



**ROUTLEDGE TRANSNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES
ON AMERICAN LITERATURE**

DON DELILLO

The possibility of fiction

Peter Boxall

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Don DeLillo

DeLillo's writing has been concerned, from its inception, with thinking about how fiction has developed from the end of the Second World War. This book reads the whole of Don DeLillo's oeuvre to date – from *Americana* to *Cosmopolis* – and asks how far his writing can be thought of as an enactment of the possibilities of literary fiction in contemporary global culture.

DeLillo's work offers an analysis of the ways in which the globalisation of capital, the end of the modernist avant-garde, and the expansion of US military and economic power have transformed the production of fiction. The writer as a social critic, as a figure who helps us to 'think and see', is under threat in DeLillo's writing from new forms of mass communication, and ever more advanced modes of surveillance and control. But if his writing charts the disappearance of critical fiction, then it also develops new forms in which fiction might persist under new global conditions.

This is the first book to offer a reading of DeLillo's complete oeuvre in the light of 9/11, and of the new global power relations that have come about in the wake of the attacks. In reading DeLillo's ambivalent engagement with globalisation, and with global terrorism, Peter Boxall suggests ways in which his writing might help us to think about the possibilities of fiction in the post-9/11 global context.

Peter Boxall is a senior lecturer in English Literature at the University of Sussex. He has published widely on modernist and postmodernist literature, in Europe and the USA.

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For Hannah, Ava and Laurie

Contents

<i>Figures</i>	ix
<i>Preface and acknowledgements</i>	x
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xiii
 Introduction: the possibility of fiction	 1
 PART I	
The 1970s	17
1 <i>Americana: Americana, End Zone, Great Jones Street</i>	19
<i>Silent with answers: early DeLillo and the canon</i>	19
<i>American Bethlehem: art as redemption</i>	22
<i>Cliché, tautology and the possibility of fiction</i>	35
2 <i>The historical counterfunction: Ratner's Star, Players, Running Dog</i>	50
<i>Messages to ourselves</i>	50
<i>Dreams beyond our grasp</i>	60
<i>Lost historical categories</i>	68
 PART II	
The 1980s	85
3 <i>Writing and apostasy: The Names</i>	87
4 <i>Death and the avant-garde: White Noise</i>	109
5 <i>Becoming historical: Libra</i>	131

PART III

The 1990s 155

6 Terrorism and globalisation: *Mao II* 157

7 The work of death: *Underworld* 176

Ecstasy and apocalypse 176

Uncycled memory 195

CODA

Ground Zero 213

8 The body of history: *The Body Artist, Cosmopolis* 215

Notes 233

Index 248

Figures

1	The self-immolation of Quang Duc	17
2	Lee Harvey Oswald	85
3	A Kouros sculpture	97
4	Detail from Pieter Bruegel, <i>The Triumph of Death</i>	155
5	Ground Zero	213

Preface and acknowledgements

I began work on the outline of this book in the summer of 2001, and was at my desk on campus on the afternoon of September 11. I left my office for a coffee at around 3 p.m. GMT, and when I returned there was a message on my answering machine from my partner telling me that something unbelievable was happening, that I should stop what I was doing and come home.

I returned home immediately, and spent the afternoon and the evening with my partner and my daughter, watching the attacks repeated on television, again and again. The following day I arrived back in my office to continue my work, feeling that there was something absurd about carrying on as if nothing had happened, as if the world had not changed, or was not about to change again. The message from my partner, belonging to the inconceivable past, was still on my machine. The recording had a strange power for me, a strange aura – a loved voice speaking in the very shadow of what was to become 9/11 – and I decided that I should save it, that I should keep it to commemorate a moment of global change. Inexpertly, I summoned the menu on my voice mail. Scrolling through the ‘options’ itemised for me by the machine’s synthetic voice – a voice I always find strangely unnerving – I mistakenly deleted the message, consigning it to memory, to the unrecoverable past.

The telephone message, of course, was central to the experience of 9/11, and to its dramatisation. The voices left on answering machines by victims of the attacks are, among other things, a testimony to the fact that 9/11 is about the possibilities of electronic, global communication. Planes, as much as mobile phones and world trade, make the world supremely navigable, just as they make it unprecedentedly vulnerable, and the cinematic event that occurred on September 11 performed, as never before, the incredible proximity of this navigability and this vulnerability. The technologies that bring us into communication, that make us available and answerable to one another, also threaten us with erasure. My deleting of my partner’s message seemed to me, on September 12, to be inevitable, and perhaps, after all, the most fitting way of responding to its out-of-time urgency.

The book that I wrote, after completing the outline that summer, is in a sense framed by that answering machine message, and by my accidental

deletion of it. DeLillo's writing is concerned, at its heart, with the ways in which the progression towards an ultimate, apocalyptic communicability is shadowed and undermined by an opposite movement towards erasure, silence and darkness. My thinking about the possibilities of fiction, in the pages that follow, is conducted through an approach to this delicate relation in DeLillo between what can be said, preserved, 'saved', and what cannot be brought to the surface, what remains shrouded in the past, and secreted in an unforeseeable future. If the telephone answering machine is a sign, in DeLillo, of complete communication – a technology which, one of his narrators suggests, destroys the 'poetry of nobody home' – then it also speaks of the very absence that it seeks to eradicate. The digitally recorded voice of my partner, speaking as the event that continues to dictate the passage of world history was in the very process of becoming, carried an unmistakable aura of loss. The message suggested that the transitional moment, even as it is recorded, as it is replayed, cannot be seen again or lived again, cannot, perhaps, be seen or lived at all. Deleting the message was simply to realise the erasure of which it already spoke, to respond to its poetry of nobody home.

It is still unclear what the legacy of September 11 is going to be. The event, to that extent, is still underway, overflowing the boundaries of the date by which it is known. But what is clear is that 9/11 is a major point of reference for our understanding of the relations between global capital, global terrorism and advanced technology. What is urgently required, at this tremendously precarious historical moment, is a way of thinking the ethics and the politics of these relations, a way of understanding how they determine or modulate our sense of history, and our conception of the future. It is for this reason that DeLillo is such a timely writer. From the beginning of his career, he has been working towards an ethics of globalisation, working to understand how the possibilities of global communication relate to the violence of global capital and global terror. He has tried to understand, from the beginning, how an imaginative resistance to or dissent from the tyranny of globalisation can find ethical and poetic expression; an expression which does not simply reduce itself to regressive forms of terror, but which is animated by the spirit of a future in which anything is possible, a future in which the word peace – the word with which *Underworld* closes – may come to have a meaning recognisable to us all. The possibility of fiction, as it is thought and performed in his writing, is the possibility of this kind of expression, the possibility that we might find, in the poetry of nobody home that persists even in an era of mass communication, the trace of what Marx called the poetry of the future.

Many friends and colleagues helped me in the writing of this book. The bulk of the work was carried out during a period of study leave, granted by the Department of English at the University of Sussex. Matthew Losasso spent many hours working on the art work reproduced here. For his time, and for his skill, I am deeply grateful. Drafts have been read by Maria Lauret, Richard Godden, Peter Nicholls, Josh Cohen, Rick Crownshaw, Hannah Jordan and

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A number of organisations and bodies have provided me with permission to reproduce material in the book and I wish to express my thanks to them. If any unknowing use of copyright material in the book has been made, please contact the author via the publishers, since every effort was made to trace copyright owners.

Above all, I owe a debt of gratitude to my family – the Boxalls, the Jordans, the Neils, the Moenchs, the Losassos, the Chamberlains – for their love and support. Between the words ‘epic’ and ‘morbidity’, on page 179, my second child was born. That I continued to write and to finish this book – itself a labour of love – in the midst of such urgent new life, was a triumph of love and selflessness on the part of all those closest to me.

Abbreviations

- A Don DeLillo, *Americana* (1971; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990)
E Don DeLillo, *End Zone* (1972; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986)
GJS Don DeLillo, *Great Jones Street* (1973; London: Picador, 1998)
RS Don DeLillo, *Ratner's Star* (1976; London: Vintage, 1991)
P Don DeLillo, *Players* (1977; London: Vintage, 1991)
RD Don DeLillo, *Running Dog* (1978; London: Picador, 1999)
N Don DeLillo, *The Names* (1982; London: Picador, 1999)
WN Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (1984; London: Picador, 1999)
DR Don DeLillo, *The Day Room* (New York: Dramatists Play Service inc., 1988)
L Don DeLillo, *Libra* (1988; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989)
M Don DeLillo, *Mao II* (1991; London: Vintage, 1992)
U Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (1997; London: Picador, 1999)
V Don DeLillo, *Valparaiso* (1999; London: Picador, 2004)
BA Don DeLillo, *The Body Artist* (2001; London: Picador, 2001)
C Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* (2003; London: Picador, 2003)

Introduction

The possibility of fiction

Something is taking its course.

Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*¹

Something is happening.

Don DeLillo, *The Body Artist*²

In a conversation with Theodor Adorno, that takes place in 1964, Ernst Bloch comments that ‘possibility has had a bad press’.³ For both the left and the right, for the east and the west, he goes on, there is something disreputable about the concept of possibility. For those on the right who have vested interests to protect, for whom an irrational status quo yields profit and comfort, it is rather important to resist or deny the possible, to ‘prevent the world from being changed into the possible’.⁴ Possibility, for the dominant class, spells revolution. For those on the left, who struggle against the status quo, an investment in the possible can seem too often like a distraction, a fond and politically disabling dream of the world that might be. For a revolutionary consciousness, it is perhaps necessary to focus not on the possible world – on what Bloch calls the ‘ocean of possibility’⁵ – but on the real world, where injustice occurs, and where wealth is distributed unequally. The possible is an *ignis fatuus*.

The context for Bloch’s remarks – a context conditioned by the cold war and by the iron curtain, by Stalinism and socialist realism and McCarthyism – seems to be a somewhat remote one from where I am writing. The constituencies that Bloch addresses in 1964 – the west and the east, the left and the right – may no longer exist in the form in which he conceived of them. The end of the cold war and the fall of the Berlin wall have led to an uneasy consensus between east and west. The left has waned as a political force in many democratic nation states, as the political spectrum has narrowed in response to the collapse of the USSR and the globalisation of capital. The work of national governments, the development of foreign and domestic policy, concerns itself now largely with the attempt to influence the movements of an unboundaried global market which no single nation state is able fully to control. The very concept of an alternative to the free market economy,

2 *Introduction: the possibility of fiction*

an anti-capitalist 'system' of government imposed and maintained by the state, has come, remarkably quickly, to seem quaint.⁶ But despite these changes in context, Bloch's suggestion that possibility gets a bad press still has currency, or indeed its currency has inflated since the end of the cold war. The distrust of utopian possibility that Bloch recognises in both east and west in 1964 has matured, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, into a wider abandonment of the possibility of any form of opposition whatsoever to an economic and political hegemony that is tending towards the global and the universal.

There is a widely recognised perception in contemporary culture that, with the globalisation of capital, history has reached a kind of end point, that there is no more possibility, that there is nothing latent in the culture left to explore or to develop. The struggle between opposing blocs that drove the twentieth century through hot and cold world wars has given way, for many, to a kind of historical completion, an 'end of history' in which the 'liberal democracy' that is enforced on the globe by the world's single superpower stands in for Hegel's absolute knowledge. Francis Fukuyama claims that we must 'take seriously' Alexandre Kojève's claim that 'history has ended'.⁷ For Kojève, Fukuyama goes on, the spread of liberal democracy has 'definitely solved the question of recognition by replacing the relationship of lordship and bondage with universal and equal recognition'. Fukuyama suggests, still paraphrasing Kojève, that 'what man had been seeking throughout the course of history – what had driven the prior "stages of history" – was recognition. In the modern world, he finally found it, and was "completely satisfied"'.⁸ For theorists such as Fukuyama, Kojève and Anthony Giddens, the engine that drives history forward for Hegel, and later for Bloch and Adorno, has stalled with the arrival of the global market.⁹ And with this stalling of the dialectic, the possibility that has a bad reputation in 1964 disappears altogether. Bloch conceives possibility as a kind of negative potential that is immanent in the dialectic, that is contained latently within the Hegelian struggle for recognition.¹⁰ The possible is that which has not yet become conscious. It is the unrealised historical potential which, through its 'determined negation of that which merely is', points towards what 'should be'.¹¹ In a globalised world in which prosperity and democracy has made us all 'completely satisfied', in which there is no longer historical tension between is and ought, possibility as 'determined negation', as a compelling absence in the present, has been wiped out, colonised by the forces of benign liberalism. The recent signs of a violent resistance to western hegemony, evidenced in the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, and in the opposition to the western occupation in Iraq since 2003, might suggest that the perception of 'complete satisfaction' with liberal democracy is a little wide of the mark. But Fukuyama argues in 2001 that Islamic and Arab rejection of western democracy is not organised around a 'serious alternative to western liberal democracy', but is rather a simple root and branch rejection, by a fundamentalist minority, of modernity *per se*.¹² For Fukuyama, Al Qaeda has no more power to create a new future, or to conceive a new set of historical possibilities,

than Marx, or Castro, or Che Guevara. After September 11, he insists, we 'remain at the end of history because there is only one system that will continue to dominate world politics, that of the liberal-democratic west'.¹³ Capital, like the 'freedom' invoked in George W. Bush's 2004 re-election campaign, is 'on the march',¹⁴ and there is no historical force, no as yet unrealised possibility, that can stop it.

Whilst Fukuyama might articulate his end of history thesis more trenchantly than most, this sense of historical completion, and of a failure of resistance to a global capitalist hegemony, is pervasive in contemporary culture. It is not confined to the right wing, to Fukuyama's neo-conservative championing of the victory of western liberalism, but rather its influence can be felt across the political spectrum. The perception that Bloch's possibility has waned, that there has been what Maurice Blanchot among others has characterised as a 'weakening of the negative', influences almost every sphere of cultural production. The globalisation of capital produces a kind of dizzying speed, a rush of technological invention and creativity, but it also produces a cultural exhaustion, what Gilles Deleuze calls the 'exhaustion of the possible'. Deleuze comments, in his essay on Samuel Beckett entitled 'The Exhausted', that 'there is no longer any possible'. Beckett's work, situated as it is in the wake of modernism, in a kind of extended aftermath of the avant-garde and at the threshold of globalisation, is that of the 'exhausted person'. 'He exhausts that which, in the possible, *is not realized*,' Deleuze says. 'He has done with the possible, beyond all tiredness, "for to end yet again"'.¹⁵ Beckett's work, it has been suggested, stands as a kind of epitaph to the possibility of any critique of a culture which has become globalised and self-perpetuating; it marks the exhaustion of the possibility of fiction. The final snippet of the final sentence of his novel *The Unnamable* – 'I can't go on, I'll go on' – brings fiction up against a blank and unnavigable aporia.¹⁶ To 'proceed' from here, the narrator acknowledges right at the beginning of the novel, is to proceed 'by aporia pure and simple' ('I say aporia', he adds demurely, 'without knowing what it means').¹⁷ *The Unnamable* brings us to a kind of closure, or impasse, a historical ending in which one has nevertheless to continue, in which one has to end, yet again, and then again. Don DeLillo has suggested, in a letter to Gary Adelman quoted in 2004, that Beckett is 'the last writer whose work enters into the world'.¹⁸ In exhausting the possible, in articulating a cultural predicament in which one can 'no longer possibilize',¹⁹ Beckett's writing is fiction's last gasp, its last attempt to 'enter the world'. In the words of one of DeLillo's fictional creations, a novelist named Bill Gray, Beckett is the last writer to produce a critical reflection on the cultural conditions that 'shape the way that we think and see'. After him, Gray goes on, 'the major work involves mid-air explosions and crumbled buildings' (M 157). If the progress of the twentieth century has seen a gradual weakening of the negative, an attenuation of the ways in which possibility can be preserved in the art work as that which has yet to be realised, then Beckett's writing sees the final fizzles of the possibility of critical fiction. After

him, the work of cultural critique is handed over to terrorists, to paramilitaries, to suicide bombers; to a kind of uncritical violence which, Fukuyama tells us, can in any case scarcely make an impact on the shiny surface.

Don DeLillo's fiction, his body of novels stretching from *Americana* in 1971 to *Cosmopolis* in 2003, comes into being in the wake of the 'last writer', in the narrow space of the contradiction cleared by the final line of *The Unnamable*. DeLillo's writing takes place, perhaps, in what Beckett's character/narrator Molloy calls his 'ruins'. 'My ruins', Molloy says, are a 'place with neither plan nor bounds', in a 'world at an end, in spite of appearances'.²⁰ As in his play *Endgame*, Beckett's fictional spaces offer a kind of flimsy refuge at the end of the world, where a little life continues to go on without going on, where movement is also an exhausted stasis, and where a persistent stirring, as in one of Beckett's last prose pieces, nevertheless remains still.²¹ And it is this refuge, this space without foundations, this time without direction, that offers an ambiguous asylum to the writers that come after Beckett. DeLillo's oeuvre may evidence an anti-Beckettian prolificacy, a capacity to offer an encyclopaedic cataloguing of culture that is more redolent, perhaps, of Joyce than of Beckett. But from the beginning, DeLillo's writing has taken place, like Beckett's, in the shadow of the end. If Molloy says of his own fictional effort that 'ending it began', then DeLillo's origins are found in what one of his early characters calls a 'terminal nullity' (E 88).²² It is perhaps his fascination with life at the end that leads to his preoccupation with the millennial moment. From *Americana* onwards, the millennium has formed DeLillo's far horizon, and his organising principle. The millennium comes to signify, in DeLillo's work and elsewhere in later twentieth century culture, an apocalyptic end point.²³ It provides a means of conceiving and fixing in time and space, in a kind of longitudinal grid, the endedness which has inhabited culture since Beckett, the endedness which marks the very conception of a globalised world. But if the millennium forms the far horizon in DeLillo's writing, it is also always already here. DeLillo's novels take place in what Edward Said has called 'lateness itself'.²⁴ The culture to which DeLillo responds, and of which his work is symptomatic, is one which is entering, in 1971, into a kind of static completion, where endedness cannot be deferred until a later date, cannot wait for Judgement Day or the appearance of the Messiah to declare its coming. Again and again in DeLillo's novels we are confronted with a predicament in which the future is already here, in which the post-apocalyptic future that is darkly massing behind the flimsy boundary of the second millennium comes flooding in, to arrive 'ahead of schedule' (P 84). The future, which harbours the unrealised possibility, which preserves that which has yet to be seen or imagined or colonised, has 'become insistent' in DeLillo's work. It is forcing itself into the now, as the culture reaches past its own spatial and temporal margins, colonises its own outsides, brings even un-lived time under the jurisdiction of the global market.

In this sense, DeLillo's novels can be thought of as an extended enactment of the exhaustion of possibility in post-war culture. It is a familiar refrain in

his writing that even the most fleeting urge to invention, to fabrication or to dissent, is cancelled by the interpellating power of a culture which has become, in another of DeLillo's key words, 'self-referring' (e.g. N 297, L 23, WN 51). When the world has become self-referring, Owen says in *The Names*, when it is ruled by a single bloc from which there is 'no escape' (N 297), it no longer matters 'whether we lie or tell the truth' (N 81).²⁵ Self-reference, historical closure, the exhaustion of the possibility of fiction, means that it becomes an impossibility or an irrelevance to lie, or to deviate from an orthodoxy that has become so all embracing that there is no space left for the fictional, the unorthodox, or the counter-hegemonic. As the narrator of *White Noise* puts it, a millennial, historical completion produces a strange, dislocated medium, in which 'remarks exist in a state of permanent flotation. No one thing [is] either more or less plausible than any other thing' (WN 129). Or as Freddie has it in *The Day Room*, self-reference produces a predicament in which 'everything is true', and in which 'one place is as good as another' (DR 41). ('How different can two places be', Freddie goes on, 'if we use the word "place" in both cases?') Everything is true, or as Karen discovers in *Mao II*, 'everything is real' (M 85). DeLillo's novels posit a world in which the nonexistent, the unnameable, the unthinkable, have been eradicated; in which cultural truth is disseminated by the forces of a globalised capital from which there is no escape. When the last obstacles to world trade and to US hegemony give way, dismantled like the Berlin wall, when the 'force of converging markets produces an instantaneous capital that shoots across horizons', there is a resulting cultural uniformity a 'furtive sameness, a planing away of particulars' (U 786). 'Capital', the epilogue to *Underworld* declares, 'burns off the nuance in a culture' (U 785). Just when you think you are lying, when you fondly believe you are inventing, or disobeying, or dissenting, you find that you are toeing the line, because the ground upon which the counternarrative might be based has been removed, or subsumed into the hegemony. As Beckett's Molloy puts it, 'you think you are inventing, you think you are escaping, and all you do is stammer out your lesson, the remnants of a pensum one day got by heart'.²⁶ In a globalised culture that has absorbed its own margins, and crossed its own far horizons, there is no possibility of dishonesty, or secrecy, or conspiring against the state. As Oswald discovers in *Libra*, resistance becomes just another form of compliance, and a plot against the state is a form of civil service.

Throughout DeLillo's fiction, his characters and narrators struggle against this predicament. The development of his fiction follows a historical trajectory towards the millennium, and towards the globalisation of US military and economic power, and in tracing this trajectory, the novels also chart a history of resistance to cultural uniformity. Through the 1970s, the 1980s and the 1990s, DeLillo's fiction is organised around the possibility of a historical counterfunction, of a counternarrative that might preserve a radical revolutionary spirit, that might keep possibility alive in the thin air of the 'end of history'. From *Americana* to *Underworld*, the novels look for a spatial and a temporal

ground that remains beyond the interpellating power of an American voice, a ground upon which difference, singularity, and resistance to US cultural imperialism might be based. David Bell travels into the heart of the USA in search of the Navaho; James Axton travels to Greece in search of a European history etched in Parian marble and in Mediterranean light; Oswald travels to Moscow in search of the spirit of Marx; Nick Shay journeys from the USA to Kazakhstan and back, from the 1990s to the 1950s and back, in search of the ghost of himself. All of these restless movements are driven by a search for spaces that have not yet been colonised, for culturally specific and diverse histories that have not yet been erased by the excoriating power of capital. In the passage from *Americana* to *Cosmopolis*, and from 1945, through the cold war, to the present day, the novels trace the shifts in the balance of power, and the economic, political and cultural developments that have shaped the second half of the twentieth century. The struggle to resist, to find spaces beyond the reach of a US central intelligence, are modulated by these developments. The novels offer a mini history, for example, of technological developments in the post-war. Like Pynchon's writing, DeLillo's oeuvre can be read as a history of military technology.²⁷ The possibility of fiction is traced in relation to the development of the U2 spy plane, of satellite surveillance, of the proliferation of nuclear weaponry. If we are heading towards the millennium, in the passage from *Americana* to *Underworld*, then we are also heading towards a nuclear apocalypse, and the novels read the post-war historical development as the playing out of a military narrative, a narrative with a mushroom cloud as its consummation. As Matt Shay thinks to himself in *Underworld*, 'all technology refers to the bomb' (U 467). In tracing this technological development towards the end of history, towards the End Zone or the endgame, the novels might project us towards the disaster, but they also suggest that the end has not yet arrived, that it is possible somehow to place oneself outside the current towards apocalypse. The ostensibly civilian forms of technology that develop across the sweep of DeLillo's oeuvre in parallel with the military – information technology, video and computer technology – similarly suggest ever more sophisticated means of surveillance and mediation. Civilian and military technology develops in sinister tandem in DeLillo's fiction. The progression from *Americana* to *Cosmopolis* takes us from relatively primitive communication technologies – from the office mimeograph and the cine camera in *Americana* – to information technologies, in *Cosmopolis*, that are so advanced, so intimate and invasive that have become more available to us than our own bodies. The electronic distribution of information and of capital has become so immediate, in *Cosmopolis*, that the passage of money seems more effortless, more weightless, than the passage of thought. This sweep towards virtualisation suggests a progression towards a form of control that is as effective, and as destructive of possibility, as any military power, an electronic rather than an atomic apocalypse. But the trajectory that is preserved in DeLillo's oeuvre, the slow passage from the mimeograph, through the telex machine,

to email and the internet, suggests, again, that the mediation of the culture is not yet total, that there are other histories that can be written and imagined, unrealised possibilities that remain dormant in the culture, unthought, and offline.

This sense, however, that history is continuing to progress in DeLillo's writing – that there is an ongoing struggle to discover the counternarrative, to angle oneself against the historical current towards the globalisation of capital – has to contend with the opposite sense that the future is already here, that historical progression is a fantasy, that the very concept of proceeding has become aporetic. DeLillo's fiction suggests a deep underlying connection between technology, violence and capital, a connection which undermines the possibility of historical progression. If, for Matt Shay, 'all technology refers to the bomb', then for the venture capitalist Eric Packer of *Cosmopolis*, it is the 'interaction between technology and capital' that is the most important reference in contemporary culture, the 'only thing in the world worth pursuing intellectually and professionally' (C 23). The kinds of destruction wreaked by weaponry, by technology and by capital reach a certain equivalence here, a certain 'inseparability' (C 23). As Warhol's extraordinary silkscreen *Atomic Bomb* (1965) has suggested, the violence of mass production and of the photographic image mirrors the violence of an atomic explosion.²⁸ This equivalence between capital, violence and technology unsettles any attempt to conceive of a gradual historical progression towards the millennium, or towards the end. Locating the destructive power of the bomb in the technologies of mass production suggests that the apocalypse will not wait, that the apocalypse is happening now. Warhol's print multiplies the image of a mushroom cloud, repeating it twenty-five times, in five lines of five. The only variation between one image and the next is that the contrast is gradually reduced, so that as the reading eye travels from left to right and from top to the bottom of the print, the explosion exhausts itself, fading out through the process of duplication. This lends the work a kind of doubleness, as if it is spread over two planes. The mushroom cloud suggests one kind of consummation, one explosive end point to history, figuratively expressed, captured by the camera, whilst the fading of the duplicated image from top to bottom suggests another ending that is in process in the print itself, a kind of fizzling out, a Deleuzian exhaustion through repetition. The explosive power of the bomb here is not confined to its potential energy, the deferred, mutually assured destruction that powered the cold war. Rather, it is found in the reproductive technologies that grew up with the bomb, that 'refer to the bomb', and that transform the culture through the power of repetition, and through the work of the photographic image. This set of connections that Warhol makes between photography, weaponry, and a kind of ongoing apocalypse-through-exhaustion achieves a rich resonance in DeLillo's work. The Kazakh capitalist Viktor Maltsev suggests, in the epilogue to *Underworld*, that it is the bomb that leads to the exhaustion of the possibility of fiction. 'Once they imagine the bomb', he says,

they see it's possible to build, they build, they test in the American desert, they drop on the Japanese, but once they imagine in the beginning, it makes everything true [. . .] Nothing you can believe is not coming true.
(U 801–802)

The bomb makes everything true. The equations on the page that lead to the bomb, once they are written down, once they are imagined, sweep away the possibility of difference, of dissent, of fiction. The equations themselves do it; we don't need to wait for the blast, or for the fallout. The power of the bomb, of the technology that produces the bomb, is such that it sweeps everything away, levels everything, planes away the particulars. The decade boundaries that organise DeLillo's oeuvre, that hold off the future, that keep the apocalypse at bay, are blown away by the mere thought of the bomb. Historical progress, a steady march through the decades towards an end that has not yet been seen, becomes a fantasy as soon as those sinister equations undo the bonds that hold time and space together, abandoning us to a stalled temporality, to a kind of endless ground zero. The splitting of the atom releases explosive energy, but it also clears the cultural ground. It removes the obstacles, opens the culture to the free movement of capital, to the endless repetition of the image. One of the spin-offs of military research in the 1970s was the invention of email, as if military technology leads directly to weightless communication.²⁹ DeLillo's oeuvre might offer us a history of this technological progression, the progression for example from epigraphy to calligraphy to the typewriter to the word processor to the weightless speed of hypertext, but this history is one which contains within it the cancellation of the very possibility of history. It is a history which traces the progression towards weightlessness, towards endless repetition, to the loss of the grounds upon which a material history might found itself. It is a history which comes from and returns to the impasse marked out by Samuel Beckett, in the 1950s, at the end of *The Unnamable* and at the beginning of the cold war. It is a history at an end, in spite of appearances; a history which continues to go on even though it can't go on, which conjures the phantasm of progress from a condition of profound stasis.

DeLillo's fiction, then, can be seen as an extended performance of a kind of critical exhaustion. It marks the end of the avant-garde, the end of a writing which is able to shape the way we think and see. It offers a non-critique of the possibility of fiction, by living through a suspension of the critical capacity, by performing the ways in which the struggle towards singularity, towards invention and civil disobedience, collapses repeatedly back into a vast, static uniformity, the kind of spatial and temporal sameness that is required and guaranteed by the globalisation of capital. Despite this sense of stasis, however, this stalled historical quality that reaches across the oeuvre, DeLillo's fiction is not simply an enactment of the exhaustion of possibility. This is not to deny the force of Deleuze's conception of exhaustion; it is no doubt the case that DeLillo's writing exemplifies, in its depiction of a time

that has 'lost its narrative quality' (BA 65), the end of a certain kind of possibility. But, even in the new temporality of the post-war, DeLillo's writing suggests that possibility persists, that the unrealised and the not-yet conscious still inhabit the contemporary, albeit in a changed form. DeLillo does not simply enact the collapse of the possibility of fiction. Rather, in performing a historical endedness, in articulating a mode of cultural stasis, his writing produces also a new kind of possibility; in enacting a form of cultural exhaustion, it evidences nevertheless the continuing possibility of fiction. Beckett's play *Endgame* opens with Clov's declaration that it is 'Finished'.³⁰ The play is, in some respects, simply a yawning of the void, a flaw in the emptiness that allows time to continue after it has finished, a spectral duration in the heartland of the end. But even here, where things are already over, where there is 'no more nature',³¹ 'no more tide',³² and 'no more painkiller',³³ something continues to unfold. 'What's happening', Hamm asks Clov repeatedly, in a kind of apoplectic bafflement at his failure to be still, to be at peace, and Clov replies, 'Something is taking its course'.³⁴ Something is continuing to take its course, even in the close straits of *Endgame*, even at the tortured end of *The Unnamable*. It may be that, like Hamm, we do not have the apparatus to see this thing clearly, or to measure the time and rhythm of its passing, but it is this pale continuation, this tidal something that continues to take its course, that is Beckett's legacy to DeLillo. Deleuze suggests that Beckett's poetics of exhaustion leads not simply to a failure of possibility, but to what he calls a '*Language III*', a language which opens the exhausted to a new set of possibilities.³⁵ Beckett's exhaustion of language discovers an 'immanent limit' to the possible, a limit which is 'ceaselessly displaced',³⁶ which is exceeded and ruptured by the movement of Beckett's poetics. The exhaustion of possibility in Beckett does not lead simply to stasis or completion, but it opens a tear in language itself. A young Beckett writes, in 1937, that 'language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it',³⁷ and Deleuze discovers precisely this destruction of language in Beckett's late work. The exhaustion of language, Deleuze suggests, opens 'hiatuses, holes, or tears that we would never notice, or attribute to mere tiredness, if they did not suddenly widen in such a way as to receive something from the outside or from elsewhere'.³⁸ It is this something from elsewhere, this opening onto an outside that has not yet been thought or dreamt, this disjunction in the unbroken surface of things, that is Beckett's gift to those who come after him. Something continues to take its course in Beckett, and is taking its course even now, and even here. Even in the virtually still, keening time of DeLillo's 2001 novel *The Body Artist*, something continues. 'Something is happening,' Lauren Hartke thinks. 'Something is happening. It has happened. It will happen. This is what she believed. There is a story, a flow of consciousness and possibility. The future comes into being' (BA 98–99).

The sign of this something, in DeLillo, this something that continues, is death. If the end of history, produced by the bomb, by information

technology, by global capital, delivers a transcendent death, the kind of total extinction and implacable judgment imagined in Revelations, then the possibility of fiction in DeLillo is intimately bound up with an unrevealed, immanent death, a death in process which inhabits the texture of the present as the unrealised, the not yet conscious. 'Death', Blanchot says, 'is man's greatest hope'; 'death is man's possibility, his chance, it is through death that the future of a finished world is still there for us'.³⁹ For Blanchot, 'literature is really the work of death in the world'.⁴⁰ This deathliness in the present, this death that is at work in literature, remains unnameable and unlocatable. It is difficult to spot. It does not set itself against the historical tide, it does not pit itself against electronic capital, against the repetition of the photographic image, against the weightless history of film, of video, or of the internet. Indeed, DeLillo finds death, and deathly possibility, inhabiting those very technologies that promise to eradicate death, to bring the unknown future under the control of the present. Film, for example, might prepare the world for the global market, might offer the world up for consumption as a virtual product. Film, like the infinitely repeatable image, like the virtualisation of internet culture, might lead to a certain weightlessness and timelessness, a simultaneity, an undoing of history, a cancellation even of the history of film. But again and again in DeLillo's writing, it is film, and information technology more generally, that harbour precisely the kind of deathly possibility that is threatened by the technological globalisation of capital. It is film, in DeLillo as in Deleuze, that offers to mark a hiatus in an exhausted culture. The Zapruder film, for example, contains, in its capturing of the Kennedy assassination, a kind of disruptive historical disjunction; in capturing the historical moment, it opens history to Deleuze's 'something from the outside or from elsewhere'. Even in its capacity to deliver time to us in its completion, to replay endlessly and exhaustively the moment at which Kennedy takes the bullet, the film carries within it a kind of surplus, a death that remains at work in the grain of the celluloid. The Zapruder footage, Klara Sax thinks in *Underworld*,

seemed to advance some argument about the nature of film itself. The progress of the car down Elm Street, the movement of the film through the camera body, some sharable darkness – this was a death that seemed to rise from the streamy debris of the mind, it came from some night of the mind, there was some trick of film emulsion that showed the ghost of consciousness.

(U 496)

The death that is conjured here, that belongs to the night of the mind, is an absence that is given to us by film, an unrealised historical possibility that is a kind of side effect of technology itself. If something is continuing to take its course in DeLillo's oeuvre, if there is to be an as yet undreamt future in store in Blanchot's 'finished world', then it is from this death-at-work

in film that the new future will emerge, from the absences and the flaws that ghost the culture in DeLillo's writing, that are at work even in 'advanced' technology, in voice mail, in the internet, in the live streaming video feed.

The history of struggle that DeLillo's oeuvre catalogues, the search for a historical counternarrative, for a spatial or temporal ground beyond the interpellating power of the American voice, is organised around this latent possibility, this death at work. The decades during which DeLillo's writing has come into being have seen a kind of acceleration towards the end, towards the global. The power of military and civilian technology works, as I have suggested, to sweep away both decade boundaries and national boundaries, to deliver us to an unboundaried time and space, a place which, for DeLillo's Freddie and for Beckett's Hamm, is just like any other place, an endless day which is just 'like any other day'.⁴¹ But death as possibility, the disjunctive, disruptive space that persists in DeLillo's fiction, that haunts consciousness, that cannot be articulated or named or brought into the light, works to maintain the boundaries that are under threat of disappearance in post-war culture. The decade boundary, both in DeLillo's oeuvre, and in the visual imagination of this book, is inhabited by a death. James Axton's death is suspended, in *The Names*, in the passage from 1979 to 1980; the death of Bill Gray is situated, in *Mao II*, in the passage from 1989 to 1990; and the prose that comes after 1999 is situated in the space of a technological, post-millennial death that is still occurring, in the space of a boundary that has not yet discovered its far side, in Voltaire's and Bloch's ocean of death which does not have a shore.⁴² In one sense, this death testifies to the unnameable, unimaginable nature of the boundary, to the impossibility of marking the point at which one decade becomes another, or at which one moment becomes another. Transition itself is a kind of impossible fiction, which can only be figured as a death. But in another sense, it is this death in the boundary – this death that is at work in the now – that allows for the possibility of duration, of spatial and temporal diversity, of a continual becoming over time. It is this death that is interwoven into the texture of the moment that marks and performs the persistence of the negative, that keeps history moving, and that holds a transcendent death – a deathly global uniformity – at bay. It is this death at work that allows something to happen, something to take its course. It is this death that DeLillo inherits from Beckett, this death that allows for the continuing possibility of critique, of struggle, of resistance. It is the death at work in the space of the boundary that allows for the continuing possibility of fiction.

* * *

There is a story one can tell about the history of critique in western thought, since Kant and Hegel, since the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the *Critique of Judgement* and the *Critique of Pure Reason*. This story has it that the historical reception of Kant and Hegel has taken the form of a fork. One prong of this

fork has passed through Freud and has led us to poststructuralism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and deconstruction, to Derrida, Kristeva and DeMan. The other prong of this fork has taken us through Marx, and has led to critical theory, to the Frankfurt school, to Adorno and Benjamin and Lukács. If we allow ourselves to be carried along with this story for a while, we might suggest that the first prong leads to the abandonment of the possibility of critique, whilst the second is organised around the possibility of its persistence. The work of the latter, of Frankfurt school critics such as Adorno and Horkheimer, is the search for a space from which to critique the culture industry, a space which would allow for the persistence of what Adorno calls a negative dialectic.⁴³ The work of the former, of contemporary French theorists, of thinkers such as Derrida and Deleuze, is organised around the impossibility of such a critical space. A deconstructive logic demands that 'instead of opposing critique to non-critique', it is necessary to 'situate the non-critical in a place that would no longer be opposed to, nor even perhaps exterior to, critique'.⁴⁴ For Derrida, for example, it is axiomatic that 'critique and non-critique are fundamentally the same'.⁴⁵ If we go along with this story still further, then we can suggest that the postmodern, and all of the discrete cultural elements that are positioned by that term, are built upon this fork in the reception of Kant and Hegel. Postmodernism is the end of the road of deconstruction, its destination, its conclusion. The work of thinkers such as Jean Baudrillard and Judith Butler is the end result of Derrida's reception of Hegel. The refusal to oppose critique to non-critique leads to Baudrillard's claim that the first Gulf War did not happen, and to Butler's disavowal of the materiality of the body.⁴⁶ The postmodern, and any politics that is erected upon its groundless ground, testifies to the collapse of critique, and the withering of Marxist thought. Alexandre Kojève's reading of Hegel leads, for Frederic Jameson, directly to a postmodernism which is characterised by an exhausted cultural and political depthlessness, by 'the free play of masks and roles without content or substance'.⁴⁷ A theorist such as Jameson, who seeks to think a Marxist postmodernism, has to reckon at the outset with this problem. 'Marxism and postmodernism', he writes in an essay entitled 'Marxism and Postmodernism':

people often seem to find this combination peculiar or paradoxical, and somehow intensely unstable, so that some of them are led to conclude that, in my own case, having 'become' a postmodernist, I must have ceased to be a Marxist in any meaningful (or in other words stereotypical) sense.⁴⁸

The reception of DeLillo's work has been informed, to a considerable extent, by this kind of story. Debate in DeLillo criticism has been organised around DeLillo's response to postmodernity. Some have argued that his work is a celebration or a symptom of postmodernism, that it derives from the kinds of weightlessness produced by the abandonment of a dialectical politics. This branch of DeLillo criticism tends to read DeLillo through Baudrillard, and through the received models of postmodernism, and of postmodern politics.

Frank Lentricchia, for example, has argued in his essay 'Libra as Postmodern Critique', that DeLillo's novel *Libra* dramatises a movement away from a radical politics grounded in a dialectical Marxism, towards a Baudrillardian, postmodern politics of the image. Oswald initially sees his struggle towards self-consciousness in terms of the 'classic Marxist directive', which enjoins each of us to 'take part in the struggle'. But at the end of the novel, Lentricchia suggests, 'Marxist Oswald' becomes 'postmodern Oswald', a post-Marxist breed of insurrectionary who revolts against the state 'not through striking a blow in class warfare on the side of the working oppressed', but by 'entering the aura', by giving himself up to the postmodern manipulation of the image.⁴⁹ Others have argued that DeLillo's work represents a rejection of postmodernism, or at least an ambivalence towards it. David Cowart, for example, has argued in his tremendously elegant work *The Physics of Language* (2002), that, despite being an 'exemplary postmodernist', 'DeLillo's engagement with the postmodern, at least as it is commonly defined, is or has come to be adversarial'.⁵⁰ This second branch of criticism, which has become the more influential in recent years, tends to find in DeLillo a quality or a value that survives postmodern depthlessness, and that offers itself in some kind of opposition to it. Mark Osteen, for example, suggests that DeLillo's work represents a struggle to preserve the value of art, in a culture which has forsaken the auratic power of the art work. DeLillo engages with postmodern culture – and with American dread – only in order to transform it, to redeem its loss of critical purchase. DeLillo, for Osteen, 'presents art as the soundest magic against dread, the truest source of radiance and community'.⁵¹ Art here is a quasi sacred, mystical force which has the power to transcend the postmodern; it is an alchemy, or a kind of aesthetic recycling, which transforms the very symptoms of the contemporary – the abandoned 'wastes' of postmodernity – into 'signs of redemption'.⁵² If Osteen pits the magic of art against postmodern dread, then Cowart suggests that DeLillo finds redemption in language. Cowart concedes that there is a postmodern resonance to DeLillo's writing, a resonance which he discovers in the compatibility between DeLillo and poststructuralism. 'To be sure,' he writes, 'DeLillo invites his readers to recognise, with poststructuralist theory, the inadequacy of the old model of things and their word labels'.⁵³ One must, he says,

test DeLillo's fictions against elements of the postmodern aesthetic defined by such theorists as Lacan, Derrida, and Baudrillard: the fore-shortened view of history, the unmooring of subjectivity, radical discontinuity, replication and parody, awareness of the constructedness of all knowledge and myths, resistance to closure, indifference to what Lyotard calls 'the solace of good forms,' and that 'new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense' that Frederic Jameson characterizes as 'the supreme formal feature of all postmodernisms'.⁵⁴

But, for Cowart, this is a superficial compatibility. DeLillo is finally 'impatient of the reductive thinking that makes language some kind of gossamer