American magic and dread:

Don DeLillo's dialogue with culture

Mark Osteen.

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American Magic and Dread Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture

Mark Osteen

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Introduction

arly in Don DeLillo's novel White Noise, Murray Jay Siskind, an eccentric colleague of protagonist Jack Gladney, enthusiastically announces his wish to immerse himself in "American magic and dread" (WN 19). Siskind's project involves reading such periodicals as Ufologist Today and American Transvestite, studying the television listings, and taking factfinding trips to the supermarket and the shopping mall. Although DeLillo's attitude is a good deal more complex than Siskind's, he shares his character's fascination with these phenomena. Indeed, this study argues that DeLillo's work undertakes a dialogue with American cultural institutions and their discourses that dramatizes the dialectical relationship between, as well as the myriad shapes, meanings, and consequences of, American magic and dread. In DeLillo's work, the bombardment of consciousness by cinematic and consumer images; the fetishization of secrecy, violence, and celebrity; the fragmentation of the grand narratives of history, heroism, and high culture all combine to induce a paralyzing dread. His characters respond by seeking forms of magic-quasi-religious rituals, pseudodivine authorities, miraculous transformations — that they hope will help them rediscover sacredness and community.

In his fiction and in interviews, DeLillo emphasizes the power of language to shape identity and society. His fiction manifests that power: with his unsurpassed ear for dialogue, talent for aphorism, and astonishing ability to imitate the discourses of different cultural milieux, he stands

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as perhaps the most gifted stylist in American letters today. My subtitle is therefore meant to suggest the discursive and dramatic properties of DeLillo's work: a playwright as well as a novelist, he writes fictions that borrow from Renaissance masques, classical satires, Platonic dialogues and contemporary theater. If at times his alienated, narcissistic characters seem little more than voices exchanging witty miniature essays, their talk seldom yields genuine communication. Thus the major structural tropes in his fiction are figures of broken exchange and failed reciprocity: the cinematic cross-cut, the incomplete return, the unanswered question. Moreover, his protagonists repeatedly confront structures whose monolithic authority is represented by monologic discourse: the characters' alienation is manifest in linguistic tyrannies. Yet their elaborate strategies to evade or subvert those authorities usually lead only to exploitation by other, equally impacable forces, ideologies, or discourses.

Although unapologetically contemporary, DeLillo's work is much more intertextually embedded than has previously been recognized, quoting figures as diverse as Pythagoras, Saint Augustine, Georg Cantor, Lewis Carroll, Walter Benjamin, Sergei Eisenstein, Ernest Becker, Herman Kahn, Jean-Luc Godard, and Susan Sontag. Hence his dialogue with contemporary culture operates partly as a conversation with the high cultural icons and practices of the past; it is also a dialogue with history. But despite its manifold generic and intertextual sources, DeLillo's work repeatedly addresses a set of related themes: the tension between American individualism and the pull of public life; the prevalence of spectacle—movies, advertising, televised disasters, terrorist violence—and the consequent decay of historical consciousness; the complicity of late capitalist society with antisocial phenomena such as murder, war, pornography; the unfulfilled yearning for transcendence.

Dissecting the relationships between consumerism and religion, between individuals and collectives, DeLillo's work explores the myriad magical antidotes to postmodern dread. Recognizing that consumerism offers communion without real community, his characters seek solace in purgative rituals. DeLillo demonstrates how the pursuit of such perfect structures paves the way to fascism, and how the desire for purification may become just another image or commodity. But if the characters' magical remedies fail, their quests still provide glimpses of a potentially redemptive realm. Thus while DeLillo repeatedly critiques fetishistic oversimplifications, he sympathizes with his characters' inchoate mysticism, as his typically mysterious, even magical endings suggest. In short, DeLillo's work catalogues the varieties of American religious experience, repeatedly asking the question

posed at the beginning of *Mao II*: "When the Old God leaves the world, what happens to all the unexpended faith?" (M7).

But for me the most bracing feature of DeLillo's work is that he satirizes postmodern cultural forms not from some privileged position outside the culture, but from within those very forms. His works brilliantly mimic the argots of the same cultural forms—violent thrillers and conspiracy theories, pop music, advertising, science fiction, military tactics, film and television—that he anatomizes. Because of this strategy, DeLillo has been read both as a denouncer and as a defender of postmodern culture. I argue that neither description adequately fits. Instead, I show that his dialogue with contemporary cultural institutions respects their power but criticizes their dangerous consequences. Indeed, by adopting these discourses, DeLillo is able to concentrate his cultural critique more forcefully upon their dehumanizing potential.

Just as DeLillo borrows his narrative forms from the idioms of his chosen subject, so each chapter of this study draws its methodology from the discourses and institutions depicted in the text. My opening chapter thus assesses the influence of film on DeLillo's early fiction, particularly addressing his relationship with French nouvelle vague filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard. I suggest that DeLillo's early fictions employ cinematic allusions and techniques to reveal the harmful effects of cinematic representation on subjectivity. The early stories preview both the concerns of his later fiction and the frightening late twentieth-century world that those works depict. Americana more thoroughly introduces one of DeLillo's chief concerns the power of images—through its fractured Bildungsroman narrative, in which protagonist David Bell withdraws from his glamorous TV job to liberate himself from his movie-fed self-image by making an autobiographical film. But the film, a pastiche of techniques adapted from his father's archive of television commercials and his own cinematic education, instead teaches him a "lesson in the effect of echoes": that perfect originality, or even an identity outside of the domain of images, is impossible—and perhaps undesirable. The early fiction thus depicts the multiply framed nature of postmodern subjectivity, while also posing a crucial question to radical writers and filmmakers: how can your work avoid becoming just another commodity?

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My second chapter interprets his next two novels as essays in what Bell calls "the nature of diminishing existence" (A 277). In each, the protagonist pursues ascetic simplifications that end (or rather do not end) by enveloping him further in the oppressive institutions from which he has tried to escape. In *End Zone*, college football player Gary Harkness's obsession with

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nuclear holocaust epitomizes his quest for an "end zone" that nullifies all complexities of meaning. In this novel DeLillo traces our fascination with nuclear holocaust tales to an ascetic desire for violent purification; our fictions manifest a deep attraction to terminality. Revealing the religious and linguistic mutations that underlie the lure of apocalypse, DeLillo criticizes both the dreadful ideology of national security and the magical fictions that exploit it. In *Great Jones Street*, rock star Bucky Wunderlick abandons his group in mid-tour to seek a "moral form to master commerce": a pathway out of commodification and celebrity. But Bucky discovers (like *Mao II*'s Bill Gray) that even silence can be marketed to a ravenous public desperate for mythic figures. In both novels, DeLillo's formal innovations suggest his rejection of the characters' solutions: both texts employ unconventional plots that downplay narrative movement, thereby resisting consumption and the satisfaction of conventional closure.

A Menippean satire of Joycean complexity, Ratner's Star, treated in Chapter 3, traverses a wildly eccentric orbit apparently far removed from DeLillo's other fictions. Here he blends an imaginative history of mathematics with a symbiotic rewriting of Lewis Carroll's Alice books to produce a disturbing parable of the hazards of scientific arrogance. Through his intertextual dialogue with Carroll, DeLillo depicts the faith in mathematics as a dream that ineluctably leads to the looking-glass world of uncertainty and self-reflexivity that is twentieth-century hard science. Responding fearfully to this uncertainty, DeLillo's scientists resort to magic, seeking the age-old chimera of a purified scientific language. But instead they find an infinite regress of self-reference whose paradoxes are embodied in the novel's palindromic structure, and especially in its recurrent trope of the boornerang, which comes not only to represent human history and the shape of the cosmos, but also to imply that the power of science, like that of any other fiction, depends on our belief in it.

The next chapter pairs DeLillo's two most penetrating assessments of obsession. In the guise of a movie thriller, Running Dog mounts a complex consideration of the enduring appeal of fascism, of the power of film to mok subjectivity, and of the convergence of film and fascism in pornographic representation. In this postmodern grail-quest tale, the sacred icon is instead an unholy grail that symbolizes its pursuers' consumption by greed. Investigating the fascinations of fascism and exposing how such fascinations become commodities, Running Dog reveals the collusion of surveillance technologies and capitalism in the marketing of violent obsession. The Names blends domestic drama, quest tale and expatriate novel into a profound meditation on language as it traces protagonist James Axton's emerging awareness of his complicity with systems of terror. Adapting

Axton's son Tap's "counter-language," Ob, as his hidden structural principle, DeLillo charts Axton's development through a series of "ob" words. Hence Axton begins the novel as a self-deluded dilettante who denies domestic and political obligations and objectifies "Orientals." But his dreadful encounter with a murderous language cult obliterates his smug neutrality. Finally, after reading Tap's fictional rendering of the ritual of tongue-speaking, Axton achieves a new apprehension of language as a currency that counteracts the lethal literality of the Names cult. Dread gives way to magic: obliteration yields to oblation in the practice of glossolalia, which is presented as a gift that restores community and relieves the pressures of history.

In Chapter 5, "The Theology of Secrets," I suggest how the protagonists of *Players* and *Libra* invent secret lives as fantasies of subversion, only to find those secrets reappropriated by the institutions they meant to oppose. In Players, numbed urbanites Lyle and Pammy Wynant pursue separate forms of terrorism: Lyle gets involved with a violent cadre that aims to destroy "the idea of money"; Pammy becomes the third party in a destructive gay male relationship. DeLillo details how secrecy counteracts dread by forming a shield against the prying of institutions and the depersonalization of the postmodern economy. The protagonists' self-scripted narratives conclude, however, by reducing them to fungible counters in an elaborate game of hide-and-seek. Extending these themes, Libra investigates the "theology of secrets" (L 442) as a form of authorship, offering at once a plausible conspiracy theory about the assassination of President Kennedy and a critique of such conspiracy theories. The novel's divided plot lines a sympathetic portrayal of Lee Oswald that converges with an account of rogue CIA agents scripting a story in which Oswald performs—embody the deep ruptures that DeLillo diagnoses not only in Oswald, but in the American soul. Oswald, the disaffected nobody, emerges as an American everyman; if the CIA is "the best organized church in the Christian world" (L 260), Oswald is its patsy and its prophet.

White Noise, DeLillo's mordant satire of consumerism, television, and the post-nuclear family, explores the places where Americans seek "peace of mind in a profit-oriented context" (WN 87), echoing the "panasonic" discourses of popular culture to deconstruct the dialectical relationship between magic and dread. An American book of the dead, the novel "channels" the discourses of popular culture both to dissect the religion of consumerism and to discover what DeLillo calls the "radiance in dailiness" ("Outsider" 63). Through Jack Gladney's haunted voice, DeLillo implies that the waves and radiation of mass culture may have made us materially richer but have stolen our spiritual property. Yet the novel's deadpan de-

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nouement suggests that if the waning of orthodox faith has left only tabloid tales of resurrection and the mantras of marketing, such "spells" may be necessary, consoling responses to a centerless world. In Chapter 6 I imitate DeLillo's method, punctuating analytical passages with phrases drawn from the novel's lists of brand names and litanies of electronic voices, in order to suggest that any effective analysis of the novel must acknowledge—along with DeLillo—its own imbrication in the discourses that it critiques.

Following upon White Noise's comedy and Libra's historical ambition, Mao II, discussed in Chapter 7, appears at first to be a more polished treatment of Great Jones Street's themes. But the novel is important less for its themes than for the directness with which it addresses DeLillo's stance as an oppositional writer through the figure of novelist Bill Gray. After years of withdrawal from public life Gray has begun to realize, like Bucky Wunderlick, that his very reclusiveness only makes him more ripe for exploitation by the society of the spectacle. Gray declares—and at first DeLillo seems to espouse his declaration—that the words moving masses today are not narratives of isolated artists, but dramas staged by terrorists and fanatics who harness the power of images. Mao II dramatizes how Gray's Romantic authorship has been supplanted by what I call spectacular authorship, which counters the Western mythos of individualism as effectively as Andy Warhol's silkscreens exploded the narratives of Western art. Gray's anonymous death seems to forecast a bleak future for art and individualism, but this forecast is brightened, I argue, by novel's more genuine model of authorship: not the maker of sentences but the maker of photographs, Brita Nilsson, who shapes the culture as much as she is shaped by it. In the right hands, the novel implies, the camera can be as effective a weapon as the gun.

DeLillo's latest novel, Underworld, a monumental chronicle of American life since the 1950s, explores in unprecedented detail the myriad relationships between the two most hazardous consequences of the Cold War, weapons and waste. Beginning from the famed 1951 Dodgers-Giants playoff game and then looping backward from the 1990s, Underworld traces the dissolution of the American community into isolated monads of fear and estrangement. In Chapter 8 I argue that as Underworld shuttles back and forth from public figures and famous events to unknown, private lives, it embodies in form and content how "everything is connected" (U825). Numerous motifs thread their way through the text, weaving a cohesive narrative from its multiple strands and demonstrating the collusion of weapons and waste. Two brothers, Matt and Nick Shay, exemplify the alienation and terror wrought by these twin forces (and their shadow, the ideology of containment), as well as the longing for wholeness, harmony, and radiance those forces steal and distort. Again DeLillo imitates the discourses that

he records, using a montage-like arrangement of fragments to document the psychic and cultural fission, the material and spiritual waste, of militarism and capitalism. Yet DeLillo finds seeds of regeneration in the work of real and fictional underground artists such as Lenny Bruce, Klara Sax, and Sergei Eisenstein, who salvage the waste and weapons of the Cold War and transform them into signs of redemption. Imitating them, *Underworld* reconstructs out of the fragments of the Cold War a counterhistory that resists and undermines the technologies of war and capitalism.

This last movement propels *Underworld* past the bleak denouement of *Mao II*. DeLillo presents art as the soundest magic against dread, the truest source of radiance and community. Albeit tentatively and ambiguously, *Underworld* suggests that artists may achieve an accommodation with culture that is also act of resistance. By accepting the writer's inevitable involvement in postmodern culture while fiercely challenging all forms of institutional power, *Underworld*, most powerfully of all DeLillo's work, provides a model for contemporary artists and critics of all stripes.

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Chapter 1 Children of Godard and Coca-Cola

Cinema and Consumerism in the Early Fiction

In an interview with Tom LeClair, Don DeLillo was asked the "great barmitzvah question"—to name some writers who had influenced him. He eventually listed novels by Joyce, Nabokov, Faulkner, and Lowry, but he first cited not a novelist but a filmmaker: "Probably the movies of Jean-Luc Godard had a more immediate effect on my early work than anything I'd ever read" (Interview with LeClair 25). While writing his first novel, Americana, DeLillo kept in mind "the strong image, the short ambiguous scene, the dream sense of some movies, the artificiality, the arbitrary choices of some directors, the cutting and editing. The power of images" (Interview with LeClair 25). Indeed, the influence of film on the plot, narrative structures, and themes of DeLillo's early work is enormous. These early fictions provide DeLillo's initial analysis of American magic and dread, one that illustrates how both conditions are reflected and shaped by cinema.

DeLillo's early fiction depicts a disturbing collusion between cinema—even in its least mainstream form—and consumer practices and products. In his early stories, characters look to film images for the icons and ideals that will permit them to rise above their alienation, but these images merely model for them the very aimlessness and fear from which they have sought to escape. In *Americana* DeLillo provides multiple frames for his protagonist's quest for stable identity and perfect originality; but the presence of these frames (the most powerful of which is film history), eventually exposes this quest as a chimera, and originality as merely the echo of an

echo. Film is revealed not as a magical solution, but as a mirror that reflects the distortions of personal and national history.

DeLillo's debts to various cinematic figures and techniques are apparent throughout his work, as later chapters of this study demonstrate. The specific influence of Godard first appears in three uncollected early short stories, "Coming Sun. Mon. Tues.," "Baghdad Towers West," and "The Uniforms," which both demonstrate DeLillo's debt to avant-garde cinema and function as previews for DeLillo's later work, introducing situations, characters, and scenes that he later reuses. Presaging DeLillo's novels, they also forecast the coming attractions and dangers of postmodern culture that DeLillo anatomizes so brilliantly in his novels: the effacement of historical consciousness; dehumanization by institutions and technology; the power of images to mold subjectivity and blur the differences between reality and representations; the totalizing effects of consumer capitalism; the yearning for magical antidotes to overwhelming dread.

COMING ATTRACTIONS: PREVIEWS AND PRETEXTS IN THE EARLY SHORT FICTION

The title of "Coming Sun. Mon. Tues." imitates a marquee advertising coming attractions, as if the story were the plot outline of an upcoming movie. And indeed, with its vague characterizations and detached point of view, the story resembles nothing so much as a film scenario or "treatment." The title is followed by excerpts from an imaginary review by "The Times," calling it a "social document" about the "bitterness and urgency of today's rebellious youth" ("Coming" 391). Published in the "Briefer Comment" section of Kenyon Review, the story possesses an essayistic quality that typifies much of DeLillo's work, in which hyperarticulate characters exchange mini-essays in tersely elegant prose. The essaylike format of this early story also echoes the practices of Godard, who has called himself "an essayist, producing essays in novel form or novels in essay form: only instead of writing, I film them" (Godard 171). One of those cinematic essays was the sociological study-cum-romantic comedy Masculin féminin, which was released at about the same time as DeLillo's story, and which traces the fortunes of Paul, a polltaker and lukewarm Marxist, as he tries to woo Madeleine, a budding pop singer. Along with its light comedy, Godard's film intersperses political placards and descriptions of the action, incongruent episodes of violence, self-reflexive comments on filmmaking, and remarks on the nature of observation. DeLillo's epigraph functions similarly both as a preview or summary of the narrative and as Godardian selfcommentary, inviting us to measure our responses against its description:

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will it be "evocative and bittersweet" and "somewhat controversial" as the "review" promises? Like Godard, DeLillo foregrounds the collaboration between auteur and audience in making meaning.

The plot of the story is quite complicated, considering its brevity. It depicts a stereotypical youthful couple doing youthful things—window shopping, drinking wine, being Bohemian. When the girl gets pregnant, they visit an "abortionist" who tells them to "come back next Tuesday" ("Coming" 392). The boy tries halfheartedly to get a job and fails; the couple attend parties in which everyone speaks the revolutionary cant of the day. He steals a car, they fight, and she goes home to her stereotypical parents. The boy visits a bar where he sees his father with a woman who is not his mother; the boy is sent to jail (apparently for car theft, but we aren't sure). Finally the couple reunite and decide to have the baby. My sketchy outline may seem unfair to the story, but the text does little more to flesh out the action or characters, who are viewed as through a telephoto lens. The story eschews character development for a studied neutrality; connects plot elements simply by "then"; remains vague about setting ("it is Greenwich Village or the West Side. . . . or it is Soho or it is Montmartre" ["Coming" 391]), perhaps to create an allegorical universality or perhaps to reflect the vagueness of its protagonists' aspirations. Although told in a single paragraph, the story abruptly and inexplicably shifts from scene to scene, as if to render the protagonists' disjointed sense of time and causality.1

Some of the story's events—the car theft, the girl's pregnancy—seem to have been borrowed from Godard's Breathless. Like Jean-Paul Belmondo's Michel in that film, DeLillo's boy constantly looks at himself in the mirror ("Coming" 392, 394): like Michel's, his rebellion is the prescripted defiance of movie tough guys. The boy's cinematic models are clearly exhibited when he "stands in front of a movie theater looking at a poster of Jean Paul Belmondo" ("Coming" 393), mimicking the scene in Breathless when Belmondo gazes at a poster of Humphrey Bogart in The Harder They Fall. DeLillo reuses this scene in Americana, when novice filmmaker David Bell looks "at the poster of Belmondo looking at the poster of purposeful Bogart" (A 287).2 Like Bell, the boy in the earlier story is an image "made in the image and likeness of images" (A 130), able to see himself only when reflected from a screen or piece of glass. At the end of the story the couple look at themselves in distorted funhouse mirrors ("Coming" 394), illustrating the infinite regress of images that has shaped · - or misshaped - their identities. DeLillo's distancing devices place the characters in a neverland where all events occur as if in a dream. Likewise, Godard typically cuts out connectives and explanations in order to speak in a "purer present tense," as Susan Sontag puts it ("Godard" 257). DeLillo's Godardian strategies suggest that the future for these young people will be an eternal present of instant gratification and consumer fulfillment in which psychological density has been supplanted by endless mirror images.

DeLillo's 1968 story "Baghdad Towers West" seems less cinematic than the other two stories I am considering, although its predictions about postmodern culture and its previews of DeLillo's future work are just as striking. The story concerns a middle-aged man who rents an apartment in a building called Baghdad Towers West from three young women, each of whom is seeking success in a field of pop culture. A place without history, Baghdad Towers promises "a new kind of mystery, electronic and ultramodern, in which the angel of death pushes a vacuum cleaner and all the werewolves are schnauzers" ("Baghdad" 198-99). The sterile setting prefigures DeLillo's use of architecture as a symbol of postmodern alienation in Players, where the World Trade Center and the protagonists' boxlike apartment suggest their self-enclosure. The situation of the story is a virtual replay of a scene in Masculin féminin in which Paul temporarily stays in the apartment that Madeleine shares with two other young women. Paul is conducting a survey about the condition of French youth; much of the film consists of "interviews" in which the respondent is framed by a stationary camera as another character asks questions from offscreen. In "Baghdad Towers West" the three women similarly speak to the narrator "as if [he] were interviewing them for a profile in Look magazine" (200). Caroline: "I sculpt. . . . I am committed to junk. Give me sparkplugs, Maytag washers, jet engines, the teeth of combs. Today all beauty is apocalyptic and it demands new forms for its expression. . . . Doom is my medium" (200).3 Robin: "I want to model. . . . I want to wear long vicious boots. . . . I want to be high fashiony" (200). Melinda Bird: "I want to act. . . . All my life I've wanted to act. . . . I like to walk up and down Broadway and look at the lights and at the fabulous people" ("Baghdad" 201). In one of his bestknown placards in Masculin féminin, Godard dubs his characters "children of Marx and Coca-Cola" for their uneasy allegiance both to leftist politics and to pop-cultural images. The women in DeLillo's story have a similarly mixed genealogy: over their beds, they have pinned photos of "Bogie, Marilyn, Ringo, Ike, Lurleen, Stokely, Marlon, Ravi and Papa" ("Baghdad" 196-97).

While the women's responses all seem prescripted from contemporary pop culture, the narrator's identity is drawn from classic Hollywood features. As he first gazes up at the building, a film clip unreels in his mind: "But I knew I was not the young Jimmy Stewart ('I'll lick you yet New York') fresh from the midwest, not the urbane Cary Grant about to

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trade quips with Rosalind Russell [in His Girl Friday]. . . . I was, in fact, nobody" ("Baghdad" 198). His sorties into "the midst of the Pepsi Generation" (204) send him to a club called Moloch, where "the spectators seated at tables watched the dancers watching the spectators watching the dancers" ("Baghdad" 203): as in "Coming Sun. Mon. Tues.," culture has become a Baudrillardian precession of simulacra, a "generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (Baudrillard "Simulacra" 166). The narrator thus feels that he is constantly performing; even when ensconced safely in bed he imagines "the eerie kind of background music used in old Hitchcock films [such as Spellbound] to indicate that Gregory Peck is going nuts" ("Baghdad" 207).

Slowly withdrawing into sleep, the narrator hopes to find "something new, which was myself, or at least the beginnings of myself" ("Baghdad" 205). His dreams are dictated by the beds: in Caroline's bed he has apocalyptic dreams; in Robin's he dreams of striking poses as flashbulbs explode and "Michelangelo Antonioni emerges from the darkness and kisses my hand" ("Baghdad" 205); in Melinda Bird's he finds himself on stage in "some cynically modern version of Peter Pan" ("Baghdad" 207). The narrator's quest for purity prefigures those of several later DeLillo protagonists, including Bucky Wunderlick, the disenchanted rock star of Great Jones Street, Glen Selvy, the soldier without a cause of Running Dog, and Shaver Stevens, the disgruntled hockey player in DeLillo's pseudonymous novel Amazons. His love of sleep also echoes Masculin féminin. In one scene Paul, suffering over his unrequited passion for Madeleine, pleads with sleep to "free me a moment from myself." DeLillo's narrator seeks a similar retreat from self-awareness, a haven safe from images and observation. Sleep seems less a natural function than a magical trance state, a spell to ward off despair.

But after being rebuffed for clumsily attempting to grope one of the women, the narrator plunges even deeper, finally—paradoxically—asking the security guards to put him "on permanent security"—to maintain vigilance over the apartment even when he is there. His fantasy of security replicates the postmodern panopticon described in Running Dog (analyzed in chapter 4), in which "Everybody's on camera" all the time (RD 150). The result of this ubiquitous camera eye is not security, however, but an insecurity so total that even slumber becomes a performance. The narrator's tranquility thus soon gives way to an undefined dread that presages the nebulous anxiety of later protagonists, such as White Noise's Jack Gladney: "From bed to bed I went, searching for applause . . . for the Barrymores, Balenciaga, the odd sad hope of fulfillment. But what I found was sheer terror. I would wake up sweating, or screaming, and yet I could not remember

a single dream" ("Baghdad" 216). Even earlier, his serenity was accompanied by an urge to "set the whole thing on fire" ("Baghdad" 211), to bring about the very apocalyptic ending that he most fears.

In this story DeLillo envisions the future as belonging neither to the paralyzed narrator nor to the young women, none of whom end up attaining their dreams, but to people like Ulysses, the dispirited fourth-grader who sets only easily achievable goals ("If I try to achieve a goal that's simply beyond my abilities, I'm bound to be disappointed"), and whose epic journey consists of riding the elevators autistically from floor to floor ("Baghdad" 208-9). Just as in Players elevators are represented as "places" (P 24) that connote the emptiness of their inhabitants, so Ulysses's elevator replicates the narrator's "empty box within an empty box" ("Baghdad" 208), a domain safe from the urban nightmare reported on the narrator's radio: "From my seat in the helicopter I can see it all, the entire metropolitan area, through the poisonous smoke and fog. It is a scene of unbelievable terror and madness" ("Baghdad" 210).

This vision of an automotive apocalypse parallels another Godard film, Weekend, with its famous seven-minute tracking shot of a colossal traffic jam and its terrifying vision of an amoral, cannibalistic near future. In this film, Godard presents the out-of-control automobile as the embodiment of rampant consumerism. Thus the corruption of Corinne and Rolande Duran, the repellent protagonists of the film, is displayed as much by Rolande's callous disregard for traffic laws as by their plan to murder her parents for their money. After a wild drive, they crash; as the cars burn, Corinne screams, apparently in pain. But in fact she is only lamenting the loss of her Hermès handbag. They later encounter actors playing Rousseau and Emily Brontë, the latter of whom they nonchalantly burn. But no matter; as Rolande says, "they're only imaginary characters. We're little more than that ourselves." These postmodernist touches are not merely gimmicks; they dramatize Godard's message that the bourgeoisie live an imaginary life built upon the unacknowledged exploitation of workers and third world countries. If the Durands' "freedom is violence"-merely the "highest stage of barbarism"—the rest of their journey transports them back from "advanced savagery to primitive barbarism": they are hijacked, stripped of their car, and kidnapped by a brutal gang of roving, cannibalistic-and cinematically literate-revolutionaries, whose radio codenames are drawn from classic cinema (in one scene "Battleship Potemkin" calls to "The Searchers") and whose slogan is "the horror of the bourgeoisie can only be overcome by more horror," which they are happy to provide. At the end of the film Corinne blithely consumes a stew made of English tourists and, perhaps, some parts of her husband as well. The implication, of course,

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is that she has always been a cannibal, that her meal merely literalizes the violent consumerism that has always defined her class. The terrorists thus enable the Durands to act out their savagery more honestly. For Godard, then, the bourgeoisie are themselves terrorists. But so is he: Godard conceives of his films as terrorist acts—as what Robert Stam terms a series of "guerrilla raids" (259)—not only upon capitalism and bourgeois culture, but also upon cinematic conventions such as linear plot, character development, and structural and visual continuity.

DeLillo's "The Uniforms" is essentially a gloss on Weekend, as he admits in an appendix to a reprint of the story: "I consider this piece of work a movie as much as anything else. . . . [It] is an attempt to hammer and nail my own frame around somebody else's movie. The movie in question is 'Weekend,' made of course by the mock-illustrious Jean-Luc Godard" (Appendix 532-33). Some of his borrowings are obvious: in one scene DeLillo's terrorists eat a pig ("Uniforms" 452), in imitation of the pig slaughtering scene in Weekend; in another, they stop a car and ask the occupants if they'd rather eat bananas picked by oppressed workers or sleep in a bed full of tarantulas. The man who chooses the bananas is murdered ("Uniforms" 452-53). This inquisition reenacts a scene in Weekend in which the autoless Corinne and Rolande are asked by passing motorists if they'd rather be "screwed by Mao or Johnson." When Rolande answers "Johnson," the car drives off without them. As the question about bananas indicates, the politics of DeLillo's revolutionaries are merely a pretext for murder and rape. Hence, after they kill the occupants of a tank and cut off their genitals, they rationalize that "the tank was full of products made by Dow Chemical" ("Uniforms" 453).4

But the story is not just a rehash of Godard's outrageous movie. For one thing, DeLillo omits most of the cars and concentrates on the terrorists. His story is even more plotless than Weekend, lacking even the auto journey to give it shape. And while the deadpan depiction of acts of violence mirrors Godard's film, the perpetrators are even more clearly movie-mad: at the beginning, one terrorist edits film clips of their previous attack; another is nicknamed Breathless ("Uniforms" 451); yet another experiences repeated flashbacks of a "soft-focus childhood" in which he sees himself running in slow motion ("Uniforms" 453). Likewise, their debates about the meaning of history are really arguments about historical films: they don't care about the righteousness of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, but only about whether Alain Resnais "faked the film-clips of the bomb victims in [Hiroshima Mon Amour]" ("Uniforms" 455). The past is just a film; wars and war movies are the same thing. Thus their knowledge of the American Revolution and Civil War is derived solely from "the films

of John Ford and John Huston," who have shown that "tight dusty uniforms are most acceptable to the devouring eye of history and the camera" ("Uniforms" 454). In short, their politics is a combination of fashion statement and film criticism: "the revolutionary uniform must be tight and spare. . . . We have thrown off the shackles of black-and-white revisionism. We will shoot in color because color is the color of childhood fantasy" ("Uniforms" 454). It follows that one of their final actions (presaging the prologue of *Players*) is to slaughter a group of golfing "middle class white Protestants," apparently because they have ugly clothes ("Uniforms" 456; cf. P7).

Ironically, after perpetrating all these horrific acts, the terrorists go window-shopping ("Uniforms" 454). DeLillo's point is perhaps too obvious: these "revolutionaries" are wedded to the capitalism they claim to want to destroy. Not only do they carefully filch their victims' "Gucci wallets," "Tiffany cigarette cases" and "Patek-Philippe wristwatches" ("Uniforms" 455), but DeLillo's descriptions of the revolutionaries focus almost entirely on their clothes - their "uniforms" - which are carefully assembled for the most striking effect. Thus one wears a fez, a Mau Mau shirt, a safari jacket, granny glasses, and track shoes; another wears a motorcycle helmet, jump boots, a cowhide vest, and bandoliers. Just as history is pastiche, so radicalism equals the ability to arrange a fashionably outrageous ensemble. The story dramatizes DeLillo's recognition that, as Steven Connor argues, in postmodern culture "images, styles, and representations are not the promotional accessories to economic products; they are the products themselves" (46). But DeLillo reverses Godard's association between terrorism and consumerism: whereas for Godard the bourgeoisie are terrorists, for DeLillo the terrorists are bourgeois consumers.

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DeLillo's prescient vision of terrorist manipulation of the media anticipates the themes of *Mao II* as well as the media savvy of real-life terrorists. But the relationship between the media and violence works both ways: the bombardment of consciousness by images is itself a form of violence. DeLillo has described "contemporary violence as a kind of sardonic response to the promise of consumer fulfillment" ("Outsider" 57). In this case, unlike that of *Libra*'s Oswald, it's not that the murderers are alienated from the glorious paradise they see advertised on TV; rather, it's that violence has become just another way to embody the right brand image. Moreover, it's not that the terrorists are inauthentic; it's that the collaboration of cinema and consumerism has blurred the distinction between commitment and celebrity, between reality and representations, as suggested when DeLillo's revolutionaries see "a film crew shooting a television commercial for a movie about television" ("Uniforms" 455). If these terrorists'

crimes are movie crimes, they are no less real for all that. As Baudrillard has observed, "all hold ups, hijacks and the like are now as it were simulation hold ups, in the sense that they are inscribed in advance in the decoding and orchestration rituals of the media, anticipated in their mode of presentation and possible consequences" ("Simulacra" 179). "The Uniforms" depicts this collapse of distinction as a terrorism of representation that implicates us all.

At the end of "The Uniforms," we learn that a "Godard film was playing at the local cinema" (459). DeLillo seems to be claiming that Godard's vaunted revolution against bourgeois film conventions is itself just fashion; the story also implies that Godard's deadpan depiction of violence mistakenly conflates political and aesthetic radicalism and thereby desensitizes viewers to actual violence. As Godard has admitted, "The more one indulges in spectacle . . . the more one becomes immersed in what one is trying to destroy" (Stam 182). But then how does DeLillo's story, with its neutral portrayal of equally atrocious crimes, escape the same complicity? At the end of the appendix to his story, DeLillo writes, "Thousands of short stories and novels have been made into movies. I simply tried to reverse the process. . . . I submit this mode of work as a legitimate challenge to writers of radical intent" (533). His challenge is most obviously a charge to write "cinematic" stories that dispense with conventions such as plot, psychology, and closure. But he is also asking whether "radical" techniques necessarily promote radical politics. How, in other words, can one honestly portray revolution or violence without glorifying it? DeLillo leaves these questions unanswered; indeed he raises them again as part of the self-critical dialogue with postmodern culture that continues throughout his work. Nevertheless, by placing a cinematic frame around the story, he at least acknowledges the potential complicity of his own radical art in the alliance of consumerism and violence, in the collaboration of magic and dread.

All three of these stories examine the relationship between subjectivity and cinema, between image and identity, between real and reel, prompting disturbing questions about what lies ahead in the post-postmodern future. The apocalypse of *Weekend*? The aimless anomie of "Coming Sun. Mon. Tues"? The catatonic oblivion of "Baghdad Towers West"? In exploring the collusion between cinema and consumerism, DeLillo questions the possibility of any truly radical filmmaking aesthetic. And by hammering new frames around these pretextual films, DeLillo presents advertisements for the future that turn the camera back upon novelists and imagemakers, as if to ask, "to what degree is our art just another consumer product?"

"A LESSON IN THE EFFECT OF ECHOES": INTERVIEW AND INTERTEXT IN AMERICANA

David Bell, the protagonist and narrator of Americana, displays the same schizophrenia about cinema and consumer culture exhibited in Godard's films and DeLillo's earlier fiction. He also continues the pattern of withdrawal, begun by the narrator of "Baghdad Towers West," that typifies many of DeLillo's later characters. Abandoning his high-profile career at a television network, Bell hopes to discover an authentic origin, a core identity, a genuine passion. From the outset, however, Bell's desires are contradictory: he wants both to discover and to destroy his past. In fact, his greatest problem may be his awareness that his identity is not only composed of the psychological patterns bequeathed him by his parents, but is also burdened by the immense weight of the cultural images, texts, and discourses that have influenced him. Hoping to liberate himself, Bell examines his past, revises it by making it into a movie, and then writes about it in the text we are reading.

Of course, Bell's memoir lies within a long and illustrious literary history that goes back at least to Saint Augustine (who is quoted by Ted Warburton, the network's mad memowriter). Similarly, in writing Bell's fictional life, first novelist Don DeLillo contributes to one of the novel's most distinguished subgenres: the Kunstlerroman. Like other Kunstlerroman heroes, Bell composes a work of art—an autobiographical film that demonstrates both his talent and his limitations; but his work is "a lesson in the effect of echoes" (A 58), a pastiche of the styles and techniques of previous filmmakers - particularly Godard - that reveals nothing so much as the impossibility of complete artistic originality. DeLillo suggests that Bell's quest for originality and a true self beneath the images that have constructed him is futile, partly because it is based upon outmoded notions of originality and identity no longer recuperable in postmodern America. Instead, Bell's quest demonstrates the inescapability of and interrelationship between cinematic and commercial images, and the profound way that they form—and fragment—postmodern subjectivity. The novel, with its interpolated and multiply framed film, becomes a kind of self-interview, as David Bell's dialogue with himself dramatizes DeLillo's dialogue with postmodern culture.

At his job with the TV network, Bell feels alienated, hopeless, with "no echo for grief" (A 29). The network strikes him as a series of "test patterns and shadows" (A 270) of previous images that are themselves unoriginal. At times he imagines he is living in one of those "dull morality tales about power plays and timid adulteries" (A 20), such as Patterns or The

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18 Chapter 1 Man in the Gray Flannel Suit (both 1956), in vogue in the 1950s. The memo anonymously sent by Ted Warburton, the network's "tribal conscience" (A 62), describes David's condition: "And never can a man be more disastrously in death than when death itself shall be deathless" (A 21). Warburton glosses this passage from Saint Augustine's City of God (Book 13, Chapter 22, 421) to mean that living is nothing but a process of dying; yet once one dies, he or she goes on dying forever, so that death is never "finished" (A 100-101). For David it signifies that his life at the network is an unending death, providing only the "immortality" embodied in his fear that "all of us at the network existed only on videotape. Our words and actions seemed to have a disturbingly elapsed quality. . . . And there was the feeling that somebody's deadly pinky might nudge a button and we would all be erased forever" (A 23). Yet David's oppression by inherited images is accompanied by a movie-fed narcissism: a man who resembles "a number of Hollywood stars known for their interchangeability" (A 93), Bell revels in his image, constantly looking at himself in the mirror and boasting of his handsomeness. As Tom LeClair notes, David is thus torn between his desire to participate in "the Bell system" (A 41) of mass communication and a desire to flee from it (Loop 32). He escapes, ostensibly to make a documentary about the Navajos, with a surrogate family, the most important of whom is Sully, an avant-garde sculptress who stands in for David's demented (and now deceased) mother.

Part 2 of the novel interrupts the linear narrative for a flashback in which David recalls his adolescence and family life. Within the tale of his belatedness emerges a mini-Bildungsroman that follows most Bildungsroman conventions: the early life in a provincial town (Old Holly), constraints by family and education, movement to the city, a series of love affairs. This section is multiply framed: framed intertextually by the Bildungsroman/Kunstlerroman tradition and by the "echoes" from movies that have helped to create his identity, it also functions as a tale-within-a tale, and hence it is also intratextually framed by the narrative of Bell's later life that surrounds it, and eventually by the frame around the entire novel, which David, alone on an island, narrates in 1999. These multiple echoes, or frames within frames, themselves suggest the quixotic nature of David's quest to be free from the past.

Unlike earlier *Bildungsroman* protagonists, David's education is not literary but cinematic,⁷ and his identity has been shaped most dramatically by those "American pyramids" (A 12) Burt Lancaster and Kirk Douglas. As Sergeant Warden in *From Here to Eternity*, Lancaster is a "crescendo of male perfection"; through him David discovers the "true power of the image" (A 13, 12). Warden is an unreachable ideal, "the icon of a new religion" at

once private and mass-produced. Perfectly synthesizing the roles of friend, big brother and father, Lancaster/Warden substitutes for David's less satisfactory real father, fifty-five-year-old ad executive Clinton Bell. Clinton also echoes a number of popular 1950s figures, particularly Tom Rath, the protagonist of The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit. Like Rath, Clinton has three children (two girls and a younger boy), strives to balance the demands of corporate and domestic life, and is haunted by his violent actions in World War II. But unlike Rath, Clinton conceives of his family as ad images mirroring those in his basement archive of videotaped TV commercials, which he reruns repeatedly to "find the common threads and nuances" in those that have achieved "high test ratings" (A 84). These masscultural artifacts, replacing the personal mementos and home movies preserved by other middle-class males, are his Americana. Habitué of the Playboy Club and avid consumer of Jaguars and expensive cologne (A 152), Clinton boasts that he is successful because he has the "right brand image" (A 85); having created himself from TV commercials and best-sellers, Clinton has become commodified. Hence, when David films the commercial that is his life, he also tries to trade his father in for a better brand.

In his early years, David believes devoutly in the American dream of the good life, which encompasses "all those things which all people are said to want, materials and objects and the shadows they cast." He buys "the institutional messages, the psalms and placards, the pictures, the words. Better living through chemistry. The Sears, Roebuck catalog. Aunt Jemima. All the impulses of all the media were fed into the circuitry of my dreams. One thinks of echoes. One thinks of an image made in the image and likeness of images. It was that complex" (A 130). As the allusion to Genesis 1:26 suggests, cinematic and commercial images are David's sacred texts. But unlike the Divine Word, these intertextual discourses are mass-produced copies, designed and consumed anonymously. David's dreams thus again exemplify Baudrillard's domain of the simulacrum, in which signs follow "an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference" (Baudrillard, "Simulacra" 170). Marx's commodity fetishism here reaches its ultimate stage, as social relationships yield to relationships not between commodities but between images. Consumer capitalism has engendered hew economies of meaning and identity, in which experience, as John Johnston notes, "can only appear to be 'always already' framed, multiply mediated, and available only through sets of competing and often contradictory images and representations" ("Post-cinematic" 97). As Baudrillard writes, the problem is that "illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible" ("Simulacra" 177): originality and unitary identity become impossible because representations refer back only to other representations.

Paradoxically, David aims to use cinematic representation to delve beneath the representations that have formed him; he hopes that by re-presenting himself to himself, he may find the source of his pathology, the glue for his identity, and thereby transcend his oppression by the past.

Thus, very early in David's journey (which halts in a town called Ft. Curtis), he conceives the idea for a "messy autobiographical-type film . . a long unmanageable movie full of fragments of everything that's part of my life," which may "explain the darkness, if only to myself" (A 205-6). The psychological "darkness" issues from his mother, Ann. Molested by the family physician and then stricken with cancer, she shared the story of her molestation with the adolescent David, inciting unresolved Oedipal feelings in him. At David's "coming out" party, he sees her spitting on the ice cubes; later that night, David breathlessly anticipates an Oedipal encounter with Ann, only to be interrupted by the sound of his father's feet on the stairs (A 197). With her patrician Virginia heritage, Ann represents a high cultural legacy at odds with Clinton's commercialized world. Thus her haunting presence comes to David filtered through echoes from his "sacred scroll" at college (A 145), Joyce's Ulysses, rewritten with David as Stephen Dedalus.8 The conflict between Ann and Clinton thus engenders several conflicts in David-object of Oedipal desire vs. obstacle to that desire; the literary vs. the cinematic, high culture vs. popular culture, Godard vs. Coca-Cola-producing the fragmented psyche that David attempts to suture with his film.

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Like his entire story, David's film is multiply framed. First, it is framed intratextually within the novel so that we "see" it only through Bell, who, as narrator, interprets it in advance (LeClair, Loop 43). Second, because it is presented after we have learned about David's early life, it stands as both artwork and symptom, forcing us to read "through" the cinematic text to apprehend its sources. The film even contains its own intratextual frame: its first sequence, in which fledgling actor Austin Wakely plays fledgling filmmaker David Bell with his back to a full-length mirror, facing the camera (A 241). The length he choses for the framing episode—20 seconds, a "popular commercial length" (A 241)—betrays his father's influence, as well as his own self-conception as a commodity. The film is also framed intertextually by numerous films and filmmakers; this "signature" scene is also an intertextual mirror, reflecting both the autobiographical intention of the film and the derivativeness that David describes to his friend Ken Wild:

It's a sort of first-person thing but without me in it in any physical sense, except fleetingly, . . . my mirror image at any rate. . . . It'll be part dream, part fiction,

part movies. . . . By that I mean certain juxtapositions of movies with reality, certain images that have stayed with me, certain influences too. . . . Ghosts and shadows everywhere in terms of technique. Bresson. Miklós Jancsó. Ozu. Shirley Clarke. The interview technique. The monologue. The anti-movie. The single camera position. The expressionless actor. The shot extended to its ultimate limit in time. (A 263)

Bell hopes that by incorporating these cinematic "ghosts and shadows" he can banish them and the psychic echoes that resound in his consciousness. For him (and for DeLillo, whose novel frames David's film), intertextuality here approaches a Barthesian infinite regress in which even the self who approaches a text is "already a plurality of other texts, of infinite, or more precisely, lost codes" (S/Z10).9 Bell hopes to create what Derrida calls an "iterable" text (315): one simultaneously derivative and original, a tissue of citations that is thereby one of a kind. That paradoxical condition is further implied when David prepares actress Carol Deming for segment 5 by mentioning Bergman's Persona, a film that movingly examines identity and "the nature of diminishing existence" (A 277)—a phrase that David uses to describe his life (and which, I show in the next chapter, applies to DeLillo's next two protagonists as well)—through the blending and exchange of two female protagonists. David is attempting to execute a similar feat: to split himself into interviewer and interviewee, to undertake a dialogue with himself that will yield a unitary subject. But despite these dizzying multiple frames, David's citation of influences shows a yearning to recover "lost" codes and points us toward the techniques and traumas that have inspired his film.

The film consists mostly of interviews with actors playing figures from Bell's life. Facing the camera directly, they respond to questions from offscreen. In most ways it is a very uncinematic movie and seems to bear little resemblance to the work of French filmmaker Robert Bresson, But Bresson is an acknowledged influence on Godard, especially in his use of "expressionless" acting (D. A. Cook 542); in addition, Bresson's nearly dialoguefree narratives proceed with minimal camera movement ("the single camera position") to suggest the social conditions entrapping the characters. Like Bresson, Hungarian filmmaker Miklós Jancsó employs a very static camera, while experimenting with "the shot extended to its ultimate limit in time." (Winter Wind [Sirokko, 1969], for example, consists of only thirteen shots [D. A. Cook 705].) Like Bresson and Jancsó, Japanese filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu mastered the long take and the static camera, which he usually placed about three feet high—the vantage point of a person sitting on a tatami mat. Instead of using alternating over-the-shoulder shots, as do American directors, Ozu often had his actors directly face the camCinema an Consumerisi in the Earl Fictio era, which thereby assumes the addressee's point of view. The technique places the viewer within the scene to share the characters' intimacies. Most famously, Ozu exploited the value of empty space: often when actors leave a room, his camera does not follow them, but remains trained on the vacant room for several seconds. Thus though these classicist filmmakers' work seems antithetical to David's gabfest, the ghosts of their techniques animate his movie, joining the spirits of his own past in spectral company. Bell's appropriation of these anti-Hollywood techniques suggests that he wants to produce a film that resists the primacy of Image and to create one that, to paraphrase Bresson, is not a spectacle but a style.

The "interview technique" and the "monologue" recall the work of another avant-garde filmmaker, Shirley Clarke, and particularly her influential film The Connection (1961), which depicts junkies awaiting their connection while being filmed by a documentary crew, to whom the characters speak directly.11 Like Bell, she uses intratextual framing to comment on the impossibility of objectivity and the blurry line between acting and behaving. For example, in The Connection the director of the film-withinthe-film claims to want to make "an honest human document," but constantly exhorts the actors to produce some "action" — to behave unlike their "normal" selves. Ultimately, the director's quest for total authenticity overwhelms his desire for objectivity, and he allows himself to be injected with heroin. But Clarke implies that the real drugs are cinematic images, which we crave as a way of ensuring ourselves that we exist. Near the end of The Connection we glimpse the cameraman, reflected in a window, shooting the scene we are watching, an image that David replicates near the end of his own film when he appears "reflected in a mirror as I hold the camera" (A 347). For both Bell and Clarke, film is not a window but a mirror; objectivity is impossible not only because of one's emotional involvement in what one films, but also because the medium ineluctably alters both observer and observed.

All of these echoes are quieter, however, than the one David admits when he calls himself a "child of Godard and Coca-Cola" (A 269), a witty transmutation of Godard's famous description of his characters in Masculin féminin as "children of Marx and Coca-Cola." ¹² As I noted in the first part of this chapter, DeLillo is himself a "child of Godard." In Americana one of the principal Godardian strategies is what Richard Roud calls the "analogical" plot (93): the inclusion of seemingly irrelevant digressions that function as commentary or collage. As its title suggests, Americana also resembles a collage-like assortment of photos or postcards, and incorporates diverse literary and cinematic sources and models. Throughout his oeuvre DeLillo also resembles Godard in his deconstructions of popular genres. ¹³

Bell's film also seeks a Godardian spontaneity, exemplifying Godard's view that the best films are those "in which the character conducts a dialectical search, experimenting and discovering his theme and structure as he goes along" (Giannetti 27). The film thus fits Godard's description of one of his early films as "a secret diary... or the monologue of someone trying to justify himself before an almost accusing camera, as one does before a lawyer or psychiatrist" (Godard, "Marginal Notes" 179).

Segment 5 contains such a monologue, as Carol Deming, playing David's sister Mary, admits that her life with a mobster has been modeled after Godard's Breathless (A 277). David, too, borrows from that film. In one scene from Breathless, Jean Seberg's Patricia and Jean-Paul Belmondo's Michel read an excerpt from William Faulkner's Wild Palms that presents the choice between grief and nothingness. Michel chooses the latter, as would Carol/Mary, who says she "needed death in order to believe I was living" (A 279). Likewise, Godard's Patricia could be speaking for Mary when she says, "I don't know if I'm unhappy because I'm not free, or not free because I'm unhappy." David's scene is thus again multiply framed: not only is Carol playing Mary, but, David's film implies, Mary was imitating Jean Seberg as Patricia, who herself assumes various roles in Breathless, including interviewer and thief's moll. Later, in segment 11, David's fellow traveler Bobby Brand and Carol improvise their dialogue so that Carol's "real" life shades into her performance as Mary (A 306). Jean Seberg's tragic story merges with that of Patricia, whose affair with Michel turns out to be just another "act"; Mary's existence becomes a gloss on Patricia's, and Carol's performance as Mary amounts to playing herself. David's projection of his sister's life thus demonstrates not just that Godard's film (itself a pastiche of 1940s Hollywood B pictures) has influenced Mary, Carol, and other women who have watched it, but that behavior and identity are "always already" framed.

Also prefiguring Americana in both plot and theme is Godard's 1965 film Pierrot le fou, whose schizoid protagonist, Ferdinand, flees from his deadening bourgeois existence for an experiment in spontaneity and violence with a woman named Marianne. The stultification of his previous life is dramatized in a cocktail party scene (resembling the early scenes in Americana) in which the characters' conversations consist entirely of commercials for such products as Olds Rocket 88 and Odorono deodorant. Asked about his previous life, Ferdinand answers, "I was in television." His adventure, like Bell's, is self-consciously patterned after the films of B-movie director Samuel Fuller, who appears in a cameo, talking portentously about film. The psychological purpose of David's film is concisely expressed in another scene in Pierrot, when Ferdinand and Marianne watch

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an earlier Godard film, *Le grand escroc*, in which Jean Seberg says, "[W]e are carefully looking for . . . that moment when the imaginary character has given way to the real one . . . if there ever was a real one."

Bell's film, however, most clearly resembles Masculin féminin, which is subtitled "A film in 15 precise acts," the same number of segments that David films during the time of the novel, and which uses the "interview technique" virtually all the way through its running time. For Godard's characters, as for Bell, nothing exists prior to mechanical reproduction: even Paul's declarations of love are spoken not to Madeleine but to a recording machine. More significantly, Godard dramatizes the conflict between "Marx and Coca-Cola" in a variety of ways. In one scene, Robert, one male protagonist, reads the instructions for becoming a perfect "revolutionary machine," while his interlocutor, Catherine, washes dishes, a box of Tide detergent prominently displayed in the background. The scene prompts us to wonder not only whether the revolution requires males to help with the dishes but also whether becoming a "revolutionary machine" is truly preferable to—or even different from—being a consuming machine. As with the revolutionaries in "The Uniforms," the politics of Godard's characters seem mostly a matter of fashion. So thoroughly molded are they by seemingly opposed ideologies that they are not even aware of any contradiction between them.

So much for Godard. But what about Coca-Cola? Segment 4 of David's film dramatizes his views on consumerism through multiple frames. The camera records eight minutes of a TV game show, including the commercials, while Ft. Curtis resident Glen Yost (as Clinton Bell) is interviewed from off-camera. He describes television as an "electronic form of packaging" in which the image is the most important product (A 270). TV and advertising are symbiotically related: both make the viewer "want to change the way he lives" by appealing to the "universal third person," which advertising has discovered, and which it exploits "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" (A 270). This universal third person is not a real person, however, just as the chief products of postmodern society are not commodities; rather, as Guy Debord has famously argued (Society 16), both are images.

Glen/Clinton's formulation echoes Fredric Jameson's discussion of what he calls "seriality," the characteristic condition of consumer society, in which "the uniqueness of my own experience is undermined by a secret anonymity, a statistical quality. Somehow I feel I am no longer central, that I am merely doing just what everybody else is doing.... [But] everybody else

feels exactly the same way" (76, emphasis in original). The result is an endless circuit in which everyone projects onto everyone else "an optical illusion of centrality as 'public opinion'" (77). Through such means, the argument continues, the discourses of consumer capitalism have so thoroughly colonized the self that each individual conceives of him/herself primarily (if not only) as a consumer. All states of mind, relationships and processes are transformed either into needs for products or commodities, or into the results of consuming. Nothing is immune to consumption; nothing is prior to the image. But while advertising discovered this person, it didn't invent him: in fact, says Glen/Clinton, he "came over on the Mayflower" (A 271). That is, advertising is not just a form of Americana; America is itself no more than an advertisement.

In Americana advertising is presented as a prototypical form of American magic. But whether advertising really operates in so sinister and totalizing a way is debatable. Certainly successful commercials aim to incite desires and illustrate ways to fulfill them, while preying most upon those with limited access to other information and opportunities: children, the poor, the ignorant. And yet, as Judith Williamson has argued, even the most unsubtle ads leave gaps for the viewer or reader to fill with personal images, thereby inviting participation in the economy of meaning created by advertising's "currency of signs" (14, 20). Indeed, Yost/Clinton notes that consuming dreamers realize the limitations of their dreams. Recognizing these limits, advertising has learned to exploit the "anti-image": the slice-of-life commercial that brings movie-fueled desires back down to earth and hence counteracts the image (A 272). This conflict is also reflected in David's psyche and film: while modeling himself after Burt and Kirk-bigger-thanlife images - he nonetheless makes a film based on the styles of Ozu, Bresson, Clarke—epitomes of the "anti-image." Godard's films encapsulate the conflict: although he once defined the cinema as "research in the form of spectacle" ("Marginal Notes" 181), his films aim to explode our passive acceptance of spectacle by constantly upsetting our expectations about plot, form, and character. What does DeLillo think? He remains elusive. His use of multiples frames in the "Clinton" sequence permits David to editorialize only through an actor pretending to be his father; DeLillo's voice is thus audible only as a series of echoes, forcing us to question the source and veracity of the argument, as well as our own complicity with the conditions described. DeLillo thus uses Clinton's monologue to generate dialogues between himself and his readers, himself and his narrator, his narrator and his alter egos: here is another lesson in the effect of echoes.

The collision and collusion between image and anti-image, between high culture and consumer culture, is forcefully dramatized by David's reCinema and Consumerist in the Earl Fiction

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peated appropriation of a scene from Akira Kurosawa's 1952 film, Ikiru ("To Live"). Ikiru concerns an aging bureaucrat named Watanabe, whose life embodies "the nature of diminishing existence." Watanabe's vitality has been crushed by years of toil in the Citizens Section of the city government; when he learns that he has stomach cancer, he is forced to examine that stultifying life. Rather than simply running away, as David does, Watanabe uses his position to help a group of local women turn a swampy field into a playground. In a moving scene near the end of the film, Watanabe is viewed sitting on a swing amid falling snow, softly singing to himself a sad song from childhood. David adapts this scene for the seventh segment of his film, in which Sully, filmed swinging on a snowless playground, substitutes for Watanabe and for David's cancer-ridden mother (A 290). The scene constitutes David's attempt to generate the kind of retrospective epiphany that Watanabe undergoes. Here again Bell attempts to transform intertextual echoes into original sounds. 16 Its effect, however, remains ambiguous, as Sully's presence weakens "what was for [David] an all too overarching moment" (A 290).

Chapter 1

Ikiru reappears in unexpected places. In segment 4, Clinton/Yost tells of a mouthwash commercial he once made in which a triumphant race-car driver gets the girl by using the right oral hygiene product. But the client turned it down because in the background of the celebrating crowd was an aged Asian man who violated the ad's atmosphere of "health, happiness, freshness, mouth-appeal" (A 274). The anti-image intruded on the image. The old man-it is Watanabe-migrated from David's trove of images from classic cinema. The old man's unlikely presence brings to light what the ad is trying to suppress: that postwar prosperity was built on the (Japanese) ruins and suffering of war; that the fear of death lurks behind ads for personal care products. The appearance of Watanabe also explains why David has decided to abandon the network: he identifies himself with the old man and fears his own living death.

The same fragment of Ikiru reappears in segment 8, in which Yost/ Clinton narrates "his" (actually a blend of Clinton's and Yost's) experiences in the Bataan Death March. Just outside Orani he and the other prisoners experienced a collective vision of a Japanese officer who appeared to be an old man swinging, singing a song, and blessing them (A 296) - Watanabe again. In one sense, Watanabe here represents Ann (who also died from cancer) and the peaceful family life Clinton has lost forever. In another sense, the old man is Clinton himself, crushed by the war and enduring a death-in-life similar to Watanabe's. Thus when, in the final image of this sequence, Clinton recalls burying a Filipino prisoner alive, we recognize it as a symbol of his own voluntary self-interment ("he's buried alive but still

breathing"-A 285) as well as of David's Oedipal wish to kill him. Ikiru has mutated into a primal scene in which the son is haunted by the motheras-Watanabe and wants to replace the father-as-Watanabe. David's fixation on the old man demonstrates that he is trying simultaneously to bury and to unearth his parents, both to assemble and to disassemble the montage of the past. Near the end of the Bataan sequence Clinton/Yost blames his country for treasuring "the sacrifice of its sons, making slogans out of their death and selling war bonds with it or soap for all we knew" (A 297). The implication is that twentieth-century war is simply consumerism carried on by other means—and vice versa. Thus the insertion of Watanabe—emblem of the "anti-image" - in these sequences signifies David's wish to create a cinematic form that would escape the cycle of consumption, a set of images that would exist, paradoxically, outside of the regime of "inauthentic" images: true images that would do for him what the playground does for Watanabe.17

With these goals in mind, David interviews "himself" in segments 6, 10, and 12. First "David" interrogates David's project, recalling how he once filmed an aged black couple at a demonstration, believing that he was celebrating their dignity. Now he realizes that he was patronizing them and cheapening their suffering (A 286): as Paul recognizes at the end of Masculin féminin, the "observation of behavior . . . insidiously substitutes an attempt to form value judgments" that may not even reflect the observer's real point of view. In these framing segments David confronts, like Paul, what Giannetti calls the "twin dangers of subjectivity and objectivity" (Giannetti 47)—or, more accurately, the collapse of the distinction between them. Both 6 and 12 also function as temporal mirrors in which "David" (Austin) addresses the future David: "Hello to myself in the remote future, watching this in fear and darkness. . .. I hope you've finally become part of your time, David" (A 286). In 12, however, Austin/David just stands silently against a wall, ready to answer questions that the 1999 David (who narrates the novel) might pose. But the older David has no questions; what remains is a silence of twenty seconds—the length of a commercial.

Not only does this mute tableau suggest that the younger David has no answers for the older one; it also mocks David's exploration of the past. Indeed, while these moments highlight the consistency of identity over time, they also illustrate that Bell's existence has been "twenty-eight years in the movies," a pastiche of Fellini's La strada, the dance of death in Bergman's The Seventh Seal, Albert Finney falling down the stairs in Karel Reisz's Saturday Night and Sunday Morning, "Burt Lancaster toweling his chest . . . Bell looking at the poster of Belmondo looking at the poster of purposeful Bogart. . . . Watanabe, singing to his unseen infancy," and Shane riding