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Escaping the Third Person Singular:
Art and Semiotics in Don DeLillo's *Americana*

In a 1991 interview titled "I Don't Belong to the Club, to the Seraglio," Jean Baudrillard

describes the period in which he studied under Roland Barthes as the point in his intellectual

development at which "everything changed."[1] Drawing heavily on Ferdinand de Saussure's

study of the linguistic sign, Barthes' exploration of consumer and media culture gave Baudrillard

the impetus to study as functionaries of the system of language such "life signs within society" as

myths, ideologies, fashion and the media.[2] As Mike Gane notes in *Baudrillard: Critical and

Fatal Theory*, Barthes' reading of Saussure not only provided the general methodological

guidelines Baudrillard would use throughout his career, but also provided him with the

semiological background needed to examine the ways in which all objects interact to form a

system that functions much like language.[3] This so-called "system of objects," he argues, is

regulated by the same logic of value that regulates signification. This logic, he maintains, is

dehumanising in that it renders all elements of the system—including what might otherwise be

considered the human subject—objects: by grounding all meaning in the abstract realm of value

rather than in the "real" world, consumer ideology envelops us within an artificial system in

which we can only regard ourselves as commodities. However, he argues, the very knowledge

"that the Object is nothing and that behind it stands the tangled void of human relations" offers hope that "violent irruptions and sudden disintegrations" will inevitably and unexpectedly arise to destroy consumer ideology.[4]

The "violent irruptions and sudden disintegrations" Baudrillard describes must not only consist of subversive acts against the bourgeois power structures that victimise labour, but also, and more importantly, a complete rethinking of communication and exchange in such a way that allows for the reemergence of ambivalence, a term Baudrillard uses to denote the incessant potential for the "destruction of the illusion of value."[5] Cultivating ambivalence, however, presents a number of complications, not the least of which is how one might go about doing so. Douglas Kellner notes in *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond* that Baudrillard presents neither a theory of the subject as an agent of social change nor a theory of class or group revolt.[6] As a result, Baudrillard's call for ambivalence has little bite beyond the realm of theory. Moreover, the contrast Baudrillard draws between the "real" world and the abstract realm of value raises the issue of whether moving beyond value is a viable proposition. Baudrillard's dichotomy suggests that the "real" world exists outside language or, at the very least, can be reached via a mode of language that is not grounded in value. Whether such a mode of language can exist is certainly debatable, as are the practicality and practicability of abandoning value. Nonetheless, if Baudrillard's assessment of consumerism (*i.e.* that it renders us objects) is even marginally correct, these issues must be examined, a task rendered less daunting and perhaps more rewarding in the light of Barthes' work in the field of semiology and Don DeLillo's first novel, *Americana.*

Like such post-Marxist critics as Walter Benjamin and T. H. Adorno, Baudrillard describes a world in which advances in communications technology have robbed the cultural

landscape of a human presence. As a result of such technological advances, Baudrillard argues,

we live in a state of hyperreality, or one in which models always precede reality. Such is the state

of the developed world in DeLillo's novels as well, and this, Duvall notes, is where the projects

of DeLillo and Baudrillard intersect:

> If DeLillo's work represents the theme of individual freedom, it is because he is willing to explore so thoroughly the way individual subjectivity is constrained and produced by the contemporary media, the electronic image, and by shopping, or as the French theorist Jean Baudrillard might put it, our social labor as consumers. DeLillo has captured in his fiction crystallizing examples of what Baudrillard identifies as the hyperreal and simulacrum.[7]

Where Baudrillard sees hyperreality as a state that can only stifle humanity, however, DeLillo

recognises the hyperreal landscape as a proving ground *for* humanity. In other words, his novels

explore the ways in which we might retain our humanity even in the dehumanising face of

hyperreality. If, as Derek Attridge notes in "Literary Form and the Demands of Politics," the

"formal singularity" of particular works constitutes both their "effectiveness as literature" as well

as their importance to the "ethico-political realm," then DeLillo's modelling of ambivalence and

ambivalent language in *Americana* is particularly noteworthy, in that (from Baudrillard's

perspective, anyway) ambivalence is the key to safeguarding the subject against the objectifying

machinations of consumerism.[8]

Like Duvall, many critics have glossed the affinity between DeLillo and Baudrillard.

Among the most significant, John Frow's "The Last Things Before the Last: Notes on *White

Noise*" uses Baudrillard to examine the ways in which reproduction and representation erode the

distinction between the general and the particular within postmodern society and thus allow a

homogeneous banality to pervade the lives of the characters in *White Noise*. In "Baudrillard,

DeLillo's *White Noise*, and the End of Heroic Narrative," Leonard Wilcox argues that the glut of

information endemic to the media landscape depicted in *White Noise* leads to the dissolution of

what he describes as a modernist sense of subjectivity, and that this dissolution calls for a new understanding of subjectivity for the postmodern age. In "Lee Harvey Oswald and the Postmodern Subject: History and Intertextuality in Don DeLillo's *Libra*, *The Names*, and *Mao II*," Thomas Carmichael argues that the postmodern historical subject as depicted in DeLillo's novels emerges as an effect of the signs and images that constitute the subject's culture and that the proliferation of such phenomena results in struggles that are textual in nature: the postmodern historical subject alters the course of history by serving as a text that is both informed by and transforms previous historical texts. In "Subjects, Objects and the Postmodern Differend in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*," Stephen N. doCarmo uses Baudrillard and other postmodern theorists to explore the ways in which *White Noise* adopts ambiguity as a strategy for subverting the fascistic impulses of advanced capitalism. While these essays explain some of the ways in which the works of Baudrillard allow for constructive readings of DeLillo, they do not examine Baudrillard's notion of ambivalence, which this study argues is an essential element of the author's revolutionary vision in *Americana*.

Describing the role of semiology some years after the publication of Baudrillard's landmark *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Barthes argues in *The Semiotic Challenge* that the study of signs should indeed yield answers to the issues Baudrillard raises. Regarding the "ideological commitment" of semiology, Barthes explains that attacking "the petit-bourgeois good conscience" is not enough.[9] Semiology must also interrogate "the symbolic and semantic system of our entire culture; it is not enough to change contents, we must above all aim at *fissuring* the meaning-system itself."[10] As with Baudrillard, the meaning-system Barthes envisions is predicated on value, which he defines as "the redeeming concept which permits saving language's permanence and surmounting what we must call *fiduciary anxiety*."[11] In other

words, value amounts to an unspoken agreement or social contract much like that which

regulates currency: in order for language (like currency) to work, we must agree to regard the

artificial and arbitrary connection between signs and concepts as if it were natural and purely

logical.

To illustrate his point, Barthes examines a pair of lavatory doors at the University of

Geneva respectively marked *Messieurs* and *Professeurs*:

> On the level of pure signification, the inscription has no meaning: are not
> "professors" "gentlemen"? It is on the level of value that the opposition, as
> bizarre as it is ethical, is explained: two paradigms enter into collision, of which
> we read no more than the ruins: *messieurs*/dames//*professeurs*/étudiants: in the
> play of language, it is indeed value (and not signification) which possesses the
> apparent, symbolic, and social charge: here that of segregation, pedagogical and
> sexual.[12]

For Baudrillard, such segregation results in commodification; because all elements of the system

are segregated by their apparent value, they become nothing more than signs of value (*i.e.*

commodities), a theory that is examined throughout much of DeLillo's oeuvre as well. In *White

Noise*, for example, narrator Jack Gladney explains that checking his bank balance gives him the

sense "that something of deep personal value, but not money, not that at all" has been

confirmed.[13] While this sense of deep personal value is "not money," it can nonetheless be

quantified, as when the money Jack spends at the local mall comes back to him "in the form of

existential credit."[14] In line with Baudrillard's position, Jack's attitude in this regard

demonstrates that consumer ideology does, indeed, have the potential to commodify people as

well as objects insofar as it allows Jack to define himself as he does the goods he purchases: in

terms of value.

For Baudrillard, the key to effecting the kind of "fissuring" Barthes describes in *The

Semiotic Challenge* is ambivalence, which divorces the sign from the abstract concept of value

upon which the "meaning-system" of consumer culture is predicated. While interrogating this meaning-system is essential to both Baudrillard and DeLillo, each depicts the mechanics of ambivalence differently. For Baudrillard, ambivalence is completely repressed by consumer ideology. From this perspective, ambivalence and consumer ideology are so inimical to each other that the reemergence of ambivalence within contemporary society would immediately trigger the demise of consumer ideology. For DeLillo, on the other hand, ambivalence is certainly curtailed by consumer ideology, but it is not entirely repressed. Endangered though it may be from DeLillo's perspective, ambivalence remains a bulwark against the crushing onslaught of consumer ideology and, as such, prevents the total assimilation of the consumer into what Baudrillard terms the system of objects. Thus where Baudrillard argues that ambivalence must be cultivated in order to overthrow the ideological regime that has reduced everyone to a commodity, DeLillo sees such cultivation as a preventive measure: either we strive to view the world at large in terms other than value or we run the risk of becoming commodities, or signs of value, ourselves.

Setting the tone for many of DeLillo's later works, *Americana* explores the viability of life outside the grip of consumer culture and, by extension, beyond the logic of value that regulates the language of that culture. Describing what he calls the "double-bind" at work in the novel, Tom LeClair argues in *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* that much of *Americana* is invested in interrogating the conflicting rules and messages, both spoken and unspoken, at work in society as well as the ways in which the advertising industry attempts to suppress those conflicts.[15] For the novel's protagonist, David Bell, this double-bind begins within the confines of his family: his mother's mental illness results in erratic behavior and conflicting messages that David cannot reconcile. She secretly spits in an ice cube tray while entertaining

guests at her home; she imposes upon David the strict morality of her Southern upbringing while at the same time encouraging a sense of moral relativity through her interest in magic and curiosity about death; she alternates between periods of sullen silence and near-manic confession. Most troubling to David, however, is the attraction he feels toward his mother, which, in LeClair's words, "adds the guilt of desire for a helpless woman" to "conventional Oedipal guilt."[16] Additionally, David's father withdraws from the situation rather than providing a model for mediating the mother's conflicting messages and the child's conflicting feelings toward his mother. The most telling example of this withdrawal occurs as David, his sisters and their father spend evenings watching films of television commercials while their mother lies alone in her room, "small and blue, a question mark curled on the bed."[17]

That the world to which both David and his father escape during David's youth is the world of advertising suggests a preference for the simplicity of advertising's messages over the complexity of the mother's. Where the communiqués from David's mother, a figure LeClair describes as one of "pathos and respect, more in contact with memory and dreams, more inquisitive, fearless, and profound, a figure complex and mysterious," disturb the protagonist by placing him on uncertain ground in relation to her, advertising and television offer a reductive form of communication that offers comfort by eliminating ambiguity and contradiction.[18] When David films an autobiographical version of his life, he has his fictionalised father explain how television works its simplifying magic: "The TV set is a package, and it's full of products. Inside are detergents, automobiles, cameras, breakfast cereals, other television sets. Programs are not interrupted by commercials; exactly the reverse is true. A television is an electronic form of packaging. Without the products there's nothing."[19] Just as packaging serves not only to protect goods in transit but also (and perhaps more importantly) to present those goods as desirable,

television's message is simple: happiness can be achieved through the acquisition of commodities. Or, as David's father further observes, "In this country there is a universal third person, the man we all want to be. Advertising has discovered this man. It uses him to express the possibilities open to the consumer. To consume in America is not to buy; it is to dream. Advertising is the suggestion that the dream of entering the third person singular might possibly be fulfilled."[20]

David's description of himself as "an extremely handsome young man" who takes the "simple step" of lathering up and shaving whenever he begins to wonder who he is, combined with his self-described resemblance to movie stars Kirk Douglas and Burt Lancaster, suggests early on that he has attained the American dream of entering what his father calls "the third-person singular."[21] Insofar as his sense of identity depends primarily upon the image he sees in the mirror and its resemblance to celebrities, David appears to have reduced his life to the two-dimensional world of appearances and, in so doing, distanced himself from the disturbing conflicts embodied by his mother. In this way, David's behaviour sheds light on the relationship between Sigmund Freud's notion of ambivalence and that of Baudrillard. In *Inhibition, Symptoms and Anxiety*, Freud notes that a patient's fear of horses represents an attempt to resolve an Oedipal attitude toward his father: "a well-grounded love and a no less justifiable hatred directed towards one and the same person."[22] While such conflicts are common, Freud notes, they generally do not result in phobia. Rather, the child's affection tends to intensify at the expense of the hatred; this phenomenon, which Freud terms a reaction formation, stems from a need to repress the disagreeable instinct to desire the mother at the expense of the father's life.[23]

Where the reaction of Little Hans to his disagreeable Oedipal instincts is a fear of the horses he associates with his father, David's is a more typical reaction; he simply represses the

ambivalence he feels toward both parents. One thing that allows him to do so is the model

provided by the advertisements his father has created. In Baudrillard's terms, because these

advertisements proffer the illusion of a world in which commodities can thoroughly meet all

human needs, they eliminate David's ambivalence toward objects. In so doing, these

advertisements also create an environment that eases to the point of suppression the ambivalence

he feels toward the members of his family even as it reduces him to a two-dimensional

commodity, the third-person singular image of himself. As a result, Davis comes to define

himself solely in terms of value. In this context, what LeClair refers to as "the new consumerism

of communications, with its entropic tendency toward the most probable and reductive state"[24]

takes on heightened significance: the most probable and reductive state proffered by television

advertisements is value, and David's entrance into the third person singular, his "buying into" the

ethos of advertising, is at the same time his crossing over into what Baudrillard terms the system

of objects. If this crossing over into the system of objects tends to isolate David, it also proves an

attractive alternative to living in the often painful "real" world precisely because it offers order in

the face of apparent chaos; the conflicts and contradictions embodied in David's mother are

denied by what DeLillo refers to in his 1983 *Rolling Stone* article, "American Blood," as "the

artificial and dulling language" of the consumerist dream.[25] Indeed, from Barthes' perspective,

such language can only result in the suppression of conflict and contradiction because the

message of advertising always boils down to a single notion: the unparalleled excellence of all

commodities.[26]

The problem, of course, with the language of advertising as Barthes frames it is that it

eliminates difference and, in so doing, "entirely exhausts the intention of communication."[27] If

every brand of mouthwash, for example, is touted as "the best," then only the most superficial (if

any) difference exists between the messages of each brand's advertisement. In *Americana*,

David's father demonstrates the validity of Barthes' argument when he describes his own efforts

to devise an advertisement campaign for Dentex mouthwash:

> Okay, so we zero in on one of the essential ingredients, quasi-cinnamaldehyde-plus. QCP. We take the hard-sell route. Dentex with QCP kills mouth poisons and odor-causing impurities thirty-two percent faster. Be specific. Be factual. Make a promise. Okay, so some little creep says to me in a meeting: thirty-two percent faster than what? Obvious, I tell him: thirty-two percent faster that if Dentex didn't have QCP. The fact that all mouthwashes have this cinnamaldehyde stuff is beside the point; we were the only ones talking about it. This is known as pre-empting the truth.[28]

Citing QCP as the ingredient that makes Dentex "the best" mouthwash even as he admits that all

mouthwashes contain this ingredient, David's father reveals that there is, in fact, no "best" and,

by extension, that the hierarchy established by the concept of "the best" is entirely artificial.

Nonetheless, the concept of the "the best," which is the benchmark for the concept of value,

continues to serve as the governing myth of David's culture, as evidenced by his friend Pike's

obsession with establishing a universal pecking order for such mismatched animals as polar

bears and tigers, as well as David's obsession with his own place on the corporate ladder.

Like his fellow employees, David sees the workplace as a battleground rife with signs

that he is either gaining or losing ground in his efforts at being recognised as "the best" in his

field. Indeed, so convinced is David that everything in the workplace is a sign that he begins to

agonise over the décor of his fellow workers' offices. After providing an exhaustive list of his

co-workers and the colours of their sofas and office doors, David explains, "I had all this down

on paper. On slow afternoons I used to study it, trying to find a pattern. I thought there might be

a subtle color scheme designed by management and based on a man's salary, ability, and

prospects for advancement and decline."[29] Likewise, his co-workers all subscribe to a system of

measuring success in which "points" are scored for ruthlessness, personal appearance, cleverness

and (ironically) humility.[30] Although David notes that such rivalries generally occur "in every

business which thrives in the heat of the image," the world of signs he envisions is not limited to

the workplace.[31] Measuring his performance in all personal encounters against those of the

idealised figures of Kirk Douglas and Burt Lancaster (*i.e.* "the best" men he can imagine), David

can only relate to people on competitive terms. In the social world as in the business world, his

quest to set himself off as "the best" renders David an advertisement for himself, but as an

advertisement, he is limited to repeating the same message that all of his friends and co-workers

must also repeat: that he is "the best."

As with Barthes' critique of the language of advertising, the seemingly universal desire to

prove oneself "the best" renders meaningful communication impossible in David's world.

Describing meetings with his co-workers as "drone-fests," David explains that the language of

these meetings is such that words are always "at odds" with their meanings, that they do not "say

what [is] being said, nor its reverse."[32] The message David receives at these drone-fests is that he

is, indeed, a drone and that his job as such is to avoid independent thinking.[33] Growing

comfortable with telling "bizarre and pointless lies" and writing "snake-hissing memos," David

quickly learns what he describes as the "new language" of his workplace.[34] Yet while David

initially claims to have mastered "the special elements of that tongue," he eventually confesses

that the tongue has mastered him: "Words blow in and out. I can hear them perfectly, with

astounding clarity, but I can't believe they're coming from my mouth."[35] After relentlessly

reproducing the unvarying message of corporate America for so long, David comes to realise

that he has no voice of his own.

In an effort to reclaim his voice, David embarks upon a cross-country quest to discover what he calls the "yin and yang in Kansas."[36] While this metaphor appears early in the novel, David does not come to understand its implications until much later. Rather than seeking the kind of balance the "yin and yang in Kansas" implies, David's initial instinct is to sabotage the "yin" of the corporate world with the "yang" of his preferred artistic medium, film. Yet as David's adaptation of the medium to corporate ends in the dog-eat-dog world of television programming demonstrates, his use of film only serves to reproduce the underlying message of consumerism he is trying to resist. From Baudrillard's perspective, this is because the work of art, like any commodity, ultimately serves as a sign of value or "part of the package, the constellation of accessories by which the 'socio-cultural' standing of the average citizen is determined."[37] Far from interrogating the logic of value, then, art, in Baudrillard's opinion, has been co-opted by consumer culture and, as a result, has become a sign of acculturation. Arguing that the essence of consumer acculturation is distilled in the phrase "Beethoven is fabulous," Baudrillard notes that the acculturated consumer is less concerned with the aesthetics of Beethoven's music than the social cachet attached to recognising the "quality" of the composer's works.[38]

In *Americana*, Baudrillard's example takes an appropriately cinematic twist as David moves from group to group at a party "so boring that boredom itself soon becomes the topic of conversation," and he "hears the same sentence a dozen times. 'It's like an Antonioni movie.'"[39] Like the women who come and go "Talking of Michelangelo" in T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," the partygoers in this passage appear less interested in art itself than in using their knowledge of it to demonstrate social ascendancy. While repeated references to Antonioni fail to advance the party's conversational discourse, these references underline the desire among

David's friends and co-workers to prove their acculturation or, in plain language, that they are among "the best" at engaging in witty banter at cocktail parties. That David retreats to the bathroom to check for dandruff shortly after hearing several identical versions of the Antonioni conversation suggests that such public displays of what passes for wit among his friends and co-workers are akin to personal appearance in the social realm. In both cases, the goal is to impress; good grooming and wit go hand-in-hand. To be ignorant of Antonioni is to have dandruff, or worse yet (if the above-mentioned Dentex commercial has any value), halitosis.

In addition to demonstrating knowledge of art, possessing art is another sign of social ascendancy that operates in much the same way as personal appearance. Upon entering his host's bathroom, David notices six framed graffiti hanging on the wall: "The words were set in large bold type, about 60-point, on glossy paper; they were set in a scripted typeface to look real. Three of the graffiti were blasphemous and three were obscene. The frames looked expensive. I noticed some dandruff on my shoulders."[40] Though blasphemous and obscene, these graffiti fail to evoke the defiance David later attempts to voice. That they are "set in a scripted typeface to look real" recalls Baudrillard's notion of the hyperreal, or a world consisting of models based on models, insofar as these pieces are not reproductions of "real" graffiti but merely models loosely based on some artist's notion of what graffiti might be like. Moreover, the expensive frames in which they appear underline the fact that these ersatz graffiti pose no threat to the order of consumption. Indeed, as Baudrillard points out in *The Consumer Society*, blasphemy and obscenity do not exist in consumer culture: "If all the denunciations, all the disquisitions on 'alienation', and all the derisive force of pop and anti-art play so easily into establishment hands, that is because they are themselves part of the myth."[41] The only "true" blasphemy is to fail to partake in what Baudrillard refers to as the "formal liturgy" of consumption, but the affluence of

the Western world precludes this option. Far from encouraging him to resist consumer ideology, the painting reminds David of his dandruff, perhaps the most subtle of all social diseases invented by Madison Avenue to move merchandise from store shelves to consumers' bathrooms.

According to Baudrillard, what suffers when art serves only to indicate the socio-cultural standing of the individual who either possesses or appreciates it is a sense of confrontation. Rather than interrogating consumer ideology, the work of art serves only to reinforce that ideology. To appreciate the work of art is to accept and reaffirm its value and, in turn, to legitimate the practice of using commodities to signal social standing. In other words, to demonstrate an appreciation of art is to demonstrate that one is "in on the joke." DeLillo underlines the fact that the "joke" of consumer ideology is itself obscene when David emerges from the bathroom to find his host entertaining partygoers with a spate of racist anecdotes:

> Quincy was in rare form, telling a series of jokes about Polish janitors, Negro ministers, Jews in concentration camps and Italian women with hairy legs. He battered his audience with shock and insult, challenging people to object. Of course we were choking with laughter, trying to outdo each other in showing how enlightened we were. It was meant to be a liberating ethnic experience. If you were offended by such jokes in general, or sensitive to particular ones which slurred your own race or ancestry, you were not ready to be accepted into the mainstream. B. G. Haines who was a professional model and one of the most beautiful women I have ever known, seemed to be enjoying Quincy's routine. She was one of four black people in the room—and the only American among them—and she apparently felt it was her diplomatic duty to laugh louder than anyone at Quincy's most vicious color jokes. She almost crumpled to the floor laughing and I was sure I detected a convulsive broken sob at the crest of every laugh.[42]

Like the acculturated individual who agrees that Beethoven is fabulous, Haines has no choice but to laugh lest she signal her divergence from the mainstream. Her sobs, however, tell another story—one of repressed sadness and rage. Moreover, the comments of a fellow partygoer named Pru Morrison demonstrate the racial prejudice beneath this so-called "enlightened" behaviour: Morrison privately refers to Haines as a "nignog" while discussing the ongoing conflict in

Vietnam, where her brother mans an M-79 grenade launcher and "can't tell the friendlies from the hostiles."[43] In response to Pru's commentary, David symbolically washes his hands and wonders if a trickle of water issuing from the bathtub faucet is "supposed to have a sexual connotation."[44] Though not necessarily sexual in nature, David's impotence in regard to social issues is made clear by his response to the war. Rather than confronting the ideological issues at stake in regard to the Vietnam conflict, David and his contemporaries turn to movies for comfort and escape. When the movies all begin to "look alike," they go to parties, turn "on or off," burn joss sticks and listen to tapes of "near silence."[45] Clearly the art of cinema poses little threat to the dominant culture in this instance; even the 16mm movie camera David brings to these parties serves only as a "witty toy."[46]

Far from critiquing consumer culture, such toys as David's camera only serve to reinforce it. Describing his first camera, David notes almost lovingly, "I was using a Beaulieu 8mm camera then, the S2008 to be exact, with non-detachable pistol grip, automatic exposure control, an Angenieux zoom lens—all in all a clever piece of optical mechanics that had set my father back almost seven hundred dollars."[47] Although David's early experiments in the medium— including a forty-five minute film on underwear—give him a sense of unlimited possibility, post-college life in corporate America robs him of this sense. Early in their marriage, cinema provides an opportunity for David and his wife to demonstrate his fashion sense and serves as a model for living in the corporate world:

> We saw all the new movies and went to a lot of parties. We seemed to believe that everything we did was the most wonderful thing that had ever been done. We wore certain clothes to certain movies. Grays for black and white. Boots, leather, chino, flag shirts and the like (our pre-acid gear) for Technicolor. Dressing, we matched each unmatching item with great care and spent several minutes assuring each other that we were ready for the waiting line at Cinema I. Each movie we saw was the greatest. Merry would talk about it constantly for two days and then

forget it forever. There was no time for remembering things because something else was always coming along—another great movie, a great new pub or restaurant, a great new men's shop, boutique, ski area, beach house or rock group….

　　Soon I was no longer content merely to make love to my wife. I had to seduce her first. These seductions often took their inspiration from cinema. I liked to get rough with her. I liked to be silent for long periods. The movies were giving difficult meanings to some of the private moments of my life.[48]

Here, seeing the movie and being seen by other moviegoers are of equal importance to David, and the movies he and his wife take in are not only disposable insofar as they are forgotten after two days but also interchangeable with all the other opportunities for consumption their world offers.

In addition to serving as a commodity, film has become a prescriptive medium for David, both inspiring and giving meaning to the particulars of his sex life. Just as the work of art functions only as a sign of acculturation in consumer society, so too does lovemaking. In the context David describes, to make love well is to demonstrate one's prowess as a consumer. Yet even as he seduces his wife, David reveals a degree of social impotence. He cannot change consumer culture, cannot argue with its logic. He can only take cues from his environment and learn how to behave by watching the objects around him. Or, to reverse the formula, far from causing David to question consumer ideology, the objects in David's life—including those which might be described as "art"—provide models for acceptable behavior even in so private a realm as the bedroom. While it may be overstating the case to argue that consumer culture, rather than David himself, makes love to his wife in the above passage, it is safe to say that David's sexual activity, like his movie camera, reaffirms the power of the marketplace to dictate cultural norms.

As for art's potential to subvert consumer ideology, Baudrillard argues in *The Consumer Society* that, in what he terms our generalised neo-culture, "there is no longer any difference between a delicatessen and an art gallery."[49] This is because the art object, like all objects of

consumption, "loses its symbolic meaning and tends to peter out into a discourse of connotations which are… simply relative to one another within a framework of a totalitarian cultural system (that is to say, a system which is able to integrate all significations whatever their provenance)."[50] Within this system, objects and images operate as signs of value, which serves as the controlling myth of consumer culture. Beholden to this myth, consumer culture cannot regard itself from a critical distance; because all language speaks of value, there is no critiquing value through language. As a result, Baudrillard argues, "there can be no contemporary art which is not, in its very existence and practice, compromised and complicit with that opaquely self-evident state of affairs"[51]—which is to say that art, like language, is bound up in the manipulation of signs for the sole purpose of indicating social status.

Although Baudrillard posits pop art as the first medium to explore its own status as a "signed" and "consumed" object, he also argues that pop artists "forget that for a painting to be a super-sign (a unique object, a signature, the object of a noble, magical commerce), it is not sufficient to change the content of the picture or the artist's intentions: it is the structures of the production of culture which decide the matter."[52] Like the graffiti David finds in his host's bathroom, pop art does not challenge consumer culture. Instead, the medium operates on the same level as Quincy's race jokes. Baudrillard notes that many works of pop art

> provoke a moral and obscene laugh (or hint of a laugh)—the canvases being indeed obscene to the classical gaze—followed by a derisive smile, which might be a judgment on either the objects painted or the painting itself. It is a smile which willingly enters into the game: 'This isn't very serious, but we aren't going to be scandalized by it. And, deep down, perhaps… [Baudrillard's ellipses]' But these reactions are rather strained, amid some shameful dejection at not knowing quite what to make of it all. Even so, pop is both full of humour and humourless. Quite logically, it has nothing to do with subversive, aggressive humour, with the telescoping of surrealist objects. It is no longer a question of short-circuiting objects in their function, but one of juxtaposing them to analyse the relations between them. This approach is not terroristic.[53]

The laughter evoked by Quincy's jokes and many works of pop art is that of cynical distance, a term Slavoj Zizek uses in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* to describe seemingly subversive acts and attitudes that are, in the end, "part of ideology's game."[54] Thus while offering what might be considered humorous, even "revolutionary," content, even pop art—the mode of expression most aware of the logic behind consumer ideology—is powerless to change that ideology or the means by which culture is produced. According to Baudrillard, then, art is bound by the logic of consumption, and the best the artist can hope for is to be named in statements like "Beethoven is fabulous" or "It's like an Antonioni movie."

Yet David continues to hold out for a mode of art that is, indeed, transgressive—like the motorcycle gang that rumbles through his boyhood town and causes his neighbours to look out their windows with "a strange mixture of longing and terror."[55] Although they are "gone in seconds," the gang of twenty marauders leaves a young David with the impression that "a hurricane or plague had struck the town," and as the gang disappears in the distance, he realises that he and his neighbours are "not quite the same people" they had been just seconds earlier.[56] To effect a similar change in himself as an adult, David begins to shoot a "long messy autobiographical-type film" when he arrives with his entourage in a small town in what he simply calls "Middle America."[57] Describing the film as "the strangest, darkest, most horrifying idea" of his life, David initially models his work after his friend Bobby Brand's novel-in-progress, *Coitus Interruptus*.[58] Touted as "the novel that would detonate in the gut of America" and cause everyone in the country to "puke blood when they read it," *Coitus Interruptus* is, to all appearances, the literary equivalent of the motorcycle gang that briefly terrorised David's neighbourhood in his youth.[59] Moreover, Brand's project is similar to that of Baudrillard and Barthes in that it seeks to reform society at the level of language. "I plan to take out the slang and

replace it with new forms, new modes," Brand explains; "Maybe I'll eliminate language itself. It may be possible to find a completely new mode."[60] Although Brand fantasises that *Coitus Interruptus* will put him in good stead with "famous old French intellectuals," the project ultimately proves unfruitful when he reveals that his manuscript consists of eleven pages, seven of which "don't have any words on them."[61]

The author's apparent lack of productivity notwithstanding, *Coitus Interruptus* can only fail to provide the new mode of language Brand seeks because the seemingly revolutionary concept behind the novel reinforces the logic of value. Although the novel exists largely in Brand's imagination, he explains that it is about a former president of the United States who has been succeeded by the first African-American president and subsequently begins to turn into a woman.[62] While this configuration reverses the order of the hierarchy Barthes sees as implicit in the lavatory doors at the University of Geneva (*i.e. messieurs*/dames// *professeurs*/étudiants and, to add race to the mix, *white*/black), it leaves the notion of hierarchy—and, by extension, value—intact. In other words, while Brand's novel replaces *messieurs*/dames and, in this case, *white*/black with their opposites, sexual and racial segregation continue to exist as functions of language and value. As his name suggests, Brand is merely substituting one mode of hierarchy for another, positing his own "brand" as the best. In so doing, he continues in the tradition of David's father, whose affinity with Brand is further revealed when the would-be author claims that the theme of his novel is immaterial "because appearance is all that matters."[63] While *Coitus Interruptus* might (as Brand claims) cause the whole country to "puke blood," it would do little to undermine the logic of value that undergirds consumer ideology.

In contrast to the hierarchical dichotomies *Coitus Interruptus* continues to uphold, a fellow traveller and artist named Sullivan presents David with "a strange painted wood-and-wire

doll" that represents a "menacing bitchy hermaphroditic divinity."[64] Neither man nor woman, the

doll dissolves the bar between the terms of the sexual binary Barthes describes and, in so doing,

nullifies the hierarchy that binary implies. Rather than substituting *dames*/messieurs for

messieurs/dames (as Brand's novel does), the hermaphrodite divinity short-circuits the

distinction between sexes and, as a result, imparts meaning that is not predicated on value. In

other words, the doll is a symbol that allows for what Baudrillard terms ambivalence, or the

incessant potential for the destruction of the illusion of value, to emerge. Yet the binary

distinction between ambivalence and the logic of value underscores the conundrum of Barthes'

call for a "fissuring" of "the meaning system:" if such binaries as *messieurs*/dames demonstrate

that meaning under the current system is contingent upon value, then how does the binary

ambivalence/value exemplify a system of meaning that is not contingent upon value? As David's

interest in Zen philosophy demonstrates, however, this apparent paradox ensures the separation

of language and value for which Barthes and Baudrillard call.

Referring to John Keats' "Ode On a Grecian Urn," David draws attention to the similarity

between the poet's notion of "negative capability" and the distrust of words that marks Zen

philosophy. "Beauty was too difficult and truth in the West had died with Crazy Horse,"[65] David

explains, before describing Professor Hiroshi Oh's lectures on Zen:

> Oh spoke of Emptiness. The mind is an empty box within an empty box. With his
> index finger he made a sign in the air, one motion, name-shape, the circles single
> fulfilling line…. Oh hummed and chanted. Note the paradox. Empty box within
> empty box. He went into more paradox, more gentle conflict, more questions of
> interpretation in which ancient masters nodded their disagreement. It was Oh's
> practice to reveal some deep Zen principle, carefully planting evidence of its
> undeniable truth, and then confront us with a totally different theory of equally
> undeniable truth. He seemed to enjoy trying to break our minds, crush us with
> centuries of confusion as if to say: If the great teachers and enlightened ones of
> history cannot find a common interpretation, how will you ever know what to
> believe, you poor white gullible bastards?[66]

Here, the empty boxes of Zen philosophy are similar to the urn depicted in the Keats poem in that both contain their share of paradoxes. The tension between the temporal and everlasting in Keats, for example, and the logical impasse of a box that is both empty and not empty are reminiscent of the poet's praise of negative capability, a state in which "man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."[67] This aversion to fact and reason reflects a dissatisfaction with signification that is common to Baudrillard and practitioners of Zen philosophy alike.

D. T. Suzuki, whom David references as the author of the text used in Oh's class, explains in *Zen and Japanese Culture* that the philosophy of Zen is invested in engendering a quality very similar to negative capability.[68] Appealing to an intuitive mode of understanding known in Japanese as *satori*, Zen aims to abandon concepts "in order to reach the truth of things."[69] Concepts, Suzuki notes, "are useful in defining the truth of things but not in making us personally acquainted with it. Conceptual knowledge may make us wise in a way, but this is only superficial. It is not the living truth itself, and therefore there is no creativeness in it, being a mere accumulation of dead matter."[70] To this end, Zen practitioners subvert the rationality of words through paradox. Zen is not necessarily against words, Suzuki notes, "but it is well aware of the fact that they are always liable to detach themselves from realities and turn into conceptions."[71] What concerns Zen is not words or language but "something" hovering wordlessly in the mind, "an unnamable 'X.' It is no abstraction; it is concrete enough, and direct, as the eye sees that the sun is, but it is not to be subsumed in the categories of linguistics. As soon as we try to do this, it disappears."[72]

Suzuki's distinction between conceptual knowledge and intuitive knowledge of "the living truth itself" mirrors the distinction Baudrillard draws between the object and the utensil:

where the utensil grounds the individual in the world and allows for what Suzuki calls a personal acquaintance with the truth of things, the object can only be "read" in terms of value.[73] In this context, Zen's wariness of words is well founded: by denoting value, as Baudrillard contends, words do indeed, to borrow Suzuki's phrase, "detach themselves from realities and turn into conceptions."[74] As the Zen *koan* demonstrates, however, words do not necessarily have to follow the logic of the sign. For example, the empty box within an empty box to which Oh alludes in *Americana* has no signified; just as there is no way to imagine a square circle, the notion of an empty box containing anything represents an impossible proposition. Divorced from any sensible signified, the phrase "empty box within an empty box" cannot be considered a signifier. Rather, the phrase is a conglomeration of words that must be considered independent of their "meaning," words *qua* words. Because these words do not signify the abstract, they take on gravity and alert us to their own tangibility. Like the primitive tools and furniture to which Baudrillard alludes in *The System of Objects*, the words of the Zen *koan* function as "traditional symbolic objects" that bear the imprint of human activity insofar as their organisation does not form a signifying fabric constituting the "virtual totality of all objects and messages ready-constituted as a more or less coherent discourse."[75] No longer simply a means of exchanging abstract concepts, the words of the Zen *koan* do not share the sign's conceit that the signifier can name the otherwise unspeakable signified. In other words, the language of the Zen *koan* "speaks" yet refrains from signifying value.

Like the Lacanian Real, the "unnamable 'X'" to which Suzuki refers in his discussion of the Zen *koan* cannot be reached through language. Rather, language bars us from that X through the construction of what Zen philosophy dubs conceptual knowledge and Marxist philosophy calls ideology. In the context of consumer culture, Baudrillard argues, the concept to which

ideology reduces everything through the process of signification is value. Taken together, then, it is not surprising that David's interests in Zen philosophy and consumer culture combine to form an amalgam that is remarkably similar to Baudrillard's critique of the sign. Informed by Zen's inherent distrust of language in general and words in particular, David's later artistic endeavours aim at subverting the reductive logic of value and substitute for it a mode of communication that allows for ambivalence to operate. Attempting to bypass what Baudrillard describes in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* as the "fixed and equational structure" of the sign,[76] David's goal as he becomes more involved with his project is to create a film that, like the language of the Zen *koan*, allows ambivalence to surface by rupturing the connection between language and value.

Unlike Brand, David explains that his project is not to reduce the value of language, but to reinforce it.[77] This explanation puts David's project at odds with that of Baudrillard insofar as Baudrillard calls for the destruction of value while David's project is merely one of displacement: his aim is to increase the value of language by rescuing meaning from the contingency of value. In other words, David wants to strengthen language by divorcing its capacity to be meaningful from what Barthes sees as its unerring tendency to root all meaning in hierarchy. In order to bring this mode of language into being, David shoots his film in such a way that reduces "the kind of movement that tells a story or creates harmony."[78] Doing so, he argues, will allow "language to evolve from static forms" as opposed to adhering to a preordained sense of order.[79] Echoing the language of the Zen *koan*, David describes one of his characters as "standing still but moving" and "silent with answers."[80] As with the Zen *koan*, these apparent contradictions divorce David's words from abstract concepts and, by extension, from value. Moreover, David confronts the ambivalence of his Oedipal guilt when he films a

scene in which Sullivan, portraying David's mother, appears to merge with a teenage boy portraying David: "I could see it in the foreflash, underexposed, their bodies incomplete… and I wondered why this mute soliloquy of woman and boy should mean anything more, even to me, than what it so clearly was, face of one and head of the other."[81] Like the "menacing bitchy hermaphroditic divinity" Sullivan presents to David earlier in the novel, the single figure created by Sullivan and the boy is neither male nor female but partakes in the essence of both genders and, in so doing, eliminates the sense of hierarchy implied by the male/female binary.

Yet even as David frames what might be termed his primal scene, he returns to the language of value by referring to his project as a "commercial" and wonders if it will "sell the product."[82] While David's regression to the very idiom he seeks to interrogate suggests the failure of his project, it must be remembered that David does not aim to subvert consumer ideology entirely but to demystify it: where consumer ideology generally forces us to interpret all manner of phenomena in terms of value, David's purpose is to allow us to recognise the illusory nature of value in the form of ambivalence. By nature, this project is distinctly non-utopian: far from positing an ideal world, it forces us to recognise the "bad" of the world along with the "good" or, more accurately, to recognise that the world cannot be broken down along such binary lines as good or bad, or even, as Madison Avenue might have us believe, into discreet shades of better or worse judged in relation to "the best." Thus David cannot view his project along the lines of a purely *anti-commercial*/commercial dichotomy but as a commingling of both elements; hence his assertion that his film "functions best as a sort of ultimate schizogram, an exercise in diametrics to unmake meaning."[83] As an artist, his purpose is to "deal in the complexities of truth," an endeavour in which he considers himself "most successful."[84] This success is due in large part to his ability to recognise that while his culture may be schizoid in

nature, the pieces of that culture form a coherent if conflicted whole. While such truths are beyond the ken of Madison Avenue, they are well within the purview of DeLillo's artistic vision.

Americana offers a glimpse of two Americas: one steeped solely in the logic of value, and one fraught with ambivalence. In the first America, the notion of "the best" segregates all elements of society along arbitrary lines. From Baudrillard's perspective, this first America is the only America consumer ideology will allow; even art allegedly aimed at subverting consumer ideology will ultimately be assimilated by it. From DeLillo's perspective, on the other hand, art has the potential to dissolve such dichotomies as *good*/bad dissolve in order to reveal the second America. This America is certainly no utopia, but because its language is not based entirely on value, its internal conflicts can be more honestly confronted than those repressed by the artificial strictures of consumer ideology. Under such conditions, Sullivan explains after relating a tale of her own conflicted uncle, "the war" is more easily recognised as being "not between North and South, black and white, young and old, rich and poor, crusader and heathen, warhawk and pacifist, God and the devil" but "between Uncle Malcolm and Uncle Malcolm."[85] Likewise, the "war" DeLillo depicts in *Americana* is not between art and commerce, DeLillo and Baudrillard, or even ideology and its opposite. It is between David and David, America and America. In the words of a young hitchhiker David meets on the road, "What the heck, this is America. Bad as it is, we have to learn to live with it."[86]

Notes

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3. Mike Gane, *Baudrillard: Critical and Fatal Theory* (London: Routledge, 1991), 34.
4. Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (London: Sage, 1998 [1970]), 196.
5. Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign,* trans. Charles Levin (St. Louis: Telos, 1981 [1972]), 209.
6. Kellner, 18.

7. John Duvall, "Baseball as Aesthetic Ideology: Cold War History, Race, and DeLillo's 'Pafko at the Wall'" (*Modern Fiction Studies* 45.3, 1999), 563.

8. Derek Attridge, "Literary Form and the Demands of Politics" in *Aesthetics and Ideology,* ed. George Levine (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 244.

9. Roland Barthes, *The Semiotic Challenge*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994 [1985]), 8.

10. Ibid.

11. Barthes, 155.

12. Ibid.

13. Don DeLillo, *Americana* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 46.

14. Ibid., 84.

15. Tom LeClair, *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 35.

16. Ibid., 39.

17. DeLillo, *Americana,* 199.

18. LeClair, 41,47.

19. DeLillo, *Americana,* 270.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid., 11, 12.

22. Sigmund Freud, *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety,* trans. Alix Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1971), 16.

23. Ibid., 16,17.

24. LeClair, 49.

25. Don DeLillo, "American Blood: A Journey through the Labyrinth of Dallas and JFK" (*Rolling Stone,* 8 Dec. 1983), 27.

26. Barthes, 174.

27. Ibid., 175.

28. DeLillo, *Americana,* 273.

29. Ibid., 88.

30. Ibid., 13.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid., 63, 36.

33. Ibid., 36.

34. Ibid., 26,36.

35. Ibid., 36, 97.

36. Ibid., 10.

37. Baudrillard, *Consumer Society,* 107.

38. Ibid., 108.

39. DeLillo, *Americana,* 4.

40. Ibid.

41. Baudrillard, *Consumer Society,* 196.

42. DeLillo, *Americana,* 6.

43. Ibid., 5.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid., 33.

48. Ibid., 34-35.

49. Baudrillard, *Consumer Society,* 28.

50. Ibid., 115.

51. Ibid., 116.

52. Ibid., 119.

53. Ibid., 120-121.

54. Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), 28.

55. DeLillo, *Americana,* 183.

56. Ibid., 182-183

57. Ibid., 205, 207.

58. Ibid., 125, 205.
59. Ibid., 112, 205.
60. Ibid., 288.
61. Ibid., 291, 307.
62. Ibid., 205.
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid. 289.
65. Ibid., 175.
66. Ibid., 176.
67. John Keats, "To George and Thomas Keats" [Negative Capability] in M. H. Abrams, ed., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Major Authors Edition, Revsd.,* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968, 1738-40), 1739.
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71. Ibid., 5.
72. Ibid., 7.
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75. Baudrillard, *System,* 200.
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77. DeLillo, *Americana,* 288.
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79. Ibid.
80. Ibid., 309.
81. Ibid., 317.
82. Ibid.
83. Ibid., 347.
84. Ibid.
85. Ibid., 331.
86. Ibid., 220.