Boswell has pointed out, the ‘popular conception of Wallace as a technically dazzling and intellectually sophisticated writer of self-help narratives designed to “save us” from solipsism, loneliness, addiction, and so on [has been] calcified by the book publication’ of ‘This is Water.’<sup>39</sup> Rather than considering ‘This is Water’ as a statement of intent for Wallace’s literature, I view it as a naïve step in the development of his ideas concerning the everyday. These ideas were clarified to some extent in ‘Deciderization,’ which asks how it is possible to be a political subject in the information age. Wallace labels this inscrutable deluge of information ‘Total Noise’: ‘the seething static of every particular thing and experience, and one’s total freedom of infinite choice about what to choose to attend to and represent and connect, and how, and why, etc.’<sup>40</sup> But Total Noise resembles, of course, the ‘white noise’ of capitalist reification in DeLillo’s supermarket; the ‘dull and unlocatable roar, as of some form of swarming life just outside the range of human apprehension.’<sup>41</sup> Wallace argues that our inability to demystify this onslaught of detail bolsters reactionary politics:

There is just no way that 2004’s reelection [of Bush] could have taken place—not to mention extraordinary renditions, legalized torture, FISA-flouting, or the 6 passage of the Military Commissions Act—if we had been paying attention and handling information in a competent grown-up way.<sup>42</sup>

The impossibility of navigating the complexity and volume of this ocean of information accounts for ‘the seduction of partisan dogma.’<sup>43</sup> The essays selected for this anthology appeal to him because they organize information expertly, and perform a service that the for-profit media necessarily cannot, as it is

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<sup>39</sup> Marshall Boswell, ‘Trickle-Down Citizenship: Taxes and Civic Responsibility in David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King*,’ *Studies in the Novel* 44.4 (2012): 464-79, 465.

<sup>40</sup> David Foster Wallace, ‘Deciderization,’ in *Both Flesh And Not* (Penguin, 2013), 299-320, 302.

<sup>41</sup> *WN*, 36.

<sup>42</sup> Wallace, ‘Deciderization,’ 313.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 315.

highly attuned to what we want and the amount of detail we'll sit still for [...] a ninety-second news piece on the question of whether and how the Geneva Conventions ought to apply in an era of asymmetrical warfare is not going to explain anything; the relevant questions are too numerous and complicated, too fraught with contexts in everything from civil law and military history to ethics and game theory.<sup>44</sup>

It is not just violent news events that lie beyond our comprehension because of the dramatic, reductive form in which they are presented to us: our everyday lives are shaped by events that are opaque to us because they are *not* spectacular and resist this kind of representation. 'Deciderization' edges towards this point, but it remains unstated. Georges Perec also grappled with this problem in an essay published in 1973:

What speaks to us, seemingly, is always the big event, the untoward, the extra-ordinary: the front-page splash, the banner headlines. Railway trains only begin to exist when they are derailed [...] Behind the event there is a scandal, a fissure, a danger, as if life reveals itself only by way of the spectacular.<sup>45</sup>

Responding to the issue that 'the daily newspapers talk of everything except the daily,' Perec asks:

What's really going on, what we're experiencing, the rest, all the rest, where is it? How should we take account of, question, describe what happens every day and recurs everyday: the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, *the background noise*, the habitual?<sup>46</sup>

We can take Wallace and Perec's formulations further by breaking down the opposition between 'big events' and the everyday, and considering the ways in which seemingly banal events have spectacular but virtually unrepresentable consequences. Rob Nixon articulates this representational impasse through the concept of 'slow violence':

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 314.

<sup>45</sup> Georges Perec, 'Approaches to What?' *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, trans. John Sturrock (London: Penguin, 1997) 205-7, 203.

<sup>46</sup> Perec, *Approaches*, 204.

Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales. In so doing, we also need to engage the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence.<sup>47</sup>

Though Nixon's purview is limited to environmental damage and its effects on disempowered people in economic peripheries, the concept of 'slow violence' has much in common with my conception of the everyday. It provides a useful lens for thinking about the invisible connections and structures that govern our everyday lives, and how drawn-out temporal scales render that which is happening continuously in our daily lives imperceptible. Though 'Deciderization' only scratches the surface of these issues, *The Pale King* represents Wallace's sustained effort to think through the ways literature can 'engage the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges' tangled up in the everyday.

### **'We recoil from the dull'**

The *Pale King* explicitly takes up these challenges in the foreword to the novel, (§9), in which the 'David Wallace' narrator contends that most Americans are unaware of Reagan's ideological overthrow of the IRS in the mid-1980s because 'the whole subject of tax policy and administration is dull. Massively, spectacularly dull.' 'The IRS,' it continues, 'was one of the very first government agencies to learn that such qualities help insulate them against public protest and political opposition, and that abstruse dullness is actually a much more effective shield than is secrecy.'<sup>48</sup> Oxymoronic phrases such as 'spectacularly dull,' and, later, 'monumentally dull,' capture the simultaneously transformative and insidious slow violence of these

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<sup>47</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>48</sup> *TPK*, 85.



reforms, to which I will return. Reagan's 'Tax Revolt' came as part of a series of neoliberalizing measures—deregulation of the financial sector, privatization of the public sector, the shrinking of the state—and entailed slashing the top marginal tax rate from 70% to 28%, and the bottom rate from 14% to 11%, and reducing the maximum capital gains tax to 20%.<sup>49</sup> The stage for these policies was set by several important 'shocks' to the economy: the Nixon shock of 1971 (the unilateral abandonment of the Bretton Woods system, achieved by unpegging the dollar from the gold standard in favour of free-floating fiat currency); the resulting oil shock of 1973; and, in 1979, Paul Volcker (chairman of the U.S. Federal Reserve Bank under Carter's administration) raising the nominal rate of interest to curb inflation at the expense of employment, known as the Volcker shock.<sup>50</sup> However, Reagan's Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981 can be considered the most transformative measure: the largest tax cut in American history, it dramatically increased income inequality and unemployment, and its effects have never been reversed.<sup>51</sup>

The author's foreword acknowledges the paradox that 'the book's legal disclaimer defines everything that follows it as fiction, including this Foreword, but now here in this Foreword I'm saying that the whole thing is really non-fiction'—a claim that will be undercut by Drinion, an IRS employee who levitates, another who is psychic, and the inclusion of ghosts. The novel insists on its referentiality, and short-circuits our attempts to read it as a 'clever metafictional titty-pincher,' or for its devices to be considered formally innovative:

The idea, as both sides' counsel worked it out, is that you will regard features like shifting p.o.v.s, structural fragmentation, willed incongruities, & c. as simply the modern literary analogs of 'Once upon a time . . .' or 'Far, far away, there once dwelt . . .' or any of the other

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<sup>49</sup> Jerry Temalski, 'Revenue Effects of Major Tax Bills,' Office for Tax Analysis Working Paper 81, September 2006, <https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/tax-policy/tax-analysis/Documents/WP-81.pdf>

<sup>50</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 23.

<sup>51</sup> Monica Prasad, 'The Popular Origins of Neoliberalism in the Reagan Tax Cut of 1981,' *Journal of Policy History*, 24.3 (2012): 351-83, 352.

traditional devices that signaled the reader that what was under way was fiction and should be processed accordingly.<sup>52</sup>

Here, the narrator asserts the ordinariness of once radical modernist techniques; shock has been domesticated. Why does Wallace insist upon the ordinariness of a novel that contains clearly experimental passages, such as its list of pharmaceuticals and a chapter that narrates IRS workers at work? (“Irrelevant” Chris Fogle turns a page. Howard Cardwell turns a page. Ken Wax turns a page. Matt Redgate turns a page. “Groovy” Bruce Channing attaches a form to a file. Ann Williams turns a page.<sup>53</sup>) Clearly, excessively detailed literature no longer shocks in the way that *Ulysses* did, and has hardened into a cliché of ‘serious’ art. Nonetheless, such passages were designated a ‘slog,’ and as thwarting our desire to find ‘interesting or narratively gripping details.’<sup>54</sup> *The Pale King* emphasizes the dull side of experimentalism rather than the aesthetics of shock. It is my contention that it does so because shock has attained reactionary associations, as I have argued in my discussion of Kleinian shock in Chapter Three (see pages 153-4), both owing to the slow violence of financial shocks and the spectacular violence of Shock and Awe. In *The Pale King*, the radical transformation of everyday life to which the avant-garde aspired has been effected by neoliberal reforms—the aforementioned economic shock therapy—which Harvey variously describes as ‘revolutionary’ and as a form of ‘creative destruction.’<sup>55</sup>

On the one hand, *The Pale King*’s turn to the boring registers the frightening reality that sublime, shocking, artistic spectacles are now to be found in military strategy, and that the main force for radical change is now the shock therapy of neoliberalization. But it also confronts the problem of engaging a kind of violence that is both spectacular *and* slow: tax reforms unfold in incremental, insidious,

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<sup>52</sup> *TPK*, 72.

<sup>53</sup> *TPK*, 312.

<sup>54</sup> Michiko Kakutani, ‘Maximized Revenue, Minimized Existence,’ *New York Times*, 31 March, 2011, and Stephen Shapiro, ‘From capitalist to communist abstraction: *The Pale King*’s cultural fix,’ *Textual Practice* 28.7 (2014): 1249-71, 1268.

<sup>55</sup> David Harvey, ‘Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction,’ *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 610.1 (2007): 21-44, 22.

invisible ways that require us to raise our boredom thresholds to grasp. In a chronologically early section of *The Pale King*, several characters debate civics, and one presages the rise of Reagan: ‘look for us to elect someone who can cast himself as a Rebel, maybe even a cowboy, but who deep down we’ll know is a bureaucratic creature who’ll operate inside the government mechanism.’<sup>56</sup> The same speaker identifies the sixties as marking a point when individuality, standing out from the ‘great gray abstract mass,’ became important, and when ‘rebellion against conformity became fashionable’<sup>57</sup> As Adam Kelly has pointed out, this scepticism towards the sixties is territory already traversed in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* and ‘E Unibus Pluram,’ but the elevator debate *historicizes* how the aesthetic rebellion of the sixties worked in tandem with ‘the move from the production-model of American democracy to something more like a consumption-model, where corporate production depends on a team approach whereas being a customer is a solo venture.’<sup>58</sup> Glendenning, a conservative IRS worker, argues that this has hamstrung collectivity: citizens once felt ‘like they were part of Everything, that the huge Everybody Else that determined policy and taste and the common good was in fact made up of a whole lot of individuals,’ but now, though ‘the government *is* the people [...] we split it off and pretend it’s not us.’<sup>59</sup> This returns us to questions ‘This is Water’ circles around, regarding how we relate to others, but, as I will argue, *The Pale King* stages these questions in a more sophisticated manner, prompting us to think systemically rather than empathetically.

**‘We fill pre-existing forms and when we fill them we change them and are changed’<sup>60</sup>**

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<sup>56</sup> *TPK* 147.

<sup>57</sup> 144-5.

<sup>58</sup> Adam Kelly, ‘Development through Dialogue: David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas,’ *Studies in the Novel* 44.3 (2012): 267-83, 278; qtd in Kelly. 278-9.

<sup>59</sup> *TPK*, 139; 137.

<sup>60</sup> Epigraph to *TPK*, taken from Frank Bidart, ‘Borges and I,’ 1.

Though a great deal of criticism has focused on explaining the ideas and concerns about civic politics expressed in the ‘elevator debate’ in *The Pale King*, these readings do not discuss how the novel stages these problems at the level of form.<sup>61</sup> To this end, I will now look at §24 of the novel, which follows the author character’s arrival at an IRS branch in Peoria. The section features Wallace’s characteristic sprawling explanatory footnotes, despite the author’s repeated assurance that he is relaying ‘specially selected relevant portions’ of his experience.<sup>62</sup> Like *White Noise*’s gesture to the detective novel when Jack Gladney sifts through the contents of the trash compactor, these declarations encourage the expectation that the mundane details of the passage will be highly significant. But, similarly, the passage seems to militate against us extracting meaning from its quotidian details. For example, the main body of the text includes a catalogue of the contents of the narrator’s dispatch case, which ‘contained the sorts of intimate or irreplaceable personal effects, toiletries, customized earplug case, dermatological salves and ointments, and important papers that any thinking person carries with him instead of trusting the vagaries of baggage handling.’<sup>63</sup> Rather than stemming the flow of the plot, we could regard the list as a reality effect or an index of character. However, as in *White Noise*, the objects represent an excess of signifiers, and dance around the intersection of significance and insignificance that marks the everyday. Again, the narrator asserts the verisimilitude of the passage, making frequent references to the writing of memoir, but delineating his position on ‘truth’:

unlike some so-called memoirists, I refuse to pretend that the mind works any other way than it really does. At the same time, rest assured [...] that I have no intention of inflicting on you a regurgitation of every last sensation and passing thought I happen to recall. I am about art here, not simple reproduction. What logorrheic colleagues like Fogle failed to understand is that there are vastly different kinds of truth, some of which are incompatible with one another. Example: A 100 percent accurate, comprehensive list of the exact size and shape of

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<sup>61</sup> See: Kelly, ‘Development through Dialogue,’ 277-80; Boswell, ‘Trickle-Down Citizenship,’ 470-3.

<sup>62</sup> *TPK*, 261.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

every blade of grass in my front lawn is ‘true,’ but it is not a truth that anyone will have any interest in. What renders a truth meaningful, worthwhile, & c. is its relevance, which in turn requires extraordinary discernment and sensitivity to context, questions of value, and overall point—otherwise we might as well as just be computers downloading raw data to one another.<sup>64</sup>

With its episodic structure, interpolated narratives, and insistence on the authenticity of its account of events, there are echoes of Cervantes in *The Pale King*.<sup>65</sup> But Wallace’s invocation of the individual blades of a lawn recalls a *specific* moment in *Don Quixote*, when Sancho Panza tells Don Quixote a tale involving a man conveying 300 goats across a river. He narrates: ‘the fisherman climbed into his boat and took one goat across, and he came back and took another goat across, and he came back again and took another goat across.’ Already agitated by the story’s previous digressions, Quixote interrupts, instructing Sancho to ‘just assume that he has ferried them all across’; consequently, Sancho declines to finish the story.<sup>66</sup> Here, Quixote’s cognizance that ‘realism’ is simply a set of literary conventions clashes with Sancho’s ‘naïve commitment to narrative as a mapping of world that finds its standard of truth in a complete correspondence to the facts,’ as Anthony J. Cascardi puts it. According to Cascardi, ‘counting and re-counting [...] occur in the shadow of a mimetic ideal that aims at a point-to-point transposition of the world into words.’<sup>67</sup> Like *Don Quixote*, *The Pale King* oscillates between Don Quixote’s keen sense that

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<sup>64</sup> *TPK*, 259.

<sup>65</sup> Compare, for instance, the following:

‘At this point the author describes every detail of Don Diego’s house—all the contents of any rich gentleman farmer’s dwelling; but the translator of this history thought it better to pass in silence over these and other similar minutiae, because they aren’t relevant to the principal purpose of the history, which derives its strength from its truthfulness rather than from dull digressions.’ Miguel Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, trans. John Rutherford (London: Penguin, 2003), 600-1.

‘I will spare all of us much sensuous reminiscence about Peoria’s main bus terminal—which was ghastly in the special way of bus stations in depressed downtowns everywhere—or of my over-two-hour wait there, except to say that its air was not conditioned or even circulated, and it was extremely crowded, and that there were a certain number of lone men and groups of two or three men, nearly all wearing suit coats and hats, or else holding their hats or slowly fanning themselves with them as they sat’ *TPK*, 263-4.

<sup>66</sup> Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, 159.

<sup>67</sup> Anthony J. Cascardi, *Cambridge Companion to Cervantes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 58–79, 74.

conventional realism eliminates textual waste to parodically undercutting this literary principle with a digressive mode of storytelling akin to Sancho Panza's.

This mention of counting takes us back to the earliest forms of writing: lists that enumerated possessions and recorded transactions.<sup>68</sup> By both proclaiming and precluding the referentiality of the list of possessions, Wallace problematizes a realist faith in what Osteen describes as the 'commensurability of monetary and linguistic systems,' in which all signifiers can be traced back to a stable referential context, just as money is pegged to gold. Osteen is writing about *Ulysses*, but it is my contention that Wallace's impossible insistence upon realism is an attempt to subvert a textual economy in which 'the withdrawal of the gold standard [...] parallels the decline of literary realism, which depends, like the gold standard, upon a naïve version of semiosis that valorizes referential representation.'<sup>69</sup> Though my thesis disputes Jameson and Baudrillard's readings of culture as merely reflecting postmodern depthlessness, Baudrillard himself historicizes postmodernism as registering the abandonment of the gold standard, arguing that 'the incontrovertibility of currencies into gold' mirrors the 'inconvertibility of signs into their systems of reference,' and that 'the floating and generalized convertibility of currencies amongst themselves' reflects the 'mobility and the endless structural play of signs.'<sup>70</sup> What I am asserting, *contra* Jameson and Baudrillard, is that both supposedly postmodern and 'post-postmodern' texts such as Wallace's attempt to *subvert* the floating textual economy of postmodernism.

Richard Godden and Michael Szalay argue for the importance of the abandonment of the Gold Standard to *The Pale King*; arguing that its emphasis on

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<sup>68</sup> See: Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

<sup>69</sup> Mark Osteen, *The Economy of Ulysses: Making Both Ends Meet* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 367.

<sup>70</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (London: Sage, 1993), 23. David Harvey also advances this argument: 'Postmodern concerns for the signifier rather than the signified, the medium (money) rather than the message (social labour), the emphasis on fiction rather than function, on signs rather than things, on aesthetics rather than ethics, suggest a reinforcement rather than a transformation of the role of money as Marx depicts it.' Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 102.

the characters' bodies thematize the 'unstable relation between corporeality and the forms of abstraction inherent in finance capital.' They argue that 'the "real" humans [the IRS] employ lose their bodies; their once solid forms melt into systems designed for the processing of tax monies.'<sup>71</sup> In their reading, Wallace's published planning note for the novel that reads 'David Wallace disappears—becomes creature of the system' is a manifestation of the ghostliness of finance capital, and its uncanny abstraction of exchange value from use value, money from referent.<sup>72</sup> However, in their eagerness to apply a materialist analysis, Godden and Szalay reductively employ the imperative of efficiency they claim to oppose. Not one drop of sweat, blood, urine, or semen secreted by the IRS workers escapes the determinism of their analysis: bodily residue 'figures the correspondingly recalcitrant precipitate left behind by "financial data."<sup>73</sup> This simplification of the relationship between abstraction and corporeality overlooks the ways in which Wallace uses concrete detail to map the workings of capitalism.

Wallace's text demands a less materialist approach, with its paradoxically referential yet floating signifiers, relevant irrelevance, and attention to the ordinary. The list of the narrator's effects provokes us to construct an alternative textual economy and to reassess our notions regarding value. If we look closely, the items on the list are curiously disconnected from any one individual, and instead the details vacillate between significance and insignificance: the suitcase is reported to contain '*the sorts of intimate or irreplaceable personal effects [...] that any thinking person carries with him.*' The narrator tells us that he has acne, which seems to connect the dermatological products to him, but the list is characterized as an *aggregation* of hypothetical items, and resists us reading it as a window into the character's interiority. In other words, I regard this passage as a manifestation of what Stephen Shapiro describes as the novel's 'turn against individual singularity,' and desire 'to

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<sup>71</sup> Richard Godden and Michael Szalay, 'The bodies in the bubble: David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*,' *Textual Practice* 28.7 (2014): 1273-1322, 1276.

<sup>72</sup> *TPK*, 546.

<sup>73</sup> Szalay and Godden, 1300.

encourage careful examination of what seems insignificant or overly abstracted from the drama of emotive biography.<sup>74</sup> However, unlike Shapiro, I do not believe that Wallace is endorsing a Communist form of collectivity.

David Wallace becomes a creature of the system, then, to resist our identifying with him; the novel is an attempt to prompt us to think systemically. Quotidian items and their paradoxically marginal and elevated position in the text create openings to track the world-capitalist system's movements from the particular to the abstract, rather than merely demonstrating how capitalism abstracts labour and bodies, as in Godden and Szalay's reading. Walter Benn Michaels' formulation is valuable here (as in Chapter One (see page 67)). Michaels argues for art that, 'rather than 'inspiring in us compassion for [...] victims and a desire to correct that abuse,' is 'less interested in the abuses of the system than in the system itself.' I contend that, instead of feeling 'the pathos of the suffering produced by' neoliberalism, Wallace's text prompts us to consider 'the structure that makes the problem.'<sup>75</sup> Wallace therefore widens his scope from his early work, such as 'Octet,' with its desire to engage empathetically with the reader.

Systemic thinking is problematized, however, by characters in the novel who are able to envision the invisible flows of commodities and labour behind the weave of the everyday but are unable to do anything useful with these powers of perceptions. This occurs strikingly in the case of the aforementioned 'Irrelevant Chris Fogle,' who recounts taking Obetrol, drug that makes him hyperaware of the overlooked and ordinary, such as his beige dorm room wall. He is able to identify 'little embedded strings and clots which painters tend to leave when they're paid by the job and not the hour and thus have motivation to hurry,' and avers: 'if you really look at something, you can almost always tell what type of wage structure the person who made it was on.'<sup>76</sup> This hyperattention to the quotidian can also be traumatic:

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<sup>74</sup> Stephen Shapiro, 'From capitalist to communist abstraction: *The Pale King's* cultural fix,' *Textual Practice* 28.7 (2014): 1249-1271, 1267.

<sup>75</sup> Walter Benn Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem: Photography, Autonomy, Economy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 39.

<sup>76</sup> *TPK*, 182.



Sylvanshine, the psychic, is plagued by tsunamis of minutiae. He ‘tastes a Hostess cupcake. Knows where it was made; knows who ran the machine that sprayed a light coating of chocolate frosting on top; knows that person’s weight, shoe size, bowling average; he knows the dimensions of the room that person is in right now. Overwhelming.’<sup>77</sup> Just as Don Quixote is pained by Sancho Panza’s need for him to know exactly how many goats crossed the river, and we would be pained by Wallace providing us with an ‘100 percent accurate, comprehensive list of the exact size and shape of every blade of grass in my front lawn,’ Sylvanshine is pained by his knowledge of ‘the number of blades of grass in the front lawn of one mailman’s home.’<sup>78</sup> As Wallace writes, determining relevance ‘requires extraordinary discernment’ on the part of the reader.<sup>79</sup> And this discernment is tested when the narrator offers a purportedly ‘condensed’ but amusingly elaborate list of logistical problems with the IRS’ access roads and parking design, surmising: ‘in short, it all seemed like just phenomenally bad planning, resulting in gross inefficiency, waste, and frustration for everyone involved.’<sup>80</sup> The conventions of realism might impose a De Certeauan ‘grid of discipline’ on unwieldy information, but the process of selection and capitalism’s efficiency drive can be valuable. Wallace shifts the responsibility to minimize textual waste to the reader rather than the writer. Rather than ossifying the world-system, or a specific mode of resistance within it, *The Pale King* carves out a space to *imagine* collectivism, and suggests that doing so will require strenuous readerly labour. Shapiro thus reifies the novel as embodying leftist ideals, claiming:

By refusing the lure of entertainment, we can notice the minutiae of capitalist abstraction and then replace the individual liberty of selfishness in favour of a selflessness in service of collective

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>78</sup> In *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, a character narrates a rape and describes the ‘almost hallucinatory accentuation of detail, the way in some nightmares you remember the precise shape of every blade of grass in your father’s lawn on the day your mother left him and took you to live at your sister’s.’ *Brief Interviews*, ‘B.I. #20 12-96,’ 287-318, 262.

<sup>79</sup> *TPK*, 262.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 279.

emancipation. Here, David Foster Wallace joins a lineage that insists that learning how to read, learning how to do an observant textual practice, belongs to a left ethics in service of real emancipation.<sup>81</sup>

In this reading, the novel plays out the dictum of an old-fashioned liberal in §19: ‘sometimes what’s important is dull. Sometimes it’s work. Sometimes the important things aren’t works of art for your entertainment.’<sup>82</sup> But by identifying explicitly left-wing visions of collectivity in the novel, Shapiro overlooks the novel’s (and in particular §19’s) problematizing of left and right wing binaries. *The Pale King’s* onslaught of data attempts to restore to view what reductive political positions occlude, and suggests that conservative civic ideals might be more useful than simplistic leftist critiques of consumerism, for example. Moreover, Shapiro’s emphasis on readerly hard work and our need to refuse the ‘lure of entertainment,’ belies how entertaining *The Pale King* can be, and that it refuses to condemn the products that entertain us. The narrator in §24 is burdened by his suitcases because the story predates the ‘sudden advance’ of cases with wheels, which he considers ‘just the sort of abrupt ingenious advance that makes entrepreneurial capitalism such an exciting system.’<sup>83</sup> With its pleasurable profusions of details that somehow evade *and* embody the capitalistic demand for signifiers to signify, the novel reinserts an account of the pleasures of consumerism into its critique of some of the effects of neoliberalism.

### **Interviews and hideous men**

*A Visit from the Goon Squad* features a curiously Wallace-like character, in a chapter presented as a celebrity profile. The reporter, Jules Jones, barely quotes the actress he is interviewing, deeming most of their exchange unworthy of relaying. Any voice or semblance of Kitty’s personality is lost in Jules’ narcissistic footnoted forays into his

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<sup>81</sup> Shapiro, ‘Capitalist to communist,’ 21.

<sup>82</sup> *TPK*, 140.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

thoughts on how quantum mechanics might explain Kitty's star quality, and his thought-process behind attempting to rape Kitty. Anticipating criticism, he explains:

Why do I keep mentioning—'inserting', as it may seem—myself into this story? Because I'm trying to wrest readable material from a nineteen-year-old-girl who is very, very nice; I'm trying to build a story that not only unlocks the velveteen secrets of her teenager's heart, but also contains action, development, along with—God help me—some intimation of meaning. But my problem is this: Kitty's a snooze. The most interesting thing about her is the effect she has upon others, and since the 'other' whose inner life is most readily available for our collective inspection happens to be myself, it is only natural—indeed, it is *required* [...] that the alleged story of my lunch with Kitty Jackson actually be the story of the myriad effects Kitty Jackson has upon me during the course of said lunch.<sup>84</sup>

Jules expresses frustration over his inability to penetrate Kitty's 'prophylactic shield of niceness' to 'unveil some aspect of Kitty that you haven't seen before,' without which his article will be 'killed.'<sup>85</sup> In order to produce something beyond the usual unrevealing boilerplate celebrity profile, he must satisfy the 'market demand' for the novel and 'real,' but, as the passage above demonstrates, he too is hungry. The phrase 'velveteen secrets of her teenager's heart' is instructive: even if Jules does attain the access to Kitty's inner life that he desires, he believes that all he will find is velveteen, a fabric that *imitates* velvet. For many readers, the word alone will evoke the popular 1922 children's story *The Velveteen Rabbit*, about a proto-Baudrillardian stuffed toy who 'long[s] to become Real,' despite not being able to 'claim to be a model of anything, for he didn't know that real rabbits existed.'<sup>86</sup> Beneath the synthetic celebrity persona lies a simulacrum; the pun on 'teen' in 'velveteen' and its recursion in 'teenager' concretizes this sense of *mise-en-abîme*, or of two mirrors facing one another, a sense that pervades the piece owing to Jules' use of meta-commentary on the interview.

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<sup>84</sup> Jennifer Egan, *A Visit From the Goon Squad* (London: Corsair, 2011), 182–3.

<sup>85</sup> *GS*, 179–10.

<sup>86</sup> Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit* (Copenhagen: Egmont, 2007), 5; 2.

More than one critic has commented on Jules' resemblance to David Foster Wallace, whose non-fiction writing often deconstructed journalistic genres such as the investigative reporting, or meditated on his own artistic aesthetics through another figure (David Lynch, Roger Federer). It is also worth noting that Wallace once told an interviewer: 'I don't think I've ever found anything as purely "moving" as the end of *The Velveteen Rabbit* when I first read it.'<sup>87</sup> However, the passage calls to mind most strikingly *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, in which sexual violence towards women is refracted through the retellings of solipsistic men. In Egan's hyperbolic version, the violence of representation degenerates into a literal sexual assault. As Sarah Churchwell notes, the scene is counterintuitively amusing, in part owing to the documentary style Jules employs to narrate the attack: 'Kitty is writhing beneath me, but her writhing is stymied by my height—six foot three—and my weight, two hundred and sixty pounds, approximately one-third of which is concentrated in my "spare tire of a" (Janet Green, during our last, failed sexual encounter) gut, which pinions her like a sandbag.'<sup>88</sup> Lest we are left to wonder, the author continues his grotesquely comical narration by asking:

How is this all affecting me? [...] I feel this crazy—what?—rage, it must be; what else could account for my longing to slit Kitty open like a fish and let her guts slip out, or my separate, corollary desire to break her in half and plunge my arms into whatever pure, perfumed liquid that swirls within her? I want to rub it into my raw, 'scrofulous' (ibid.) parched skin in hopes that it will finally be healed. I want to fuck her (obviously) and then kill her, or possibly kill her in the act of fucking her ('fuck her to death' and 'fuck her brains out' being acceptable variations on this basic goal.) What I have no interest in doing is killing her and *then* fucking her, because it's her life—the inner life of Kitty Jackson—that I so desperately long to reach.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Wallace, interview with Stacey Schmeidel, 'Brief Interview with a Five Draft Man,' *Amherst Magazine*, Spring 1999: <https://www.amherst.edu/amherst-story/magazine/extra/node/66410>

<sup>88</sup> *GS*, 187.

<sup>89</sup> *GS*, 187.

Jules ends this aside with an imperative: ‘Let us return to the moment.’<sup>90</sup> Amongst the editorializing and detached displays of erudition, Jules addresses and interpellates the reader as someone who shares his desires. The writer who wants to engage with the ‘human heart’ is recast as a sinister vivisectionist whose disdain for the inauthentic is projected onto women. The quest for authenticity through engagement with the reader that critics have come to associate with Wallace is exposed here as a façade for a kind of violent solipsism and the universalizing of an entitled male perspective. Ultimately, whether we consider the passage an affectionate homage or excoriation of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* hinges on how far we believe the collection critiques—rather than simply replicates—the structures of misogyny. But this scene sets up the concerns to which I will now turn in my discussion of *Look at Me*. Egan takes up DeLillo’s interest in the ordinary, but highlights how a quest for the ordinary beneath postmodern simulation can amount to a form of misogyny and violence.

### Surface disturbances

*Look at Me* follows Charlotte Swenson, a model from Rockford, Illinois, whose face is rendered unrecognisable after a car crash. The novel interweaves Charlotte Swenson’s story with that of Charlotte’s friend’s daughter (also named Charlotte), but, for my purposes, Charlotte Swenson’s attempts to relaunch herself as a model will be of primary importance here. My reading of *Look at Me* is in dialogue with Kelly’s reading of the novel, in which he groups Egan with ‘a range of U.S. authors writing in the wake of postmodernism [who] have themselves addressed in their fiction the problem of historicizing the postmodern.’<sup>91</sup> Indeed, for characters in Egan’s novel, postmodern notions are virtually common sense: Irene Maitlock, a comparative literature professor, studies how literature and cinema mediates experience—for example how detectives imitate hard-boiled novels. Kelly identifies Irene as a

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>91</sup> Kelly, ‘Beginning with Postmodernism,’ *Twentieth-Century Literature* 57.3/4 (2011): 391–422, 391.

successor to Murray Siskind, and notes her academic research's similarities to the concerns of Paul Auster's meta-fictional detective stories in *The New York Trilogy*, arguing that 'this underlying network of allusions to postmodern texts provides the novel with an additional layer of mediation beyond the levels associated with those technologies of representation—television, film, writing—that were the focus of postmodern critique.'<sup>92</sup> However, whilst discussing *Look at Me's* continuation of DeLilloean concerns, I draw out Egan's dialogue with her supposedly 'post-postmodern,' New Sincerity-acolyte contemporaries.

Charlotte performs a postmodernist reading of the city when she sees stacks of faded signs, forming a collage of old brands:

It's a sign, I thought, the wind gulping my laughter. A sign in the form of a sign.

At the corner of Sixth Avenue and Twenty-eighth Street I stopped and turned slowly around. They were everywhere—signs and the possibility of signs, many faded to translucence, as if I'd gained some new power that allowed me, finally, to see them. 'Harris Suspenders Garters Belts'. 'Maid-Rite Dress Co.'; mementos of the gritty industrialism I'd come to New York to escape. But today the signs looked honest, legible in a way that the negligéed models I'd seen this morning in *Vogue*, prone in a parking lot surrounded by broken glass, would never be.<sup>93</sup>

Here, the globalized city coalesces with the industrial past, resulting in stylistic uneven development. As Peter Fritzsche reminds us, the industrial city was a 'word city'—a dizzying collage of text and image, industrial buildings amidst a forest of advertising billboards and signs.<sup>94</sup> Earlier in the novel, Charlotte notices an old advertisement for Griffin's Shears, and feels moved by it because 'it reminded [her] of Rockford, of its factories and smokestacks and industry. A glimpse of New York's shadow face.'<sup>95</sup> The gloss of contemporary New York is interrupted by a sign Charlotte can connect to her Midwestern homeplace, Rockford, known for its 'drills, transmissions, joints, saws, watertight seals, adjustable door bumpers, spark plugs,

<sup>92</sup> Kelly, 'Beginning,' 402-3.

<sup>93</sup> *Look at Me* (London: Corsair, 2011), 89.

<sup>94</sup> Peter Fritzsche, *Reading Berlin 1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 12-50.

<sup>95</sup> *LM*, 48.

gaskets—“automobile sundries”, as such products are known—and for its agricultural tools; in short, for dull, invisible things that no one in the world would ever know or care about.<sup>96</sup>

Egan’s list of dull objects seem to invite the mode of reading that DeLillo’s lists and *The Pale King* demand—indeed, there is an echo of this scene in *The Pale King*; in which Chris Fogle observes the shadow of a neon sign of a foot that advertises a podiatric clinic, the position of which sometimes offer him a ‘sign’ that he should ‘blow off homework’ and go to a bar—like Charlotte, Chris acknowledges the ‘incredibly obvious double entendre.’<sup>97</sup> On the attention-focusing drug Obetrol, he is able to divine the ‘placement of the sun’; ‘concentration yields a totalising imperative that enables him to recover from the items of everyday [...] the structural source, be it wage system or solar movement, from which they derive their form.’<sup>98</sup> Just as Charlotte feels empowered by this perception, Chris explains: ‘I was aware of the awareness. It maybe sounds abstract or stoned, but to me it felt alive.’<sup>99</sup> Heightened attention to the ordinary reverses and refutes what Baudrillard envisioned as the severing of signifier and referent, finding its ‘artificial resurrection in the systems of signs,’ exemplified by America’s forest of billboards and neon signs.<sup>100</sup> Just as the billboard in *Underworld* branches out to signify Agent Orange, Wallace and Egan’s signs do not exemplify postmodern meaninglessness, but have a complex web of referents perceptible to those that are capable of mapping the everyday’s oscillations from the particular to the general. However, in *Look at Me*, the ‘ordinary’ embedded in the sign is performing dubious ideological work. Why is the image storehouse of the modern city, as represented by the *Vogue* advert, less authentic than ‘gritty industrialism?’ The gendered nature of the billboard is significant here. The scene probes the heterosexist dimensions of Jamesonian

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<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>97</sup> *TPK*, 165.

<sup>98</sup> Godden and Szalay, ‘Bodies,’ 1294-5.

<sup>99</sup> *TPK*, 185.

<sup>100</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (London: Sage, 1993), 174.

postmodernism, which, as Jack Halberstam writes, ‘depends utterly on a homophobic repudiation of the superficial, the depthless and the spectacular.’<sup>101</sup>

For Kelly, Charlotte’s encounter with the old signs provides a corrective to postmodern conceptions of depthlessness and ahistoricity:

in a world obsessed with image over reality, and with lying over truth, these ‘shadow selves,’ where detected, offer Charlotte the comfort of accessing something authentic, some reality that is not being simulated [...] seeing ‘signs and the possibility of signs,’ and connecting them to historical referents, to the depth they might connote, involves an ability to see the world as characterized less by the loss of history than by its suppression<sup>102</sup>

This reading of Egan as critiquing the assumptions of postmodernism and Theory is very convincing, but I think *Look at Me* excoriates the masculinist conceptualization of the ‘authentic’ or ‘real’ against which postmodernism is defined, as illustrated by its characters’ romanticization of the industrial Midwest and its putative authenticity. Moose also emblemizes this construction of the Midwest. An ardent anti-postmodernist, he believes that the contemporary world is awash with ‘appearances disjoined from anything real, afloat upon nothing, in the service of nothing, cut off from every source of blood and life.’<sup>103</sup> The means to reverse this process strikes him when he is walking by the river in Rockford:

Moose looked across the river and felt the past unroll suddenly from behind the present panorama of dead chrome and glass and riverfront homes as if a phony backdrop had toppled, exposing a labyrinth. ‘It’s all here,’ he murmured wonderingly, and experienced a lifting within himself [...] the joy of discovery had rescued Moose, had given him hope: the Industrial Revolution had happened right here in a form that was exquisitely compressed; everything he needed to know was right under his feet!<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 100.

<sup>102</sup> Kelly, ‘Beginning,’ 409.

<sup>103</sup> *LM*, 135.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.



As in a Romantic poem, the river becomes a site of revelation and inspiration, and a site to imagine and idealise pre-industrial life left behind by the linear progress of the river.<sup>105</sup> The imagery in the above passage evokes Fernand Braudel's famous formulation, in which the scales of history are represented by the sea, its tides, and foam: 'the history of events' is composed of 'surface disturbances, crests of foam that the tides of history carry on their strong backs.'<sup>106</sup> More than a surface disturbance, the fictitious nature of capital can be traced in cyclical long-term world-historical structures, the 'slow but perceptible rhythms' of the tides.<sup>107</sup> But instead of studying these structures, Moose believes he can restore referentiality by examining everyday life at a granular level:

he began stockpiling facts about Rockford's history until the mention of any single year could prompt a detailed recitation of which buildings were under construction and which businesses at their zeniths, the mayor's name, a rundown of the influential families, a recipe for a certain raisin pudding.<sup>108</sup>

As his brother-in-law comments: 'what he's trying to figure out is why he cracked up. Like a hundred and fifty years of trivia is going to answer that question.'<sup>109</sup> Moose's literary forebears suggest we should be sceptical towards his fixation on the ordinary: he resembles Peter Stillman in 'City of Glass,' whose deranged quest to reunite signifier with signified leads him to obsessively collect junk and, more deleteriously, seriously abuse his son. Moose's concerns also mirror that of the pseudo-intellectual terrorists in *The Names*, who aim to mend the 'self-referring' nature of the world through murder. Though Moose's nostalgia for the pre-industrial would render industrial Rockford contaminated, it is deemed more 'real' than the contemporary

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<sup>105</sup> See: Paul de Man, 'Time and History in Wordsworth,' in *English Romantic Poetry*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2004), 265-288, 275. (See also: Nigel J. Leask, 'Mont Blanc's Mysterious Voice: Shelley and Huttonian Earth Science,' in *The Third Culture: Literature and Science*, ed. Elinor S. Shaffer (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), 182-203, for a discussion of Shelley's 'Mont Blanc' in relation to *cyclical* geological forces, as figured by water.)

<sup>106</sup> Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, i (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 21.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>108</sup> *LM*, 71-2.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

world. His obsession with industrial work codes the supposedly ordinary as masculine, propagating the image of the heroic male industrial worker who produces tangible product, with one mention of the raisin pudding that supports this labour. In fact, the one item on the list implicitly associated with women—the raisin pudding—and that can be regarded as having use-value rather than exchange value strongly evokes homespun Midwesternness, in contrast to the glittering financialized surfaces of New York City.

The idea that the abstractions of postmodernism and Theory involve a violently reductive perception of the world, and in turn may lead to actual violence, is suggested in *Look at Me* when we are informed that Moose was fired from his position at Yale after playing Russian roulette in class and staging a ‘thought experiment’ in which he rigged a classroom with bombs and presented eight students with the detonator.<sup>110</sup> Moose belongs to a group of characters in *Look at Me* itself whose revulsion towards the unreality of contemporary life acquires violent dimensions. The most extreme of these is the Middle-Eastern terrorist Z, whose precise political objections to the U.S. remain opaque, but are projected onto its Baudrillardian trappings—‘houses like ships, supermarkets bigger than the biggest mosques, vegetables, mailboxes, all enlarged beyond belief, to the point of comedy’—in a manner reminiscent of Hammad in *Falling Man*.<sup>111</sup> His appearance in the novel is prefigured by Spiro, a sinister Pygmalion-esque fashion photographer who styles models as classical statues and then cuts their faces with razors. He attempts to sell the idea to Charlotte by invoking ‘truth’:

I’m trying to get at some kind of truth here, in this phony, sick, ludicrous world. Something pure. Releasing blood is a sacrifice. It’s the most real thing there is. [...] Everything is artifice. [...] I want to cut through that shit to what’s real and fundamental. And I want you to be a part of it.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> *LM*, 68.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

Spiro's project is a grotesque, violent literalization of the role women often play as scapegoats for the evils of consumerism and charges of superficiality and artifice. It is significant that one of the poems Charlotte displays knowledge of is Pope's 'The Rape of the Lock,' with its catalogue of the fruits of empire on which Belinda's beauty depends, so that when she performs her toilette:

Unnumber'd treasures ope at once, and here  
The various offerings of the world appear;  
From each she nicely culls with curious toil,  
And decks the goddess with the glitt'ring spoil.  
This casket India's glowing gems unlocks,  
And all Arabia breathes from yonder box.  
The tortoise here and elephant unite,  
Transform'd to combs, the speckled and the white.<sup>113</sup>

This, of course, slots into a wider tradition of women being constructed as the 'archetypal consumer,' both the figure and motive for capitalist expansion.<sup>114</sup> As Laura Brown writes, in eighteenth-century poetry, 'mercantile capitalism itself, with all of its attractions as well as its ambiguous consequences, is attributed to women, whose marginality allows them to serve [...] as a perfect proxy or scapegoat.'<sup>115</sup> Figures in DeLillo are parodied for regarding the world as reduced to postmodern surface, whereas in Egan they are complicit in the misogynistic displacement of consumerism and artifice onto women. The most important figure for my purposes is Thomas Keene, whose desire for the 'real' is portrayed as insidiously exoticist.

## Ordinary People

Thomas Keene is the entrepreneur who founds Extra/Ordinary People, a subscription-based website that buys the 'rights to people's stories, just ordinary Americans' (and a

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<sup>113</sup> Alexander Pope, 'The Rape of the Lock,' canto 1, 129-36.

<sup>114</sup> Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 62. See also: Rachel Bowlby, *Carried Away: The Invention of Modern Shopping* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000).

<sup>115</sup> Laura Brown, *Ends of Empire: Women and Ideology in Early Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (Cornell University Press, 1993), 119.

handful of ‘Extraordinary People,’ like Charlotte) and hosts their PersonalSpaces, homepages where the Ordinary People create content about their everyday lives. Seizing on his examples—miners and fishermen—Charlotte objects that access to their lives would be dull. Thomas rejoins with a pitch:

Most of us are desperate for raw experience. [...] TV tries to satisfy that, books, movies—they try, but they’re all so lame—so mediated! They’re just not *real* enough.

Eventually, we’ll take this international—a Yanomamo warrior in Brazil, a rebel in Sierra Leone. A Hezbollah suicide bomber...imagine if there a way for you to hear that guy’s last thoughts as he gets ready to die for his beliefs! And for him, the exposure—way beyond anything he could get from a day or two of headlines.<sup>116</sup>

Thomas’ pitch calls to mind Andreas Eliades’ invective in *The Names*, in which he complains that ‘it’s only in a crisis that Americans see other people [...] you then you turn on the television and they tell you where the country is, what the language is, how to pronounce the names of the leaders, what the religion is all about, and maybe you can cut out recipes in the newspaper of Persian dishes’ (see page 135). The desire for the ‘truth’ masks the desire to commodify and consume otherness.

Of course, Ordinary People presages the rise of websites such as Facebook and Twitter, which invite users to generate content about their everyday lives for free. By the time Egan was writing *Look at Me*, though, the way had already been paved for these services. As Thomas notes, ‘Hollywood’s drooling for real-life stories.’<sup>117</sup> Later in the novel, he declaims: ‘people aren’t moved by abstract concepts anymore [...] They’re moved by people’s individual struggles. Save the Children—like, what children?’<sup>118</sup> The 1990s saw a surge in confessional prose, memoirs, diaries, and popular interest in the concepts of trauma and ‘witness testimony.’ David Shields has recently argued that this ‘reality hunger’ has found its apotheosis in the twenty-first century, with the prevalence of reality television (*Big Brother*, for example), found

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<sup>116</sup> *LM*, 248-9.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 323.

footage films, mockumentaries, the internet ‘first person’ essay, etc.<sup>119</sup> At the time that Egan was writing, however, the thirst for ‘reality’ and stories of ‘people’s individual struggles,’ to use Thomas’ words, was epitomized by the content of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, a daytime talkshow that aired from 1986 to 2011. The show self-consciously positioned itself as providing a platform for ‘real stories’ told by ‘ordinary people,’ with the guiding assumption that some political change can be effected through viewers identifying with the stories. As Winfrey herself has said: ‘my whole career (has been) trying to get people to see how other people’s stories mirror or reflect into their own stories.’<sup>120</sup> *Oprah* embodies Lauren Berlant’s concept of the ‘juxtapolitical’: that which exists in ‘proximity to the political because the political is deemed an elsewhere managed by elites who are interested in reproducing the conditions of their own objective superiority, not in the well-being of ordinary people or life-worlds.’<sup>121</sup> This notion underlies Thomas’ techno-utopian belief that Ordinary People possesses liberatory potential, which he evinces in response to the observation that the service is Orwellian:

This is the *exact opposite* of what Orwell was talking about: There you had folks being spied on by a totalitarian government—they had no choice in the matter and no freedom. Whereas this is not only a hundred percent voluntary, obviously, but the whole thing is *about* freedom—freedom to communicate your experiences! Freedom to learn how other people live. If you ask me, it’s the ultimate expression of a democracy!<sup>122</sup>

Thomas’ assertion that Ordinary People is ‘*about* freedom’ is disturbing. Not only does it perform Silicon Valley’s classic move of reformulating the free *market* as freedom, it positions the sharing of individual experience as a substitute for formal politics, and betrays the neoliberal ideology of his agenda. As Zygmunt Bauman has

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<sup>119</sup> David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (London: Penguin, 2011).

<sup>120</sup> Oprah Winfrey, interview with *Entertainment Executive*, 21 February 21, 1991: <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/printmember/win0int-1>

<sup>121</sup> Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 2.

<sup>122</sup> *LM*, 320.

written, such stories ‘articulate individual lives in a way that excludes [...] the possibility of tracking down the links connecting individual fate to the ways and means by which society as a whole operates.’<sup>123</sup> *Ordinary People* depoliticizes and fetishizes everyday life by privileging the micro-level, rather than presenting a version of the everyday that represents the *intersection* of systemic forces and the particularity of lived experience.

The products of confessional culture are often wrested into ‘the interpretive straitjacket [sic] of the neoliberal belief that people have their fates in their own hands,’ which disconnects individual ‘struggle’ from systemic inequality, and Charlotte’s story will be no exception.<sup>124</sup> A media guru advises her: ‘if we can work the story around the idea of punishment and redemption, that could be *very* appealing. Never underestimate Americans’ religious fanaticism.’<sup>125</sup> Thomas issues a similar stylistic directive to Charlotte’s ghostwriter: ‘Hardy. The Bröntes. Tolstoy. Sad things happen but they happen for a reason.’<sup>126</sup> Thomas’ ethos obviously resonates with the Foucauldian model of the ‘entrepreneurial self,’ a familiar trope in discourse on neoliberalism, in which the individual willingly molds herself into a commodity. Charlotte is cognizant of this, observing: ‘I was still the model, after all. I was modeling my life.’<sup>127</sup>

*The Names* patently satirizes the commodification of the ‘ordinary,’ but the redemptive current to confessional culture specifically is brilliantly satirized in Deillo’s 1999 play *Valparaiso*, in which a man named Michael does the daytime talk show circuit to tell a story of how he accidentally boarded a plane to Valparaiso, Chile, instead of his intended destination, Valparaiso, Indiana. On the way he encounters an interviewer who is ‘looking for what’s left of some splash of real,’ and aims to find this in a film that follows Michael’s every movement (‘we don’t peel the

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<sup>123</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *The Individualized Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), 9.

<sup>124</sup> Alexander Freund, ‘Under Storytelling’s Spell? Oral History in a Neoliberal Age,’ *Oral History Review* 42.1 (2015): 96-132, 108.

<sup>125</sup> *LM*, 240.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 318.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.

film off the body until we're finished shooting') to create a 'self-commenting super-verité [...] in which everything that goes into the making of the film *is* the film.'<sup>128</sup> The play culminates in Michael confessing to an Oprah-esque host, Delphina, that he deliberately took the wrong flight. Delphina is introduced to the television stage as 'our life-spirit, the shining soul of daytime America,' and represented as vampiric, feeding off intimate knowledge of people's lives: 'the studio restores my life force,' she explains. Her prompts for access to her interviewing subject's self are couched in somatic metaphors: she asks him what he's 'hiding in [his] heart,' declares her desire for his 'naked shitmost self,' and, whilst strangling him with a microphone cord, asks 'what is your last living thought? Take us through it, Michael.'<sup>129</sup> Laura Grindstaff has written that the talkshow 'genre is [...] a kind of machine for producing ordinariness, where ordinariness is associated with emotion (the body)'; *Valparaiso* grossly literalizes this by concluding with a corpse on the studio floor.<sup>130</sup> This connects to a long tradition of the 'authenticating' body of the other having the Real violently inscribed upon it.

DeLillo's critique is not as explicitly concerned with gender as Egan's, and it is worth reminding ourselves of Thomas' catalogue of ideal Ordinary People: a miner, a fisherman, a Yanomamo warrior, a Hizbollah terrorist. As Thomas' catalogue of ideal Ordinary People demonstrates, the 'real' is often identified with the working class, people from economic peripheries, and (in Charlotte's case) women. This attitude is embodied by Jack Gladney in *White Noise*, when he claims: 'I don't see myself fleeing an airborne toxic event. That's for people who live in mobile homes out in the scrubby parts of the country, where the fish hatcheries are.'<sup>131</sup> This point is underscored in *Look at Me* when Charlotte's agent bemoans the 'mania for real people' in modeling, which has led to the booking of a 'beautiful, starving refugee' noticed in *Time Magazine*, a 'beautiful North Korean girl' spotted in 'a story about

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<sup>128</sup> DeLillo, *Valparaiso* (London: Picador, 2004), 36; 37; 36.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 64; 93; 75; 91; 104.

<sup>130</sup> Laura Grindstaff, *The Money Shot: Trash, Class, And The Making Of TV Talk Shows*, First Edition edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 21.

<sup>131</sup> *WN*, 117.

famine,' and 'Ukrainian studs' seen 'on CNN working on an oil rig that capsized.'<sup>132</sup> As Grindstaff writes, talk shows '[position] ordinary people—especially women, people of color, and the white working classes—as somehow closer to nature and more obviously (i.e., negatively) embodied than elite white men.'<sup>133</sup> But the putative 'realness' of economic peripheries is converted into a commodified spectacle so that the core can consume the 'exotic ordinary,' and used to bolster assertions Sontag critiques when she avers 'to speak of reality becoming a spectacle is a breathtaking provincialism [...] It suggests, perversely, unseriously, that there is no real suffering in the world.'<sup>134</sup> However, in *Valparaiso*, there is not as much at stake in Michael's embodied nature as there is in his wife's, for example; he urges another interviewer to 'interview her uterus [...] Talk to her clitoris.'<sup>135</sup> As I have attempted to demonstrate, *Look at Me* exposes how marginalised people's bodies are fodder for reality hunger.

### Surgeons of reality

To conclude, I want to turn to the epilogue of *Look at Me*, which opens as follows:

That woman entertaining guests on her East River balcony in early summer, mixing rum drinks in such a way that the Bacardi and Coca-Cola labels blink at the viewer haphazardly in the dusty golden light—she isn't me.

That woman whose sponsors have included Doritos, Lean Cuisine, Frigidaire, Williams-Sonoma, O.B., Sea Breeze, Q-tips, Clairol, Mac Cosmetics, Lubriderm, Vidal Sassoon, Bayer, NyQuil, *TV Guide*, Calvin Klein, Johnson & Johnson, Panasonic, Goodyear, Raisinettes, Windex, Tide, Clorox, Pine-Sol, Dustbuster, CarpetClean, Mason Pearson, Dentine, See's Candies, Scope, Nine West, Random House, General Electric, Tiffany, Flossrite, Crate & Barrel, Fruit of the Loom, Scotchgard, Apple, the *New York Post*, Hanes, Odoreaters, Frame-o-Rama, Kodak, Rubik's Cube, Day Runner, FTD, Sam Flax,

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<sup>132</sup> *LM*, 45.

<sup>133</sup> Grindstaff, *Money Shot*, 32.

<sup>134</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2003), 98.

<sup>135</sup> DeLillo, *Valparaiso*, 49.



*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Roach Motel, Reebok, Blistex, Braun, Levolor, Xerox, the Door Store, Right Guard, Panasonic, D'Agostino, Rubbermaid, K-Y jelly, and the services of Dr Raymond Huff, obstetrician—that woman whose veins and stomach and intestines have opened up their slippery corridors to small exploratory cameras [...] she isn't me.  
I swear.<sup>136</sup>

This list recalls DeLillo's characteristic enumerating of brand names, and the link is cemented through Egan's repetition of 'Panasonic,' DeLillo's original title for *White Noise* (permission was denied by the corporation).<sup>137</sup> It also evokes the reverse-blazon in *White Noise*, in which the (to some extent feminized) body is configured through the waste products it has produced: 'a banana skin with a tampon inside,' 'ear swabs,' 'strands of decayed dental floss,' 'a pair of shredded undershorts with lipstick markings' (see page 45-8).<sup>138</sup> Amongst Egan's catalogue of brands are O.B. tampons, Q-Tip ear swabs, Flossrite dental floss, and make-up brands (Clairol and Mac Cosmetics). While *White Noise* figures an absent body through the gross materiality of waste products, Egan's list is only composed of brand names. Ordinary detail acquires a negative particularity in the list of trash in *White Noise*, whereas it is abstract and nebulous in *Look at Me*. This trope of 'undressing' brings us back to 'The Rape of the Lock's' denuding Belinda of her cosmetic accoutrements, which Brown attests is a response to how 'female adornment becomes the main cultural emblem of commodity fetishism':

The figure of the woman, because of her connection with the material products of accumulation, comes to embody the whole complex question of the real human relations that underlie the fantastic ones created by commodification. That is, through images of dressing and adornment, women become a cultural focal point for the representation of the commodity [...] the obsessive and ambiguous dressing and undressing of that figure can be seen as an attempt to strip away the

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<sup>136</sup> *LM*, 509-10.

<sup>137</sup> DeLillo, Letter to Elizabeth Sifton, 'Sifton, Elisabeth, 1984-2001,' Container 106.5-6, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas.

<sup>138</sup> *WN*, 259..

mystifying “clothing” of the commodity and to discover the lost human essence that lies beneath<sup>139</sup>

Accordingly, the list that denudes Charlotte of the commodities is followed by an exploration of Charlotte’s ‘veins and stomach and intestines’ by ‘small exploratory cameras,’ a violation arising from the desire to get ‘beneath the surface’ of the commodity fetish. Charlotte does not consider the woman on film to be herself because, although ‘the breach between myself and Charlotte Swenson had its antecedents before *Ordinary People* [...] public life widened the fissures between us,’ and we learn that Charlotte has sold her persona and the rights to her image to Thomas’ company.<sup>140</sup> She has changed her name, assumed a new identity, married Anthony Halliday and had a child with him. ‘As for myself,’ she concludes, ‘I’d rather not say very much.’ She continues:

Even as we try to catch the mystery of ourselves, to catch it unawares, expose its pulse and flinch and peristalsis, the truth has slipped away, burrowed further inside a dark, coiled privacy that replenishes itself like blood. It cannot be seen, much as one might wish to show it. It dies the instant it is touched by light.<sup>141</sup>

Just as the everyday appears transiently when we begin to track the relations between the abstraction of the commodity fetish and the concrete, the ‘self’ only appears fleetingly. DeLillo’s texts reach out to the texture of the quotidian to demonstrate its imbrication in the capitalist world-system, showing that it is a luxury to issue postmodern declarations about the world sliding into surface and representation. Egan takes this further, and gives DeLillo’s gender critique teeth.

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<sup>139</sup> Brown, *Ends*, 120.

<sup>140</sup> *LM*, 510.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 514.

## CODA

### Body Time

#### Exhaustion and the everyday in DeLillo's late fiction

*The Names*, *White Noise*, *Mao II*, and *Underworld* are littered with quotidian things. *Falling Man* (2007) forms a bridge between these texts and what has been termed DeLillo's 'late style,' characterised by the stripping back of detail, dematerialization, and dead time that becomes evident in *The Body Artist* (2001), *Cosmopolis* (2003), *Point Omega* (2010), and *Zero K* (2016). Peter Boxall has eloquently described the 'peculiarly slowed, stalled time,' 'narrative stasis' and 'suspended temporality' of DeLillo's listless late prose.<sup>1</sup> He claims that 'these late novels craft Woolfian moments of being which are remarkably sharp, and brightly lit, but remain static, motionless, removed from any larger narrative flow or historical condition.'<sup>2</sup> Boxall is correct to emphasise the exhausted quality of DeLillo's late prose, but he overlooks the fact that exhaustion is itself a recurrent historical condition, caused by cyclical over- and under-accumulation and capitalism's systemic tendency towards over-extension. *The Body Artist* is replete with Woolfian moments.<sup>3</sup> It follows Lauren Hartke, a performance artist, struggling to come to terms with her husband's suicide whilst living in a rented house in rural New England. We might regard the insularity and apparent temporal dislocation of *The Body Artist's* farmhouse setting as embodying what Alison Shonkwiler refers to as 'the fable of financialization, in which capitalism is imagined as not only expanding beyond the rules of historical materialism but as liberating itself from the real world altogether.'<sup>4</sup> Shonkwiler is writing on

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 27; 29; *ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> Peter Boxall, 'Late: Fictional Time in the Twenty-First Century,' *Contemporary Literature* 53.4 (2012): 681-712, 691.

<sup>3</sup> See: Philp Nel, 'Don DeLillo's Return to Form: The Modernist Poetics of *The Body Artist*,' *Contemporary Literature* 42.4 (2002): 736-59.

<sup>4</sup> Alison Shonkwiler, 'Don DeLillo's Financial Sublime,' *Contemporary Literature* 51.2 (2010): 246-83, 250.

*Cosmopolis*, a text that explicitly engages with finance capital. Set against the backdrop of the dot-com bubble burst, *Cosmopolis* follows the investment banker Eric Packer's destructive bet against the Yen. In a similar fashion, and reminiscent of Egan's anti-postmodern dupes, Packer's desire for the 'real' amidst the 'glow of cybercapital' leads to murder (his employee's, and then his own). Observing scrolling displays of market data, he thinks: 'We are not witnessing the flow of information so much as pure spectacle, or information made sacred, ritually unreadable.'<sup>5</sup> Shonkwiler believes that *Cosmopolis* embodies the 'financial sublime,' a mode she uses to refer to 'the full range of mystifications of capital—technological, political, and otherwise—that make it difficult or impossible to distinguish the actuality of money from the increasing unreality of global capitalism.'<sup>6</sup> Whilst *Cosmopolis* brilliantly captures the seeming impenetrability and unreality of the global market, however, it simultaneously demonstrates the violently material effects wrought by the intensely fictitious capital of late financialization.

DeLillo's 2002 short story, 'Baader-Meinhof,' registers the rapacity of finance capital in a more nebulous fashion. An out-of-work investment banker approaches a woman at an art gallery, and, though she admonishes him for his refusal to look at the paintings closely, they end up at her apartment together; when she asks him to leave, he makes a sexual advance, she retreats to the bathroom, and he masturbates on her bed. After he leaves and she emerges from her bathroom: 'she saw everything twice now. [...] Nearly everything in the room had a double effect—what it was and the association it carried in her mind. She went out walking and the connection was still there, at the coffee table, on the bed, in the bathroom.'<sup>7</sup> The ordinary is here deformed by speculative non-bodily violation, forming an analogue with the nebulous machinations and everyday predations of finance capital, whose material ramifications penetrate domestic spaces (as in *Falling Man*.) and embodied relations.

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<sup>5</sup> DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* (London: Picador, 2004), 80.

<sup>6</sup> Shonkwiler, 'Financial Sublime,' 249.

<sup>7</sup> DeLillo, 'Baader-Meinhof,' in *The Angel Esmeralda: Nine Stories* (London: Picador, 2011), 105-118, 117.

If we can adopt the intense mode of looking that DeLillo associates with his protagonist, rather than the myopia of finance capital, we might be able to decode the inscrutability and insidious forms of violence enacted by financial regimes even as these structure and saturate everyday life.

DeLillo's 2010 short story, 'Hammer and Sickle,' similarly tracks the deleterious material effects of illegal investment schemes. Set in a minimum-security prison for men convicted of financial crimes, the story depicts the protagonist's young daughters reading out stock market trends on television. Their increasingly surreal reports curiously lapse into calls for revolution, attracting cheers from the 'white-collar felons watching' as the protagonist observes: 'We were the end products of the system, the logical outcome, slabs of burnt capital.'<sup>8</sup> In what follows I argue that these explicit engagements with financialisation provide a paradigm for reading DeLillo's apparently ahistorical, temporally dislocated 'late novels,' focusing in particular on *The Body Artist's* treatment of the ordinary. In doing so, I not only reject analyses of this slight, insular novel that have dismissed it as 'DeLillo with the politics left out, without conspiracies and secret histories, with no bomb and no environment—no world situation—to worry over,' but propose an alternative reading that connects this and DeLillo's other late fictions with financialised exhaustion.<sup>9</sup>

In its opening lines, *The Body Artist* announces its own hyperattentiveness to ordinary detail: 'Time seems to pass. The world happens, unrolling into moments, and you stop to glance at a spider pressed to its web. There is a quickness of light and a sense of things outlined precisely.'<sup>10</sup> The scene that follows introduces us to Lauren and her husband Rey Robles, as they eat breakfast in the secluded farmhouse. Lauren and Rey absent-mindedly converse as they eat, and Lauren absorbs all the sensuous detail of this routine scenario: the sounds of voices on the radio and birdsong outside; the opacity of the water from the tap; the body odour smell of the soya granules she

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<sup>8</sup> DeLillo, 'Hammer and Sickle,' in *The Angel Esmeralda*, 147-81, 175.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Gorra, 'Voices Off,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 16 February 2001, 21.

<sup>10</sup> DeLillo, *The Body Artist* (London: Picador, 2002), 3.

adds to her cereal. Orange juice features, as in *Underworld*, and Lauren observes the ‘slim of sizzling foam’ at the top of a glass of juice and the ‘bounce and slosh and cardboard aroma’ of the carton as Rey shakes it. *Underworld* imbricates orange juice in the U.S.’ military-industrial complex, connecting it to the use of Agent Orange in Vietnam. In *The Body Artist*, however, quotidian things are firmly anchored to the sensations and rhythms of the body, rather than mediated by their status within the capitalist world-system. The passage luxuriates in the description of Rey’s ritualized consumption of a fig with his morning toast:

He bit off the stem and tossed it toward the sink. Then he split the fig open with his thumbnails and took the spoon out of her hand and licked it off and used it to scoop a measure of claret flesh out of the gaping fig skin. He dropped this stuff on his toast—the flesh, the mash, the pulp—and then spread it with the bottom of the spoon, blood-buttery swirls that popped with seedlife.<sup>11</sup>

The splayed fig is overtly sexual, and imbued with female fertility, but operates differently to the chance encounter of a banana skin and a tampon in *White Noise*. It is symbolically rooted to the materiality and sensations of Rey and Lauren’s bodies rather than figuring an absent body, systemic periphery, or commodity chain. Indeed, with the references to blood, skin, and flesh, the fig’s materiality merges with that of the human body. Rather than the production of the commodity, the overdetermined fig is ‘defined entirely by its enmeshed production within a ring of [...] psychological relations,’ to use Victoria Coulson’s phrase.<sup>12</sup> The scene’s ordinariness is contaminated, however, when we learn almost immediately afterwards that Rey commits suicide later that day, and the discovery of the body is unconsciously linked back to his seemingly banal exchange with Lauren that morning:

‘I’m the one to be touchy in the morning. I’m the one to moan. The terror of another ordinary day,’ he said slyly. ‘You don’t know this yet.’

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>12</sup> Victoria Coulson, ‘Sticky Realism: Armchair Hermeneutics in Late James,’ *The Henry James Review* 25.2 (2004): 115-126, 122.

'Give us all a break,' she told him.'<sup>13</sup>

The scene becomes mediated and overlain with foreboding, amounting to an estrangement of the ordinary, rather than the linking of the particular to overarching systemic structures. Instead of appearing subtly through the tension between plot progression and digression, the mundane is pulled to the foreground, as time contracts. Lauren notes that 'all day yesterday [she] thought it was Friday [...] How does it happen that Thursday seems like Friday? We're out of the city. We're off the calendar. Friday shouldn't have an identity here.'<sup>14</sup> The insularity of the farmhouse also applies to DeLillo's aesthetically austere text. When Lauren returns to the farmhouse after Rey's death, the ordinary assumes extraordinary significance:

How completely strange it suddenly seemed that major corporations mass-produced bread crumbs and packaged and sold them everywhere in the world and she looked at the bread-crumbs carton for the first true time, really seeing it and understanding what was in it, and it was bread crumbs.<sup>15</sup>

The self-referential nature of the commodity attests to DeLillo's enduring interest in what he called 'circular system[s]' in a 1988 interview with *Rolling Stone*:

It is just my sense that we live in a kind of circular or near-circular system and that there are an increasing number of rings which keep intersecting at some point, whether you're using a plastic card to draw money out of your account at an automatic-teller machine or thinking about the movement of planetary bodies. I mean, these systems all seem to interact to me. But I view all this in the most general terms, and I have no idea what kind of scientific studies are taking place. The secrets within systems, I suppose, are things that have informed my work. But they're almost secrets of consciousness, or ways in which consciousness is replicated in the natural world.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *BA*, 12.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>16</sup> DeLillo, Interview with Anthony DeCurtis, 'Q&A: Don DeLillo,' in *Rolling Stone*, 17 November, 1988: <http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/matters-of-fact-and-fiction-19881117>

Earlier texts such as *White Noise* deploy circularity in a different manner, depicting systemic interconnectedness rather than *The Body Artist's* 'secrets of consciousness.' Instead of gesturing towards the invisible labour and commodity chains congealed in the 'mass-produced breadcrumbs,' the product's packaging provokes another moment of internalized self-reflection that leads, once again, back to sheer materiality. The mundane appears opaque Lauren, rather than mediated by the systems in which it is embroiled. The idea of circularity is reinforced by Mr. Tuttle entering the narrative, a man with a language-based learning disability who has been hiding in the house and can 'replay' Lauren and Rey's conversations to her. He tells Lauren: 'The word for moonlight is moonlight,' which pleases her: 'this made her happy. It was logically complex and oddly moving and circularly beautiful and true—or maybe not so circular but straight as straight can be.'<sup>17</sup>

In critical readings that sever *The Body Artist* from history, Lauren's performance art piece would serve simply as an allegory for DeLillo's prolix aesthetics, and a way for Lauren to process her grief.<sup>18</sup> A journalist writes of the performance, entitled 'Body Time': '[Lauren] Hartke clearly wanted her audience to feel time go by, viscerally, even painfully.'<sup>19</sup> Lauren tells the journalist: 'I know there are people who think the piece was too slow and repetitious, I guess, and uneventful. But it's probably too eventful. I put too much into it. It ought to be sparer than it is, even longer than it is.'<sup>20</sup> But 'Body Time' holds significance beyond trauma and loss: Lauren's bodily endurance and uncanny performances are redolent of those of the Falling Man with which Chapter Three closed. If the Falling Man's repetitive jumps perform the systemic cycles of capitalism, however, both Lauren's longueurs and the lassitude of DeLillo's prose register world-weary capitalism in an era of systemic exhaustion and diminishing returns. Hence Lauren's decision to eat 'little more' than

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<sup>17</sup> *BA*, 87.

<sup>18</sup> For such a reading, see: Laura Di Prete, 'Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist*: Performing the Body, Narrating Trauma,' *Contemporary Literature* 46.3 (2005), 483-510.

<sup>19</sup> *BA*, 110.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 112-3.



nothing, resulting in what the journalist describes as Lauren's 'wasted,' 'rawboned' appearance by the close of the novel.<sup>21</sup>

Here, I am using the term 'exhaustion' to refer to what Jason W. Moore describes as 'the erosion of [the] historically-specific accumulation strategies that remake the specific forms of capital, power and nature in successive long centuries of accumulation.'<sup>22</sup> As Moore explains, when the 'exhaustion of [...] human and biophysical natures' occurs, 'it begins to fetter labour productivity,' and 'capitalists and empires begin to look for new frontiers' for resource and labour extraction.<sup>23</sup> However, in the age of neoliberalism, 'opportunities for frontier expansion' have been exhausted.<sup>24</sup> When the profitability of commodities and bodies is exhausted, market prices and thus profit margins are depressed, and the rate of turnover and material production slows down. Giovanni Arrighi explains that this is the moment that financialisation re-occurs, and:

returns to capital invested in lending and speculation soar. The predisposition of capitalist organizations to withdraw cash surpluses from trade and production in response to falling profits and increasing risks, in contrast, continually tends to pull the mass of capital invested in commodities downwards, towards, or below the lower path, so that

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<sup>21</sup> 109; 101. Exhausted, wasted, and starved bodies feature prominently in late DeLillo. See: his 2005 play, *Love-Lies-Bleeding* (London: Picador, 2011) and 2011 short story, 'The Starveling,' in *The Angela Esmeralda*, 83-211. For an earlier treatment of starving and wasting, see 'The Artist Naked in a Cage,' *New Yorker*, 26 May, 1997, 6-7, which links the Russian performance artist Oleg Kulik, Franz Kafka's hunger artist, and Chinese dissident Wei Jingsheng together to discuss artistic repression. Mark Osteen has commented that tropes of the undead abound in late DeLillo—this seems curiously appropriate, given the zombie-like resurrection of the neoliberal phase of capital after the turbulence of the 2007-9 crisis. See: Osteen, 'The Living and the Undead: Don DeLillo's Late Style,' (paper presented at 'Don DeLillo: Fiction Rescues History' conference, Paris, 18-20 February, 2016).

<sup>22</sup> Jason W. Moore, 'The End of Cheap Nature or: How I learned to Stop Worrying about "the" Environment and Love the Crisis of Capitalism,' in *Structures of the World Political Economy and the Future of Global Conflict and Cooperation*, ed. Christian Suter and Christopher Chase-Dunn (Berlin: LIT, 2014), 285-314, 296.

<sup>23</sup> Moore, interview with Tom Keefer, 'Wall Street is a Way of Organizing Nature,' *Upping the Anti: A Journal of Theory and Action*, 12 (2011): 39-53, 45.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

the profits of trade and production rise and those of lending and speculation fall.<sup>25</sup>

When capital accumulation enters this exhausted phase, it 'becomes subject to more or less violent downswings and upswings which recreate and destroy over and over again the profitability of capital invested in trade.'<sup>26</sup> For Arrighi, then, the financial crash of 2007 was the result of a structural tendency that characterizes the capitalist world-system—namely, the logical exhaustion of working bodies and commodity frontiers that leads to financial expansion via increasingly speculative/fictitious accumulation strategies, yielding over-accumulation and (forced) under-consumption, and therefore systemic crisis. Though such crises have historically ushered in a new 'systemic cycle of accumulation', neoliberal finance capital has curiously survived global economic crisis by pushing biophysical limits to their extremes through increasingly intensive forms of extraction. Accordingly, in *The Body Artist*:

Lauren worked her body hard. There were always states to reach that surpassed previous extremes. She could take a thing to an unendurable extreme as measured by breath or strength or length of time or force of will and then resolve to extend the limit. [...] She did [...] her slow-motion repetitions of everyday gestures, checking the time on your wrist or turning to hail a cab, actions quoted by rote in another conceptual frame, many times over and now slower and over.<sup>27</sup>

The cyclicity of Lauren's bodily repetitions (like the self-referring language of Mr. Tuttle) perform the systemic cyclicity of capitalist crisis. Her bodily exhaustion, alongside the exhausted nature of the prose, and her bodily exhaustion gesture towards the coming of financial crash, a ripple of 'local turbulence' in the current

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<sup>25</sup> Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times* (London: Verso, 1994), 233.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *BA*, 59-60.

‘systemic cycle of accumulation’ that portends the eventual terminal crisis of capitalism’s neoliberal phase.<sup>28</sup>

*The Body Artist’s* interest in circularity and self-referentiality goes deeper, however: if the gold standard set money adrift, financial speculation is an intensification of the concept of money as a self-referring system of signs, bound up in endless credit, leveraging, and liquidity, in which capital appears to be propagated from capital. The torturous repetitions of Lauren’s ‘Body Time’ performance symbolise an economy on the brink of financialised crisis, its recursions and apparent self-reference figuring the self-referring overextension and violent re-ascension of high finance. If the formal abundance and cluttered surfaces of DeLillo’s 1980s and 1990s novels formally register what Arrighi terms the ‘*belles époques*’ of these decades, an era in which Americans enjoyed the illusive boom created by importing capital from foreign investors, the torpor of late DeLillo depicts the waning of accumulation, the material exhaustion of bodies and commodities, and a U.S.-led capitalist cycle on the brink of collapse.<sup>29</sup>

In *Point Omega*, DeLillo returns to the ideologically charged site of the desert, where the protagonist, Jim Finley, travels to interview Richard Elster—a scholar who has worked as a military strategist, abetting the U.S. military in Iraq.<sup>30</sup> For the narrator, the desert embodies ‘dead time’ and ‘self-entrapment,’ but for Elster it captures the immensity of ‘all that space and time’ and the far-reaching ‘force’ of deep ‘geologic time.’<sup>31</sup> This sense is captured by the portentous narrator’s observation: ‘Spaciousness and claustrophobia. This would become a theme.’<sup>32</sup> Indeed, there is a restrictive, exhausted, economical quality to the prose, as epitomised by Elster’s reductive aphorisms:

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<sup>28</sup> I am using ‘local turbulence’ in Arrighi’s sense, defined in opposition to ‘systemic turbulence,’ which denotes the actual terminal crises of capitalist regimes. ‘Systemic cycle of accumulation’ is Arrighi’s phrase, too, which refers to the endemic cycles of accumulation, exhaustion, financialisation, and crisis. Arrighi, *Long*, 366; 242.

<sup>29</sup> DeLillo, *Point Omega* (London: Picador, 2011), 242.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 46; 24.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

Finally, he said, 'Haiku.'

[...]

'Haiku means nothing beyond what it is. A pond in summer, a leaf in the wind. It's human consciousness located in nature. It's the answer to everything in a set number of lines, a prescribed syllable count. I wanted a haiku war,' he said. 'I wanted a war in three lines. [...] Bare everything to plain sight. See what's there. Things in war are transient. See what's there and then be prepared to watch it disappear.'<sup>33</sup>

The text clearly satirises the conception of war being simplified and mediated through technology, a point that is underlined when Elster's daughter goes missing, in an eerie echo of extraordinary rendition. But the spent signifiers Elster imputes to the haiku, meaning 'nothing beyond' what they are, register the U.S.' disastrous efforts to expand to new oil frontiers with the 2003 invasion of Iraq and surmount its financialised exhaustion through the creation of a new free-market bulwark in the Middle East. Again, DeLillo presents us with the spectacle of bodily longueurs: the novel opens and closes with descriptions of Douglas Gordon's '24 Hour Psycho,' an art installation created in 1993 that slows Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) down to two frames a second. Jim watches the film in full, fatigued by the standing, but enraptured by the long duration: 'It takes close attention to see what is happening in front of you. It takes work, pious effort, to see what you are looking at. He was mesmerized by this, the depths that were possible in the slowing of motion, the things to see, the depths of things so easy to miss in the shallow habit of seeing.'<sup>34</sup> Though this a mode of looking DeLillo would surely endorse, the black-and-white bodies of Anthony Perkins and Janet Leigh inevitably evoke footage of drone warfare. Jim's gaze drifts over the bodies just as the digital crosshairs hover over the blurred bodies on screen, figuring the technologies of surveillance and warfare that have been 'central to financialization [...] and monitoring and suppressing opposition to the neoliberal project.'<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> DeLillo, *Point Omega*, 37.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-7.

<sup>35</sup> Moore, 'Wall Street,' 47.

DeLillo's latest novel, *Zero K*, tempts us to regard the text as operating 'outside time, outside history,' in the words of one of its characters, but presents us with Artis, a woman who will be cryogenically frozen in order to wake up in the new world. When explaining her decision, Artis recalls a moment of intense perception when recovering from an eye operation, of waking up in her room and finding that: 'Everything looked different. [...] What was I seeing? I was seeing what was always there. The bed, the windows, the walls, the floor. But the brightness of it, the radiance. The bedspread and pillow cases, the rich color, the depths of color, something from within.'<sup>36</sup> She believes that after waking up from her cryogenic suspension, she will similarly 'reawaken to new perception of the world,' adding: 'And this is what I think about when I try to imagine the future. I will be reborn into a deeper and truer reality. Lines of brilliant light, every material thing in its fullness, a holy object.'<sup>37</sup> Here, DeLillo depicts the uncanny new technologies that must be invented to renew and sustain capitalist productivity. Is this a dream of awakening in a world in which capitalism has renewed itself and revived accumulation? Or is it the dream of a transformation of everyday life, in which the ordinary is not mediated by capitalist relations?

DeLillo's late work eschews the project of the everyday, the formal dynamic that works to map the capitalist world-system through the particularity of the mundane, and poses a radical formal challenge to the systems of value imposed and bolstered by capitalist social relations. Where the systemicity of the everyday and quotidian had suffused his earlier fiction, this later writing moves to allegorising the vicissitudes of capitalist accumulation, but, in so doing, urges us to re-train our attention to the 'radiance in dailiness.' This thesis has demonstrated that literary critics must reorient their mode of looking to investigate beyond the depthless surfaces of postmodernism, and the simplistic readings advanced by deterministic applications of Marxist theory to literature, both of which elide the richness and

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<sup>36</sup> DeLillo, *Zero K* (London: Picador, 2016), 44-5.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

complexity of the everyday. For, by striving to apprehend 'the depth and reach of the commonplace,' we bring ourselves closer to imagining the transformation of everyday life.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DeLillo

*BA – The Body Artist*

*FM – Falling Man*

*MII – Mao II*

*TN – The Names*

*U – Underworld*

*WN – White Noise*

Egan

*GS – A Visit from the Goon Squad*

*LM – Look at Me*

Wallace

*TPK – The Pale King*

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