

DON DELILLO AND *TV BUDDHA*: A DISCOURSE ON FILMIC AND TELEVISUAL  
MODELS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

by

JACOB WATSON

(Under the Direction of Jed Rasula)

ABSTRACT

This thesis interprets Don DeLillo's more recent novels and video artist Nam June Paik's video installation *TV Buddha* as parallel critiques of the presentation of media and consciousness in Western thought. It argues that Western philosophy has used the dominant visual media technology of the given era as a conceptual model for understanding human cognition and perception since Plato. It then gives a thorough analysis of Paik's *TV Buddha*, leading to the conclusion that the work is a Buddhist deconstruction of Cartesian consciousness that reveals the vanity and circularity of the traditional Cartesian way of imagining human cognition. Finally, it attempts to show that a similar critique runs through DeLillo's work in the form of a career-long exploration of the relationship between media and consciousness that culminates in three works, *Cosmopolis*, *Falling Man*, and *Point Omega*, that strongly critique the use of technological media as models for consciousness.

INDEX WORDS: Cartesian Theater, Consciousness, Don DeLillo, Film, Media Theory, Nam June Paik, *Point Omega*, Television, *TV Buddha*

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JACOB WATSON

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JACOB WATSON

Major Professor: Jed Rasula

Committee: Hugh Ruppersburg  
Christopher Pizzino

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso  
Dean of the Graduate School  
The University of Georgia  
May 2011

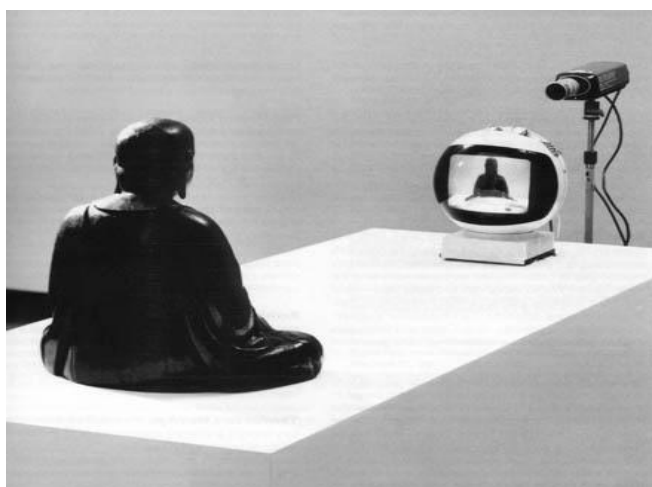
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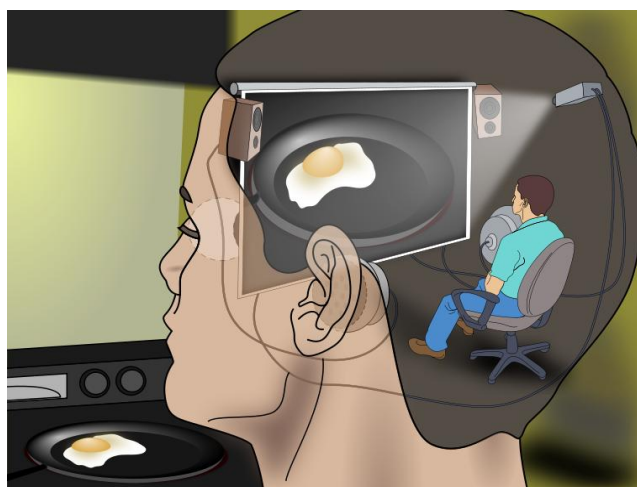
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## DON DELILLO AND *TV BUDDHA*: A DISCOURSE ON FILMIC AND TELEVISUAL MODELS OF CONSCIOUSNESS



*Fig. 1. TV Buddha. 1982.*



*Fig. 2. Cartesian Theater.*

### I. Introduction

Prolific novelist Don DeLillo and pioneering video artist Nam June Paik have two important things in common. Both are artists whose work represents a prolonged engagement with late twentieth century visual media, especially television, and both are widely recognized by the academic community as poster children of the postmodern tendency in culture. DeLillo's name appears alongside Thomas Pynchon's in an inestimable number of texts concerned with defining the postmodern novel, and Paik is abundantly cited in Fredric Jameson's seminal *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* as an example of the “quintessentially

postmodern” in the visual arts (Jameson 162). The former parallel, the one that connects DeLillo and Paik to one another as diagnosticians of mass media culture, is the basis of the critical comparison I want to make in this essay. In both DeLillo and Paik, one can clearly identify an interest in the relationship between technological media and human consciousness that puts some of their work in conversation with a voluminous history of Western philosophical discourse on the subject of perception and mediation. There is a long-standing tradition in Western thought that treats the relationship between man-made media contrivances and natural perception as an analogical one. Because human perception is centered around sight more so than any other sense, Western thought has consistently used visual scenarios as models of cognition, often conceptualizing the act of mental perception through the most advanced form of image transmission available in a given era. New media technologies have been mined frequently in the past for conceptual models that could be used to explain acts of perception, cognition, and recollection, and many of these models ultimately make their way into popular belief with cultural and even political consequences. Paik's and DeLillo's work deals in the first place with how our perceptions are conditioned and altered by the media sensorium we occupy as subjects of a technological society; it also participates, at times, in exposing the fallacies, limitations, and hypocrisies of a worldview in which the technical schematics of the dominant media technology are conceptually superimposed onto the mind of the viewer.

Rather than comparing two particular works or two bodies of work, I've found it most fruitful to make a lopsided comparison between a career-long preoccupation that culminates in DeLillo's last three novels and a single, slightly uncharacteristic work by Paik: his well-known *TV Buddha* installation. *TV Buddha* strikes me as the precise visual correlate, the materialization, one might say, of a critique of media-based models of consciousness that becomes fully realized



in DeLillo's later works. While my primary concern is not to raise questions about the generic classification of any of these works, I take it to be a consequence of my reading that both *TV Buddha* and DeLillo's 21<sup>st</sup> century novels have a stronger relationship to the legacy of modernism than to postmodernism (In the case of DeLillo, I would not be the first to take this position). Both are imbued with plural but definite meanings in my view, and both represent a perspective on media and consciousness that is ontologically grounded in a way that eludes many, though not all, definitions of postmodernism.

## **II. The Projectionist of Consciousness: A Brief History**

The extent of the relationship between models of consciousness and visual technology can be clearly demonstrated with reference to a few prominent examples. Plato's famous Allegory of the Cave, for instance, draws its analogy from the most basic form of image transmission imaginable: the projection of a shadow from an opaque object intervening between a light source and a surface capable of reflecting some light. In the seventh book of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates asks his student Glaucon to “behold”:

human beings living in a underground den, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them,

over which they show the puppets [...] And do you see, I said, men passing along the wall carrying all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures of animals made of wood and stone and various materials, which appear over the wall? (*Republic* 265)

The “statues” and “figures of animals” are perpetually casting distorted shadows as they pass by for the prisoners to see (265-266). Socrates places emphasis on the imperfection of the projection medium here in order to impose a corresponding unreliability on the world of human perception. Socrates goes on to tell of one of the prisoners who is released and made aware of both the existence of a substantial material world and, consequently, the mechanism by which that world produces his former, fictitious world. This released prisoner's new awareness, Socrates explains, is something he can never communicate to his bound comrades who still have no way of conceptualizing a world more real than their realm of shadows. Moreover, the enlightened prisoner's knowledge changes his worldview so fundamentally that he can never participate in or be concerned about events within the lifeworld of his former friends, which now seems so impoverished and false. What this enlightened prisoner has discovered is, in effect, the mediumicity of the world of perception.

This last detail of Socrates' story of course leads to the revelation that the entire scenario has been an allegory for the relationship between the material realm and the true realm of the forms, the enlightened prisoner standing for the philosopher whose eyes have glimpsed the divine. Socrates elevates himself and his profession to the level of metaphysical-technical specialists who have seen and understood the apparatus that produces the phantasmagoric world. At the same time, Socrates verbally takes on the role of the projectionist, starting his allegory with “let me show you in a figure” (*Republic* 265), followed by an exclamatory “behold!” (“ἰδε,” in the Greek text), rhetorically yanking away the curtain from his allegorical scene (*Plato's* 514).

He perpetuates the visual language by asking Glaucon, in a characteristically leading question, whether he can “see” the animals and statues that pass between the fire and wall of the cave (*Republic* 265). The entire scene, which itself revolves around the mystifying properties of projection, is framed as something that Socrates rhetorically projects before Glaucon's eyes, prompting Glaucon to comment that Socrates has “shown [him] a strange image”.

While Plato's allegory sheds no light on the actual mechanics of cognition (Plato isn't thinking in precisely those terms here), it does set a precedent in drawing parallels between human experience and visual technology, placing special emphasis on the mediated nature of experience. The allegory and the method of analysis it represents indubitably had an influence on the “fathers” of modern Western philosophy, including René Descartes. By Descartes' time, the well-educated minority in European society were aware of a more refined method of projecting images through the use of the “camera obscura” effect. Descartes describes the phenomenon in his *Dioptrique*: “Suppose a chamber is all shut up apart from a single hole, and a glass lens is placed in front of this hole with a white sheet stretched a certain distance behind it [...] the light coming from objects outside [will] form images on the sheet” (“Optics” 63). He goes on to use the camera obscura as an analogy to give a fairly accurate description of the physical mechanics of the human eye. By a logical syllogism, one can assume that the same conceptual relationship exists between the camera obscura and the mind when, a few years later, Descartes discusses cognition using predominantly visual metaphors in his *Meditations*. The implicit analogue of the mind is the eye throughout this text, and because of Descartes' technologically conceived understanding of the eye, this gives the mind the appearance of a metaphysical camera obscura. Descartes uses the phrase “*aciem mentis*,” sometimes translated “mind's eye” and signifying the sharp, focused point of awareness that characterizes the subject of Cartesian consciousness

("Meditationes"). The *acies mentis* is analogous to the focal point of the camera obscura which allows rays of light to pass through; in this case, it is "the light of nature," which is Descartes' luminary metaphor for the source of all truth, that the mental aperture is designed to focus. Addressing the imperfections of the mental medium, he acknowledges that "ideas that are in me are like images that can easily fail to match the perfection of the things from which they have been drawn" (*Meditations* 23), faintly echoing the distorted representations of Plato's cave. Descartes' reference to drawing could be seen as an allusion to the practice of tracing images captured by a camera obscura, a technique used by astronomers in Descartes' time and picked up by artists later on (Mannoni). Thus the camera obscura as an analogue allows Descartes to explain how the error-prone human mind functions in relation to God's perfect world; both the *acies mentis* as a focal point and the independent will as drafter are capable of introducing distortions into an image cast by the light of nature.

With the development of motion picture photography in the late nineteenth century, the analogue is updated once again as philosophers of human perception begin incorporating filmic metaphors into their theoretical discourse. In Henri Bergson's writings, for instance, the new machinic paradigm is used to explain how the mind processes duration, and once again, the technical limitations of the analogue are carried over and theorized as limitations in the mind itself. With regards to the human ability to conceptualize movement and change, Bergson concludes, "Whether we would think becoming, or express it, or even perceive it, we hardly do anything else than set going a kind of cinematograph inside us. We may therefore sum up what we have been saying in the conclusion that the mechanism of our ordinary knowledge is of a cinematographical kind" (Bergson 322). As Gilles Deleuze points out, Bergson's notion of the "cinematographical" locates the essence of the medium in the way that "the cinema reconstitutes

movement with mobile sections,” and drawing on the historical paradigms, Bergson is able to assert that cinema “is merely doing what was already being done by the most ancient thought[...] or what natural perception does” (Deleuze 2).

In the age of film, the idea of consciousness as an internal viewer interacting with a coherent yet mediated world seems to have solidified its place in culture more than ever, even as cognitive science has advanced beyond the usefulness of this overly simplistic model. Ephemeral media such as the camera obscura were ready exemplars of the potentially dubious nature of conscious perceptions, but with a relatively more permanent medium like film, one can seemingly account for memory as well. It is a small jump from the cinematographic mind of which Bergson wrote to models based on digital media, reflected in popular films such as *Avatar* and *The Matrix*, in which the mind is figured as an interaction between rewritable data and the always autonomous viewer self that stands in relation to that data, both of which can be transmitted and transferred away from the body into any compatible medium.

### **III. *TV Buddha* and the Cartesian Theater**

When Nam June Paik began experimenting with video in the 1960s, television was already a viable competitor against film for the status of normative viewing technology and was soon to proliferate in metaphorical form into various theorists' accounts of the fragmented, postmodern subject. Paik created his first *TV Buddha* installation for New York's Galleria Bonino in 1974 (“Nam”). The installation featured a statue of a seated, meditating Buddha facing a video monitor. A closed-circuit camera would continuously film the statue and project its image onto the video monitor in real-time. Over the course of the next two decades, Paik created

numerous variations on the idea of *TV Buddha*, re-staging the concept with different monitors, cameras, statues and settings. In the tradition of conceptual art, the primary appeal of the work lies in its function as a provocation to thought. The simple arrangement of objects raises a host of questions about consciousness and mediation while drawing many of the same parallels and inferences that one finds in Don DeLillo's recent novels.

In the case of *TV Buddha*, I will have to strongly disagree with Fredric Jameson's assertion that "only the most misguided museum viewer would look for the 'art' in the content of [Nam June Paik's] video images themselves" (Jameson 162). Then again, the piece itself differs in every respect from the way Jameson characterizes the artist's oeuvre. In *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, he defines Paik's body of work as consisting of "stacked or scattered television screens, positioned at intervals within lush vegetation, or winking down at us from a ceiling of strange new video stars, [that] recapitulate over and over again prearranged sequences or loops of images which return at dyssynchronous moments on the various screens" (Jameson 31). With regard to the numerous works by Paik for which Jameson's description is applicable, I would probably be more inclined to agree with Jameson's claim that whatever particular images flash across the various and sundry screens are "relatively worthless," at least in the estimation of any traditional system of aesthetic values (31). With *TV Buddha*, the image on the screen is singular, static, and has definite aesthetic value as a constituent part of a relation, a deceptively simple-seeming yet exceedingly complex, multifarious relation that is the sole subject of the work. *TV Buddha* as an individual work is not a maximal display of information multiplicity, but, rather, a minimalist exercise in the medium of video. It resembles certain minimalist experiments in painting that, by means of a radical reduction, seek to reorient attention towards the basic compositional elements of the artform, and in doing so, reveal the

essence previously obscured by figural content. In a similar way, *TV Buddha*'s reduction of video content is meant to expose the essence of video, an essence which is bound up with our cultural conceptions of consciousness.

*TV Buddha*'s constituent elements can be (and often have been) interpreted as existing in tense opposition. The television rig can't help but appear starkly modern, almost futuristic, juxtaposed with the ancient spiritual icon, and there is a temptation to infer a criticism or even condemnation from Paik's presentation of the Buddha's somber, Eastern profundity subjected to the thoroughly Western superficiality associated with television as a medium. Focusing on this disjunct, one steers towards a reading of *TV Buddha* as an artwork aimed at critiquing the cultural effects of globalization; the role of the camera is then to co-opt and denature the iconography of a marginalized tradition, while the monitor forces the immobile statue to become a consumer of its own appropriated and bastardized image. Certainly, this is one of the relationships *TV Buddha* dramatizes, whether intentionally or unintentionally. However, to view the work only thus—as a hostile, one-sided exchange between two emissaries of irreconcilably different worlds—is unsatisfactory for at least two reasons. First, it politicizes the piece in an overly simplistic way that belies the nature of Paik's interest in Buddhism, which, the artist claims, is more aesthetic than political or spiritual. Paik neither practiced Buddhism nor identified with the tradition and stated in one interview, “I react to Zen in the same way as I react to Johann Sebastian Bach” (“Interview” 171). While the artist's position on Buddhism may not be enough to discredit the overtly political interpretation of the work, it surely casts doubt over whether this is the only legitimate interpretation.

Secondly, viewing the work through the lens of geopolitical tension tends to obscure the ways in which the objects collaborate to suggest a higher synthesis. If there's a more fruitful tension at work in the piece, it is the tension between exteriors and interiors. The traditional Buddha statue sits in a meditative posture suggestive of a gaze turned inward in contemplation. Placing the statue in front of a viewing screen then transforms it into the art spectator's double, its gaze turned outward in contemplation of a work of art which also happens to be a representation of itself. The second contradictory gaze co-exists uneasily with the first, and the degree to which the statue seems to be looking inward or outward will depend on the viewing angle: whether one looks directly into the statue's placid unseeing eyes, illuminated slightly by the phosphorescent glow of the television screen, or prefers to see the statue from the over-the-shoulder vantage point represented in most photographs of *TV Buddha* installations, a point-of-view that strongly evokes the illusion that the statue possesses a line of sight.

Of course, the statue, like most works of art, has no interior. Beneath its surface lies only homogeneous material, though the expression on its carved face superficially composes a simulacrum of interiority. It is actually the cold televisual apparatus that can be said to have an interior. Indeed, the device's most complex processes and artful workings take place out of sight. It is the machine and not the Buddha whose inward contemplation (information processing) and outward gaze make the whole installation possible. In this respect, the work can be taken as a quasi-optical illusion that foregrounds the role of art as deception. The installation presents the spectator with a Koan-like riddle: how can the Buddha direct his gaze within and without at the same time? One way to approach the riddle is for the spectator to look not at the superficial exterior of the piece, but within his or her own cultural knowledge base as a subject living within a technological world in order to understand that the video camera is the true Buddha of the



installation. Of the two, the camera represents the more approximate metaphor for an emptied consciousness in selfless contemplation, and the statue would then be its visual Koan. One could go so far as to draw parallels between the filling and emptying of the lungs with measured breaths in meditational practices and the camera's isochronal receiving and sending of the light that forms the Buddha's static image.

Rather than resolving tensions, the way the camera makes itself available to this line of metaphorical reasoning ultimately creates another level of contradiction in the piece. Both the closed-circuit rig and the Buddha offer themselves as models of the subject of meditation. The Buddha does so in an overt, visual way, and the camera and monitor, upon analysis, covertly do the same. Like the work's presentation of interior and exterior, this ambivalent subject position presents itself as a contradiction that cannot be resolved within conventional metaphysical parameters. The existence of these contradictions pushes the viewer towards a radical redefinition of subject-object relations such as one finds in some interpretations of the Hindu/Buddhist concept of nirvana. Religion scholar Walter Smith writes of *TV Buddha* that “the meditating Buddha image itself represents nirvana, or enlightenment. This transcendent, indefinable state is to be identified with the Buddha himself. And so, the Buddha contemplating himself is contemplating, or absorbed within, his own nirvana” (Smith 361). To achieve the Buddha's state of consciousness is to be simultaneously the subject and object of contemplation. The work then dramatizes one version of enlightened consciousness, which is either being playfully literalized or playfully doubled, depending on how one chooses to resolve the central paradox of *TV Buddha*. As Smith's remark implies, the reflexive nature of enlightened consciousness is something already signified by the image of the meditating Buddha. A spectator who understands the statue's meaning in its cultural context would have to interpret the video

apparatus as a redundant gesture, a signifier of reflexivity attached to a signifier of reflexivity, or so it would seem. In this view, the electronic components of the installation appear garish and vestigial, like a cartoon thought bubble extending out of (and receding mutely back into) the statue's head. Like the phrase “chai tea,” *TV Buddha* is a cross-cultural pleonasm, an opaque (to some) sign accompanied by its own translation.

At the same time, there is something inherently problematic about the semantic content of the meditating Buddha, even within its own cultural context. The problem is roughly analogous to a conundrum Søren Kierkegaard poses in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to “Philosophical Fragments”*. Kierkegaard describes a situation in which someone wants to share his personal discovery that “truth is inwardness” (77). In order to do so, however, he must put his message in terms that can be disseminated outwardly. In the words of communication scholar John Durham Peters, Kierkegaard's “publisher of inwardness finds himself caught in a performative contradiction” (Peters 132). If the meditating Buddha's message is that truth is inwardness, then it falls into the same performative trap; the statue is a sign that signifies a truth that undermines signification, insofar as signs are intrinsically “outward” directed entities.

To complicate the matter further, truth as inwardness is really only a simplification of the real semantic content of the Buddha statue, which is not only intransmissible, but also unknowable. In some traditions of Buddhist philosophy, nirvana is understood to signify the dissolution or “blowing out” of the self. The unification of subject and object described earlier means that for the Buddha mind there is no separation between reality and thought, no such thing as exterior and interior. Outward and inward are finite concepts, and achievement of nirvana entails a psychological union with the infinite. More like Kierkegaard's Abraham than his

publisher of inwardness, the Buddha mind seems to stand in absolute relation to the absolute, a condition that makes it utterly unintelligible (*Fear and Trembling*).

With this in mind, one can view the complex and convoluted symbolism of the work as an expression of futility. *TV Buddha* strives to represent what Smith calls an “indefinable” state of being (361). The tense play of exterior and interior is a frustrated, anguished oscillation that stands for the work's inability to synthesize two opposites. The subject of the work, then, is really mediation and the impossibility of mediating the absolute. The Buddha as a sign for the indefinable gets reinscribed in another medium in a closed loop of signifiers with no conceivable referents except one another. The Buddha's TV-watching posture points indexically to the image on screen, and the image on screen iconically replicates the Buddha in a circular syntax. One could even go so far as to say that the installation is itself a simple sign system structured by the transcendental signifier for nirvana.

If I'm correct in supposing that *TV Buddha*'s objective is to represent (or bemoan the impossibility of representing) a certain state of consciousness, then this formula it is using to do so can be characterized as essentially Cartesian. Precisely the same looping syntax that follows from a semiotic interpretation of the piece can be uncovered in Descartes' famous “Cogito” premise. In the second of Descartes' *Meditations*, he determines that “this pronouncement 'I am, I exist' is necessarily true every time I utter it or conceive it in my mind” (*Meditations* 13). In exploring the implications of this truth, he goes on to surmise that “thought exists,” and that “it alone cannot be separated from me” (15). Thus, Descartes finds an indubitable guarantee of existence only in the moment of cognition. The inseparability Descartes discovers between thought and the thinker is an important insight that the philosopher goes on to revisit in a number of his later works. The Cogito can be viewed as not so much an argument, but rather an intuitive

truth. At a logical level, the phrase “I think,” where “I” is taken to be defined by and inseparable from the act of thinking, forms a never-ending circle. Only the immanence of the thinking “I” rescues the claim from being a verbal Ouroboros or mere tautology. In this way, the immanent “I” in the Cogito is analogous to the indefinable state of mind associated with representations of the meditating Buddha and by extension with the *TV Buddha* installation, and the Cogito itself bears the same syntax as the artwork.

Furthermore, with the predominantly visual metaphors Descartes uses to describe cognition, acts of the imagination are presented in terms of images brought before the viewing “I” like players on a stage, but even more so, to give in to anachronism, like representations on a screen. The influence of this account on contemporary theories of cognition has led to what philosopher Daniel Dennett has called the “Cartesian Theater” view of consciousness (Dennett 107). The “Cartesian Theater” is Dennett’s name for the lingering sense in popular and academic culture that data collected by the senses and processed by the unconscious brain results in a synthesized representation that gets offered up to the conscious mind. This view implies some of the same doubling, the same reflexivity that pertains to *TV Buddha*, and it potentially leads to an infinite regress. Consciousness as an anthropomorphized viewer, a “homunculus” within the self, repeats the physical body’s act of seeing, only with the mind-generated content as the object of its perception instead of the original stimulus. This raises the question of how the represented content gets processed within this consciousness-as-viewer. That is to say, the model relocates rather than answers the question of how perceptions are processed in the mind.

One can see how *TV Buddha* closely resembles what a moment of self-awareness might look like within the Cartesian theater. Within the limitless mind that encompasses all things, the Buddha statue represents a focal point, an *acies mentis*. Like the titular jar in Wallace Stevens’

well-known poem, this homunculus of the universe reorganizes space around itself. The closed-circuit television is the Buddha-mind's interface with the external world, which also happens to be the internal world. *TV Buddha* is simultaneously a Buddhist Cartesian theater and a physicalist one: physicalist in the sense that it works by entirely material processes that transcend the abstraction of artistic representation. Light actually travels from the Buddha's surface into the camera's aperture and ultimately orchestrates the paths of electrons firing through the monitor's vacuum tube, which in turn sends real light back onto the Buddha's surface. As such, it is a model of Cartesian circularity that really functions, down to an atomic level. Like the Cartesian homunculus, the Buddha remains an opaque sign; it sits at the center of a conceptual model that groups and structures reality in a certain way, yet explains nothing.

Following these reflections, one can see how *TV Buddha* combines and extends the implications of two Cartesian ideas: the Cogito and the theater of cognition. If consciousness is a discrete subject that watches representational thought-content, and self-awareness is the ability to make the thinking subject and the content of thought identical, then *TV Buddha*, in watching itself, completes the Cartesian loop that “proves” its existence as a thinking thing. Making the Cartesian model come to life in this manner demonstrates in a visual way that the model doesn't constitute a solution, that it complicates rather than solves the paradoxes of being. Furthermore, it foregrounds the vanity of such a model. The prideful autonomy of the Cogito subject, which proves itself with reference to nothing beyond its own nature, the hubris of an indivisible inner-self that cannot be dissected or analyzed: these self-aggrandizing tendencies in Cartesian thought, perhaps in Western thought generally, become part of the iconography of *TV Buddha*.

Instead of providing an answer, this view of consciousness provides us with a likeness of Narcissus gazing into the pool, or Buddha gazing into the television.

#### **IV: Television, Death, and Anxiety in Don DeLillo**

In Don DeLillo's novels, we find competing models of consciousness, contrastively figured after two visual technologies of great influence in late twentieth century Western culture: television and film. As the predominant contemporary visual technology, video is the de facto inheritor of a legacy of analogic relation to consciousness, and its closest ancestor and rival in this station is film. The diametric opposition of these two media in DeLillo's work goes all the way back to his first novel, *Americana*, which tells the story of David Bell, a television executive turned filmmaker; however, I'm primarily interested in the way this binary evolves through DeLillo's later works, and especially his post-*Underworld*, 21<sup>st</sup> century novels. Like Paik with his many variant incarnations of *TV Buddha*, DeLillo's theory of visual media and their relationship to consciousness reveals itself through a series of minute variations on the same character types, situations and events, recurring in multiple works. There are intertextual patterns that thus form and allow one to map the contours of an idea that is central to DeLillo's novelistic insights into modern existence.

One such pattern emerges in the way DeLillo depicts televised violence in his novels. The same basic scenario recapitulated in a number of works spanning two decades of DeLillo's creative output consists of someone watching a scene of real, graphic violence on television, broadcast over and over. In *Libra*, the scene is the death of Lee Harvey Oswald as viewed by Beryl Parmenter, wife of JFK assassination conspirator Larry Parmenter; In *Cosmopolis*, it is the

protagonist and Wall Street capitalist Eric Packer watching rival businessman Arthur Rapp assassinated in North Korea; In *Falling Man*, it is the planes hitting the World Trade Center viewed by Lianne, estranged wife of 9/11 survivor Keith Neudecker; *Underworld* features two prominent examples of this trope: Matt Shay, brother of protagonist Nick Shay, watching footage of a murder committed by the “Texas Highway Killer,” and artist Klara Sax watching a bootleg copy of the infamous Zapruder film.

In each instance, DeLillo places emphasis on the aspect of repetition. In all but one example, repetition takes the form of incessant playing and replaying of graphic footage during the news coverage of an event. Each of these televised events—a murder, a serial killing, an assassination, a terrorist attack—is shown again and again, ad nauseum. Each signifies a death; in the case of 9/11, many deaths, yet Lianne's sense of the tragedy is still somehow localized in the possible death of her husband Keith, who stands behind her as she watches and “places his hand on hers [...] as though to console her for his dying” (*Falling Man* 135). Because of the way Lianne personalizes the images, one can conclude that in every example, the news footage shown represents in some way an individual's death, and each brings to mind the possible death of the viewer. In *Libra*, Oswald is said to have “made us part of his dying” (447). In *Underworld*, the clip of a man shot while driving his car is “instructional” and “demonstrates an elemental truth, that every breath you take has two possible endings” (159-60).

There is an existential identification with the dying person on camera that makes these images the source of infinite fascination. In one sense, it is this fascination that gives rise to the incessant repetition of the same footage that marks each scenario because, as “Matty” Shay says in *Underworld*, the news is there “to provide our entertainment” (160). In another sense, the repetition of these images can be seen as an attempt to annihilate death, or at least nullify its

significance. The footage of Lee Harvey Oswald's murder is shown “over and over,” Beryl Parmenter speculates, in order to “make Oswald go away forever” (*Libra* 446). Through repetition, the media seeks to erase Kennedy's assassin from existence, and in a broader sense, to erase death itself. Like Andy Warhol's prints of car crashes and suicides, the overplayed footage could represent an attempt to relegate death to the domain of mass produced commodities, thus stripping it of its power and horror. This desire to gain power over death through mediation and repetition is evident in *Cosmopolis* when Eric Packer witnesses an elaborate funeral procession and experiences a strong desire “to see the hearse pass by again, the body tilted for viewing, a digital corpse, a loop, a replication. It did not seem right that the hearse had come and gone. He wanted it to reappear at intervals” (139).

The Zapruder screening in *Underworld* is an anomalous outlier in this intertextual pattern. The scene is thematically linked to the other TV-watching scenarios but differs in fundamental ways. While the other scenes depict a common media phenomenon, the Zapruder screening exists to show that this phenomenon is not merely a symptom of the consumable nature of televised news coverage, but rather a sign of a comprehensive change in the nature of human experience brought on by visual media technology. As Walter Benjamin argues in his influential essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” “*the whole sphere of authenticity eludes technological—and of course not only technological—reproduction*” (Benjamin 21). It is Benjamin's contention that the mystifying aura of particularity exuded by an “authentic” or “original” work of art is annihilated by the reproducibility of that work, especially when reproduction can be accomplished with technological precision. Furthermore, film, says Benjamin, “is the first art form whose artistic character is entirely determined by its reproducibility” (Benjamin 28). A film as a work of art is always already a



machine-made reproduction of an event, and moreover, a montage of reproductions. The sense that an “original” copy of a film is any more original than subsequent copies, or any less a reproduction, is illusory. Film thus inaugurates a sensorium in which artistic authenticity can no longer seem possible.

The Zapruder screening in *Underworld* reveals that Benjamin's claim about film extends beyond the domain of art. Everything about the scene emphasizes reproduction down to the film itself, which is “a bootleg copy” (*Underworld* 488). It's a private screening rather than a public broadcast, but DeLillo still manages to highlight the element of repetition in the way he imagines the screening venue; it's a filthy apartment crowded with guests and filled with TV sets “arranged in stacks everywhere,” like Paik-esque video sculptures, and in one room, “a TV wall, maybe a hundred identical sets banked floor to ceiling” (*Underworld* 488). Together with this physical/spatial repetition, there is a delay between the time the footage begins running in the first screening room and when it begins in each successive room, so that the viewers' reactions to the fatal headshot are staggered into rounds: “people in the room went ohh, and then the next ohh, and five seconds later the room at the back went ohh, the same release of breath every time” (488). This staggering effect creates the same sense of repetition as the news broadcasts, calling attention to the event and the witnessing of the event as a mass-produced, repeatable experience. Even this “rare” screening of images that “almost no one outside the government had seen” is divested of its aura as a singular or original experience by the essential reproducibility of the technological medium (488).

The Zapruder screening episode makes it clear that DeLillo is, in each instance, dealing with a question of authenticity and reproducibility that lies at the essence of visual technologies. Significantly, the Zapruder screening is the only example out of the five I've mentioned that

involves 8mm film instead of a television broadcast, and even it takes place within an overstuffed shrine-like depository of televisions, where one might go to worship “the great proscenium face of the household god” (*Underworld* 488). In this respect, DeLillo is able to theorize beyond Benjamin and Benjamin's time, connecting the essential reproducibility of film to the reproducibility that is even more germane to the essence of television, where every image electronically traced over the phosphorescent screen is in effect a newly created reproduction. The images of death that DeLillo so frequently puts on his characters' televisions represent something that, in some prominent schools of thought, is antithetical to this notion of reproducibility. In *Being and Time*, for instance, the philosopher Martin Heidegger characterizes death as the singular certain event that every individual must stand in relation to and be defined by. Television represents, at one extreme, the absolute nullification of a certain kind of authenticity, while death functions, in a classically Heideggerian sense, as the source of all authenticity; as such, the moments of televised death in DeLillo signify a confrontation, a dialectical opposition of sorts, between Benjaminian reproducibility and Heideggerian authenticity.

As much as DeLillo has been associated with post-structural thinking and its rejection of transcendental ideas over the years, I wouldn't be the first critic to suggest that his writings, especially his 21<sup>st</sup> century novels, have more in common with Heidegger than with post-Heideggerian continental thought, primarily when it comes to Heidegger's transcendent notion of the meaningfulness of death. Cornel Bonca is the author of an exceptional essay on Heideggerian motifs in DeLillo's *The Body Artist*, in which he comments:

The fear of death, the fact of death, does serve, I think, for DeLillo as a "ground zero" (to use a current metaphor), a locus of charged psychic force so powerful

that it concentrates his mind in a way that is unassailable and worthy of his philosophic trust. Now, it is just this concentrated focus, even reliance, on death as epistemological and ontological mooring which links DeLillo with Martin Heidegger... (Bonca 60)

This “philosophic trust” in death that links DeLillo to Heidegger is the reason why death never loses its aura or its particularity for any of DeLillo's characters, even those exposed to the desensitizing repetitious broadcasts of death's image on the news. Lianne's and Beryl's scenes in *Falling Man* and *Libra* respectively are highly emotional and lack closure, and in *Underworld*, Matt Shay's scene concludes with the acknowledgement that “the tape sucks the air right out of your chest” despite the fact that “they show it a thousand times a day” (*Underworld* 160).

Moreover, in DeLillo as in Heidegger, the awareness of one's own death is associated with a particular kind of consciousness. For Heidegger, the anxious anticipation of death begets a state of mind that is the natural result of truly understanding one's existence in relation to death. For DeLillo too, the anxious awareness of one's own death is a subject meriting intense consideration, and surprisingly, television seems to play an integral role in DeLillo's representations of this mode of consciousness, for although television fails to mediate death, it mediates or symbolically represents self-awareness in a state of Heideggerian anxiety in multiple instances in DeLillo's novels. One such moment occurs in *Cosmopolis* when Eric Packer watches himself react on a closed-circuit television while a bomb explodes near his limousine. Another instance is the death of Oswald in *Libra*, during which Oswald feels as though he is watching himself “in a darkish room, someone's TV den” (*Libra* 440). Both signify moments of shock in which the looming possibility of death (at least momentarily) erases all mundane concerns from

the field of awareness, and both bear a striking resemblance to the *TV Buddha* as portraits of individuals in rapt self-observation mediated by a television set.

Oswald's vision seems to take place through some kind of imaginative dissociation that allows him to "see himself shot as the camera caught it" (*Libra* 439). Beryl Parmenter also notices "something in Oswald's face, a glance at the camera before he was shot, that put him here in the audience" (447). This observation adds an almost supernatural credence to the idea that Oswald somehow occupied the position of both TV spectacle and TV spectator in the moment of his dying. There is a compression of space and time implicit here that mimics the narrowing of consciousness brought on by the anxiety of impending death. As he "watch[es] TV," Oswald's sphere of awareness is reduced until his entire being is concentrated in "the pathway of the bullet," and then moments later, "there was nothing left but the barest consciousness of bullet" (440). In his discussion of the "Texas Highway Killer" videotape in *Underworld*, DeLillo theorizes at length over this relationship between consciousness, time and electronic media in a manner that seems directly applicable to Oswald's death experience. The narrator describes the medium of videotape in terms of "compressed time and repeated images" (159), and as a medium that acts in the same way as "the jostled part of your mind, the film that runs through your hotel brain under all the thoughts you know you're thinking" (156). The televisual mind is figured here as an undercurrent of consciousness, brought to the surface only when "jostled," as Oswald is psychologically jostled by the bullet entering his body.

The sense of temporal compression is also a prominent feature of televisual consciousness in *Cosmopolis*. Throughout the novel, Eric believes he can see things happen on the closed-circuit television before they happen in life, causing him to become paranoid that the camera is transmitting an independently generated image slightly out of sync with the reality it is

supposed to represent. As the bomb explodes near Eric's limo, "His own image caught his eye, live on the oval screen beneath the spycam. Some seconds passed. He saw himself recoil in shock. More time passed. He felt suspended, waiting. Then there was a detonation, loud and deep, near enough to consume all the information around him. He recoiled in shock"

(*Cosmopolis* 93). One explanation for this phenomenon might be that the camera is operating like the visceral, knee-jerk reactions of the body, faster than consciousness can process. This might account for why Eric sees himself react before he registers hearing the explosion, but of course, it doesn't explain how he would register seeing himself react on the screen before being aware of reacting. In any case, the sense of psychological compression Eric's mind undergoes is evident when DeLillo's writes that the detonation "consume[d] all the information around him". His attention is diverted from the glowing screens of data that fill his mobile workspace, the "array of visual display units" streaming "flowing symbols and alpine charts, the polychrome numbers pulsing," and he becomes focused on the single screen that shows his real-time image. This diversion of attention seems a perfect representation of the emergence of the "jostled" mind "under all the thoughts you know you're thinking" described in *Underworld*. With this in mind, one might think of Eric as a sort of homonculus within the larger mind of technology, the data screens representing his Cartesian interface with the external world, and his shift in focus representing the instinctual paring down of conscious attention in a moment of perceived danger. It is worth noting that here, more than anywhere else in DeLillo's work, the precise equation of *TV Buddha* finds itself expressed in literary form.

## V: Temporal Expansion and Filmic Consciousness: The Origins of *Point Omega*

In direct contrast to the temporal compression and perceptual narrowing of televisual consciousness, film is associated in DeLillo's novels with the expansion of time and the dissolution of focus. A perfect example of this contrast is in the differing treatment of Oswald's televised death versus John F. Kennedy's assassination captured on the Zapruder film. While Oswald's murder—from the shooting itself to the ambulance ride during which he seems to lose consciousness—is recited in three pages, most of which are dominated by short, one-sentence paragraphs, DeLillo's protracted description of Kennedy's assassination takes up an entire chapter. There are six pages of description devoted to just the time elapsed from the first until the final shot fired by JFK's assassin(s), an interval which the Warren Commission tentatively defines as “a minimum time of 7.1 to 7.9 seconds,” provided that “either the first or third shots missed,” or “4.8 to 5.6 seconds” if “the second shot missed” (U.S. 117). That estimate would make each page encompass roughly one second of time. One could argue that the Kennedy assassination is naturally given more attention as it is the central event of the novel, but that doesn't account for the stylistic differences that foreground the mediation of each event.

As I mentioned before, the novel's account of Oswald's murder is primarily written in monosyllabic words, arranged into single sentence paragraphs:

*A shot.*

*There's a shot.*

*Oswald has been shot.*

*Oswald has been shot.*

*A shot rang out.*

*Mass confusion here. (Libra 438)*

The diction is obviously intended to imitate news anchors and/or radio commentators live on the scene, while the syntax and text arrangement reflect the temporal compression of Oswald's televisual death. The phrase “*A Shot*” standing alone on the page mirrors Oswald's experience of “the barest consciousness of bullet” (440). The situation is apropos of Frederic Jameson's claim that in the age of television, “what used to be called 'critical distance' has become obsolete” (*Postmodernism* 70). DeLillo's prose reveals a perfect parallel between the live coverage of Oswald's death and the death itself in that both lack critical distance; both leave no space for reflection between action and reaction. Both are bullet-like: closing time and distance, annihilating through shock the possibility of analysis.

By contrast, the protracted description of Kennedy's death is preceded by Oswald reflecting to himself how “everything was slow and clear” (395). At that point in the narrative, the body of the text seems to become infused with images from the Zapruder film, played in slow motion; the description of the president's arms “coming up slowly like a man on a rowing machine,” the limousine “emerg[ing] from behind a freeway sign,” and glints of sunlight making “the car metal shine” are all highly suggestive of the precise images and angles of perspective that appear in the film sequence (*Libra* 395-7). It is a third-person death, seen from a distance and perceived slowly. Instead of the visceral knowledge that Oswald experiences in his own dying, we are given scenes of confusion and delayed apprehension: a woman approaching the limousine and asking to take Kennedy's picture after the first shot has been fired; words that DeLillo took from an actual radio broadcast asking listeners to “*stand by a moment please*”

(*Libra* 398, Shannon). In Oswald's death, time and awareness collapse inward and condense; in Kennedy's, they expand and splinter apart.

The antipodal fluctuations in time associated with television and film in *Libra* reflect, in some ways, the contrasting technological essence of each medium. There is a sense in which television is always moving faster than human perception, with beams of electrons painting and repainting the screen dozens of times within the space of a second. Television is made by immaterial particles, guided by magnetic fields, traveling at inconceivable speeds. Film, by contrast, is composed of a steady sequence of still images, each one of which is solid and tangible, and could be examined at leisure. Historically, the technology of film has its origins in the scientific desire to protract and dissect time, going back to Eadweard Muybridge's studies of the locomotion of animals in the 1870's (Crary 138-48). A rapidly captured sequence of images can take a galloping horse and slow it down for the purpose of analysis without altering its motions. In a phenomenological sense, one could argue that filmic time is protracted relative to televisual time because of the greater role that memory plays in film experiences. It is Fredric Jameson's contention that critical distance in cinema "is surely bound up with memory itself" (*Postmodernism* 70). Conversely, "memory seems to play no role in television, commercial or otherwise," according to Jameson (70).

As a counterpoint to the compressed and concentrated temporality of televisual consciousness, DeLillo's 21<sup>st</sup> century works are mainly interested in exploring the expanded states of awareness that one might call moments of filmic consciousness. 2001's *The Body Artist*, a novel which ostensibly has little to do with film or film technology, is DeLillo's first sustained meditation on temporal expansion. Critic Adam Begley calls it a novel about "how we structure time and are structured by it," and comments on how the opening chapter "expands in space and



time, each showcased moment stretching to eternity” (Begley). The novel's conclusion features the protagonist Lauren Hartke staging a performance art piece called “Body Time” that attempts to make the audience “feel time go by, viscerally, even painfully” (*Body Artist* 104). Hartke describes the goal of her performance to an art critic friend in terms that could well be applied to the novel itself:

'Maybe the idea is to think of time differently,' she says after a while. 'Stop time, or stretch it out, or open it up. Make a still life that's living, not painted. When time stops, so do we. We don't stop, we become stripped down, less self-assured. I don't know. In dreams or high fevers or doped up or depressed. Doesn't time slow down or seem to stop? What's left? Who's left?' (107)

Hartke's language here also presages the “Anonymity” chapters of DeLillo's 2010 novel *Point Omega*; these sections, which bookend the novel, take place at an exhibition of *24 Hour Psycho*, a video art installation by Scottish artist Douglas Gordon that came to New York's Museum of Modern Art in the summer of 2006 (Acknowledgement 119). Gordon's piece consists of Alfred Hitchcock's iconic film *Psycho* slowed down to a grueling 24-hour runtime. Like Hartke's analysis of her own performance piece, DeLillo's “Anonymity” focuses on a solitary spectator's psychological experience in the presence of an expanse of “pure film, pure time” (*Point Omega* 6). Echoing the dissolution of self that Hartke describes as occurring in “doped up” moments of consciousness, the Gordon exhibit is described as “a thing receding into its drugged parts” (10). Hartke's assertion that her work should make the viewer “think of time differently” again parallels the demands that *24 Hour Psycho*'s “merciless pacing” makes on the viewer to assume a “corresponding watchfulness” (5). For DeLillo's solitary spectator, this watchfulness is precisely the meaning and purpose of the piece. The exhibit is figured as an

object of meditation and an impetus to altered consciousness that allows the viewer to achieve an awareness of “the depths of things so easy to miss in the shallow habit of seeing” (13). The meditative aspect of the work takes on an almost religious significance as DeLillo's spectator contemplates the “pious effort” involved in truly “see[ing] what is happening in front of you” (13). This opening section of the novel prepares the reader for a discourse on a certain kind of protracted image consciousness, metaphorically modeled after film, that determines and inhabits in numerous ways the sparse narrative that follows.

The diametric opposition of what I'm calling filmic and televisual consciousness features most prominently in *Point Omega* in the way the handful of characters that appear in the novel are constructed. The solitary and isolated spectator of the novel's opening and closing sections clearly represents the filmic way of experiencing the world, considering the way he models his mode of conscious awareness after an exhibit of “pure film, pure time” (6). As the novel moves into its central narrative, the focus shifts towards a young filmmaker named Jim Finley, an aging scholar, and the scholar's peculiar daughter, Jessie, the latter of whom is the antithesis of the spectator character in several significant ways. The spectator, in his adoration of the expanded version of *Psycho* expresses disdain towards those who only see the film in its mundane context as “a common experience to be relived on TV screens” (*Point Omega* 12). This is precisely the context that Jessie would seem to prefer the film in, as she doesn't go to movies but likes “old movies on television” (46). The spectator also maligns people who have “to think in words” (10). His understanding of the film is object-oriented and sub-linguistic, superior, he contends, to that of academics for whom “the action moved too slow to accommodate their vocabulary of film” (10). Jessie's way of being in the world is quite the opposite of this; as child, she claims she could look at a person's lips and know “what they were saying before they said it” (113). While

the spectator operates in a state of temporal awareness too protracted for language to apply, Jessie compresses time, endeavoring to close the gap between the sending and receiving of a verbal message, to outstrip the speed of language as a medium. Significantly, this is a talent Jessie shares with several other DeLillo characters from earlier novels, notably Steffie in *White Noise* and Karen in *Mao II*, both of whom practice their peculiar ability exclusively while watching TV (*White Noise* 84, *Mao II* 65).

The opposition between the spectator's filmic consciousness and Jessie's televisual mind is one of the structural antagonisms that holds the novel together and insinuates the spectator into the role of Jessie's potential murderer. A similar opposition also exists between Jessie and the narrative space she enters into. The central narrative takes place in a house in the desert, where Jessie's appearance and disappearance—possibly, her murder—are essentially the only events that occur. Before Jessie's arrival, her father, Richard Elster, and his guest are poised in a moment of indecision. Whether or not Elster will agree to appear in the young man's film project is a question that bears no indication of being answered any time soon. Beyond that question, the two men share virtually no connection, have no reason being where they are, no impetus toward action. Jessie is a catalyst entering into a static environment of suspended animation.

The environment in which the main action takes place seems to open out from the protracted space of Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* into an even more vast stillness. The way the novel begins and ends at the exhibit gives it the shape of a frame tale, as though the interior chapters exist within a contained reality the parameters of which are demarcated by the unraveled and dissected iconography of Hitchcock's *Psycho*. Like *24 Hour Psycho*, the sense of causality and meaning is obliterated by the abyssal magnitude of the narrative space, so that Elster and Jim find themselves, like the spectator, “isolated from every expectation” (*Point*

*Omega* 8). Like the dramatis personae of *Psycho*, they find themselves somewhere in the southwest, but their location is stripped of virtually any regional particularity, characterized only by “the distances that enfolded every feature of the landscape” and the plodding “force of geologic time” that governs it (19). Elster explicitly designates it as a place where “time slows down” (23). In the absence of expectations, the spectator of *24 Hour Psycho* is confronted with contextless objects, and as a result, becomes hyper-conscious of things in themselves: “the knife, the silence, the spinning [curtain] rings” (13). Elster and Jim likewise seem to confront objects and images, discrete moments taken out of the film *Psycho* but wholly disassociated from one another in a vast temporal matrix. After Jessie disappears, a knife is found “in a deep ravine,” suggestive of some violence to an active imagination, but too far away to have any determinable connection to the disappearance (91). In his initial search for Jessie, Jim says he “threw back the shower curtain making more noise than [he]’d intended” (76). In doing this, Jim is acting out the climactic moment of *Psycho*, when Norman Bates as his mother pulls back the shower curtain on the horrified Marion Crane. Jim’s action resembles the climax of the film only by visual coincidence. The would-be victim is already gone, there is no motivation, no outcome to the act. The knife, the shower curtain: both suggest that Jim and Elster are existing in a space that is analogous to the dissected film.

To continue cataloging the ways in which *Point Omega* is an exploded pastiche of *Psycho*, one could certainly say that the figure of Norman Bates has a definite presence in the narrative. Like the other iconography of the film, however, he is broken down into component parts and diffused across an expansive void. There are elements of Bates in almost every male character in the novel. There is the spectator, who becomes assimilated, “pore by pore,” into the figure of Bates in the last moments of the novel (*Point Omega* 116). There is also the mysterious

“Dennis,” known only by a first name and never encountered, who may have had some kind of obsession with Jessie. Whether the spectator and Dennis are one in the same is ultimately irrelevant, as the novel works in the opposite direction of a conventional mystery, not resolving identities but dispersing them. Alongside Dennis and the spectator in this role, there is the protagonist Jim Finley himself. The voyeuristic acts that define Bates' character in the original film are mainly reenacted by Jim. Like the memorable scene from *Psycho* in which Bates uses a hidden peephole to watch Marion Crane without being seen, Jim tries to watch Jessie sleeping through “the space between the door and jamb” of her bedroom (73). In the original *Psycho*, this voyeurism eerily asserts connections between the viewer and Bates—through shared perspectives insinuated by camera angles, and through the unavoidable condition Hitchcock creates in which the killer and audience become consumers of a shared spectacle. In *Point Omega*, it connects Jim to the unnamed spectator of “Anonymity”. Both are moviegoers that possess a disciplined filmic consciousness. Jim claims he “used to sit through the credits, all of them, when [he] went to the movies” (63). Like the spectator with his gallery vigil, Jim constructs his conscious attention in relation to sluggish, filmic stimuli.

Jim in his filmic consciousness feels at home in Elster's desert, and on some level, recognizes its essentially filmic properties. It occurs to him that he “didn't miss the movies” in this place (*Point Omega* 64). It's a place that fits the filmic structure of his perceptual apparatus, a place where he can watch “a car on the horizon floating slowly into motion, rippled in dust and haze, as in a long shot in a film, a moment of slow expectation” (81). We become aware through Jim's perspective that Jessie operates on a completely different timescale. She is flitting, fleeting, and like a television signal, “her element was air” (49). Her attention is compressed, often “fixed tightly within” (60). Her gaze is not expansive, instead it “had an abridged quality, it wasn't

reaching the wall or window” (59). Her disappearance is the natural result of being constituted in a transient medium. Jim reflects, “passing into air, it seemed this is what she was meant to do, what she was made for” (81).

Besides Jessie, the other counterpoint to the expansive space-time of the desert in *Point Omega* is the city. According to Elster, cities are “all about time, dimwit time, inferior time, people checking watches and other devices” (45). There is a compression of time in the city that takes the form of an “endless counting down” (45). City time is the “machine time” that Fredric Jameson says “punctuates the flow of commercial television” (Jameson 76). “Cities were built to measure time,” says Elster, at the core of which, “what's left is terror” (*Point Omega* 45). The interior story of the novel begins after Jim's departure from the city and ends with him driving back to it, thinking, “soon the city will be happening, nonstop New York faces, languages, construction scaffolds everywhere, the stream of taxis at four in the afternoon” (100). This movement between the hectic, overdetermined space of the city and the alien void of the desert is another one of the prominent repeating patterns of DeLillo's novels. The city is almost always New York. In *Underworld*, the desert is Arizona, and also the desert camp where Klara Sax makes artwork. In *Falling Man*, it is a Las Vegas casino. In other works the desert takes the form of a deserted house, like the one in which Lauren Hartke grieves for her dead husband in *The Body Artist*. Desert-like spaces in DeLillo's novels are places of creation, where artistic works gestate and are born. They are also barren and overwhelming spaces, “womblike and world-sized,” to borrow a phrase from Jim Finley (31). Cities are contrapuntally depicted as spaces of exhibition and conflict. The trajectory of geographical movement in DeLillo is almost always from most saturated to most rarefied or vice versa: from city to desert or desert to city. This creates narrative rhythms of compression and expansion like the parabolic one that flows through

*Point Omega*. The association between the DeLillian desert and filmic consciousness is only fully explored in *Point Omega*, but the city is always and by default a televisual space.

## **VI: The Singularity, The Omega Point, and Pain as the Un-medium**

It is no coincidence that both filmic and televisual consciousness lead DeLillo's 21<sup>st</sup> century characters toward teleological philosophies of radical transformation. His three most recent novels, *Cosmopolis*, *Falling Man*, and *Point Omega* constitute a triptych of meditations on consciousness and mediation that renounces filmic and televisual consciousness as false paths, malignancies, picked up from the technologically saturated environment in which we live, that need to be excised. *Cosmopolis* takes place in the televisual space of the city; *Point Omega*, in the filmic desert. Each revolves around a narcissistic, destructive personality with a well-articulated, totalizing system of thought through which he understands the world. Each of these malignant personalities are associated with a contemporary disaster: *Cosmopolis*'s Eric Packer is DeLillo's prescient specter of the late 2000s financial crisis, and Richard Elster is one of the men behind the occupation of Iraq. At the center of the triptych, *Falling Man* is a tragic but redemptive story in which DeLillo reevaluates the relationship between the mind and the external world and calls into question the mediumicity of thought. It is an anti-Cartesian and anti-dualistic vision that emerges, a vision of consciousness as inseparable from the body and fundamentally intersubjective.

For Eric Packer in *Cosmopolis*, it is the popular notion of the “technological singularity” that seems so attractive, the notion that the accelerated pace of technology is destined to dramatically alter human existence through artificial intelligence. To Packer, the singularity

signifies the possibility of immortality through the prospect of “transcending his body mass, the soft tissue over the bones, the muscle and fat [...] to live outside the given limits, in a chip, on a disk, as data, in whirl, in radiant spin, a consciousness saved from void” (*Cosmopolis* 206). Even in the moments leading up to his death, Packer daydreams about the possibility of “an evolutionary advance that needed only the practical mapping of the nervous system onto digital memory” (270). The particulars of this teleological scheme fit nicely with Packer's televisual consciousness: the compressed temporality oriented towards an always imminent future, the mind as a flitting, transient stream of data.

In *Point Omega*, Elster's filmic consciousness demands a more organic teleology of transcendence, unfolding on a more geologic timescale. He finds this in the titular concept of the novel, the “omega point,” theorized by Jesuit philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Chardin's “phenomenology” sees matter as the primordial medium of spirit, and spirit as impelling the universe towards higher and higher levels of synthesis, culminating in human social consciousness. The “omega point” is the point at which the progress of socialization reaches “at a finite distance in the future, a critical meeting point or peak” (qtd. in Rideau 57). Unity dominates the material universe at this point, immediately causing universal consciousness to “break through the experimental framework of time and space” in search of an even higher synthesis with God (57). Elster has studied Chardin, and frequently quotes from and alludes to his writings. His personal version of the omega point is darker, more motivated by the drive towards death than universal love. Instead of synthesis with God at the culmination of history, Elster claims we would prefer “to be the dead matter we used to be” (*Point Omega* 50).

Both Elster's point omega theory and Packer's singularity ultimately come unraveled when each man is confronted with the unmediated in the form of real pain. The clear separation



between content and vehicle, the interchangeability of content, and really, the whole structure of media collapses in the experience of pain, as it proves to transcend media models of consciousness. For Packer, a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the hand causes him to lose sight of his dream of infinite digital existence. “His pain,” DeLillo writes, “interfered with his immortality” (207). In a similar fashion, the heart-wrenching disappearance of Elster's daughter deflates his grandiose omega point, causing it to shrink down “to the point of a knife as it enters a body.” “All the man's grand themes” are then “funneled down to local grief, one body, out there somewhere, or not” (98).

Of all DeLillo's novels, *Falling Man* most thoroughly develops his concept of pain as beyond mediation, and as such, a threat to media-based theories of consciousness. As a novel about 9/11, it seems fitting that the work should take an interest in the vulnerability and permeability of the body. Very near the beginning, a doctor treating 9/11 survivor Keith Neudecker introduces the concept of “organic shrapnel”:

In those places where it happens, the survivors, the people nearby who are injured, sometimes, months later, they develop bumps, for lack of a better term, and it turns out this is caused by small fragments, tiny fragments of the suicide bomber's body. The bomber is blown to bits, literally bits and pieces, and fragments of flesh and bone come flying outward with such force and velocity that they get wedged, they get fixed in the body of anyone who's in striking range. Do you believe it? A student is sitting in a café. She survives the attack. Then, months later, they find these little, like, pellets of flesh, human flesh that got driven into her skin. (*Falling Man* 16)

The description gives us a grisly sense of the body's permeability, specifically its permeability to other bodies. Organic shrapnel, like sex and surgery, evokes the vulnerability of the self to penetration by the other. Like sex, it erases or suspends the distinct boundaries between persons and substitutes a material connectedness, although it is an admittedly horrific perversion of this connectedness. Through violence and pain, rather than love, organic shrapnel transgresses against the supposed autonomy of the self.

An echo of this idea returns later when Lianne is watching footage of the second plane hitting the World Trade Center. She thinks to herself, “this was the footage that entered the body, that seemed to run beneath her skin” (134). The footage, like organic shrapnel, is painful and invasive, something from outside that enters uninvited and must be dealt with. Significantly, the images aren't characterized as existing on a separate plane from the physical phenomenon described earlier. The footage is like shrapnel; it has real consequences that Lianne feels in a visceral way. Through this analogy, the novel develops the idea of pain as fundamentally visceral and psychological in a unified way, as a point from which to deconstruct the Cartesian split between mind and body that lies at the root of media-oriented theories of consciousness. It also promotes the idea that total identification with one's own body is a more ontologically and existentially authentic way of viewing reality. Lianne comes to this realization through an epiphany of body-consciousness:

one late night, undressing, she yanked a clean green T-shirt over her head and it wasn't sweat she smelled or maybe just a faint trace but not the sour reek of the morning run. It was just her, the body through and through. It was the body and everything it carried, inside and out, identity and memory and human heat. It wasn't even something she smelled so much as knew. It was something she'd

always known. The child was in it, the girl who wanted to be other people, and obscure things she could not name. (236)

“Identity and memory” are figured as bodily attributes alongside “human heat”. The body itself is a kind of knowledge. Alongside the protracted and compressed temporalities associated with media, a holistic temporality appears in this epiphany, a synchronous experience of childhood and girlhood within adulthood. The profound sense of unification in this passage has a healing effect. It counterbalances the fragmentation represented by the horrific concept of organic shrapnel, reassembling the body against this and perhaps even older, more conceptual threats to bodily integrity.

The idea of organic shrapnel returns once again in an unexpected way at the culmination of the novel. The last chapter begins with the hijacked planes making their way towards the twin towers and segues into a somber recollection of World Trade Center survivors making their way out of the burning building. DeLillo is in the midst of describing a suicide attacker's last thoughts as the plane he is on approaches one of the two towers. The man focuses his attention on a bottle rolling across the floor of the plane: “this way and that, a water bottle, empty, making an arc one way and rolling back the other” (*Falling Man* 239). As “he watched it spin more quickly and then skitter across the floor an instant before the aircraft struck the tower,” the rambling sentence suddenly disintegrates into “heat, then fuel, then fire, and a blast wave passed through the structure that sent Keith Neudecker out of his chair and into a wall” (239). The trio of heat, fuel, and fire is all that goes towards representing an unwritable moment of chaotic violence, and then the narrative perspective finds itself flung into the mind of a different character. The sentence acts as organic shrapnel, passing surreptitiously from one body to another. This completes the transmutation of the concept from a physical phenomenon, to a mental phenomenon with

physical effects, to a mental phenomenon; that is to say, this is how one would express it in traditional Cartesian metaphysics. Within the text, the transmutation brings with it the dissolution of such categories. It becomes instead a transformation from physical, to physical/mental, to physical-mental. *Falling Man's* treatment of organic shrapnel leads to the conclusion that the mind is bodily, and the body is mental. Both are anchored by the transcendental signifier of suffering.

As with *TV Buddha*, attempts to deny the inseparability of mind and body in favor of a content/medium distinction lead to hubris and error for DeLillo's 21<sup>st</sup> century characters. The old media-based models of consciousness have an undeniable influence over the culture that DeLillo and Paik draw their inspiration from, but in these select works it becomes apparent that the old models may no longer be tenable. They might even be dangerous. In the case of Paik's *TV Buddha*, we may take this commentary as an internal critique, playfully exploiting the instability of existing models without necessarily positing alternatives. In DeLillo, however, the transcendent significance of suffering is one of several quintessentially un-postmodern themes, along with the absolute meaning of death, that DeLillo seems to be pursuing with a renewed earnestness in his most recent work. This leads me to agree with Cornel Bonca that it may be time for critics to “break away from the postmodern paradigms” in classifying Don DeLillo's creative output (Bonca 67). At the very least, his views on media and consciousness have taken a turn towards the humanistic. They constitute a formidable critique that nevertheless relies on unabashed faith in one particular. Whether DeLillo has joined the post-9/11 intellectuals and writers who laud the “end of irony,” or whether he is embarked on a more personal path, is yet to be seen.

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