

In 1993, David Foster Wallace published an essay piece entitled “[E Unibus Pluram](#)” in which he outlined his belief that fiction should move away from the 'critical and destructive' postmodern irony that he saw as dominating the field (Wallace 183). With the rise of this “New Sincerity” since the early 1990s, we should surely expect that the metafictional vanity and ludic mode of the the postmodern literary movement would by now be extinct. This has not been wholly the case, as I will outline in this piece. The reasons for this stasis are diverse and difficult to trace, but by briefly surveying the post-millennial trends of [Don DeLillo](#), [Thomas Pynchon](#), [David Foster Wallace](#) and finally resting on [Roberto Bolaño's 2666](#), it can be seen that an emerging trend of cloaked, “crypto-didactic” metafiction is one of the the new standards by which this literature measures itself.

In the initial survey of the triad of American postmodernists I've picked upon, DeLillo is perhaps the easiest to assess. Although never as playful as Pynchon, *Ratner's Star* (1976), *Running Dog* (1978) and *White Noise* (1985) are easy to place; they are very much of their time and are saturated with issues of (self-)representation, simulacrum and simulation in the late-capitalist phase. Likewise, DeLillo also has an easily locatable series of [historiographic metafiction](#) work – those concerned with issues of history and its relation to fictional narrative. Indeed, *Libra* (1988), and *Underworld* (1997) are perhaps most exemplary of this trend, the former obsessing over the Kennedy assassination, its cultural significance and the role of the [Zapruder film](#) – another mode of representation – in the retrospective reconstruction of the event.



Late 20th-century historiographic metafiction: reconstructing events like the Kennedy assassination
[Image by Alex Sandifer under a CC-BY-NC-SA license]

DeLillo is a fantastic candidate for appraising shifts post-2000 because his work changes at almost precisely that point. Moving away from his standard novel form, with the exception of 2003's *Cosmopolis*, DeLillo has published three pieces that exemplify a change in style: *The Body Artist* (2001), *Falling Man* (2007) and *Point Omega* (2010). These three texts are notably more compact than DeLillo's previous work. They seem, as with the dissection of Douglas Gordon's [24 Hour Psycho](#) in *Point Omega*, to zoom in, to slow down, to contemplate at a pace that resists the ever-speeding commodity-exchange process; a mode of resistance to capitalist time that resonates with Pynchon's essay on Sloth (Pynchon, 1993). Interestingly, though, despite the change of pace and form, DeLillo's texts are still saturated with issues of representation: film in *Point Omega* and performance art in *The Body Artist* and *Falling Man*, the latter of which has drawn [sharp criticism](#) for its juxtaposition of 9/11 with artistic practice. So, despite their contractions and their focus upon the unique and the specific that is often overlooked or consumed under an over-limited generalisation, DeLillo's novels still cannot let go of the ironic twist and self-focus.

One of the key factors that renders DeLillo's continued metafictional writing unsurprising, though, lies in the posthumous publication of Wallace's *The Pale King* (2011), a document reconstructed by Wallace's long-time editor, Michael Pietsch. This novel, which primarily aims to represent the mundane and the everyday in such a way that can still hold the reader's attention – a problematic aesthetic – hardly shows Wallace eating his own dog-food as set out in “E Unibus Pluram”. In fact, the novel features a character called David Wallace who continually asks the reader to look back at the copyright page and to believe his sincere statements on authorial veracity. If this is a turn away from metafictional practices, it is done through a double irony, for we would have to read the presence of Wallace in his own novel as an ironic depiction of an ironic situation. Unless we believe that

Wallace thought that two wrongs made a right, *The Pale King* is no more successful at turning away from its literary roots than was his pre-millennial *Infinite Jest* (1996), which also features many artefacts (mostly futuristic entertainment “cartridges”, particularly “Accomplice!”) that mirror the novel's own preoccupations. Adam Kelly, in his [essay on Wallace and the New Sincerity](#), claims that Wallace's practice resembles metafiction, but actually forces a re-negotiation of the author-reader contract. With the publication of *The Pale King*, I'm not sure that this still holds true.



The postmodern city of surfaces and simulacra: have 21st-century narratives moved beyond metafiction? [[Image by Randy Lemoine under a CC-BY license](#)]

Similarly, one might also believe that Thomas Pynchon's 2009 *Inherent Vice*, with its slimmed appearance, relatively small ensemble and (gasp!) discernible plotline represents a move to new modes. This is not straightforwardly true, though. Although *Mason & Dixon* (1997) presented Pynchon's most “human” novel yet, with its affective protagonists and sentimental conclusion, *Against the Day* (2006) comes across as a less structured version of *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) and features many of the the hallmarks of his novels: a massive ensemble of characters, pre-occupations with spatial and temporal distortion, the [Sanjak of Novi Pazar](#), a kazoo

(restrainedly limited to a single mention), bizarre sexual couplings and triplings and songs. Pynchon does seem to have softened his metafiction a degree – we are, after all, told, with a joking reference to Freud, that “sometimes a Tatzelwurm is only a Tatzelwurm” (Pynchon 2006: 655) – but to all intents and purposes, Pynchon's fiction remains similar, if not completely unaltered from his twentieth-century writing. Indeed, *Inherent Vice* now gives us the California trilogy taking its place alongside *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and *Vineland* (1990).

Of course, one could argue, [as does Patricia Waugh](#), that to some extent, all fictions are metafictions. However, as she acknowledges, these lie on a spectrum (Waugh 18-19). These shifts in the prevalence of metafiction in the writings of the past masters have not, I would argue, borne out the promise of a sincere, post-post-modernist fictional practice that moves back along this spectrum. For a final consideration, let me turn to Bolaño's *2666*. Bolaño was never in this clique of writers and so is a better figure through which to read the shifts in metafictional writing. He is also from a different extra-US national setting. However, in various ways, *2666* acknowledges the heritage of American postmodernism within which it frames itself and thus it acts as a crucial keystone for an appraisal of early-twenty-first-century changes to fiction.

2666 has been heralded as phenomenal. Impossible to do justice to its size and scope, by way of synopsis, Bolaño's novel interweaves five narratives concerning a set of self-obsessed literary critics, Oscar Amalfitano, Oscar Fate, Bolaño's fictional reclusive author Archimbaldi and a central section on “the crimes” across a 900 page epic. These “crimes” form the dystopian, or form of utopian, centrepiece with which the novel batters its reader: the sequential, gruelling description of the bodies of the female sexual homicides around the fictional town of Santa Teresa, a thinly veiled rendition of the ongoing, [horrendous reality in Ciudad Juárez](#).



Has Pynchon softened his metafiction in the 21st Century? Fans take part in the international "Pynchon in Public Day" [[Image by Creg Thrmas for Pynchon in Public Day, a CC-BY-SA licensed project](#)]

Interestingly, however, Bolaño's novel explicitly encourages comparisons to Thomas Pynchon, as one of its central figures is a much-lauded reclusive novelist, amid a 1000-odd page book populated with interlaced narratives. Bolaño's metafiction seems to work very differently, though, to the aforementioned writers. Instead, it seems to recognise the ethical core of its work lies in a form of moralising that teaches; it rests in a form that I call "crypto-didacticism". This mode relies upon a complex, often-lengthy fictional format with diverse casts of characters; in short, an encyclopaedic narrative. However, a crypto-didactic text is one that can be reduced through interpretation to an ethical formulation. This is, therefore, the "new" mode by which works of fiction can moralise in a way that doesn't seem to patronise a reader's intelligence in an age of relativism. In the world of *2666*, a world that maps the necropolis of our own reality, this is clear. Four hundred women have been tortured, raped and murdered, the police do nothing about it because the victims are working class women and, to quote Bolaño directly, "nobody noticed" (Bolaño 372). In other words, amid rampant gynophobia and misogyny: "the women here aren't worth shit" (Bolaño 318). Bolaño's practice is metafictional, though, through the flares it sends up to show its transformative desire: "teaching children might be the best job in the world, gently opening children's eyes, even the tiniest bit" (Bolaño 456). Or consider another example, in the dialogue between two of Bolaño's characters:

"That's a pretty story. [...] A pity I'm too old and have seen too much to believe it'
'It has nothing to do with belief [...] it has to do with understanding, and then changing'" (Bolaño 716)

If this is the new, truly ethical direction in which metafiction is moving, then perhaps it's time to break out the champagne? I remain less convinced by this and still undecided that the New Sincerity actually ever represented any kind of break from postmodernism's project. To illustrate this point and to round off this discussion, I'll leave you with a summary of *Gravity's Rainbow* that I feel is fairly accurate: contemporary America's power is predicated upon instruments of death, developed by the Nazis, built by slave labour and exemplified by the V-2 rocket. We, in Europe and America, are all complicit in building this.

You can decide for yourself whether this project already sounds, in 1973, for all its metafiction and irony, as though it has an ethical core and, beneath all its cryptic cloakings, as though it has something to teach us.