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"Too many goddamn echoes": Historicizing the Iraq War in Don DeLillo's Point Omega

The novels of Don DeLillo are, in multiple senses, exemplary of a formal movement from postmodern play, through to quasi-encyclopaedicism to a contracted minimalism over the course of his career. [SLIDE] From his clear Pynchon-influence phase in *Ratner's Star*, we move to *Libra* and *Underworld's* grand explorations of history, film and American culture. Around the millennial break, though, DeLillo's fiction contracts. Although it is initially *Cosmopolis* that reads as the work of a man in shock at 9/11's symbolic emasculation of an era, it is actually in the stark reductions of *The Body Artist*, *Falling Man* and *Point Omega* that the true shift is to be found. While it might be tempting then, given the way in which the two latter novels are focused on 9/11 and the Iraq War respectively, to posit a historicist, quasi-biographical parallel between theme and this stylistic contraction, this poses a problem; *The Body Artist* was written before the events of 9/11.

In this paper I want to think through some of the ways in which this counter-historicist stance yields resonances with DeLillo's works that cannot be understood as specifically *about* the Iraq War but that nonetheless seem to structurally presage it. This is of interest not least because DeLillo explicitly links his later works back to pre-Iraq works, [SLIDE] thus evading the inevitable critiques that might be levelled at a solely critic-driven a-historical methodology. Indeed, Peter Boxall has already framed the way in which prophetic coincidences in DeLillo's work, such as the front cover of *Underworld* featuring an image of the World Trade Center partially obscured by the silhouette of a church, should be not be read as important for the specific details that are later validated, but for its understanding on a historiographic level: "it gains some kind of access to the

hidden underlying forces that continue to produce history”.¹ While my claims for prophetic insight are certainly not going to be this grand, I do think that DeLillo's historiographic passages have a function here of pre-empting a post-national mode of “warfare” – in which the nation-state is no longer the privileged agent of war – to which I'll return, but I also simultaneously want to explore the way in which this historiography signals a specific return to a mode of State-driven, international conflict. I want, [SLIDE] in short, to examine the way that DeLillo's latest novel, about Iraq, points backwards [SLIDE] to *Underworld*, his earlier novel that subtly compares and contrasts the Cold War with terrorism. [SLIDE] In that looking backwards, though, I want to think through the ways that DeLillo's earlier text, about the Cold War, anticipates *Point Omega* and Iraq.

Set in what Alexander Dunst has referred to as a “traumatized present”², [SLIDE] *Point Omega*, DeLillo's latest novel, begins with an unknown character's visit to the Museum of Modern Art, where he has come to view Douglas Gordon's installation *Twenty-Four Hour Psycho*. This film is, as its name suggests, a version of Alfred Hitchcock's classic horror film stretched to run over a day-long period. This episode is, however, “merely” an enigmatic frame to the main action of the novel, which concerns the visit of a film-maker to Iraq War strategist Richard Elster whose daughter, Jessie, then disappears without a trace, although it is probable that Jessie's disappearance is linked to her meeting with the unknown viewer of the Gordon installation. While this thematic material on Iraq might give the impression that *Point Omega* is to be read as a highly politicised, committed novel, David Cowart succinctly characterises this differently in his cleverly titled article, “The Lady Vanishes”: “Though he foregrounds the spiritual crisis of an apologist for the Second Gulf War, DeLillo deflects problems of immediate political legitimacy toward larger, less topical questions of a civilization’s decline. He perpend the prospect of an omega point for the American empire”.³ While, therefore, DeLillo may claim that “the novel itself is not at all political”, this is

1 Peter Boxall, *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 158.

2 Alexander Dunst, ‘After Trauma: Time and Affect in American Culture Beyond 9/11’, *Parallax*, 18 (2012), 56–71 (p. 60) <doi:10.1080/13534645.2012.672244>.

3 David Cowart, ‘The Lady Vanishes: Don DeLillo’s Point Omega’, *Contemporary Literature*, 53 (2012), 31–50 (p. 32) <doi:10.1353/cli.2012.0009>.

disingenuous.⁴ The novel may not be condemnatory in its tone or theme regarding those responsible for the Iraq War, but the cyclical nature of this Gibbon-inflected, intra-US imperial decline interpretation has, I contend, implications for how we read DeLillo on Iraq and on terrorism in *Point Omega* and across his oeuvre.

[SLIDE] In many ways, *Point Omega* is a structural re-enactment, at a microscopic, compressed level, of DeLillo's entire canon and the various classificatory phases through which it passes and I want to voice some remarks on aesthetic form and periodization, although I appreciate some of you may find this latter classifying impulse tiresome, that are integral to a reading of Iraq in DeLillo's works. With echoes of Beckett's *Ghost Trio*'s "door imperceptibly ajar", the prose in this novel has, as Cowart puts it, a style indebted to a "modernist aesthetic that married a high standard of economy to new representational challenges",⁵ which can be seen in its rhythm and tone from the off: "There was a man standing against the north wall, barely visible. People entered in twos and threes and they stood in the dark and looked at the screen and then they left"⁶ or shortly after, "The guard was here to be unseen".⁷ At the same time, DeLillo deliberately evokes postmodern metafiction in a looped repeat of his earlier novels, but particularly *Ratner's Star*. This is achieved both through direct metafictional statements about the slender *Point Omega* – "The less there was to see, the harder he looked, the more he saw"⁸ – and in the allusions to the ultra-slow film epochs of rocks in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* where "We're talking frames per century",⁹ thereby mirroring Richard Elster's experience of *Twenty Four Hour Psycho*: "He told me it was like watching the universe die over a period of about seven billion years".¹⁰ The novel seems also to signal an awareness, though, of the transition from supposed postmodern fiction (implying indeterminacy, notions of metafiction and play etc.) to an inelegantly named "post-postmodernism".

4 Don DeLillo, 'A Conversation with Thomas DePietro', *The Barnes & Noble Review*, 2010
<<http://bnreview.barnesandnoble.com/t5/Interview/Don-DeLillo/ba-p/2144>> [accessed 31 January 2013].

5 Cowart, p. 31.

6 Don DeLillo, *Point Omega* (London: Picador, 2010), p. 3.

7 DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 7.

8 DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 5.

9 Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 612.

10 DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 47.

A regular correspondent with David Foster Wallace and obviously, as already mentioned, in tune with Pynchon, DeLillo early on brings the need for concentration to the fore, remarking that “It takes close attention to see what is happening in front of you”,¹¹ aspects that have featured in both Pynchon's and Wallace's work (*Gravity's Rainbow* unveils that “the secret is in the concentrating”¹² while *Infinite Jest* informs us that “Concentrating intently on anything is very hard work”¹³). While, therefore, this synthesis of modernist and postmodernist aesthetics might signal some manner of formal dialect at work, it also is just one of the ways that DeLillo's text re-invokes its generic antecedents, a trait also seen overtly, as opposed to purely structurally, in the genre parodies of David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* and Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day*.

Moving beyond stylistic aesthetics, though, the novel also cycles back, importantly, towards a postmodern indeterminacy; the reader is never given enough evidence to uncover what has happened to Jessie or what has caused her disappearance, only strongly suggestive clues and forking paths. DeLillo does also, however, embed significant allusions to his own earlier works in the text. This includes reference to the more recent short story, “Baader-Meinhof,” with its disturbing implied sexual violence, an aspect that features as another sub-text in *Point Omega*, as it does in the case of any contemporary abduction, but especially so here when the unknown gallery character “imagined turning and pinning her to the wall”.¹⁴ More significantly for the topic at hand, however, the Iraq War, the key line that stands out for me is [SLIDE] “that the country needed this, we needed it in our desperation, our dwindling, needed something, anything, whatever we could get, rendition, yes, and then invasion”.¹⁵

This is a significant line of prose because it is almost a direct echo of Marvin Lundy's assertion in DeLillo's earlier novel, *Underworld*, that “the Cold War is your friend. [...] You need it to stay on top [...] the whole thing is geared to your dominance in the world”.¹⁶ Indeed, if DeLillo's

11 DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 13.

12 Pynchon, p. 734.

13 David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1996), p. 203.

14 DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 112.

15 DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 35.

16 Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (London: Picador, 1998), pp. 170–171.

persistently rendered fear or hope across the period between these two novel s is the approaching end of a US-dominated world, the function of the comparison between Iraq and the Cold War must be considered. It must also be noted, at this juncture, however, that the second Iraq War, like Afghanistan before it, was a national conflict predicated on sub-national terrorism and the notion of the “rogue state”. Indeed, the US State Department's rationale was the removal of “a regime [hostile governments are always 'regimes', not 'governments'] that developed and used weapons of mass destruction, that harbored and supported terrorists, committed outrageous human rights abuses, and defied the just demands of the United Nations and the world”. It is surely unnecessary to point out the hypocrisy of such a rationale given that the invasion was launched in contravention of the United Nations Charter and deemed illegal by the UN Secretary, Kofi Annan.¹⁷ It is also surely unnecessary to say that subsequent claims for weapons of mass destruction and any evidence of cooperation with Al Qaeda were disproved.¹⁸ What now needs careful exploration, however, is the exact nature of the comparison that DeLillo makes to the Cold War, across this multiply positioned, re-historicized sub- or inter- nationally falsely justified Iraq War.

[SLIDE] Let me first turn attention to the sub-national component of Iraq: the base for Al-Qaeda, the ongoing “War on Terror”. According to the US State Department, in a paper entitled 'Patterns of Global Terrorism' published in 2000, terrorism is “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience”.¹⁹ Contrast this with the definition presented by Christopher Harmon, a theoretician, as opposed to policy-maker: “[t]errorism is the deliberate and systematic murder, maiming, and menacing of the innocent to inspire fear for political ends”.²⁰ The important distinctions between these definitions are threefold. The first of these aspects is the inclusion of a

17 ‘Iraq War Illegal, Says Annan’, *BBC*, 16 September 2004, section Middle East

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/3661134.stm> [accessed 1 February 2013].

18 R. Jeffrey Smith, ‘Hussein’s Prewar Ties To Al-Qaeda Discounted’, *The Washington Post*, 6 April 2007, section Nation <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/05/AR2007040502263.html>> [accessed 1 February 2013].

19 Cited in Glenn E. Schweitzer and Carole Dorsch Schweitzer, *A Faceless Enemy: The Origins of Modern Terrorism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Perseus, 2002), p. 31.

20 Christopher C. Harmon, *Terrorism Today*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 7.

clause specifying that terrorism can only be perpetrated by “subnational or clandestine agents”. As with the post-World War II International Military Tribunal (IMT) in Nuremberg, in which the charges were specifically crafted to ensure that the atomic bombings could not be construed as war crimes, this definition of terrorism guarantees that any acts committed as a state cannot be considered as acts of terror. Secondly, in the State Department's definition, the term “noncombatant” is used in preference to Harmon's “innocent”. Finally, in Harmon's definition, the mere “menacing” of individuals is enough to constitute terrorism, as opposed to the actual act of violence which is requisite in the State Department's version. This inclusion purportedly exists to criminalise kidnapping but it also seems likely that the US does not wish to classify threatening behaviour as terrorism; it does, after all, consistently position itself as the most heavily armed nation in the world.

[SLIDE] These facets are all of interest, but especially so when it is considered that Larry Diamond, a Senior Fellow at Stanford, noted in a 2002 policy paper for the “Institute of Global Democracy” that “[t]he political struggle against international terrorism has many of the features of a new Cold War”.²¹ Furthermore, he also refers to jihadist terrorists as the “Islamic Bolsheviks” while mapping parallels between their levels of education and that of Russian revolutionaries, specifically Lenin. Unfortunately, Diamond's political stance, which rationalises terrorism within an over-simplified civilized/barbarian dichotomy is, at best, naïve, at worst, imperialistic. To brand systems as “predatory societ[ies]”, whilst seeing the American “civic community” as a “culture of trust, cooperation, reciprocity, respect, restraint, tolerance and compromise” seems to demonstrate a belief that inequality and its consequential bitterness are the faults of the victims, a clearly biased US-centric stance. This metaphorical parallel between the Cold War and the Second Gulf War is one whose prevalence is growing. In early 2013, Tony Blair deployed the exact same terminology in an interview with the *Guardian* newspaper, likening the fight against terrorism to the Cold War.

21 Larry Diamond, ‘Winning the New Cold War on Terrorism: The Democratic Governance Imperative’, *Institute for Global Democracy*, Policy Paper No. 1 (2002), p. 2.

Furthering this Cold War comparison, and noting that while it is impossible for *Underworld* to have foreseen its catastrophic events, DeLillo's earlier text admirably depicts the conditions that produced September 11th, 2001. In his post-9/11 essay, 'The Ruins of the Future', DeLillo suggested that a major contribution to these conditions must be attributed to “[t]he Bush Administration[’s ...] nostalgia for the Cold War”, a fascination which ended “in the rubble”.²² In addition to this, DeLillo also wrote of the urgent need to abandon the “Us and Them” dichotomy, a divide that was already being dismantled in *Underworld* through the presentation of the state as a terrorist. This is a topic that has already been touched upon by Linda Kauffman who notes that “[t]errorism is inside us all – not just individuals, but nations”, connecting this to the easy targets of “the Nazis” and post-9/11 governmental policies of “renditions, Guantanamo, Abu Gharib, and a gulag of secret prisons”.²³

[SLIDE] The best example of this binary scaling between state and terrorist is found in *Underworld*'s depiction of the so-called Texas Highway Killer. In a clear allusion to the Kennedy assassination, several of the murders are captured on film, to the delight of the media outlets who run the footage on loop.²⁴ These same media outlets serve as a platform for the Killer to dissociate himself from the stereotype of the lunatic, insane murderer: “[I]et's set the record straight. I did not grow up with head trauma. I had a healthy, basically, type childhood”.²⁵ This fits well with Gus Martin's assessment of the mainstream, as opposed to expert, opinion on the logic of terrorism:

This presumption suggests that terrorism is a priori [...] irrational behaviour and that only deranged individuals [...] would select terrorist violence as a strategy. Most experts agree that this blanket presumption is incorrect [...] their behaviour is neither insane nor necessarily irrational.²⁶

Comparing this with the threat of nuclear warfare reveals several key similarities. Both situations emerge from rational, normative beginnings: a desire for a deterrent or a typical childhood; both

22 Don DeLillo, 'In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September', *Harper's*, 2001, pp. 33–40 (pp. 33–34).

23 Linda S. Kauffman, 'The Wake of Terror: Don DeLillo's "In The Ruins of The Future," "Baader-Meinhof," and Falling Man', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 54 (2008), 353–377 (p. 360).

24 DeLillo, *Underworld*, p. 155.

25 DeLillo, *Underworld*, p. 216.

26 Gus Martin, *Essentials of Terrorism: Concepts and Controversies* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008), p. 48.

situations lead to a state of intimidation and violence: the policy of M.A.D. and the terror campaign of the Highway Killer; and both situations must finally realise that they no longer serve their rational origins: an arms race that has escalated beyond all intuitive explanation and an inability to answer the question posed by the media outlet, “[w]hy are you doing it?”²⁷

It seems clear, as I have already argued elsewhere and have only been able to briefly recapitulate here,²⁸ that DeLillo's pre-9/11 novels, particularly *Underworld*, situate sub-national terrorism and acts of violence within Cold War metaphors and similes. Let me now turn, then, in the time that remains, to the way in which Iraq 2003 is specifically depicted in *Point Omega*.

Firstly, DeLillo plays on his Baudrillard-infused earlier novel *White Noise* with the lament of Elster that [SLIDE] “their war is acronyms, projections, contingencies, methodologies Their war is abstract”; in some senses, the Iraq War Did Not Happen Again.²⁹ Secondly, deriving from this, the truth of the Iraq War, in Elster's warped apologist stance is filmic: “Lying is necessary. The state has to lie. We went beyond this. We tried to create new realities overnight These were words that would yield pictures eventually and then become three-dimensional”.³⁰ Thirdly, again linking from these sown seeds of reality, war is future-orientated: “A great power has to act. We were struck hard. We need to retake the future. The force of will, the sheer visceral need. We can't let others shape our world, our minds”.³¹

This depiction, garnered from just one conversation with Richard Elster, is a twofold wavering between 1.) a national level of warfare predicated on “great powers”, “the state” locked in battles of will in order to shape the future and 2.) a more decentralized form of abstraction. This second feature becomes more clear when DeLillo's work moves on to provide information on one of Elster's academic pieces; a study of the etymology of the word “rendition”. Rendition and

27 DeLillo, *Underworld*, p. 216.

28 Martin Paul Eve, “‘It Sure’s Hell Looked Like War’: Terrorism and the Cold War in Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day* and Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*”, in *Thomas Pynchon and the (De)vices of Global (Post)modernity*, ed. by Zofia Kolbuszewska (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2012).

29 DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 28.

30 DeLillo, *Point Omega*, pp. 28–29.

31 DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 30.

“enhanced interrogation techniques” – which Elster knows to be criminal as he projects a future scenario in which [SLIDE] “the administration's crimes” are tried in a Nuremberg/Eichmann-esque fashion with “men and women, in cubicles, wearing headphones” – are always undertaken, though, by “others”.³² Indeed, those who “ask pointed questions of flesh-and-blood individuals” “behind closed doors” are not the State but “finally others, still others”.³³ The implications of the State structure here is that it constitutes at once an international entity of political standing but contains its own alienated sub-national others. This works bi-directionally, for this is how the United States is fictionally depicted here and it is also how the invasion of another sovereign power can be justified on the basis of terrorism. Indeed, Elster makes this explicit within his fictional article, mediating between the collective will of a power-structure nation and the sub-national, terrorist component as

Toward the end of the commentary he wrote about select current meanings of the word *rendition* – interpretation, translation, performance. Within those walls, somewhere in seclusion, a drama is being enacted, old as human memory, he wrote, actors naked, chained, blindfolded, other actors with props of intimidation, the renderers, nameless and masked, dressed in black, and what ensues, he wrote, is a revenge play that reflects the mass will and interprets the shadowy need of an entire nation, ours.³⁴

As I'm coming to the end of my time, I want to draw these threads together to posit a thesis from these observations. *Point Omega*, Don DeLillo's shortest novel, is a text that is centred around the Iraq War. It is also, however, a multi-layered conflation of and mediation between stylistic genres. The text makes specific back-reference to the Cold War in *Underworld*, in which sub-national notions of terrorism are placed into direct parallel with this quasi-virtualized past conflict. *Point Omega* itself situates the Iraq War between State action and non-State actors, fluctuating between the massive (*Underworld*) and the individual (*Point Omega*). In short, the thesis that I want to put forward and which, undoubtedly, needs further exploration than I could manage within the time today, is that the future of conflict depicted in *Point Omega* could go either way. This novel can be read as a text of transition to a new mode of warfare in which the massive state is no longer

³² DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 33.

³³ DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 33.

³⁴ DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 34.

the central player. It can also, though, be read as a text that loops, that re-historicizes, that builds patterns both literary-taxonomical and socio-historical, that re-runs the film of its antecedents, *Running Dog*, *Libra* and, of course, *Underworld*. DeLillo can be read as saying that the nature of international conflict is now changing but he can also be seen as referencing the past and implying the cycle. It is for good reason, after all, that Elster calls “these nuclear flirtations we’ve been having” “Little whispers”.³⁵ It is perhaps true, in regard to the first reading, that Elster truly believes that “We’re all played out”.³⁶ On the other hand, the historical cycle is far less easy to dismiss. There are, certainly in DeLillo’s worlds, [SLIDE] “Too many goddamn echoes”.³⁷

35 DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 50.

36 DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 50.

37 DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 21.