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The Philosophy of Don DeLillo's Fiction:

Novels without Characters

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Index

Abstract	1
1. Introduction	2
2. First-person narratives: <i>The Names</i> and <i>White Noise</i>	4
3. Third-person narratives: <i>Libra</i>	8
4. Non-characters and narrative collapse: <i>Underworld</i>	10
5. Conclusion	19
Works Cited	21

All I can tell you with certainty is that I, for one, have no self, and that I am unwilling or unable to perpetrate upon myself the joke of a self.... What I have instead is a variety of impersonations I can do, and not only of myself—a troupe of players that I have internalised, a permanent company of actors that I can call upon when a self is required.... I am a theater and nothing more than a theater.

—Philip Roth, *The Counterlife*.

No perplexity concerning the object of knowledge can be solved saying that there is a mind knowing it.

—Alfred North Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature*.

Do not leave objects out of account. The world, after all, which is radically old, is made up mostly of objects.

—David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*.

Abstract

The present paper **is an enquiry into the issue of characterization in some of Don DeLillo's most prominent fictions:** *The Names* (1982), *White Noise* (1985), *Libra* (1988) and *Underworld* (1997). It deals with previous critical approaches inspired by the same issue, as well as with the general critical framework in which DeLillo's fiction has been thus far understood. In contemplating formal processes such as character-making and narrative voice, the paper largely relies on a **close reading** of the aforementioned works. However, it also aims at defining the **philosophical context** where these processes take place and the critical tools, beyond current paradigms of postmodern criticism, that might be useful in future approaches to contemporary English and American fiction. The line of questioning, developed at the level of the texts and at the level of synthetic, philosophical argument, reaches conclusions as to the issue of characterization that fulfil suggestions in previous criticism and puts forward new lines of research in **DeLillo criticism, postmodern criticism, critical theory and media theory**.

1. Introduction

DeLillo, whose distinctive feature is often said to be a tendency to mystery¹, has nonetheless inspired some unanimous critical approaches. Aside from those concerned with his obsessions as a thematic writer—terrorism, cybernetics, geopolitics—, there is a recurrent formal approach to understand him as a novelist: his indifference for characterization, or at least his unconventional approach to it. Indeed, the unsubstantiality of his characters and their apparent lack of humanity are anomalies in a voice otherwise comprehensive. Against the opinion that they are but the result of poor novelistic craftsmanship, some research² has considered these anomalies as a deliberate experiment and, moreover, as the interpretative key to both the structural and philosophical principles behind his fiction. Prompted by a similar intuition, this paper will demonstrate how DeLillo's anomalous characterization must be understood under a series of displacements (in the text's hierarchy and in the ontological relationships that constitute the text), and will also determine the deliberateness of such experiments.

Textual displacement, the paper argues, occurs when the hierarchy arranging textual elements is altered or cancelled. As will be shown, this happens to DeLillo's characters in very conspicuous ways: they lose the fundament of their subjectivity, fail at telling their own story or at being satisfactorily told by a narrator, and are, generally, thrown into epistemic struggles which they can only endure in a passive position.

Ontological displacement, on the other hand, is the shift in the subject-object relationship that ensues from these attacks against the characters' subjectivity; or, rather, is the principle on which the attacks are built. As it will become apparent through our close reading, this shift forces us to understand characterisation beyond any

¹ As Peter Knight argues: "Evidence of the postmodern sublime might be found in the repeated moments in DeLillo's novels that exude a sense of unnamable mystery" (Knight 48). Or, in John McClure's more psychological terms: "In DeLillo's work it is only by coming to terms with permanent mystery, by accepting finitude and fragility, and by reasoning from this position that humans are able to live less anxiously, act more responsibly" (McClure 167).

² See LeClair, dealing with the concept of the 'systems novel', whereby, as in this paper (but under different reasoning), DeLillo's unconventional characterization is regarded an epistemic fact. Cowart 71-110 and 181-196 also shows how his unsubstantial characters belong to a cultural and linguistic identity crisis, and not to discussions of style.

canonical, philosophical notion of subjectivity, and to acknowledge the capacity of fiction to articulate subjectivity from an objectivist view; that is, to survive in a context where objects can exist without being apprehended by a subject.

The ontological relationship of subject and object arguably reflects on every aspect of a fiction: from the categories of author and reader to the hierarchy of units (narrator, character, setting) that constitutes the ‘texture’ of each different kind of text. Given its persistence in all the areas of fiction—even in those which operate by bending the fundamentals of fiction itself, such as most modernist writing—, this subject-object relationship should instead be considered a correlate: it defines the existence of a subject as the prerequisite for the existence of an object, and is thus violated when, like in DeLillo, subjects become little more than passive spectators of information and events, of ‘objects’ that determine the true course of the narrative, and, in fact, of their own development too.

DeLillo has his claim to postmodernity in the persistent subversion of these textual and ontological hierarchies: his experiments deal not only with the elements in the text, but with their usual coexistence; chiefly, with the subject-object correlation. By stripping his characters of the autonomy and humanity that a modern, third-person narrator would be expected to achieve, or a first-person narrator to experience, he plays with the idea that characters might be built upon an objective rather than subjective basis (just like description, time-passage or any over-arching, non-individualized textual feature), and forces the novel to digest the determinism inevitably embedded in contemporary culture, rather than simply ignore it. This displacement of the subject-object correlation has profound consequences for the act of writing as well as for the act of reading and reveals our potential discomfort with his characters and the structure of his novels as a revulsion against a deeper, philosophical crisis.

The causes and the implications of this displacement will be illustrated on two levels: the textual, through an overview of four of his major works (*The Names*, *White Noise*, *Libra* and *Underworld*), and the philosophical, through a critical review of the postulates on which the novels rest. Even if the two levels will at all times co-exist, the argument will be developed in two distinct sections: the first section, consisting of parts 2 and 3, provides detailed description of the anomalous characterization in three different fictions, as well as their connection with different kinds of narrators (first and third-person narrators); the second section, consisting of part 4, arrives at the final processes of ‘un-characterisation’ in DeLillo and determines the textual strategies that

harmonize these processes, as well as the general implications for critical theory.

2. First-person narratives: *The Names* and *White Noise*

In the case of the first-person narratives, the protagonist voice seemingly has no other role in the events it experiences than processing them as information. In *The Names*, James Axton, a risk analyst for lobbies operating in the Middle East, becomes obsessed with a series of cult murders spanning from Greece to India and whose only connection seems to be semantic: the victims' initials always line up with the name of the village in which they are killed. His investigation anticlimactically culminates with the discovery that the murders have none of the ulterior, geopolitical motives he could have construed, and are driven by the semantic symmetry alone. The cult, obsessed with the mystique (religious, philosophical, poetical) of the sign-signifier relationship, performs the murders as an act of communion with reality: words (the 'names') are more than arbitrary, ostensible labels of reality, they are the very substance of reality, and can therefore be acted upon—and death, it seems, is the most incontestable of actions. As the distinction between sign and signifier vanishes, so does any kind of classical epistemic structure: subjects exist only when language is used (by being named; by their names being acted upon), but the prerequisite to use language is, itself, to be a subject, for nothing but a subject can act upon other things deliberately and upon its own volition. What narrative meaning can be extracted from this *reductio ad absurdum*, this critique of linguistic subjectivity as a circular argument, is summed in the later chapters:

These killings mock us. They mock our need to structure and classify, to build a system against the terror in our souls. They make the system equal to the terror. The means to contend with death has become death (...) They intended nothing, they meant nothing. They only matched the letters.

(DeLillo *Names* 150)

Subdued by this nihilism, James Axton abandons the active role he had

sustained in connecting the crimes and, neither detaining the group nor joining it, he simply finishes to metabolize the information. This process, the only manifestation of his will, results in him distilling his world in the cult's fashion. By accepting that language persists beyond meaning, beyond what it refers to or who chooses that reference, he dethrones his subjectivity from its canonical, central position, and lays it together with the rest of the information that makes up his epistemic frame—language, other subjects and objects stripped to a tautological category: sameness. The psychological consequence is “a freedom, an escape from the condition of ideal balance. Normal understanding is surpassed, the self and its machinery obliterated” (*Names* 233). Thus, the ontological dualism of modernity (“the condition of ideal balance”) gives way to an ontology in which the subject is itself an object.

Under such a premise, it is obvious that characterization cannot be conventional. Axton, who had started as a remarkably passive character-narrator (intellectually engaging with the cult murders, but neither detaining nor encouraging them), ends by totally blending with the general noise of the world—in fact, he is substituted by a third-person narrator by the end of the novel, signifying he has accessed a degree of reality in which the subject-object correlation is lost:

His fate was signed. He ran into the rainy distance, smaller and smaller. This was worse than a retched nightmare. It was the nightmare of real things, the fallen wonder of the world.

(*Names* 165)

A similar alteration in the subject-object frequency occurs when Jack Gladney, narrator of *White Noise* and a college lecturer specialized in the “continuing mass appeal of fascist tyranny” (DeLillo *Noise* 43) confronts his mortality, the essential premise of his subjectivity, with the patchwork of his own character. The media he has mastered as part of his research (photography, film, radio, propaganda) is one of fragmentation and reproduction: it shatters the ‘aura’ of an original phenomenon, according to Walter Benjamin³, allowing it thereon to exist only in repetition: a crisis

³ “The *authenticity* of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on *authenticity*, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration

of authenticity. A place like “the most photographed barn in America” (*Noise* 65), which a colleague takes him to visit during the first half of the novel, exists only within the tautological imagination of its tourists—it is famous because it is famous; the moment of its aura coming into being is the moment of its aura being reproduced: “we are not here to capture an image, we are here to maintain one” (*Noise* 66).

His life is cut after this mechanism of repetition: from the household composed of the children of four different, but replicated marriages, to his “Hitler Studies” lectures on the rhetoric of mass-produced authenticity, which comically are the basis of his own personality—“we have an aura to maintain” (*Noise* 73), says he, satisfied with the awe he has inspired in the audience. He exists, then, as far as he can be reproduced—a subject experiencing itself as an object. This loop can be likened to Douglas Hofstadter’s “strange loop” of consciousness: “In the end, we self-perceiving, self-inventing, locked-in mirages are little miracles of self-reference” (Hofstadter 56). The essential difference is, of course, that Hofstadter’s loop has subjectivity as its outcome, whereas DeLillo’s is stuck at the level of objects, technologies. There is no introspection.

There should be introspection, however, when, in the second half of the book, a dramatic event breaks the chain of reproducibility. The “airborne toxic event”, as it is called, is the modest, provincial catastrophe that follows from a train car derailing and spilling a toxic agent. When the authorities declare it potentially deadly, Gladney refuses to acknowledge this new element outside his loop: “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 county” (*Noise* 117). However, after inhaling the agent and being diagnosed with a “potential death” (for the effect of the agent on humans is unknown), the loop is suddenly interrupted and forced to reconstruct itself among new objects. The intense fear of death that captures the narration is this new object and the way to interact with it is again not subjective but material: using an instrument, a chemical neuronal inhibitor discovered through a colleague, to suppress it:

It's not just a powerful tranquilizer. The drug specifically interacts with

ceases to matter. (...) *One might subsume the eliminated element in the term ‘aura’*” (Benjamin 221; italics are mine)

neurotransmitters in the brain that are related to the fear of death. Every emotion or sensation has its own neurotransmitters. Mr. Gray found fear of death and then worked on finding the chemicals that would induce the brain to make its own inhibitors.

(*Noise* 117)

Against the rational, cartesian distinction that would have fear as a subjective response to a thing (*res*), the fear itself becomes the *res*. This new loop, in which fear is replicated, becomes the basis of Gladney's persona, who again is nothing but an aggregate of objects. If the subject is, therefore, just the noise generated by objects referencing each other in a loop, there is no argument—outside convention—to maintain the distinction between literary characters and objects.

The subject-object distinction which I have so far employed, and which we have seen fall victim to linguistic (*The Names*), epistemic or psychological (*White Noise*) inconsistency, begs a brief historical overview. Prompted in its origin by the necessity to ground philosophical discourse in an internal axiom (*cogito*) instead of subsidiary arguments (*God*), it has evaded the trap of self-reference in two ways: that objects have no ontological bearing outside of the subject on whose existence they depend (the transcendental argument in Fichte, Kant and Hegel) and that, even if objects were admitted to be autonomous from the subject, they would still be distinct from the subject in their need to be experienced and perceived by a separate ontological entity (Husserl and Heidegger) and, moreover, to be interpreted (Gadamer). How is this distinction, then, shattered? By the introduction of a class of object which is not merely available to the subject but which transforms the subject: technology and, specifically, information.

Heidegger had already warned against this subversion: “Everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology (...) But we are delivered over to it in the worst possible way when we regard it as something neutral; for this conception of it (...), makes us utterly blind to the essence of technology” (Heidegger *Technology* 120). “As something neutral”, that is, as something leaving the subject unaffected. If, in the words of McLuhan, “the medium is the message” (McLuhan 33), then Heidegger is right in suggesting that a merely instrumental view of technology is naïve. Indeed, in a medium saturated by its message, or by its own tautology—as those constantly experienced by DeLillo's characters—, “Heidegger's narrative, in which the object may be said to

produce the subject gives way to one in which the object may be said to *constitute* the subject” (Jameson 48; italics are mine). That is, to be ontologically identical.

3. Third-person narratives: *Libra*

This scepticism towards a modern conception of the subject is not limited to DeLillo’s first-person narrators. But as it is presented diachronically by them, through different processes of self-annihilation, so it becomes a consummate, natural fact for his third-person narrators. In *Libra*, published after the consecutive first-person narratives of *The Names* and *White Noise*, DeLillo seems to be sufficiently at ease with the ontological shift as to incorporate it to the genre of foremost subject-object separation: biography. After a thorough investigation of the events surrounding Kennedy’s death which included reading the *Warren Report* and visiting Oswald’s familiar landscapes (De Pietro 97), DeLillo felt prepared not to furnish one of the many plausible theories with the weight of well-written fiction but to write about the very disorder that has made all theories, however extravagant, seem fitting. This disdain of narrative authority was read by some commentators as a sympathetic gesture towards Oswald, whom they felt insufficiently chastised: “DeLillo's attempt to "follow the bullets' trajectories" back into the minds of Lee Harvey Oswald and others becomes yet another exercise in blaming America for Oswald's act of derangement”, read George. F Will’s review for *The Washington Post* (Will 25-28).

But we must remember that the problem here for DeLillo is only ethical as far as there is a poor ethical argument involved: demonstrating Oswald’s guilt—if it could be done without a doubt—is a forensic and not a novelistic business. For the novel, the true difficulty resides in assigning an ontological value to the Oswald who would later stand trial: Is he a character, a historical subject or an object in the vast system of information compiled around Kennedy’s death? If he is a character, will he drift towards self-annihilation like DeLillo’s first-person narrators? If he is a historical subject, where but in the historical violence he exerts will we find reasons to revert his reification? And if he is to remain as a mere object, will we consider his behaviour a product of necessity, of a pre-determined causal chain, or a consequence of entropy, defying cohesive narration and the cultural demand for meaning behind history? Every event in *Libra* is multiplied by the prism of these questions. As the novel asks towards its end: “Can’t a man die without the ensuing ritual of a search for patterns and links?”

(DeLillo *Libra* 379). Or: can we live at all without this ritual?

Not in vain is *Libra*, then, a contradictory fiction: a biography about a death; that is, a biography focused on bringing about the destruction of its characters, Kennedy and Oswald. The balance its title predicates (the scales) on these self-excluding forces is, perhaps, the chief symbol of DeLillo's struggle between the inherent affirmations of the novel and the holocaust of the subject. Kennedy's own historic holocaust is certainly a turning point for the images that conform reality—a televised death whose perfect, seven-second condensation makes it impossible to distinguish the instants of life and death (for in which exact frame of the Zapruder Film does Kennedy die?), and casts the concrete, tangible form of a death on history. In an interview with *Rolling Stone* in 1988, DeLillo explains how the event lingers over his literary education, and how it forces fiction that attempts to tackle it to adopt its same murky texture:

As the years have flowed away from that point, I think we've all come to feel that what's been missing over these past twenty-five years is a sense of a manageable reality. Much of that feeling can be traced to that one moment in Dallas. We seem much more aware of elements like randomness and ambiguity and chaos since then.

(DeCurtis)

A sense of unmanageable reality, founded on the notions of “randomness, chaos and ambiguity”, is the topic of *Libra*—not the unaccountable assassination. Oswald tries to discern his place in history by contrasting American and Soviet ideology, deserting one when the other's sense of reality comparatively increased (as it happened on different occasions): “He thought the only end to isolation was to reach the point where he was no longer separated from the struggles that went on around him. The name we give to this point is History” (*Libra* 248). Similarly, the CIA agents preparing the fake assassination attempt for which Oswald is catastrophically recruited, wonder whether their plot can be executed in isolation or if “randomness, chaos and ambiguity” will make it evolve into something different, like an actual assassination: “Plots carry their own logic. There is a tendency of plots to move toward death. He believed that the idea of death is woven into the nature of every plot.” (*Libra* 223) The logic of causality is substituted by that of fiction. Events fail to succeed one another according

to a regular law—they are just the way they are told.

This confusion is what DeLillo's characters experience both as observers and constituent objects. Devoid of the conventions of subjectivity, neither reflective nor active, their only struggle is to find patterns.

4. Non-characters and narrative collapse: *Underworld*

Underworld, an encyclopaedic effort covering most of DeLillo's thematic obsessions (technology, history, capitalism), and constantly alternating between first and third person narratives, is a novel about waste: contemporary American history as a random patchwork of waste; waste as art. Its protagonist, Nick Shay, is a waste management executive raised in New York's Bronx who lives during the Cold War era. Juxtaposed with the different kinds of waste that thread his life together (professional waste and personal waste) are the events defining his *Zeitgeist*: atomic war, state paranoia, technological development, etc. These sundry themes, picked and discontinued by a logic resembling that of the web-browser, the hyper-link, create juxtapositions between micro and macrocosms. The famous 1951 home run by New York Giants' Bobby Thomson (the 'Shot Heard 'Round the World'), for example, is set in continuous analogy throughout the book with the Soviet nuclear race, which had its first nuclear test on the same day of the game; and so are many other pop hallmarks linked to political and historical issues, which in turn appeal to the scraps of waste with which Shay must physically and statistically deal as a waste management executive.

Along these myriad themes composing a tapestry of the sentimental, intellectual and political education of 20th century Americans, there is a myriad of characters interpreting them, jumping in and out of the narrative focus, typifying DeLillo's trope of the character as pattern-finder. Indeed, the novel culminates in no drama, but simply—vastly—captures the longing for meaning of a generation, the experience of creating and discarding meaning.

By their condition as pattern finders, it could then be understood that DeLillo's characters are interpreters of a shared reality—but this is false on two levels. When the strict correlation between subject and object becomes a relative correlation between objects alone, reality ceases to be something apprehensible and becomes something

from which apprehension is performed. Without a transcendental subject to arrange them according to a metaphysic notion of *reality*, objects are represented in what Heidegger deemed *Zuhandenheit*, or ‘ready-to-hand’—they exist immediately, unmediated by the subject-object correlation: understood as tools, as carriers of action instead of meaning. If objects withdraw from the correlationist frame where the subject apprehended them through specific meanings (*Vorhandenheit*⁴, or ‘present-at-hand’) and we accept characters are objects in themselves, not only will characters be excluded from the privileged role of interpreters: they will become an indistinguishable part of the reality they can no longer assign a meaning to. One of the most uncomfortable effects of this harsh realism, in which the narrative progresses indifferent to the subjective existence of its characters, is then that it paradoxically shatters our notion of reality.

The second level on which the metaphor of interpretation is false is its assumption of hermeneutic tools. But do DeLillo’s characters ever make use of such? In one of *Underworld*’s central episodes, Nick Shay is introduced to nominalist doctrine by a Jesuit priest, warning him against abstract, deductive systems of meaning:

Sometimes I think the education we dispense is better suited to a fifty-year-old who feels he missed the point the first time around. Too many abstract ideas. Eternal verities left and right. You’d be better served looking at your shoe and naming the parts.

(DeLillo *Underworld* 537)

What follows the warning is, perhaps, one of DeLillo’s finest dialogues. The names of the shoe are dug out with a religiosity grounded in naturalist technique, contemptuous of generalization. But unlike in *The Names*, where language is burdened by formal inconsistency, *Underworld* offers an exit into some larger ontological field:

I wanted to look up words. I wanted to look up velleity and quotidian and memorize the fuckers for all time (...) This is the only way in the world you can

⁴ See Heidegger (*Being*), where this distinction is formulated. It has featured prominently in eco-theory and the works of Graham Harman, Ray Brassier and Reza Negarestani, among other object-oriented philosophers and novelists. For a synthesis of the distinction, see Carman 84-100.

escape the things that made you.

(*Underworld* 543)

Language becomes a tool of *being*, and it does so outside of any usual subject-object correlation; it is not a system of meaning framing reality, but reality itself—something to be escaped from. The words Shay must learn are on equal grounds with the words that constitute him (“that made you”). They are the objects that articulate his existence, in a loop of ever-increasing semantic precision. Is it by chance that this nominalist view leads to a career in waste management? Waste (material or digital; destroyed or re-cycled) is a reminder of the circular shape of our systems of meaning. Objects are interpreted, consumed, violated and then naïvely set aside from the presumed subject, who is immediately fed on them again. As one of Shay’s colleagues says: “Garbage rose first, inciting people to build a civilization in response, in self-defence [...] It forced us to develop the logic and rigor that would lead to systematic investigations of reality, to science, art, music, mathematics [...] we build a system to deal with it” (*Underworld* 288). We have here, in similar terms to those used by Heidegger in his warnings against technology, an unconventional subject-object correlation, where the object (the trash) conditions the subject (people, civilization), as well as prompts the forms of meaning that will mediate between them. Under this logic, interpretation sheds any transcendental accolade and becomes, again, mere pattern finding.

From this reformulation of interpretation, it could be argued, should follow one of meaning. Indeed, DeLillo’s characters have been said to function as vessels of communication between larger fields of information: the way they retain some of this information as a simulacrum of personality is in line with the shift from hermeneutics to performativity. Like Deleuze’s autopoietic machines⁵, they cannot be understood from what they subjectively mean but from what they objectively do. And what they do is draw something from their environment and translate it into new propositional content:

The protagonists of the systems novel are primarily producers and consumers of messages, would-be artists or detectives in multiple, frequently

⁵ “A book itself is a little machine” (Deleuze 12), that is: a book performs a series of meanings; it is not a meaning in itself.

overloaded communication loops. They try to understand new information rather than cause events to happen; they learn the processes in which they participate, rather than dictate the circumstances.

(LeClair 17)

This is a very succinct description of the bond between theme and structure in DeLillo: the self-referential narrators (“producers and consumers of messages”) are not drawn to the themes of technology and information by the writer’s external volition. Instead, the very way in which they sustain the narration (“they learn the processes in which they participate, rather than dictate the circumstances”) implies those themes. It could in fact be argued that any novelistic interaction with them is bound to a certain degree of collapse. If we follow McLuhan’s distinction⁶ between the “cold” media of electronic communication and the “hot” one of mechanic—or literary—reproduction (i.e., between one tending to unification and another tending to fragmentation), we will readily understand how the subject-object correlation dissolves in the electronic field, where all information is equal and the perceiving subject is but the momentary pattern between some objects. By writing on digital themes we are, after all, using the output of a medium as input for another, strictly different one. Don DeLillo, William Gaddis or Thomas Pynchon, having worked in marketing, public relations and technical journalism respectively, are thus a generation of ‘accidental’ writers: stuck in the loop of explaining “cold” (digital, unified) media through the “hot” medium of writing.

This sense of ‘accidentality’, of inevitability, refutes the idea that DeLillo’s subversion of the subject-object correlation is deliberate, but also adds to the philosophical impact of the subversion. Indeed, DeLillo is not a theorist, he is the realization of our contemporary literary circumstances: “I’m just translating the world around me in what seems to be straightforward terms”, he says in an interview with *The Guardian*, “for my readers, this is sometimes a vision that’s not familiar. But I’m not trying to manipulate reality. This is just what I see and hear” (McCrum). Just like his characters, he gives himself entirely to the surge of information that constitutes the contemporary: what matters about *The Names* is not stopping the cult murders but understanding them; in *White Noise* not satirizing the indigestion of media but understanding how it has changed the perception of death; in *Libra* not accounting for

⁶ See McLuhan 94.

the events leading to a death but for the confusion death casts on the facts. This radical attitude has in fact garnered him the libel of holding an “ostentatiously gloomy view of American life and culture” (Yardley 20-22).

It is no surprise, then, that critics who dislike DeLillo’s object-oriented writing, who resent it for failing to solve its themes, have regarded his characterization, beyond the issue of intentionality, an unredeemable stylistic flaw—as indeed it would be outside of his personal praxis. As one review has recently said of *Zero K*: “DeLillo’s characters can often sound more like delivery mechanisms for existential inquiry than like real people” (Daum). The term “real people”, which a sophisticated reader might find superficial, actually alludes to a central novelistic issue: how the text pertaining the character—for that is, ultimately, how any ideas on characterization manifest—must relate to the text pertaining the objects and, more so, to the text pertaining the writer himself. Daniel Aaron, in his topical dissection of DeLillo’s early works, makes a similar observation:

DeLillo’s characters might be likened to actors in a traveling theatrical company, ready at any moment to harangue, comment, speculate, and improvise, yet they stick to their scripts and seem to have no real autonomy, no continuing presence or independent life [...] they are more than fictional inventions: they are DeLillo’s emanations.

(Aaron 74)

Both metaphors are eminently deterministic: the machine that replicates stored knowledge and the actor that suppresses his own. Both make the same implication about characterization: that it is a subjective process in so far as it allows for volition, and that its opposite is, therefore, determinism. Aaron, however, moves from the particular to the structural: this determinism does not occur from within the specific category of the character but comes as an “emanation” of DeLillo—it can only be understood within his larger choices. This shift from characterization as a specific feature of DeLillo’s writing to something that dissolves in his general idiosyncrasy invites to reconsider his defective characters as non-characters. Characters operate as dictated by the author in the industrial novel; in DeLillo’s, which is electronic, these causal relations are missing. The problem, thus, ceases to be what little liberty the

narrator concedes to his characters, but how they renounce to their own subjectivity. Frank Lentricchia has explained this as an American problem: “To be real in America is to be in the position of the ‘I’ who would be ‘he’ or ‘she’, the I who must negate I, leave I behind in a real or metaphoric Europe” (Lentricchia “Bad Ciziten” 13). The misadjustment between Europe and America, it could be argued, is but a matter of pace: how quickly have their respective subjectivities started to derive, precisely, from objectivist paradigms of information and communication.

This self-renouncement of subjectivity would naturally impact the substance of the text if it was gratuitously performed, without philosophical ground or further textual compensation. As some critics have observed: “The deliberate unsubstantiality of DeLillo’s characters is compensated by an extraordinary and eloquent plenitude of speech. Characters become meditative voices, capable of extended vatic aphorism about the world” (Goodheart 120). “World”, if we translate it to text, is the key transgression. There is no deliberateness, as we have seen, nor anything remarkable about a character referring to the context in which he is set; what is remarkable, however, is a character that refers to its text. As in William Gaddis’ *JR*, DeLillo’s dialogues are part of the central narrative: they often paraphrase fragments of text to which, in conventional fiction, should be inaccessible. In *Libra*, the conspirators trying to persuade Oswald to kill the president make identical inflections as those the narrator employs when describing Oswald’s own train of thought:

You see what this means. How it shows what you’ve got to do. We didn’t arrange your job in that building or set up the motorcade route. We don’t have that kind of reach or power. There’s something else that’s generating this event. A pattern outside experience. Something that jerks you out of the spin of history. I think you’ve had it all backwards this time. You wanted to enter history. Wrong approach, Leon. What you really want is out.

(*Libra* 384)

A summary of the very contents of the novel: “there’s something else that’s generating this event”, “a pattern outside experience”, “the spin of history”. Again, there are no characters. Only disarranged objects interwoven through writing.

Even more convincing instances of a space shared between character and narrator are the few overt descriptions of death in DeLillo. Although a sense of violence

is present in most of his writings, only a few scenes frame it in an explicit, terminating fashion. Of these, George Manza's shotgun accident in *Underworld* is the most representative. In the scene, heroin-addict George Manza taunts Nick Shay to point and fire an unloaded shotgun at him. When the shotgun turns out to be loaded, DeLillo's pace is shattered by what could be described as an objective narrator suffering from a bout of stream-of-consciousness writing. He (the narrator) is on the same footing with the characters (the other objects) and the sudden disappearance of one affects his speech:

Nick pulled the trigger. **C**

In the extended interval of the trigger pull, the long quarter second, with the action of the trigger sluggish and rough, Nick saw into the smile on the other man's face. **C** [...]

He asked if the thing was loaded and the man said no (**B**) and now he has a weapon in his hands that has just apparently been fired. **C**

He force-squeezed the trigger and looked into the smile on the man's face. **C**

But first he posed with the gun (**A**) and pointed and asked if it was loaded. **B**

Then the noise busted through the room and he stood there thinking weakly he didn't do it. **C**

But first he force-squeezed the trigger and saw into the smile and it seemed to have the spirit of a dare. **C**

Why would the man say no if it was loaded? **B**

But first why would he point the gun at the man's head? **A**

He pointed the gun at the man's head (**A**) and asked if it was loaded. **B**

Then he felt the action of the trigger and saw into the slyness of the smile. **C**

He went through the sequence and it played out the same.

(*Underworld* 780-781; 'ABC' notation is mine)

The three instants (pointing the gun, asking if it was loaded, and firing) are reiterated in slightly different phrasings and rhythms, like puzzle pieces rotating to fit into their contours. And when they are finally told in a logical sequence (A-B-C), the trauma is too extensive to be assimilated: "he went through the sequence and it played

out the same". This is not merely the universal trauma of death, it is the trauma of death captured by technology, preserved for the contemplation of those who need to relocate their subjectivity in it. Such is the purpose of our ritual visit to catastrophe and our voluptuous desire for it to become "bigger, grander, more sweeping" (DeLillo *Noise* 64). Stored into the virtual, permanently accessible under the guise of information, these acts of violence can through sheer repetition attain a totality that surpasses the historical event to which they are bound. Is this not the principle that introduces, in our re-watching of the Zapruder film or 9/11 footage, the shadow of the sublime, the forbearance of neutral, historical perspective for simple, impersonal awe?

Again, the only point of subjects and characters in DeLillo is how their absence relates to a larger thesis: overcoming the novel's fixation with the modern category of the self. Flaubert formulated this triumph over the style of subjectivity (something external) and content (a 'subject' in the thematic sense) as a triumph of style: "What seems beautiful to me, what I should like to write, is a book about nothing, a book dependent on nothing external, which would be held together by the internal strength of its style (...) a book which would have almost no subject, or at least in which the subject would be almost invisible" (Flaubert 221). In DeLillo's time, with verbal experimentation nearly exhausted, the "internal force" has to be found in a deeper struggle. Without it, what prevents DeLillo's novels from simply falling apart? If nothing in them comes to a satisfactory end, if their characters are indistinct from the chaotic objects which trigger their writing, how can they be turned to the press as unities, much less as the "autopoietic" machines I suggested earlier?

My impression is that paranoia, working as a type of subjectivity, holds them together. Παράνοια, madness, from παρά ('beyond') and νόος ('mind'), is defined by the OED as "a mental condition characterized by delusions of persecution, unwarranted jealousy, or exaggerated self-importance, *typically worked into an organized system*" (OED; italics are mine). DeLillo's systems of information, in which the self is reduced to an object, are not sustained by some sort of beatific curiosity, but by persisting paranoia. "The chief shaman of the paranoid school of American fiction" (Towers), as he was baptized by the New York Review, says this about the "organized systems" of a paranoia, obsessions: "it is interesting to writers because it involves a centering and narrowing down, an intense convergence. An obsessed person is an automatic piece of fiction. He has purity of movement, an integrity" (DePietro 13). That "purity of movement", what casts the light that separates him from the other objects, is paranoia:

the obsession with the patterns he has found in them. Paranoia is what humanizes DeLillo: the sheer, animal force that drives his otherwise unmoved characters. “In a book about fear and paranoia”, he says apropos of *Libra*, “a plot was bound to assert itself”. (DePietro 89).

This paranoid mood does not only account for the ability of his novels to present themselves as such: it is also the principle that unifies their eclectic thematic features. Indeed, most of his writing—except *Ratner’s Star* (1976), *Cosmopolis* (2003), and some secondary works—follows the principles of the thriller genre. As Daniel Aaron explains:

His archetypal plot is a mystery whose generally inconclusive solution depends on the deciphering of clues—a name, word, number, code. The protagonists are usually troubled intelligent personas already poised to kick over the traces and susceptible to intrigue. He sets them tunnelling deeper and deeper toward some unreachable solution or explanation, then shows them to be players in a game manipulated by unknowable forces.

(Aaron 76)

The conclusion is indefinitely delayed, with the “tunnelling deeper and deeper”, the pattern-finding, trying to reach it through increasingly complex systems—this process, this nostalgia of the mechanic era that refuses to abdicate to chaos is paranoia: the art of creating a subject outside of the subject-object correlation, in the vastness of disconnected, fragmented objects. And when chaos is brought, as it happens in DeLillo’s pseudo-thrillers, by a violent act, paranoia derives in the specific genre of conspiracy theories: “Conspirations have a logic and a daring beyond our reach. All conspiracies are the same taut story of men who find coherence in some criminal act” (*Libra* 440).

Not only does the object-oriented novel of DeLillo find a link of necessity between its ontology and its themes in the fact of paranoia—it is also connected to history. The landscape of contemporary American history, indiscriminately registered by the Internet, where the distinction between historian and spectator vanishes, where the victims of historical processes are also in charge of arranging them in patterns, is one decided by fear. It is no wonder that a thousand conspiracy theories, in what might

be America's largest folkloric effort, have arisen against the criminal act of this uncertainty. In America and "Americana", fear, that "self-awareness raised to a higher level" (*Noise* 229) is the ultimate exercise of pattern-finding: it reclaims a new subject from among the objects.

5. Conclusion

At the level of close reading and doxography, our analysis has extensively shown that characterization is a central feature in DeLillo's fiction insofar as it is ignored or transgressed. First and third-person narratives have been proven to clash with the expectations usually assigned to them, and the anointed subjective voices in each of the specific novels have revealed themselves as inconsistent or bent on self-annihilation. DeLillo's novels are therefore populated by non-characters: they interact with the other textual elements outside any fixed hierarchy and their 'personalities' are devoid of any transcendental claim to individuality, in open contradiction with the subject-object correlation. Moreover, this lack of characterization is neither a stylistic short-coming nor a deliberate experiment but the necessary by-product of the philosophical context in which DeLillo sets his fiction: the linguistic crisis in *The Names*, the crisis of authenticity in *White Noise*, the crisis of causality in *Libra* and, finally, the crisis of information in *Underworld*. Indeed, the symmetry between the novels' themes and the way the subject-object correlation is respectively undermined suggests a very intuitive apprehension of the link between the formal and ideological aspects of the novel. This intuition is arguably what makes DeLillo's voice so distinct.

Beyond the aetiology of non-characters (the end of the subject-object correlation) and their philosophical projection, the paper has also accounted for the mechanisms of textual cohesiveness that hold the fictions together, namely, paranoia as organizing principle and the relevance of information and information fields (linguistic, industrial, virtual) as substitutes of subjective meaning. These new devices of textual cohesiveness have suggested another set of conclusions at the level of criticism and philosophy; that is, a new critical approach that we might call object-oriented criticism, dealing with narratives carried neither by an absolute subject (an omniscient narrator), a relative subject (an unreliable narrator) nor an analysed subject (a character fleshed out through psychological mechanisms), but by a passive one which makes no distinction between himself—or his characters—and other objects.

Although it is ever easier to explain the revulsion of the novel against itself under Lyotard's notion of "incredulity toward metanarrative" (Lyotard 24), and thus comfortably label it as postmodern, this paper has attempted to retrace other critical tools that criticism is bound to neglect when it becomes trapped in circular definition (all definitions of postmodernism are, in a sense, postmodern exercises). These tools have been recovered from interconnected areas of the philosophical and literary canons: classical ontology, phenomenology, critique of rationalism, author theory, critical theory, etc.

We may then conclude that the main task of object-oriented should be to re-examine the postmodern anxiety of form as symptomatic of an ontological shift. Perhaps, as I have hinted before, the crisis in postmodern novel writing comes from limiting our understanding of what the novel comprises to the psychological constraints of the subject-object correlation. Do we expect psychological penetration from the medieval *roman*? Then, why do we expect it from DeLillo? As in premodern Europe there was no clear boundary between the psychology of the individual and its origin in divinity, so in the electronic technology the transcendental subject is turned immanent by its media.

The analogy between God and the Internet is not an exaggeration. In similar terms, Thomas J. Ferraro says of *White Noise*: "[it] deals not so much with character as with culture, survival and the ever-increasing interdependence between the national and the world community" (Ferraro 24). This "interdependence" is an act of dissolution: the dissolution of any closed, binary hierarchies, like the subject-object correlation that we have seen vanish in DeLillo. In *Underworld*'s epilogue, as objects so different as Sister Edgar—the religious counterpoint to Shay's theme of waste—and Edgar Hoover, head of the FBI, melt in the equity of the Internet, the pattern-finder declares with a mix of relief and disquiet:

Everything is connected in the end.

Sister and Brother. A fantasy in cyberspace and a way of seeing the other side; a settling of differences that have less to do with gender than with difference itself, all argument, all conflict programmed.

(Underworld 826)

Along the philological and critical suggestions that this paper has produced, we

might then add a set of questions for future criticism. Under the light of DeLillo's apparatus, and particularly the previous quote: Is the novel a context for cyberspace, or cyberspace a context for the novel? Which medium contains the other, what hierarchy can writers assign to these fields of information? If the equalizing space of the Internet precedes individuality, like God's did for the illiterate crowd, how can one write from the standpoint of the self, rising it as a subject among the other objects of cognition? These are the questions pressing fiction in the Internet era.

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