LANGUAGE AND SELF IN THE NOVELS OF DON DELILLO

DISSERTATION

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By

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

There seems to be a characteristic duality about our understanding of ourselves in this age. On one hand we experience ourselves as embodied creatures, inhabiting time and space, defined for the most part by our biological, cultural, and historical inheritance. On the other hand we often sense something indeterminate and indeterminable in ourselves, so that clarity of self never comes, or if it does, never stays. In a traditional understanding, the world consists of independently existing objects, capable of precise objective observation and classification. The self is also a fixed entity with pre-ordained traits, a constancy. And in this view, language is an aggregate of words which stand in a one-to-one correspondence with things; each word has a distinct meaning attached to it. Objects, self, and language are related to the extent that all three have a basis in grounded, objective reality.
This traditional view underlies Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* (1718). He intends to write a "portrait" of himself premised on his ability to be wholly honest with himself and his reader. "I know my own heart," he writes, "and understand my fellow man" (17). His account is an interesting attempt to reveal his life, as he says, "in all situations, good and bad," as if by revealing the bad he is guaranteeing the truth. At the end, he writes, "I have told the truth. If anyone knows anything contrary to what I have here recorded, though he prove it a thousand times, his knowledge is a lie and an imposture." If anyone can read his account and still believe him to be "a dishonourable man," he writes, that man "deserves to be stifled" (606). In order to preserve the appearance of a transparent self, language too must be transparent—and any contradiction to the single truth must be a lie, and the man who speaks it must be shut up. If a person can be all one thing, and language can be found to put that entirety into words, it follows that the story of one's life also can be entirely true, valid even if a contrary interpretation is proved "a thousand times."

Not everyone shared Rousseau's assumptions about our ability to know ourselves and our world. Rousseau's contemporary, Scottish philosopher David Hume, held that it is impossible to grasp or "know" the world in direct, unmediated form. His "philosophical scepticism" influenced
generations of thinkers, including Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who saw that the relationships between words and things were strictly arbitrary, that there were no "natural" links between language and the world. What this means, among other things, is that our knowledge of the world is inextricably shaped and conditioned by the language that represents it. Words don't stand for things in a one-to-one correspondence; rather, according to Saussure, meanings are bound up in a system of relationship and difference. Our knowledge of things is almost imperceptibly structured by the systems of code and convention which alone enable us to make sense of the chaotic flow of experience.

Contemporary French philosopher Jean Baudrillard's work shows the influence of Saussure and others who stress the importance of representation, signs, and systems of signs in social and domestic life. In his early work, Baudrillard asserts that objects as well as words are interpreted as signs. He sees commodities as part of a system of objects correlated with a system of needs. These needs are not spontaneous, but are generated by the media, particularly by advertising. He attempts to describe the system of objects and to indicate how they condition and structure needs, fantasies and behaviour. But he argues against the idea that these manufactured needs are inferior to other needs: critics of the "false" or
artificial needs generally presuppose something like true human needs. But, as Baudrillard argues, there is no way to distinguish between true and false needs. In Baudrillard's concept of the "consumer society," consumption has replaced production as the primary social behaviour, becoming the new mode of being, of gaining an identity, and finding meaning, in our society.

In the early eighties Baudrillard articulated his theory of a new, postmodern society based on a new realm of experience, provided by the media, simulations, and cybernetic models. Simulations and simulacra, media and information, science and technology together produce what Baudrillard calls an "implosion" of the boundary between representation and reality, so that, as a result, the experience of the real disappears. For Baudrillard, the postmodern society is the site of an implosion of all boundaries, not only between appearance and reality but nearly every other binary opposition as well. This implosion is effected primarily by the media. Whereas previously the media were believed to mirror, reflect, or represent reality, now they are shown to constitute a (hyper)reality, a new media reality, more real than real, where the real is subordinate to representation.

In Don DeLillo's vision of America, too, the primary shaping forces of the self are not family, class, tradition or status but the environment of the image,
whose major effect, writes Frank Lentricchia, is to realign radically all social agents (from top to bottom) as first person agents of desire seeking self-annihilation and fulfillment in the magical third" (Introducing 198). People in the age of the image conform to the images provided for them—the clothes, talk, manners and attitudes generated by the commercial interests that invent the images—and we come to think of this borrowed conglomerate as our identity. David Bell, the protagonist of DeLillo's first novel, Americana, believes conceptions of self are nothing more than projections of identity supplied by TV. Indeed, one characteristic of the age is that identity is a matter of performance and imitation rather than of self-understanding.

But how is it that we could be so malleable, that we could be deeply manipulated by depthless images? Part of the answer may lie with the role of language in the formation of the self, the way language constitutes the self, shapes our values and beliefs, feelings, even perceptions. Not only our self-image, but also our image of the world around us is created with words. In White Noise, for example, a group of airline passengers believes they are about to crash and die. The crew decides to pretend that it's not a crash but a crash landing that is only seconds away. "After all, the difference between the two is only one word. Didn't this suggest that the two
forms of flight termination were more or less interchangeable? How much could one word matter? "They see how easy it is, "by adding one word, to maintain a grip on the future, to extend it in consciousness if not in actual fact" (91). And because our images of self and reality are created fundamentally by and through language, encoded in language, then anything that affects language affects us fundamentally; the abuses and corruption of language--cliche, jargon, amphibiology, propaganda--result in corruption and debasement of self; the fragmentation of language leads to the fragmented self.

"Over the years it's possible for a writer to shape himself as a human being through the language that he uses," DeLillo has said in an interview. "He not only sees himself, but begins to make himself or remake himself" (LeClair 82). But creating oneself this way is hard work, partly because language is made up of words like "self" and "reality," which are notoriously slippery. Multiple meanings, hidden meanings, ambiguity, abstraction, euphemism, jargon, shifting intertextuality and linguistic relativity are all present but unaccountable, so that language communication seems almost accidental. Billy Twilieg, the mathematics genius in Ratner's Star and one of a long list of DeLillo protagonists who have fundamental problems with the language, is filled with fear of the "mystery" of language, which he finds to be a
"stupid" medium when compared with mathematics' precision. The problem with language is succinctly if unwittingly stated by Billy Dupree, Lee Harvey Oswald's friend and brig cellmate in Libra. Asked whether or not he committed the crime he is accused of, he replies, "In my mind, I could like verbalize it either way" (98).

Each novel analyzes the language of its subject: the simplistic messages, consumer conditioning, and "baby bliss" images of TV in Americana; the new language of war, with its logocentric reductionism, euphemism and jargon, in End Zone; the evolution of language parodied in a rock musician's lyrics, beginning as a channel and source of messages, moving inward toward meaninglessness and finally silence in Great Jones Street; the language of science turned back upon itself in Ratner's Star, naming itself in progressively arbitrary symbols, revealing the subjectivity at the heart of "objective" scientific theory; the rhetoric of terrorism in Players and Mao II; the language of conspiracy in Running Dog and Libra; the language of the cult in The Names; and the sophistry of academia in White Noise. In examining the contaminated language of their subjects, the novels usually lead to the protagonists being stripped of illusion and having their world unmade, left searching for a way into or out of the language in which they live.
David Bell's initial challenge in *Americana* is to work through his family's "double-bind" method of communication. It is not surprising, therefore, that his deepest desire throughout the novel is for a clear verbal message. He is so fond of the unambiguous image of simple masculinity portrayed by Burt Lancaster that he tries to imitate it, as office-mate Strobe Botway imitates Humphrey Bogart. Movie figures present a predictable, one-dimensional image, a stable identity-type that seems to offer Bell a cover for his own complexity and uncertainty.

Throughout the novel images have an admittedly strong attraction for Bell. But how exactly do the images used in movies, television, and advertising shape the viewer? David's father believes the advertising image makes the viewer want to live—or consume—a different life, become a different self.

It moves him from first-person consciousness to third person. In this country there is a universal third person, the man we all want to be....To consume in America is not to buy; it is to dream. Advertising is the suggestion that the dream of entering the third person singular might possibly be fulfilled. (270)

Images, especially the honed, directed, purposeful images used in television commercials, turn the viewer into a wish-fulfillment self to be seen and admired by the viewer, making identity "a matter of mirrored performance and voyeurism" (LeClair 55). In DeLillo's America, the
distinction between the real and fictional cannot be sustained. To be real in America, Lentrichia notes, 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, some suffocating ghetto of selfhood" (Introducing 195).

Great Jones Street, like Americana, features a first-person narrator who begins shortly after a turning point in a lucrative, successful career. Each narrator plunges rapidly from stasis into chaos and meaninglessness, before finally lapsing into silence. Wunderlick's lyrics, like his lifestyle, draw increasingly inward, from political protest to aestheticism to "a kind of minimalist gibberish" (DeCurtis 134). "You were making incredible amounts of noise," his girlfriend Opel tells him, "and communicating absolutely nothing" (88). Rather than remaining a channel and source of messages, Wunderlick has become an end, a product for consumption.

But what is the alternative to the "mad weather" of language, which erodes all it touches? Are we left with an unmade world or is there a possibility of remaking based on a reconstituted language? Or is there an ur-language, a language beneath the corruption, that one can get to and thus finally speak purely, truly? In End Zone, Emmett Creed is obsessed with the kind of oneness promised by an ur-language: absolutist, monovalent, Creed wants to return
to original simplicity, to the earlier Logos, the state from which he assumes deterioration and complication have issued. And he instills in the narrator Harkness the desire to "begin to reword the overflowing world...To call something by its name and need no other sound" (70-71).

But language is not as simple a system as the unequivocal words that call football plays. Creed's search for oneness, for what he calls "the knowledge of ourselves," is impossible because of the nature of language. Early on Harkness learns with astonishment that words can "escape meaning" (14). "They don't explain, they don't clarify, they don't express. They're painkillers. Everything becomes abstract" (66). The "verbal magic" that gives Harkness nine synonyms for the "low mound of simple shit" (98-89) he comes across in the desert can also neutralize mass killing through the use of words and phrases like "thermal hurricanes, overkill, circular error probability, post-attack environment, stark deterrence, dose-rate contours, kill-ration, spasm war" (21). The more extreme the danger, the more abstract the vocabulary that describes it, remarks a character in Ratner's Star: euphemism is tantamount to terror. The novel's abundant examples of language abuse suggest that the debasement of language leads to the breakdown of social order, particularly in the heightened possibility of nuclear war.
And yet, for all its deterioration, corruption, and ambiguity, language still communicates something; the expectation of sense is what drives the plot of DeLillo's fourth novel, Ratner's Star, in which a group of scientists strive to decode a binary number code believed to have originated from a distant star. It is this expectation of pattern, logic, and meaning, even from extraterrestrial communication that brings Billy Twillig to the scientific community; as it is the lack of such precise pattern and logic in words that drives him to numbers in the first place. At first the scientists want Billy to break the code and reveal the content; later, however, they decide the content is unimportant, and they shift their energies to designing a "metalanguage" with which they can control all possible communication. But, like many other DeLillo novels, Ratner's Star ends in a recognition that the quest for the absolute may be futile. Our position is always on the brink, graphically portrayed in the novel's coda by the tableau of Billy Twillig, half-illuminated and half-obscured by the shadow bands preceding solar eclipse, standing poised between enlightenment and ignorance at the brink of Endor's hole.

The primary concern in Players is the power of the image to shape the individual. The major "players," Kinnear and Marina, as well as minor leaguers Pammy, Lyle, and Rosemary, are all emptied of substance, floating
shadows. While the Wynants assume they freely choose their clothes, food, attitudes and social activities, these choices are strongly shaped by media manipulation. It is this "absence of the quiddity of the subject" that prompts their need to make and remake identities (Goodheart 118). Rather than honest, intimate conversation, Lyle frequently speaks in tough-guy or comic routines; expectations for how one should look, feel, and behave are formed by the movies. The final image is of Lyle, emptying out, "shedding capabilities and traits by the second" until he is "barely recognizable as male" (212). Rather than a unified, simplified totality of self, in Players identity is a both a commodity and a matter of professional talent.

While Players is concerned with the power of the image to shape the individual in small, pervasive ways, the protagonist in Running Dog dons ready-made selves, fantasies packaged and swallowed whole. Glen Selvy tries on four different romantic fantasies--secret agent, knight, desperado and mystic--in his run for life that, at the end, turns out to be a run to death. The secret agent routine is attractive for its simplicity: it shuts down choices, entanglements and ethics in an attempt to produce a singleness of purpose and intent similar to Creed's monomania. It is "a mind set, all those mechanically performed operations of the intellect that accompanied this line of work. You...deadened yourself to the
implications" (81).

Selvy's apparent rebellion from the routine, his run, turns out to be an extreme form of the routine; he realizes what he's done only at the end, when it is too late to save himself. "He was starting to understand what it meant...The full-fledged secrecy. The reading. The routine. The double life...What you are. It was clear, finally...All this time he'd been preparing to die" (183).

His final realization is that all conspiracies "begin with individual self-repression" (183)—but if they begin with repression, they advance with the stories that we tell ourselves, the personal myths we live by. If he's good enough with his gun, Selvy tells himself, he'll be safe. If he follows the ways of the warrior—disciplining, purifying and perfecting his body, joining an order, serving a cause—he'll be safe. The only problem is that Selvy is wearing this two-dimensional screen image of a warrior in a three-dimensional world. He learns too late the weak correspondence between the image and the world: his "order," PAC/ORD, turns out to be as corrupt and manipulative as the terror organizations it is ostensibly dedicated to destroying. The object of the quest is not the Holy Grail or even justice, but a pornographic film. The film itself turns out to contain not pornography but Hitler imitating Charlie Chaplin imitating Hitler, performed for the amusement and diversion of the children
in the bunker, who are also about to die. Partly because it shows a moving, human portrayal of a man they are used to thinking unidimensionally about, and not the pornography they'd hoped for, which simplifies and mechanizes humanity, the film is a disappointment to all concerned--government, mafia, and media.

The primary longing in The Names is for unmediated contact, experience without the interference of language. In the beginning Jack Axton likes the talk of his friends, those world-weary American travellers who turn places into "one-sentence stories," who speak specialized jargon, and observe the protocols of conspiratorial exchange. The purpose of language, for them, is mastery: "subdue and codify" (80). But watching and listening to the Greeks in their public places, Axton hears a different way to use language, not as a tool for manipulation but an expression of life itself, our "deepest being" (52). The Acropolis is "a place of congregation, free exchange, and 'open expression,' a language community antithetical in its purposes and principals of exchange to the conspiratorial community he is fleeing" (McClure 111).

Axton's desire for unmediated contact is apparent in his seduction of Janet Ruffing. He uses words out of context to free them of content and meaning, in order to heighten their primary power to physically affect. "Say belly. I want to watch your lips," he tells her. "Say
legs. Seriously, I want you to. **Stockings.** Whisper it. The word is meant to be whispered." Janet's problem, he tells her, is that there's "a lack of connection between your words and the physical action they describe, the parts of the body they describe" (228).

The film director Volterra also seeks the unmediated experience, trying to get at the prelinguistic world directly, through image: "Forget relationships. I want faces, land, weather" (199). He wants to film an actual cult murder—the cult who, in attempting to get to their own preverbal experience, brutally butcher an arcaneely chosen victim. As their repeated stabbings or poundings reach a climax, they achieve a preverbal recognition, an instant of freedom from the isolation cell of language, from the tyranny of content, sense, plot. To achieve success, the act must be void of meaning. But the demise of the abecedarian cult seems to imply that providing meaning is a necessary function of our minds, a means to console and distract. Relationships, reasons, cause and effect, plot—all the organizing structures and artifices possible (precisely what is missing from Volterra's film), the mind will always supply. It will always tells its own story.

The Noonie cult in Mao II speaks a half-language, words unconnected to self. Although it is the cult members who have been programmed, softened up by sleep and food
deprivation and then brainwashed through empty repetition of ready-made declarations, and thus "immunized against the language of self" (8), it is their parents who don't know how to feel, who are "checking around for hints," trying to "shape a response or organize a memory" to drain the mass-wedding scene of its "eeriness and power" (6).

Mao II, like Players, is concerned with the power of the image to shape identity. There are no images allowed in a mosque, novelist Bill Gray muses, but the final wall of defense between terrorist leader Abu Rashid and the outside world is a wall of children, boys wearing hoods and automatic weapons, with the photographic image of Abu pinned to their chests. "These children need an identity outside the narrow function of who they are and where they are from," says Abu. "They don't need their own features or voices. They are surrendering these things to something powerful and great" (234). It is particularly terrifying because it seems to make little difference where the image comes from, the image one grows into--there is a difference only in degree between the boy terrorists, Jack Gladney's Nazis, and the group of college parents at the beginning of White Noise, growing into the image provided for them by mass advertising that targets them as a group. They all take their identity from something else: from an image offered to them as an identity.
It is this underlying problem, that real things are being replaced by phantoms, that meaning is somehow emptying out of the world, that underlies all other problems in this novel. Discussing the public relations problems of terrorists who torture and murder innocent victims, George Haddad tells Bill, "Of course [the victim is] innocent. That's why they took him....The more heartless [terrorists] are, the better we see their rage" (129). This is what the West has taught Beirut: that it isn't what's real anymore that's at issue: it's the message, the image. Charlie understands the logic of the simulacrum. When Bill first hears that the terrorists want to trade him for the real hostage, he expresses disbelief. Charlie says, "Only shallow people insist on disbelief. You and I know better. We know how reality is invented. A person sits in a room and thinks a thought and it bleeds out into the world" (132). But when you inflict punishment on someone who's not guilty, Bill realizes, "you begin to empty the world of meaning and erect a separate mental state, the mind consuming what's outside itself, replacing real things with plots and fictions"(200). This is why he goes to London, to Greece, and finally Lebanon. He is not out to free the hostage, but to battle the simulacrum.

The fundamental question in White Noise is "What is natural now? Has the nature of nature changed? What is the nature and being of real things?" As in Mao II, the
deepest problem in White Noise involves the simulacrum, the chain of simulations that throws into doubt the nature of real things. TV, radio, movies, supermarkets and malls are all sources and repositories of what Murray Jay Siskind calls "sacred formulas." In the supermarket:

Everything is concealed in symbolism, hidden in veils of mystery and layers of cultural material. But it is psychic data, absolutely. The doors slide open, close unbidden. Energy waves, incident radiation. All the letters and numbers are here, all the colors of the spectrum, all the voices and sounds, all the code words and ceremonial phrases (38).

Television too "practically overflows with sacred formulas." It "opens ancient memories of world birth, it welcomes us into the grid, the network of little buzzing dots that make up the picture pattern" (51).

What these images do, primarily, is obliterate both the original and the subject, so that he or she is ready to consume. The simulacrum accomplishes the "emptying out of meaning (that is, of originals, of stable referents) from a world which is henceforth made up of closed and self-referring systems of semiotic exchange" (Frow 181). This process is evident in White Noise when Jack tries to imagine Heinrich's convict chess partner, for example, and his picture is a composite drawn from TV images: "Did he care for his weapons excessively? Did he have an arsenal stacked in his shabby little room off a six-story concrete car park?" (44). The effect of the simulacrum is evident
when Jack adjusts the covers over his sleeping son and feels he has "wandered into a TV moment" (154). Both the chess partner and the moment are shaped by a TV image, which gives to both a pre-formed structure independent of what they are, but which instantly becomes part of their reality. The image increasingly interpenetrates the real until the world becomes so "saturated with representations" it is "increasingly difficult to separate primary actions from imitations of actions" (Frow 184).

The two most important examples of the simulacrum are the evacuation organization SIMUVAC and the most photographed barn in America. In the wake of the "airborne toxic event," when Jack points out to one of SIMUVAC's employees that this is not a simulation but a real evacuation, he replies, "We thought we could use it as a model." The accident gives them "a chance to use the real event in order to rehearse the simulation" (139). When Jack and Murray visit the most photographed barn in America, Murray says, "No one sees the barn....Once you've seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn" (12). The tourists attempt to see the barn by photographing it--they have come, after all, because it is the most photographed barn in America. The image produced, however, is not of the barn but of themselves. The "real" barn is replaced by the group image. "We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one,"
Murray says. "Every photograph reinforces the aura. Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender. We see only what the others see...We've agreed to be part of a collective perception. This literally colors our vision" (12).

Perhaps DeLillo's greatest achievement so far is his portrayal of the process and effect of the simulacrum in the characterization of Lee Harvey Oswald in Libra. Examples abound of the simulacrum and what Frank Lentricchia calls "third-person thinking," from the Brooklyn boy who refers to himself as the kid ("The kid quits school the minute he's sixteen....The kid gets a job in construction. First thing, he buys ten shirts with Mr. B collars" 8-9), to Wayne Elko, whose "experience in life and in the movies" form his expectations, to Kennedy himself, on the tarmac, who "looked like himself, like photographs" (392).

The book is structured in two alternating parts. The conspirators' plot unfolds with relentless inevitability; in comparison, Oswald's life is aimless and episodic. What DeLillo has done, notes Lentricchia, "is given us one perfectly-shaped, intention-driven narrative while folding within it, every other chapter, a second narrative, his imagined biography of Oswald, a plotless tale of an aimless life propelled by the agonies of inconsistent and contradictory motivation" (Introducing 201). Oswald is a man in search of an event, the one thing that will tie his
life together and help him make sense of it. This is the reason for his defection to Russia, as well as his attempted assassination of General Walker: each was to provide the missing element, to make all the episodic scenes coherent.

What Oswald is looking to buy, ex-CIA man Win Everett is looking to sell: an identity, and an event to seal that identity. How identity is put together is one of the secrets Win Everett knows, how easy it is, a few scraps of paper, some glue, a plot that will bring out the hidden symmetries of a chaotic, off-balanced life. This is the attraction of conspiracy: it's "the perfect working of a scheme," and therefore represents "everything that ordinary life is not." All conspiracies are "the same taut story of men who find coherence in some criminal act" (440-41).

Oswald's life is not simply that of a crazy assassin, as we would like to believe, writes Lentricchia, but a "vision of normalcy," of an everyday life "utterly enthralled by the fantasy selves projected in the media as our possible third-person....Oswald is ourselves painted large, in scary tones, but ourselves" (Introducing 204). Libra dramatizes the experience of everyday life in the age of the image, a "world gone inside out," where objects dissolve into their representations, perception is offered in a package and taken en masse. In this age, when life is
lived totally inside the images generated in the media, Oswald can watch even his own death in the TV cameras that surround him.

The lost child in Mao II, Karen, remarks casually to Bill that she never thinks about the future. He replies, "You come from the future" (85). Karen, like a writer, or someone insane, "tries out voices" in her head (176), and finds she can hold "Master's total voice ready in her head" (194). Programmed, deprogrammed, reprogrammed, Karen can become lost in the dusty light of the TV. She is "thin boundaried. She took it all in, she believed it all, pain, ecstasy, dog food, all the seraphic matter, the baby bliss that falls from the air...She carried the virus of the future" (119). It is a bleak vision, this end result of the chain of simulations. When objects dissolve into their representations, when the simulation is preferred to the original because the simulation has more power, when you fill rooms with innocent victims to send a message of moral outrage, you obliterate the original, you begin "to empty the world of meaning." When identity is no longer authentic, when it is something practiced, copied, packaged, bought and sold, the world itself must be repressed.

Glossolalia, the language of the spirit, of the "sweet soul before birth, before blood and corruption," is not open to most of us, as it wasn't to young Owen
Brademas. All we have is a regular everyday corrupt language, and our losses—innocence, immediacy—are great. But they are at least partly compensated by the stories we tell ourselves, the stories that continually restructure our lives. These stories give us a world more dependable than the one that nature has provided, one that "grants symbolic rewards on which we count for most of our pleasures" (Foster 167).

Thus, despite the corruption and hurly burly of language, it is partly effective, for it satisfies our need for sense. Marguerite Oswald’s cry for pity and for justice, a desperate conglomeration of platitudes and remade cliches, is nonetheless powerful, moving, and honest; even the misspellings and misuse of words in nine-year-old Tap Axton’s novel reflect an alternate and perhaps deeper kind of reality. At the heart of the mystery of reality and self is language, and at the heart of language is silence: this is what language simultaneously discovers and re-covers, adapting itself with each generation, remaking itself to protect us from "the nightmare of real things, the fallen wonder of the world" (The Names 339).
Chapter II

Americana and Great Jones Street: Made in the Likeness of the Image

Don DeLillo's first novel, Americana (1971), presents itself as autobiography written by David Bell from an island off the coast of Africa (129). Its form is similar to Bell's film series "Soliloquy," which consisted of "an individual appearing before the camera for an hour and telling his life story" (24); its content is similar to David's own film, untitled, described in detail in the last third of the book. In the autobiography, however, in contrast to the film, Bell strives to appear artless and straightforward, and this contrast highlights a distinction between Bell's autobiography and DeLillo's novel: though Bell strives for objectivity, DeLillo knows there is no stand one can take outside oneself, that there are no degrees of objectivity, only degrees of the illusion. "I wanted to become an artist," Bell says in retrospect. "I ended in silence and darkness, sitting still, a maker of objects that imitate my predilection"
David Bell is obsessed with being young, handsome, and successful. Not surprisingly, he is also losing control of himself. His is an almost indefinable ailment, at times nothing more than a sinking feeling, at times an unshakable sensation of a loss of footing in the real world, a perception that everything and everyone is nothing more than images and shadows. He is afraid that he is "disappearing," that the unique individual is disappearing, replaced by what a character in Great Jones Street calls "mass man." He sees himself and others as existing "only on videotape" (23); indeed, he believes his identity is nothing more than a compilation of images from a lifetime of commercial movies and television. Carol Deming, the actress, speaks the truth for many in this novel when she tells David that she doesn't want to talk intimately, honestly: "Just give me something to play. An idea, a role, a masquerade" (251). The "only problem," he says, is that "my whole life was a lesson in the effect of echoes" (58). Bell's sickness goes beyond solipsism, which holds that only the self is real, for in Americana, even the self is suspect, infiltrated: "I" has become "he" or "she," what Bell calls "living in the third person" (58).

The aesthetic conflict in this novel is between film and writing, the image and the word. Both, of course, are merely media, but Bell, a television producer, has
distrusted words from an early age. He fears "the involvement of words" (167). Early experience has taught him that language is used dishonestly, for power and control, more often than honestly, for intimacy; in fact, he comes to see honesty as a mistake because it makes one vulnerable. "Do you think I'm handsome?" he asks Amy at the party at Old Holly.

"I know it's an ambivalent thing to ask but I heard you discussing colors with old Andy Alexander and you seem to have good taste and I was just wondering what you thought. I'm sure you wonder if people think you're pretty. Do you think I'm handsome?"

"Yes," she said.
"Do you want to know if I think you're pretty?"
"Okay."
"I think you just miss," I said. "What's your opinion of Burt Lancaster? I think he's the all-time greatest." (192)

Manipulation through language, so common in this novel that it sets the standard for communication, is especially effective here because David, implying intimacy in his question, invites an honest response. When he gets the answer he wants, his tone changes abruptly, revealing that his was only a surface question, that he is only acting intimate and open. The non-question about Burt Lancaster serves as the second punch in Bell's one-two combination repartee.
Manipulation is one type of language abuse; at the network where Bell works three more are prevalent: jargon, abstraction, and deliberate obfuscation. The common thread in all these types is that language is used to blur or disguise reality. Jargon, for example, is the use of unnecessary technical language: "Did you read where MBO is using re-cons for the depth skids?" (19), especially when used not to communicate but to intimidate, as when David and Bud try to "intimidate the two older men with all sorts of insane technical data" (212-13). Abstraction, because it is often an attempt to protect one's thoughts by wrapping them in words that have no concrete referent, has the effect of blurring reality: "What I want to know at this juncture is whether the World War III idea is any more viable than it was a week ago in the light of recent developments on the international scene" (65). Deliberate obfuscation is dishonest by evasion, as in this exchange:

"But has he definitely committed?"
"I would say he has just about definitely committed."
"In other words we have rounded the buoy?" (65)

Language is abused when words are used not to stand for or point to the truth, but instead to smokescreen, disguise, or misrepresent it.
By contrast, Bobby Brand, the novelist, believes there is a connection between language and self, and thus he tries to purify himself by purifying his medium, by getting rid of the slang in his vocabulary. He asks David to correct him if he falls back into "the old drug argot or military talk" because slang and jargon is "insidious. It leads to violence" (113). Brand would like to write a novel without using language at all, though Bell points out that the problem isn’t with language itself, but with how it’s used. His film, he claims, reinforces the value of language by reducing "the kind of movement that tells a story or creates a harmony" (288-89). Narrative, like language, is a cognitive tool, a way of making the flux of experience comprehensible. But when recollections are given shape, when they achieve coherence, exhibit causality, possess a beginning, middle, and an end, they no longer tell the "truth" but tell a "story," and this is Bell’s objection. The form of Americana is thus the result of Bell’s attempt not to tell a story, but rather to "hurl great chunks of experience at the page" (LeClair 33), to record events simply, without comment or interpretation.

It is in the stories we tell ourselves to make sense of the world, those documentary "newsreels" (117) we sometimes tell ourselves in the dark before sleep, that language shapes not only what we see but who we are. Our lives begin and end in the dark, Bell muses, but
"somewhere between beginning and end there would have to be an attempt to explain the darkness, if only to myself" (206).

At least partly because of the abuse of language, Bell is attracted to images. They grant one form of his strongest desire—the clear message. When Kirk Douglas or Burt Lancaster laughs or cries "it [is] without restraint. Their chromium smiles [are] never ambiguous" (12). As emblems of simplicity and directness, images gain power in direct proportion to the ambiguity and indirectness prevalent in language. At the network, the deepest communication takes place, Bell is convinced, through a code having to do with the color of one's door and the color of one's sofa. Verbal communication consists of rumor, anti-rumor, gossip, and lies. "Words and meanings were at odds," Bell says. "Words did not say what was being said nor even its reverse. I learned to speak a new language" (36). In contrast, because it doesn't use words to communicate, the image seems inherently trustworthy: pictures don't lie.

The novel itself is saturated with movie and advertising images. When Bell, as a teenager, sees Burt Lancaster stand above Deborah Kerr on the beach in From Here To Eternity, he feels for the first time "the true power of the image" (12). Bell describes that power as an enlargement: Burt is so big that he is "like a city in
which we are all living," and Bell knows that he "must extend [him]self until the molecules parted and [he] was spliced into the image." Though on the screen the image is fleeting, in the psyche it is permanent: "I carry that image to this day, and so, I believe, do millions of others" (13). As Bell is obsessed with Lancaster, office-mate Strobe Botway imitates Humphrey Bogart, their identities so spliced with those of film images that Bell feels their true lives "existed only on videotape....We seemed to be no more than electronic signals" (23-24).

The movie image shapes identity by providing a strong, clear model for imitation; similarly, the advertising image works, not to make viewers want to change what they have but who they are.

It moves him from first person consciousness to third person. In this country there is a universal third person, the man we all want to be....To consume in America is not to buy; it is to dream. Advertising is the suggestion that the dream of entering the third person singular might possibly be fulfilled. (270)

Advertising is a primary mechanism for changing us from the self-we-are, to the self-we-would-become. Worse, any distinction between the real and fictional cannot be sustained, notes Frank Lentricchia; "its undesirability is the key meaning, even, of being an American. 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, some suffocating ghetto of selfhood" (Lentricchia 194).

At bottom, the advertising image exploits discontent by promising changes in the self through acquisition of product. Bell, glancing through a magazine article on the Vietnam war, sees a full-page ad for a panty-girdle opposite a photograph of decapitated villagers. "The model was extraordinarily lovely, a tall dove-colored girl holding a camel whip" (104). Ostensibly the whip is in the photo to provide a visual image of control and discipline; the whip stands for these qualities, and by making the whip and girdle interchangeable, the value of the whip adheres to the girdle. The qualities of the whip adhere not only to the girdle, however, but to the model as well, and thus in the context of the war photo suggests an easy way to avoid feeling vulnerable, to avoid feeling the pain, guilt and terror of the war: buy this girdle. A similar theme is seen in a brandy ad in the same magazine. "A woman in a white evening dress was walking a leashed panther across the lawn of a Newport estate" (105). The qualities of the brandy are equated with the qualities of the estate: classy, impressive, and, in context, removed and invulnerable. The jaguar seems tame—the ultimate effect of civilization—and yet implies wildness, for those discontent with civilization. The ad is telling the viewer that it is entirely possible to feel simultaneously.
civilized and wild, tame and unleashed, dangerous and invulnerable even in the midst of danger and savagery.

The image is attractive not only because it provides antidotes to and escapes from reality, but also because it provides meaning. Relationships, human nature, and reality are all given a context that makes them simple, easy to understand, as in this twenty-second TV commercial:

A house stood on a quiet suburban street at night. Inside, a man and a woman were having an argument. A teen-age girl leaned against the TV set listening to them. She was very homely. Then she disappeared, returning seconds later with a small bottle of something. The man and woman looked at the bottle, embraced and began to sing. (199)

The simplicity of such an approach seems a reproach to credulity, but David's description of the "perfect night" on which he met Meredith shows that even simple cliched images can become deeply grooved in the mind, affecting not only thought and feeling but also perception. He describes his surroundings--the trees, wind, water sprinklers, the couple sculptures in the dim light--as if it were a scene arranged "for the whim of the camera." He is stirred once again, he says, "by the power of the image" (30-31). After David and Meredith marry, spending their time seeing "all the new movies" (34), Bell is no longer content merely to make love to his wife. He has to seduce her first. "These seductions often took their inspiration from cinema. I liked to get rough with her. I
liked to be silent for long periods. The movies were giving difficult meanings to some of the private moments of my life" (35).

American is suffused with examples of advertising images and their subtle power to shape individuals by shaping how they see the world. Successful advertising first creates and then exploits groups of people—Yuppies, for example, New Englanders, Baby Boomers—so that David wanders among the adults at his mother's party unalarmed by the fact that they "dressed more or less the same. They talked the same way and said the same things and I didn't know how dull they were or that they were more or less interchangeable. I was one of them, after all" (189). Geography and history are shaped by the image: the West, for Bell, is "Marlboro country" (112), and his favorite Indian tribe is "The Chiricahua Apaches. Burt Lancaster with that paisley headband" (116). Likewise, speech is borrowed from or punctuated by movie lines, and when Bell says something witty at a party a woman assumes he got it "from some great old Randolph Scott movie in that green Technicolor" (103). Sexual response is similarly influenced by the image. After seeing an ad in which a woman lifts her leg out of the tub to rub soap along her calf, David asks Sully if she lifts one leg and washes it like the models in TV commercials. "No," she says (208). Later in the tub, of course, she does imitate the image,
looking to see if David is watching. But most important, David sees himself and others in borrowed movie role stereotypes. "We'll be like Cary Grant and Roz Russell," he tells his secretary. "Sipping martinis in my penthouse office" (123).

What is it, exactly, about the image that makes it so powerful, that allows it to mold how we look at ourselves and the world? It isn't simply the message, nor simply the medium, though, for Bell, there seems to be something in the dots themselves that make up the image:

I looked at the TV screen for a moment and then found myself in a chair about a foot away from the set, watching intently. I could not tell what was happening on the screen and it didn't seem to matter. Sitting that close all I could perceive was that meshed effect, those stormy motes, but it drew me in and held me as if I were an integral part of the set, my molecules mating with those millions of dots. (43)

It is as if the dots themselves perfectly order or perfectly empty the universe, create a blank screen on which difference—the play of differently colored dots—creates meaning out of meaninglessness. The image spreads across the screen like stars in a night sky, providing a message simpler, less ambiguous and therefore more attractive, than the ones that come from staring at the real sky. Moreover, it's set to catchy music.

Images are powerful because they simplify what they represent. The high-rise workers across the street from Bell's office are assumed to be Mohawks because Mohawks
are typically known for "their inherent catlike agility and superb sense of balance." Meredith's friend Kurt has "all boys" because "[t]hat's the type he is. Athletic. Outdoorsy, Tweed and Leather" (57). Television did not invent the stereotype, but television exploits it, presenting such simple types so often to so many people that the type, in Americana, has obliterated the original. Ironically, people have molded themselves to a type that was created in the first place in the image of the people. Gang members watch gang movies to see how they should dress, what weapons to use. It is this, David believes, that is destroying the individual. Even a gesture is enough to materialize the entire aura of the image, as when Mary smokes a cigarette "like Lauren Bacall, the cool appeal of those sleepy rhythms" (161), or when Wendy Judd straddles a chair "in the manner of a Berlin nightclub singer in the disillusioned twenties" (104), or when David sees two old men in a small town who look "as though they might have shared a watch or two on a tin can off Guadal"--not in some real past, but "in the Warner Brothers forties" (211).

Nevertheless, even when Bell wonders "how real the landscape truly was" (13), even when people seem to be only imitations of images, there is always the reality of self. The physical element of identity means a great deal to David Bell. "When I began to wonder who I was," he
tells us, "I took the simple step of lathering my face and shaving. It all became so clear, so wonderful" (11). The mirror provides the illusion of a unified self, of simple "blue-eyed David Bell." But the whole self is more than simply physical, as he acknowledges in his extra-marital affair with Jennifer, when he refuses to share of himself because "I feared my own disappearance" (41). Such hoarding is ineffective, however, and he is tortured by "the hellish feeling of having left something important behind me in one of those indistinguishable rooms" (42). He feels he is disintegrating, that he can no longer control what he says: "Words blow in and out. I can hear them perfectly...but I can't believe they're coming from my mouth" (97). Indeed, the primary reason for Bell's cross-country trek is not to film the Navajo documentary, but to finally confront the problem of who he is, to face his real self, a task which requires him to "smash my likeness, prism of all my images, and become finally a man who lives by his own power and smell" (236).

But first he must break through two double-binds. Bell's psychological make-up is characterized by his obsessive drive, his isolation, and his childish passive-aggression, shown to be a symptom of childhood trauma caused by his family's "double-bind" method of communication. The double bind, a concept defined by anthropologist Gregory Bateson, consists of "a primary
negative injunction from one or both parents to the child; a secondary, conflicting injunction, often expressed nonverbally; and the prohibition of escape from the two injunctions" (LeClair 35). This occurs, for example, when David and his mother have a tense, almost sexual encounter in the pantry and then David hears the authoritarian sound of his "father's bare feet on the stairs. That was all" (196-7).

This moment gains power by its recurrence throughout the novel. In Brand's aunt's house, David wanders into the pantry and wonders how long it had been since he had stood "in a pantry at midnight, the dark shelves lined with cookie jars, jams and spices." In Brand's pantry, he says, he "returned to a tight hot room in another town, the idle perfume of a summer" (115). Furthermore, Bell exhibits a penchant for older women. He recalls as a boy standing beneath an elm and watching "a woman ironing clothes in the shingled house, standing in her slip, the blinds not quite shut," remembering too his "hopelessness of lust" (109). It is in the morning at Brand's house, watching a woman "close to forty" trimming the hedges "like a bird discovering flight" that David conceives of the film, coming to him as "the strangest, darkest, most horrifying idea of my life" (124-5). That idea is to exorcise the demon of the pantry memory, to break through the first double-bind by re-presenting it on film. This time,
however, he has the Hermes' Shield of art to protect him. This time, he will see it as a voyeur.

In turning life into art, Bell's task involves organizing his memories. They are too dangerous as they are, unruly and uncooperative. They "insist on evasion, on camouflage, on dissolving into uninvited images" (299). When he wants to remember Old Holly, for instance, he's never sure if he'll get his father's hands curled around a snow shovel or his mother catatonic in the rocking chair. And if identity boils down to "we are what we remember" (299), then one way to change who we are is to change what we remember. This is the conscious motivation for the film. To leave no doubt that this is a film about identity, it begins and ends with this coda: an actor David facing the real David behind the camera, whose image is caught in a bathroom mirror (241). The film is a series of monologues, culminating in the pantry scene. It is unified in its attempt to diffuse the power of that final scene, to loosen the tie that double-binds.

Clinton Bell, played by Glenn Yost, explains that the sole aim of advertising, the real product it pushes, is the image. The successful TV commercial affects the viewer by making "him want to change the way he lives" (270). Austin Wakely, playing David, identifies the particular power of the camera: it organizes surreptitiously, implying "meaning where no meaning exists" (286). This is
what makes it an "almost religious authority" (86). It has the power, more importantly, of freezing the image, the surface of identity, providing a kind of salvation by "chemical reincarnation" from the ravages of time and decay (254).

In the final scene, Bud Yost and Sully recreate the pantry scene. Sully has been linked to Bell's mother before in Bell's autobiography. In Sully's first scene, for instance, she is standing against the wall at Quincy's party, having slipped one shoe off and tucked her leg up behind her. "She remained that way, on one leg, a cryptic shoe moored beneath her...I was drawn to her, terribly" (7-8). When Bell finds his mother spitting into the ice cube tray at her party, she also "was wearing just one shoe. The other was on the floor, a black shoe, upright, near the wall" (195).

Shooting the scene, David is terrified. To lessen its power he tries to mock it, referring to it as "my very own commercial, a life in the life," and he wonders "whether it would sell the product." He steels himself, he speaks gruffly and issues orders, but still his terror causes him to rush the scene, to shoot it poorly. But he had to do it and be done with it, he says, and maybe this was the best, to "obliterate the memory by mocking it, no power at all, spilling seed into uncaptured light" (317). Even before the film is finished, however, Bell knows that it will not
accomplish what he sought from it, an image to obliterate
the original. Not even acting out the implications of the
scene, committing symbolic incest with Sully that night in
the motel, will be enough to break the bind.

The symptoms of David Bell's ailment include a
feeling of unreality about the world, others, and himself.
He is, he believes, little more than a compilation of
images and fronts, evasions and lies. If the human
condition is, as DeLillo seems to suggest, one in which we
are nearly incapable of honesty in word, thought, emotion,
or perception, the central metaphor for self is the "motel
in the heart of every man" (257). The effect of emptiness
is achieved by the force of repetition--identical rooms in
identical motels in identical cities--and cheap
imitation--"the four seasons of the year inside aerosol
cans." The endless repetition is "so insistent and
irresistible that, if not freedom, then liberation is
possible," deliverance from the burden of existence. "You
can sit on your bed and become man sitting on bed," or
even "if you choose, the man on the bed in the next room"
(257). Such freedom is possible only in a world of
representation, in which symbols and images take the place
of real things. But to achieve an existence almost totally
symbolic is not without its price, for such a life makes
"no allowance for the truth beneath the symbols, for the
interlinear notes, the presence of something black (and
somehow very funny) at the mirror rim of one's awareness" (139). Nevertheless, Bell says, he believed all of it, the institutional messages, the psalms and placards, the pictures, the words. Better living through chemistry. The Sears, Roebuck catalog. Aunt Jemima. All the impulses of all the media were fed into the circuitry of my dreams. One thinks of echoes. One thinks of an image made in the image and likeness of images. It was that complex. (130)

The name usually given to this system of symbols, a system with no fixed determinations, in which anything can be anything else, in which the image obliterates the real, is the simulacrum. For Plato, the simulacrum is the copy of a copy. Its untruth is defined by "its distance from the original and by its exposure of the scandal that an imitation can in its turn function as a reality to be copied (and so on endlessly)" (Frow 181). In Americana the simulacrum throws into doubt the nature of real things. Appearance takes priority over substance because, as Brand says, "appearance is all that matters, man" (205). The graffiti in Quincy's bathroom, for instance, is framed, "set in a scripted typeface to look real" (4). David drinks in a bar that has a "movie-set atmosphere" (38), sleeps as a guest in a house that looks exactly like "the place where everyone's grandmother lives in television commercials" (115), and even eats in a "frontier-style" restaurant in New Mexico whose "main dining hall was a replica of the main dining hall at the famous Cattleman on
Forty-fifth Street in New York City" (348). Though he took the trip west in order to confront his true self, at the end of the novel, driving back to New York in a rented car, he feels as if it was literature I had been confronting these past days, the archetypes of dismal mystery, sons and daughters of the archetypes, images that could not be certain which of two confusions held less terror, their own or what their own might become if it ever faced the truth. (377) The telling symptom of Bell's sickness is his fear that he is disappearing, that at bottom, beneath the borrowed robes of movie and advertising images that constitute his identity, there is nothing, and further, that everyone around him, little by little, has disappeared. The seductive power of advertising images that promises a new self, of movie images that offer seductively clear, simple messages, shaping identity by shaping language as well as perceptions of human nature, history, the world itself. Bell's first instinct is to fight the illusion of the image with words, but he finds the same illusion in stories, in the deception inherent in narration itself, in the necessary structure of beginning, middle, and end, in causality. He finds the illusion, finally, in language, necessitated by this second double-bind created by the desire to live and speak honestly when all we have to live by and to speak with are words that, in addition to the pitfalls of manipulation, lies, and deliberate abuse, are inherently untrustworthy
because they are mere representations, dependent upon a stable referent. The simulacrum offers deliverance from this burden of existence, a deliverance possible only in a world of complete representation, in which words refer not to an external referent but only to themselves, but such a world makes no allowance for the "truth beneath the symbols," no allowance for personal self-identity, for a distinction between the fictional and the real.

Like Americana, Great Jones Street (1973) is ultimately concerned with the nature of real things. It explores the animate, inanimate, and the death-in-life of living things becoming objects. Among the animate are people and language; among the inanimate, products. In this novel about power, the most powerful force is the simulacrum.

Like David Bell, Bucky Wunderlick, the narrator of Great Jones Street, begins his story shortly after a turning point in a lucrative, successful career as a rock musician. Both Bell and Wunderlick follow a similar plunge from relative stasis into chaos and meaninglessness before finally lapping into silence. At the beginning of Great Jones Street DeLillo presents what seems like the endpoint of Bucky's withdrawal: the room on Jones Street, "a small crooked room, cold as a penny, looking out on warehouses, trucks and rubble" (5). But it is from here that Wunderlick's real withdrawal can begin, as he strips away
illusion, identity, and finally language itself, becoming
nearly as disembodied as he desires to be. "I'm tired of
my body. I want to be a dream, their dream. I want to flow
right through them" (231). Like his lifestyle,
Wunderlick's lyrics have drawn increasingly inward over
the span of his career, beginning as both a source and
channel of information, referring outward to a real
America, real institutions and a real war, but gradually
turning inward, his lyrics referring to himself, and then
to nothing at all, abstraction pushed to meaninglessness.
In Opel's words, Bucky ends up "making incredible amounts
of noise and communicating absolutely nothing" (88). The
final stage in this evolution is silence.

The lyrics to Bucky's first album, *Amerikan War*
*Sutra* (1968) refer to the "outside" world, particularly
the Vietnam war and American society.

Born in a hearse  
Left foot first  
Nursed on a hand-me-down nipple

Got a murder degree  
From I.T.T.  
Shot three holes in a cripple (97)

Typically, the audience is not only affected by but also
affects the music, helps to shape it. Language is an open
channel, flowing both ways. For example, playing before an
audience outraged by "this or that atrocity, at home or
abroad," Bucky plays with increased fury and outrage,
because "[w]e were the one group that people depended on to validate their emotions" (14). The songs in Sutra both reflect and direct the spirit of Bucky's audience. Bohack, the leader of the Happy Valley Farm Commune, claims his group is the very child of Bucky's music. "We're your group-image, Bucky," he says. "We were willing victims of your sound" (194).

From a first album that protests political and social conditions, Wunderlick moves in his second album to more self-referential lyrics. Two years after War Sutra came Diamond Stylus, an "evident move," writes Rolling Stone editor Anthony DeCurtis, "from political protest to a kind of aestheticism" (DeCurtis 133). The lyrics on this album are more abstract, refer less to the world and more to the self; the title cut, in fact, uses the delicate vinyl album as a metaphor for life:

It scratched out lines on my face
Test pressing time
It pained me so it pained me so
Drying out the vinyl

Sound is hard to child-bear
Skin inked to black
Turning into burning thing
Circling into wordtime (112)

Wunderlick's desire to strip away the rational meanings of language becomes more intense as he realizes the inherent falseness of language, a system of symbolic representation that of necessity mediates between us and the thing
itself. Through abstraction, he is trying to get beyond language to the truth behind words, to "that unimprintable level where all sound is silken and nothing erodes in the mad weather of language" (265). But his desire to communicate the truth keeps running up against words.

By the time of his last album, *Pee-pee-maw-maw* (1971), Bucky has minimized language to the point of meaninglessness. "Blank mumble blat/ Babble song babble song," begins the title cut. "The beast is loose/ Least is best" (118). No longer a social protest nor even a song of self, the lyrics in this album are an attempt to defeat language itself, to invite the audience to fill in its own blanks. "Make it all up," as Bucky tells the Running Dog reporter. "Make it up. Whatever you write will be true" (21). Bucky's quest for the least has led him to Opel's room on Great Jones Street, because the room was perfect for "testing the depths of silence. Or one's willingness to be silent. Or one's fear of this willingness" (25). But even silence is a message; even sitting still, demands are made. As the ABC anchor tells him, "The less you say, the more you are" (128). What Wunderlick learns from his withdrawal, as DeCurtis points out, is that it is finally impossible to withdraw (134). The small, crooked room, metaphor not only for the creative core of the artist but also for the inner man, the true self, is quickly invaded, first by Globke, who informs an astonished Bucky that
Transparanoia—the company Bucky created but over which he has no control—owns the building, then by Happy Valley, Watney, Azarian, Hanes, various media, and Dr. Pepper, twice in disguise.

When Bucky’s lyrics move inward, from producing information to producing only sound, the audience itself withdraws, creating a vacuum. "Rather than remaining a channel, he has become an end...No longer a source of messages, Wunderlick the performer becomes a product to be consumed, a commodity without use value, with only exchange value" (LeClair 95). When Bucky’s language becomes a thing, Bucky himself becomes a thing, "apprehending...myself as object" (52). Still, there are attractions, compensations, to being a thing. A telephone that's disconnected—a thing instead of an instrument—in time becomes "an intriguing piece of sculpture." When the phone descends "to total dumbness," Bucky notes, it "becomes beautiful" (31). Beautiful, too, is the deformed Micklewhite, who lives in the apartment below Bucky. When he sees the boy close-up for the first time, he is naturally repelled, but it occurs to him that it wasn't just "the fear of being peeled to this limp circumstance" that caused revulsion, but "maybe it was something else as well, the possibility that such a circumstance concludes in beauty" (162). Hanes, too, is one of several characters who strives to turn himself into an object, though his
"minimizing" is used to mask an inner deficiency. "I don't do anything...I'm just here—or there. People use me for whatever they want. It's a way of existing" (43).

But, as Hanes himself tells Bucky, "Things don't get better just because they get more simple" (43). When Opel chides him for being more interested in things than people, Bucky stops listening and allows her words to lapse into mere sound. "There was a consoling remoteness to sound now. It lapped across the room in wave-shaped bands, touching nothing. What was said existed on a plane behind the words themselves." But when Opel's words become merely sound, Opel in turn becomes "a lump in the bed" (61). This simplification, turning people into things, is the essence of control--it is a primary rationale behind military and prison uniformity of clothing and hairstyle, for example. It is also, as Ed Fenig points out, the essence of pornography, which also "makes people easy to manipulate. It puts people on the level of things" (223).

In Great Jones Street music, drugs, fear, and language are all used to soften the lines of identity, to cast doubt on the nature of real things, with the ultimate goal of making people easier to control. "Music is the final hypnotic," says Hanes. "I get taken beyond every reference that indicates who I am or how I behave. Just so out of it. Music is dangerous in so many ways. It's the most dangerous thing in the world" (45-6). When he's high,
the drug hashish seems to Bucky to be "a puppet drug of technology, made and marketed under government supervision, a contingency weapon devised by some hobbyist of the nastier industrial echelons" (138). The "ultimate drug" itself, repeatedly referred to as "the product," is described as "[s]omething U.S. Guv has been putting together to brainwash gooks or radicals" (58). The oldest, crudest, but most immediately effective form of control in the novel is fear. The writer Ed Fenig, describing the break-in staged by Bohack and carried out by Happy Valley's enforcement agency, the "dog-boys," believes that fear was "the biggest part of their operation. The idea of taking over a building. The idea of breaking and entering. The idea of domination" (163). The character Chess, who is undoubtedly Dr. Pepper in disguise (or Pepper is a disguise for Chess, or both are disguises for a third), explains to Bucky that "[i]rrationality can be managed to great effect. There's power and intimidation behind every event the dog-boys are made to stage" (253). But the ultimate method of control in this novel is language. Both business and the media thrive on rumor, counter-rumor, manipulation, and "you know, this ultra-morbid promotional activity. What's it all mean?" (22-3). The ultimate drug is ultimate because it takes away the mind's ability to form words, turning people into things. But an even more terrifying form of control is that which Bucky only
half-jokingly describes in Azarian: "His voice is not his voice. It belongs to a donor. What Azarian seems to be saying is really being said by another person's vocal chords" (22).

The central issue of the novel—and likewise a central issue in the concept of the simulacrum—is control. In bed after the break-in by the dog-boys, Bucky begins "to feel that the bed was having a dream and that the dream was me...It was all a question of control. I was being dreamed-smoked-created" (142). By who or what, he is not able to say. Just as the ultimate drug takes away words, so the simulacrum takes away self-identity—the self is created by something else: "The essential question," Bucky repeats, "was one of control. I went deeper now, struggling to produce a dream of my own" (143).

This question of control is made more complicated by the difference between appearance and reality, a distinction DeLillo plays with throughout the novel. As Watney points out, Bucky’s power is only the illusion of power. "You’re a bloody artist you are. Less than four ounces on the meat scale" (231). The break-in by the dog-boys is staged, not an act of theft but a warning to Bucky. Dr. Pepper, arguably the most powerful character in the novel, is a master of disguise: "He’s got disguises, he’s got surprises....The man’s a master of regional
accents, a master of total recall, a master of surreptitiousness" (168). At the end of the novel, when Bucky is about to be involuntarily injected with the drug that will destroy the part of his brain that controls language, Bucky guesses that Chess and Pepper are the same. Chess denies it with a relish that indicates Bucky is correct:

> Look, if I were Pepper...[y]ou’d have to revise everything that’s happened. It would mean that I managed not only Bohack but also Hanes and Watney. If I’m Pepper, it means everything’s been a lie up to now. I managed the whole thing....It would mean that you’ve been the victim of the paranoid man’s ultimate fear. Everything that takes place is taking place solely to mislead you. Your reality is managed by others. Logic is inside out. Events are delusions. (253-4)

Pepper is powerful not because he is able to disguise himself, but because he is able to disguise reality, to make "seem" the end of "be." Globke is powerful, though to a lesser extent, because he also appropriates reality: "In fact I’m leaking word about the mountain tapes starting today. Tomorrow I begin co-opting the rumors behind the reason for your comeback. You’ve got an incurable disease. One year to live. You want to spend it with your fans" (235).

In truth, Bucky does have an incurable disease, and it’s similar to David Bell’s in *Americana*: he is sickened not only by the distance between appearance and reality, but by the fact that it’s so hard to tell the difference.
What at first seems a jest or metaphor may actually be as close to the truth as he can come, when Bucky says that Azarian's face is reconstructed "with skin and bone taken from the faces of volunteers" (22); that his voice as well "belongs to a donor." Bucky's house in the mountains is merely "the facsimile of a house...the pictorial mode of a house." Globke is also a facsimile, as is Bucky himself; in fact, "Transparanoia markets facsimiles" (24).

The true terror of the simulacrum, however, is not that real things are being replaced by phantoms, but that, finally, there are no real things. "The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth--it is the truth which conceals that there is none," writes philosopher Jean Baudrillard. "The simulacrum is true" (Poster 46). When Watney and Bucky talk about California, for example, it seems as if Bucky is pointing out the difference between the image and reality:

[Watney:]"...No, missed California this trip. Good friends out there. Out there's different. I liked California. Not the same kind of edgy pace."
"They drink human blood," I said.
"But the weather," he said. "Fantastic streak of weather last time."
"They tear the entrails out of dogs and cats and offer them up as devotions to dead movie stars."
"The weather's the thing out there. I remember the weather."  (153)

But Bucky's counterpoint is, after all, just another image, neither more nor less true than Watney's. Watney's art--which consists, according to Bucky, of his ability
"to take a tiny stitch and rip it wide, blinking while the blood flowed, society's uncoiled parts left without their package" (154)--was, according to Watney, all an act, another illusion. "It was a good act all right. But it was all just an act, just a runaround, just a show" (155).

"People are getting to be all one thing," says Opel. "I used to have shadings. Now I'm all one thing" (87-8).

The image simulates and thus co-opts reality, until people, places, and finally life itself, like Hanes' vacation, becomes "Death-in-life. A string of make-believings" (210). When the media expose every facet of our lives, privacy is lost. But the media simultaneously offers images to cover every contingency, a way out, a way to cover up through conformity. "People want words and images," the ABC reporter tells Bucky. "They want images" (128). "America is out there," says Globke, "and it's full of people who are waiting to be told what to do" (144). The more our lives are exposed, the more greedily we grasp at and conform to the image. The result is what Bohack calls "mass man" (194); when everyone conforms to the image, the individual disappears. "Everybody's missing," laments a bag lady in chapter twenty-one. "Little by little, everybody's disappearing" (212).

Not only are people becoming all one thing, taking their identity from the images surrounding them, faces
"put together from a strip of silent film, frame by frame" and voices delivered like "monologues from a rocking chair" (170); not only are events staged, the government allowing the drug to be stolen because it is the most effective way to distribute it to the dissenters and radicals they wished to silence; but even the underground itself is not the antithesis it pretends to be. As the various underground factions in the novel begin to intersect, they "begin more and more to resemble flaky, sinister spin-offs on the dominant culture, rather than rebellious or subversive alternatives to it" (DeCurtis 136). Happy Valley, for example, presents itself as a city-based "Farm Commune" whose goal is to return "the idea of privacy to the idea of American life" (193). With the return to privacy comes the return to individuality and the end of mass control—the goal, they believe, of the government. But Happy Valley is more an imitation of than an antithesis to the government. Their methods of control include pale imitations of methods they accuse the government of using: fear, coercion, mass conformity, unfair division of labor and quality of life, "putting up walls." Thus, what DeLillo depicts in Great Jones Street, as DeCurtis notes, is "a society in which there are no meaningful alternatives, in which everyone and everything is bound in the cash nexus and the exchange of commodities, outside of which there stands nothing."
Everything is consumed, or consumes itself: murder or suicide, exploitation or self-destruction" (140).

It is a meaningful alternative that Bucky is searching for, holed up in a crooked room "cold as a penny." His evolution has brought him here. By the time the novel opens, Bucky has been deteriorating (or evolving) to the point where even words no longer "made no sense" (15). But language, like Great Jones Street itself, may not be in "a final squalor." It may be possible to see, even in its decline, "a kind of redemptive tenor, the suggestion of new forms about to evolve" (18).

The night of Opel's death, he tells her that he wants to go back out, return to the public. His problem is that he doesn't know what kind of sound--language--to make. He knows he doesn't want to "churn up" the same old dull horror, and he also knows he "can't go out there and sing pretty lyrics or striking lyrics" and he can't just do the same old thing only louder (88). If the essential question is one of control, the next logical question is, control of what? Is there something real beneath the illusion, behind the words? Opel believes she sees it in strawberries, the real thing: "They lived, the strawberries lived. I could look right into them. I understood what strawberries really are." The problem is that she can not "put it in words" (84), because words are only representations, symbols. They cannot hold life, they
can only point to it. And this, finally, is the reason for Bucky's silence.

David Bell says he wanted to be an artist, and "ended in silence and darkness, sitting still" (Americana 347). Bucky Wunderlick, whose identity is bound even more tightly to language than is David's, muses that the "artist sits still, finally, because the materials he deals with begin to shape his life, instead of being shaped" (126). Wunderlick ends, not in the self-imposed silence of the novel's beginning nor even the imposed silence of the drug, but, miraculously, with his ability to understand and form words returned to him, as if from the dead. The first thing he understands is the sound of capitalism, a man selling apples: "RED YAPPLES GREEN YAPPLES GOLDEN YAPPLES MAKE A YAPPLE PIE MAKE ALSO A YAPPLE STRUDEL YAPPLES YAPPLES YAPPLES" (259). It is, to Bucky, "a religious cry he produced," as is the cry of the rag man ("HAND FOOT ARM GOD NOSE TOE FACE GOD"), his rhetoric a kind of "accusation aimed at those too constricted in spirit to see the earth as a place for gods to grow" (262). No longer an experience of death-in-life, Bucky's coming out is more life-in-death, characterized by his ability to see the consecrated even in the common, the sacred inherent in everyday language, even in the act of naming items found on the sidewalk: "NEWSPAPER VOMIT SHIT GLASS CARDBOARD BOTTLE SHIT SPIT" (260). By the final
page, Bucky knows he will come back out, when the season is right. He doesn’t yet know what sound to make--this is a problem that occupies DeLillo through many future novels. But he knows he will return.
Chapter III

End Zone and Ratner's Star:
The Game of Language

The conflict in Great Jones Street centers between Bucky Wunderlick's desire to speak the truth and his sense of the inherent falseness of language that may convey that truth. A similar conflict divides Americana's David Bell, who tries to reconcile the simplistic, authoritative language of his father with the mad, playful, destructive communication of his mother. In DeLillo's second novel, End Zone (1972), this conflict takes the form of a game, dramatizing the inherent tension between rules and play, order and chaos, salvation and obliteration.

In Americana the conflict of the double-bind spread outward from Bell's specific family situation to society itself, so that, as Tom LeClair notes, "the system of family relations becomes the system of social and economic relations" (LeClair 45). In End Zone, this conflict exists in language itself, and therefore in the structure of our reality, since language stamps its own character on whatever it touches. From our position on the playing
field, in the middle of things, it is impossible to see everything at once, and so in order to know how to move, we make projections, mental images, and thus play life at one remove, like the quarterback Hobbs playing the "All-American Quarterback" game with twenty-two plastic football players on a tiny plastic gridiron (142). The human condition is likewise comparable to that of the nautiloids in Myna's science fiction novel, for whom everything is doubled: with two mechanisms for perception, the nautiloid "sees itself seeing what is outside it being seen by itself." This duplication "results in the making of words," which make the original disappear (169).

End Zone explores the relationship between the map and the territory, the war game and the war, the word and the thing itself. DeLillo's attempt to talk validly about the deceptions and illusions the mind employs in its attempt to comprehend, to organize the flux of experience, to cope with the silence, results in the difficult form the novel eventually takes. Traditionally a novel relies on similar deceptions to tell its story; to expose the deceptions of the mind, therefore, DeLillo removes or otherwise exposes some of the traditional deceptions of the novel, such as "life-like" characterization, simple cause-and-effect, and structural devices including transitions, clear beginnings and endings, even singular "point of view." The plot of End Zone is developed
chronologically, with no flashbacks and little background, and—like a football game—structured by two halves and a half-time show. While the content revolves around three related systems—football, nuclear war, and language—the novel is not so much an exploration of the metaphor of football as war ("Warfare is warfare. We don’t need substitutes because we’ve got the real thing" [164]) as it is an exploration of games in general, and the function of games in helping us play out our deepest fears, needs, and loves.

"Football," says head coach Emmett Creed, "is a complex of systems." Like warfare, like language, football is an interlocking of a number of systems. The individual. The small cluster he’s part of. The larger unit....Football is brutal only from a distance. In the middle of it there’s a calm, a tranquility....When the systems interlock, there’s a satisfaction to the game that can’t be duplicated. There’s a harmony. (199)

As Gary balances his fascination with death with his growing wonder at life, so he balances the precise harmony of his offensive unit with the chaos of its encounter with an equally harmonious defense. When he compares this clash to battle, the harmony of a military unit and the chaos of battle, he realizes an astonishing thing: both games imitate the game of language, perhaps the original battleground for the conflict between play and order, seem
and be, untellable and teliable.

The elemental meeting point—the lowest common denominator of football, nuclear war and language—is the fundamental conflict between order and play. Order and play are relative terms, rather than absolute—like light and dark, each is dependent on the other for definition and meaning. Rules are necessary for play; but play chafes against rules. Rules simplify, demarcate. "Whatever complexities, whatever dark politics of the human mind, the heart—these are noted only within the chalked borders of the playing field" (4). Not only do rules simplify, they are necessary to make the game satisfying. For example, before rules are established for the game Bang, you're dead, a massacre gives the participants only empty pleasure, so they "cooled things off and devised unwritten limits" to make the game more satisfying (32). Similarly, in an apparent effort to teach his players the necessity of rules, Coach Creed suggests a beer party with "no coaches, no females, and no time limit"—in short, no rules (99). Like a football game, the party features individual and team contests of strength and endurance: pissing contests, tag-team wrestling, mock bullfights, circle spitting, food stuffing and beer chugging, fist fights, mass vomiting, singing and comradeship. Yet it was, says Harkness, "the most disgusting, ridiculous and adolescent night I had ever spent" (99).
Rules seem to impose order on chaos. Indeed, Coach Creed, champion of rules, is "famous for creating order out of chaos" (10). The more complex the game, the more necessary rules become, but for an extremely complicated game, like nuclear war, new rules must be written:

Each side agrees to use clean bombs. And each side agrees to limit the amount of megatons he uses....There'd be all sorts of controls. You'd practically have a referee and a timekeeper. (81-82)

Theoretically these rules will limit the chaos and destruction, making nuclear war more manageable. But, as biology professor Alan Zapalac points out, all games present "a benign illusion, the illusion that order is possible" (112).

Also inherent in the notion of games is an antithesis to rules, which is play. The spirit of play is reflected in the language, in the noun play, which is a little simulation of reality, in freeplay, in playing around, playing up, playing down, playing off, or playing with as opposed to playing by the rules. This spirit of play is completely neutralized in second-stringer Ted Joost's idea of an electronically-controlled football game, in which players receive signals from satellites with a computerized data bank of plays, formations, and probabilities. Such a game is more an equation than a game; it is all rule, no play. The special satisfaction a
game provides is dependent upon the balance of rules and play.

The conflict between rules and play enacted in football, war, and language is never-ending, without resolution, a binary principle. The goal of rules is order, unity, simplicity, purity. For example, Coach Creed's deepest desire is to "get down to the bottom of it," to the simplicity and purity of the original Logos, the state from which he assumes deterioration and complication have issued (LeClair 66). The goal of play, on the other hand, is chaos, multiplicity, disruption. The spirit of play breaks out everywhere—even, for instance, from the utilitarian dictionary definitions Gary and Myna read to each other in the library, where their playfulness leads to a risky erotic exchange. Adherents of rules stick to a rigorous regimen of discipline and asceticism; proponents of play challenge rules, break with discipline and tradition, delight in excess.

While Gary Harkness oscillates between these two poles of rules and play, playing games even while searching for an end to them, at times accepting and at times rebelling against the logocentric values personified by Creed, DeLillo himself seems more fully conscious of how these two poles work, maintaining, as LeClair notes, a useful illustrative tension between them, understanding, as a writer, that every playful deconstruction is a
reinscription of the rules, that his text has a first and last page, and that he cannot stand outside language (68). Nevertheless he can play up the inventiveness of language, the symbolic nature of the exchange, while playing down the illusion. This attempt results in some of the difficulty of the novel, in the flatness of the characters, the self-consciousness of the dialogue, the deliberate attempts to disrupt the story. Instead, DeLillo de-emphasizes the "humanity" of the characters in order to emphasize their function in the novel: they have a "made-up nature," DeLillo has said in an interview, because they are "pieces of jargon. They engage in wars of jargon with each other" (LeClair 63). He deliberately disrupts the story in order to call attention to what the story is about—that is, the illusory nature of story-telling, of the "game" of language itself.

Not only do football, nuclear war, and language share the primary characteristic of games—that is, they all provide a scenario in which opposing forces work out conflict while bounded by a set of rules—but they also share the concept of end zones. Besides the literal end zone, football's metaphoric goal is oneness, the "sense of order" Creed speaks of, "even at the end of a running play with bodies strewn everywhere" (199). Order, dependent upon organization, control, and efficiency, always moves "toward perfection" (112). The literal end zone of nuclear
weapons is the blast area and the fallout zone, which yields "bonus-kills" (81), though the ultimate goal from a political perspective is to have such a balance of destructive capability that neither side will risk direct war. If one side does come out swinging, however, the military goal is all-out, unstoppable destruction. The inevitability of this end, once war has started, is dramatized in the war game Major Staley and Gary play. Starting from an arbitrary opening "move," one navy carrier strafed by two enemy MIGs, the game proceeds in a straight line, efficiently, economically, inevitably, in twelve steps, to "spasm response," or all-out destruction (225). This is the final "end zone" of nuclear war; the metaphorical goal is, in Major Staley's words, "omnipotent power." Nuclear warheads are not just bombs but a kind of god. As his power grows, our fear naturally increases....We begin to capitulate to the overwhelming presence. It's so powerful. It dwarfs us so much. We say let the god have his way. (80)

Similarly, language too, as a game, has its own end zones. The wide array of lies, rumors, put-ons, jargon, cliches, and abstractions represent a dead-end. In End Zone, honest communication has deteriorated to the point that the one time Gary says something honest and straight-forward about his feelings for his girlfriend Myna, she tells him, "don't fool around. You know the way
"Okay, I'm sorry."
"Did [the opposing players] hurt you baby?"
"They killed me." (149)

But the true end zone for language is "the untellable," the area between being and knowing. Billy Mast is taking a course in the untellable, but, of course, he can't describe it. "We've done a certain amount of delving. We plan to delve some more. That's about all I can tell you" (181). The untellable, the mystery and terror enclosed in "that space between what I know and what I am," as Billy says in Ratner's Star, or in that unspeakable space between an object and its representation--this is the true subject of both End Zone and Ratner's Star, as well as the true end zone of language and of self.

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In The Tractatus, Wittgenstein developed a "picture theory" of language which at its simplest stated that there is a logical correspondence between language and the world, a one-to-one link between word and thing, and therefore "the meaning of language is that to which it refers: the proposition and its referant have identical logical form and naming has primacy" (Messenger 305). Finding words to represent things in a perfect correspondence: this is what Gary tries to do in his walk through the desert, to "re-recite the alphabet. To make
elemental lists. To call something by its name and need no other sound... The sun. The desert. The sky. The silence..." (89). It is also what the narrator tries to do in re-creating the Centrex game in Part II, to make words into pictures, turning the reader into "spectator." The description of the game may be nothing more than "a game on paper... the book as television set" (111-12).

But then again, the narrator suggests, "maybe not" (112). One problem is that even words with one definition don't have a single meaning--there are connotations and denotations, contextual and linguistic relativity, not to mention the problems presented by abstraction, euphemism and cliche, so that language cannot present a single unambiguous picture. Furthermore, words can lose meaning. For example, when Gary was in high school, his father put a sign in his room:

WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH
THE TOUGH GET GOING

After looking at the sign three years, Gary says, he began to perceive a certain beauty in it... beauty flew from the words themselves, the letters, consonants swallowing vowels, aggression and tenderness, a semi-self-re-creation from line to line, word to word, letter to letter. All meaning faded... It was a sinister thing to discover at such an age, that words can escape their meanings. (17)

Moreover, trying to understand why Bobby Luke keeps saying the same thing over and over ("I'd go through a brick wall
for Coach Creed"), Gary speculates that maybe the words "were commissioned, as it were, by language itself" (54), as if words were independent of human thought, existing on an altogether different plane—a language existing above the corruption: a language of angels. Billy Mast, memorizing a long Rilke Elegy in German for his course in the Untellable, actually finds more comfort in the words when he doesn’t know what they mean (142). In matters of love, loyalty, war and death, the "old words" are "true words," capable of reassurance, comfort, consolation. Men follow such words to their death "because other men before them had done the same, and perhaps it was easier to die than admit that words could lose their meaning" (54).

If it is true that words "lose meaning," what was their true meaning before they lost it? And how do words lose meaning? The most prominent reason for this loss in End Zone is the abuse of the language—cliche, euphemism, and abstraction, for example—that cause words to splinter and finally dissolve into pure sound.

One way clichéd words and phrases rob meaning, besides the dulling effect of overuse, is through unsuitable use. For example, Tim Flanders describes his grandfather as a "man of destiny" who was, unfortunately, burned beyond recognition in an industrial accident. When Gary asks if that was his destiny, Tim replies, "Of course not....He never attained it, Gary. It was the accident
that prevented him from attaining it" (57). Cliches are not meant to communicate specifically; in fact, their very meaninglessness makes them safe to use, and thus, Gary notes, "[m]ost lives are guided by cliches" (69). They soothe and console, and so hide their true menace.

Not surprisingly, most of the cliches in End Zone appear in the section on Norgene Azamanian's and Tom Clark's funerals; perhaps death is "the best soil for the cliche" because death is what we try to hide the most. Obligingly, the cliche empties meaning, reducing speech to "units of sound" (54). "Everyone commented on how good the corpse looked," Gary notices; this becomes "the theme of the wake" (70). Euphemism works the same way, hiding or diminishing true meaning by substituting words that wield less emotional power, or possess honorific rather than negative connotations, as in the military euphemism "bonus kills," meaning "deaths by nuclear fallout" (81), or as in ex-bible student Ray Toon's reference to God as "the man upstairs" (97).

As words become more abstract, meaning diffuses. Thus, even words originally intended to describe horror and death can, when detached from meaning, become beautiful. Military abstractions, words and phrases like "thermal hurricane, overkill, circular error probability, post-attack environment, stark deterrence, dose-rate contours, kill-ratio, spasm war," give Gary pleasure. This
pleasure is derived not solely from his fascination with mass death, but also from the beauty of the words themselves, which provide a "thrill almost sensual" (21). Like jargon, abstraction can be used to hide meaning, to hide culpability. Football teams are ordered to "neutralize the defense," to "inflate the injury potential" of the quarterback (27). Used in this way, language becomes a means to evade rather than to describe or create reality. But, as Gary tells Major Staley, our words "don't explain, they don't clarify, they don't express. They're painkillers. Everything becomes abstract," in part at least, because "there's no way to express thirty million dead" (85). Both imagination and language, which constrains it, fail to conjure up that much horror and death.

To dramatize the difference between abstract and concrete, to illustrate the dangerous blinding effect of abstraction, DeLillo has Gary recall Major Staley's description of a nuclear blast while wandering the desert naming the elements of his environment:

"The rate is six per thousand per one hundred R. That's twenty-four hundred lethal genetic events per four hundred thousand people exposed to one hundred roentgens. Hiroshima supports this formula."

The sun. The desert. The sky. The silence. The flat stones. The insects. The wind and the clouds. The moon. The stars. The west and east. The song, the color, the smell of the earth. (87)
Another problem with language is that to get to meaning "we have to get through all the barriers," as Zapalac says of science. Some of the barriers in science apply equally to language: multiple definitions, "cross-references nobody's even begun to put in any coherent form," "terminologies which are untranslatable," "duplications," and "inconsistencies" (92). Another barrier is relativity, which haunts both science and language. Linguistic relativity creates confusion (and often humor) when a word is understood in a different sense than intended, as when, at Gary's suggestion that he and Anatole "change the subject" of their conversation, Anatole replies, "Also the predicate and the object" (47). Anatole's frequent comparison questions illustrate another difficulty with relativity: "Who in your opinion was the greater man?" he demands of Gary, "Edward Gibbon or Archimedes?" (15). But without established criteria on which to base an evaluation, such a question is impossible to answer because it's relative.

Finally, in addition to abuse, deception, and inherent barriers to single meaning in language, there seems to be as well a force in language itself--a disruptive, playful force, like a dust devil in the desert, wreaking havoc on rules, order, and meaning. For example, Gary discovers the playful eroticism of words
when he and Myna read dictionary definitions to each other.

Then we selected certain words to read aloud. We read them slowly, syllable by syllable, taking turns...perhaps starting with a middle syllable, and finally reading the word as word, overpronouncing slightly, noses to the page as if in search of protomorphic spoor. Some of the words put Myna into a state of mild delirium; she thought their beauty almost excessive....The words were ways of touching and made us want to speak with hands. (216-17)

Walking through the desert, Gary has a similar sense of the playful, of the limitless variety of language when, searching for one thing that was singular, that "could be defined in one sense only, something not probable or variable, a thing unalterably itself," he finds a low mound of "simple shit, nothing more" (88). It seems at first the single thing he'd been searching for, but immediately it fragments into categories of synonyms and near synonyms: functions, purposes, and images proliferate in his mind, defecation, feces, dung, excrement, offal, "shit everywhere, shit in life cycle, shit as earth as food as shit...shit's infinite treachery, everywhere this whisper of inexistence" (89). It is unavoidable that the "verbal magic" that makes poetry out of shit can also emotionally neutralize mass killing through the use of phrases like thermal hurricanes, dose-rate contours, kill-ratio, fission-yield.
Logocentrism, a term coined by Jacques Derrida, is a philosophical system that attempts to find a way out of this swamp of confusion and uncertainty in language. Logocentrism is a set of assumptions based on a "metaphysics of presence," a prejudice toward terms of "presence" in logical oppositions: positive before negative, simple before complex, pure before impure. "Absence" is conceived not as a co-determinant with presence, not as a necessary half of a binary system, but as a later complication or "fall." According to Derrida, the logocentric seeks "to decipher...a truth or origin which escapes play," to find the original word, the single, true meaning. When philosophy is thus oriented "toward an order of meaning--thought, truth, reason, logic, the Word--conceived of existing in itself, as foundation," the philosophical enterprise becomes the "returning strategically in idealization, to an origin or to a priority seen as simple, intact, normal, pure, standard, self-identical, in order then to conceive of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident" (Culler 92-3).

The logocentric ideal is dramatized in the simple, disciplined, single-minded values of football, exemplified in coaches and players alike. Football players travel "the straightest of lines," (4); they do not "drag-ass," but "move swiftly from place to place, both on the field and
in the corridors of buildings" (11). They cultivate the simple life (5), striving for a singleness that imitates religious asceticism: "[s]implicity, repetition, solitude, starkness, discipline upon discipline" (30). Yet singleness of mind is not exclusive to football players; indeed, it is identified as a "distinctly modern characteristic" shared by systems planners, management consultants, and nuclear strategists (49). The path of simplicity and single-mindedness leads to "oneness," a concept highly valued in the logocentric systems of football and the military. Simplicity is the ally of reason; the simplicity of winter, its "sense of brevity, one color, much of winter's purity and silence," Gary feels, gives reason a better chance "to prevail" (47). Gary's father, an ex-football player himself, follows "the simplest, most pioneer of rhythms--the eternal work cycle, the blood-hunt for bear and deer, the mellow rocking of chairs" because beyond these "honest latitudes lay nothing but chaos" (17). And yet, DeLillo seems to be saying, when confusion is pared down, categorized, pigeonholed into opposites and affinities, life itself is reduced, distorted.

The primary voice for logocentrism in _End Zone_ is head coach Emmett Creed. Gary (and others) resort to metaphor when describing Creed: he is "a landlocked Ahab who paced and raged, who was unfolding his life toward a
single moment" (54); or again, he is "part Satan, part Saint Francis" (236). He lives in a small, sparsely-furnished room off the isometrics area, no windows, the only decoration a "black-and-white plate of a girl praying in a medieval cell," (198), Saint Teresa of Avila (who, ever mindful of her own end zone, ate from "a human skull" [202]). For Creed's fanatical single-mindedness and his dedication to the pure, Gary likens him to a god, seeing in Creed's isolation, in his position in the tower "studying overall patterns" (9), and in his ability to create "order out of chaos" (10) glimpses of the god-like attributes of mystery, omniscience and omnipotence. Creed, says Gary, was "the maker of plays, the name-giver. We were his chalk-scrawls" (135).

The goal of most sports is perfect control, and football is "the one sport guided by language, by the word signal": in short, by a perfect language that is singular, efficient, unambiguous (112). The goal of all logocentric thinking is control. "Our inner life is falling apart," says Creed. "We're losing control of things. We need more self-sacrifice, more discipline. Our inner life is crumbling. We need to renounce everything that turns us from knowledge of ourselves" (200). The Sioux, Creed reminds Gary, "purified themselves by fasting and solitude." This self-control, he says, is "the only way to
attain moral perfection" (201). This new, logocentric asceticism mistakenly takes the form of the old without taking also the spirit, which is the spirit of play, that gives meaning to the form.

The new asceticism calls for a new way of thinking, and thus a new way of speaking: speak straight to think straight (186). Anatole Bloomberg tries to speak "in complete sentences at least ninety-five percent of the time. Subject, predicate, object. It's a way of escaping the smelly undisciplined past" (186). The military, after all, relies on "simple declarative sentences" (230). Anatole insightfully declares that austerity is our true mode: "After all, the ultimate genius of modern weapons, from the purely theoretical standpoint, is that they destroy the unborn much more effectively than they destroy the living" (215). While the goal of this austere way of speaking and thinking is control--"harvest the seas, colonize the planets, control every aspect of weather" (78)--the inevitable end of total control is total destruction. The war game Major Staley engages Harkness in near the end of the novel starts with a minor incident, but escalates quickly, surely, with single-minded efficiency, to the final goal: all-out, computer-locked, "spasm response" nuclear war. All or nothing, total control or total destruction--all rules and no play leads always to this End Zone. Thus, the chief error of
logocentric thinking is that it fails to recognize the necessary balance between rules and play.

As Wittgenstein himself came to realize, his early formulation of the picture theory of language ultimately fails to recognize that language is circular rather than linear, that meaning doesn't come from one-to-one correspondence but, in Derrida's terms, from a

play of differences [that] involves syntheses and referrals that prevent there from being at any moment or in any way a simple element that is present in and of itself and refers only to itself. Whether in written or in spoken discourse, no element can function as a sign without relating to another element which itself is not simply present. (Derrida 26)

Creed's deepest desire is "the knowledge of ourselves," a full presence of the self to itself, the logocentric ideal of a return to the simple, the pure. But this idea is impossible because of the nature of language: "There is no presence or first cause or word to find; even if there were, the circular system of language could not simply name it. Creed is called the 'name-giver,' but in fact he can only combine, recombine, and recontextualize names already given" (LeClair 66).

The logocentric ideal, when pursued in language, leads to an emptying of meaning. The high value assigned to simplicity and singularity makes deception and manipulation necessary in order to avoid contradiction. For example, at the accident site where Norgene died,
state troopers investigating the accident made their reports, not by looking at the accident, but by copying from each other.

One trooper stood writing, another at his shoulder writing what the first one wrote. They checked each other out until it was apparent that they had reached an accord. It was a safeguard against errors and stray facts. There couldn't possibly be a mistake if they all had the same information. (72)

This deception is the direct result of the high value placed on the "official version." Similarly, the football team captains get together before the big game to decide what they'll say after, when they're called on to say something from the heart. "'Kimbrough's over in the other bus saying the exact same thing,'" Dennis Smee says, "'We worked it out at breakfast, word for word. That's our function as co-captains. To work for the good of the team'" (149). Zapalac, in his typically self-mocking way, confesses a fear that government agents will come calling at three in the morning to convince him to stop telling stories that question the official story (160). Because of the very nature of language, there can be no true stories, only "official stories." Any system of ideas that insists on the value of the absolute and the possibility of finding what is "present in and of itself," says Derrida, will be "self-contradictory, a rhetoric protecting or asserting power and authority, rather than a consistent system" (LeClair 66-7).
Logocentric ideals are dramatized everywhere in this novel, not only in the games of football, war, science, and language, but also in identity, in love, even in father-son relationships, particularly in the typical father's attempt to play out his dream in the life of his son, refusing to see difference, to allow individual growth. Lloyd Philpot, a defensive end, falls from exhaustion during practice. "We left him there in the end zone, on his stomach, one leg twitching slightly. His father had won all-conference honors at Baylor for three straight years" (11). Gary's own father played football at Michigan State. "He had ambitions on my behalf," Gary says, "and more or less at my expense" (17). Major Staley's father was "a war hero, one of the crew on the Nagasaki mission" (71). The logocentric goal in father-son relationships is to create and control an extension of the self, the same goal of the military and of all dictatorial governments. Logocentric thinking, then, motivated by the apparent corruption and meaninglessness of words—and, by extension, in the world—seeks to rise above the corruption to the pure, the single, the true. It seeks an end to play. But such a direction leads to manipulation and deception; it upsets the necessary balance, and, in its most terrifying aspect, it leads quickly to complete annihilation. To impose order and control on a system of balanced opposites necessitates annihilation; and that is
why no matter what the beginning scenario of Major Staley's war game, the end is always the same.

At bottom, words do not simply stand for real things in a one-to-one correspondence but rather create meaning through a play of differences; they do not reflect but create reality. For example, Gary prepares for a football game by telling himself words--how badly he'll play, how humiliated he'll feel--and his body responds with the adrenaline he needs to play well (128). One of the other players derives comfort from naming objects that bring comfort, even in the middle of a brutal game. "'Bed,' Jerry Fallon said. 'Pillow, sheet, blanket, mattress'" (123). There seems to be a special power of creation in proper names, in contrast to mere words. Talking about a fellow-player named Nix, Jimmy Fife says, "I'll tell you what he really is. He's a nihilist. He himself says so. I've had conversations with the guy. He blames it on his name. Nix meaning no, no thanks, nothing" (203). The first thing Creed changes when he gets to Logos College is the name of the team, from the "Cactus Wrens" to the "Screaming Eagles" (10). In the war game, as well, Major Staley changes the names of the participating countries, from USSR to COMRUS and from USA to AMAC, "just to make them a little less appealing or distasteful to our emotions" so as not to depend upon "preconceptions" (220). Clearly, names shape one's personal conception of reality.
Calling people names helps football player Number 77 to hit with extreme prejudice—even at the bottom of the pile, he’s still talking: "Nigger kike faggot. Kike fag. Nigger fag. Nigger kike faggot" (119).

Not only is external reality structured through words, but so is the internal reality of self-identity. Anatole Bloomberg understands that to "unjew" himself he must begin by speaking differently, by taking out "the urbanisms. The question marks. All that folk wisdom. The melodies in your speech. The inverted sentences. You use a completely different set of words and phrases" (46). When Gary asks if he’ll also change his name, he replies that’s not necessary, because "I’ve already reached the points where my name connotes nothing more to me than the designation EK-seventeen might connote" (187). Though names give "autobiographical projections," though they often carry an entire ethnic heritage, a history, even, according to Anatole, a smell, he no longer has to "live up to" his name (187). And yet all of this baggage, this appearance of reality attached to a name, is not an inherent but rather a human construct. "A name’s a name," says Taft Robinson. "A place could just as easily be another place" (241). The responsibility of being human, Gary muses, may be to get beyond the name, to imagine someone truly, to empathize, in order to more fully exist. Indeed, before Assistant Coach Tom Clark’s suicide, he
seemed to Gary "no more than a face, a hat, a certain way of talking" (72). But after, Gary wonders if maybe Tom Clark's "life depended on what my mind could make of him, existence turning on a wheel, numerical, nonbuddhist, the notes comforting the notebook, numbers covering the words used to cover silence" (73). Words don't reflect reality so much as they create it, by covering the silence, diverting one's attention for a moment, like a magician, to facilitate the sleight of hand. Raymond Toon's sportscasting is thus a metaphor for how language works: the radio sportscaster watches the totality of the play, overall patterns as well as individual efforts, the mood and the spirit, the fans, the weather--and this he or she condenses into a brief description:

"There it goes, end over end, a high spiral.
The deep man avoids or evades would be better.
Down he goes, woof...Now they come out in a flood left to work against a rotating zone." (138)

The words in turn create a reality in the mind of the listener, who is actively recreating the game from the words. The clearest danger comes from wrong words: "Toony," Gary says, "that's not a flood" (138). But a less apparent danger is that reality re-created from re-created reality is off by two, at two removes, necessarily distorted. Public relations plays the same kind of game with words and reality, actively seeking to manipulate people's perception--and reality--through words. After
Gary smokes marijuana and walks out of a football game, PR
man Wally Pippich tells him, "I'd like to see what I can
do with it. Temperamental star. Psychosis attack. Loss of
Memory. Give me something to go on" (177). All
communication presents this barrier, this space between
words and reality, but mass communication seems to be more
dangerous because it affects a larger audience, it shapes
in stronger ways. Even news casts reduce and distort, as
shown in the way news cliches have shaped the football
players' understanding of plane crashes when Mrs. Tom's
plane goes down:

"She was in a light plane going to some
conference. It overshot the runway. She's on
the critical list."
"They had to rush her to the hospital."
"I wonder if it was raining," Flanders
said. "Usually they overshoot in bad weather....
I wonder if she was burned beyond recognition....
That usually happens in that kind of crash." (182)

A second metaphor for the relationship between
language and reality is the nautiloid, the
extraterrestrial creature in Myna's science fiction novel.
The nautiloid's problem is that within its brain are two
"mechanisms" so that it perceives two landscapes. Like a
fully self-conscious individual, it "sees itself seeing
what is outside it being seen by itself." This duplication
results in the making of words.

Each likeness is a word rather than a
thing. When the word is imprinted on the thing's
original mechanism, the likeness that was the
word's picture instantaneously disappears. The
thing's brain keeps on producing likenesses and then delivering words into its own circuitry. The thing perceives everything into itself. It duplicates perceptions and then reduplicates results...It keeps making likenesses to make words. The words have no meaning. They're just fragments of cosmic language. (169-70)

While logocentrism relies on rules and reduction in its quest for the pure, the spirit of play attempts to recapture mystery and awe. For DeLillo, this mystery is related to the innocence of childhood, demonstrated in the compulsion to "probe everywhere for magic" (185). Capturing it involves relearning the distinction between the tellable and untellable, retraining perception to be able to see "[b]eyond the window...[t]o that other world, unsyllabed, snow lifted in the wind, swirling up, massing within the lightless white day, falling toward the sky" (189). To recapture awe requires that we "unbox the lexicon for all eyes to see"--to reveal in language language's own depth and complexity, its deceptions, its own game; to reveal what words hide, and finally, to reveal the silence that language covers. This, says the narrator, is his "permanent duty" (113). To unbox the lexicon means to write with the recognition that language carries everything with it, both sides, rules and play; ordered regularity balanced with and dependent on the play of presence and absence for meaning. But this playful element in language is resisted; it is seen as the enemy of the "superrational mind" because it leads to awe, and
it forces confrontation with "the unreal, the paradoxical, the ironic, the satanic" (215). The playful element is hated most, DeLillo implies, because it reveals language's primary function, to "cover silence" (73).

"Of all the aspects of exile," Gary says, "silence pleased me least" (30). This silence goes deeper than aural silence; difficult, menacing, threatening, this is the silence beyond the senses, beneath language. Fear of this silence is the primary motivation for simulation: as the nautiloid wiped out the original by making likenesses, so Gary derives protection from death by simulating death--"Never mere injury; always death" (32). In the game Bang, you're dead, the hand simulates a gun while the voice imitates the sound of gunfire; though it seemed "all very silly," the game "possessed gradations, dark joys, a resonance echoing from the most perplexing of dreams" (32). Like all good simulation games, it can be simultaneously a guide to and an evasion of reality. For example, when the Centrex game is over, Hobbs, bruised and bloody, slumps on a bench and plays his simulation game, both to become a better player in the "real" game, as well as for the pleasure of the illusion of control the game provides. Plus, he doesn't get hit as hard.

But in the larger simulation game, the creation of self and of reality, it's easy--in fact, it seems imperative--to forget the nature of the game. Among other
reasons, we play simulation games--like literary fiction--to better know reality. We imagine it through the game, we make a fiction, but belief in that fiction is necessary for it to do its job--to empower us to move. We must forget the nature of the game. Creed's identity is both shaped by and revealed in the black and white plate of Saint Teresa praying in her cell, back in (what is perceived as) the time of purity, when neither saints nor demons disguised themselves, when words meant one thing and reflected a real world. But Taft Robinson, who doesn't have anything on his walls (not even a poster of Wittgenstein), seems to have achieved the deeper contentment, a more profound unity. Of the two parts to Wittgenstein's work, Gary muses, it is the unwritten, the untellable, that perhaps "Taft was a student of" (233). Indeed, in Taft's room, Gary is able to perceive varieties of silence, small pauses in corners, rectangular planes of stillness, the insides of desks and closets (where shoes curl in the dust), the spaces between things, the endless silence of surfaces, time swallowed by methodically silent clocks, whispering air and the speechlessness of sentient beings, all these broken codes contained in the surrounding calm, the vastness beyond the window, sunblaze, a clash of metals no louder than heat on flesh. (191-92)

Taft corroborates that he is a student of silence, that he strives "to create degrees of silence" (239). It becomes, for him "a spiritual exercise" (240). Courage in the face of fear, an ear for silence, the steady balance of
tensions illustrated even in Taft's two clocks, correcting each other, so that "[b]etween them, a balance is arrived at, a notion of how much space has to be reconstructed" (238-9): these are the things Taft teaches Gary in the end; this is the motivation behind Gary's final fast. Though it is possible to see this fast as an act of loyalty to Creed, who had recommended the Sioux ritual, Gary is more likely following Taft in preparing himself for a vision, a glimpse at the world-as-it-is—not the shadows we see here but, in the words of Sioux philosopher Black Elk, "the real world that is behind this one" (Neihardt 71).

In End Zone, Gary's fascination with mass death is linked with Creed's vision of unity: annihilation is the inevitable end point of logocentric control. The quest for oneness, for the absolute, leads to self-destruction, as Bucky Wunderlick discovers in Great Jones Street. After the close scrutiny of language in his first three novels, DeLillo turns his attention, in Ratner's Star, to mathematics. In contrast to words, numbers seem to be precise and unambiguous, free from corruption and deterioration, inherently honest. And yet mathematics communicates; like language, it possesses a sense of direction, holds forth the promise of meaning. It is this expectation of sense that drives the plot of Ratner's
Star, in which a group of scientists work to decode a binary number code believed to have originated from a distant star. Faith in the meaning of numbers prompts fourteen year old genius Billy Twillig to go to a scientific community called Field Experiment Number One to try to crack the code and thus decipher the message.

Once he begins work, this same expectation of sense bolsters Billy’s impression that the answer is just around the corner; the code seems too suggestive to "lead nowhere." Though frustration of this expectation caused Billy’s predecessor, the great scientist Endor, to give up and retreat into a hole, even when Billy starts to feel stuck, he feels certain that help will come from somewhere, perhaps a note slipped under his door or a message scrawled on his computer screen (260).

Some of the scientists in Ratner’s Star seem to view nature, the universe, even reality itself, as a kind of code, and far-reaching theories such as Darwin’s theory of evolution seem to be keys to parts of this code. A computer programmer named Goldfloss is particularly anxious that Billy solve the star code because he believes it is the key to the Ratnerian language and thus "to every piece of knowledge they possess." Once Billy breaks the code, "[w]e’ll know everything they know. In that sense the star is our future" (101).
The novel's own sense of direction is tied in to the reader's expectation of sense, the search for a key, to break the novel's code, to make sense, to give the message. The reader's search develops simultaneously with Billy's search, so that Billy's experiences--lessons learned and confusion endured--become the reader's as well; in truth, it is Billy's search, and not the eventual solution, that contain the power and meaning of the novel. In addition to scrutinizing language, in *Ratner's Star* DeLillo also examines science and mathematics, exposing assumptions and discovering in the roots of mathematical thought a contact line between concrete and abstract, science and mysticism, something and its shadow.

DeLillo's critique of language in *Ratner's Star* centers on language's uncertainty, in the way euphemism, cliche, and abstraction empty out meaning and cast doubt on the true nature of things. Characters often seem indifferent to what words mean, as when Ratner's physician, asked his area of specialization, replies, "Everything" (212), or when the chauffeur, Ottum, refers to the Cadillac as "The Rolls-Royce of automobiles" (14). One of the oddest characters, Elux Troxl (not his name, he insists, but the name of his name), combines parts of idioms with not-quite-right cliches in English, near English, and Spanish to form an abstract and elusive language that seems suggestive of, but which finally
escapes meaning. "We admit to a lust for abstraction," Troxl says. "The cartel has an undrinkable greed for the abstract" (146). Troxl describes the work of his cartel in purely abstract terms:

"We acquire air space. We make motion studies in and out. We lease and sublease multi kinds of time--makeshift, standby, conceptual et al forth. Then we either buy, sell, retain or incite revolution, all totally nonprofitless, done merely to flux the curve our way." (147)

Indeed, the money curve is more attractive to Troxl than money itself because it is more abstract than money; real money, says Troxl "is germed and clumsy of usage....The curve, however, is pure" (149).

Yet language seems to have hidden power in Ratner's Star: though it tends to be ambiguous, imprecise, and subject to abuses that empty meaning, words still have enough power to strike fear in many of the characters. Logophobia, in fact, is a common ailment at Field Experiment Number One. What is the true nature of words, and what exactly is the power they possess?

First of all, letters have a meaning and a power of their own. They are even more powerful in combination. "If you know the right combination of letters," Ratner tells Billy, "you can make anything. This is the secret power of the alphabet. Meaningless sounds, abstract symbols, they have the power of creation" (222). Words also possess meaning in and of themselves, though they too are shaped
by context, dependent on context for specific meaning. While the beauty of the meta-language Logicon may be "the nearly surreal cleanness of its ideography: nothing unnecessary, nothing concealed" (359), the beauty of ordinary language is at least partly its extravagance, its surfeits and feints, as the writer Jean Venable discovers in musing on the Latin word *pupilla*, which has

the roundabout charm of meaning 'little orphan girl' while it refers to the pupil of the eye, a connection based on the fact that when a child looks at her own miniature reflection in another person's eye, she sees a female figure locked inside concentric rings, a lone doll in a coiled room, a little orphan girl. (399)

If, for DeLillo, words have two natures, the common (corruptable, fragmented) and the sacred, (mysterious, powerful), then the sacred nature is brought out most clearly in the act of naming. To bear a name is "both terrible and necessary"—terrible because one can never escape, "never more than delay in meeting one's substitute, that alphabetic shadow abstracted from its physical source" (19). Because of the "secret power" of names, secret things—sex, death, and insanity, for instance—are referred to by nicknames and slang; while dieties, totemic animals and plants, and sacred objects often have no speakable name. "Know the names of things," Endor advises Billy, "names and numbers give us power over the world" (195). Acknowledging that power even as he
tries to deny it, Billy fears the secret connection between the names given to parts of his body and to the corresponding parts of a chair; he fears the sympathetic magic of names:

He was fairly sure nothing would happen to him if his arms touched the arms of the chair but what worried him slightly was the fact that the arms of the chair were called "arms" and that his arms were also called "arms" and it was just barely possible that this business of self-touching applied not only to parts of the body but to parts of the body and parts of other objects that happened to have the same names. (59)

This sacred, magical power of names empowers the name-giver. Ratner tells Billy that the first man was a "golem"--a soulless thing--until he gave names to things (227). Siba Isten-Esru tells Billy that names contain one's destiny; thus, the knowledge of one's name brings the responsibility to fulfill that destiny (155). Jean Venable believes names "serve as a subscript to the inner person, a primitive index of the soul" (396). At the procession of laureates in the Great Hole, Billy begins to fear that "he could not occur when his name was called," that the "calling of his name might pre-empt him. The name itself might assimilate his specific presence" (229). And this is precisely why the most sacred things remain nameless: to give a name is to make specific, to impose a limit, to represent and thus to falsify; nothing with a name can be pure. When Mutuka gets to the "most sacred part" of his sacred narrative, he stresses that it "must
be free of naming...The narrative must be pure" (106). And Ratner's final words to Billy, in what could be mistaken for the emotional climax of the novel, give the true name of the universe as "the name of G-dash-d. All of us. Everything. Here, there, everywhere. Time and space. The whole universe. It all adds up to the true name of G-dash-d" (230).

The dual nature of words is partly responsible for the logophobia Billy and several other characters experience. Logophobia, commonly defined as the unreasonable fear of words and the effect of words, could perhaps be described more accurately as an intuition of the true power of words.

While it is not clear if Billy is a mathematician because he fears words, he does know that although there are "a lot of crazy things in the world...mathematics is the one thing where there's nothing to be afraid of or stupid about or think it's a big mystery" (67). He recalls the "sweet clean shock of number theory," the precise pleasure of numbers that were "[n]ever more nor less than what was meant" (26). For Billy at the beginning of the novel, mathematics is completely separate from mystery. "There's no mystery. When you talk about difficulty, that's one thing, the difficulty of simple arithmetic. But mystery, forget about, because that's another subject" (23). Numbers attain the ultimate order: only numbers are
"absolute reality" (258).

Numbers can be considered superior to words for several reasons. As symbols, numbers communicate more precise information. Furthermore, numbers exist "as themselves, abstractly" (86), while words cannot be separated from their use, and this makes them more relative and more easily manipulable. Numbers are superior to words because they are more reliable, more orderly, more strictly repeatable. Five plus five equals ten every time, in every context. In comparison, words seem flighty, unstable, dependent. Mathematics is described as "the universal language" (163); because mathematical ideas "consistently outlive the civilizations that give rise to them" (8), numbers seem to get closer to the real than words. Finally, unlike language, mathematics seems independent of human perception. "Mathematics is the one language we might conceivably have in common with other forms of intelligent life in the universe," one scientist believes, because "there is no reality more independent of our perception and more true to itself than mathematical reality" (48). "Mathematics," says the narrator, "is what the world is when we subtract our own perceptions" (432). Billy Twillig is attracted to mathematics for exactly those characteristics that distinguish it from language: for its severity, its strict adherence to a consistent inner code, for
the arch-reality of pure mathematics, its austere disposition, its links to simplicity and permanence; the formal balances it maintains, inevitability adjacent to surprise, exactitude to generality; the endless disdain of mathematics for what is slack in the character of its practitioners and what is trivial and needlessly repetitive in their work; its precision as a language; its claim to necessary conclusions; its pursuit of connective patterns and significant form; the manifold freedom it offers in the very strictures it persistently upholds.

Mathematics made sense. (13)

Because words seem to be vague and indeterminate, while numbers seem an absolute reality, turning from words to numbers is equivalent to turning from darkness, superstition, and magic to truth, reason, and light. This is presented to Billy as a natural process of growing up, getting smart, seeing things as they are. At The Center for The Refinement of Ideational Structures, he learns the acronym k.b.i.s.f.b., for "keep believing it, shit for brains," which is used to indicate a foolish or superstitious belief. Thinking about the phrase "giant crane," for instance, Billy first pictures a "stick-legged silent bird with giant wings that closed over the heads of small sleeping people" before admonishing himself, "Keep believing it, shit for brains" (18). When Myriad Kyriakos tells Billy that Pascal's hexagram is mystic, Billy thinks, "Keep believing it" (258). Nevertheless, Ratner's Star is, in part, a critique of scientific and mathematical thought, particularly arithmacentrism.
Similar to logocentrism, arithmacentrism is more than simply a prejudice toward numbers as opposed to words, but the belief that numbers are the origin, the foundation, the only absolute reality. DeLillo accomplishes his critique by exploring the history of mathematics and highlighting its roots in mystical inquiry. As a result of Billy's relationship with Ratner and Endor, two famous scientists who now freely acknowledge the mystical, Billy's thinking begins to change. In fact, near the end of the novel, when his mentor Robert Softly tells him his depression is medical, the result of "aggravated sunlessness," Billy tells him to "keep believing it" (369). And finally, the phrase is used to disparage not a superstition but a rational belief, as when Softly tells himself that the unscheduled eclipse would not take place, and then whispers "Keep believing it, shit-for-brains" (436).

Arithmacentrism and logocentrism share several interesting similarities: for example, Edna Lown enjoys searching out and destroying inconsistencies and exceptions to rules. "I like rules, regulations, formats," she says (285). Lester Bolin likes uniformity, suggesting the members of the logicon project wear uniforms (298). While the goal of the Logicon project is to develop a universal logical language, a "ruthlessly precise system of symbolic notation" free of contradiction and even the
"slightest intuitive content" (272), the goal of the entire Field Experiment is to get everyone "to behave as a single people" with "goals and pursuits that can unite us" (274).

Furthermore, both logocentrism and arithmacentrism lead to reduction. The more reductive the meta-language Logicon, the greater "the technical possibilities" (316). But the real reason for arithmacentric reductionism is humorously portrayed when Billy, straddling Ratner's acrylic tank and listening to his words about science and mystery, is asked to repeat Ratner's words to the assembled Nobel laureates. When Ratner tells Billy about the creation of the universe, he mixes science and mysticism indiscriminately, beginning not at the point of the explosion, the traditional starting point for science, but before the explosion, when "the en-sof contracted to make room":

The creator, also known as G-dash-d, then made the point of pure energy that became the universe....As a scientist my preference is definitely little bang. As a whole man I believe in the contraction of the en-sof to make room for the point. (217)

But Billy reports only the science: "He votes for little bang. The noise was muffled." Ratner eventually confronts Billy, accusing him of giving only one side of the story. "Don't think I can't hear that you're reporting only science, leaving out the mystical content, which they
could use a little exposure to, those laureates with their half a million Swedish kronor" (220). Still, afraid of and confused by the mystical, Billy reduces his report to only what he knows, science. In its attempt to get to the real, arithmacentric reasoning makes finer and finer distinctions, more precise symbols, at times by covering up or ignoring what doesn’t fit the pattern.

As the end zone of numbers is the ultimate abstraction of infinity, so the end zone of science is uncertainty. The response to this uncertainty is the same as the response to silence in End Zone: simulation. Ratner’s "tank" is the end zone of medicine: the simulation of death, which kills death itself. Billy presents roses to the "small figure of Ratner, pillowed in deep white" inside a coffin-shape tank. Ratner’s "ancient face was glazed like artificial fruit," while his "arms were crossed on his chest, baby fists curled" (216). By mixing characteristics of life and death, such a simulation undercuts the reality of death, fractures the power and meaning of death, though at the cost of fracturing as well the power and meaning of life.

Though numbers may seem to be an independent reality, not subject to perception or the uncertainty that affects language, numbers have, in fact, two natures: they exist as themselves, abstractly, but they are also compared by the narrator to "a fiction whose limits were determined by
one's perspective" (3). The ancients, Endor tells Billy, believed that "number is the essence of all things," both scientific and mystical (195). "The emanations of the en-sof are numbers. The ten sefirot are numerical operations that determine the course of the universe" (223). While whole numbers have a kind of "divinity," nothing corresponds in "the terror of the irrational." Always "something eludes. Screech and claw of the inexpressible" (22). This indicates a level deeper than that of pure number, deeper than the over-arching symmetry of a number system. Billy's sudden grasp of this level beneath symmetry enables him to solve the code--the first half of the mystery. What seemed to be 14, 28, 57 in decimal notation becomes 52,137 in sexagesimal, or notation by sixty (239).

If numbers, too, are relative, and depend upon context for meaning, then numbers can help to define the mystery, but they cannot dispel it. Science keeps reaching for perfection, for the end zone of knowledge. It builds models, simulations, a computer universe, to aid in looking further, closer. Though the current model is presented as truth, tiny cracks are starting to show:

There is the problem of absolute velocity. There is the suspicion of matter crossing over to us from elsewhere. There is the lack of cause and effect in the behaviour of elementary particles. Certain basic components of our physical system defy precise measurement and definition. Are we
dealing with physics or astrophysics? (49)

Just as Billy, apparently peering through a microscope at a giant molecule but actually looking at Desilu Espy's knees, is accused of having the "wrong" eye open, so Ratner contends that most scientists are using the wrong eye. From a background in secular humanism, and a belief that science in the hands of enlightened men could do the work of God, Ratner now believes in "the secret power of the alphabet, the unnamable name, the literal contraction of the superdivinity...[and] sperm demons" (215).

Mathematics, Endor tells Billy, is "the only avant-garde remaining in the whole province of art. It's pure art, lad. Art and science. Art, science and language" (85).

Science, Endor goes on, actually means the opposite of what most believe it to mean. Scientists "don't extend the senses to probe microbe and universe. We deny the senses. We deny the evidence of our senses. A lifetime of such denial is what sends people into larva-eating rages" (87). For evidence he gives the example of the sun moving across the sky, which science has taught us is an illusion: it is really the earth that moves. DeLillo's use of history shows that rather than arriving at final truths, science is "crosshatched with lines of additive and corrective thought. Truth accumulates. It can be borrowed and paid back. We correct our predecessors, an
effete form of assassination" (193). To dramatize the
game, some of the characters at Field Experiment Number
One display arithmacentric thinking, while others, such as
the Aborigine, the Name Lady, LoQuadro, Endor and Ratner
present to Billy arguments that balance arithmacentrism,
so that the novel itself becomes a crosshatched search for
truth. LoQuadro points out that although near the
seventeenth century it was believed the work of science
would be nearly complete, "just a matter of time before
all knowledge was integrated and made available, all the
inmost secrets pried open," the work of science, in fact,
has never seemed further from "being done"; moreover, it
is now seriously doubted whether it ever could be done,
whether we will ever have definitive answers to anything:
"the thing continues to expand. It grows and grows. It
curls into itself and bends back and then thrusts outward
in a new direction. It refuses to be contained" (65).
Arithmacentrism in science denies the inner secret,
removes the awe, reverence, and mystery from life itself.
Thinking about the scientific explanation he has been
given for the creation and birth of children, Billy muses,
"Did I really come from him and her or is it all some kind
of story they tell to kids? Ovulation, intercourse,
fertilization, pregnancy, labor, delivery. It can`t be
that simple. There must be more they aren`t telling us. A
circling bird, a dream, a number whispered in the night"
Science and mathematics, though serious disciplines entrusted with the job of mapping and describing reality, have in fact much in common with games. Science tries to answer what the universe looks like and how it behaves. But these are absolutes, and we can't see enough of the universe to say. So scientists make and test models, simulations. "What we need at this stage of our perceptual development," the astral engineer Nyquist tells Billy, "is an overarching symmetry. Something that constitutes what appears to be—even if it isn't—a totally harmonious picture of the world system. Our naivety, if nothing else, demands it" (49). In the game of science, "a little make-believe" is sometimes necessary, as Mohole makes believe there are holes in the bottom of his hole, so that the universe is open rather than closed (182). Mohole plays science well, but still, he says, it took years to "beat them at their own game" (184); Endor also knows the game, and when he tells Billy that the whole history of mathematics is the history of "nothing happening," he adds that "everything is changed"—not the universe but our understanding of it. Of course the models are made up, they are fictions, but life itself would be "sheer dread without the verifiable fictions of mathematics" (195) because such fictions give comfort, convince us of order, purpose, and harmony in the universe, because they help us
to make sense of and to move in the world.

"In mathematics," Jean Venable asks Billy, "don't you try to build a sense of direction into ideas like space, time and motion? Make it a game, isn't that it, with specific rules that govern every operation" (326). When she has grown enough as a person to understand fiction for the first time, she decides that she wants to write a novel. The game that she will play is based on the same system as mathematics.

I plan to make strict rules that I plan to follow. Reading my book will be a game with specific rules that have to be learned. I'm free to make whatever rules I want as long as there's an inner firmness and cohesion, right? Just like mathematics, excuse the comparison. (352) Yet the comparison needn't be excused. For both demand strict adherence to the rules, the inner cohesion, the formal balance, "inevitability adjacent to surprise, exactitude next to generality," both are in "pursuit of connective patterns and significant form" (13). And finally, at the heart of both mathematics and art is a secret nature, a "secret memory of death" (394). This is why the earliest artists descended to the most remote parts of caves to paint on the most inaccessible walls, as if the intricate journey and isolated site are representative of this secret heart, because "all fiction," including mathematics, "takes place at the end of this process of crawl, scratch, and gasp" (394).
While Jean Venable ponders this secret, Billy becomes aware of a space between "himself and his idea of himself" (361). Like Gary Harkness in *End Zone*, Billy defines this space as a silence.

There is a life inside this life. A filling of gaps. There is something between the spaces. I am different from this. I am not just this but more. There is something else that belongs to the rest of me. I don’t know what to call it or how to reach it. But it’s there.... There is something in the space between what I know and what I am and what fills this space is what I know there are no words for. (370)

The exploration of this silence is the goal of a certain class of fiction writers, the class Jean Venable aspires to, writing her novel on blank pages--but numbered, so that she doesn’t lose her place. It isn’t necessary, she knows, to write down the words. She doesn’t want her work read.

To express what is expressible isn’t why you write if you’re in this class of writers. To be understood is faintly embarrassing.... Once they know, you’re finished. If you’re in this class, what you have to do is either not publish or make absolutely sure your work leaves readers strewn along the margins. (410-11)

Just as an essential element in games is the binary principle of rules and play, so the organization of the universe of Ratner’s Star seems to be based on a similar dyadic principle in which an element complements its opposite. "Everything in the universe works on the theory
of opposites," Ratner tells Billy. "Remember, all things are present in all other things. Each in its opposite" (219). Because Billy himself gives only one side of the story to the listening laureates, Ratner tells him to go "into your own bottom parts....Here you find the contradictions joined and harmonized" (222). This dyadic principle is prevalent in the novel, in the armillary sphere and its shadow that "could be one shape and only one" (59), in the Field Experiment building itself and the Great Hole on which it's built, the "temple cave" (204), featuring remnants of ancient architecture spotlighted with fluorescent lighting. But even deeper than the Great Hole is the antrum, where Billy goes with Softly to work on Logicon. The most "satisfying" aspect of Field Experiment Number One, for Softly, is that it comes in two parts: the cycloid above ground, while a second cycloid "is the first in reverse, completely below ground level. Same shape upside down. Same distance down as up." Nothing "official" goes on down there, Softly says, but "it fulfills the concept" (282).

This dyadic concept is present not only in man-made-objects but also in nature. Wu tells Billy that, depending on the hemisphere, bats fly out of caves in leftward-tending spirals or rightward-tending spirals, so "we see that bilateral symmetry is preserved" (323). Bilateral symmetry, that is, the "exact correspondence of
form and constituent arrangement on opposite sides of a dividing line or plane" extends to individuals in the idea of the doppelganger, or double: someone or something on the other side of an imaginary median line with corresponding parts and "into which [one] might theoretically flow" (300). Bilateral symmetry in history is preserved by latent history: "Latent in any period's estimation of itself as an age of reason is the specific history of the insane. Diametrically opposed entities...partaking of each other's flesh" (387).

The dyadic principle seems to intensify in outer space, becoming even more apparent than on earth. Ratner's Star itself is discovered to be part of a two-star system, a binary-star (93). Later it is believed to be "a main sequence star and its sister star is a black hole" (101). Celeste Dessau tells Billy that for every black hole there's a white hole. "All matter lost in black holes must inevitably reappear through white holes either in another part of the universe or in an alternate universe." Billy decides that in a "dumb kind of way" the idea makes sense (114). There is also the odd correspondance between outer space and inner, the fact that "relative to their respective diameters, the average distance between two stars is roughly the same as the average distance between atomic particles in interstellar space. Is this mere 'coincidence'? From the Medieval Latin. To happen
together. Something and its shadow" (50).

This same dyadic principle is featured in the novel's own model of the universe, the boomerang shape Billy comes to name a "stellated twilligon" (181), two triangles sharing an invisible base. The triangles each represent one part of the symmetry; together they form a single entity. Olin Nyquist, the astral engineer, suggests to Billy that early man used animal shapes or parts of animals' bodies—"a whale's tail perhaps"—to explain the design of the universe (49). Maurice Wu's thesis, that beyond a certain point man becomes more advanced the deeper scientists dig into history, can be represented graphically by the boomerang shape, indicating that time as well as space may possess bilateral symmetry (321-22). And finally, the binary code itself, believed to have originated from Ratner's Star in the recent past, is eventually discovered to have originated from the earth in the distant past, beamed into space to bounce off Ratner's star and return, to warn the present inhabitants of the impending eclipse. This, too, can be represented graphically and suggested metaphorically by the boomerang.

There are at least two possible conclusions to draw from the dyadic principle that seems to be the underlying structure of time and space: that it's really there, or that it just seems to be there. For the primary senses are paired, as is the brain itself. Generally speaking, the
left hemisphere of the brain controls sequence, order, logic, numbers; while the right controls creativity, harmony, words. Eye movements are "coordinated in terms of conjugate function--a paired mechanism supplying the single vision....Which is the object, which the image? They are paired one-to-one" (264). It's possible, DeLillo seems to suggest, that we see the dyad everywhere because everywhere we see ourselves. Billy's commitment to mathematics is traced back to his belief in numbers as a way to make the world "comprehensible, a plane of equations, all knowledge able to be welded, all nature controllable." This is a powerful motivation, but the value of Billy's work, he knows, is "simply what it revealed about the nature of his intellect. What was at stake, in effect, was his own principle of intelligence or individual consciousness; his identity, in short" (117).

Because it is the "natural tendency" of Billy's work to provide a model of his own mind, he is puzzled by his inability to understand "what made his mathematics happen" (238). But it is the nature of perception (and creation) to hide its own devices, and inconsistency is hardest to prove in a system consistently inconsistent. While the task of science is to "try to find the pictorial link between the universe and our own senses of perception" (49), history reveals that knowledge of the universe is merely knowledge of the perceiver. "Knowledge," Dyne
summarizes. "Study the planet. Observe the solar system. Listen to the universe. Know thyself" (21).

Once knowledge is seen as inward-bending, chained to a perception that is by nature dual, at times contradictory, the game of science becomes more apparent. "Not what something really is," Softly thinks, "but how we think of it. Our struggle to apprehend it. Our need to unify and explain it. Our attempt to peel back experience and reveal the meaning beneath" (327). In a sense, true knowledge stops when a child first learns perspective, the moment Edna Lown calls "the shattering of [a single] perspective" (331). From that moment, perception becomes an act of creation, though it hides its own workings. For example, unable to observe the kills of cannibal bats because of their quickness and his own delayed reaction, Wu is nevertheless able to "re-record events (or fit them together) as the discarded parts of a number of roosting bats hit the floor of the cave" (390). But if knowledge does not necessarily reflect objective reality, what is its value? In Ratner's Star, DeLillo suggests that the ultimate reason for man's search for knowledge, his explorations of inner and outer space, the stars, the shape and behaviour of the universe, may be to find comfort in the face of terrifying vastness. Maurice Wu studies China's history and language, not for knowledge or even self-identity, but because "he wanted from that
microscopic China in his mind...some affirmation of the fact that he was not alone" (356).

If there is a dyadic principle at work in our own biology, in nature, in history, in the universe, then it follows that the contact line between the two sides will prove to be the most fruitful area of inquiry. The struggle to live life honestly may be the struggle to join the two spheres. "There are two distinct parts to your name," Siba Isten-Esru tells Billy, "Twi--two. Lig--to bind, as in 'ligate' and 'ligature.' Is it your destiny then to bind together two distinct entities? To join the unjoinable?" (155). It is at the contact line of nature and mathematical thought where "things make sense, things accede to our view of them, things return to us a propagating wave of reason" (431).

In Ratner's Star, as in Americana, the greatest threat to balance, to this search for knowledge and the struggle for honesty, is the simulacrum. In Baudrillard's conception, simulations are of three orders. First-order simulacra involve the counterfeit of an original, as in Mohole's aerosol cans of artificial fragrances like "cheese and crackers," "wood-burning fire," or "Yvonne, Yvonne" (188), in the simulated female companionship he promises for Billy (198), or again in the photographs of heads, tusks and horns that have replaced the real in the Zoolog director's office (54). Second-order simulation,
that of the pure series, of serial production like xerox copies or molded plastic chess pieces, does not come into play in Ratner's Star. Although this order, like the first, challenges the "natural" order, this second phase tends to be ephemeral because it is "a rather poor imaginary solution to the problem of mastering the world" (Poster 138). That task is left to third-order simulacra, the "simulation proper, the end result of a long historical process of simulation in which simulation models come to constitute the world, and overtake and finally 'devour' representation" (Kellner 79). The simulation programs that create a "computer universe" at Field Experiment Number One are an example of third-order simulation (48-49). These models become more powerful than (and so "devour") representation because the models are more precise and orderly than what they represent.

Mathematics, as a precise model, has no content:

Form, it's nothing but form. It stands on thin air. The symbols we use are everything. What they represent we discard without the slightest misgiving. The focus of our thought, the object of our examination, our analysis, our passion if you will, is the notation itself. (286)

Elux Trox1, before he became interested in the money curve, headed a fund-raising organization that (anonymously, of course) fire-bombed zoos and animal hospitals in order to get people to contribute funds to
rebuild the hospitals. This is the logic of third order simulacra: divorced from the logic of reason, facts no longer have any "trajectory of their own, they arise at the intersection of all models" (Poster 175).

One of DeLillo's metaphors for the simulacrum is the extended fantasy of the vegetoid growing in the sink in Billy's home in the Bronx. It was his mother Faye's theory that the vegetoid threatened something even deeper than their lives, that it would completely absorb them.

This became Faye's theme. Absorption by the shapeless mass. Total assimilation. They would be incorporated, transformed and metabolized. They would become functions of the inner liquid maintenance of the vegetoid. More extreme than death, this was de-occurrence, the most radical of cancellations. (131-2)

This is the true danger that threatens the scientists at Field Experiment Number One—not the international tensions Softly makes up to get his team into the antrum, nor the unscheduled eclipse that disrupts their system, but the system itself, the model that takes precedence over the real, including the metalanguage that empties meaning by purging all statements that do not consistently refer only to themselves (308). In the spirit of play, the eclipse sweeps across the world, casting its shadow on the poverty and pain, the religious ceremonies, the children's games, the model universe of the scientists at Field Experiment Number One, busy in their pursuit of the
asolute. Thus the novel ends on the brink, graphically portrayed in the novel's coda by the tableau of Billy Twilig, half-illuminated and half-obscured by the shadowbands preceding solar eclipse, standing poised between enlightenment and ignorance on the brink of Endor's hole.
Chapter IV

Players and Running Dog:

The Game of Identity

DeLillo’s first four novels have each been concerned with the relationships among language, reality and self. Players (1977) and Running Dog (1978), DeLillo’s fifth and sixth novels, continue this investigation through the metaphor of the "double life" of the terrorist and secret agent. For the average person, this "double life" consists of a persona, or outer mask, and identity, the inner life, what the characters think of as their true selves. But both persona and identity are themselves contrasted with something even deeper, something only glimpsed during times of trauma or crisis, something intuited, and intuitively repelled, something at the heart of each character which resists representation, either in words or images. This, for DeLillo, is the true self: not an entity but a void, not a construct but a negation, a formless space beneath the roles, routines, and disguises.
The characters in Players are depicted as the ultimate consumers: not only do they surround themselves with objects, but they make objects of themselves and others. They consume as a way of gaining an identity, as a way of being. In the end, they consume entire lifestyles. This obsessive consumption widens the gap between their inner and outer selves. In Players, not only do government and business networks exhibit "clandestine mentalities," not only do terrorists and spies lead a double life, but so too do Lyle the stockbroker, Jack the drifter, and Pammy the writer. The central subject of the novel, the double life of the terrorist and spy, is also the central metaphor to express the complex, secret relationships among self, identity, and persona.

Players features Lyle and Pammy Wynant, a Manhattan couple most noticeable for their typicality. Lyle is a Wall Street stockbroker, while Pammy works for a firm called the "Grief Management Council" (18). Their small compulsions--Lyle's TV channel switching, Pammy's fruit purchases--at first seem as common and "aimless" as their evenings: "They chattered and made sounds a while longer and got up and walked and stretched and ate-and-drunk a little and bumped each other and gestured" (57). But then, something happens: a man is fatally shot on the floor of the Exchange, and the story of Pammy and Lyle appears to diverge. With little perceptible motivation, Lyle begins
to pursue an elusive secretary, Rosemary Moore. Blindly, he goes through his seduction routine while she plays her part; actually she is seducing him into the terrorist group of Marina Vilar. Pammy, meanwhile, vacations in Maine with her friend Ethan and his lover Jack Laws. While Lyle agrees to work with the terrorists, Pammy seduces Jack. The novel ends with Jack's suicide on a trash dump in Maine, while Lyle performs the same act, abstractly, in a motel room somewhere in Canada.

"Just as the wolf-child becomes a wolf by living among them," writes Baudrillard, "so we are ourselves becoming functional objects" (Poster 29). In the society portrayed in Players, characters establish their persona, the face they wear in the world, through the acquisition and display of objects. Elements of the persona—one's occupation, appearance, and sexuality, for example—are seen as "operational variables," commodities which can be packaged and advertised for greatest value. Indeed, in Players, the characters' personas often merge with the objects around them. Lyle realizes he is "present in things" (49), and when Pammy moves through the apartment taking off clothes, Lyle sees them as "pieces of her everywhere" (33). He sees the acquisition of products and services is an "inward-tending" pleasure, an "accumulation of self" (75). Like other commodities, from perfume to automobiles, personas attain varying prestige, signifying
the social position and status of their consumers, or "players." Like other commodities, personas have an exchange value: Lyle trades his stockbroker persona for one as a terrorist. Whenever terrorist A. J. Kinnear needs to "drop out of sight" for awhile, he simply buys a new persona, complete with personal history and official I.D. Then, in front of a mirror, he practices looking different. "He stretches his mouth. It’s gotten so he does it an awful lot lately...He wants to do his chin next," Rosemary tells Lyle (195). The bomb-maker Luis has also developed "a manner. A dozen ways. He’s very quick, he slips away" (185). According to his partner Marina, he "likes to make up a character as he goes along" (185). His persona is thus "a strategy," similar to his habit of addressing Lyle in the third person, as if in recognition of their respective masks (186). Personas operate in the same system as other products, as signs in a coded system of signs. For example, to advertise his sexual and cultural identity, Ethan stitches together an elaborate "semi-Edwardian" persona through a coordinated "repertoire of ruined flourishes" and "extravagantly shabby clothing" (19).

In contrast to the outer mask of the persona, identity is the inner life, what the characters think of as their true selves. If the persona is formed in response to external demands, identity is believed to be "the real
thing," a product of the characters' own thoughts, emotions, and desires. But in *Players* and *Running Dog* everything, including identity, is consumable. Identity is formed primarily by media images and a corresponding system of organized consumption: what the characters think of as coming from themselves—their own needs and desires—are actually manipulated by external forces; what they think of as "free choices" are actually socially controlled. As a result, a gap appears between identity and self, an absence of roots, or what Ethan calls "the solid footing." He tells Jack and Pammy about certain cultural icons, a "Pete Smith Specialty," for example, or "Pull my Daisy," of which they are unaware, though their "whole own attitude comes from some of these things, which were the basis, the solid rock" (141).

Complementing these external influences on identity is an internal urge to shrink from pain or danger through repression and self-deception. The characters repress guilt and discontent; they make moral and physical imperatives abstract in order to deny them. For example, Pammy denies her concern for Jack by making an abstract list of all the reasons she feels concern; she imitates the simulated emotions presented on TV in order not to feel her own. Abstraction creates distance, and makes clear lines indistinct. For example, Lyle reduces Rosemary to "flesh," to "overample thighs, the contact chill of her
body," because he finds in this abstraction a "detachment from common bonds" (91). Similarly, he makes his own body abstract, finding satisfaction in the androgeny of his "[h]airless chest and limbs" and his "[m]iddling implement of sex," for the "formal apartness" it creates, the "distance he'd perfected" (196).

Lyle makes his emotions abstract as well, using cliched images such as "grieved suitor" to distance himself from the disappointment he feels with Rosemary (86). In players, emotions are organized and commodified by services such as Grief Management, a company which "anticipated that people would one day crave the means to codify their emotions" (18). Pammy's brochure, "It Ends For Him On The Day He Dies--But You Have To Face Tomorrow"--costs a dollar (62-3). Pammy's own emotions lose authenticity as she codifies the emotions of her clients. She has abridged grief for so long that when it comes time to deal with her own, all she can offer are the cliches from her own direct-mail piece: "the only thing is time. That's the only thing that can alleviate. Time is change. After a period of time it won't be so bad" (202).

As they distance themselves from anything genuine or authentic in themselves, the characters also distance themselves from their environment. Though television portrays life at one remove already, Lyle makes it even more abstract by switching the channel compulsively,
looking not for content but for "fresh image burns" (16). For Lyle, television prevents response, isolating and seducing him into a world of simulation, in which channel switching allows him to control an infinitely variable arcade of sights, sounds, and sensations.

He explored content to a point. The tactile-visual delight of switching channels took precedence, however, transforming even random moments of content into pleasing territorial abstractions. (16)

What does catch his attention, occasionally, is pornography--an abstract performance of sexuality. It's the "amateur hour" that piques his interest: this simulation of the "real thing" retains his attention completely "even as it continue[s] to dull his senses." He wonders if he's become "too complex to look at naked bodies, as such, and be stirred" (17).

Preoccupation with one's complexity becomes a shared theme. Lyle wonders if he's too complex to "enjoy a decent meal in attractive surroundings" (14); watching a woman on TV speak ungrammatically about her dead children, Pammy wonders if she's "become too complex to put death before grammar" (58). But this is the point of such complexity: thinking about grammar, one doesn't feel death. Similarly, this complexity allows her to evade responsibility for her emotions. Realizing that the "nutritive material" for her sex life is provided by others, "whoever happened to be present at a party or other gathering," she wonders if
she's become "too complex to care whether the others [are] gay or straight" (70-71). Indeed, to avoid feeling concern for Jack after her seduction, she makes a list of reasons for concern and then wonders if she's become "too complex to be concerned about someone without listing possible reasons" (169).

Lyle, the narrator tells us, sometimes carries teleprinter slips around with him. He sees in the numbers and symbols "an artful reduction of the external world to printed output, the machine's coded model of exactitude." He uses this abstract reduction "to return to him an impression of reality disconnected from the resonance of his own senses." The numbers are not only symbols of property, but "property in its own right, tucked away, his particular share (once removed) of the animal breathing in the night" (70). Even in "normal forms," money is abstract, a representation of an arbitrary standard of value. Moreover, it is a representation of ideas—for Lyle, a "compression of his worth" and also "spiritual indemnity against some future loss" (110). Walking near the financial district, Lyle envisions all the people inside the granite cubes of office buildings, sorting money of various types,

...dizzying billions being propelled through machines, computer-scanned and coded, filed, cleared, wrapped and trucked, all in a high-speed din....He'd seen the encoding rooms, the microfilming of checks, money moving, shrinking
as it moved, beginning to elude visualization, to pass from a paper existence to electronic sequences, its meaning increasingly harder to name. (110)

What remains at the end is the process itself, the "deathless presence" of charged waves and particles (110); these symbols and numbers make not only money abstract, but also the self—they become a way to achieve immortality. They are the capitalist's hope for "continuing on through rotting flesh, their closest taste of immortality. Not the bulk of all that money. The system itself, the current" (107).

The characters reveal a high level of abstraction in their language, in mannerisms such as talking in the third person: "'Do I like cantaloupe, he asked'" (33). "'You are well informed, he exclaimed. Where is the check, they inquired'" (62). Lyle and Pammy talk in foreign accents, they laugh in "Portuguese" and "Dutch" (35). Ethan rarely talks to Jack, but addresses him "by talking about the furniture, movies, the weather. That, plus third person. He [says] things to Pammy that [are] meant for Jack" (138). Lyle studies comedy records, "getting the routine down pat, the phrasing, the dialects," in order to imitate the entire routine as a substitute for conversation. In fact, Lyle has substituted fake talk for real conversation so often that when real talk is called for, all he can do is make "gulping sounds." Perhaps for the deeper truth it
represents, he expands the sound, evolving "chokes and
gasps" until he begins "to drown or suffocate, making
convulsive attempts to breathe" (36).

In addition, the characters make their lives abstract
through obsessive routine, creating established procedures
for work, home, even vacations and lovemaking—as if in
routine they find a measure of protection. Jack complains
that their vacation is just another "bullshit routine"
(111), but routine can effectively deaden the senses,
preventing the self-awareness that these characters work
so hard to avoid. Because of its potential to disintegrate
roles and reveal the chaos within, sex is especially prone
to being reduced, transformed, or made abstract. Although
Pammy's seduction of Jack was to be "a serene event,
easefully pleasant sex between friends" (165), having
choreographed her seduction, Pammy is caught off-guard
when Jack's emotions unleash forces beyond their control,
intensifying the identity crisis that contributes to his
self-destruction. Likewise, to lessen his fear of
lovemaking, Lyle tries to diffuse its power through
abstract reduction: "It is time to 'perform,' he thought.
She would have to be 'satisfied.' He would have to
'service' her. They would make efforts to 'interact'"
(35).
More powerful than either abstraction or routine, repression is the most effective means for the characters to alienate themselves. They block out nagging discontent, close their eyes to pain, ferociously subdue unpleasant thoughts, ideas and feelings. The primary motivation for this alienation is fear. Pammy and Lyle fear vulnerability, emotional pain, and most of all, death. Indeed, one strand of Lyle's complex reaction to George Sedbauer's death is to seek comfort and a place to hide--first in an extramarital affair, and finally in the very terrorist network responsible for George's death. Pammy, on the other hand, reacts to Jack Laws' death by blocking out everything but objects, making herself an object in order to keep from feeling her own responsibility, regret, and fear. Though adept at repression, Pammy eventually loses control. Her discontent begins to insist on recognition: "She remembered what had been bothering her, this vague presence. Her life. She hated her life." She forces the feeling down by doggedly resuming her routine (32). Pammy tends to yawn when she is most afraid (5); she also professes to be bored often, though she knows this is "a shield for deeper feelings."

Things in the street, just things she saw and heard day to day, forced her into subtle evasions. Her body would automatically relax. To feel this slackening take place was to complete another weary detour. (51)

During her tap routine, when her instructor tells her to
use dance to become "accessible to [her]self," to get beyond her defenses in order to allow her "whole body" to become aware of the physical and moral universe, Pammy shuts her out by putting her hands over her ears (79). She does the same at the site of Jack's death, holding her breath as well as covering her ears, but still she can feel, under each hand, a "steady pressuring subroar, oceanic space, brain-deadened, her own coiled shell" (199).

This oceanic space, insensible to the processes of the brain, protected by the coiled shell of persona and identity, is Pammy's truest self; what she thinks of as her true self is something she assembles herself, "calling this very flesh out of the air" (10). But like Lyle she is vaguely aware of a still deeper, more secret life, an unspeakable space (27). Pammy discovers that relationships, like people, have a secret life:

A place was being hollowed out, an isolated site, and into it would go the shifting allegiances of the past week, the resentments surfacing daily, all the remarks tossed off, minor slights she couldn't seem to forget.... It occurred to her that this was the secret life of their involvement. (177)

This secret life generally remains hidden, however, because for these characters self-awareness is a dangerous thing. Even new places are dangerous, because the environment becomes "a mirror" flashing back images of the hidden self. New places, Ethan tells Pammy, allow "you to
see yourself minus all the familiar outward forms, the trappings and surroundings. If it's too new, it's frightening. You get too much feedback that's not predetermined" (139).

Sex and death (of others) are often feared because of their power to disintegrate the constructed identity and reveal the formless self within. Before her affair, Pammy had always thought of Jack as "Ethan's Jack," but now she wonders who he "really" is, and who she is. Something about sexual intercourse allows her to "break through," to feel free of the constraints that simultaneously define and hide her, free of "the tampering management of her own sense of fitness, of what agrees to observe reason." This freedom, however, "last[s] but seconds" (168). The affair has a more pronounced impact on Jack, revealing a profound identity crisis just below his surface. As he "comes apart," Pammy notices, his sentences "never quite" end (175). When she wants to have sex with him again, he pleads, "Where will I be?...Where will I be then?" (174-5). Confronting death can also produce this glimpse at the self. After seeing Jack's body, Pammy is reduced to "delirious monologue." Trying to tell Lyle what happened, she lapses into "accounts of recent dreams" (200). But such moments are too intense to be sustained, and language not only reveals but also re-covers: Lyle calms her by summarizing the event "in short declarative sentences."
This seemed to help, breaking the story into coherent segments" (200).

Obsessive abstraction, repression, and denial results in a kind of mass-deadening, Pammy's perception of people as robots, or Lyle's commuters skidding along "through constant sourceless noise, mouths slightly open, the fish of cities" (80). "There's nothing out there," he tells Pammy. "Everybody went away" (72). At first the terrorists in this novel seem to provide a strong contrast to this "modern-stupid" robot identity (43). Though Marina Vilar is physically "close to shapeless," her face has "precise lines...strongly bored" (98). She seems to believe in one thing "to the exclusion of everything else." Although Lyle doesn't know what this one thing is, he is certain "she'd imbued it with a particular kind of purity, a savage light" (98). The one thing her brother Rafael believes in is death: "You had to be prepared to kill him, or love him, or stay away. There was nothing else" (182). Though this angularity seems to contrast with Lyle and Pammy's cotton candy personalities, the terrorists in fact represent an extreme form of the persona, what Jung calls the "rigid persona"--as with politicians or ministers, for example, who cannot stop performing their roles (Storr 100). Indeed, the terrorists conform to an even more rigid code: they not only believe in one thing, but they also live one life, highly regulated and externally imposed.
The identity of the terrorist is in permanent "transience."

The characters in Players create personas for the same reason David Bell makes a movie of himself, or scientists build simulation models of the universe, or financiers turn money into symbols and blips: to help alleviate fear. A persona then becomes useful because the self is vulnerable to emotional pain, to terror, to invasion. When Pammy sees an exhibitionist looking at her while masturbating in his car, she feels humiliated then angry as she realizes he's made an offer she can't turn down: "To see the offer made was to accept, automatically." To Pammy, it feels as if he'd taken her into his car and "taught her his way of speaking, his beliefs and customs, the names of his mother and father." This done, he wouldn't need to physically violate her.

"They were part of each other now" (25). To be sure, Pammy is susceptible to all kinds of fear. To lessen her fear of the elevators in the World Trade Center, she thinks of them in the abstract, as "places." The lobbies are "spaces." She feels "abstract terms [are] called for in the face of such tyrannic grandeur" (24). Similarly, Lyle likes motels because they are "powerfully abstract. They seem the idea of something, still waiting to be expressed fully in concrete form" (209). Lyle imagines that "this vast system of nearly identical rooms, worldwide, has been
established so that people will have somewhere to be afraid on a regular basis" (210).

"Fear," says Ethan, "is intense self-awareness" (139). Fear makes us self-aware, and self-awareness makes us afraid: this is why images are so powerful, why Pammy cannot stop watching an "inept and boring" movie (204), and why its cheapness is "magnetic": because watching it she experiences "a near obliteration of self-awareness" (205). Watching a TV screen filled with "serial grief" obliterates her own, as representations devour the real. Pammy becomes "awash with emotion"--not her own, but the simulated emotion of the dying wife on TV, the mother of the catatonic son, the sister of the man in trouble with the mob. "Movies did that to people, awful or not" (205). Watching television is a way to empty out, to become "part of the imploding light." Not insignificantly, Lyle hates to turn off the TV. He feels "an immense depression" settle in when he switches off the set because he has "to resume" his own life (125).

In Players, identity is a product of external forces and the internal effort to empty oneself; it is a commodity with exchange value. The terrorists make it clear to Lyle that to them he is merely "a George," a person who can get them access to the floor of the exchange. Clearly, neither George Sembauer nor Lyle is motivated by money--what they want is the identity, the
secret life. In a "consumer society," in which commodity signs form the system of values, not only can one good or individual substitute for another, but even dialectically opposed institutions seem indistinguishable, even mirror images of each other. As in Great Jones Street, where the Happy Valley Farm Commune imitates the control techniques of "U.S. Guv," in Players, the CIA and the terrorists have identical methods of operation. "Things change and maybe it's advanced communications, I don't know," says Kinnear, "but today there's just one terrorist network and one police apparatus. Thing is, they sometimes overlap" (116). In fact, Kinnear implies, the government has the dirtiest secrets, which "goes a long way toward explaining why their techniques are so well developed" (134).

It's everywhere, isn't it? Mazes, you're correct. Intricate techniques. Our big problem in the past, as a nation, was that we didn't give our government credit for being the totally entangling force that it was. They were even more evil than we'd imagined. More evil and much more interesting. Assassination, blackmail, torture, enormous improbable intrigues. All these convolutions and relationships....Behind every stark fact we encounter layers of ambiguity.... This haze of conspiracies and multiple interpretations. So much for the great instructing vision of the federal government. (104)

Furthermore, the CIA and the terrorists speak the same language, particularly in their characteristic use of ambiguity, amphibiology, and "disinformation." For example, when Rosemary vaguely suggests that Lyle meet the terrorists, his use of words like "clearly" and
"certainly" highlights the contrast between language use and what it's meant to convey:

"There may be some people you can meet."
"Of course, I know."
"I was wondering," she said. "The car?"
"Sure, I remember, clearly."
"That picks me up from work sometimes."
"Absolutely, who else but them?"
"If you want to."
"Why not, certainly, what am I here for?" (92)

The terrorists protect themselves with equivocation. Lyle is told that when he hears a muttered wrong number to "memorize the first, third, fourth, fifth and seventh digits....The rest is padding" (122). Kinnean responds to a question like a politician: "I don't confirm, I don't deny. Yes and no, but don't quote me on that" (115). This kind of language abuse is expected from a terrorist group with so much to hide; what confuses Lyle is hearing the same language spoken by the CIA. Lyle's first contact comes from a man on the street who doesn't speak, yet seems "clearly intent on conveying some tacit information." When Lyle finally asks, "You're McKechnie's friend, aren't you?" the man replies, "Is life that simple?" (127). Conversation with "Burks" is "like a conversation with a doctor who was reporting the results of significant tests. Questions and answers floated through each other. One's life seemed to hinge on syntax, inflection, points of grammar" (128).
DeLillo implies that these networks, systems and institutions begin to look alike because, after all, they are our own creations. As in Ratner's Star, the mazes reflect our own minds, the violence our own fantasies, the conspiracies our own indiscretions written large. Lyle may have learned how to blow up the stock exchange from Marina, but he was already practicing "empty[ing] his face" when he began the affair with Rosemary (73). The Nixon administration had too many fantasies, Kinnear says, but those politicians were acting as our "representatives."

[T]hey were our fantasies, weren't they, ultimately? The whole assortment. Our leaders simply lived them out....we were stone blind not to guess it. All we had to do was know our own dreams. (105)

Yet one purpose of the system is to keep us from knowing our own dreams, so that we can dream those we are given--ultimately, so that we may become better consumers. Our individual dreams are often mere reflections of the American dream. Lyle identifies "the capitalist system and the power structure and the pattern of repression" as the dominant elements working together to prevent self-awareness (34). Later, wondering about George's death, he tells Rosemary, "We go through all those days not questioning. It's all so organized. Even the noise is organized. I'd like to question a little bit, to ask what this is, what that is, where we are, whose life am I
leading and why?" (62).

On the surface, Players seems to belong to the thriller genre, a spy novel featuring a terrorist plot to blow up Wall Street, and an unwitting citizen's encounter with the double life. The terrorists have disguises to help them hide, they have personas complete with fake I.D.'s, they converse in code. But these characteristics also describe the common lives of Pammy and Lyle, Ethan and Jack, Frank McKechnie. The true subject of Players is the double life of the average citizen, the spaces created by persona and identity, the "self-enchantment, the near common dream" we countenance as a nation (54).

#

Though DeLillo's characters and settings are diverse--David Bell's American tv landscape, Harkness's Texas college football field, Billy Twillig's surreal cycloid, Lyle's Wall Street--they are held together by the bond of a common era, typified by a proliferation of technology and images, which produces self-consciousness without a corresponding self-awareness, and produces also the common aura of secrecy, suspicion, deception, and unreality. It is the age of simulation, in which new technologies--media, computers, and cybernetic models--have become the organizing principle in society (Poster 130). Like Players, Running Dog is about the power of images and technology to shape our sense of the real,
even our real selves. In *Players*, the persona is a code whose elements, such as occupation and sexuality, can be packaged for maximum value. In *Running Dog*, however, Glen Selvy's persona as a government intelligence agent merges with his identity, becoming a fantasy-self, a complete routine dictating a program of thought, feeling, and behaviour. Glen Selvy's routine, which is his identity, is permanent, round-the-clock, airtight.

Like DeLillo's previous novels, *Running Dog* is about language, especially the power of language to shape reality and identity. While in the contemporary world the boundary between representation and reality "implodes," so in language the boundary between signifier and signified disappears, and the two poles collapse into each other. Gone are the referentials; everything now is relative:

...from now on signs will exchange among themselves exclusively, without interacting with the real.... The emancipation of the sign: released from that 'archaic' obligation that it might have to designate something, the sign is at last free for a structural or combinatory play according to indifference and a total indetermination which succeeds the previous role of determinate equivalence. (Poster 125)

The characters in *Players* and *Running Dog* are so caught up in a world of signs, spectacles, representations and simulations that they no longer have access to anything genuine. What they think of as real is often illusory, a creation of their minds. DeLillo implies that we "construct" rather than "apprehend" reality because we
don't have the sense mechanism to see anything clearly and continuously. Like Wu reconstructing the bat kill in Ratner's Star, Selvy puts together in his mind a raven's flight, watching it rise "at first gradually, a continuous and familiar fact, and then in spasmodic urges, peculiar stages of rapid ascent...imperceptible transitions that left the watcher trying to account for missing segments of space or time" (222). In Running Dog reality is put together with mental pictures, with expectations. For example, the night Cristoph Ludecke is murdered, the policeman cruising the area keeps a certain picture in his head, formed by experience. Things that fit the picture--trucks and earth-moving equipment, derelicts around a fire--he pays no attention to. Other things he categorizes as discrepancies, near-discrepancies, and possible discrepancies (5). Likewise, Glen Selvy is startled to make the connection between Ludecke and Radial Matrix because it "didn't fit the known world as recently constructed. It was a peculiar element in a series of events otherwise joined in explainable ways" (81). This discrepancy between the real and the imagined is a constant source of surprise in the novel, culminating in the Hitler film, which isn't at all what anyone expects.

Finally, the characters' sense of reality is formed by language, particularly in the stories they tell themselves and each other. The reporter Moll Robbins
marvels at the ease and skill with which Earl Mudger, head of Radial Matrix, uses words to compose and demolish moods in the brief time they spend together (169). Senator Percival, investigating Radial Matrix, creates his picture of the organization from information provided by Arthur Lomax, who secretly works for Mudger. In fact, Lomax doesn’t know who he works for, ultimately: "That’s the nature of the times," says Mudger (90). The seriousness of these stories indicates the gaming nature of these times. Like Shahrazad, Selvy undergoes a story competition with Mudger and Lomax to see who can best fit together the ostensible facts of Selvy’s behaviour with Klara Ludecke and Moll Robbins. Despite his charge that Lomax’s story is implausible, Selvy loses—and pays with his life (107). Interviewing Percival in the men’s room, Moil has a "sense of Memorable Event Taking Place," and she begins to merge the actual experience with words she uses to describe the experience: "So we’re in this U. S. Senate men’s room and he’s got his head down inside a Florentine marble washbasin and I’m checking out the urinals to see if they have state emblems on them..." (31).

As a human endeavour, as a working out of conflict within an inscribed set of rules, the construction of reality has much in common with other games, like football or conspiracy. Indeed, constructing reality is a seminal game which spawns variations like Lyle’s glass game, in
which he holds a drink glass over the parapet and drops it from one hand to the other with "that soft fraction of a second when neither hand touched the glass" (Players 148), or like Selvy's game of closing his eyes behind the wheel, recreating the landscape in his mind. "On a small rise he spotted a curve in the road up ahead. He closed his eyes and counted to seven, easing the steering wheel left at four, when he'd estimated the car would reach the bend" (157). Like Hobbs slumped on a bench playing "All-American Quarterback," Lyle and Selvy simulate the risks they are facing, using representation to try to devour their fear.

As a human construct, a clash of conflicting forces bound by rules, identity is also a kind of game. Selvy's game of choice is the Secret Agent routine. In one sense the routine consists of "his physical movement between New York and Washington, and the set pieces of procedure, the subroutines, that were part of this travel." But in a larger sense the routine is an entire mind set,

all those mechanically performed operations of the intellect that accompanied this line of work. You made connection-A but allowed connection-B to elude you. You felt free to question phase-1 of a given operation but deadened yourself to the implications of phase-2. You used expressions that contained interchangeable words. (81)

Whereas in Players the job routine lasted only eight hours a day, leaving the players lost and empty during their free time, in Running Dog the routine never ends; there is no "free time" to take off the mask, to question or
reflect.

Selvy's routine separates him from his actions. Moll detects "an edge of detachment in Selvy's voice and manner," and that his reactions are "just the tiniest bit mechanical" (17). The routine dictates that Selvy move through his day "apart from other people, sitting in aisle seats, standing at the edge of waiting lines, unobtrusively watchful, last on, first off" (53). Fired upon at Frankie's Tropical Bar, Selvy fires back, though the routine makes it "academic really, whether he'd hit the man. No concern of his. A technicality" (66). The detachment provided by the routine allows Selvy enough distance to discuss his own death with Lomax, who has helped arrange it. They refer to it, in the "current parlance," as "an adjustment" (107).

Like the logocentric routines in End Zone, the secret agent routine produces both single-minded efficiency and an obsession with weapons. Moll detects a "spareness" in Selvy, a "hard-edged overriding disposition, the kind of single-mindedness she didn't confront in the course of an average day" (35). In her dreams she sees him in "a military setting, a barracks usually," occasionally merging him with the image of Monty Clift in From Here To Eternity (42). To Selvy, choice is "a subtle form of disease" (192), and single-mindedness helps eliminate choice. His life is an exercise in paring down.
All behind him now. Cities, buildings, people, systems, the relationships and links... All that incoherence. Selection, election, option, alternative. All behind him now. Codes and formats. Courses of action. Values, bias, predilection. (192)

Selvy's "virtual passion" for weapons is a direct corollary to his single-minded efficiency (82). At the firing range he works on breath control. "The idea was to build almost a second self. Someone smarter and more detached" (83). He practices, does steadying exercises, and cleans his guns obsessively, because his interest is a way of "demonstrating involvement in his own well-being"; his skill becomes an "inventory of personal worth" (82). If he's good enough with his gun, he tells himself, he'll be safe. While the routine prevents Selvy "from seeking human links," it prompts him "to study the interactions within mechanisms" (82-3). Human relationships tend to be messy, but weapons are clean and precise: "Things fit" (82).

Furthermore, the routine reduces personal accountability. Selvy especially likes the quality of transience. "If you were always ten minutes from departure, you couldn't be expected to answer to the same moderating precepts other people followed" (24). Interviewing Cristoph Luđecke's widow Klara, Selvy uses the routine to sidestep other issues, such as responsibility for her husband's murder (42). The mind-set of the routine simplifies things, eliminates choice and
reduces accountability, but at a price: the routine, Selvy realizes, "was how your mind had come to work: which areas you avoided; the person you'd become" (81).

But the most encompassing effect of the routine is the aura of indeterminacy it provides. For example, Selvy's instructions are never specific. During his recruitment into Radial Matrix and training in the Marathon Mines, Selvy, like Lomax, is never certain who he is working for. His instructors "convey" impressions. He "hear[s] the phrase 'funding mechanism'" and "internal affairs enforcement" (153). For Baudrillard, this widespread undecidability is characteristic of our era. "Determination is dead, indeterminism reigns." Terms once dialectically opposed are now commutable:

the beautiful and the ugly in fashion...the Left and the Right in politics...the true and the false in every message from the media...the useful and the useless in objects....Everything becomes undecidable--this is the characteristic effect of the domination of the code which is based everywhere on the principle of neutralization and indifference. (Poster 127-8)

The aura of indeterminacy keeps "the real" at bay; Selvy believes this keeps him safe. When Arthur Lomax warns Selvy about the adjustment, therefore, Selvy would rather not hear it. It brings things to the surface, "or close to it--things he didn't care to know about. Textures, entanglements, riddles, words. It compromised the routine" (107). In this aura of indeterminacy it becomes nearly
impossible to tell true from false, good from bad; impracticable to get to a place where one can perceive what is real, or determine exactly who or what is controlling events.

It is evident from Selvy's resistance to the warning, from his pride in traveling "the event" to the end, that the simulacrum shapes his mind to the extent that the routine becomes all important, overriding concern for health and safety. External factors, such as where he lives, or who he happens to be with, are to Selvy "all the same, mere coloration for the true life, for the empty meditations, the routine, the tradecraft, the fine edge to be maintained in preparation for--he didn't know what. In preparation for what?" (54). The routine must last to the end. Whenever he comes across something he isn't supposed to know, a connection, a discrepancy, the answer to a question about the goal of his preparations, the routine seals it off. "This was where the routine was important. He stuck to the routine. The routine enabled him mentally to bury this queer bit of intelligence" (81-2). It isn't "in Selvy's purview" to make the connections, explore the implications, even when "they might pertain to his own ultimate sustenance. Especially then. This was why the routine existed" (82).
Selvy's code is his way of managing within the routine; every element serves it. For example, restricting his sexual involvement to married women gives Selvy "an edge of maneuverability. He was able to define the style of a given affair, the limits of his own attachments. It suited him. Life narrowed down to intense segments" (135). Even when Selvy breaks the code, with Moll, and again with Nadine Rademacher in the front seat of his car, the routine still applies because it is carried on "beneath the level of ordinary life" (54). When he seems most at variance--on the run with Nadine, fleeing into the wilds of America--he is in fact going in a "straight line" from New York to the Marathon Mines (152). Ostensibly rebelling, he is merely choosing his place to die. For it finally becomes clear to Selvy, what he's been preparing for all this time:

What it meant. The full-fledged secrecy. The reading. The routine. The double life. His private disciplines. His handguns. His regard for precautions. How your mind works. The narrowing of choices....All this time he'd been preparing to die. (183)

Permitting himself that realization allows the significance of Lomax's black limousine to also become clear: "All this time they'd been conveying him to the cemetery. In short hops. In stages" (184). Still Selvy throws away his guns, demonstrating his acquiescence to the routine: he'll die. The "routine persist[s]" for
Selvy, even at the end, walking out to meet his assassins (229). But he has bought an old guerrilla bolo knife and spent his final hour sharpening it—his one small act of defiance. He'll die, but he takes one of his assassins with him.

Cristoph Ludecke is wearing a woman's dress when he is murdered at the beginning of the novel, apparently as both a disguise and as a "preference" (101). Yet in *Running Dog* it is not the secret agents who disguise themselves as much as it is everybody else. In Times Square on a Saturday night, "[e]verybody's in costume. Cowboys, bikers, drag queens, punk rockers, decoy cops, Moonies, gypsies, Salvation Army regulars" (114). Whether it's "skinhead Krishna chanters in saffron pants" or Moll in her thong sandals, loose cotton dress and hip sash, ("an outfit she used whenever she felt a deceptive appearance was called for"), one motivation for disguise is fear, for disguise provides a measure of safety. Moll uses it to help in "safeguarding her true self, pending developments" (29). Indeed, a main point of both *Players* and *Running Dog* is that everyone leads a kind of double life, that average citizens involve themselves in disguise, conspiracy, secrecy. "These days, what is it?" asks the cop who finds Ludecke. "Everybody's in disguise" (8).
"This is the age of conspiracy," Moll says. "This is the age of connections, links, secret relationships" (111). There is no longer any distinction between organized law and organized crime, between the CIA and terrorists, or corporations and mafia families. The government's check and balance safeguard is an illusion. Selvy finds it curious that "intelligence officers of a huge industrial power [are] ready to adopt the techniques of ill-equipped revolutionaries" (153), but he doesn't pursue the implications of this fact. Various government agencies blackmail American companies and private citizens as well as foreign powers. For example, Lomax uses a connection at the IRS to get the private financial records of Grace Delaney, publisher of Running Dog, a pop-culture magazine of national and international conspiracy. Lomax blackmails Delaney to prevent the publication of Moll's expose on Percival's porn collection, which would deflate its blackmail value for Radial Matrix (127). Though Moll believes her own initiative and good luck direct her to Percival's collection and the "scoop of the half-century," she is in fact being led down this path: Percival only pretends to pass out to allow her to discover the secret passageway (it isn't that hard) that leads to his collection.
PAC/ORD is a specific example of the double life of the government. On the surface it is an "above-board clerical and budgetary operation," whose letters stand for "Personnel Advisory Committee, Office of Records and Disbursements" (25), but underneath, "[t]hey've got mechanisms. Undercover channeling operations. They've got offshoots" (72). One of those off-shoots is Radial Matrix, a "secret arm" of PAC/ORD. Using the cover of a legitimate systems planning business, Radial Matrix is in fact

a centralized funding mechanism for covert operations directed against foreign governments.... responsible for channeling and laundering funds for unlisted station personnel, indigenous agents, terrorist operations, defector recruitment, political contributions, penetration of foreign communications networks and postal agencies. (74)

But a surprising thing happens. Contrary to expectations, Radial Matrix becomes an "enormous success" as a business venture, and CEO Earl Mudger "[falls] in love with profits." Radial Matrix becomes "a breakaway unit of the U.S. intelligence apparatus" (75).

He uses the same methods in business he used in espionage activities. In actual combat. That's why the firm's a whopping success. The man's made his own set of rules and won't allow anyone else to use them. He's got all kinds of links, organized crime and so on. And he's just sitting out there in the countryside running up profits. (76)

Like organized crime, Radial Matrix has "no table of organization. There [is] no structure, no infrastructure. Only the haziest lines of command" (155). As an employee, Selvy goes around the country arranging the "disappearance
of a trade commissioner," financing "the terrorist bombing of a machine-tool plant. Legitimate business expenditures" (156).

In *Running Dog*, nearly everyone and everything has two sides, the apparent and the hidden. *Running Dog*, the conspiracy magazine, is itself riddled with conspiracy. They practice their own kind of espionage, information-gathering and networking. The editor is sleeping with the enemy. "When the priests stop believing," Grace asks Arthur Lomax, "what does it mean?" (218). Richie Armbriester, America's "king of smut," cares only about avenues of commerce, and the "higher issues" of demography and patterns of distribution. He has never even asked Lightborne what the Hitler movie is supposed to show (194). He tries to hide behind "a maze of paper": holding companies and dummy corporations. "I don't exist as a person," he boasts to Lightborne. "I'm not in writing anywhere. I'm sitting behind all that paper" (50).

At bottom, there is no one behind the massive conspiracy, no specific government or private forces controlling the entire process, nothing but a kind of "technological determinism" whereby machines and the models they generate determine social reality. Advanced technology facilitates spying, which makes people paranoid and thus more pliant. "There's a neat correlation between the complexity of the hardware and the lack of genuine
attachments," Earl Mudger tells Moll. "Devices make everyone pliant. There's a general sponginess, a lack of conviction" (91). This is because advanced technology makes people feel like criminals: one's "whole existence" is on file, data collected by "[b]anks, insurance companies, credit organizations, tax examiners, passport offices, reporting services, police agencies, intelligence gatherers" (93). But worse, the reality created by technology is more compelling than personal reality:

If they issue a print-out saying we're guilty, then we're guilty. But it goes even deeper, doesn't it? It's the presence alone, the very fact, the superabundance of technology, that makes us feel we're committing crimes. Just the fact that these things exist at this widespread level. The processing machines, the scanners, the sorters. That's enough to make us feel like criminals. What enormous weight. What complex programs. And there's no one to explain it to us. (93)

Instead, when things don't happen the way they should, technology can "make it happen" (92). For example, Moll Robbins never slept with Percival, though with the help of technology Mudger can offer taped proof she did. "All we need's your voice and his, which we have. The rest is purely technical" (92).

The preferred medium for this advanced technology is film, itself yet another example of the simulacrum. "Go into a bank, you're filmed," Lightborne tells Moll. "Go into a department store, you're filmed. Increasingly we see this." It is no longer God who watches over America,

Running Dog is about a new era, prefigured by the Nazis, who also "put everything on film," who also developed a taste for the theatrical, and for spectacle (52). It is an era marked by the disappearance of the boundary between representation and reality, in contrast to remaining vestiges of the old era, such as Percival's erotic art collection. The paintings and sculpture are clearly representational, and Moll finds that despite their high quality she is "curiously indifferent to the objects around her." Her strongest feeling is "a sense of the work's innate limitations" (80), and she recalls Lightborne's comment that "a thing isn't fully erotic unless it has the capacity to move." We're in a new era, he has told her, one of "movement, action, frames per second" (15), whose single biggest difference from the old is "the motion picture. The movie. The image that moves" (18).

Film is seductive because it devours what it represents; its ultimate power lies in its promise of freedom from self. Just before watching the Hitler film,
Moll begins to anticipate this special thrill:

It was an expectation of pleasure like no other. Simple mysteries are the deepest. What did it mean, this wholly secure escape, this credence in her heart....The anticipation was apart from what followed. It was permanently renewable, a sense of freedom from all the duties and conditions of the nonmovie world. (225)

Film makes an image materialize, a "two-dimensional city...afloat in various kinds of time, all different from the system in which real events occur." And yet Moll is able to enter it, to "understand it so readily and well" (225). In fact, when she walks out of Lightborne's building after the viewing, what seems false is the "real" world, the "rude surprise of sunlight," the unreality of the landscape: "What is this place? Why are these people so short and ugly? Look at the hard surfaces, the blatant flesh of things" (244).

If the image is powerful because it devours what it represents, language is more flexible, revealing as it hides the doubleness of its message, managing to suggest the underside of its own concealment. Grace Delaney is able to maintain such a clear sense of doubleness she can make "insults sound like endearments. Often she purred obscenities" (58). Likewise, Senator Percival can boast that it "pleases the Lord" to give him the wealth to pursue his pornography collection. He prefaced his most honest revelation to Moll by saying that what follows is "undocumented, unfounded and unreal. I deny everything in
advance. . . . It's all lies. I find it utterly inconceivable that such things could find their way into the pages, so on, so on, so on" (73). Intimate conversation takes place in secrecy and by code, exemplified by Lightborne walking slowly around his gallery giving Moll clues to Selvy's destination while turning out the lights one by one (22-3). Just as Lyle's conversation with Burks is "like a conversation with a doctor," with questions and answers floating through each other (Players 128), so Moll's conversation with Mudger is like "communicating from either side of a semitransparent curtain or theatrical scrim" (169). At the end, she is left with the impression that it was "a recitation. A factual and rather pretty narrative. A calm and beautifully detached and rather touching enumeration of small truths" (172).

As every surface hides a secret side, so every force has its counterforce. Percival's public self is a persona, his political life only a role; his "true life" is his collection: "This is what I am" (157). The Mafioso Vincent Talerico turns his "mysterious and fierce" paralyzed eye to Richie Armbrister, but at home he is a family man, affectionately watching his wife wash breakfast dishes while his young daughter plays in the yard (177). Earl Mudger is also a family man, a do-it-yourselfer who likes to make knives in his basement, who finds deep satisfaction truing up the blade's edge, or cutting along
pencil lines (119).

For Baudrillard, the larger binary structure of force/counterforce constitutes a "deterrence model," in which consumer purchases, fashions, media, polling, elections and so forth are all part of "a system of binary regulation stabilized by two political parties, two opposing classes, two hostile superpowers, two (or more) choices at every moment." But the system only appears to offer choice; in fact, the two poles tend to "cancel out their differences, and serve to maintain a self-regulating, selfsame, self-reproducing system." What appears to be in opposition to the system is really functioning within the system, a part of a society of simulations. As Percival points out, the history of reform reveals "a counteraction built in. A low-lying surly passion. Always people ready to invent new secrets, new bureaucracies of terror" (74). It is Selvy, seeing the Marathon Mines for the last time, who identifies this doubleness as something human. The barracks are surrounded by debris, a grouping of common objects he finds touching: "Signs of occupancy and abandonment. Faceted in sad light. A human presence" (192).

This human doubleness is also the enduring image of the Hitler film, which had been billed as explicit pornography. It turns out to contain not pornography but Hitler imitating Charlie Chaplin imitating Hitler--a more
explicit and brutal truth than any naked body. He is performing for the amusement and diversion of the children in the bunker, who are about to die; their reactions are prompted by adults showing "outsized delight" at the performance (235). Partly because it shows a moving, human portrayal of a man they are used to thinking unidimensionally about, and not the pornography they'd hoped for, which simplifies and mechanizes humanity, the film is a disappointment to all concerned--government, mafia, and media. As Ludecke had promised, it is a performance that takes its place "among the strangest and most haunting ever given" (19). As Chaplain's "original" performance is about identity, burlesque, and impersonation, so too is Hitler's: the performance and the film are both simulacra--and another way of cancelling out the self. Hitler "produces an expression, finally--a sweet, epicene, guilty little smile. Charlie's smile. An accurate reproduction" (236).

"All conspiracies," Selvy concludes, "begin with individual self-repression" (183). Though Players and Running Dog feature the double life of terrorists, spies, and government agents, their deeper concern is the double life of the individual--how and why it is formed, and its effect on the characters themselves and on society. Though often mistaken for the true self, identity is molded from without, shaped by media images as well as a system of
organized consumption that has shifted the locus of
decision in purchasing goods "from the consumer where it
is beyond control to the firm where it is subject to
control" (Poster 38). These outside influences gain power
through a corresponding internal drive to repress and
alienate the self. Fear of vulnerability and pain drive
many of DeLillo's characters away from themselves; they
seek to hide in the personas they create.

Furthermore, in DeLillo's novels, society and its
institutions reveal a similar doubleness. As Lyle
cultivates a persona, locking up his real self far beneath
the surface, so the real Wall Street is "a locked sector,
sealed off from the rest of the city, as the city itself
had been planned to conceal what lay around it." Like
Lyle, the district grows "repeatedly inward, more
secret...extending ever deeper into its own veined marble"
(132). The age of simulation--our age--is characterized by
the explosion of technology and images that work to efface
the boundaries between representation and reality,
resulting in an aura of suspicion, deception, unreality
and uncertainty, in which it becomes increasingly
difficult to tell the true from the false. Indeed, "true"
and "false" lose their meaning completely; and reality,
including the self, must be constructed rather than
apprehended. Like the four different stories Kinnear
offers in explanation of what happened to George Sedbauer,
the truth—if there is a truth—lies somewhere in between, in the "untellable" space at the heart of the matter. Every force breeds a counterforce, the sacred and the profane, the CIA and terrorists, poise and counterpoise. Every image hides not the real but a counterimage, Taft Robinson's two clocks, each correcting the other. This is the human condition, for DeLillo: there is no final truth, not even about Hitler. There is only an eternal doubleness, as in Selvy's last view of the Marathon Mines, which shows signs of "occupancy and abandonment," surrounded by debris, faceted in "the rose and gold of sunset" (192).
Chapter V

The Names and Mao II:
The "Lost Game" of Self

With The Names (1982), DeLillo turns from the mystery genre to the nature of mystery itself, particularly the related mysteries of the real, the other, and the self; in both The Names and Mao II, he focuses on language as the mediation—the cause of our corruption and our only path back to innocence. The surface problem of The Names concerns the separation of narrator James Axton from his wife and ten-year-old son Thomas (Tap), who live on the Greek island Kouros. Axton, a technical writer by trade, has taken a job as a "risk analyst" for an insurance company to be near them, to try to understand Kathryn and to woo her back. Though Axton pursues her intermittently throughout the novel, it is unclear by the end whether they will reunite, indicating that, more than the relationship, it is Axton's struggle with separation—the limbo of being neither married nor single—that provides the frame DeLillo wants for his scrutiny of the mystery of other and of the self.

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This mystery is about hidden things, about risk and trust, and in *The Names* it is punctuated by the failing marriages and ruined lives of Axton's expatriate friends and dinner companions. The banker's wife Lindsey Keller casually remarks that the only unconditional love she comes across these days is not between two people but rather "what people feel for animals," prompting Axton to wonder if the failure of love is a "sign of some modern collapse" (321). The mystery of the other presses on him. He and Kathryn argue about what it means "to be a couple, to share that risk and distance. The pain of separation, the fore-memory of death" (123). Axton is not very good at risking himself in the relationship: Kathryn accuses him of arranging his life around things he "couldn't possibly fear losing" (127). She disapproves of his job, his method of synthesizing leading indicators in various countries to determine the risk to American property and operations (34). "It's just insurance," he tells her. "It's the world's biggest, richest companies protecting their investments" (12). But to Kathryn, minimizing risk—in business as in love—seems morally wrong: "It's the wrong use of the future" (12).

Like Kathryn sifting through the dirt at the archeological site on Kouros, Axton sifts through the dirt of his marriage, searching for clues beneath the surface signs. "Who were they when I wasn't there?" he asks
himself. "What were the secrets they were keeping?" (312). Early in the novel Axton calls on his family, finds they aren't home, and lets himself in to wait. He catches himself scrutinizing the house, hoping to find "in the simple furniture, in the spaces between the faded walls, something about [his] wife and son that had been hidden from [him]" (8).

Marriage is a mystery because, like language, a relationship is improvised; it's almost offhand, says Axton. "It's too inspired and quicksilver a thing to be clearly understood" (39). Kathryn compares it to a movie, the whole composed of a "series of small flickering moments" (39). But his family provides Axton with a sense of who he is, and when they leave, he feels he has no place in particular he belongs. "They were my place," he says, "the only true boundaries I had" (49).

Marriage is a mystery, in part, because of its two natures, the sacred and the common. On one hand, it is the day-to-day life, small joys and defeats, passing grievances and embarrassments. To help overshadow their fear, Axton's friends, with their boring predictable stories, their indiscretions and small-hearted forgiveness, tend to reduce marriage as they reduce the places they've been to "one-sentence stories" (94). This is the point of marriage, Kathryn says during an argument, "to reduce each other and everything else" (122). But
marriage has a sacred nature as well, a mystery in the union of two. Though his marriage may have little to do with Charles Maitland's concept of wedlock, still Axton's love for Kathryn has grown around him until it "covered everything, it became everything" (321).

The mystery of the other is a primary mystery, like the mystery of death, because it can never be solved. It is at the heart of all relationships. Owen Brademas has been haunted all his life by the memory of a preacher who called on him to join the group, to "yield to the Spirit" by speaking in tongues. Glossolalia is a "learned behaviour," but Owen cannot learn and cannot yield, he cannot make the words that will make him a part of the group (173). In a fragment from Tap Axton's novel that serves as an epilogue to The Names, Owen "wanted to yeeld [sic]. This is the point! There was nothing in the world he wanted than to yeeld totaly, to go across to them, to speak as they were speaking" (336). The memory informs Owen's passion for mysterious words and the stones in which they're shaped. The memory comes back to him again and again; for instance, while echoing the native boy's recitation of the inscription at Rajsamand, the Sanskrit words sounding "strange, distant, other, but also almost known," the memory comes striking through from "where the nightmares lay, the ones in which he could not speak as others did, could not understand what they were saying"
The mystery of the other is undercut by empathy, particularly the artist's ability to feel another's emotions; ironically, it is Tap Axton's empathetic description of Owen in his "non-fiction novel" that reveals most fully the power and terror of Owen's isolation:

He only wished to free himself from this dreadful woe of incomprehension. They spoke all around him and he couldn't make real sense of it. He wanted freely to yield but he couldn't get there or go across to them. (338)

At bottom, the mystery of the other is the problem of determining what is real, the nature of the real person. Frank Volterra makes a film about his lover, a well-known, married society woman. It is rarely shown, for legal reasons, until a conglomerate buys the rights, changes the title and other names, hires stars and re-shoots the movie. "It was one of those strange transferences in which people conspire to lose sight of a central reality," Axton says. "But what was reality in this case?" (109). Which comes closest to the actual truth of the love affair—Volterra's impromptu film, or the final version professionally produced? The question assumes that there is an actual entity, the love affair, that exists prior to either representation of it, and that therefore one version or the other can come closer to the truth, that either version can be more or less true in an objective
sense. But the idea that things happen objectively, that events happen first, and then we talk or write or make a film about them, may be exactly backwards. It is narrative that gives coherence to events in our understanding—we provide the beginning, middle and end, the interpretation that forms the coherent set of interrelationships we call an event.

Meaning comes from the pattern, rhythm, and juxtaposition that we impose. Even memory is an act of "reconstructing the terrain," as Owen must do to get to a monastery he can no longer see (27), or as Wu does in simultaneously seeing and putting together the bat kill (Ratner's Star 395), or Selvy trying to follow the flight of the raven (Running Dog 222). Subjectively, the other does not exist apart from our representation, from the story we tell of them in our minds. In Mao II, the hostage does not exist for Bill Gray until Gray begins to write about him, to put him in words. Similarly, in the beginning of The Names, Axton is tormented by the realization that he knows his family only "in the simplest way, the accumulation, the natural gathering of hours"; by the end he knows the accumulation is all there is, that love comes down to the "things that happen and what we say about them" (312).
This is the eternal human element, the face we put on nature, "the man in the moon." Sometimes stories and events seem to come to us already formed, with their own beginning, middle, and end—like Kathryn's story of the two motorcycle riders on either side of a dock, kick-starting their scooters at exactly the same time and roaring off in opposite directions. Though Kathryn believes she "saw the elements begin to fit" (25), it is her mind that has selected the details she notes, her mind which contributes the form and meaning—this is its ceaseless occupation. Not only does the mind make a narrative out of raw experience, it also tends to formulize its narratives. This is dramatized when Axton tries to tell the story about his extramarital affair. David Keller asks him to "[p]aint a picture," but the event is so routine David supplies the details:

"The plant-filled parlor room. The glass of wine."
"Something like that."
"The intimate talk," [David] said.
"Yes."
"Always the intimate talk. This woman is divorced, right?"
"Yes."
"The sadness," he said.
"There was sadness, yes." (68)

The fact that David knows how these things go, from the physical surroundings to the emotional configurations, suggests the extent to which we manipulate events to make them fit a pattern, even as the events seem to "shape
themselves" (27).

Even random things take ideal shapes and come to us in painterly forms: Owen Brademas believes this is "a matter of seeing what is there." He believes he can see things other people can't, "[e]lements falling into place. A design. A shape in the color of things" (172). Travelling to the Qasr Hallabat ruins, where archaeologists are at work matching inscribed stones, Owen notices that the out-of-order inscriptions are situated midway between Zarqa and Azraq, names he recognizes at once as anagrams, identical but differently ordered letters. What strikes him is that it is "precisely a rearrangement, a reordering that [is] in progress at Qasr Hallabat." This is an example of what he calls "the mind's little infinite" (76). In India, Owen notices a woman in a magenta sari who carries a brass water pot on her head, "the garment and the container being the precise colors of the mingled bougainvillea that covered the wall behind her, the dark reddish purple, the tainted gold." These moments are "a 'control'--a design at the edge of the human surge" (278). He finds comfort and reassurance in these patterns because, he says, they take place outside himself, "outside the silent grid, because they suggest an outer state that works somewhat the way [his] mind does but without the restlessness, the predeterminative quality." He feels "safe from [him]self as long as there's
an accidental pattern to observe in the physical world" (172).

Axton too notices connections, patterns. The village, the island, and even the ship that brings Axton to the island are all named Kouros, which makes them "singly knit" (81). Standing by the bed in his pajamas, Kathryn reading, Axton feels connected to past moments:

It appeared to be nothing, bedtime once more, her pillowed head in fifty watts, except that these particulars, man standing, pages turning, the details repeated almost nightly, began to take on a mysterious force....It was a memory that didn’t exist independently. I recalled the moment only when repeating it. The mystery built around this fact, I think, that act and recollection were one. (81)

For Axton, the power of the moment is in what he doesn’t know about it, standing there with "the night tides returning, the mortal gleanings that filled the space between us, untellably" (82).

In Americana, David Bell tries in his movie to reduce "the kind of movement that tells a story or creates a harmony" (288-89). This is exactly what filmmaker Frank Volterra is trying to reduce in his film about the cult. "Forget relationships," he says. "I want faces, land, weather" (199). At the end, according to his girlfriend Del Nearing, the film will simply end. "He doesn’t want the helicopter gaining altitude to signal the end is here. He doesn’t want the figures to fade into the landscape. This is sentimental. It just ends" (249).
But such a project, like the cult itself, may be doomed from the start—the sense-making urge is too strong. To help us make sense of events, we shape them with words. A taxi driver opens his door for Axton only to find a man asleep in the back seat; the driver curses and kicks him out. But the more he talks about it, the less irritated he becomes. "As he unraveled the event and analyzed it, he began showing amusement. Whenever he paused to think back on it, he couldn't help laughing. The event was a funny one after all" (21). In Running Dog, interviewing Senator Percival in the men's room, Moll Robbins tells herself the story of the event as it happens, merging the event with the telling. Conversely, when Owen Brademas tells Axton about his experience with glossolalia, there is "a strange radiance in his face, the slightest separation of the man from his condition... Motionless. The telling had merged with the event" (308).

Recognizing the mind's propensity to see what it looks for, to give form and endow with meaning the formless flux of experience, Axton begins to realize the prison of his own consciousness. The loss of faith in an external reality can lead to the solipsistic belief that the only reality is personal, that everything is subjective. For example, Axton's anthropomorphisms reveal his own emotions in the external world: listening to the
rumble of planes taking off, for example, he hears a sound "full of anxious gatherings" (6); in the wind he hears "an anxious whispering sound" (9), and in two entangled trees he sees "a passionate and human fury," marveling at how strongly the "element of humanness showed in that stark mingling" (196). Cult member Emmerich understands himself similarly through the act of murder, which "furnishes endless material for speculation and self-knowledge. Everything he reads and learns is made to serve as a personal philosophy, an explanation, an enlargement of that brilliant single moment, a moment he has reworked, re-explained to himself, made use of." The victim and the act "form the philosophical base he relies on for his sense of self" (291).

But the paradox at the root of Axton's thinking lies in his equally held belief in the power of names to compose their own reality. Brand names like MacKintosh, Kleenex and Xerox usurp the names of the objects themselves (10); the very nature of events is changed by the names we give to them, such as the difference between "love affair" and "adulterous sex" (161). After Kathryn and Tap leave the island, it is details, such as names, that Axton needs to imagine them more fully, to feel closer to them. People need "a detailed picture in which to place the small figure, the lone figure" (311). Axton recalls his own father's "catechism of minims"—requiring
"names, numbers, colors, whatever I could collect of particular things. These helped him see me as real" (311).

Further, the power of names to rehydrate memory, to create intimacy and bring back innocence, provides the power for Axton's seduction of Janet Ruffing, the banker's wife and amateur belly dancer. After her dance, she joins Axton's table, where he listens to her "analyze her body in objective terms." But he wants to "really talk," he tells her, and to do that he has "to put [her] voice back inside [her] body, where it belongs." The problem is the "lack of connection" between her words and "the physical action they describe, the parts of the body they describe" (228). He wants the words to take on a solidity, writes Dennis Foster, to "shed the ordinary sense that screens language, just as the formal movements of belly dancing screen the body they display" (168). In order to put her voice back in her body, he tells her, she must see herself, she must see him. To do that, she must not only use words, but also feel them. "Say legs. Seriously, I want you to. Stockings. Whisper it. The word was meant to be whispered....Use names" (228).

Without language--without the names of things--meaning is reduced to design, mere pattern, as in Dharan where Axton finds that figural things are rendered as nuances of line, patterns of repetition. "Even writing was design, not meant to be read, as though part of some
unbearable revelation. I didn't know the names of things" (138). At the end of Owen's life, the room he'd been preparing for all his days is simply empty. "You see what I've done, don't you" he asks Axton. "Brought only the names" (275). It is, for Owen, a cleaner, simpler reality. In India, the cultist Singh says, the "word itself is all that matters. The Hindu woman tries to avoid speaking her husband's name. Every utterance of his name brings him closer to death" (294). There is a mystical connection between words and reality, evident in the way the name seems to constitute the self. The Egyptians engraved the name of their enemy on pottery, then smashed the bowls (150). The abecedarian cult members cut their victim's initials into the weapon they kill with, and during a night of troubled sleep Axton imagines a line from an old western: "If one of those bullets has your name on it, Cody, there's not a goddamned thing you can do about it" (153).

This is an aspect of the mystery of self, that to be human is to be mediated by words, and thus to be doubled always, the real and the representation, self and identity. But the deeper mystery is the silence at the heart of self, at the heart of the real and the other—the silence and emptiness that seems to be everywhere we look deeply. Though Owen Brademas devotes his life to finding those patterns that speak of something outside, apart from
himself, he knows our entire structure of classification is "a system against the terror in our souls," a terror that comes from and defines the self. Beneath the daily texture of life, beneath the images, roles, the self-imposed patterns that, like Billy Twilling's mathematics, reveal only the nature of the intellect that perceives them (Ratner's Star 117)--beneath all this there is nothing, an emptiness, or perhaps more precisely a formlessness. For Axton this is the most terrifying knowledge of all. The formlessness within is compared to the desert, to the "Empty Quarter," and to death. In the desert, a "vast space," which seems to Axton like "a container for emptiness," identity is more crucial than ever. There is always "someone in authority" to "demand to know who we are" (253). Emptiness without speaks to emptiness within; this is the constant threat of open spaces. David Keller tells Axton that one can stand on the airstrip in the Empty Quarter, a quarter of a million square miles of nothing but sand, and "hear the blood flowing in [one's] body"; though he tries to convince himself that the desert is beautiful, the "vast sweep" scares him (70).

As in End Zone and Ratner's Star, in The Names the characters cover the silence with words, and give shape to the emptiness by imposing pattern and meaning everywhere they look. Emmerich believes he will not die because he
has "learned too much" about himself, but Owen knows better: "Isn’t this why people kill themselves?” (292).
Owen feels safer not knowing; when asked who he is, he replies "No one" (292). But for Axton, whether self-knowledge makes one safe or puts one in danger may be beside the point, presuming that one can know oneself. The "27 Depravities," a list he compiles to understand his wife’s complaints against him—and thus to understand himself—is, as Kathryn pronounces it, a "masterpiece of evasion" (18). It demonstrates the tortured and circuitous route the mind must take to trick itself, to try to see what is outside it.

For Volterra, the problem of self requires a confrontation with what is really there, dramatized in "classic" film by "figures in open spaces." The formless background "is their existence. They’re here to work out their existence. This space, this emptiness is what they have to confront" (198). Thus in his film of the cult he wants to sabotage film’s shaping power, the illusion fostered by editing, shaping, juxtaposing scenes which to Volterra suggests the narrative pattern of the mind. He wants to film "[p]eople in a wilderness, a wild and barren space. The space is the desert, the movie screen, the strip of film, however you see it." He will provide only a "scant narrative line," an ambiguous ending: "That’s all we see. We don’t know what it means" (198-99).
Because of the essential formlessness of the self, perceived boundaries are essential, valuable. Separated from Kathryn and Tap, Axton realizes he had come to see them as the boundaries of his self, "the only true boundaries I had" (49). Objects are on the other side of the boundary, which may explain some of their fascination for us: "Objects are what we aren’t, what we can’t extend ourselves to be. Do people make things to define the boundaries of the self? Objects are the limits we desperately need. They show us where we end. They dispel our sadness, temporarily" (133). Where we end, the other begins. If it is real, solid, other than us, we are given the impression we are in the world of real things. But the effect is temporary, as even objects pick up the human dust of memory, names, representation. The only safety, for Axton, is in relationship: he believes "deeply in the idea of two. Two people. It’s the only sanity" (162).

Axton perceives the self as "a collection of things rather than an absence"; it is "put together out of...nameless things" (162). As in Players and Running Dog, the whole self seems to be composed of separable elements: the persona, or outer mask; identity, the perceived self; and a wordless, formless space that constitutes the core self. The persona is "the public self," that sometimes "wear[ies] of its gleam" and longs to resume its "murky shape" (57). The persona almost
always plays a prescribed role, such as the movie role
Charles Maitland compares his life to: "It is like the
Empire," he says. "Opportunity, adventure, sunsets, dusty
death" (7). As an adult Axton feels he’s been only two
ages: twenty-two and forty (78). Both he and Owen have
felt themselves slip into the role of their own father.
Owen describes "unreal moments" when he felt he’d "become
[his] father. He took me over, he filled me" (78).

Superficially, people can either match or mismatch
persona with identity: Ann Maitland, Axton jokes, would
have to gain thirty pounds, thicken her ankles "and wear
slippers without backs or sides" in order to match her
identity, while the perfect part in Hardeman’s hair, and
his geometric glasses seem "the finished things," the
achievement of "a systematic self-knowledge" (261).

Owen, a man with "lifelong inclinations toward
solitude, toward the sanctity of a personal space" (296),
would have to overcome enormous fears in order to
surrender to a group, to take part, for example, in a
ritual like running the circuit of the Ka`bah. Yet
wandering in the midst of Jains, Muslims, Sikhs and
Buddhists, Owen begins to think of himself "once more as a
Christian, simply by way of fundamental identification,"
and finds that the word sounds "curiously strong" to him,
"full of doleful comfort" (281). This is remarkable to
Owen, who suffers from a touch of agoraphobia, fear of
open spaces, fear of crowds. He is surprised by the element of envy in his terror of losing himself in something larger:

Trampled, drowned. In his fear of things that took place on such a rampant scale, was there an element of desperate envy?....Was it a grace to be there, to lose oneself in the mortal crowd, surrendering, giving oneself over to mass awe, to disappearance in others? (285)

Instinctively he fears the pull from the vortex of the crowd. And yet it is the surrender of self that brings innocence, that washes the stain of existence. To be one of the hundred thousand people running the circuit, dressed as the others all in white, to be "carried along, no gaps in the ranks, to move at a pace determined by the crowd itself, breathless, in and of them," this is what draws Owen to such things. "Surrender. To burn away one's self in the sandstone hills" (296). It is the same surrender the preacher demands in the prairie church, surrounded by miles of open space, gusts of rain washing through the wheatfields: "'Get wet,' the preacher says. 'Let me hear that babbling brook. What am I talking about but freedom? Be yourself, that's all it is. Be free in the Spirit'" (306). In an inverted grain bin near the desert town of Hawa Mandir, Owen crouches, waiting for the murder of Hamir and wondering about the uses of ecstasy. A "coming out of stasis," he decides, that's all it is. "A freedom, an escape from the condition of ideal balance."
Normal understanding is surpassed, the self and its machinery obliterated. Is this what innocence is?" (307).

But it is in the empty places that DeLillo’s characters feel the tug of recognition from their own selves. Owen is "afraid of the desert but drawn to it, drawn to the contradiction. Men will come to fill this empty place." Like the emptiness of the self, reflected in the mirror of language, the desert "is empty in order that men may rush in to fill it" (296). Axton too is alone and isolated, his marriage failing. Language seems powerless at best, destructive and hurtful at worst. And yet language is all he has to get across to her, to know her and to know himself.

This is the mystery of language that is at the heart of the cult. Religion, marriage, and the self all have dimensions that seem transcendent even while they remain, like language, vulgarly physical. "DeLillo’s metaphor for this crossing of idea and flesh," notes Dennis Foster, "is the ‘cult’ that Axton pursues" (158). What makes this cult intriguing to Volterra is the "particular logic" they display: "these people are stalkers. They pick a victim and watch" (140). Owen guesses that they fear disorder: "They may have felt they were moving toward static perfection....One mind, one madness. To be part of some unified vision" (115-16). Their particular interest, besides the death of their victims, is the alphabet,
"letters, written symbols, fixed in sequence" (30). The initials of each victim are cut into the blade of the tool used to kill. Axton discovers a link between the proper name of each victim and the place-name where they are killed: Michaelis Kalliambetsos is killed in Mikro Kamini (168), Hamir Mazmudar in Hawa Mandir (301). Axton feels "a terrible elation" when he first discovers the link, the knowledge "bounded by emptiness and fear" (170). It is an intimation of the meaninglessness of the act, a truly senseless killing, the emptiness without speaking to the emptiness within.

Axton doggedly pursues this question of why, as if the answer might keep his family safe, might somehow keep him safe. As in other pursuits of meaning, from Billy Twillig's number search to Glen Selvy's run, Axton's strongest motivation is fear. He and Owen sit up far into the night, talking, arguing, speculating. Though death is "our base reality," and our peculiarly human fore-knowledge of death a "special sadness" and thus a "sanctification," Owen believes the cult is engaged in elaborate denial (175). The final denial of death is to produce a death. "Here is the stark drama of our separateness. A needless death. A death by system, by machine-intellect" (175). Knowing more than he reveals, Owen tells Axton not to look for meaning in the act, not to look for answers. Any meaning lies paradoxically in its
meaninglessness. The cultists aren't repeating an ancient ritual, they aren't making a plea to gods, a gesture to prevent a catastrophe, a prayer for the harvest or an act of worship. The cult's power is based on the absence of motivation, attitudes and needs: "No sense, no content, no historic bond, no ritual significance" (216). They intend nothing, they mean nothing, they only match the letters (308). And yet they don't seem as disconnected as modern mass killers, as American assassins firing from a rooftop or an overpass, "unconnected to the earth." There is "a different signature here, a deeper and austere calculation" (171).

When Axton travels to the Mani with Tap, sensing in the landscape an argument "for silence, for finding a way to acknowledge the bleakness that carries something human in it" (182), he knows at once he has located the cult. As Emmerich tells him, the attraction of the Mani is that it suggests nothing, "no gods, no history." There is only "what is here. The rocks, the towers. A dead silence. A place where it is possible for men to stop making history. We are inventing a way out" (209). Of the killing, Emmerich tells Axton that he recognized its rightness immediately--it is a solution that feels inevitable, "perfect and right." What's more, he suggests the solution "finds a home" in Axton's unconscious mind, as well:
A recognition. This curious recognition is not subject to conscious scrutiny. Our program evokes something that you seem to understand and find familiar, something you cannot analyze. We are working at a preverbal level, although we use words, of course, we use them all the time. This is a mystery. (208)

Only a death can complete the program because only death goes deep enough to short-circuit the mind's capacity to make sense, to make the words that mediate between self and real. The killing is "a blunt recital of the facts" (302). It is not a blood frenzy but a frenzy "of knowing, of terrible confirmation" of self, of existence: "Yes, we are here, we are actually killing, we are doing it" (211). The killing is "true to the premise," Singh tells Owen, it's "clean....Nothing clings to the act." But the power of the mind to create meaning pulls together even scattered meaningless acts, imposing order, symmetry, names. This is why the cult is dying.

Language mediates reality, interpreting for us present experience, memory, emotions, the self. There is a delay between experience and understanding, as when Axton sees "The Names" written in Greek, Ta Onomata, and experiences a chill delayed because first he has "to think, to translate" (188). As Owen mediates between Kathryn and Axton at the beginning of the novel, providing "a third voice" through which they can safely connect (20), so language mediates between self and experience, providing a connection, a way to be together. The mind's
little infinite, to use Owen's phrase, may depend upon language's infinite, for language determines both the event and our understanding of it. In Sanskrit, for example, where the word for yesterday is the same as the word for tomorrow, a man giving details of his life "might automatically include details from the lives of dead relatives" (279). Language mediates history, not only by subduing and codifying experience to fit into a pattern, shaped by a beginning, middle and end, but also by making history meaningful, making it moral, by providing cause and effect and also by providing an ending, which must show a sequence of events coming to a close while recognizing that the sequence of events goes on, and thus the end must be attributed by a moral interpretation that endows it with moral closure (White 238).

The professional teller of tales, Owen tells us, must stick to the story, to what happened; if he interrupts to interpret, to summarize, to weigh events and characters, the crowd grows impatient, calling out, "Show us their faces, tell us what they said!" (276). The true story lies in what happens, but we apprehend what happens only through what we say, through the force of our impulse to moralize events by investing them with a coherence, integrity, fullness and closure that is imaginary, a fiction. What life and love come down to, Axton decides, is not only what happens, but what we say about it (312).
This is language's mediation, and this is what the cult seeks to obviate. But the only way to prevent such mediation is to nullify symbolic representation, to find a way to speak "as from the womb, as from the sweet soul before birth, before blood and corruption" (306). What we experienced before language--this is the "home" Singh refers to in discussing the paradox with Owen. "Something in our method finds a home in your unconscious mind. A recognition" (208). This unconscious home, which Foster compares to the "brick and mortar, the absolutely familiar elements of life, but which can no longer be touched except through the structure of the house" (159), is similar to what linguist Julia Kristeva calls the "chora," the primal underpinning of language that consists, in part, of the sum of every child's verbal but prelinguistic experiences, such as the sound of the mother's voice (Moi 93). These first words are not heard as symbols standing for what is absent, but as physical presences, the real rather than cultural construct (Foster 159). The chora, Kristeva asserts, is "the place where the subject is both generated and negated, the place where his unity succumbs before the process of charges and stases that produce him" (Moi 95); and that, further, even after the chora is incorporated into language, it is not extinguished but merely cloaked by symbolic meaning. "Our program evokes something that you seem to understand and find familiar,"
Singh tells Owen, "something you cannot analyze. We are working at a preverbal level, although we use words" (208).

Language, writes Dennis Foster, is thus a kind of risk insurance, "offering a sort of currency in exchange for a child's lost home." On one hand, words mediate between us and what is real, but on the other, the "losses to which life is prone, as much psychic as physical, find indemnity in the narratives that continually restructure our lives" (Foster 166). "Conversation is life," says Axton, "language is the deepest being" (52)--the deepest being we can get to, anyway. But if the only truth is subjective, and all experience a fiction, how can that fiction satisfy? How can one set of patterns be any more satisfying, make more sense, than any other? "It is necessary to remember," Owen says, "to dream the pristine earth" (307). Memory and language together have the power both to find and create what will suffice, as Axton tries to do with his friends, who are, he says, "among the people I've tried to know twice, the second time in memory and language. Through them, myself" (329). This is the "recompense in memories."

Recall the bewilderment and ache, the longing for a thing that's out of reach, and you can begin to repair your present condition. Owen believed that memory was the faculty of absolution. Men developed memories to ease their disquiet over things they did as men. The deep past is the only innocence and therefore necessary to retain. (304)
But it is important to get it right, Owen says, to "tell it correctly. Being precise is all that's left" (299). Innocence is at stake; innocence depends on the precision of "the shapes and colors of this device he was building, this child's model of a rainy day in Kansas" (305).

In the beginning of *The Names*, explaining why he'd never visited the Acropolis, Axton comments on the "ambiguity...in exalted things" (3). Religion, marriage and language all possess this ambiguity, these two natures. Language can be used to hide, to deceive, or used to advantage, like Charles Maitland learning Greek but never speaking it, using it instead to spy: "I pick up things, listening. I have an advantage in this regard" (41). The concierge at Axton’s hotel also has "the advantage, the language" over Axton, and like the young Owen Brademas among a congregation speaking in tongues, Axton feels "a childlike fear and guilt" at not knowing "the correct words" (102).

Except for the epilogue, however, *The Names* also concludes at the Acropolis, and it is here, where memory and desire bring people together to speak openly about what they have and what they want, that the power of language is most fully expressed. Language is flawed but it is literally all we have. "This is what we bring to the temple, not prayer or chant or slaughtered rams. Our
offering is language" (331). Among the crowds, Axton notices, everyone is talking. From the stones themselves he discovers "a human feeling...deeper than the art and mathematics embodied in the structure, the optical exactitudes. I found a cry for pity....this open cry, this voice we know as our own" (330).

In The Names, DeLillo confronts the larger questions of what it means to be human: What is real? What is self? How is it possible to live fully, to connect with others meaningfully, to see things truly? The Names suggests that at the heart of this mystery is language, and at the heart of language is silence. This silence is "worse than a retched nightmare," writes Tap. "It [is] the nightmare of real things, the fallen wonder of the world" (339)--fallen because it is no longer present but represented to us.

The abecedarian cult in The Names tries to short-circuit the mind's sense-making mechanism to achieve a recognition--to "know again"--the primacy of experience. In Mao II (1991), the cult members who follow Reverend Sun Myung Moon are gripped by the force of a similar longing, for the oneness that brings the end of time. "They know at once, they feel it, all of them together, a longing deep in time, running in earthly blood. This is what people have wanted since consciousness became corrupt" (16)--in other words, since the first representation, the first use
of words, when the image first became more real, powerful, and true than the original. But as the simulacrum absorbs the original, the cult, whose goal is oneness, absorbs the individual. Mao II is about cults, particularly the "Moonies" and the terrorist cult of Abu Rashid. It is about other forces of assimilation, such as the image, particularly in mass media. And like The Names, it is about finding a way back to innocence, finding what might suffice.

In Americana, television presents such simple stereotypes so often to so many that the type has obliterated the original. It is the image, David believes, that is destroying the individual. Americana portrays a world of representation, a system of symbols with no fixed determinations, in which anything can be anything else—the simulacrum. But the true terror of the simulacrum, as developed in Great Jones Street, is not that real things are being replaced by phantoms, but that, finally, there are no real things. The simulacrum does not conceal the truth; instead, "it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true" (Poster 166). In Ratner's Star, simulation models, such as the matalanguage "logicon" or the "computer universe" at Field Experiment Number One, become more powerful, more real—because they are more precise and orderly—than what they represent.
In *Mao II*, as well, the model takes precedence over the real as elements of the simulacrum, primarily the image and technology, work to cast doubt on the nature of real things. For example, Brita Nilsson began her career photographing street people in New York, until it began to seem somehow not valid: the image began to look different from what it represented. No matter what she shot, no matter "how much horror, reality, misery, ruined bodies, bloody faces, it was all so fucking pretty in the end. Do you know?" (24-5). Everything around us works "to channel our lives toward some final reality in print or on film," says novelist Bill Gray, sitting for his portrait. Everything "seeks its own heightened version. Or put it this way. Nothing happens until it’s consumed. Or put it this way. Nature has given way to aura" (43-4). In *Great Jones Street*, the commune leader Bohack talks about "mass man" (194); when everyone conforms to the image, the individual disappears. Similarly, the terrorist spokesman George Haddad in *Mao II* asserts that nearly everyone is absorbed by the simulacrum, the system of representation. "The artist is absorbed, the madman in the street is absorbed and processed and incorporated. Give him a dollar, put him in a TV commercial" (157). Indeed, resistance to such absorption is low: the simulacrum offers deliverance from the age-old burden of existence, of the individual, of "being here" (*The Names* 32).
In Baudrillard's conception, the first order of simulacra is that of imitation, such as the man in whiteface who sings "Mack the Knife" in "perfect, chilling imitation" of Louis Armstrong's voice (211), or the schoolboys who imitate drug dealers, using their ties for headbands and "lifting the schoolbag to the hip Uzi-style and spraying imaginary fire" (145-6). As in previous novels, DeLillo demonstrates how the image shapes our understanding, how images devour what they represent. The power of the image is measured by its ability to shape both what we see and our response to it. For example, in a conversation with Brita, Scott casually mentions "[t]hat great Winogrand photo of a small child at the head of a driveway and the fallen tricycle and the storm shadow on the bare hills" (51); when he tells of seeing Karen for the first time, he echoes the description: Karen is a funny-looking girl "on the tumbledown street with an undecidable threat in the air, stormlit skies" (77).

Particularly in America, it seems, people are hungry for the image. No images are allowed in a mosque, Bill muses, but in America "we sleep and eat the image and pray to it and wear it too" (37). Bill Gray's books have been available for years, yet people who have never read them clamor for his photograph; they "still want the image, don't they?" (26). The image is more valued than the real. George tells Bill that if Abu Rashid's terrorist group was
able to lure him close enough to kidnap him, they would do so, then kill him, photograph the corpse, and "keep the picture handy for the time when it can be used most effectively." Bill asks naively, "Doesn't he think I'm worth more than my photograph?" (164). The image is more powerful because it appears more real than real--it is "hyperreal." Brita warns Bill that "from the moment your picture appears you'll be expected to look just like it. And if you meet people somewhere, they will absolutely question your right to look different from your picture" (43).

People want the image more than the real because the image is safer. When Jean-Claude Julien becomes a hostage, his media image affords him "a second self, an immortality, the spirit of Jean-Claude Julien." He becomes "a digital mosaic in the processing grid, lines of ghostly type on microfilm. They were putting him together, storing his data in starfish satellites," and, while he himself stands chained to a drainpipe, his image is "bouncing...off the moon" (112). Furthermore, the mass-wedding couples being photographed feel "that space is contagious. They're here but also there, already in the albums and slide projectors...the minikin selves they are trying to become" (10). A photo creates a "sentimental past for people in the decades to come" (42)--like narration, the photo simplifies by selection, it moralizes
by composition. The image, at first a substitute for reality, becomes the "final reality" (43).

It used to be that the world was where we went to get away from self, Singh tells Owen in The Names (297), but now the world has its own self, and to Brita, strapped in an airplane five miles aloft, "the world [is] so intimate that she [is] everywhere in it" (167). She doesn't want to look at the magazine in front of her because she fears she "might see something from her life in there" (167). Our lives are exposed by advertising images, by hidden cameras, traffic scanners, spy satellites, the computer network, network news. News coverage "provides an unremitting mood of catastrophe. This is where we find emotional experience not available elsewhere. We don't need the novel....We don't even need catastrophes, necessarily. We only need the reports and predictions and warnings" (72). It used to be the novel that fed "our search for meaning," but now "[n]ews of disaster is the only narrative people need" (42). And this is why the novel has fallen, Bill tells George. "Beckett is the last writer to shape the way we think and see. After him, the major work involves midair explosions and crumbled buildings. This is the new tragic narrative" (157).

After image-addiction and news-addiction, what comes next? DeLillo portrays one vision of the future in ex-Moonie Karen Janney, the lost child who tells Bill that
she never thinks about the future. He replies, "You come from the future" (85). Programmed, reprogrammed, deprogrammed, now Karen becomes lost in the dusty light of the TV. She is "thin-boundaried. She took it all in, she believed it all, pain, ecstasy, dog food, all the seraphic matter, the baby bliss that falls from the air....She carried the virus of the future" (119). Not only can she study the TV face and "shade into it at the same time, even sneak a half second ahead" (117), but she also "knows what people are going to say next. Not only gets it right but does their voices" (65). It is Karen who is married in the mass-wedding prologue, "holding a cluster of starry jasmine and thinking of the bloodstorm to come," part of the undifferentiated mass who look "like a toy with thirteen thousand parts, just tootling along, an innocent and menacing thing" (7). The future, DeLillo concludes gloomily at the beginning of the novel, "belongs to crowds" (16).

The second order of simulacra in Baudrillard's concept involves serial reproduction, such as the mechanized production of mass objects. Television belongs to both first and second order simulacra, in that it first produces the image then reproduces it through millions of television sets around the world. In Players, Lyle likes the repeated image, such as the "vast system of nearly identical" motel rooms, (210), as does David Bell in
Americana, who finds "you can easily forget who you are" in a reduplicated room in a reduplicated motel (257). In Mao II, Scott finds something liberating in the repeated image of Chairman Mao, painted, printed, photocopied, silk-screened, wallpapered, synthetic-polymered. It seems to present the "deeper meaning of Mao" (21). Likewise Mr. Janney, looking for his daughter Karen in the Yankee Stadium wedding crowd, reflects that when "[t]hey take a time-honored event and repeat it, repeat it, repeat it," eventually "something new enters the world" (4). But Bill sees "a symptom of millennial hysteria" in the mass-wedding, a longing for the End that makes the present "more anxious, more surreal, more image-bound, more prone to hurrying its own transformation" (80). Illustrating the difference between first and second orders of simulacra by a comparison between the automaton and the robot, Baudrillard writes that while the "automaton is the analogy of man....the machine is man's equivalent and annexes him to itself in the unity of its operational process" (Poster 178). Brita's answering machine, for example, not only "makes everything a message," but it also "destroys the poetry of nobody home." As a substitute self, it casts doubt on the real: people are no longer either home or not, they're "picking up or not picking up" (92).
The third order of simulacra is the stage in which simulation models—such as Ratner’s Star’s model universe or the war games in End Zone—come to constitute the world, and overwhelm representation, becoming more powerful than the real. The first step in such a task is to destroy what is individual—one-of-a-kind things such as personal identity, or the novel. The individual is absorbed in the group. Mao II is filled with groups, crowds, and cults—Mexican Catholics and Chinese Protestants, the Moslems at Khomeini’s funeral. Everywhere the emphasis is on conformity to the group identity. Karen is mesmerized by rows of jogging Chinese troops on TV, all dressed alike, guns held at the same angle, charging a group of students in the square. She sees the “motley crowd against the crowd where everyone dresses alike,” and it seems to her a “preachment of history” (177). When Scott thinks of crowds he thinks of “how they merge with the future, how the future makes room for the nonachiever, the nonaggressor, the trudger, the nonindividual” (70).

Cults are proliferating, DeLillo suggests, because they allow the individual to give up the self. Reverend Moon simply gives his followers what they need; he "answers their yearning" by "unburden[ing] them of free will and independent thought. See how happy they look" (7). Among Moon’s flower-sellers traversing the country in vans, "all clothing was the same, dumped in a pile and
washed together, then given out so many items per person, never mind original owner or previous wearer" (77).
Moreover, like the Chinese soldiers, Moon's mass-wedding couples all dress alike, the grooms in dark blue suits with maroon ties, the brides wearing "Simplicity Pattern number eight three nine two with the neckline two inches higher" (183).

The cult is attractive because, like the image, it simplifies. Cult members "speak a half-language, a set of ready-made terms and empty repetitions. All things, the sum of the knowable, everything true, it all comes down to a few simple formulas copied and memorized and passed on" (7). The cult is attractive also because it gives direction and purpose to those who feel lost. Karen is attracted to "the rooted point of view" that her prayers, in unison with the group, affect "the lives of every single person on the planet" (78). The cult offers "a link to the fate of mankind" which makes breaking out on one's own a lonely proposition (82). Like other logocentric systems--the military unit, the football team--the goal of the cult is oneness:

There is something in the chant, the fact of chanting, the being-one, that transports the cult members with its power... They feel the power of the human voice, the power of a single word repeated as it moves them deeper into oneness... They chant for one language, one word, for the time when names are lost. (15-16)

This is the point of the mass-wedding, the point of the
cult, to achieve oneness, one body, an "undifferentiated mass" (3). Programming involves altering the paths of the mind, altering the words we use to make sense of experience. Karen's mind-words "take a funny snub-nosed form, the rudimentary English spoken by some of Master's chief assistants" (8). There are times when she not only thinks in "Master's words" but speaks in his voice, "lecturing the sisters in the van, pressing them to sell, make the goal, grab the cash, and they didn't know whether to be inspired by the uncanny mimicry or report her for disrespect" (13). Preaching to the homeless at Tompkins Square, she has "Master's total voice ready in her head" (194). Karen and other members of the cult know Moon "at molecular level. He lives in them like chains of matter that determine who they are" (6). They have surrendered themselves, "immunized" themselves "against the language of self" (8).

Similarly, the terrorist Abu Rashid's motto is "All men one man" (233). To this end he gives the boys in his band his image, literally pinning his photograph to their shirts. Over their own heads they wear hoods. "The boys who work near Abu Rashid have no face or speech. Their features are identical. They are his features. They don't need their own features or voices. They are surrendering these things to something powerful and great" (234). It gives them a vision, Rashid's interpreter explains to
Brita. "These children need an identity outside the narrow function of who they are and where they come from." Like Moon, Rashid gives them identity and a sense of purpose. And like Moon, it is not the man himself they emulate, but the image: "The image of Rashid is their identity" (233). The power of the cult lies in its ability to shut down consciousness and narrow the range of possibilities.

In the world of simulacra, right and wrong lose their meaning--there is no "reality" to stand on, no basis on which to form a moral judgment, because behind the flow of images, models, signs, there is nothing. Thus Rashid's terrorist group, holding hostage the Swiss writer Jean-Claude Julien, terrorize the innocent to communicate their righteous indignation. This is one of the things they learned from Western media, George Haddad notes: "The worse the better" (130). The "more heartless" terrorists are, "the better we see their rage" (130). As the boundary between representation and reality implodes, and not only the foundation but the experience of the real disappears, mass media no longer reflects reality but creates its own hyperreality, more real than real, and thus the hostage's freedom is absolutely tied to "the public announcement of his freedom. You can't have the first without the second" (129). This is another thing learned from the West. Nothing happens until it is consumed, aired. The hostage and the terrorist group depend on each other for
self-definition, for identity, for existence. In fact, Charlie tells Bill, the hostage is the only proof that the terrorist group exists (98). The way to power is through the system of images, the simulacrum; to be outside is to go unnoticed, to cease to exist. The fiction of the novelist involves an encounter with self, Bill knows, but when you inflict punishment on someone who is not guilty, you create a fiction that tells you nothing while projecting your image onto others.

[When you fill rooms with innocent victims, you begin to empty the world of meaning and erect a separate mental state, the mind consuming what's outside itself, replacing real things with plots and fictions. One fiction taking the world narrowly into itself, the other fiction pushing out toward the social order, trying to unfold into it. (200)]

While terrorists and cult groups create a fiction that masks consciousness, covering it with the image, the writer creates character "as a way to reveal consciousness, increase the flow of meaning." This is how the novelist replies to power and beats back fear: by "extending the pitch of consciousness and human possibility" (200).

In "Simulacra and Simulations," Baudrillard writes that any given bombing may be the work of extremists to the left, extremists to the right, centrists trying to bring the extremists into disrepute, or even a police set-up, an attempt to get more money for security. Each story is "equally true, and the search for proof--indeed
the objectivity of the fact--does not check this vertigo of interpretation" (Poster 174–75). Similarly in Mao II, there are three stories about the ferry. It was hit by gunboats thirty miles from Lebanon by Israeli or Lebanese forces. Or the ferry was hit by land-based forces, by Shiites loyal to Syria, Shiites loyal to Iran, or "possibly Christians loyal to Israel." The third story held that "the Syrians themselves were responsible" (195). In the logic of simulation, everything is equally plausible, and even facts are no longer objectively true, no longer "have any trajectory of their own," but rather "they arise at the intersection of the models" (Poster 175). In such a grid of possibilities, the "old wild-eyed vision" of unity and oneness--one language, one religion, one undifferentiated body--gains force and seductive power. "We need a model that transcends all the bitter history," George tells Bill. "[T]otal politics, total authority, total being" (158). But for Bill it comes down to a question of the value of the individual. His experience as a novelist has taught him "how autocracy fails, how total control wrecks the spirit, how [his] characters deny [his] efforts to own them completely," how he needs internal dissent and self-argument. The novel, like the self, is one thing that is unlike another, "one voice unlike the next. Ambiguities, contradictions, whispers, hints" (159).
But is the idea of a unique personal entity—of a self—still possible? How can it be defined? Many of DeLillo’s characters—David Bell, Gary Harkness, Lyle and Pammy, Glen Selvy—have something in common with Karen, who "couldn’t figure out exactly who it was that lived in [her] body" (79-80). Like the bag lady who seems to possess one large bag when it is really "many things bundled and tied and placed inside each other, a secret universe of things, unwhisperable, plastic bags inside plastic bags," the whole self seems to be composed of outer masks as well as an inner mask of identity, and a core self, a formless but somehow contained nothingness, personal, differentiated from the nothingness that surrounds.

The persona involves both appearance—the Moonies’ uniform smiles, "showing the face they squeeze out with the toothpaste every morning" (4)—as well as roles, like the "scripted roles of sisterly and intimate" that Karen and Junette play when they’re reunited (81). The emphasis is on appearance, surface, image. Not only the cult members but also their parents cultivate personas, relying on others to tell them how to look and feel, "checking around for hints" (4).

Identity, on the other hand, is the image one holds of one’s self. Whereas Karen has no sense of self, and thus takes to the image effortlessly, Scott’s sense of
himself is of someone who gets left. So while he also
follows a role, that of abandoned friend, discarded lover,
it is one he "naturally fitted himself to," it is what he
believes about himself. But Scott's identity is
self-fulfilling, enacted the same way Bill develops
impressionistic ailments that he can then control with
medication (143). The thing Scott believes about himself
and secretly fears is "not a secret at all but the open
and eternal thing that predicts its own recurrence"
because he engineers its recurrence (219).

But what is the essential self, without roles,
images, without self-fulfilling identity? Mulling over the
problem of the hostage Jean-Claude, Bill Gray begins first
to think about him, then to empathize, using memory and
imagination to find the places where he and the hostage
"converge" (160). The problem of the hostage, he
discovers, is the problem of self. Cut off from people,
"whose voices were the ravel of his being," the hostage
grows "scant and pale because there was no one to see him
and give him back his body." When he feels something
crawling on the back of his hand, he wants to speak to it,
"to tell it who he was because this was now a matter of
some confusion" (110). The problem of self comes down to
what is left when the sense-making things are taken away.
For the hostage, removed from his daily routine and
chained now to randomness, wearing a hood that muffles
perception, there is no "sequence or narrative or one day that leads to another" (109). Sometimes the boy forgets to replace the hostage’s hood after meals, or he forgets meals, and this makes the hostage nervous because the "last sense-making thing, the times for meals and beatings, was in danger of collapse" (110).

But in the midst of randomness, the last sense-making tool is narrative. With no one to give him a sense of who he is, nothing to connect the days or to connect him to something larger, the hostage tries to repeat "the old stories tried and true":

Sex with a shadowy woman on a stairway in an empty building on a rainy day. The more banal, the more commonplace, the more predictable, the triter, the staler, the dumber, the better. The only thing he didn’t have time for was originality. He wanted the same junior fantasies the boy had, sucking on the images that would trail them into middle age, into the final ruin, those sad little picture-stories so dependable and true. (111)

We make sense of things by telling ourselves stories, by giving the arbitrary flux of experience a beginning, middle and end, cause and effect, plot. Because it is one of the mind’s ceaseless occupations, it is rarely perceived except as a "conscientious tape running in [the hostage’s] head" (107) or "that helpless half-life of self-commentary," Brita recognizes when slipping under her quilt at night, "the voice film that runs between light and dark" (91). The urge to connect and make sense is so strong we can listen to the arbitrary notes of a boat
whistle and hear a harmony, a little song (215). What we actually have in front of us is one thing, as Scott realizes when looking at the photographs of Bill, but "how we analyze and describe and codify it is something else completely" (222). And the reason we describe, the motivation behind how we describe, the point of all these stories, according to Bill, is to "absorb our terror" (140). For example, parents at the mass-wedding snap photographs anxiously, "trying to shape a response" that might "neutralize the event, drain it of eeriness and power" (6). Likewise, when Brita's driver tells her a story about bombs in Beirut being made of flooring and roofing nails, she waits for him to make sense of the fact, to get to the point. "Isn't there supposed to be an irony, some grim humor, some sense of the peculiar human insistence on seeing past the larger madness into small and skewed practicalities, into off-shaded moments that help us consider a narrow hope?" (227).

Time, Bill's hostage realizes, is relative, tied to perception. Pain makes it hard for him to sleep, and this "stretched and deepened time, gave it a consciousness, a quality of ingenious and pervasive presence" (109). All perception is an act of selection and re-creation; the mind limits and shapes what we see so pervasively that when Bill sees something "full-measure," such as Karen's breasts, he feels "almost lost in the force of it." He
finds himself shaping the moment, imaginatively advancing in time in order to "give it stillness and coherence, make it a memory of shape and grace caught unaware" (85). Through both Karen's and Bill's experiences with the shining light--Karen suddenly senses "that she [is] glowing, cars and people glowing" (148), while Bill sees a eucalyptus tree shining "electric and intense" so that "the tree seemed revealed" (171)--DeLillo seems to suggest that different kinds of seeing are possible, leading to deeper if not truer perceptions. It's as if normal perception helps to make sense by reducing everything it confronts, becoming thus the first mediation between what is there and what we say is there, a part of the sense-making process that limits us to our own imagination--much like the hostage, who has only "small closed images under the hood" (204). This is both the strength and weakness of perception.

And this is both the strength and weakness of words, that they mediate between us and the real, between us and self; they latch on at the point of perception and so the illusion is preserved, the system closed. Coming upon Tompkins Square park, Karen sees blue plastic sheeting covering a network of boxes and in order to see what they are she must think of the word, lean-tos; watching the Chinese troops on TV clash with a protest crowd, she asks herself, "What is the word, dispersed?" (177). Like the
captions beneath photographs, which help locate the pictures, make them less bare, "alone in open space," (174), words and perception work in tandem to shape the world, to give it a human face. Reality is invented, Charlie says. "A person sits in a room and thinks a thought and it bleeds out into the world" (132).

When everything is taken away, when even perception is pared down to what can be sensed beneath a hood, Bill's hostage longs for "paper and something to write with, some way to sustain a thought, place it in the world" (110). Only the words, he believes, can tell him who he is (204). "Every sentence has a truth waiting at the end of it," Bill tells Brita.

On one level this truth is the swing of the sentence, the beat and poise, but down deeper it's the integrity of the writer as he matches with the language. I've always seen myself in sentences. I begin to recognize myself, word by word, as I work through a sentence....There's a moral force in a sentence when it comes out right. It speaks the writer's will to live. The deeper I become entangled in the process of getting a sentence right in its syllables and rhythms, the more I learn about myself. (48)

Bill's real life, minus the images, the interpretations, the psychosomatic ailments, consists chiefly of hair, phlegm and fluids. "This was the texture of his life....a chronicle of gas pains and skipped heartbeats, grinding teeth and dizzy spells and smothered breath." During sleepless nights Bill goes down the batting order of the 1938 Cleveland Indians. "This was the true man, awake with
phantoms" (135-6). What is real to him, in the end, is the endless hair that drifts into the typewriter, the tub strainer, the rim of the toilet bowl, "all his lost strands settled in the mechanism, the grayness and tumble, the soft disorder, everything that is not clear and sharp and bright" (201).

The human condition is one of permanent mediation, doubleness, uncertainty. There was an Eden but we fell from grace, spoke the word and banished ourselves forever from what is real, solid, certain. It may be that the only hope now is for the end, the only act left is the chant to bring the End Time closer through the power of oneness. This is what people have wanted since consciousness became corrupt. But while the Moonies use ecstasy to bypass meaning in order to get to knowing, Bill Gray uses words. The "pure game of making up" can also lead to pure and innocent knowing:

You sit there suspended in a perfect clarity of invention. There's no separation between you and the players and the room and the field. Everything is seamless and transparent...it's the lost game of self, without doubt or fear. (46)

At the end of his life, having abandoned everything else, Bill Gray still tries to write about the hostage. There is "something at stake" in these sentences: they not only tell him who he is, they are who he is (204).
Taking the circuitous, secret route to Bill's house, Brita remarks to Scott that she feels as if she's "being taken to see some terrorist chief at his secret retreat in the mountains" (27). Besides a passion for secrecy and a mission to alter the inner landscape, writers and terrorists have other things in common. Bill Gray himself, according to his editor Charlie Everson, sees writers and terrorists "at the far margin" of society, "doing dangerous things." Central American writers carry guns; "every government, every group that holds power or aspires to power should feel so threatened by writers that they hunt them down, everywhere" (97). But too many writers have been absorbed, so that now, in America, they are harmless, "painted dummies" and "effigies" (41). Thus, it's the novelist who best understands the terrorist, the "secret life, the rage that underlies all obscurity and neglect" (158). George Haddad hopes that Bill meets Abu Rashid; it appeals to his "sense of correspondence, of spiritual kinship. Two underground figures. Men of the same measure in a way" (156).

But writers and terrorists are fundamentally opposed in their ultimate goals; in fact, they are "playing a zero-sum game": what terrorists gain, novelists lose. "The degree to which [terrorists] influence mass consciousness," Bill tells George, "is the extent of our decline as shapers of sensibility and thought." Or, put
another way, "the more clearly we see terror, the less impact we feel from art" (156-7). Yet it is still possible for the novel to feed the human search for meaning, for transcendence, for a novelist to "alter the inner life of the culture" (41). Indeed, Bill's death enroute to Beirut to meet Rashid suggests that perhaps it is only through writing about him that Bill can "bring him back," and "return a meaning that had been lost to the world when they locked him in that room" (200).

The cults that dominate both The Names and Mao II, like other logocentric systems, desire oneness, a return to innocence, the end of time. This yearning seems to be a response to the perception that the world has become corrupt, self-referring; that instead of providing an escape from self, the world is now part of the "machinery of self," so that everywhere one goes, even five miles aloft strapped into an airplane, one cannot help but see images of one's own life everywhere. Cults and other groups offer an escape from self, an identity in the group, an existence streamlined and simplified, unburdened of free will and thought. To get to the real, the abecedarians use killing, the Moonies use ecstasy; the terrorists use terror to obviate the mediation, to get past words. But the novelist's alternative is to recognize and use the mediation as honestly and searchingly as possible, to unbox the lexicon by using language to reveal
language's feints and dodges, using words to refresh memory, to see others empathetically, to see the world new. Art, too, can bring back innocence. As Karen looks for Bill "kind of in [her] mind" (147), James Axton looks for his friends in "the primitive silkscreen the brain is able to produce," trying to know them again, "the second time in memory and language." Through them he can know himself, because they are "what I've become, in ways I don't understand but which I believe will accrue to a rounded truth, a second life for me as well as for them" (The Names 329).
Chapter VI

White Noise and Libra: Signs of the Times

White Noise and Libra are DeLillo’s two most powerful and comprehensive attempts to chronicle the uncertainty and confusion of our time, the explosion of information and images, the disappearance of the authentic. The central issue of White Noise (1985) is the nature of death, and the nature of our fear. Fear makes college professor Jack Gladney wake up in a cold sweat, feeling "small, weak, deathbound, alone" (224). Yet that same fear, suggests microbiologist Winnie Richards, could instead enable him to see himself as if for the first time, distinct and whole (229). Contemplation of death leads to the novel’s central questions: What is real, and what is the self? The latest information, in this age of information, is often inconsistent, misleading, and impossible to verify. Indeed, while the information alone is enough to make Jack crumble, the actual effects of the novel’s major disaster, the airborne toxic event, are all invisible. In White Noise, strategies for evading death
instead lead the characters closer to it. Fleeing the toxic event only exposes Jack further; the drug Dylar, designed to alleviate fear, produces the side effect of living death. Fleeing death necessitates fleeing life and self, abandoning immediacy and authenticity.

Ultimately, the only thing we know is what we say. Language is the form we give to formlessness; it is a kind of prism that refracts the unseen real to produce a visible spectrum. The lasting achievement of *White Noise* is the way DeLillo manages to satirize the transcendent moments of his first-person narrator, Jack Gladney, while simultaneously portraying a more true and profound sense of wonder and transcendence. While Gladney's celebrations are absorbed, swallowed up in absurdity, DeLillo's somehow press through to reveal the true mystery and wonder of language.

While Owen Brademas finds a "sanctification" in our knowledge that we must die (*The Names* 175), Jack Gladney finds it only ironic that "we are the highest form of life on earth and yet ineffably sad because we know what no other animal knows, that we must die" (99). The human condition, for Jack Gladney, is bound up in the "pause at the center" of his being. "What is out there?" he asks, "Who are you?" (103). In the face of terrible, lingering fear, Jack wonders how other people manage to function, to survive. "Is it something we all hide from each other, by
mutual consent? Or do we share the same secret without knowing it? Wear the same disguise?" (198). The paradox of the dead is that while they are "in the ground...crumbling," they also have "a presence" (98); Jack likes to think of them as "asleep." In truth, life and death interpenetrate: when Jack learns of his Nyodene D exposure, he feels as if death itself has "entered" his body (141). In Ratner's Star, the nature of reality expands, eludes, refuses to be contained (65); in White Noise death itself adapts, expands, eludes. Dylar doesn't work because death is stronger, and an even stronger drug would lead only to "a greater death" (308). The more we learn, Murray says, the more it grows. "Every advance in knowledge and technique is matched by a new kind of death, a new strain...Is it a law of nature?" (150). In White Noise DeLillo draws no final conclusions about the nature of death. Winnie Richards delivers what may be taken as the Words of Wisdom about death: "Isn't death the boundary we need? Doesn't it give a precious texture to life, a sense of definition? You have to ask yourself whether anything you do in this life would have beauty and meaning without the knowledge you carry of a final line, a border or limit" (228-9). But while Winnie Richards gently suggests to Jack that it's foolish to shrink from death, DeLillo deflates the effect of her words in this exchange between Murray and Jack:
"Do you believe life without death is somehow incomplete?"
"How could it be incomplete? Death is what makes it incomplete."
"Doesn't our knowledge of death make life more precious?"
"What good is a preciousness based on fear and anxiety? It's an anxious quivering thing." (284)

DeLillo comes to no final conclusion about the nature of death because, like the nature of reality, it is unknowable through words. On the contrary, DeLillo is more interested in the human response to death, in the strategies, the stories, the models we use to ease our fear.

The American environment in White Noise is a potpourri of representation and artifice, a media explosion of information that informs only doubt, and occasions sharper images that only make the big picture ambiguous. The old truths, old sentiments, old authorities are all suspect. In White Noise, not even nuns believe anymore; they simply represent belief, by maintaining the image for those "who spend their lives believing that [nuns] still believe." We are here, one nun says, to "embody old things, old beliefs. The devil, the angels, heaven, hell. If we did not pretend to believe these things, the world would collapse" (318). Though it is widely believed that science will bring certainty, truth and light, scientific results tend to be inconclusive and misleading: when the high school is closed due to a
mysterious ailment, men in Mylex suits do scientific tests with detecting machines, but because "Mylex is itself a suspect material, the results tended to be ambiguous" (35). The world is more complicated than before, Babette says. "We didn't grow up with all these shifting facts and attitudes. One day they just started appearing" (171).

In White Noise new technology doesn't bring increased knowledge and production as much as it brings profound uncertainty and ambivalence, creating an appetite for immortality on one hand while threatening extinction on the other. For example, the drug Dylar is designed to drive death down, to ease the fear, but instead it brings death and its simulacra--paralysis, dementia--to the surface. The airborne toxin itself is a byproduct of the advanced technology that goes into the making of insecticides. When it is accidently released into the air, scientists recommend seeding the cloud with microbes to neutralize it--a solution that brings hope but also fear. "I feel they're working on the superstitious part of my nature," says Babette. "Every advance is worse than the one before because it makes me more scared" (161). After the crisis, the sunsets seem to grow more vivid, perhaps because of the toxin, perhaps the microbe. There is, Gladney says, no "measurable connection."

If the special character of Nyodene Derivative... had caused this aesthetic leap from already brilliant sunsets to broad towering ruddled
visionary landscapes, tinged with dread, no one had been able to prove it. (170)

At the end of the novel, Jack notes that some people "are scared by the sunsets, some determined to be elated, but most of us don't know how to feel, are ready to go either way" (324) --an ambivalence that extends to their feelings about the technology that created the sunsets.

The information age is ushered in by mass media--the domain of the young--which has the effect of turning children into teachers and adults into students. After the airborne toxic event, people gather around young Heinrich Gladney who, having grown up in the information age, would have a greater "awareness of the environment; his knowledge of chemistry would be fresh and up-to-date" (130). Still, the new information merely confuses adults, requiring them to believe in the invisible, the unnatural. The radio tells the Gladneys to boil their water because of microscopic dangers. It's the "new thing," Babette says, "like turn your wheel in the direction of the skid" (34). Not only are the new dangers invisible, but they often put people in a bind. To defeat her addiction to carcinogenic cigarettes, Babette chews gum, but according to one interpretation of conflicting scientific reports, the gum, too, causes cancer (41-2). Arguing about whether or not it's raining, Heinrich asks Jack, "How do you know it's not sulfuric acid from
factories across the river? How do you know it's not fallout from a war in China?....How do I know that what you call rain is really rain? What is rain, anyway?" (24). Despite the clamor for new information, Jack argues that it is useless, especially in a crisis, and that if it is knowledge, it isn't really ours. "What good is knowledge if it just floats in the air? It goes from computer to computer. It changes and grows every second of every day. But nobody actually knows anything" (148-9). But Jack is merely nostalgic, because the old facts he and Babette happily repeat--how a bill becomes law, whether the Monitor or the Merrimac got sunk, the three kinds of rock--seem equally useless (176).

In the information age, technology is worse than simply an omnipotent, omnipresent threat to each of us: it is, more importantly, a way of thinking and a way of existing. One characteristic of techno-thinking is acquiescence to the machine. The reality portrayed by hospital equipment, for example, easily overrides Jack's own judgment. When a technician in a white smock asks how he feels, Jack asks, "Based on the printout?" When pressed, he says he feels "relatively sound, pending confirmation" (277). The numbers determine what is real. Jack's doctor plays on Jack's submission to the machine when he recommends Autumn Harvest Farms, a new medical testing facility with "gleaming new equipment. You won't
be disappointed, wait and see. It gleams, absolutely" (261). Murray advises Jack to put his faith in it.

It's what we invented to conceal the terrible secret of our decaying bodies. But it's also life, isn't it? It prolongs life, it provides new organs for those that wear out. New devices, new techniques every day. Lasers, masers, ultrasound. Give yourself up to it, Jack. Believe in it. They'll insert you in a gleaming tube, irradiate your body with the basic stuff of the universe. Light, energy, dreams. (285)

Though it promises "God's own goodness," the effect of this technology is invariably isolation and estrangement from self. Judged by the computer to have a "massive tally" with "pulsing stars," Jack immediately feels that he is dying and yet feels "separate from the dying"; he believes he can literally see it on the computer screen.

It is when death is rendered graphically, is televised so to speak, that you sense an eerie separation between your condition and yourself. A network of symbols has been introduced, an entire awesome technology wrested from the gods. It makes you feel like a stranger in your own dying" (142).

The flow of information facilitated by mass media logically should lead to increased knowledge, wisdom, and understanding, to clarity and serenity. But, as with technology, the result is opposite expectations. The television in the Gladney home, always on, seems to give a great deal of information:

"If it breaks easily into pieces, it is called shale. When wet, it smells like clay." (28)

"There are forms of vertigo that do not include spinning." (56)
"Now watch this. Joanie is trying to snap Ralph's patella with a bushido stun kick. She makes contact, he crumples, she runs." (257)

But in fact the TV delivers "infobits," simulated information, fragmented, oversimplified and taken out of context. Rather than educating people, TV seems to make them less capable than ever (299).

Nevertheless, in spite of their contradictions and misinformation, television, movies and radio are the authorities in the information age. At first the radio calls the toxic cloud a "feathery plume," though Heinrich describes it as a "dark black breathing thing of smoke" (111). Later the radio calls it a "black billowing cloud" (113). Though TV meteorology seems to help Jack's German teacher, Howard Dunlop, through a depression, more often it sends people into a panic. Older people are particularly susceptible to "news of impending calamity as it was forecast on TV by grave men standing before digital radar maps or pulsing photographs of the planet" (167).

Cable TV, the innovation of the late seventies, has become successful partly because cable channels specialize--movies, news, rock music, country music--and thus offer advertisers a more precise target audience. Gladney's television offers "CABLE HEALTH, CABLE WEATHER, CABLE NEWS, CABLE NATURE" (231), a sequence that promises complete and god-like control over the human environment,
notes Michael Moses—nature itself on tap, on cable, readily available to any viewer who has access to subscriber television.

To be sure, what cable television actually provides is only a representation of health, weather, news, and nature. But this is DeLillo’s point: It is precisely by way of technology reducing nature to a postmodern simulacrum (a copy with no original), "CABLE NATURE," that man assumes sovereignty over a reality that was once understood to transcend man himself. (Moses 64-5)

The illusion that mastery of the world is possible, that "everything is correctible" and that one "can change a harmful condition by reducing it to its simplest parts," has helped create the micro-organization characteristic of the information age (191). Babette teaches classes in sitting, standing and walking. Because of the uncertainty created by "shifting facts," people "need to be reassured by someone in a position of authority that a certain way to do something is the right way or the wrong way, at least for the time being" (171-72). There are no given or natural activities, only technical procedures for mastering one's environment.

In the current aura, the government is an unidentifiable, distant, mysterious authority—no longer "we the people" but "they." "They just closed part of the interstate," Heinrich announces shortly after the first news of the feathery plume. Fleeing with his family, Jack fears most that "those in positions of authority will long
since have fled, leaving us in charge of our own chaos" (120). He takes comfort in a blockade, remarking to his son:

"They seem to have things under control."
"Who?"
"Whoever's in charge out there."
"Who's in charge out there?"
"Never mind." (147)

The ultimate authority in *White Noise*, however, is not the government but the system. Government, business and media all float in the same aura, are all absorbed in the system. Television provides some of the signs and codes and that allow access: "Look at the wealth of data concealed in the grid," Murray says, "the coded messages and endless repetitions, like chants, like mantras. Coke is it, Coke is it, Coke is it. The medium practically overflows with sacred formulas" (51). The financial sector likewise requires secret codes for even limited access. Jack must type in his secret code at an automated teller machine to check his account balance.

The figure on the screen roughly corresponded to my independent estimate, feebly arrived at after long searches through documents, tormented arithmetic. Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval....The system was invisible, which made it all the more impressive, all the more disquieting to deal with. But we were in accord, at least for now. The networks, the circuits, the streams, the harmonies. (46)

The supermarket also provides secret codes and symbols that allow access to the system: "All the letters and
numbers are here," Murray claims, "all the colors of the spectrum, all the voices and sounds, all the code words and ceremonial phrases" (38). The check-out lanes, now called "terminals," are equipped with holographic scanners to "decode the binary secret of every item, infallibly" (326).

The system's interrelated components--the imitation, the type, the image, the sign and the model--can be stratified in a hierarchy of abstraction. On the lowest level is the imitation object, such as the wax and sawdust fireplace logs on Gladney's front porch (27). While such objects are primarily imitations, they are also objects in themselves, and thus still connected to the concrete. With the type, however, imitation breaks away from the referent. From the real--for example, actual people who live in rooming houses--the type is abstracted: "A woman who harbors a terrible secret. A man with a haunted look. A man who never comes out of his room." Murray Siskind, who lives in a rooming house, sees even himself as a type: "I'm the Jew. What else would I be?" (10). While it is assumed that the real is prior to and has a different kind of reality from any secondary representation of it, in White Noise, it's the other way around: the type precedes the real. The parents of the students see "images of themselves in every direction. The conscientious suntans. The well-made faces and wry looks. They feel a sense of
renewal, of communal recognition" (3). Not only do these parents and students simply recognize the type, but they also strive for it. They buy the brandnames that will identify them with that particular type. Rather than an extrapolation from the real, the type is a self-conscious enactment:

the middle-class parents know the ideality they are supposed to represent, and are deliberately living up to it. But this means that the type loses its purity, since it can always be imitated, feigned; or rather that there is no longer a difference in kind between the social category and the life-style which brings it into everyday being... (Prow 177-78).

Television, movies, advertising, and even the ritual assembly of station wagons tell the parents "they are a collection of the like-minded and the spiritually akin, a people, a nation" (4). Trying to picture his son Heinrich's chess-by-mail partner, a prison inmate convicted of murder, Jack's queries reveal the extent of television's influence--the suggestability of the type--on his understanding: "Did he care for his weapons excessively? Did he have an arsenal stashed in his shabby little room off a six-story concrete car park?... Did he fire from a highway overpass?" (44). It is thus no longer possible to distinguish between the type rooted in the concrete and the type rooted in representation, in the image (Prow 178). Even the anti-type is absorbed into the type. Murray says of Babette, "I'll bet she's great to
have around in a family tragedy. She'd be the type to take control, show strength and affirmation." When Jack tells him Babette falls apart in family crises, Murray responds, "Who wouldn't?" (19-20). In the simulacrum, the type takes precedence over the real. The evacuation during the airborne toxic event is handled by a state program called SIMUVAC, short for simulated evacuation. But when Jack points out to the keyboard operator that this isn't a simulation but the real thing, the man replies, "we thought we could use it as a model" (139). Similarly, during a simulated all-purpose leak disaster, the director informs everyone that if "reality intrudes in the form of a car crash or a victim falling off a stretcher, it is important to remember that we are not here to mend broken bones or put out real fires. We are here to simulate" (206).

While the type is purely abstract, on the level of an idea, the image presents a picture of the type. An advertising firm sponsors a nation-wide search for the typical coed (Libra 73): the winner will be chosen for having characteristics that embody the type, while she herself will provide the image. Television enacts the communal experience of the image: it kills individual response as it molds viewers into advertising target groups. The screen's ultimate strategy, suggests Thomas Ferraro, is "to destroy the distinction between flesh and
image, re-presenting the image-in-all-its-fleshiness as the thing-in-itself" (26). The night Babette appears on local cable, Jack's first surprised thought is that she is dead, or he is dead, and this was "her spirit, her secret self, some two-dimensional facsimile released by the power of technology." She is flat yet animated; it isn't her yet it is; she is endlessly "formed and reformed as the muscles in her face worked at smiling or speaking, as the electronic dots swarmed" (104). Among the family members, only two-year-old Wilder remains calm. As the camera pulls back from her face, Wilder approaches the set and touches her body, "leaving a handprint on the dusty surface of the screen" (105). The power of television lies in its ability to seduce us with the image, to insinuate the TV image into our own imagination until the two are indistinguishable, the commercial image mediating everything.

The television image shapes how we see others and how we see the world; it shapes what we believe, how we think, how we feel. Wilder, on his tricycle about to cross four lanes of busy traffic, looks--perhaps mercifully--"like a cartoon figure on morning TV" (322). A florid sunset looks to Jack "like a heart pumping in a documentary on color TV" (227). At the beginning of the airborne toxic event, Jack refuses to believe he may have to evacuate because on TV those things happen only to poor people who live in
exposed areas: "I'm a college professor. Did you ever see a college professor rowing a boat down his own street in one of those TV floods?" (114). When Jack finds himself about to kill Willie Mink, he comes up with a "plan," which turns out to be a TV plot with TV images:

My plan was this. Swivel my head to look into rooms, put him at his ease, wait for an unguarded moment, blast him in the gut three times for maximum efficiency of pain, take his Dylar, get off at the river road, shut the garage door, walk home in the rain and fog. (307)

John Frow asserts that the world of *White Noise* is a world of primary representation's that neither precede nor follow the real but are themselves real, although "it is true that they always have the appearance both of preceding another reality (as a model to be followed) and of following it (as a copy)" (183). For evidence he cites two passages in which Jack looks in on sleeping children: "I looked for a blanket to adjust, a toy to remove from a child's warm grasp, feeling I'd wandered into a TV moment" (244); and "[t]hese sleeping children were like figures in an ad for the Rosicrucians, drawing a powerful beam of light from somewhere off the page" (152). Both moments are mediated by another moment, Frow points out, a television or advertising image which shapes them, endows them with a certain structure, which becomes part of their reality. Although it is possible to distinguish the sleeping children from the ad, it is up to DeLillo to be ironic
about the gap between the real and the representation, even if Jack's ability to distinguish is less secure.

"Real moments and TV moments interpenetrate each other," writes Prow. "The world is so saturated with representations that it becomes increasingly difficult to separate primary actions from imitations of actions" (184).

Movie images also permeate the real. Not only does Jack see the evacuation from his town of Blacksmith in movie images--the trudging evacuees seem "connected in doom and ruin to a whole history of people trekking across wasted landscapes"--but it is precisely when he recognizes the image that the whole scene becomes real to him:

"[t]here was an epic quality about them that made me wonder for the first time at the scope of our predicament" (122). Similarly, contemplating the death of Attila the Hun, Jack wants to believe it was authentic, that Attila lay in his tent wrapped in animal skins "as in some internationally financed movie epic."

This is how it ended for him, with his attendants cutting off their hair and disfiguring their own faces in barbarian tribute, as the camera pulls back out of the tent and pans across the night sky of the fifth century A.D., clear and uncontaminated, bright-banded with shimmering worlds. (99-100)

Even his fantasy of a pure man, purely experiencing death under an uncontaminated sky is not only mediated by the image, it is a movie image.
The advertising image mediates as well, especially slice-of-life commercials that seem to offer naive immediacy even while making that immediacy less possible. When Jack first sees the toxic cloud up close, his description echoes the language of ads for high-powered laundry detergent or vitamins: "Packed with chlorides, benzenes, phenols, hydrocarbons" (127), the cloud resembles "a national promotion for death, a multimillion-dollar campaign backed by radio spots, heavy print and billboard, TV saturation" (158). Part of the reason for Jack's feeling of inauthenticity and estrangement from the world is that everywhere he looks the image penetrates.

A woman in a yellow slicker held up traffic to let some children cross. I pictured her in a soup commercial taking off her oilskin hat as she entered the cheerful kitchen where her husband stood over a pot of smoky lobster bisque, a smallish man with six weeks to live. (22)

Though he may long for unmediated experience, for the purity of experience he imagines in Attila the Hun, this is no longer possible: mediating images are stuck inside his head because, as Murray says, a ten-second spot for Automatic Dishwasher All has "deeper waves, deeper emanations" and is in fact psychically more compelling than a forest fire (67).
The scene in which Murray takes Jack to see "the most photographed barn in America" is, for Frank Lentricchia, one of two primal scenes in all of DeLillo. Though the ostensible point of the experience is to see the barn, the real point for Murray is "a new kind of representation as a new kind of excitement...the electronic medium of representation as the active context of contemporary existence in America." TV is one element in an entire environment of the image, and this environment "radically constitutes contemporary consciousness and therefore (such as it is) contemporary community--it guarantees that we are a people of, by and for the image" (Lentricchia, Introducing 195). With the apprehension of the sign, the referent begins to disappear. No one sees the barn, Murray asserts, because "[o]nce you`ve seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn" (12). The idea of the real, something that gives the sign whatever substance and weight it possesses, is surpassed by total relativity, so that in the simulacrum signs "exchange among themselves exclusively, without interacting with the real" (Poster 125). Thus signs and codes come to constitute the only real. Being at the most photographed barn in America is "a kind of spiritual surrender. We see only what the others see....We`ve agreed to be part of a collective perception. This literally colors our vision. A religious experience in a way, like all tourism" (12).
As the environment becomes saturated with signs, the sign becomes not simply second nature but a primary reality (Frow 182). Steffie, Denise, and Babette all experience symptoms of Nyodene D. contamination after these symptoms are announced on the radio. One of these symptoms is déjà vu; Babette has a déjà vu of experiencing déjà vu. Jack watches her "trying to measure the action against the illusion of a matching original," and he wonders if it's possible to have a false perception of an illusion (133). He wonders which is worse, a real condition or a self-created one? The difference we perceive between the two implies that the self-created condition is less real, but is it? If a psychosomatic illness produces "true" symptoms, doesn't that indicate a real illness? Also he asks, "Is a symptom a sign or a thing? What is a thing and how do we know it's not another thing?" (126). When the sign becomes the primary reality, the thing-in-itself, then anything can be anything else, the entire system of signs has broken away, become an alternate world instead of a way to point to an existing one.

While crude compared to television, the supermarket also offers the representation of experience: more than the simulated bakery and butcher shop, the supermarket presents the image of the cornucopia, packed with exotic fruits and spices from all over the world, six kinds of
apples, everything "in season, sprayed, burnished, bright"—yet the supermarket provides not real food but its representation. The fruit has a "self-conscious quality about it," like the "four-color fruit in a guide to photography" (170). Even the books are packaged, their titles in "shiny metallic print, raised letters, vivid illustrations of cult violence and windswept romance" (37). The packaging is everything: the food inside is sliced, chopped, molded, chemically altered, irradiated, artificially colored, artificially flavored. The main staple in the supermarket is "not the tangible item, the real thing, but what stimulates and sustains it in an endless deferrment" (Goodheart 122).

While the codes and messages are signs, with the addition of the miniature bakery and butcher's corner the supermarket begins to move upward in abstraction and aspiration to the model, such as the Mid Village Mall. The mall is something other than a mere imitation of the world; it is a rival, an alternate world, more attractive than the one outside because the elements are controlled. Everything is here: specialty shops, restaurants, banks and insurance offices cluster around a "center court of waterfalls, promenades and gardens"; department stores anchor the edges. All the senses are engaged: the Gladneys hear organ music, as at a ball game, they smell popcorn, chocolate, cologne, they watch a real band play "live
muzak." Jack sees his image everywhere, in mirrored columns, glassware and chrome, TV monitors (83-4).

A model provides an alternative to the real, a solid grid of "as if"--and thus, "true" and "real" lose all meaning. For example, Denise's father Bob Pardee raises funds for the "Nuclear Accident Readiness Foundation" which is actually "a legal defense fund for the industry" (56), while Tweedy Browner's husband Malcolm sponsors a communist revival in Indonesia that is actually "part of an elegant scheme designed to topple Castro" (86). Paul Cantor suggests that it is because DeLillo's Americans are swamped by overabundance that they are "set adrift in a sea of possibilities," which, being equally available, become equally valuable, or valueless.

In particular, this situation results in the distinctively postmodern attitude toward history as a kind of museum, or better yet, a supermarket of human possibilities, where people are free to shop around for their values and identities. (Cantor 41)

Thus to Jack Gladney, Hitler is simply "not a question of good and evil." To be good or evil would imply that he was real, and that there was a real basis on which to make the judgment--but neither of these prerequisites applies to "Gladney's Hitler," who is instead a symbol, a charm, an idea, and most of all an image. This is Hitler's connection with Elvis, deeper than their adoring mothers and childhood fantasies. They are both performers in mass media. Hitler and Elvis merge in the grid of the
simulacrum, which absorbs the individual.

In the face of uncertainty, confusion, doubt and fear, the characters develop strategies to trick themselves, to comfort and console. They are easily transformed, like Karen in Mao II, losing themselves in groups, creating themselves through name-brand consumption, repressing the present, remaking the past, pretending instead of feeling, hiding instead of acting. As in DeLillo’s previous novels, in White Noise the most common strategy is the persona. Characters live their lives as if they are acting out a script. For example, when Tweedy Browner meets Jack in the airport, she says, "Fool, you’re supposed to look at me in a fond and nostalgic way, smiling ruefully" (88). Though her own nostalgia has no basis in fact, her utter detachment, her lack of ironic self-awareness in her role has the effect of isolating Jack, making them both merely actors. Elvis Presley’s entire adult life is prefabricated, right down to his early death (70). As Tweedy foists a role onto Jack, Jack foists a role onto Babette. Babette is "a joyous person. She doesn’t succumb to gloom or self-pity," he tells her when she reveals the story of the Dylar. "The whole point of Babette is that she speaks to me, she reveals and confides" (191-92). The penalty for not accepting the role is unforgiveness. Jack can forgive lies and even infidelity, but he can’t forgive her telling him
she's not the woman he made in his mind. "I'm hurt," he says, "I'm devastated" (197).

Some of the characters embrace either/or logic as an antidote to uncertainty. "I am the doctor, you are the patient," Gladney's doctor tells him, reminding him of his proper role; "you are all permanent patients, like it or not" (260). Similarly, Murray tells Jack that there are only two kinds of people in the world: "Killers and diers." While diers live to die, killers "kill to live." They store up life-credit by killing. Having accepted the first reduction, having put himself in that model, Jack is led into thinking the second proposition makes sense—to his peril when he finds himself facing Mink with a gun in his hand.

The parents at the mass-wedding in Mao II look at each other for clues to know how to feel; they band together to help neutralize the power of the scene; the parents at the beginning of White Noise likewise look around at others and are pleased to see "images of themselves in every direction," indications that they are a group (3-4). This gives them their sense of who they are. This is the attraction of the most photographed barn in America: seeing "the sight" is a tacit agreement to be "part of a collective perception." One cannot tell what the barn "really" looks like, what it looked like before it was photographed for the first time, because once one
has "read the signs, seen the people snapping the pictures," it is impossible to get outside the aura.

"We're part of the aura," Murray says, "We're here, we're now" (13). The power of group perception allows the Mormon at the evacuation center to have an "eerie self-assurance" compared to the frightened and confused crowd (137). He alone feels as if he knows what is happening, for the apocalyptic vision of his group has allowed him to be the first to assimilate the event.

In his lectures on Nazism, Jack asserts that crowds "came to form a shield against their own dying. To become a crowd is to keep out death. To break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual, to face dying alone" (73). Jack's own strategy is both to lose himself in Hitler and simultaneously to grow larger, to project a larger-than-life persona. But when his fear overwhelms him, Murray points out a flaw in his scheme, that his two-pronged approach allows each effort to cancel out the other.

Some people are larger than life. Hitler is larger than death. You thought he would protect you....On one level you wanted to conceal yourself in Hitler and his works. On another level you wanted to use him to grow in significance and strength" (287-88).

Earlier in Jack's career, his chancellor had encouraged him to gain weight, to invent an extra initial and call himself J. A. K. Gladney--a tag he wears "like a borrowed suit." But the name, finally, is true; Jack
becomes "the false character that follows the name around" (17). He adds the extra touch of dark-lensed glasses with black heavy frames, never appearing on campus without them. The image becomes his identity. Murray also creates an identity apart from self, taking pains to avoid those characteristics that are the most natural to him. Instead, he tries to develop "a vulnerability that women will find attractive. He works at it consciously, like a man in a gym with weights and a mirror" (21). Similarly, the CIA operative Malcolm Hunt sometimes goes into such deep cover, his wife wonders if the man she's married to "is in fact Malcolm Hunt or a completely different person who is himself operating under deep cover. It's frankly worrisome." She doesn't know "which half of Malcolm's life is real, which half is intelligence" (89).

In Americana, the advertising image works to make viewers discontent not with what they have but with who they are. The image moves the viewer from first person consciousness to third person when the viewer merges with the image, such as occurs in White Noise when Steffie sits in front of the TV moving her lips to the sound, "attempting to match the words as they were spoken" (84), or feeling upset every time "something shameful or humiliating" seems about to happen to someone on the screen (16). The greatest influence on Professor Grappa's life is a character actor: "I copied Richard Widmark's
sadistic laugh and used it for ten years....It clarified a number of things in my life. Helped me become a person" (214-15). If Karen is Map II's vision of the future, the vision of White Noise is Willie Mink. He is vacant; he has nothing inside because he has no language of his own, only television chatterbits:

"Some of these playful dolphins have been equipped with radio transmitters....The heat from your hand will actually make the gold-leafing stick to the wax paper....Not that I have anything personal against death from our vantage point high atop Metropolitan County Stadium." (308-10)

Willie Mink is not only the ultimate TV viewer, he is an image of the ultimate consumer. Babbling in front of the TV, throwing fistfuls of Dylar at his mouth, he is an image of the consumer in the media age. Consumerism is another strategy to manage fear, doubt and uncertainty. At the supermarket Jack feels "security and contentment" in the sheer plenitude and variety of his purchases, a sense of replenishment in "the familiar package designs and vivid lettering, the giant sizes, the family bargain packs with Day-Glo sale stickers" (20). When he feels slighted by an off-hand remark at the mall, Jack takes his family on a spending spree to compensate, but there he senses a "sorrowful weight" attached to possessions, a "darkness...a foreboding" (6), and when his fears erupt he begins throwing things away, going through the house discovering "an immensity of things, an overburdening
weight, a connection, a mortality" (262). Throwing things away, like buying them in the first place, is a bid for escape.

Jack is full of strategies to escape his fear, and all of them involve fleeing himself. Though he knows he is "only a mind or a self, alone in a vast space" (198), he has no clear idea who that self is. For Heinrich, the self is "all a question of brain chemistry, signals going back and forth, electrical energy" (45). Happiness is "just a nerve cell...that's getting too much stimulation or too little stimulation" (182). Jack doesn't want to believe it: "What happens to good and evil in this system? Passion, envy and hate. Do they become a tangle of neurons?" (200). Jack prefers to believe the self is something more than "the sum total of [one's] data" (141), that emotions are somehow more real than neurons, that they're tied to destiny. But every element Jack cherishes as part of his own unique self is mediated from outside him, even his sexuality. Jack and Babette read to each other erotic literature from various centuries; on one occasion Jack decides on the twentieth century, choosing a magazine "that features letters from readers detailing their sexual experiences" (30). Paul Cantor points out that Jack's ability to choose a fantasy from any century is a freedom, but the price he pays for adopting the role is that he becomes merely an actor.
In *White Noise* the autonomous self becomes the inauthentic self. As this episode shows, the sexual identity of Jack and Babette dissolve into a sea of erotic possibilities. To gain the freedom they crave, they must transpose sex onto an imaginary plane, where their supposedly most private experience turns out to be mediated by the fantasies of others. (Cantor 43)

Repression and nostalgia work in similar ways to produce the inauthentic self. Everyone knows there's no escaping death; Murray suggests that our natural response is to repress, disguise, bury, and exclude, using "unconscious tools to perform the necessary disguising operations" (288). When Babette tells Jack she's afraid to die, he scrambles for the cover she has taken off: "How can you be sure it is death you fear?" he asks. "Maybe you just have a personal problem that surfaces in the form of a great universal subject....There must be something else, an underlying problem" (196-97). In times of uncertainty, the yearning for return to some idealized past--nostalgia--takes on a tinge of desperation. Denise's room is an "archaeology of childhood" because it is "part of her strategy in a world of displacements to make every effort to restore and preserve, keep things together for their value as remembering objects, a way of fastening herself to a life" (103). Nostalgia is more than a harmless illusion--it is a way of falsifying emotions. Certain Nazi buildings were designed to "decay gloriously, impressively, like Roman ruins," the ruin being built into
the creation in order to shape "the longings of future
generations" (257-58). Jack is himself nostalgic about
religion and belief; though he does not believe, he is
shocked to discover the nuns don't either:

I said to my nun, "What does the Church say
about heaven today? Is it still the old heaven,
like that, in the sky?"
She turned to glance at the picture.
"Do you think we are stupid?" she said. (317)

Jack is nostalgic as well about the concept of
selflessness. After he shoots Willie Mink, Jack's efforts
to help Willie make him feel "large and selfless, above
resentment. This was the key to selflessness," or so it
seems to him as he kneels over him (314). When their blood
mingles on Jack's clothes so that he cannot tell their
blood apart, he feels his "humanity soar"; he feels "a
spaciousness to this moment, an epic pity and compassion."
But this elation is merely an extension of the elation he
feels from his crime, and not a true transcendence. "It
hadn't occurred to me that a man's attempts to redeem
himself might prolong the elation he felt when he
committed the crime he now sought to make up for" (315).

As in Mao II, the deepest strategy for coping with
fear and uncertainty is narrative: stories, structure, the
face we put on things. Through these stories we "create a
space between things as we felt them at the time and as we
speak them now. This is the space reserved for irony,
sympathy and fond amusement, the means by which we rescue
ourselves from the past" (30). But narratives and other plots "move deathward," Gladney says. We "edge nearer death every time we plot" because like all strategies, plots allow us to evade ourselves for a time, giving us delusions of meaning and control.

In White Noise, as in DeLillo’s previous novels, language organizes perceptions, gives meaning to events, creates its own reality. The power of language is dramatized in two hilarious scenes, the first of which involves Babette’s objection to the use of the term "enter" to denote penetration in pornography. "We’re not lobbies or elevators," she tells Jack:

"I don’t care what these people do as long as they don’t enter or get entered."
"Agreed."
"I entered her and began to thrust."
"I’m in total agreement," I said.
"‘Enter me, enter me, yes, yes.’"
"Silly usage, absolutely."
"‘Insert yourself, Rex. I want you inside me, entering hard, entering deep, yes, now, oh.’"
I began to feel an erection stirring. How stupid and out of context. (29)

The second scene involves a group of airline passengers who believe they are about to crash and die.

Certain elements in the crew had decided to pretend that it was not a crash but a crash landing that was only seconds away. After all, the difference between the two is only one word. Didn’t this suggest that the two forms of flight termination were more or less interchangeable? How much could one word matter?...The news spread through the plane, the term was repeated in row after row. "Crash landing, crash landing." They saw how easy it was, by adding one word, to maintain a grip on the future, to extend it in
consciousness if not in actual fact. (91)
In both instances, the words themselves form a separate reality that supersedes what the characters perceive with their senses. This is Willie Mink’s condition, that he cannot distinguish words from things, so that when Jack says, "Plunging aircraft," Mink folds himself into the crash position automatically, "throwing himself into it, like a child or a mime" (310). But a similar child-like faith in the reality of words leads Jack to name his first son Heinrich, to "shield him, make him unafraid. People were naming their children Kim, Kelly and Tracy" (63).

As DeLillo has shown throughout his work, words form our basic understanding of ourselves. Words don’t reflect the self as much as they create it, covering the silence at the core of existence. But in White Noise, the words closest to this core often come from advertising. Advertising jingles, such as the one for Ray-Ban Wayfarers, periodically run through Jack’s mind (212). Brand names make up most of the three- or four-item lists that appear throughout the novel:

Krylon, Rust-Oleum, Red Devil. (159)
"Tegrin, Denorex, Selsun Blue." (289)
MasterCard, Visa, American Express. (100)

These lists are not directly related to the scene at hand, but instead seem to present words in Jack's subconscious—-a difficult illusion in a first-person
narration. But while Winnie Richards speaks movingly about the preciousness of life, Jack watches "light climb into the rounded summits of high-altitude clouds" and then we get the list "Clorets, Velamints, Freedent"—three breath freshening products that use clouds as part of their TV image (229).

When Jack sees the first arc of Willie Mink's blood, he feels as if he sees "beyond words." Like the abecedarian cult in The Names, who use killing to get beyond words to "knowing," Jack knows for the first time "what red [is]" (312). This transcendence beyond words, DeLillo has said in an interview, can spring from common experience as well—there can be "a kind of radiance in dailiness."

I would call it a sense of the importance of daily life and of ordinary moments....Sometimes this radiance can be almost frightening. Other times it can be almost holy or sacred....a sense of something extraordinary hovering just beyond our touch and just beyond our vision. (DeCurtis 63)

A crying child is an everyday and often irritating experience, but when Wilder cries on one occasion for seven straight hours, the family regards him afterward with "something like awe....as though he'd just returned from a period of wandering in some remote and holy place, in sand barrens or snowy ranges" (79). Babette's affection for her hapless ex-husband Bob Pardee seems to Jack "deep and fond and generous enough to contain all the magical
counterspells to his current run of woe, although I knew, of course, as I went back to my book, that it was only a passing affection, one of those kindnesses no one understands" (58). Jack rightfully glories in his family, in the "secondary levels of life, these extrasensory flashes and floating nuances of being, these pockets of rapport forming unexpectedly" that make him believe they are "a magic act, adults and children together, sharing unaccountable things" (34). DeLillo connects this extraordinary wonder of life to the extraordinary dread of death, both springing from an intense inner conflict whose explanation is always just out of reach. The toxic cloud is terrifying, but also "spectacular, part of the grandness of a sweeping event."

Our fear was accompanied by a sense of awe that bordered on the religious. It is surely possible to be awed by the thing that threatens your life, to see it as a cosmic force, so much larger than yourself, more powerful, created by elemental and willful rhythms. (127)

The greater the terror the greater his awe, just as mediated fear likewise mediates transcendence. Gladney’s most sincere moments of transcendence are mediated by the image: watching children sleep is the "closest [he] can come to God"—but what he is seeing and feeling is a TV moment (147). When Gladney hears his daughter whisper in her sleep, "a language not quite of this world," he leans forward to hear the secret words from her deep
unconscious--but what he hears is "Toyota Celica" (155). At first this seems like the punch line--Gladney has mistaken a brand name for his daughter's deepest words of self--but DeLillo goes beyond the satire to recover transcendence again, encompassing rather than originating from the image, finding in language the means to acknowledge and to go beyond language's finite, inconsistent, deceptive nature to describe something truer than true. A simple brand name, part of "every child's brain noise," but still the words are "beautiful and mysterious, gold-shot with looming wonder....Whatever its source, the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence" (155).

In White Noise, the human condition is characterized by uncertainty, ambiguity, and mediation: our medium is chaos; our reality, an illusion. Tourists at the most photographed barn in America attempt to see the barn by turning it into an image--composed, simplified, a form which provides meaning. Images mediate perception, thoughts, feelings, even sexuality, but the deeper mediation comes from language itself. Language is our only way to apprehend what is real, yet the real is inexpressible. Words falsify and distort whatever we pin them to. Language is ambiguous, evasive--like death, it cannot be pinned down. DeLillo's achievement is his success in unboxing the lexicon, using language to reveal
rather than hide language's inconsistencies and
deceptions, its mediations, and using language to press
beyond irony and satire to achieve a truer sense of wonder
about ourselves, and what we have to say.

Like White Noise, Libra (1988) is a chronicle of our
time, a picture of chaos and uncertainty. There's always
"something they aren't telling us," plotter David Ferrie
tells Lee Harvey Oswald. "Something we don't know about.
Truth isn't what we know or feel. It's the thing that
waits just beyond" (333). As the brig guard tells Oswald,
striking him though Oswald had quoted the Marine manual
verbatim, "There are no right answers" (104). In an
interview appearing in Rolling Stone, DeLillo talks of a
loss of "manageable reality" that he traces back to the
assassination of John F. Kennedy. "We seem much more aware
of elements like randomness and ambiguity and chaos since
then" (DeCurtis 48). Like retired CIA agent Nicholas
Branch's "secret history" of the assassination, Libra is
composed of layers, models of models, the world within the
world. There is the plot itself, which is a simulation of
reality. Every step is planned, every incident leading up
to the event designed. The conspirators "leave a dim
trail. The evidence is ambiguous," but it points to a
second, deeper lie: the assassination team comes from
Cuba. "We do the whole thing on paper," Win says. "We
script a person or persons out of ordinary pocket litter" (28). If the plot is a simulation of reality, Branch's history is twice removed, a representation of a simulated event. And though it is a "secret" history, meant only for the CIA's own closed collection, Branch, like Ferrie, is convinced there's "something they aren't telling him" (442). What, finally, is the nature of the real? What constitutes an event? There are no easy cases, KGB agent Kirilenko decides, thinking about Oswald's defection. Like the mathematical axioms he learned as a schoolboy, "necessary truths" falter badly when subjected to rigorous examination. "No plane surfaces here," he says. "We are living in curved space" (164).

Nor are there easy cases when it comes to the self: Oswald, for example, schemes to become a real defector to Russia by posing as a false defector posing as a real defector. Oswald's isolation and loneliness lead him not on the path of self-discovery but toward the manufacture of a secret self. While the men involved in the assassination of Kennedy are an extraordinary collection of spies, CIA agents, Mafiosi and political malcontents, the real subject in Libra is the secret life of ordinary people--like Dale Fitzke, who works with Oswald at a graphics arts firm in West Dallas, and who tells Oswald, "I love being in a position where I can exchange fascinating stuff with someone. Like you tell me, I tell
you" (274). Ultimately, it is language that renders the secrets, the suppressions, the ambiguity and uncertainty that swirl around the events of November 22, 1963. Conspirator Larry Parmenter marvels at the way language always finds "a deeper level, a secret level where those outside the cadre [can] not gain access to it" (117). But as language is a way in, an inward-bending secret and a power, it can also be a way out, a path to innocence, to knowing. Like The Names, Libra ends in an cry for pity and for justice from Marguerite Oswald, who fuses fragments from media cliches and magazine ads to try to tell the story she can never grasp whole: the splintered, blistered life of poverty and loneliness.

In Libra, as in Delillo's previous novels, our understanding of reality is revealed as a construct, a fiction. "Everything is supposed to be something," says David Ferrie. "But it never is. That's the nature of existence" (65). Like the hostage in Mao II, Oswald knows the prison cell is the "basic state, the crude truth of the world" (418), a metaphor of the human condition. Compiling his history, Branch concedes everything:

He questions everything, including the basic suppositions we make about our world of light and shadow, solid objects and ordinary sounds, and our ability to measure such things, to determine weight, mass and direction, to see things as they are, recall them clearly, be able to say what happened. (300-301)

The nature of reality is ambiguous, contradictory,
impossible to pin down; it is screened by language and yet, as Ferrie says, "Only a fool rejects the need to see beyond the screen" (321). To see beyond we construct a model, and pretend the model is the real thing. This is done innocently, every day, when we plan our weekend, or empathize with a friend, or when Beryl Parmenter sends newspaper clippings to friends, inviting them to see "the world" through "one-column strips" (259). It is also done less innocently. Lee creates the illusion of an entire organization with a few handbills and a rubber stamping kit: "All he had to do was stamp the committee's initials on a handbill or piece of literature. Stamp some numbers and letters. This makes it true" (313). Similarly, the CIA-sponsored revolution in Guatemala is described as "a class project in the structure of reality": radio broadcasts supposedly coming from well-entrenched rebel outposts actually originate from a barn in Honduras, running "[r]umors, false battle reports, meaningless codes, inflammatory speeches, orders to non-existent rebels." The government falls shortly after the announcement of five thousand rebel troops advancing on the capital, though the actual force consists of "several trucks and a crowded station wagon, about a hundred and fifty ragged recruits" (125).
The aura of ambiguity and uncertainty gives a desperate edge to the characters' search for pattern, for cause-and-effect, for meaning. Oswald believes in destiny because it is "larger than facts or events. It is something to believe in outside the ordinary borders of the senses, with God so distant in our lives" (204). For some in *Libra* the CIA serves as God, with its power to coerce, to make things happen, to gain access to inner secrets. The Agency is omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient—yet its own truth remains a perfect secret: it fakes its own files: "The deeper the ambiguity," says agent Larry Parmenter, "the more we believe, the more we trust, the more we band together" (259). Belief seems necessary to give life meaning, for meaninglessness, worse than cold, hunger, fear or pain, cannot be endured. All his life, Oswald has been looking for that one event that will give his life meaning, make it coherent. As a young man he convinces himself he could "be all he can be" in the Marines, but in the Marines he dreams of defection to Russia. In Russia, when his wife Marina tells him she is pregnant, he thinks "his life [makes] sense at last." A father has "a place, an obligation" (206). But the feeling wears off, along with his idealism about Russia, and while he dreams of the purer state in Cuba, he winds up back in the United States, where he hopes to find his true identity in the assassination of General Walker. From that
ambiguous disappointment, it is a relatively short step to the assassination of the president. But even after that, sitting in his prison cell, Oswald waits only "for the next event," for someone or something to tell him finally who he is, how he should live, and how he should speak (416). Indeed, Win Everett uses Oswald so easily because Everett knows first hand that desperate men "give their solitude a purpose and a destiny." Creating a plot, like stalking a victim, "can be a way of organizing one's loneliness, making a network out of it, a fabric of connections" (147).

History, like destiny or God, also gives meaning; for Oswald, it is the true story he is always trying to be a part of. Oswald longs to be "swept along," to "find himself in the stream of no-choice, the single direction....History means to merge. The purpose of history is to climb out of your own skin" (101). He believes that when he reaches the point where he is no longer separate from the true struggle that goes on around him, he will be "done with being a pitiful individual, done with isolation" (322). To Oswald, history is a closed plot, a destiny, the only true force and power.

But the idea of history as a single truth or even a single story is indefensible. Though David Ferrie defines history as "the sum total of all the things they aren't telling us" (321)--an actuality that one can arrive at
with enough knowledge—history is conceptually closer to fiction than to fact. Historian Louis Mink traces the current belief in history as "an untold story" to the discredited idea of Universal History, which claims that "the ensemble of human events belongs to a single story" with a single theme (130). Although that idea is no longer viable, the presuppositions of the idea are still at work—for example, in the notion that events are actualities, that one can talk about them in a true or false way. Nicholas Branch discovers that as the data keep coming in, as new lives enter the record, the "past is changing as he writes" (301). He thinks of "Lee H. Oswald" as a kind of technical diagram, "part of some exercise in the secret manipulation of history" (377). History is the imposition of form and meaning on neutral facts; the writing of any history, from Oswald's Historic Diary to Branch's secret history of the assassination, "validates the experience" by bringing "a persuasion and form to events" (211).

The traditional distinction between the truth of history and the falseness of fiction break down in actual practice—histories are full of things that aren't true, just as fictions are full of things that are. A further difficulty arises when one attempts to determine the sense in which a narrative may be true or false—a question of form, as well as individual statements. Individual
statements can be tested for truth, but not the combination of those statements, not the form in which they are given (Mirk 144). Thus, when Oswald asks brig-mate Bobby R. Dupard what he is charged with, Bobby replies, "There was a fire to my rack, which they accused me. But in my own mind I could like verbalize it either way" (98). Years later, alone in his cell after the assassination, Oswald too contemplates the various ways to "verbalize" his crime: "After the crime comes the reconstruction. He will have motives to analyze, the whole rich question of truth and guilt....Here is a crime that clearly yields material for deep interpretation" (434). While the bare facts may appear neutral, once those facts are given form the resulting narrative can never be free of the stain of interpretation, ideology. From the first minute of the revolution, Fidel Castro occupied himself with "inventing a convenient history of the revolution to advance his grab for power" (185), as did Trotsky, Lenin, and Stalin. This is one of the tasks of authority, to write the history that validates that authority.

"Russia is not what they say," young Oswald tells his friend Robert Sproul. "The whole thing is they lie to us about Russia" (40). In the Marines, Oswald is certain he can become an officer, but he's afraid the authorities might "rig the thing against him" (98). Throughout Oswald's life, the "authorities" become more powerful as
they become more abstract, until at the end, the conspirators are the most powerful and abstract group of all. "They've been watching you a long time, Leon," Ferrie says. "Think about them. Who are they? What do they want?" (332). They have "plans" for Oswald. It is easy for him to believe they'd been "working things around him, knowing the time would come" (329). If history is the sum of the manipulations, lies, and simulations of the powerful unseen, Oswald doesn't "want to enter history," Ferrie tells him. "What you really want is out" (384).

Recently, our understanding of history has become less simple, certain, and immediate because of the explosion of images and models, what Lentricchia calls the "environment of the image" (Introducing 198). For example, in Libra Kennedy is not so much a man of courage and intelligence as he is the image of courage and intelligence. Win Everett believes Kennedy's actions are "pure public relations, the kind of gleaming imagery" that marks his administration (51). The U-2 incident illustrates the effect of this environment--this simulacrum--on world politics. When a U.S. spy plane is shot down over the Soviet Union, neither party is as interested in establishing the truth as it is in putting the best "spin" on the event. Until Soviet officials produce the wreckage, the pilot, and the spy photos, the official U.S. version is that the Soviets shot down a
harmless weather plane. But the Soviets participate in the
game as well, making a show of denouncing the West,
sending the pilot on a public relations tour of Moscow
rather than "torturing him to get some answers they liked"
(192). The final twist in the event, the twist that most
clearly bears the mark of the simulacrum, is the rumor
that the plane hadn't been shot down at all, but had been
sabotaged by the CIA to wreck an upcoming summit between
Eisenhower and Kruschev (194).

The CIA is a model, a world within the world of
government, bringing to the surface a picture of the
administration's "guilty wishes" (364). The Agency sets up
simulated corporations to facilitate laundering money,
weapons, and information; they deliberately obscure the
lines so that no one can tell "where the agency [leaves]
off and the corporations beg[im]" (126). As a model, the
Agency is "a better-working version of the larger world"
(127). Similarly, FBI agent Bateman tells Oswald that in
New Orleans right now "black is white is black. In other
words people are playing havoc with the categories" (310).
Yet the agent himself is one of those people: he convinces
Oswald to set up a Fair Play for Cuba organization at 544
Camp Street, the home of Bannister's Detective Agency and
a clearinghouse for anti-Castro activity. Bateman wants
Oswald to pose as a rightist posing as a leftist, in order
to spy on Bannister.
"It goes round and round."
"You seem to pretend."
"But I'm not pretending."
"But you are pretending." (311)

To be sure, DeLillo's exploration of plots in *Libra* illustrates the complicated relationship between the simulated and the real, for the novel is structured as a double narrative, the life of Oswald side-by-side with the life of the plot. The conspirators' plot is tightly woven, unified in time and action, connected in cause and effect, rich in messages and meaning. Oswald's life, in contrast, is episodic, unconnected, wandering. What DeLillo gives us in *Libra*, writes Lentricchia, is one perfectly shaped, intention-driven narrative, while folded within it is a second narrative, his imagined biography of Oswald, "a plotless tale of an aimless life propelled by the agonies of inconsistent and contradictory motivation, a life without coherent form" (*Introducing* 201). As a consequence, Oswald's aimlessness prompts the reader to take on Oswald's project, to find form, meaning, to find the event that will shape this life, give it coherence and logic, a recognizable shape. But simultaneously DeLillo presents that event--the plot to assassinate the President--marching logically, single-mindedly, purposefully deathward. Win Everett, the plot originator and creator of the "Lee Harvey Oswald" who shoots the
President, knows there is a "tendency of plots to move toward death."

A plot in fiction, he believe[s], is the way we localize the force of the death outside the book, play it off, contain it. The ancients staged mock battles to parallel the tempests in nature and reduce their fear of the gods who warred across the sky. He worrie[s] about the deathward logic of his plot....He ha[s] a foreboding that the plot [will] move to a limit, develop a logical end. (221)

Win believes it is necessary "to wing a bystander or Secret Service man" in order to validate the experience, to "show them it is real" (223), and also to bring it closer to death, in order to achieve the full magical effect of simulation, the alleviation of fear. This particular plot is not entirely unique. In its layered complexity it is similar to the CIA's plot to invade Cuba. It is not the surface lie but the second, underlying lie, that is the "true" message. The conspirators are counting on investigators to rip aside the Oswald facade and get to the Cuban connection. Everett hopes the attempt takes place in Miami because the "message would be clearest there," but wherever it takes place, the investigation must uncover the fact that "Kennedy wanted Castro dead, that plots were devised, approved at high levels, put into motion, and that Fidel or his senior aides decided to retaliate. This was the major subtext and moral lesson of Win Everett's plan" (53).
Though abstract, separate from the world, plots have a way of connecting to and becoming part of the world. Creating a plot is a way of shaping the future. Plots are attractive because they make sense, they possess form, give coherence, yield answers—political plots no less than fictional ones. From the outside, the narrator tells us, a conspiracy looks like the perfect working of a scheme.

A conspiracy is everything that ordinary life is not. It's the inside game, cold, sure, undistracted, forever closed off to us. We are the flawed ones, the innocents, trying to make some rough sense of the daily jostle. Conspirators 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. (440-41)

But then again, says the narrator, "maybe not." When plots merge with the world, they are altered by happenstance, their perfection splotched by time and chance. Win Everett invents a hypothetical shooter remarkably similar to the actual Lee Harvey Oswald, "a marksman, near anonymous, with minimal known history, the kind of man who surfaces in murky places, disappears, is arrested for some violent act, is released to drift again, to surface, to disappear" (50-51). But once the shooter materializes into "a name, a face, a bodily frame," Win fears that the complications will begin, that his plot will get away from him, take on a life of its own. He fears what might happen when the two merge, Oswald altering the construct as the construct
alters Oswald.

As the simulacrum affects our understanding of what is real, so it affects our understanding of who we are. In the age of the image, the line between image and original is often blurred. The conspirators' plant "fake Oswalds" all over Texas, but Kennedy, too, according to rumor, "goes around with ten or fifteen people who look just like him" (141). Dallas itself, claims disk jockey Russ "Weird Beard" Knight, is "like everywhere wants to be. Dress alike, talk alike, think alike. We're a model for the country. I'm not making it up. But the little itchy thing is seeping out" (382). As the distinction between original and image fades, so too does the distinction between identity and persona. Libra is not only about the extraordinary personas, gray-shaded characters such as George De Mohrenschildt, who "continually emerge[s] from a different past" (55), but also the everyday persona, the spy in everyone. Like Jack Gladney, David Ferrie makes a mask to hide his fear. "I learned Latin when I was your age," Ferrie tells Oswald. "I stayed indoors and learned a dead language, for fear of being noticed out there, made to pay for being who I was" (45). But this is a common strategy among the oppressed: the prostitute Mackey hires knows "some ways to disappear. You could be alone in a room with her and forget she was there" (217). Riding the subway, Oswald watches the people on the loading platforms
stare nowhere, "a look they'd been practicing for years."
He wonders, speeding past, "who they really were" (3).
Years later he learns the brig is much like the subway platforms: the trick is "to stay within your zone, avoid eye contact, accidental touch, gestures of certain types, anything that might hint at a personality behind the drone unit. The only safety [is] in facelessness" (108). Eventually Oswald abandons this strategy and, like Gladney, seeks to lose himself in something larger, to become a man of history. He aligns himself first with the Soviet Union, where "no choice, however small, is left to the discretion of the individual" (206) and then with Cuba, where the collective cry is "The individual must disappear" (186). It isn't a clear sense of self he seeks, but "a clear sense of role" (248).

Compared to the personas of Win Everett, T. J. Mackey, or Dr. Braunfels, the Japanese spy with "a mock girlishness about her, several layers of something tricky and derisive" (111), Oswald's may seem amateurish. But even for the amateur the secret life gives a sense of destiny, creates a design, a network of connections. It is "a second existence, the private world floating out to three dimensions" (277). The world used to be where people went to escape self, so where do we go now that the world is no longer "accessible"? "We invent a false name," Everett says, "invent a destiny, purchase a firearm
through the mail" (148).

Oswald's own false name is A. J. Hidell. He knows from a young age that he will need a secret name in order to join a secret cell and "talk theory into the night" (41). "Hidell" is taken from a fellow-marine, Heindel, who happens to walk by as Oswald is about to leave a transvestite bar he mistakenly walked into. "Hidell" means "don't tell" (89). When Ferrie touches Oswald seductively, he is really putting "a hand on Hidell" (341). It is Hidell who reads spy books (248), and who signs the order forms for Oswald's rifle and pistol (273). Oswald's wallet is full of Hideli, a "dozen layers to strip away. It was everything, together, Hidell" (407).

The complexity of the relationship between Oswald and his persona is revealed when one of the two slits his wrist in a Russian hotel bathroom. Is it an honest attempt? Why is it funny, he asks himself, and why is he "watching himself do it...?" (152). Hideli apparently makes the cut, because it's Hidell who "prepares to make his maker, ha ha" (151). But in what sense, exactly, will he "make his maker"? Does he mean to fashion Oswald, to put him together? Could he mean he will achieve the status of Oswald, as one might make bank president or make a basketball team? He could mean he is preparing to acquire Oswald, as one makes a friend or a fortune, or he may mean "make" in its slang sense, TV-police lingo meaning to
establish the identity of a suspect, to "run a make."

Reading through his diary later, Oswald feels "little charges of excitement" when he reads through his suicide attempt "in the voice of Hidell, theatrical, self-mocking. It was the true voice of that episode" (211). Is it possible for a false mask to produce a true voice? It becomes impossible for Oswald to tell where he ends and Hidell begins.

While the JFK plot simulates the real, Win Everett's other creation, his "shooter," simulates the human. The simulation, scripted "out of ordinary pocket litter" (28), is considered the real thing, in contrast to the "model" Mackey searches for—a real person with "a name, a face, a bodily frame (50). They will "put him together," help him "select a fantasy" (75). Win will build for him "an identity, a skein of persuasion and habit, ever so subtle." He builds in quirks and coincidence, because it's the quirks that mark the simulation as authentic (78), the lingering mystery that "makes it real" (147).

In the complex conspiracies of Libra, the truth is buried below the surface lie and the hidden lie—a tripartite structure that coincides with DeLillo's concept of self: on the surface is the persona, a mask for the world; underneath is identity, a mask for the self; and buried far beneath this, in some "unspeakable" place beyond language, is the true self. In contrast to the true
self, identity in DeLillo's characters usually comes from outside the individual, and is something to live up to. For example, Lee Oswald takes his early identity from the Marine Corps; when he put on his uniform for the first time, he tells Bobby Dupard, he "looked in the mirror and said it's me" (106). Jack Ruby is in many ways a double of Oswald, especially in his confused identity. A strip-bar owner with underworld connections, but also "a friend of the police in the most pro-American city anywhere in the world" (268), Ruby, like Oswald, seems to be sitting in the balance, ready to be tilted either way.

Do I look swishy to you, Janet? What about my voice? People tell me there's a lisp. Is this the way a queer sounds to a neutral person? Do you think I'm latent or what? Could I go either way? Don't pee on my legs, Janet. I want the total truth. (349)

One motivation for grasping at an identity is fear of the self, fear of the awful mystery within. General Ted Walker, the hard-line right-winger who rails against "sell-out specialists and softliners, the weak sisters" (282), sits in his room at night confused and lost, thinking "of those uncombed boys in baggy jeans, sign-carriers, who shout dirty words into the night. They are soft beneath the drifting Cuban hair." Alone at night, without the crowds to give him his identity, he is "a stranger who mind-wanders into the midst of the other side, only following what he's always felt" (284).
Wondering what to do about Oswald, Kirilenko considers re-educating him, giving him "a new identity," and sending him back to the United States. "That's what they all want, isn't it, these people who live in corners inside themselves, in blinds, in hidey-holes? A second and safer identity. Teach us how to live, they say, as someone else" (166).

Mackey understands the truth about Oswald, that he is one of those solitaries who "plan eternally toward some total moment," one singular event that will tell them who they are (386). In this Oswald has something in common with Win Everett, who feels the same way about his plot: "Some things we wait for all our lives without knowing it. Then it happens and we recognize at once who we are and how we are meant to proceed" (27). Sitting in his Dallas jail cell, Oswald feels ready to grow into the event, to grow "in self-knowledge, to explore the meaning of what he's done." This, he says, is the "true beginning":

he will vary the act a hundred ways, speed it up and slow it down, shift emphasis, find shadings, see his whole life change....His life had a single clear subject now, called Lee Harvey Oswald. (434-35)

Ever since the doppelgänger first arrived in romantic fiction, the double has been used to blur the distinction between reality and appearance, to confuse categories, to introduce doubt and uncertainty. Libra is full of doubles: pilot David Ferrie says he's "the dark scary side of John
Glenn" (65); returning from Russia, Oswald is Trotsky's double, seeing the New York skyline as Trotsky saw it, believing he can "feel the man's spirit" (214). CIA agent Larry Parmenter, who is personally motivated to get Cuba back because his fortune is invested in Cuban oil fields, is Mafia boss Carmine Latta's socially acceptable double. One effect of the pervasive doubling is a displacement of the traditional hierarchy of power: while Kennedy entertains the mistress of Mafioso Sam Giancana, the Mafiosi are in conference, at meetings, busy "running a country" (346). But the distinction between Sam Giancana and Kennedy is finally as irrelevant as their metaphorical sameness, writes Frank Lentricchia, because "the action is finally somewhere else--at a level of power, beyond the conspiracies of agents, where there is no head to cut off" (Introducing 204-5).

The CIA conspires with the Mafia to assassinate Castro; the Mafia consults with the CIA on obstruction of justice laws, perjury laws, and tax liens (174). In the age of the image, even dialectically opposed institutions seem indistinguishable from each other. "If you've got criminal tendencies," Bannister tells Mackey, "one of the places to make your mark is law enforcement" (64). The United States and the Soviet Union only appear to offer different ideologies and systems; in Libra the two cancel each other out--each are mirrored opposites in a larger
system. "First they hand me over to the psychiatrists," Win says about the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs. "Then they send me into exile. What country is this anyway?" (19). Oswald isn't surprised to be a "zero" in the capitalist system (106), but what surprises him is that he's also a "zero in the system" in Moscow: "I am shocked!! My dreams!" (151). At the end, with as many photographers, news reporters, and TV cameramen "covering" Oswald as had "covered" Kennedy, it seems to Oswald as if he and Kennedy are partners: "[t]he figure of the gunman in the window [is] inextricable from the victim.... Everybody knew who he was now" (435). Likewise, when Ruby guns down Oswald he becomes identified with Oswald. In his cell, Ruby worries that he is "miscast, or cast as someone else, as Oswald. They are part of the same crime now. They are in it together and forever and together" (444). Moreover, his own past begins to merge with Oswald's: truancy, poverty, "going back to the first blow, the shock of what it means to be nothing, to know you are nothing, to be fed the message of your nothingness every day for all your days" (445). Finally, he feels Oswald is "inside him now. How can he fight the knowledge of what he is? The truth of the world is exhausting" (445).
The disturbing strength of *Libra*, writes Lentricchia, is its refusal to offer its readers a comfortable place outside Oswald.

DeLillo does not...imply that all Americans are would-be murderous sociopaths. He has presented a politically far more unsettling version of normalcy, of an everyday life so utterly enthralled by the fantasy selves projected in the media as our possible third-person, and, more insidiously, an everyday life so enthralled by the charisma of the media, that it makes little useful sense to speak of sociopathy or of a lone gunman. Oswald is ourselves painted large, in scary tones, but ourselves. (*Introducing* 204-5)

When Lee comes home from his factory job, all "drudge and grime and long hours and low pay," Marina tells him about Montgomery Ward's "cool smooth musical interior" (229). She is "happy just to walk the aisles" (226) because it is not the actual purchase, the consummation, but the foreplay of desire that is TV advertising's object. "To consume in America is not to buy; it is to dream," says David Bell in *Americana*. If buying were enough to satisfy, eventually buying would cease--but the goal of advertising is not to fulfill needs but to produce dissatisfaction with the self in order to trigger the move to third person. Advertising is merely "the suggestion that the dream of entering the third person singular might possibly be fulfilled" (*Americana* 270).
Advertising language floats in the very air: Oswald hears it in casual conversation and in the taunts of bullies:

"He sucks Clorets."
"Bad-breath kissing sweet in seconds."

"Smoke a Fag-a-teeer."
"Ex-treeeeem-ly mild." (9)

When he cuts his wrist in Russia, what comes to his mind is not a final reckoning but an advertisement: "Gillette sponsors the World Series on TV--they use a talking parrot" (151). More importantly, when Lee decides he wants to feel like part of the family again, part of America, he knows he must "start saving right away for a washing machine and car....an apartment with a balcony, their own furniture for a change, modern pieces, sleek and clean. These are standard ways to stop being lonely" (371).

In Libra, DeLillo is less occupied with the conspiracy than with the aura that produces it, with the power of the image to shape our understanding of the real and of ourselves. For example, when Bobby Dupard talks about the South, he describes the TV footage of segregation, rather than his own experience (271). Kennedy's TV image is ubiquitous; it "floats over the landscape at night, entering dreams and fantasies, entering the act of love between husbands and wives" (324). From the beginning, Oswald's environment is dominated by television: in the Bronx he plays hooky to
watch TV all day (11); in New Orleans, even out of the house, "TV voices [travel] across the backyards and driveways" around the neighborhood (306). For Oswald, who grew up with television, the collusion between image and self is an everyday occurrence, but for Marina, out for a stroll with Lee and the baby in downtown Fort Worth, seeing herself on a TV screen in a department store window display is a shock, "the world gone inside out." She keeps "walking out of the picture and coming back. She [is] amazed every time she sees herself return" (227). It is a moment Oswald nearly shares in the end, as Beryl Parmenter imagines it: watching his death over and over again on television, she thinks she sees "something in Oswald's face, a glance at the camera before he was shot, that put him here in the audience, among the rest of us....tells us that he is outside the moment, watching with the rest of us" (447).

Movie images seem to shape even more powerfully than TV. Oswald's reveries are rooted in movie images, "the fantasy of night, rain-slick streets, the heightened shadows of men in dark coats, like men on movie posters" (46)--an image he projects onto Tokyo's nudo district: "Rain-slick streets like the streets in his reveries, movie shadows and dark-coated men" (86). There is a truth beneath the fact that as a young man Oswald "disappeared for hours at the movies" (42). When John Wayne takes time
out from shooting a movie to visit the Marines in Atsugi, Lee thinks he looks "doubly real." He wants to get close to John Wayne and "say something authentic." Hearing John Wayne laugh, he finds it "remarkable and startling to see the screen laugh repeated in life" (93). Movie images, like TV images, instill in the viewer the desire to find self-annihilation and fulfillment in the third-person, a merging of the image and the self.

Other characters in Libra are similarly affected by movie images. Captured in Russia, Francis Powers thinks they might shoot him in the courtyard, "like a movie, to muffled drums" (191). One of the conspirators, Wayne Elko, sees nearly everything through the images of his favorite movie, Seven Samurai. To Wayne, the conspirators are like the movie characters, "warriors without masters, willing to band together...to win back a country" (145). It "hits him with a flash and a roar" that the conspiracy itself, the plot to kill the President of the United States, the most far-flung, deep-reaching, chaos-producing plot of the century, is a lot like the plot in Seven Samurai, in which "men outside society are called on to save a helpless people from destruction. Swinging those two-handed swords" (178). Wayne believes there is a friendship among men who carry guns. His experience "in life and in the movies" tells him that peace can ruin a good friendship: this is "the lesson of the samurai" (295). Wayne Elko's mission is
to kill Oswald after the assassination. He is to ambush Oswald in a movie house, but he doesn't shoot right away: he watches the movie, Cry of Battle, and waits for the tension to build, for the music to reach a crescendo, because "that's the way they do it in the movies" (412).

The image is dangerous because it is more compelling than the real. It's the image, the "idea of Russia" that impresses Oswald (82): "It's the great theory come to life" (110). When reality doesn't match up to the image, he doesn't give up his image, he gives up the country. Likewise, Oswald does not resent Kennedy the man so much as he is "tantalized and provoked" by his image (Goodheart 129). If one strength of Libra is that it keeps the reader inside Oswald, another strength is that it recreates the environment that allows Oswald a comfortable place outside himself, in the third person. Self-detachment is rampant. As a child, Oswald hears other children talk about themselves in third person: "The kid gets a job in construction. First thing, he buys ten shirts with Mr. B. collars. He saves his money, before you know it he owns a car....Who's better than the kid?" (8-9). Detachment from self becomes second nature, particularly in morally ambivalent situations. Thus Oswald "sees himself" having sex with Mitsuko: "He [is] partly outside the scene. He [has] sex with her and monitor[s] the scene, waiting for the pleasure to grip him" (84-5). When he tells the
Japanese spy Konno about the U-2 plane, he is "not quite connected to himself." He speaks "less to Konno than to the person Konno would report to, someone out there, in the floating world" (89). Contemplating suicide, Oswald feels "a sense of distance from the scene," picturing himself sitting on the tile floor (153).

Many characters in Libra live in the third person, inside the double-walled insulation of personas and identity. Even what they think of as their truest selves are often mere simulations, fantasy images pieced together or packaged, offered, and swallowed whole. Young Oswald believes his "real life" is secret, "the inward-spinning self," made up of secret books and reveries—but his books are propaganda, and his reveries come from the movies. Learning Russian, he believes he is opening up to a "larger and deeper version of himself" when all he is doing is imitating Braunfels, "watching her lips, repeating words and syllables" (113). The deepest level of Oswald, Ferry tells him, comes out of "dreams, visions, intuitions, prayers" (339). But this is exactly the area Ferry manipulates. "I'm in his mind," he tells Banister. "I'm there" (353).

As no final version will ever be known of 22 November 1963, Larry Parmenter believes that no final truth can be known about the self, about motive and need. "There is always another level, another secret, a way in which the
heart breeds a deception so mysterious and complex it can only be taken for a deeper kind of truth" (260). There are layers upon layers. In Mexico City, having been denied entrance to Cuba, Oswald "feels he is living at the center of an emptiness." He longs for form, for "a structure that includes him, a definition clear enough to specify where he belongs" (357). This is what he has hoped for from history, to take up the struggle in an arena "where there is no borderline between one's own personal world, and the world in general" (1). Walking toward the Texas Theater after the shooting, he has that "lurking thought, the idea of others making the choice now. He want[s] to believe it [is] out of his hands" (407).

In his Rolling Stone interview, DeLillo says that once he came upon the "abrupt, broken rhythm" of Oswald's voice, he knew he'd found the "prose counterpart to...Oswald's inner life," as the language itself began to suggest "the deepest motivation of the characters" (DeCurtis 55). Language mediates and creates; it is a secret and a power (38). It adapts, always finding a deeper level, a secret level. It mediates by imposing form, but form gives meaning—and what is more, it gives us choice, the interpretations Dupard refers to when he says, about his involvement in setting his bunk on fire, "in my own mind I could like verbalize it either way" (98). He's not burning his bunk, he tells himself, he's
"fumigating these lice on cut of here. In other way of saying it, it's like I'm doing [the guards'] job for them" (107).

As Gladney's language in White Noise ultimately transcends Gladney, so too does the language of Marguerite Oswald, who fuses fragments from TV, radio, and women's magazine ads into a language which finds its own honesty, dignity, and passion:

I stand here on this brokenhearted earth and I look at the stones of the dead, a rolling field of dead, and the chapel on the hill, and the cedar trees leaning in the wind, and I know a funeral is supposed to console the family with the quality of the ceremony and the setting. But I am not consoled. And this is from oldentimes, that the men will kill each other and the women will be left to stand at the grave. But I am not content to stand, your honor. (454-55)

Despite the overblown sentiment of "this brokenhearted earth," her voice is resonant with memory and loss--what is more, her faith in words exposes the empty and cynical language of those around her.

We use language to explain ourselves and others, to understand what is happening. We tell stories, as Oswald does the first time he meets David Ferrie, experiencing it but at the same time recounting it for his friend Robert, seeing himself telling the story (45). As if to ground himself, he tells himself stories in times of crisis. Being driven to KGB headquarters, he sees himself "telling the story of this ride to someone who resembled Robert
Sproul" (159); in his mind he tells a slightly different version to someone who looks like the man at the U.S. embassy, but who listens "with interest to the story of an ex-Marine who has infiltrated the Soviet intelligence apparatus as part of the U.S. Navy's false defector program" (164). After shooting Kennedy, he has three stories. The first he sees himself telling to "a man with a rugged Texas face, but friendly, but understanding. Pointing out the contradictions. Telling how he was tricked into the plot. What is it called, a patsy?" (400-01). But like Bobby Dupard, he can "play it either way." He didn't shoot the President at all—he's the "victim of a total frame. They'd been rigging the thing for years, watching him, using him, creating a chain of evidence with the innocent facts of his life" (418). There is a third way he can play it: he could tell them he was the lone gunman. "He did it to protest the anti-Castro aims of the government, to advance the Marxist cause into the heart of the American empire. He had no help. It was his plan, his weapon. Three shots. All struck home. He was an expert shot with a rifle" (426). He believes they will release him "once he settle[s] on the right story" (416).

Marguerite Oswald also tells herself stories. Watching television late at night, she runs backward through the images that make up her life and Lee's: Mr. Ekdahl's deceit, Robert Oswald dead on the lawn.
Frustrated with the State Department, she "work[s] into" her complaint, "starting from the time he was determined at age sixteen about joining the Marines" (200). To the Warren commission, she says, "I cannot state the truth of this case with simple yes or no. I have to tell a story." She will "wear a camera and make a photographic record of Lee's life, getting houses and rooms on the record," but she "cannot pin it down to a simple statement" (449-50). "I have to work into this in my own way," she says, "starting with the day I took him home from the Old French Hospital in New Orleans. I am reciting a life and I need time" (455).

Like ritual, narrative is a primary tool of thinking and knowing, useful to ease fear, to erase doubt and uncertainty, to help us feel less alone, to cover silence. Listening to his daughter read a simple child's story, Win Everett senses even in a child's plot the antidote to uncertainty and doubt, a shield against terror, loneliness, madness. He senses "what it [is] like to be a child again," to see what she sees, line by line, feeling "a joy so strong it might be measured in the language of angelic orders, of powers and dominations" (220-21). All plots give form, the wholeness of a beginning, a middle, and an end; they create the illusion of cause and effect that seems to provide meaning, purpose, the single-mindedness strong enough to contain all the
ambiguity and chaos in the world. Plot becomes the "folk magic" David Ferrie longs for in his dark time after the assassination, to help ease his fear (427).

As plots give form and meaning, so do the masks of persona and identity. The Marine Corps, Russia and Cuba are all successively attractive to Oswald because each promises to tell him who he is, how to dress, what to say. In an atmosphere of confusion and fear, the instinct is to hide instead of act. But even coming out of hiding, deciding to act, to merge with the greater struggle, Oswald cannot get out of the simulacrum to the real. History will make his life coherent, he believes, if he can just find a way in; he believes A. J. Hidell might get him there.

But more sophisticated than any of these crude masks is that offered by the media image. Television and movie images proliferate in Oswald's mind, at first side-by-side with his own perceptions but gradually replacing them, so that eventually he sees a movie image every time he's on a dark rainy street. The final effect is that, as the two kinds of images merge in his mind, he can no longer differentiate between them, just as he can no longer distinguish between himself and his persona. Hidell has made his maker.
DeLillo's protagonists are predominantly Underground Men: self-awareness is not a goal but a curse to be warded off by routine and detachment; knowledge serves only to make them aware of the unknowable; and their search for candor and honesty reveal only the depths of their self-deception. Until Freud, the self was commonly regarded as an entity with fixed and pre-ordained traits, though writers as diverse as Rainer Maria Rilke and D. H. Lawrence saw self-definition as an unending process. For Lawrence, the self is constantly changing: "All things flow and change, and even change is not absolute. The whole is a strange assembly of apparently incongruous parts, slipping past one another" (535). William James's metaphor of the "stream of consciousness" converts the self from an entity into a movement or activity, dramatized in the central consciousness in Henry James's novels. This consciousness is not only aware of his or her feelings and thoughts, but is also a filter through which the external events must pass, a "reflecting and coloring
medium" to record not only the events but the value and meaning of those events. To this extent, the distinction between external and internal disappears: events are engaging only when they are mirrored in an engaged consciousness.

For Carl Jung, the self is the totality of the personality, embracing "not only the conscious but also the unconscious psyche." It is therefore unknowable: "There is little hope of our ever being able to reach even approximate consciousness of the self, since however much we may make conscious, there will always exist an indeterminate and indeterminable amount of unconscious material which belongs to the totality of self" (Storr 105). The psyche is composed of several subsystems: the ego, which is the sum total of thoughts, ideas, feelings, memories and perception; the personal unconscious, which contains everything repressed from the conscious; and the collective unconscious, which includes the archetypes--inborn psychic predispositions to perception, emotion, and behaviour. One of these archetypes is the persona. Jung's persona, like Delillo's, is "a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and, on the other, to conceal the true nature of the individual" (Storr 94). Another archetype is the Anima and Animus, the personification of the feminine nature of a man's unconscious and the
masculine nature of a woman's. For both DeLillo and Jung, then, personality is split into outer and inner; into "mask" and "soul." But Jung holds that the outer and inner are complementary: the persona is "inwardly compensated" by the anima, "for it is the anima that reacts to the persona" (Storr 96); while for DeLillo, both outer and inner are shaped by influences outside the self.

Jacques Lacan's theory of the subject proposes that the self is constructed in language. The infant is initially an "hommelette"--a little man and also like a broken egg spreading out in all directions. The child has no sense of self and no way of conceiving of itself as distinct, separate from what is other. During the "mirror-phase" of development, however, the child "recognizes" itself in the mirror as a distinct unit, much like David Bell does while shaving. Whenever Bell begins to wonder who he is, he tells us, he takes "the simple step of lathering my face and shaving. It all became so clear, so wonderful. I was blue-eyed David Bell" (Americana 11). But a gap appears when the child enters language, the primary feature of what Lacan calls the "Symbolic Order."

In order to speak, the child is compelled to contain in words her/his amorphous feelings and needs, which leads to a recognition of the difference between what s/he knows and what s/he can say. This effects the split between
conscious and unconscious. In order to speak, the child is compelled further to differentiate: to speak of herself/himself, s/he has to distinguish "I" from "you."

Subjectivity, then, is constructed in language. What is more, the world itself is intelligible only through words: there is no unmediated experience, no access to the raw reality of self or others. The mirror, which seems to present a unity, actually necessitates the first split, between the I which is perceived and the I which does the perceiving, while the entry into language necessitates a second split which reinforces the first, a split between telling and knowing, between the conscious self and the self which is only partly represented there. "There is a life inside this life," says Billy Twillicg. "A filling of gaps. There is something between the spaces. I am different from this. I am not just this but more"

(*Ratner's Star* 370). The unconscious comes into being in this gap—not a repository of biological drives, as Freud believed, but a construct, made up of elements which cannot be represented in the symbolic order. Entry into language allows us to communicate, to feel less alone; it also reduces our helplessness to the extent that it enables us to articulate our needs. But the tax exacted for language use is repression, the gap between what we are and what we can say, which makes us perpetually doubled, perpetually contradictory, perpetually under
conclusion.

For DeLillo as well, the logocentric ideal of a pure, simple self, a fixed entity, is illusory. Self-definition, like language itself, is always in transition because it is dependent on a play of differences. The scientific equation of self with one's "data," the totality of neurons and electrons, is clearly reductive. Jack Gladney, like most of DeLillo's characters, wants to believe his emotions and aspirations are larger than a synapse, that he is a unique being, with some measure of control over himself and his destiny. But every trait, quirk, and habit Jack cherishes as part of his own unique self turns out to be mediated from something outside him.

For DeLillo, as for Jung, the self seems to be composed of layers: the outer mask or persona, an inner mask of identity, as well as a core self, perceptible only as a nameless, formless silence, similar to the silence at the core of the universe, an amorphous root that resists representation, in language or in image. It is the untellable mystery, inviolate, defined by Billy Twillig as the space between himself and his idea of himself: "There is something in the space between what I know and what I am and what fills this space is what I know there are no words for" (Ratner's Star 370).
The problem of self-definition comes down to describing what is left when the sense-making things are taken away—routine, cause-and-effect, narrative, language, perception. Perception is the first mediation, DeLillo suggests, helping us to make sense by reducing everything it confronts, selecting and composing so that at times even the arbitrary notes of a boat whistle can sound like a tune. But it is in the empty places, the actual and metaphorical deserts, that DeLillo’s characters feel the tug of recognition from their own selves. Beneath the persona, beneath the "daily texture of life," there is a profound stillness, a silence. For James Axton, this is the most terrifying knowledge of all. This is the deepest reason for Axton’s fascination with the cult, for the terrible elation he feels when he first discovers the true meaninglessness of their act: it is the emptiness without speaking to the emptiness within.

In the face of uncertainty, confusion, doubt and fear, the characters develop strategies to trick themselves, to comfort and console, to make sense. They lose themselves in groups, create mannequin selves through brand name consumerism, repress the present, remake the past, imitate rather than feel. Susceptible to fear, they hide in the third person, using abstraction to divorce from themselves and their environment. But fleeing fear necessitates fleeing life and self, abandoning immediacy
and authenticity. In DeLillo’s austere calculation, facing our terror acquaints us with awe; shutting out death shuts out all life. One cannot have both safety and the fully lived experience. The persona is one strategy, perhaps the most common way to deal with fear and insecurity. Many of DeLillo’s characters, such as Libra’s General Walker, fear the awful mystery of who they are and so create a single, hard-edged persona to compensate. For others, such as Lee Harvey Oswald, the persona itself is composed of layers: he schemes to become a real defector to Russia by posing as a false defector posing as a real defector, and to spy on Bannister by posing as a rightist posing as a leftist. At every level the persona is performed, worn outwardly in costume and disguise. In Players and Running Dog, the persona is a consumable product. Like other products, personas vary in prestige, possess an exchange value, and operate in the same system as other products, as a sign in a coded system of signs.

This is contrasted with identity—what the characters think of as their true selves, but which turns out to be just another mask, another role. An identity is attractive because it represents the ideal of wholeness, of form; like plot, identity gives meaning. All his life, Oswald has been searching for an identity, for an event to shape his life, to catch up all the loose ends and contradictions, to make his life coherent. In contrast to
the Anima/Animus, which is complementary to, and thus shaped by the persona, for DeLillo identity is often shaped from outside, particularly by media images. Images invade consciousness so effectively that in *Americana*, David Bell believes the solid world is merely shadows and echoes, and identity itself a lifetime accumulation of advertising and movie images. Movie images are powerful because watching them the viewer experiences a "near obliteration of self-awareness" (*Players* 205). Pammy simulates the emotions she sees in a TV movie—which are themselves a simulation—in order to keep from feeling her own. The image is powerful because it is simpler and safer than the real. It prompts third-person self-detachment so often that this maneuver becomes second nature to most of DeLillo's characters, particularly in morally ambivalent situations. Many characters live life at two removes, inside the double-walled insulation of persona and identity. Oswald believes his inner life is secret, wholly his own, but it is made up of propaganda and movie images. "There is always another level, another secret, a way in which the heart breeds a deception so mysterious and complex it can only be taken for a deeper kind of truth" (*Libra* 260). What the characters think of as coming from themselves--their own needs and desires--are actually manipulated by external forces; their thoughts, emotions, sexuality, even perceptions are all mediated from outside.
them. These outside influences gain power through a corresponding internal drive to repress and alienate the self out of fear. KGB agent Kirilenko knows what people like Oswald want: a "second and safer identity. Teach us how to live, they say, as someone else" (Libra 166).

The persona is a mask for the world, identity a mask for the conscious self, but for DeLillo, as for Jung and Lacan, there is a deeper secret, an unknowable core that keeps us doubled, indeterminate. In Americana, the abstract nature of the self is emphasized in the central metaphor of the motel in the heart of everyman. In a duplicated room, within a duplicated motel, "you can easily forget who you are...you can sit on your bed and become simply man sitting on bed, an abstraction to compete with infinity itself" (257). In Great Jones Street the metaphor for self is Opel’s small crooked room, perfect for "testing the depths of silence" (25). In Players and Running Dog, the double life of the terrorist and spy is a metaphor for the layered self. While DeLillo’s novels have their share of spies, double agents, and terrorists, DeLillo’s deeper interest is in the double life of everyone, the secret life engendered by isolation and loneliness, the conspiracies that begin with the split in the individual.
Though DeLillo's characters and settings are diverse, they are held together by the particular aura of our time, marked by a proliferation of information, images and technology, the promised flowering of civilization and science. Yet the bloom of science is already fading, and the only certainty it has brought is the assurance that we don't really know what is out there or how it works. Along with our knowledge, the nature of the universe seems to expand: "It grows and grows. It curls into itself and bends back and then thrusts outward in a new direction. It refuses to be contained" (Ratner's Star 65). New technology seems to offer eternal life with one hand, but threatens global extinction with the other. The media dispenses information that is mostly useless, fragmented, misleading, confusing and threatening. Advertising images intensify self-consciousness while masking self-awareness. To many of DeLillo's characters, the entire environment seems to suggest massive conspiracy, cover-up, manipulation at the level of our very senses.

In an age of simulation, the most difficult task is to determine what is real. DeLillo implies that true knowing, as distinguished from thinking or reasoning, stops when a child first learns perspective--that is, the shattering of a single perspective. From that moment, perception becomes an act of creation, although it hides its own workings. We don't actually see what is real, we
construct it, make a model in our minds, based on the selective signals the brain integrates from the senses. Our senses mediate between us and the real, reducing it in order to begin making sense of it. What we see is shaped by our senses in combination with our own sense-making predilection. For example, science has discovered what seems to be a binary principle at work in the structure of the universe—but this principle also can be seen in history, in language, even in ourselves—in fact, everywhere we look deeply. This grand, organizing binary principle may in fact be a result of the binary operation of our own senses and the twin hemispheres of our minds. We don’t really know, because everywhere we look we see only ourselves. Some of DeLillo’s characters understand this better than others. End Zone’s Taft Robinson has two clocks in his room, slightly different, to remind him of "how much space has to be reconstructed" (238).

If perception is the first mediation, language is the second. To make sense of what we perceive, we re-present the original in words. As with the nautiloids in End Zone (169), this duplication obliterates the original, and what we apprehend as the "plain truth, right before our eyes" is actually twice-removed, and already imperceptibly stamped with our own character. Recognizing the mind’s propensity to see what it looks for, characters such as James Axton begin to look for a way out of the circle of
consciousness. This is the project of The Names's abecedarian cult, to break out of this subjective prison, to "stop making history," by committing a meaningless act powerful enough to short-circuit the mind's capacity to make sense by making words. Volterra and Bell try to do in film what the cult tries to do through killing: to get beyond the sense-making illusions of form in order to get to the real thing.

But the nature of reality is ambiguous, contradictory, impossible to pin down; it is screened by language and yet we have a human need to see beyond the screen. To see beyond we build models—a primary occupation of not only science, economics, and politics, but of everyday life, from the moment we plan our day. These models are all fictions, of course, but they give comfort, convince us of order, purpose, harmony in the universe; they help us to make sense of and to move in the world. Terrorist George Haddad knows that in order to produce harmony, the Middle East needs "a model that transcends all the bitter history" (158). But history itself is a model, an system of ideas composed in a series of events, and thus each era has its own "version." The logocentric idea of history as a single truth or even a single story, once widely believed, is no longer defensible. History is the imposition of form and meaning on neutral events—a larger version of our individual
histories, the stories we tell to make sense of ourselves. Both are constituted in language, shaped by narrative: by the beginning, middle, and end, by pattern and juxtaposition which implies causality and creates the coherent set of interrelationships we call an event. Words and perception work in tandem to shape the world, to give it a human face.

But if everything is a fiction, how is one fiction better than any other? What's the essential difference between *Huckleberry Finn* and "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia? While terrorists and cult groups create a fiction that masks consciousness, covering it with the image, the artist creates character as a way to reveal consciousness, to increase the flow of meaning. This is how the novelist replies to power and beats back fear: by "extending the pitch of consciousness and human possibility" (Mao II 200).

Every story creates its own reality, but paradoxically for DeLillo it is important to get the story right, to tell it correctly. Innocence depends on the precision of the shapes and colors we use in the model we build, on the accuracy of the reproduction. This task is made more difficult by the simulacrum. The first two orders of simulacra, imitation and serial reproduction, both create confusion between an original and its double. But it is the third order, the simulation models that come
to constitute the world, that creates the possibility for "total control." Simulation is no longer a substance, but "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal." Representation starts from the principle that the sign and the real are equivalent, Baudrillard writes, whereas simulation starts "from the sign as reversion and death sentence of every reference" (Poster 170). No one sees the most photographed barn in America, because once they've seen the signs for the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn. When the sign becomes the primary reality, the thing-in-itself, then anything can be anything else, the entire system of signs has broken away, and become an alternate world instead of a way to point to an existing one.

The model, then, provides an alternative to the real, a solid grid of "as if"—and consequently, "true" and "real" lose all meaning: there is no reality to stand on, no basis on which to form a moral judgment. Thus, in the logic of the simulacrum, terrorists torture innocent people to communicate righteous indignation. The more heinous their crimes, the more we learn of their culture, religion, and the history of their grievances; and the more innocent they appear. The only thing that seems real is the hyperreality of the media. Everything that comes from the media is true, and nothing is true outside of its representation. This is why, in Mao II, the hostage's
release is tied to the news coverage of his release. The only way to power is through the system of images; to be outside is to go unnoticed, to cease to exist.

The preferred medium of our time is film; our era is characterized by what Baudrillard calls the implosion of the boundary between original and image. DeLillo's characters understand themselves and the world around them through images. Television presents such simple types so often to so many that some of DeLillo's characters not only see in types, they see only types. They strive to imitate the type. Film images are so powerful they make the "real" world seem false by comparison. Jack Gladney not only sees his surroundings in movie images, it isn't until he recognizes the image that his environment becomes real to him. Like David Bell and Lee Harvey Oswald, Jack Gladney feels estranged from the world because everywhere he looks he sees an image. Its power lies in its ability to seduce us, to insinuate itself into our own imagination until we cannot distinguish between our perception and the commercial image. The landscape becomes an omnipresent television that cannot be turned off, a world of primary representations that neither precede nor follow the real but are themselves real. They merge with our own perceptions, shape them, endow them with a pre-formed structure that becomes part of our reality. In White Noise the television offers cable news, weather, health and
nature, making the entire environment one's footstool, reducing nature itself to a simulacrum, a copy with no original. The image has saturated the world, mediating all perception, emotion, thought and act, until it becomes neither possible nor necessary to distinguish primary actions from imitations of actions. The ultimate power of the image, then, lies in this offer of freedom from the authentic self, deliverance from the age-old burden of existence.

Bucky Wunderlick's girlfriend Opel, under stress, believes she sees "what strawberries really are"--their essence, their truth, the real thing (Great Jones 84). Unfortunately, she can't "put it in words." This is because words re-present, they present at one remove. To put something in words is to impose a limit, to make abstract, and thus to distort and falsify. When Bucky Wunderlick realizes the inherent falseness of words, their mediation between him and the real, his first response is to try to get beyond words through meaninglessness, and finally to defeat them through silence. Neither method is successful.

DeLillo himself is more playful than Wunderlick with language. Although he is rigorously analytical below the deceptively flat surface of his prose, his language play is serendipitous, sophisticated, and deeply funny. For DeLillo, communication is a kind of haphazard game, and
language is the playing field on which opposing forces clash—harmony and chaos, rules and play. Rules are necessary to impose order on chaos, but as Gary Harkness, Billy Twillig and Bucky Wunderlick all discover, the quest for oneness, for the absolute, leads to self-destruction. The game of language depends on a balance with play—that is, with chaos, multiplicity, disruption. Meaning in language doesn’t come from a one-to-one correspondence, but from a play of differences involving syntheses and referrals that preclude simple meaning; consequently, words do not reflect reality so much as they create it.

But DeLillo focuses on language not only as mediation, the cause of our corruption, but also as our only path back to innocence. If the image is powerful because it simplifies, language is more flexible, capable of revealing the doubleness of its message, managing to suggest the underside of its own concealment. Language resists single meaning; the playful force erupts despite any attempts to suppress it. Language is foremost a medium, a kind of prism that refracts the unseen real to produce a visible spectrum. It mediates by giving form to the flux of experience, but form is a connection, a way to touch; form gives meaning—and what is more, it gives us choice, the interpretations that Dupard speaks of when he says that in his own mind, he could "verbalize it either way" (Libra 98).
Language is a mystery, finally, because of its two natures, sacred and common. Like the self, language has dimensions that seem to transcend even while it remains a common, corruptible medium. In one sense, DeLillo's novels seem to present a search for a language above corruption, above plurality, an Ur-language. But the logocentric quest for single truth, the original logos, leads only to deception and destruction. In truth, there is no Ur-language because of the nature of language, its dependence on a play of differences for meaning: like our apprehension of reality and of ourselves, meaning in language will always be a haphazard affair, elusive, slippery, uncertain. At the end of his search, Bucky Wunderlick knows that he will come back, though he doesn't know what sound to make. DeLillo's choice is apparent from his first novel, *Americana*, the ostensible autobiography of David Bell. The difference between Bell's autobiography and DeLillo's novel is that while Bell strives for objectivity and the appearance of autobiography, in the spirit of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*, DeLillo emphasizes the inherent deception in language and in narrative form. DeLillo, like the hidden narrator in *End Zone*, takes it upon himself to "unbox the lexicon for all eyes to see" (113). He cannot stand outside language, but he can emphasize rather than rely on language's deceptions, he can point out the contradictions, the
illusions, the mediation. He cannot stand beyond the screen, but he can point there, to "that other world, unsyllabed, snow lifted in the wind, swirling up, massing within the lightless white day, falling toward the sky" (Americana 189). He cannot solve the mysteries he confronts, but he can use language to define, without reduction or disguise, the true wonder of the world—and of ourselves.
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