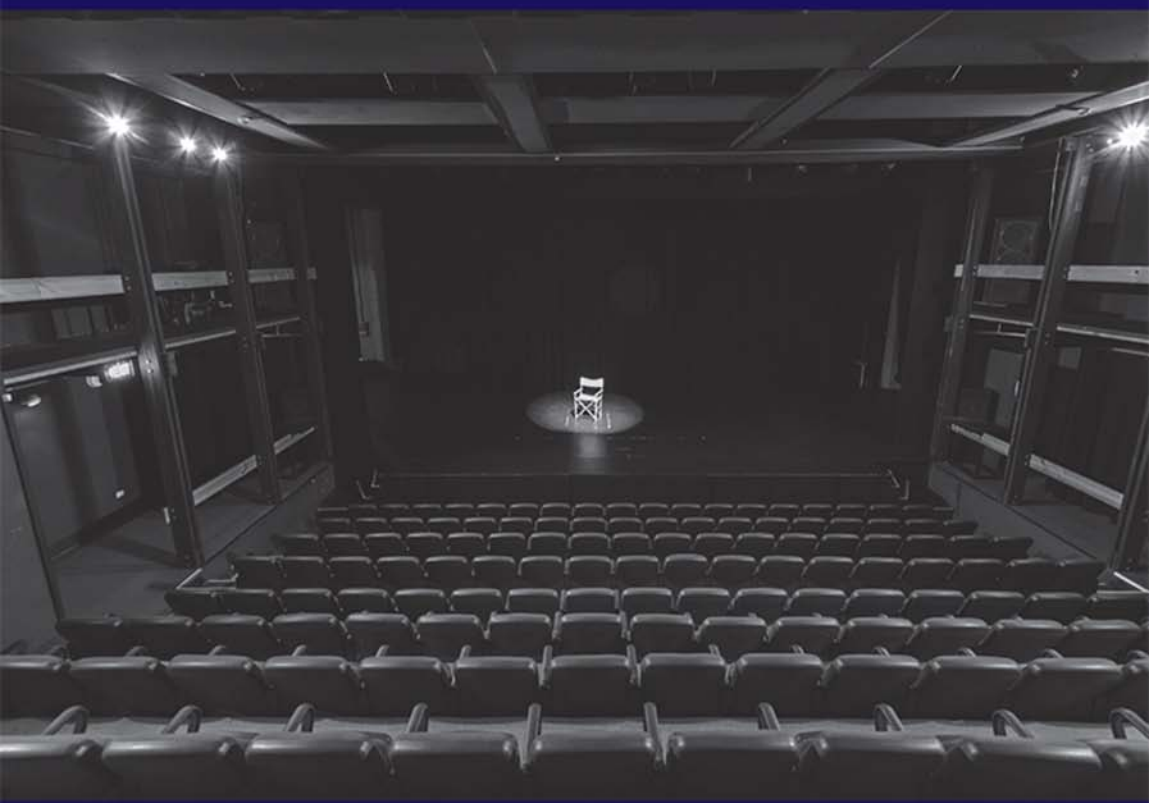
Staging Don DeLillo

REBECCA REY



ROUTLEDGE

Staging Don DeLillo

The first book-length study to focus on Don DeLillo's plays, *Staging Don DeLillo* brings the author's theatre works to the forefront. Rebecca Rey explores four central themes that emerge across DeLillo's theatre oeuvre: the centrality of language; the human fear of death; the elusiveness of truth; and the deceptive, slippery nature of personal identity. Rey examines all seven of DeLillo's plays chronologically: 'The Engineer of Moonlight' (1979), *The Day Room* (1986), the one-minute plays, 'The Rapture of the Athlete Assumed Into Heaven' (1990) and 'The Mystery at the Middle of Ordinary Life' (2000), *Valparaiso* (1999), *Love-Lies-Bleeding* (2006), and *The Word for Snow* (2014). Written in clear, accessible language, and interweaving critique of DeLillo's novels throughout, this book will appeal not only to DeLillo scholars but also to anyone working on contemporary literature and drama.

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Introduction

Don DeLillo is one of the greatest living writers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. His name appears on literary award shortlists around the world, and his novels form the backbone of any contemporary American literature reading list. It will come as a surprise to many, then, that Don DeLillo has written plays. Well known for novels like *White Noise* (1985) and *Underworld* (1997), he has rarely been acknowledged as a playwright. Indeed, I discovered DeLillo's plays accidentally myself, which sparked this study. This book attempts to rectify, in part, the lack of scholarship on this topic, and bring some critical notice to these largely unstudied texts. Any understanding of DeLillo as a writer would be incomplete without reference to his works for the stage, as the crossing of genres provide valuable insights into a writer's linguistic motifs and thematic motivations.

DeLillo was awarded the US National Book Award in 1985 and the Jerusalem Prize in 1999, as well as the American Academy of Arts and Letters's William Dean Howells Medal, for *Underworld*. His works have influenced his contemporaries, including Jonathan Franzen, David Foster Wallace and Bret Easton Ellis. Amidst this critical acclaim for his novels, DeLillo has quietly published five major playtexts and two minor ones, and all but one have been performed around the world, often numerous times and to a wide array of audiences. As Klaus Benesch (2003) points out, despite DeLillo's fame as a novelist, his plays have been conspicuously absent from academic criticism of his work. Little has changed in this regard since then. In fact, DeLillo himself admitted via correspondence in 2002 that he does not think of himself as 'anything but a novelist' (Letter to Lino Belleggia, 15 May 2002, Harry Ransom Center [HRC]).

As a writer, regardless of genre, DeLillo is meticulous, private and naturally intuitive. His work is shaped by several important elements: first, the construction and use of language is a primary driving force. His writing is purposely sculptural, the analogue result of using a typewriter and beginning each paragraph on a new page, giving him the space to study sentence architecture in isolation. As he explained to David Foster Wallace, the 'sensuous gratification' from manual typing soaks into his writing (Letter, n.d., HRC). Second, DeLillo considers writing to be an act of private intellectual rebellion. He wrote to Jonathan Franzen that 'writing is a form of personal freedom', not for authors to be 'outlaw heroes of some underculture', but to 'save themselves, to survive as individuals'

(18 August, n.y., HRC). Finally, DeLillo believes the writer is inevitably rooted in the surrounding zeitgeist. While DeLillo sometimes feels estranged from the values of society, he is 'intimately attuned, intensely receptive' to his surroundings and deeply believes that the 'writer is in history', with the isolation of writing a mere occupational hazard rather than an 'existential condition' (Letter to Franzen, 18 August, n.y., HRC). His surroundings nourish him, providing the 'beat' of his sentences. DeLillo, then, is socially inspired in theme, linguistically centred in medium, and internally motivated by a personal drive. As we'll see, these elements provide the foundation to all his works, including the little-known theatre works examined here.

DeLillo's novels are already, in a sense, theatrical. His stylised dialogue belongs to the stage, and his themes often centre on the separation and overlap of public and private, of inner world and outward societal expectation. Fiercely independent, DeLillo is nonetheless intermittently drawn to the playwright's collaborative role. In an interview, he notes the social differences between working on a play and a novel:

> I think it's precisely because a novelist lives in a world of fragile autonomy that I welcome the chance to work with other people. It's certainly not something I would want to do exclusively, and for me there is an element in which each form is an antidote to the other. (Feeney 2005, pp. 170–71)

DeLillo considers himself a social critic, an observer with his ear to the ground and pen poised. Of '[w]riters', he says, 'some of us, may tend to see things before other people do, things that are right there but aren't noticed' (Alter 2010, n.p.). Despite being always at the ready to record the fears and desires of his fellow Americans in his novels, this writer has, at times, decided that some of his work is best staged.

At the time that I began research for this book in 2008, there existed no other work that conspicuously analysed his theatrical output. Even now, the limited journal articles, performance reviews and interviews on the plays that are freely available provide no more than a cursory overview, and his personal notebooks and drafts housed at the University of Texas at Austin are sought only by the most persistent scholar prepared to rummage through over 140 boxes. Significant literary criticism is relatively non-existent; this book will begin to fill the gap in the critical literature. My intentions are similar to those of Toby Silverman Zinman (1991) in his article on two of DeLillo's plays, which Zinman wrote 'partly because the fiction is the dominant genre and partly because it is always interesting to see if and how an author can jump genres' (p. 74). There has been copious scholarship on DeLillo's novels, as we'll see below, and a handful on his plays. These monographs, main chapters and articles on DeLillo's novels implicitly inform the ideas in this book and cover the stock reading list for any student or scholar interested in the writer. A summary of these follow.

Tom LeClair was the first to publish on the novels in 1987, taking a 'systems theory' approach in *In The Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel*. He

singled out DeLillo as a systems novelist who writes novels of excess, peppered with nonchalant characters and taxonomies of people and environments. Such an information- and communication-technology-based approach arguably set the standard for later DeLillo criticism; the influence of technology on contemporary identity has since been investigated by Douglas Keesey, Joseph Tabbi, Jeremy Justus, and Klaus Benesch.

Douglas Keesey followed LeClair in 1993 with *Don DeLillo*, a thorough analysis of all the novels from *Americana* to *Mao II*. He concludes that *Libra* was DeLillo's great masterpiece and disagrees with reviewers contending that DeLillo's characters lack humanity due to the author's greater interest in ideas rather than people. Bruce Bawer (1988, p. 266), for instance, has voiced his dissenting opinion that if 'anyone is guilty of turning modern Americans into xerox copies, it is Don DeLillo'. Keesey (1993, pp. 198, 199) attempts to assuage this criticism by showing how it has also been directed at postmodern writers like William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon and William S. Burroughs. Most importantly—given this book's aims—Keesey (1993, pp. 203–4) was one of the first to very briefly discuss the playtexts 'The Engineer of Moonlight', *The Day Room*, and 'The Rapture of the Athlete Assumed into Heaven' in his final 'Coda' chapter. He likens 'The Engineer' to *Ratner's Star*, and *The Day Room* to works by Luigi Pirandello, Tom Stoppard and Samuel Beckett. Slightly preceding Keesey, Judith Laurence Pastore also delved into the links between Pirandello and DeLillo in an article published in *Italian Culture* (1990). I explore these possible textual influences of Pirandello and Beckett particularly in Chapters 1 and 2.

In 1991 DeLillo's friend, Frank Lentricchia, edited a collection called *New Essays on White Noise* (1991b), giving critics the opportunity to reinterpret the novel. In the same year, he published *Introducing Don DeLillo* (1991a), another edited collection, including Anthony DeCurtis's incisive interview, '"An Outsider in This Society": An Interview with Don DeLillo', and essays on conspiracy, cinema, and further postmodern approaches. Peter Boxall, on the other hand, in *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction* (2006), took a novel-by-novel methodology, from *Americana* through to *Cosmopolis*. In it, he contends, in a somewhat politicised way, that DeLillo's characters struggle against the increasing lack of possibility in globalised post-war culture. Creativity and opposition to the status quo have been quashed by the new self-referring, dislocated culture. However, Boxall (2006, p. 9) writes, not only does DeLillo portray the collapse of the possibility of fiction, but by writing it, he also continues the possibility of fiction. Stacey Olster's 2001 edited collection *Don DeLillo: Mao II, Underworld, Falling Man*, is also structured as a text-based novel-by-novel analysis in the style favoured by Keesey and Lentricchia. She situates these three novels' contexts as the end of the Cold War and the beginning of a globalised economy, all concerned with interrogating ideas of national identity.

Mark Osteen and David Cowart take a more cultural and linguistic approach, humanising DeLillo's novels more than previous critics. Mark Osteen's *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture* (2000) analyses several novels with the individual and the human condition as the central interest. His interpretations note how DeLillo's characters are threatened by the aggression of

media and technology, how they can use mathematics and patterns in language to attain some semblance of control, and how new heights of publicity have impacted personal privacy. His publication appeared at the cusp of the new digitally-minded millennium, going further than LeClair, Keesey and Lentricchia with his more contemporary analysis of the *integration* of technology into modern life, rather than simply its disconnective and destructive powers. This was followed by David Cowart, whose *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language* (2002) brought DeLillo's linguistic techniques to the fore. Cowart adeptly positions language as an index that exemplifies culture and provides a sensitive investigation of DeLillo's linguistic depth and luminosity. Both Osteen's and Cowart's contributions to the literature are milestones in analyses of the community aspects of culture and language. Whereas previous critics like Joseph Tabbi in *Postmodern Sublime* (1995) based their ideas on postmodern theory, the interests of Osteen and Cowart lie in American culture and language as an indicator of that culture.

Postmodern Baudrillardian real-versus-image perspectives on DeLillo's work abound. Leonard Wilcox (1991), Christian Moraru (1997, p. 194) and Joe Moran (2000, p. 140) suggest that *White Noise* and *Libra* present postmodern Baudrillardian life in America. Klaus Benesch's (2003) article was published one year after Cowart's seminal study on DeLillo's language, assuming a Baudrillardian stance on the writer's use of language by stating that DeLillo's narrative and theatre texts hinge on the substitution of the real (2003, section 3, n.p.). Benjamin Bird (2006), on the other hand, deviates from the Baudrillardian perspective by isolating a different problem that plagues DeLillo's characters: their lack of ability to accept the subjectivity of consciousness. According to Bird, their senses of selves hinge on having confidence in their subjective mental experiences.

It may well be that it was the experimental and hyperbolic nature of Baudrillardian theory that led to the broadening of scholarship at the start of the twenty-first century. *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo* (2008), edited by John N. Duvall, marks the significant period when DeLillo's fiction gained greater critical attention. Duvall's collection investigates aesthetic and cultural influences, early fiction, major novels, and themes and issues. The essays deal with a diverse array of topics and texts, the main breakthrough being the collection itself, as an accessible 'companion' for readers and students alike. It portrays DeLillo as not only an important cultural commentator, but also a predictor of trends, positioning the author as interested in how social and cultural moments affect the contemporary American sense of personal identity. Duvall, in his introduction—influenced to some degree, I would argue, by Osteen—highlights DeLillo's tendency to allow his characters the autonomy to change their situations, often through the production of art.

Much of the critical literature published in the first decade of the twenty-first century interprets DeLillo as working away from postmodern theory. These critics extend the claim made by Cowart, that DeLillo's characters are considered autonomous and fallibly human, rather than evacuated of identities. On this point, Joseph Dewey, Jesse Kavadlo and Amy Hungerford come from different critical directions but aim for similar goals. Joseph Dewey, in chapter 2 of his

Beyond Grief and Nothing (2006), takes a cursory look at the play 'The Engineer of Moonlight' as a narrative of failed spectator engagement, and in chapter 5 he evaluates the plays *Valparaiso* (1999) and *Love-Lies-Bleeding* (2005) as parables of resurrection, stressing the 'rebirth' of the characters. Kavadlo's *Don DeLillo: Balance at the Edge of Belief* (2004) delves into DeLillo's humanism, his interest in human experience, and his characters' strong beliefs and senses of self that help them transcend contemporary issues. He argues that DeLillo's recent fiction (*Mao II*, *White Noise*, *Libra*, and *Underworld*) transcends the contemporary crisis of meaning and lack of faith by providing a cultural commentary that acts as a 'moral corrective' against such a worldview. Kavadlo notes a general critical trend towards postmodern approaches, and suggests a return to human themes like fear, love and evil. Hungerford opens *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion Since 1960* (2010) by stating her interest in characters' beliefs in meaninglessness. She dedicates a chapter to DeLillo's use of language as a religious ritual based on tradition rather than doctrine. Continuing Cowart's analysis of language, but coming from the direction of religious discourse, Hungerford shows how belief in DeLillo's work operates not as a belief in the content or message, but rather a belief in the medium, human speech. Finally, Alexander Dunst's unpublished 2010 thesis focuses on madness and includes DeLillo criticism in his fourth chapter. This research indicates a return to the human, with interest again in personal fears, desires, and limits, interpreting DeLillo through a lens similar to those of Osteen and Cowart.

Ethics and moral discourse feature in two scholarly works by Peter Schneck and Philipp Schweighauser, and Paul Giaimo. Schneck and Schweighauser's *Terrorism, Media, and the Ethics of Fiction: Transatlantic Perspectives on Don DeLillo* (2010), as the title suggests, is comprised of articles designed to encourage an exchange between American and European DeLillo criticism. It rests on the need for an investigation of the ethical implications of terrorism, media and literature. This European point of view centres DeLillo's cultural critique on American consumerism, the mass media, and language. It strays from the immediately negative implications in postmodern theory—for example, Wilcox's postmodern interest in trauma—and aligns itself with a more open, and potentially positive, perspective on subjectivity. I synthesise a similar ethical interest with a literary analysis in Chapter 5 to show the cultural results of such contemporary issues, euthanasia in particular. Giaimo's *Appreciating Don DeLillo: The Moral Force of a Writer's Work* (2011) continues the ethical trend by bringing DeLillo's Catholic influence to the fore, taking on an investigation of morality within his novels. He contends that DeLillo's immoral characters are almost always punished in some way, indicating DeLillo's tendency to provide hidden morals within his stories.

Journalistic interviews have also furthered DeLillo scholarship. Some of the most illuminating interviews with DeLillo have been by Mimi Kramer (1988), Vince Passaro (1991), Maria Nadotti (1993), Adam Begley (1993), Gerald Howard (1999), Jody McAuliffe (2000), C. W. E. Bigsby (2000/2001), Kevin Connolly (2005), Anthony DeCurtis (2005), Mark Feeney (2005), William Goldstein (2005), Martha Lavey (2005–2006), Tom LeClair (2005), and Alexandra Alter (2010).

Some of these have been collected by Thomas DePietro in his excellent *Conversations with Don DeLillo* (2005); these interviews with DeLillo provide valuable insights into his writing habits, his textual influences, authorial intentions, and biographical background. I have integrated snippets of many of these illuminating exchanges to ensure that the writer remains at the forefront of his works and that his own verbatim responses and explanations are given consideration.

This book is important for two reasons: it is the first and only monograph devoted to DeLillo's plays, and it shows how the plays help us interpret the novels in a new holistic way. The critical literature above has largely missed the importance of genre in DeLillo's oeuvre by focussing only on his novels; this neglect is rectified here. DeLillo's novels can only be *truly* understood in terms of motivations and themes once his other works are scrutinised to draw out common threads running through his oeuvre. In this book I provide a new departure point in the already popular and relevant field of DeLillo research by trying to answer the questions, 'What are Don DeLillo's plays?' and 'How do his plays relate to his novels?'. Throughout this work, although the plays are given centre stage, DeLillo's novels are supporting characters called upon and given due attention throughout. For research materials, I travelled to the Harry Ransom Center (indicated by 'HRC' throughout this book) at The University of Texas at Austin to peruse the notes, drafts and ephemera in the Don DeLillo Collection, an exceptional experience recommended to any DeLillo scholar. The authenticity, transparency and 'body-hot' nature of archived handwritten notes by the author are the heartbeat of this study, without which an interpretation of the plays would run cold. I also attended a performance of *Love-Lies-Bleeding* in Melbourne and interviewed the director Alice Bishop. These materials are combined with the criticisms and interviews outlined above, as well as theatre performance reviews, for a comprehensive critical analysis of the plays in both text and stage form.

In the following pages I examine each of DeLillo's seven playtexts in chronological order, devoting a chapter to each of his main plays. We begin with his first play written in the 1970s in Chapter 1, then the 1980s in Chapter 2, then a brief intermission in the 1990s and first decade of the 2000s in Chapter 3. Following this, the curtain rises again in the late '90s in Chapter 4 and first decade of the 2000s in Chapter 5, concluding with the latest 2014 play in Chapter 6. Through a longitudinal study with a near-perfect chronological structure that examines all the plays together from first to last, I intend to showcase DeLillo's development as a writer for the stage and will conclude with an overarching broad view of DeLillo's trajectory as a novelist and a playwright.

In Chapter 1, I present an analysis of DeLillo's 'The Engineer of Moonlight' (1979)—his first published, but as yet unperformed, playtext. 'The Engineer' bears striking similarities in theme with DeLillo's earlier novel *Ratner's Star* (1976), where the young protagonist, Billy Twillig, is involved in cracking a code from outer space. In contrast to Billy, the protagonist of 'The Engineer', Eric Lighter, directs self-examination inwards in an attempt to better understand himself and his madness. I examine the motifs of madness, mathematics, and game-playing, and their interconnections as they appear in 'The Engineer'.

We then enter the realm of metatheatre in Chapter 2, with DeLillo's *The Day Room* (1986). This play involves a confusing and comedic circus of characters that leaves the spectators guessing as to which characters are genuinely mad and which are merely acting. The theme of the deception of identity is explored through the complications introduced by shifting character roles reminiscent of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921), and through unreachable truths indicative of Beckettian concerns. I also explore several wider facets present in the playtext: metatheatricality, paranoia, and the link between acting and death.

Chapter 3 provides a brief intermission, a short, playful, look at DeLillo's two one-minute plays, 'The Rapture of the Athlete Assumed into Heaven' (1992) and 'The Mystery at the Middle of Ordinary Life' (2000). 'The Rapture' portrays a victorious tennis star at the height of his extraordinary win, and 'The Mystery' is a quiet meditation on married life; both are moving examinations of core human relationships, desires and motivations.

Chapter 4 focuses on *Valparaiso* (1999), DeLillo's most technological and technocentric work for the stage. When Michael Majeski boards a plane to the wrong city, he finds himself in the centre of the media spotlight, and enjoys it. I examine the characteristics and role of mediating technology in *Valparaiso* and DeLillo's wider oeuvre, and the centrality of technology in the creation and maintenance of contemporary celebrity.

The relationship between language and death is the focus of Chapter 5's analysis of *Love-Lies-Bleeding* (2005). I view this play on euthanasia through the lens of the philosophy of death, exploring the ethics of merciful killing and the importance of specialist terminology in times of trauma. Finally, the short play *The Word for Snow* (2014) analysed in Chapter 6 was commissioned by the Chicago Humanities Festival. A strange, thoughtful work, *Snow* presents our potential future: a world slowly devastated by climate change. Through the characters of the Pilgrim, the Scholar, and the mediating Interpreter, DeLillo poses persistent questions surrounding ethical and environmental responsibility. It stands as a symbolic, pared-down bookend to DeLillo's works thus far.

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1 ‘The Engineer of Moonlight’ and the Logical Life

‘The Engineer of Moonlight’ (1979) is Don DeLillo’s first playtext, published between the novels *Players* (1977) and *The Names* (1982).[1] Most interestingly, it has remained unstaged since its 1979 publication in the *Cornell Review*, fading from view, and DeLillo’s active disownment of this play is no secret. In a letter to Ioanna Kleftoyianni in 2002, he omits mention of ‘The Engineer’, laying claim to only his stage-performed works: ‘I haven’t written for movies but I’ve written two stage plays, and one of them—called *Valparaiso*—was produced recently in Paris and New York’ (HRC). In a 2006 interview, DeLillo did eventually admit that there are ‘four [plays] and the first one was something I published in a small literary journal and forgot about, because I didn’t think it was stage-worthy’ owing to its being ‘strictly a private experiment’ (Lavey 2005–2006). Jason S. Polley, one of the few scholars who has explored DeLillo’s theatre works, observes that ‘the book-jackets of his three subsequent plays omit any mention of *The Engineer of Moonlight*. . . . Widely understood as his first dramatic work, *The Day Room* supplants *The Engineer of Moonlight*’s claim to primacy’ (Polley 2007, p. 169). Why, then, was DeLillo moved to write an unperformable play?

At the time of publishing his first playtext, DeLillo had written six novels and eight short stories. Something about the idea behind ‘The Engineer’ was different, though, requiring an entirely new genre for the writer. DeLillo describes the impetus to write ‘The Engineer’ as imagining the characters in physical space: ‘I’m not quite sure how to explain what brought it about. I think I saw people on a stage, actually, and began to follow them and to listen to them’ (McAuliffe 2000, p. 609). Despite DeLillo’s belief that ‘The Engineer’ was ‘something that was probably not stageworthy, in a way’, ‘awfully conversational’ and ‘needs a greater thrust than it has’ (McAuliffe 2000, pp. 609–610), this mysterious little play’s critical neglect and wholly textual life has opened a free space in which to explore the large themes at work.

‘The Engineer’ is a play of two acts, four characters and one home, a very similar setting and precursor in many ways to *Love-Lies-Bleeding* (2005). Mathematician

1 Henceforth for simplicity, ‘The Engineer of Moonlight’ will sometimes simply be ‘The Engineer’.

Eric Lighter, his assistant James Case, and his first and fourth wives, Diana Vail and Maya, spend the first act sunbathing and discussing Eric's mental decline. Diana has come to visit Eric to ensure his well-being after his breakdown. The second act consists of their physically playing a mysterious board game together. Although Maya, Diana and James alternate between sunbathing, chatting and playing, the central character of the play remains the enigmatic Eric Lighter and his downward spiral into madness. It's worth remembering, though, that despite being mentally unstable, Eric importantly retains his sanity and function. In this chapter we'll see how DeLillo takes this further, likening Eric to a visionary whose breakdown has given him the ability to see.

Simply structured and limited in stage directions, 'The Engineer' relies heavily on dialogue-driven action and the symbolic and connotative ideas exchanged between the characters. It involves 'people in rooms', DeLillo says, and then explains further at length:

> The play is just that. People talking, people silent, people motionless, people juxtaposed with objects. There are four characters. What connects them is the awesome power of their loving. The main character is Eric Lighter, a once-great mathematician who is now a pathetic but compelling ruin. If the play has a line of development at all, it hinges on whether Eric's former wife will abandon a recent marriage and successful career to help the others transcribe and type Eric's half-insane memoirs, along with the other day-to-day chores and obligations. The idea is absurd on the face of it. Diana ridicules the notion. Toward the end of the play she leaves the stage still denying that she'll stay. But we know she still feels a powerful love for Eric, for the aura of greatness that clings to him, and we feel uncertain about taking her at her word. The suggestion that she may stay is contained in a strange board game she'd played with the others earlier in Act Two. A game involving words and logic used in unfamiliar ways. If we take this game as a play within the play, what we see is that Diana, who has never played before, gradually comes to understand the strange and complex nature of the game—an understanding the audience doesn't share. Toward the end she is elated; she is saying it all begins to fit, the colors, the shapes, the names. She wants to play. (LeClair 1983, pp. 89–90)

DeLillo cites the rewarding aspect of the play as its being 'deeply rooted in real people and real things', although theatre, for him, is 'not about the force of reality so much as the mysteries of identity and existence' (McAuliffe 2000, p. 615).

Counting and Playing

'The Engineer' contains within it two examples of what I call methodologies of logic—pure mathematics and play—each of which will be explored in turn. These are self-contained and non-referential frameworks; they use logic and rules within their systems but are not applicable to the outside world and, hence,