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**“THE WORLD HAS BECOME SELF-REFERING”:  
DON DELILLO’S *THE NAMES* AND THE AESTHETIC OF THE  
CONTEMPORARY**

“In this century the writer has carried on a conversation with madness.”  
— Don DeLillo, *The Names*

“Writers must oppose systems.”  
— Don DeLillo, “A Conversation with Don DeLillo:  
Has Terrorism Become the World’s Main Plot?”

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**Abstract:** The essay suggests that Don DeLillo is one of the U. S. authors who have reflected most responsibly on the crisis of modernity’s fundamental institutions and community structures. Compared to the relatively stabilizing deep freeze of the Cold War, the late 1980s and the world after the fall of the Berlin Wall are, as DeLillo shows especially in his post-*White Noise* works, more interconnected, more “systematic,” and overall more “present.” Focusing primarily on DeLillo’s 1982 novel *The Names* and its “world presence” theme, the essay addresses the writer’s fascination with the systems that define the contemporary and its “aesthetic” and shows how some individuals set out to resist being defined and confined by our world’s networks of “madness.”

**Keywords:** DeLillo, systems, world, presence, aesthetics, form, contemporary

Great artists crack the code of the zeitgeist, and Don DeLillo is no exception. If, as some argue, he has replaced Thomas Pynchon at the very top of the United States' late postmodern canon in the 1990s, that may be not only because he is the consummate student of contemporaneity but, to paraphrase Giorgio Agamben, also because DeLillo dips his quill in the ink of the present with an earnestness and method quite different from Pynchon's (Agamben 19-20). "What sets the contemporary world apart?" "What does it mean to experience it as humans?" "What is the essence of the present?"— these are among the questions DeLillo has raised programmatically and imaginatively. Wrestling with them book after book, he has become one of the most observant witnesses of our present's "presentness," a notion we might understand, along the lines of the writer's own intimations in his 1982 novel *The Names*, as a historically specific world that exists with such an intensity, encroaches on us so consequentially, and proves so "immediate" to us, so much "in our face," that it marks our moment as unique. This uniqueness, DeLillo hints, is pressing on us not only as a fact of late-twentieth-early-twenty-first-century life but also intellectually, for its ontology — how things and people are in and with today's world — is cognitively inevitable too, calling as it does for urgent thinking through<sup>1</sup>.

A dominant of DeLillo's work from the very beginning, the force of this urgency comes into focus and starts driving the author's writing before the 1990s and even prior to *White Noise*, with *The Names*, a still underrated and underread book. While "the airborne toxic event" saga may have been DeLillo's breakthrough receptionwise, *The Names* carries out, I propose, another kind of break, more profound because internal to the writer's evolving oeuvre itself and also because it sets the stage for the geo-visions of Chinese-induced heartland sunsets and similar spectacles of globalization in the 1985 masterpiece and later novels<sup>2</sup>. More precisely, the 1982 volume designates the point in

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<sup>1</sup> I talk about "late postmodernism" in my 2011 book *Cosmodernism: American Narrative, Late Globalization, and the New Cultural Imaginary*. Jeremy Green has published an entire book on the subject, *Late Postmodernism* (2005), which focuses on the 1990s. This is the period during which, Green rightly contends, DeLillo "attain[ed] critical prominence" (4).

<sup>2</sup> For other critics, *The Names* is a milestone in the recent narrative of terror. See, for instance, Andrew Hoberek (498). The rise of terror as a vector of world systems ties into my discussion of the structure of presentness in DeLillo.

DeLillo when the mind-boggling immediacy of the present asserts itself decisively both as world cultural dominant *and* historical moment, to wit, as surrounding reality, constellation of objects, world structure or, more simply yet, *world*, as well as juncture in world *history*: the early 1980s as a final decade of the Cold War and harbinger of the “new order” after the impending fall of the Berlin Wall. Taking center stage in *The Names*, then, is the double duty of material world presence as temporal present, historical period, or signpost along the axis of civilizational and cultural becoming. This world is so remarkably present, DeLillo suggests, that it has acquired “epochalist” relevance, differentiating our time from earlier epochs; the world has filled with itself its planetary container, as it were, to such an alarming level and threatens to brim over with such a fury that the extensity and intensity of the world’s being — this overwhelming and imperious omnipresence of the world — has accrued historically definitional, “periodizing” force. Otherwise put, *how* the world is proves not only ontologically but also historically matchless, or at least distinctive enough. For, echoing our own raids and encroachments on the natural environment, the world is now “crowding in” *on us*, abutting on our own beings with a resolve that articulates and elucidates our *when*, locating our present in cultural time and, by the same token, shedding light on the meaning of contemporaneity. This meaning, the author suspects, is then truly inseparable of the “how,” of the way the contemporary world feels, looks, and acts. Furthermore, this unit or, better still, equivalence of content and form, this aesthetic worldliness in which immediately present form “presences” — presentifies and ultimately constitutes — meaning, is, as we will see, part and parcel of the overall aesthetic that, depending on what type of “system” this aesthetic crystallizes into, *The Names* endorses or rejects, formulates or even instantiates as a novel, as the case may be.

In the authoritative chapter he devotes to the novel in his 2002 Don DeLillo monograph, David Cowart draws from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s language games and Jacques Derrida’s critique of transcendental presence in Martin Heidegger to work out an interpretation that dwells on the “self-absencing” and “absconding” with which presence responds when characters attempt to “represent [presence] directly,” to name it (165). Exemplarily grounded in literary analysis, Cowart’s take on the “poststructuralist” or, better yet, postmodern DeLillo is persuasive, but the same textual

evidence tempts a reader like myself to take the Derridean premises in another direction, perhaps beyond and possibly against their ontological and aesthetic purview. Namely, whereas the French philosopher insists, as Cowart reminds us, that presence “cannot coexist with expression in the deceptive and misleading medium” (164) of expressive structures such as Ancient scripts, screenplays, archaeological finds, film, or the “nonfiction” novel of narrating protagonist James Axton’s young son Tap, *The Names* foregrounds repeatedly and memorably expression and form as onto-semiotically present, as a presence that, with an illuminating tautology, is and means but only insofar as it is and not beyond its palpable presence *in situ*, as it is no more and no less than present — in brief, as it is with existentially and historically singular force.

Now, in Derrida, and in a reading framed by Derrida’s deconstruction of presence as deferred, disjointed, fragmented, and ever-slippery meaning, presence is and remains, quite logically, a *de facto* absence. In the “poststructuralist” DeLillo, expression, form, and medium are venues where presence goes AWOL, where it is bound to remain missing, unrevealed, or a Lacanian *béance* subject to unremitting nostalgia for what is lacking, for meaningful “depth” inside us or “out there” in the world. In a world-“constructivist” or ontologically “presentist” DeLillo, however, because the world is so absolutely present, so hyperpresent in the wake of its flooding of the whole realm of existence, we have reached a point — our contemporary era — when all there is has drawn as near to us as possible, and things that can be have come to the surface of being. There exists, consequently, no place away from us, above, or below this material surface where either we or the world can evade each other, distance from one another, and hide ourselves or what we signify. But this generalized ontology of adjacency, close quarters, surfaces, and exposure in no way sets off a disclosure of meaning, a long-awaited “revelation.” Presence exists as presence in as much as it “insists” as such — as it insists on, and as it preserves, a sufficient measure of inscrutability, as it remains mysterious and immeasurable, persisting in its unreadability even as it invites inferences, conjectures, connections, and so forth. Signification and the traditional predicaments of hermeneutics swirling around it such as amphibology, polysemy, irony, metaphor, allegory, and the like still — *but only* — form. That is, they do so in and as fully shaped, individual, and concrete form: not as representation that substitutes, displaces, and renders absent in order to point to an

elsewhere, a beyond, or content but as self-containing presence that merely presents itself to readers internal or external to the book.

This is another way of saying that, because presence is all there is, and because the world is more present than it has ever been, “absence” has become a moot point, and thus, to manifest themselves, meaning, significance, and relevance must be *as* form and expressive configuration, must anchor themselves in and *qua* their sheer being, not in their eagerness to efface themselves and “stand for” something *au-delà*, “meta,” but in the “directness [of their] full presence” (Coward 174). Risen to the surface, the world of forms has rendered the whole world a surface. But this no longer is the “flat” world of “superficial” and onto-historically “superficial” postmodernism of the Baudrillardian-Jamesonian vulgate. Nor is it the globalizing ecumene surveyed by Thomas L. Friedman in *The World is Flat*, and it may not even be world of postmodernism at all, or of postmodernism “as we know it.” If we must call this world and its ontology flat, then the modifier should be employed to designate something compatible to what it does in “flat ontologists” such as Manuel DeLanda, Levi Bryan, and Ian Bogost, who argue, roughly speaking, for an ontologically more “equitable” and philosophically more sound repositioning of world objects and forms, regardless of origin and scale, on the same plane of existence and intellectual consideration<sup>3</sup>. *This* flatness, then, is surprisingly “thick” in all sorts of ways, so much so that, as we will also note, the presence it embodies need not lean on the crutch of mystical-metaphysical absence to engender meaning.

Thus understood, this centrality of form inaugurates or at the very least decisively consolidates in *The Names* an *aesthetic of presence*. Since form conceived along these lines is so pivotal to this aesthetic, the latter may be a “hyperformalism,” but it is not a formalism, or it is not one in a traditional sense. More than the “formalist” form of modernist art and criticism, I contend, is in play here. Soaked through with context, this brand of formalism is not just deeply attuned to key developments and shifts in world economies, ecologies, sovereignties, and cultures; it is also their receptacle and blurry imprint, echo chamber and oppositional encoding. For, notably, as DeLillo hardly ever

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew Mullins turns to object-oriented philosophy, thing theory, and considerations of flat ontology to discuss some of DeLillo’s works and postmodernism broadly in his fine 2016 book *Postmodernism in Pieces: Materializing the Social in U. S. Fiction*.

glamorizes or celebrates a priorily presence, form, pattern, code, design, and aesthetic largely, this material runs the whole aesthetic and ethical-political gamut from the sublime, beautiful, and original to the trite, derivative, serial, and kitschy and from the transformative, critical, and disobedient to the worrisome, deleterious, and destructive. Together with the novel itself, with most of DeLillo's books following *The Names*, and with the contemporary broadly, the form in question, then, is a multifaceted *geoformation*. As an aesthetic object, this geoformation may refer to completed forms or sets of forms inside the book's diegetic universe, to the novel as a literary text, to an entire contemporary aesthetic with its own varieties, and, more generally, to the contemporary itself; as a process, it foregrounds the form's making or "formation," a poiesis inflected and, again, endowed with all sorts of ramifications and implications by the world's own forming, re-forming, and themselves deeply ambiguous processes — a world poiesis.

The advent of all these world material mutations and of the geoformations they have accompanied and borne on is the event that sets aside our present from other ages and intervals. On this account, this event is a genuine "event-world," a world event that re-worlds the world in a Heideggerian sense by speeding up the world's coming together as one<sup>4</sup>. Shifting gears to complete a fundamental cycle, the world takes its worldly presence to a heretofore unreached level. Here, the world acquires a new "fullness." This plenitude is re-worlding in that it affords the world the quantum leap of "coming into itself," of "growing" a self, so to speak. Singh, a member of the cult Jim and Jim's friends, archaeologist Owen Brademas and, befittingly enough, cult movie-maker Frank Volterra, pursue across the huge swath of land conquered by Alexander the Great twenty-three centuries ago, actually speaks in these very terms. "The world," Singh tells Owen in a key scene that unfolds in the Great Indian Desert not far from the Pakistani border,

'has become self-referring. You know this. This thing has seeped into the texture of the world. The world for thousands of years was our escape, was our refuge. Men hid from themselves in the world. We hid from God or death. The world was where we lived, the

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<sup>4</sup> On "world-events" or, closer to the French original, "event-worlds" such as the attacks of September 11, 2001, see Sirinelli 35-38.

self was where we went mad and died. But now the world has made a self of its own. Why, how, never mind. What happens to us now that the world has a self? How do we say the simplest thing without falling into a trap? Where do we go, how do we live, who do we believe? This is my vision, a self-referring world, a world in which there is no escape' (*The Names* 297)

An affordance of the world's newly acquired critical mass, the self the world sprouts at the expense of planetary spaces and subsequently of the selves that, in them, took shelter and engaged in psychological, physical, and metaphysical rites of subjectivity is the epoch-making development of our time. This occurrence is momentous because, among other things, it *resets the contemporary*. As a period in history, this is no longer coextensive with the post-World War II era but is about to start over only a few years after this episode, with the end of the Cold War, if not to end history once for all, as stipulated by the cult's platform or by Francis Fukuyama's 1989 controversial essay, then to break ground for a new one.

*The Names* shows that the wheels of change are already in motion, though. Not only that, but the ongoing transformations are echoed by, and so roughly coincide with, adjustments in DeLillo's own *modus operandi*. This is reorienting itself in the early 1980s so as to become more attuned to these complex and contradictory developments and thus, in a way, rediscover the world — better still, discover it “for what it is” or is about to become within a decade. Granted, when compared to later novels, the discoveries are still incomplete or tentatively formulated, and they will remain so in the 1991 novel *Mao II*, which, on many levels, carries on the project of *The Names*. It is only with the 1997 *Underworld* that we will get DeLillo's complete Cold War report-cum-farewell to the era, much as we will have to wait until the collapse of the Berlin Wall and of the Eastern Bloc for history itself to finish turning a new page in its own book. Yet again, both in the world and in the world inside *The Names* major realignments are underway. In this sense, the world's and the writer's life-altering incidents are identical. The “objective” narrative of history and fiction writing share, one might say, the same plot. What is more, they do the sharing under the rather counterintuitive auspices of “self-reference,” of the self or self-consciousness that grows, on one side, as the world's quantitative increase brings about a new, “contemporary” quality or mode of being, and,

on the other side, as the account of this transformation, DeLillo's art, evolves into a new mode of writing. The two modes are roughly isomorphic, for the same array of geopolitical and cultural-historical factors brings them in step "formally." But homology of form does not translate into identity of content or function automatically, and so DeLillo's work is susceptible of embracing, parsing out critically, rejecting, and otherwise taking stock discriminately of the newfangled world.

World newness, as well as the "nowness," the "presentness" in question here, and its aesthetic corollaries lie in the worldly "self-reference" the contemporary world setup has evolved as globalization kicks into full swing in the 1980s, and the previous, comparatively "piecemeal," less integrated world is becoming more and more "systemic." Compared to the relatively stabilizing deep freeze of the Cold War, the 1980s, not to mention the decades following the breakup of the former USSR, are, as DeLillo himself shows especially in the works published after *Underworld*, more interconnected, that is, more world-systemic, and oftentimes devastatingly so. As he already also points out in *The Names*, this large-scale "thickening" of an earlier, more loosely integrated world into "harder" structures of the system type routinely occurs across, above, and not infrequently to the detriment of nation-states, groups, traditions, styles, and localities. This is happening as people, capital, material and symbolic goods — in the novel, mainly oil and "Oriental" rugs, both in high demand — and discourse cross, courtesy of various trans- and multinational geoeconomic and political-military apparatuses, increasingly permeable political borders to give rise to "systems" of human association, information, and culture less and less overlapping with and beholden to national sovereignties. All these world circuitries and mechanisms of communications are geared toward making the world one. If the world has oversaturated the planetary domain, and if, as a result, the planet — or the world itself, if you prefer — is in crisis, this is *the* sign that the world has become or is on the brink of becoming one, an entity capable of functioning not necessarily as a coherent or "rational" whole but just *as a whole*, viz., liable to see itself as such, to see and reference its *self* and by the same token itself as a system. For, since self-reference is a feedback loop, and since feedback loop is a basic feature of systems, when Singh asseverates that the world is self-referring, he implicitly asserts that the world is now overtly — is presenting itself as — a system or, as we will see, as a lattice of world-systems.



Needless to say, “world” and “system” are not inherently synonymous, and Immanuel Wallerstein has insisted that they are not geographically coextensive either. “Putting in the hyphen [between ‘world’ and ‘system’] was intended,” he specifies, “to underline that we are talking not about systems, economies, empires *of the* (whole) world, but about systems, economies, empires *that are* a world (but quite possibly, and indeed usually, not encompassing the entire globe)” (16-17). In DeLillo’s view, however, the systems of the 1980s are moving in this “wholist” direction and ominously so, threatening to become *totalities*, worlds, and coterminous with the world if not supplanting it. Centuries in the making according to Wallerstein and his followers, systems have served as the modern world’s primary organizing model and, warns DeLillo, are now poised to substitute themselves to the world. They have taken over so much of it — have pushed it to become so much like them — that, having swallowed more than they can digest, they are approaching, and in some cases have already reached, an impasse. Stretched too thin, less and less efficient as they keep expanding, constantly in overload mode, many of the systems DeLillo uncovers in *The Names* seem concurrently snowballing and on the verge of implosion; they are swelling *and* undergoing structural crises; they are shaping human lives, national histories, geopolitics, lifestyles, narratives, and their meanings, sometimes in demonstrably positive and “progressive” ways while also crushing life, failing to serve communities, jamming stories, and making no sense, or, worse, signifying devastation, death, and disempowerment. Particularly the latter class of systems, but also any system seeking to self-complete and thus become a fully self-referring *totality* and, implies DeLillo, all systems generally have a propensity to become quasi *totalitarian*, and, insofar as they are turning into a totality or are one already, to show symptoms of “totalism,” of pathological systemics whose end result is lethal — hence *The Names*’ frequent mentions of deadly systems and programs. Spawning death, they are also death-bound; they move toward annihilation in more ways than one, much like DeLillo’s famous plot notion in *White Noise*, *Libra*, *Zero K*, and elsewhere, where, plots, conspiracies, plans, timetables, stories, descriptions, algorithms, paradigms, models, etc. near simultaneously completion and some kind of death or obliteration.

The arc of the story, the arc of the system, and the arc of life are identical, DeLillo seems to be saying. But, if this is true, this is also frightening, and therefore he appears

to be urging too, albeit implicitly: keep telling the story, or keep it open-ended, but also make sure the system stays incomplete, open as well, imperfect, a work in progress, a flawed totality; may the system not be a world, let alone *the* world. Pressed by Jim, Owen reveals that Singh understands the world as “Everything, everybody, whatever is said or can be said. Although not these exactly. The thing that encompasses these. Maybe that’s it” (299). The dubitative is only one aspect of note — one system-opening ploy — of this loosely Wittgensteinian-Heideggerian statement about the world as totality quantifiable by language but “encompassing” whatever our utterances may enunciate. In other words, the world is both the system or series of systems of representation, from tongues, alphabets, and toponymy to storytelling, banking, and the models applied by Jim in his “risk analysis,” *and* what I identified earlier as their planetary vessel or being realm. This expanse, an area or reserve of potential worldliness, is, thinks Singh, one in which all such systems can be but need not or should not occupy completely nor complete themselves entirely in it, so that a wiggling room for the world and for ourselves — for our own selves — is left over: a space and leeway for life, freedom, and creativity.

An ever-more “systematized” world had been edging its way, however, into this ontological, ethical, and aesthetic reserve of spatiality for a while, and for *The Names* dramatis personae, the overextension of the world as system and of the world of systems is already in their air. They “feel” it. They put their finger on its communicational vector before the real people of the Internet revolution and social media will become too weary of it to respond to it with wonder, as to something “new,” and even notice it anymore. “How big the world is,” Lindsay exclaims during a walk with Jim up an Athens street. “They keep telling us,” she goes on,

‘it’s getting smaller all the time. But it’s not, is it? Whatever we learn about it makes it bigger. Whatever we do to complicate things makes it bigger. It’s all a complication. It’s one big tangled thing... Modern communications don’t shrink the world, they make it bigger. Faster planes make it bigger. They give us more, they connect more things. The world isn’t shrinking at all. People who say it’s shrinking have never flown Air Zaire in a tropical storm... No wonder people go to school to learn stretching and bending. The world is so big and complicated we don’t trust ourselves to figure out anything on our

own. No wonder people read books that tell them how to run, walk and sit. We're trying to keep up with the world, the size of it, the complications' (322-333).

Another oft-quoted fragment of the novel, the excerpt echoes through future novels from *White Noise* to *Underworld* and beyond DeLillo's fiction to anticipate and interpellate David Harvey's "time-space compression" argument about postmodernism (284). Nota bene, for Lindsay and, I would submit, for her author as well, the world is *not* contracting. The geography of the possible — the perimeter of what can be — and principally the natural domain of being are indeed decreasing in size. The world as earth, as healthy environment and habitat for all species, is diminishing, depleting, and withering quickly, while the world of artificial systems is widening, not infrequently at the expense of world ecologies and generally with great expenditure of sheer space. Before running out of clean air, people like Singh are suffocating ontologically, so to speak, because there is no "refuge," nowhere to go — because "there is no outside anymore," as Vija Kinski, Eric Packer's "chief of theory," will memorably put it in *Cosmopolis* (90). What with the revved-up spread of theories, programs, and systems implementing them, the lack of this "outside" — Singh's "escape" — reduces drastically our being and knowing possibilities, which concerns both Singh and Lindsay to the extent they depend increasingly on systems to know, do, and simply be. If, as Owen also tells Jim, "[t]he things of the world are no longer discrete," that is because the world has gelled into "patterns," connective designs, and networks, which is all people have to go on for learning, doing, and otherwise being in the world (*The Names* 81).

System-dependency is certainly on the rise at the dawn of the 1980s, but system dependability is an entirely different story. New productive and reproductive, computational and communicational, financial and commercial, military and geopolitical systems come online and into previously unclaimed zones of being to bolster the world's presence in Singh's sense<sup>5</sup>. For him and other characters in the book, this presence is seldom reassuring, and, once more, what the concept means in DeLillo is a function of context. When Jim facetiously concedes that "we [, the United States,

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<sup>5</sup> Tom LeClair's books have been foundational for understanding the role systems play in postmodern fiction in general and DeLillo's work in particular, including *The Names*. See LeClair's *The Art of Excess* and *In the Loop*, respectively.

a]re a military presence in some of th[e countries]” mentioned by Kathryn, his Canadian wife, she retorts that “America[,] the world’s living myth,” is “a presence almost everywhere” (114)<sup>6</sup>. It does not help to solve their marital disputes that Jim too, who does intelligence-gatherer on the side, sees himself as a “presence” either, a shorthand for “U. S. presence,” to be sure, but also an oblique intimation of presence overall, of what constitutes full, leverage-rich ontological stature (242). The expanding U. S. and U. S.-led NATO military system, which would within years begin to coopt Eastern Europe also, as well as the American-centered transnational finance, which employs most of *The Names*’ heroes, forefront a global presence “risk analysts” like Jim and loan officers such as David Keller themselves juxtapose to socioeconomic havoc at the subsystemic, national level and generally to setbacks by which entire regions and nations devolve out of presence status. Afghanistan, for instance, has become a “non-presence country” for David, although his firm does “business, a little,” over there, while “Iran [is a] collapsed presence” altogether, a repercussion of the same company’s “collapsed business” in the Islamic nation (233). The advancing systemic world is, then, with an apparent paradox, a world in deepening turmoil and violence, terror-prone and therefore terrorizing. This is, conspicuously, the runaway world of risk of late or second modernity sociologists Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck have attended to in detail. It also is the world of self-styled risk consultants like Jim. Both from Owen and from personal research, he learns that “[t]he means to contend with death has become death,” and so, as we build “a system against the terror in our souls,” we also “make the system equal to the terror,” whether we talk about actual systems of terror, which also start spreading exponentially and transnationally around the end of the Cold War, or about banking systems, weapons systems, computer operating systems, or systems such as the murderous cult and, inside it, the cult’s “operating program,” which matches the initials of place names and victims’ names (308). Not only does “[m]adness ha[ve] a structure,” as Andahl, another cult member, clues Jim in, but “[w]e might [also] say madness is all structure. We might say structure is inherent in madness.” “There is not,” concludes Andahl, “one without the other,” and so the cult’s onomastic structure and scheme of name-matching are mad form or madness as form, in-kind responses to an out-of-whack history. They

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<sup>6</sup> Heather M. Houser discusses some of the problematic aspects of this kind of presence, with reference to Kathryn’s words.

compound the ontological predicament even when they are wielded to retrieve the cornered self and “escap[e] the world,” and perhaps more so in that case, for the world of systems and the cult as system are too much alike (210).

Greece, where DeLillo spent the 1979-1982 interval, must have given him, much as it does to Jim, a front seat to the world spectacle of consolidating mutuality of irrationality and putatively rational systems. The protagonist will remember those years as a “season of small promise,” but the reference is deliberately litotic (143). The period’s recollection characteristically entails a palinode of world-systemic dysfunctionalities sweeping the same, multiply symbolical geography of imperial presence unified at one historical end by Greco-Hellenistic administration and culture and at the other by American hegemony. “It was,” Jim reminisces, “the winter the hostages were taken in Tehran” (143). “This was,” he adds later, “the period after the President ordered a freeze of Iranian assets held in U. S. banks. Desert One was still to come, the commando raid that ended two hundred and fifty miles from Tehran. It was the winter Rowser [Jim’s intelligence supervisor, apparently] learned that the Shi’ite underground movement, Dawa, was stockpiling weapons in the Gulf. It was the winter before the car bombings in Nablus and Ramallah, before the military took power in Turkey... It was before the Iraqi ground troops moved into Iran...” (233).

In the overheated Victorianism of the early 1980s, the best of times is also its opposite. The neo-Dickensian “epoch of belief” is driven by geo-systemic arrogance, but various systems’ failure to deliver a more logical, peaceful, and prosperous world brings about an “age of foolishness” complete with its “worst-of-times” litany of events of the last years of the Jimmy Carter administration, both listed and unlisted by Jim: the rise of violent anarchism in post-Colonels-era Greece (with Andreas a possible Communist agent), the Lebanese civil war, the martial law and the 1980 military coup in Turkey, the Turkish-Kurdish war, the 1979 Egypt-Israel peace treaty followed, however, by President Anwar el-Sadat’s 1981 assassination, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and so on. Beating the rhythm of the contemporary, world-systems concomitantly thrive and misfire, dilate and fall apart, both echoing a convulsive geopolitical tectonics and escalating it. Their overwhelming majority is centered on what Jim calls, tongue-in-cheek and not quite, American presence. Here I enumerate only a few of those crisscrossing, dovetailing, and combining in *The Names*: the Northeast Group banking

network (itself “part of a monster corporation”), Jim’s employer, in which capital venture and CIA-outsourced intelligence adventurism mesh to mutual benefit (242); U. S. military and security infrastructure and personnel, together with the operations they enable on behalf of American and other parties overtly or covertly; the circle of U. S. expatriates, for whom Athens is either a favorite residence or staging area but whose movements and activities span the whole imperial expanse mentioned earlier; tourism and travel, especially air travel, treated like another American profession; manufacturing and commercial agreements and attendant transnational activities, including the inevitable “rugs” and their obsessive purchase by Americans all over the Middle East (218-219) and the oddly recurring “refrigeration systems” (62); Jim’s effectively global — Middle Eastern, transatlantic, and Eurasian — trips in particular, and, more broadly, the imaginary map one could draw by geolocating all places where Jim and his family have lived, where Kathryn and Owen have done their field work, whose risk potential Jim has assessed, or about which he has received telexes in his Athens office; the cult as system of people, hermetic knowledge, and behavioral code; and the chain of systemic “events” — the tectonic sequence — “linking all these countries,” as Jim puts it (97).

Self-billed as rational apparatuses of knowledge, data exchange, commerce, and chaos control, these bloated totalities or totalities in the making grow, past a certain point, a mind — or “self,” Singh would say — of their own beyond and against human agency and its space in the topology of being. Riding roughshod over individuals, singularities, and life broadly, they are invested principally in self-preservation, in themselves. This is what self-reference boils down to in this situation, and because of that — because they know no *other* — these systems cannot help us, or themselves for that matter, know anything, nor do they leave room for anything meaningful, worth knowing, or for anything at all outside their turf. In this regard, the cult is once again paradigmatic. As Jim tells Volterra, “[a]nything outside the cult is meaningless to them” (215). But this is also why the cultists and systems generally are bound to fail short of their mission, which is here, as it will be in other novels by DeLillo all the way to *Zero K*, to summon up presence in the absolute present of stasis and thereby “invent[t] a way out” of a terrorizing and murderous history (209). Thus, “build[ing] a system against the terror in [their] souls” (308), the cult members fight death with more death. In the

process, they flaunt both the utopianism of their brief, their “madness,” and the circular logic of their undertaking, their project as pure form, as aesthetic *language* that works through, sets up, and gestures to a presence that consists in “[o]nly what is here, the rocks, the towers” and dispenses with any exteriority, antecedent, or transcendence, with any “associations” the cultural-historical topography of the Peloponnese would have called for (209).

“[T]he language of destruction” can be, then, “so beautiful,” as one of Owen’s rhetorical questions implies (115). Instituted, “presented” and brought into our present” by some of these systems, beauty can and does frighten, as modernists such as Reiner Maria Rilke suspected. “Devastatingly beautiful,” it can arrive in our midst draped in the rhetoric of Thanatos, as the Romantics, and the classics before them, had known full well. But, in a world-systemic global environment, DeLillo’s thanatosystems overlap, intertwine, and cross-pollinate — to some readers’ confusion and to others’ relief, I imagine — with systems or, if you will, counter-systems in which self-reference inaugurates, sometimes ambiguously and sometimes less so, a different *ethos* of form and, with it, a different kind of presence. Usually, these are “specialized” aesthetic systems. Forms of art and crafted discourse largely recognized by the traditional classifications of aesthetics and poetics, some of them are beautiful in a classical sense that values balance, harmony or proportions, rationality, and objectivity, but others are not: literary writing such as Tap’s unorthodox novelistic forays or *The Names* itself; Volterra’s cinematic poetics; the entire architecture of the Acropolis and principally the Parthenon; old languages preserved as material script and as carvings in stone and on walls; rock-like relics dug up by archaeologists such as Kathryn and even unmarked boulders and other natural objects untouched by technology and creativity, like those invoked by Andahl above, and which can be both ontologically and aesthetically repurposed; everyday humble things and other inanimate entities that, well before *Underworld*, exude the heat of a presence with an intensity few human actors reach in DeLillo; languages, ancient and modern, known and unknown, denotative or anagogical, including the glossolalia of religious worship Eastern and Western, but also language in general as glossolalia, familiar idiom as “defamiliarizing” act bringing into the open of

the quotidian and presentifying, re-presenting and reintroducing to us, words and, through them, things we assumed we knew or thought we forgot<sup>7</sup>.

If Jim postpones, quite tellingly, until the end of the novel the ritual climb to *the* “thing [that] is there,” “loom[ing]” so powerfully on the Acropolis that, doing away with human sanction, “almost forces us to ignore it” (5), *The Names* is abuzz with the rustle of a presence that calls out to Americans like Jim, who still come to Greece “to find deeper textures” even as all they seem to do is “business,” to say nothing of “risk consultancy” (6). Only, these textures — the very texture of the contemporary — are in full view, presenting themselves as they stake their spaces and contour our present in the deep time of culture. They lie on the surface of things and more often than not are the very things themselves together with their names — names *qua* things, as forms or self-referring, thick somato-semantic phonologies carrying with them spiritual sediments, affect, mentalities, and articulatory systems, not as *named* and absent realities, as signifiers of absence. To reiterate, DeLillo does not presume nor aspires to write the chronicle of the present with the ink of this ethereal absence, of the “obscurity” in which, according to Agamben, the contemporary hides its elusive essence (19-20). Even the Pentecostal sermon, which, unlike the Greek temple, “is not quite there” but “*absent*,” is actually striking in its overwhelmingly tactile and fluid presence, in its “indivisible” constitution that splices up the “inverted,” “transparent word” anchored in the Logos (the “Spirit” invoked by the preacher) and the flowing body of the speech that washes over the Midwestern parishioners, “passing over and through.” This indivisibility is the self-sustaining, integrated presence that makes the language system of the homily “beautiful” and, further, makes the beautiful a vehicle of “ecstasy” in a way counter to the beauty Owen distinguishes in the “language of destruction” and in the anti-historical “stasis” whose onset this language is supposed to spell out (*The Names* 307).

The cult, Owen also offers, presents itself in order to rescind the ethos of presence and beauty in which some characters of the novel and the novelist himself are invested. If, as later novels such as *The Body Artist* and *Zero K* make clear, the body is a quintessential site of presence and aesthetic operator, then the killings are designed not

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<sup>7</sup> “*The Names* is language obsessed,” notes Paula Bryant (17).



only to deny the body, “our base reality,” but also to annul presence as a matrix of beauty. Pointless and ultimately insane, the murderous aesthetic of the “patterns,” of the perfect and futile “programs,” of the cascading telexes and the numbers crunched by Jim — “death by system,” as Owen puts it — threatens to cancel out what one is tempted to call ethical beauty (175). And yet the latter does emerge inside the novel in a number of ways and through the novel as a whole because, here and elsewhere in his works, DeLillo sets out to counter the insanity of systems archaic or high-tech, convinced as he is that his job as a writer is to engage madness head-on and join other writers’ conversation with it. Because the twentieth-century itself “aspires” to this sort of madness, as Owen too observes, true writers have no choice (118). Jim, a writer in his own right, inches slowly in this direction not by writing a book, as Andahl half-fears, half-hopes, but, for now, by keeping out a writer’s eye for the present world in its full ambivalence. Of course, his own position is, for most of the story, ambivalent, but this makes him both a cog in the machine and the kind of insider whose reports are not only reliable but can also jam the works. More than anything else, this eye is *educated*, keen as it proves on the ballooning world of commodification, serialization, surveillance, and destruction systems, as well as on things that gain on us neither to subdue us nor to elicit rationalizations and judiciously lucrative calculations from us but, as Kathryn insists, to “ad[d] beauty to the world” itself (92).

Old and new, natural and artificial, made and found, these things can be seemingly less systemic, “ordinary things” (56) like a peach, capable of producing such a “sense pleasure [that] seems to need another context” (56). Or, they can be more “system-heavy” items such as “fire-hardened” clay tablets through which “the stone sp[eaks]” not so much as or with data but as self-sufficient “art” (167), as “dense black basalt, marble with a ferrous content” fashioned into “beautiful shapes” (35-36). Also, they can be elements of various ecosystems such as living beings like the “beautiful bees” swarming around Tap on the Greek island or, also in Greece, a mountain side charged with the “inner light of things” while “concealing the radar that faces east” (176). But, closer to what we ordinarily understand by “aesthetic,” this spectrum of beautiful presence includes at least one aspect of Volterra’s film-making if not his entire cinematic art, a certain cinematics of presence that does not transcend the “thing” but extracts the “film implied in the thing itself” (200), an approach that allows the director to imagine a

movie that would both piggyback on the cult's own, lethal poesis and suspend it in a final freeze frame. A similarly "immanentist" technique characterizes the novel's fictional and real writers. Thus, Tap's nonfictional writing renders language opaque, supremely self-referring, "botching" the form by making it a "thing," "reifying" it for the reader by calling attention to it and implicitly to its meaning through misspellings that are at once "systematic" and anti-systemic, violating the rules of correct spelling. Jim's sparse, elliptic speech, presumably a reflection of his style as a scriptwriter and fiction author-to-be, is also intensely thing-oriented, isolating objectual presences and listing them relentlessly in one syncopated, highly suggestive, often strikingly poetic sentence after another that, when cannot be easily broken down into quasi-Imagist lines, testify both to DeLillo's background as a copywriter and to his lasting appreciation for Ernest Hemingway. That is to say, Jim's is DeLillo's own, recognizable style. Not necessarily his creator's alter ego, the hero talks to other characters and to us the way DeLillo writes, through economic sequences of object lists and concisely conveyed impressions couched in short strings of nouns and clustered into "incomplete" sentences that marshal the things of the world before us and submit their severe beauty to our consideration<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> David Coward has commented comprehensively on Tap's style as well as on DeLillo's own in *The Names* (163-164).

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