

Tick-Tock or Not: Don DeLillo's *Point Omega* and the Unreliability of Postmodern Time

**A Barthesian analysis investigating the shifting
meanings of 'writerly' temporality**

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Abstract

Born out of an interest in the subjective perception of time, and a desire to test the possibilities of applying the structuralist/poststructuralist analytical framework laid out by Roland Barthes in his *S/Z* on a contemporary work of fiction, this essay is first and foremost a foray into the shifting meanings of time in Don DeLillo's 2010 novel *Point Omega*, and by extension the post-millennial era as a whole. Against a complex backdrop concerning the nature of time in postmodernity, gleaned from a review of articles by Mitchum Huehls, Frederic Jameson and Ursula K. Heise, the analysis in this essay investigates how, together, the different characters experiences of temporality in *Point Omega* suggest that time is an unreliable measurement of human experience.

This essay identifies and explains the key concepts of Barthes' analysis in *S/Z*, and describes the structure of his analysis. The description of *readerly* and *writerly* texts, the breaking apart of a text into *lexias*, as well as the definitions of Barthes' five codes of meaning, are supplemented by a brief consideration of his final work, *Camera Lucida*, which is also relevant to this investigation of temporality in DeLillo. Though in the short time allotted for the writing of this essay it was only possible to emulate a fraction of the extensive detail achieved by Barthes in *S/Z*, the application of his codes to thirty excerpts selected from *Point Omega* within, coupled with an analysis of these excerpts, together produces a comprehensive image of time's potential for having multiple meanings in the modern world. Though this essay is a work of some hybridity, it works to highlight some of the lasting possibilities, advantages and limitations of applying Barthes' theory in a specialized reading of contemporary American literature. The conclusion that emerges from my analysis is that time is an often-changing, arbitrary concept.

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1. Introduction

Throughout his career as a writer, spanning seventeen novels, five plays, as well as numerous short stories and essays as of 2018, Don DeLillo has grappled with representations of multifaceted contemporary American experience. An “unflinching chronicler of [...] difficult fiction at the edge of mystery and despair,” (T. Heise 291) he has been awarded a wide range of literary high honors and accolades, including the Jerusalem Prize, the National Book Award and the PEN/Saul Bellow Award for lifetime achievement. Born in 1936, DeLillo has been included by David Crowart as, along with Thomas Pynchon, one of two “mythic cousins of American postmodernism” (7). Crowart contends, though, that DeLillo has proven himself as the more diverse writer who consistently manages to “[transform] the water of routine storytelling into literary wine” (8).

An author of consistently dense narratives contradictorily described as in line with modernism, acutely postmodern, paranoid of postwar culture but also oppositional to dominant ideology (T. Heise 292), DeLillo’s literary career has warranted much analytical attention. Such quantities of research has been comitted to his iconic novel *White Noise* (1985), in fact, that critics have cited ”scholarship on it” as ”appear[ing] to be exhaustive” (Harack 307). There seems to exist a divide, however, between DeLillo’s stylistic approach and thematic concerns in his pre- and post-millennial novels. In an article exploring the tendency of DeLillo’s more recent works as reductive in length but not in scope or content, Laura Bieger distinguishes as ”remarkable” such a ”turn toward brevity,” especially due to the fact that DeLillo most notably achieved fame ”by writing in epic length” (2). While Bieger utilizes parallels between literary sparseness and poeticity, opting to construct the case for his short works to be read as poetry rather than prose, in this essay I will instead investigate the

presence of multiple temporalities as a narrative function in DeLillo's novel *Point Omega*, his shortest novel to date.

Time indeed emerges as being of prominent importance already from the novel's first section. Detailing an unknown male character studying a video installation of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*¹ stretched to a running time of twenty-four hours, the narrator of the first section suggests that "what he was watching seemed pure film, pure time" (*Point Omega* 7), and he goes on to wonder "how long [...] before the installation's time scheme absorbed his own" or "had this already begun to happen?" (8). Framed by the anonymous visitor's experience of the installation, the longest of the three sections of the novel presents a cast of three additional characters all of whom are escaping the confines of conventional time. Richard Elster, arguably the novel's protagonist, is an aging intellectual seeking solace from existence in the city. Trying to escape his vague involvement in the justification of the second Gulf war, Elster wants to take his body back from what he calls "the nausea of News and Traffic" (22), heading out to a residence of his in the California desert where minute human lifespans can not possibly measure themselves against the "force of geologic time" (24). Elster is only there to "eat, sleep and think," the narrator of the novel's second section, Jim Finley reasons, whose presence at Elster's desert get-away is driven by the desire to create a film about him. Floating between obsessing over different projects, Finley commits to creating an unembellished portrait of Elster in the years following his dismissal from what he calls the ministries of news and traffic. He feels at home in the desert, Finley notices, he "[knows] where he was [...] alive in the protoworld [...] the seas and reefs of ten million years ago" (25). Later, Finley conversely informs us that the same desert "was outside [his] range, an

¹ Douglas Gordon's *24-Hour Psycho* (1993) is supposedly what inspired DeLillo to begin writing *Point Omega*: "I saw that there was something in here about time and mortality. I went back two or three times. I thought: maybe this would inspire a work of fiction" (DeLillo cited in McCrum). DeLillo's fascination with the installation is contained in the prologue and epilogue about the anonymous visitor, whose frequent returns to a New York City exhibit of Gordon's installation mirror DeLillo's own.

alien being [...] both saturating and remote” and that he “had to force [himself] to believe [he] was there” (25). The final character to make an appearance is Elster’s daughter Jessie whose disappearance ultimately contradicts Elster’s desire for human extinction as well as the atemporality of the desert surrounding them. Speaking to Finley about the video installation, Jessie explains her interest in it as “the whole point of nothing happening [...] The point of waiting just to be waiting” (60).

As Bieger notes early on in her article, *Point Omega*, though only 150 pages, seems to “slow down the reading process [...] by involving us in an extended and intensified state of *now*” (3 original italics) not unlike the Gordon installation. Bieger understands DeLillo’s achievement by way of textual poeticity, but an alternative approach exists to understanding temporal manipulation in *Point Omega*. Applying Roland Barthes critical theory of *writerly* (as opposed to *readerly*) texts, and drawing on articles detailing postmodern conceptions of time and late authorial styles, I will in this essay demonstrate how the main characters’ varied understanding of temporality in *Point Omega* establishes time as an elastic, unreliable and inaccurate measurement of human experience.

The analysis undertaken below is closely modelled on Barthes’ own method in *S/Z*, and supported by selections from his *Camera Lucida*. Prefaced by an initial review of the elected Barthesian toolbox, my essay then proceeds with two subsections of literary review exploring time in the postmodern era and in *Point Omega*. In my two sections of review of previous literature and research I present as a backdrop to my analysis a number of postmodern theorists works concerned with time, among them Peter Boxall, Frederic Jameson and Ursula K. Heise. The analysis that follows is divided into three parts, each section assessing specific characters’ experiences of time in *Point Omega* through the codification of selected excerpts, or *lexia*. Instead of the conventional mechanics of quotations, the excerpts in my analysis are instead presented in accordance with the form used of Barthes’ analysis in *S/Z* –

quotations/lexias are written in italics, marked with a designated code, and briefly discussed. The excerpts are in addition grouped into smaller clusters, separated by shorter paragraphs that discuss their context. Each of the analytical sections are as a compass also allocated one of the suggested aspects of time in my thesis as its overarching theme, ultimately framed by a conclusion and section on works cited.

2.1 Roland Barthes *S/Z* and the 'Late Style' of Don DeLillo's *Point Omega*

In order to analyze the shifting temporalities present in *Point Omega*, I employ the hybrid structuralist/poststructuralist theories of the French semiotician, literary theorist and prolific writer Roland Barthes. In *S/Z*, his seminal and ambitious analysis of Honoré de Balzac's novella *Sarrasine*, Barthes proposes that literary texts can be divided into two categories: the *readerly* and *writerly*. The former, what he delineates as "products (not productions)," as those texts which "make up the enormous mass of our literature," can fittingly be understood by way of the translator Richard Miller's preface to *S/Z*, in which he makes reference to an utterance by Rilke: "something past comes again, as though out of the future; something formerly accomplished as something to be completed" (*S/Z* xi). In other words, the readerly is that thing of familiar structure presented in a format already encountered. It is easy to follow and understand but limited in literary scope or potential depth of meaning. Concisely reiterated, what Barthes posits as the readerly is literature that conforms to the conventions of genre. Literature that invites a reader and divulges its contents without requiring any detailed analysis is readerly; though it is to many a reader more appealing, it likely does not contain much artistic force. In contrast, Barthes describes the *writerly* as "a perpetual present, upon which no *consequent* language [...] can be superimposed" or "the novelistic without the novel, the poetry without the poem..." (*S/Z* 5, original italics). One notes here the placement

of the *readerly* as something in the past tense (literature as 'product'; something produced) and the oppositional nature of the *writerly* as avoiding any preconceived notions of fixed structure or content. The *writerly* text assumes a stance of the *avant-garde*, or the perpetual vanguard, as it were. This framework laid out by Barthes in *S/Z*, in combining elements both of his structuralism and poststructuralism, achieves its hybridity out of its contradictory desire for systematic analysis that still allows the irreducibility of meaning. The application of *S/Z* in this essay, aside from the aim of surveying temporality, also tests the continued relevance of Barthes' theory in the post-millennial era.

To qualify *Point Omega* for analysis as *writerly*, as a plural text and as, according to Barthes in *S/Z*, containing a "galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds" (5), it is conducive to distinguish the 2010 novel from DeLillo's pre-millennial works of "epic world making" (Mahon and McHugh 449), that by their length alone seem more to construct a world rather than leave any intricacies to the performance a reader. In an article in part dedicated to examining DeLillo's late style, Áine Mahon and Fergal McHugh find Theodor Adorno's comments on Beethoven to be apposite: "the maturity of late works does not resemble the kind one finds in fruit [...] they do not surrender themselves to mere delectation"; late works such as *Point Omega*, they suggest, "do not offer themselves easily for enjoyment or interpretation" (447) and are characterised by the "fragmentary, the intransigent, the dissonant" and "the provisional" (459). The two further posit that *Point Omega* itself is a "strange and brittle work" (452) whose "sparse and unwieldy" prose has as "primary aim [...] not to construct or edify [...] but to undo or unsettle" (449). Removed as such from the familiar (and by extension the readerly), time in *Point Omega* becomes an interesting, because challenging, candidate for Barthesian analysis. As I later suggest, it is indeed up to the reader to judge the flow of time in *Point Omega*.

In describing his *ideal* writerly text, Barthes often returns to it as containing a plurality of meaning. The writerly text has “no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances; none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend *as far as the eye can reach*, they are indeterminable” (Barthes, 5-6 original italics). DeLillo creates this access in *Point Omega* by way of shifting narrative perspective, and the division of the novel’s story into three disjointed parts that nonetheless exist on the same indefinite timeline. The novel’s uncertain chronology, and the mystery it makes out of the flow of time, furthermore inspires the subjective setting apart and recombination of its events into a plot at the whim of the reader. Change is a key component in the formula, with events occurring and reoccurring as the story is perpetually shaped and reshaped.

In analysing such plurality, Barthes renounces the treatment of any textual unit larger than a few sentences at a time: “everything signifies ceaselessly and several times” he declares, calling for the separation of the text “in the manner of a minor earthquake [...] into a series of brief, contiguous fragments, [called] *lexias*” (11-13 original italics). Gleaned from this is an understanding of the single sentence as potentially multifarious in meaning, and the difficulty of trying to gain any sense of a complete understanding by the codification of textual structures above the sentence level. Very simply put, the larger a textual structure analysed is to Barthes, the more uncertain and impossibly contradictory its meaning can become. The ideas presented above necessitates a brief discussion of the five codes a text can muster.

It doesn’t take longer than the title page of Balzac’s *Sarrasine* for Barthes to call upon the five codes standing at the ready in his arsenal. As the intricacies of a full Barthesian analysis of *Point Omega* defies both the time and space allotted for this assignment (his *S/Z* is the result of a two-year seminar), this essay is centered around the codification of thirty *lexias*, each exhibiting up to two of Barthes’ codes at the most.

First up for definition is the *hermeneutic* code (HER) under which is “list[ed] the various

(formal) terms by which an enigma can be distinguished, suggested, formulated, held in suspense and finally disclosed” (19). This first code is notably reminiscent of *Point Omega*, as the novel presents numerous enigmas. Even in terms of temporality, this can be distinguished early on as Elster remarks on his choice of locale: in the desert “time slows down” and “becomes blind,” he posits, he doesn’t know “whether an hour has passed or a minute” (*Point Omega* 30). In reference to sentences that would fall under the following *semantic* and *symbolic* codes (SEM/SYM), both of which have the potential for subjective meaning depending on the reader, Barthes emphasises the need to refrain from structuring them to “form a single thematic grouping” and instead states they ought to be allowed “the instability, the dispersion, characteristic of motes of dust, flickers of meaning:” theirs is the place for “multivalenc[y]” and “reversibility” (19). Barthes knows that referral to any sort of “real” world still depends on subjective representations. Time itself, though it may have come to mean the same thing for many people in the contemporary world, still can’t be relied on as unequivocal measurement. Finally he outlines the *proaeretic* (ACT) and *cultural* (REF) codes, which designate a reader’s connotative meanings for generic actions (for instance “*stroll, murder, rendezvous*” (19)), and *lexias* that reference pre-existing bodies of knowledge, “indicat[ing] the type of knowledge” they refer to without going so far as constructing “the culture they express” (20), respectively.

I have in this section introduced some of the concepts central to Barthes’ *S/Z*. Between the readerly and writerly (product versus production), *Point Omega* belongs to the writerly for a few reasons, among them its sparse detail and detached sense of time. Barthes’ five codes together outline the functions of plot-progress in a story, and how meaning in it is achieved on the small and large. My decisions to apply Barthes to *Point Omega*, and to conduct the codification in this essay are motivated by the novel’s designation as a writerly text, and a

recognition of this as an opportunity to conduct an inquiry into the continued relevance of Barthes' theory in the postmodern literary era.

2.2 Time and Roland Barthes *Camera Lucida*

Barthes on several occasions “wrote wryly and disparangily about his prior preoccupations” (Culler 4) and “mock[ed] his own procedures” (6): an example is *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* in which he defies the commonplace structure of an autobiography to produce a history written from outside the character he refers to as “R.B.” This treatment through the lens of a self freed from his past suggest that the Barthes writing then was not the same as that looking back. Time here allows for two versions of Barthes. More light can be shed on Barthes and time in his shorter final published work.

Reading *Camera Lucida*, one quickly dismisses the notion of Barthes as any kind of stranger to temporality. In the words of Kaila Howell's essay *Time, Loss, and the Death of the (M)other*, Barthes' writing in *Camera Lucida* “travel[s], take[s] up time and space” and as such, like its subject of photography, “resist[s] the ephemeral nature of time” (81). Barthes motivates his interest in photography as “*in opposition* to the Cinema, from which [he] nonetheless fail[s] to separate it” (*Camera Lucida* 3, original italics). The connection between time, photography and film is reminiscent of *Point Omega*'s anonymous museum visitor, fascinated by a film slowed to photographic speed. In his ruminations on photography (extended in this essay to mean *text* by his inability to separate it from cinema) Barthes' outlines two aspects at work in every image. He separates them between two categories: the *studium*, or the same “sort of [...] interest one takes in the people, the entertainers, the books, the clothes one finds 'all right'” (26), for brevity's sake summarised as the interests an onlooker might have; and the *punctum*, defined as a detail in a photograph that “changes

[one's] reading" so "that [one] is looking at a new photograph, marked in [one's] eyes with a higher value" (42).

Resembling a *writerly* text, the punctum is later redefined in terms of temporality and it is this understanding that lends itself best to realizing Barthes' aptitude for understanding time. Having earlier considered it as personal effects imparted by a photograph, Barthes re-presents the punctum as "intensity," the "lacerating effect of the 'noeme'," or that "[which]-has-been" (96). He exhibits this redefinition by way of a photograph of an American death-row inmate: "[t]he photograph is handsome, as is the boy: that is the *studium*. But the *punctum* is: *he is going to die*. I read at the same time: *this is going to be* and *this has been*." The power of the photograph, image or text lies exactly in this, their potential for the "defeat of Time" (96, original italics).

Barthes concludes this consideration with an example of a text invoking several temporalities at once, specifically a photograph of the road to Bethlehem taken in 1850, near Jerusalem: "nothing but stony ground, olive trees; but three tenses dizzy my consciousness: my present, the time of Jesus, and that of the photographer, all this under the instance of 'reality' – and no longer through the elaborations of the text, whether fictional or poetic..." (*Camera Lucida* 97). In other words, Barthes here identifies the possibility for several temporalities to exist in the same writerly text without explicit reference. Equipped with Barthes' theory, I proceed next to a short review of temporality in the postmodern literary era, followed by a section looking at two previous investigations of time in post-millennial works by DeLillo.

3.1 The End of Time in the Age of Postmodern Literature

In any discussion of temporality, the first obstacle inevitably becomes the definition of time itself. Exactly what is meant when reference is made to 'time'? It is evidently not always so

clear, especially after having set up the board for simultaneously existing tenses (to borrow from Barthes). In observing the contemporary tendency of the word "late" to collocate as a frequent determiner ("late capitalism, late modernism"), Peter Boxall writes of this trend for the "apprehension of historical completion or exhaustion" that it paradoxically also "coexists with an experience of a present that is so young," so seemingly inchoate, "that it is difficult even to inhabit it." With reference to DeLillo's 1977 novel *Players*, Boxall ventures to confront the impression that "the future has arrived 'ahead of schedule.'" (681-82). For Boxall this penultimate tendency presents recent history as the final stages of a period soon to be replaced. In the novel's of DeLillo and elsewhere, this style of treating temporality "seem[s] simply to stretch the moment [...] at which we recognize[d] that it is 'time we stopped'" (684). Sketching a comprehensive picture of this temporal shift, Boxall posits that the emergence of the art of prose fiction was what propelled postmodern temporality to full fruition as the expression of authors who acclimatized to and "fattened in the late-historical sun" (685).

Boxall notes the recurring fascination with time in DeLillo's works, and champions the argument that most of his opus (notably only up to his 1997 novel *Underworld*) is "shaped [...] by his dramatization [...] of the historical passage toward a looming apocalypse" (686). One is tempted here to divulge the prophetic connotations of *Point Omega*'s heading, but this would be advancing apace. Through reference to a variety of his pre-millennial novels, Boxall lucidly presents the perception of postmodern fiction as preeminently engrossed in what DeLillo has termed "the end of organized time," also elegantly formulated as the "postmodern sunset" (686). In lieu of the ferocity that "fueled the decades of the cold war," now subdued in a "posthistorical calm," Boxall writes that DeLillo's novels, by the fact that time nonetheless has continued, herald in "powerful undercurrents" of "historical inevitability, opening pockets of dark, unbound time... which [remain] unlit," "unnavigable and uncorralled." (688). The

continued reference to the end of time in DeLillo's novels begs the question of what will happen when such an end finally arrives, and what will follow. This theme is alluded to by the title of *Point Omega*, later expounded upon in greater detail. So as to not contort the theory presented here into what has been wryly dubbed the "encomia-for-DeLillo party line" (Huehls 74), a divergence from Boxall's article becomes prudent. This by no means entails a break with posthistorical time, simply a change of theorists, or schismatics.

By way of the parallel already drawn by Crowart between DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon as contemporary cousins of postmodernity, a chapter in Ursula K. Heise's book *Chronoschisms* becomes relevant to this discussion. Though the chapter concerns Pynchon, rather than DeLillo, the temporal theories Heise explicates can nevertheless help flesh out the understanding of time necessary for the analysis of *Point Omega*. Besett on all sides by steadily more cutting-edge scientific and technological advances, in a world where "historical events take place at the scale of atoms," Pynchon's characters (like DeLillo's) in Heise's words "enter into a complex dynamic [between man and molecule] that can not be defined in terms of conventional causality" (Heise 195). A traditional, singular understanding of time, in other words, is in the current literary era an anachronism – it cannot accurately account for the postmodern temporal condition in which individuals can freely navigate between.

Echoing a popularly cited essay by Baudrillard², Heise hones in on "the postmodern conviction that there is no reality more 'real' than the sign system it is represented by" and from this posits that just as "representations can 'cause' real event", so "real events" can, in turn "give rise to representations" (205). Exactly what this entails for time is that such representations can "exist in a temporality of [their] own which is not dependent on the laws of the 'real' world" (U. Heise 205). As such, all that is required for something to exist *out-of-*

² Baudrillard's theories of 'hyperreality', where a mind cannot tell the difference between reality and a simulated reality, has also been summoned (Huehls, Crowart for instance) to rationalize one of the most symbolic events in DeLillo's *White Noise*: "the most photographed barn in America" (*White Noise* 12)

time ("real" time) is sufficient representation. Relating this to the opening paragraphs of *Point Omega*, its unidentified narrator seems to be attempting to exist in just such a way as he reflects upon being taken over by the timeframe in Douglas Gordon's installation.

Heise unearths from Pynchon's labyrinthian prose another argument central for the task at hand, namely that "the loss of agency and causation at an individual human scale" can in postmodern literature come packaged as "associated explicitly with a shift in the experience of time" (208). All four characters in *Point Omega* can be shown to exhibit this connection: Jessie, forced to live with her father in the desert, has its temporality imposed on her; Finley from being strung along with seemingly false hopes of creating his film; Elster in the trauma triggered by his daughter's disappearance; the museum visitor, in fearing his meld with the installation's time will make him forever a part of it. Applied to *Point Omega*, this link between agency, causality and time also accounts for the possibility of its characters to simultaneously exhibit and exist within their own unique timeframes, the intricacies of which will be spelled out in greater depth during the analytical section of this paper.

A final note on Heise is her construal of the inconsistencies that follow fragmented temporalities. As an intentional narrative function "readers can," she suggests in addressing these resulting gaps "fall back on their historical knowledge to construct an alternative story line and metaphorical meanings" (216-17). Narrative temporality is by this sentence delivered on a silver platter as writerly, à la Roland Barthes. Any eventual incongruities resulting from clashes between individual perceptions of time no longer warrant explicit justification. They instead provide further potential for the subjective enrichment of a given text. While it does demonstrate the potential prospect for multivalent time(s), Heise still leaves us with a question: what happens after the hypothesized 'end of time'? An answer to this awaits within Frederic Jameson's *The End of Temporality*.

“In a sense, it is always too late to talk about time” Jameson cites of Derrida in the introduction to his article, adding that “contained in [this] laconic eptaph” (697) lies all that is needed to prove time as dependent on space. Before as trivial a question as that of the time of day can be answered, the infinitesimal moment has already passed: the now is never static. During the advance of modernity, Jameson writes, neither technology nor the means of production were in all quarters of western countries fully industrialised until the aftermath of the second world war. As such, the auteurs of the technological revolution must “still [have] lived in two distinct worlds simultaneously” (699). One conjectures in the shadow of *Chronoschisms* that these two worlds contain vacillating temporalities, and Jameson touches on this in the final lines of the same page: when “suburbs replace villages and modernity reigns triumphant and homogenous over all space” the “postmodern generations” will be “dispossessed [...] of any differential sense of that deep time the first moderns sought to inscribe in their writing” (699).

Though the world of today isn't a singular sprawling cityscape, distances have certainly been reduced. With the space that “used to hold the colonies apart from the metropolis” curbed by instant information transfers in the postmodern period one can, regardless of location, “always be coordinated with its other spaces” (701). An all-expansive metropolis may not be a physical reality, but as a simile the model can still find application in vast swathes of the post-millennial world. It is theoretically possible to live one's life entirely within the confines of cities that exist within the same definition of temporality. Such a shared experience Jameson argues, while it idyllically does unite the world under one banner, by necessity also circumscribes and neglects alternative histories that may conflict with the recognized standard, effectively “[suppressing] time and temporality itself” (701). Precisely what Jameson suggests by way of this (quasi-)global transition from the industrial to the cybernetic is a “convulsive shift” in contemporary individuals' “cognitive mapping[s] of

reality,” the result of which has the potential to “condemn them to a world of sheer passive reception” (702). Subjects in the postmodern world run the risk of being told what the date or time of day is, rather than asking and judging it for themselves. What previously helped determine and orient an individual’s temporality has now been superseded by what dominant ideology designates, or as Elster refers to it in the early pages of *Point Omega*, “News and traffic,” “Sports and Weather,” the “acid terms for the life he’d left behind” (23).

But what of the setting in which the majority of *Point Omega* takes place? Can the Anza-Borrego desert be likened to what Jameson calls “a new temporal form beyond history,” to “eternity itself” as that which “is out of time altogether” (711-12)? Jameson demonstrates early on that space and time are inseparable, that one can only be understood through the other. From this he posits the reduction of time and historicity as parallel to the reduction of the space it is understood by. That’s to say, the smaller an area a timeline describes, the more narrow its understanding of time becomes: where a single individual changes in minutes, hours, or days, the time required for change to register in an entire region can span hundreds, even thousands of years. Jameson writes that dominant temporality is imposed by a successful reduction of history into a spotlight of the present, a focus entirely on the *now*. This reduction of time necessitates its understanding not in terms of billions of humans but the single individual, or what Jameson terms “a reduction to the body as a present of time” (712). Though Elster seems to be attempting to rebel against such a reduction, it is exactly this contraction his age makes him feel he must eventually surrender to. In the final sections of his paper Jameson makes reference to action films as a plot which seems to exist in a temporal vacuum, but still manages to create an impression of advancing. In such films (he proposes Jon de Bont’s *Speed* as an example) exists a “representation of temporality, threatened” by “the bomb blast that can never take place.” Much like the explosion in *Speed* can never take place as it would arrest the plot, Elster’s prophecies of extinction can never be fully realized

in his lifetime. His admitted desire to “[become] the dead matter we used to be” (64) or, in Jameson’s words, for a “reversion to the immediacy of the animal kingdom” (717) is the looming threat on the horizon of DeLillo’s novel and is not accomplished by Elster’s extinction, but by that of Jessie, his offspring. It is such simultaneous presence and absence of time that leads Jameson to his eventual conclusion, namely that “far from demonstrating the end of temporality” he has only been able to “show the impossibility of such a demonstration” (717). Though Jessie might have ceased to exist, Finley and Elster are toward the end of the novel on their way back to rejoin the flow of dominant temporality, though in very different states of mind: time in the novel both stops and continues to flow. As a final preparation before this essay’s analysis can commence in full, as it would also merit the process, I proceed next to a consideration of two prior approaches to the study of time in DeLillo’s novels.

3.2 Treating Temporality in Don DeLillo’s Post-Millennial Works

The following section concerns two inquiries previously made into the nature of time in Don DeLillo’s *Point Omega*, one being the already mentioned article by Laura Bieger which investigates what a poetic understanding of the novel entails for a reader, and the other a chapter in a dissertation by Scott Dill detailing a deliberation off time in DeLillo’s late works, with special attention paid to *Point Omega*. This section, as such, has as its aim to serve as a springboard from which to launch my Barthesian investigation of time in *Point Omega*. As touched on before, the later works of DeLillo do not offer themselves up as readily for autopsy. What is warranted, then, is an analytical framework groomed to the task, and a well reasoned justification for its employment. The studies reviewed below will in addition to

informing the later analysis also, for a richer consideration of temporality to be realized, proactively represent a call for the theory contained in it.

Bieger characterizes the form of *Point Omega* as a hybrid construct between traditional narrative (epic novels like DeLillo's 800-page *Underworld*) and the lyric (poetry, songs). Using DeLillo's pre-millennial works as supporting evidence, she defines the narrative as the "interconnect[ion]" of "dispersed elements across space and time with the aim of evoking a sense of *progress*," and the lyric as those "act[s] of enunciation" which instead summon forth "a feeling, thought or observation [...] with the aim of giving a heightened sense of *presence* to what is evoked" (Bieger 3, original emphasis). These two formulations aren't mutually exclusive, but their co-mingling creates a "narrative movement" that is "simultaneously advanced and obstructed" (Bieger 4). In her opinion, this understanding of the narrative as something that *needs* to progress is the result of a supplanting in modern narratives of the prevalence of the proairetic code by the hermeneutic; the uprooting of action and the replanting in its stead of mystery, effectively leaving the reader desirous of resolution. *Point Omega*, rich in enigmas and in which to Bieger "nothing much happens" (4), is a prime example of this sort of shift in narrative.

The speech in *Point Omega* seems artificial to Bieger, "nobody talks (or thinks) like this, and that is precisely the point" (7), she contends. Indicating some of Finley, Elster and Jessie's curt dialogues, rife as they are with repetition and delay, the point she is referring to is the temporal figuration central to the novel: the [exploitation of] art to the end of suspending our usual sense of time" (10). DeLillo further accomplishes this suspension through the structure of *Point Omega*, expressed by Bieger as the "*spacing*" of the text into a series of "episodes, some of them as short as stanzas," separated by blank spaces that she then characterizes as the "markers of temporal discontinuity" (10). Bieger suggests as further evidence that because some of these episodes begin with the exact same words, they "invoke

a sense of standstill, or simultaneously possible realities” (10). By “tampering with the temporal reign of emplotment” (11) through the lyrical dimensions of his narrative, DeLillo aptly “slow[s] down time to the glacial pace of watching – reading – individual *frames*” of his novel. This formulation assists the extension of Barthes’ considerations of photography and film in *Camera Lucida* to include *Point Omega*. Time in the novel, however, perhaps to Elster’s dismay, never truly does freeze over. Even the Gordon installation indicative of *Point Omega*’s central theme, slowed to a few frames per minute, still advances. Bieger’s essay is ultimately a call for the affirmative effects a cohesive reading of modern fiction may have over a coherent one: how *Point Omega*, though short, can by its underlying poetic inclination be understood as a novel to be read slowly. As a less abstract vantage point will familiarize the codification undertaken later with *Point Omega*’s characters, a brief look at a more direct engagement with their temporal condition follows.

To Scott Dill, DeLillo’s post-millennial novels have increasingly become “prominent[ly] concerned” with the “feel of time passing” (72). Writing of *The Body Artist* and *Point Omega*, Dill suggests that while “shorter in length and smaller in scope” they are also in another sense “longer in duration” (73). In attempting to address the issue of postmodern temporality, DeLillo has according to Dill shifted to a shorter writing form which rather seems to “elongate the reading experience” than “compress it” (73-4). *Point Omega*, specifically, “loses track of time insofar as it does not proceed in sequential order” (75). Vaguely having taken place in “late summer, early fall” (*Point Omega* 2), the bulk of the story is impossible to pinpoint precisely in relation to the prologue and epilogue, which are dated September 3rd and 4th respectively. In the novel, time features most lucidly as the characters “waiting and watching” (Dill 78): Finley waits for an answer to his proposition for a film, Elster for extinction, Jessie for her eventual disappearance and the unknown museum-goer for the murder in Hitchcock’s *Psycho*. It is clear, Dill writes, that alongside his other post-millennial

novels, DeLillo's *Point Omega* has as a goal "to expand as well as intensify our temporal imagination" (76). As already proposed by Bieger, the novel is written to be read slowly, its style of prose according to Dill as well "invit[ing] the reader to wait, to think, perhaps even to obsess" (81). From the irresolution of Jessie's disappearance, the novel's arguable single event, Dill contends that *Point Omega* is more "a point of subjective orientation [...] from which to value time" rather than one from which "to measure it" (87). In its presentation of fractured temporality, the novel begs consideration for the various meanings time can be invested with, though for DeLillo it always seems to be measured against some looming final apocalypse. In the conclusion of his chapter on *Point Omega*, Dill assumes Jessie's murder to propose Elster's ensuing breakdown as indicative of the importance of love in the contemporary "time of waiting *together*" (90). This essay is instead of the opinion that the zeitgeist of modern time is better represented as conflicting uncertainties and temporal flux. This multiplicity of experience will below be exemplified by varied application of Barthes' five narrative codes on the temporalities of *Point Omega*'s characters.

4.0 Analysis

Following Barthes' example in *S/Z*, my analysis below is centered around the codification and analysis of consecutive sentence excerpts (lexias) from *Point Omega*. Because I cannot separate and codify the entirety of *Point Omega*, however, a resulting problem of context must be addressed before I begin. In *S/Z*, Barthes relies on the story progression in *Sarrasine* as much as his method itself. This is to say that at the same time as Barthes' through his code-work defines the referential framework and milestones leading to its conclusion, *Sarrasine* itself also unfolds before him naturally as it is read. The loss of this context in my slightly more disjointed application of Barthes is instead guided by the three concepts in my thesis:

time as an elastic, unreliable and inaccurate measurement of human experience.

My analysis begins with an account of temporality for Richard Elster, continues with Jim Finley and concludes with a split section considering both Jessie and the anonymous museum-visitor, as mentions of the two share a similar brevity. In order to not cast my net too wide, I have allotted the codification and analysis of ten lexias to each section, with the possibility of up to two codes being exhibited in the same lexia. Lexias are furthermore grouped into smaller clusters by brief paragraphs discussing the context of their meaning. It must be pointed out that almost all character interaction in *Point Omega* occurs in the novel's second section, told from the perspective of Jim Finley. Lexias concerning Finley and Elster, and few about Jessie, will be extracted from this part. Even though many of these excerpts constitute a retelling of dialogue, they ought to be considered as influenced by Finley's personal attitudes and opinions. The same should be said about the novel's two framing sections, relayed from the third-person perspective of the anonymous visitor.

To spare the reader confusion and backtracking, I here present again a list of Barthes' five codes, commenting on their designations as well as on the novel's title as an example of a codified lexia. It should also be said that since the treatment of *Point Omega* does not proceed sentence by sentence, below is not one of every sentence from start to finish, as in *S/Z*, the selection criteria for the chosen lexias are their relation to the character under consideration and to the temporal theme of the section, as informed by my thesis.

- The Hermeneutic Code (**HER**) describes enigmas, or the fragmented truths contained in a novel. The answers to these mysteries are deliberately left until a later point in order to commit a reader, or left unsolved to inspire a reader's subjective resolution. Such lexias are by Barthes categorised into three distinct types: snares, intentional

avoidances of truth; equivocations, fragmentary answers to questions; and jammings, which are questions to which the novel admits there are no answers.

- The Symbolic Code (**SYM**) can be found at work in lexias that create and reference more extensive meanings in a novel. Barthes' most frequently applies this code in the shape of antithesis, or as lexias that through their own negation imply a central idea as well as its opposition.
- The Semantic Code (**SEM**) refers to the multiplicity of meaning achieved by a word's connotative meanings for a reader. One word can come to mean different things for readers, and lexias exhibiting the semantic code as such represent a novel's potential for synecdoche, or the reference to many ideas through the use of a single one.
- The Proairetic Code (**ACT**) describes actions which in some way signal that further events are going to occur. The proairetic and hermeneutic code are together responsible for establishing the primarily temporal aspects of any story. This is achieved by reference to answers yet to be given, or actions that have yet to happen.
- The Cultural Code (**REF**) are those lexias which appeal to pre-existing bodies of knowledge or "truths" from the world outside of the novel. Idioms, stereotypes, and all aspects of "common sense" are examples of what falls in the category of this code, but also scientific, religious and supernatural maxims.

(Ex) *POINT OMEGA* (1). What is the meaning and reference point of the title? ★ **(HER.** Enigma: snare) In a novel whose name is extracted from the writings of Teilhard de Chardin, the fact that the French Jesuit philosopher is not mentioned until page 65 can be considered a deliberate avoidance of truth. Not until page 90, in addition, does Elster make direct reference to his theorized omega point, the final point in evolution where all organic matter transcends earthly existence to become one with a divine creator. As the two instances aren't linked, their connection remains largely unknown. At this early stage, the two words primarily connote place, one in time or space, and the sense of an ending ★★ **(SEM.** Transcendence)

4.1 Richard Elster: Extinction & The Elasticity of Time

The principal character of *Point Omega*, Richard Elster extends across the novel's pages through the narration of Jim Finley. Elster's character emerges through the two men's meandering, half-drunken conversations (more monologues) about existence and extinction. These parts are spaced evenly by Finley's meditative descriptions and conjecture about Elster's behavior. He "tended to be everywhere, in all four corners of a room, gathering impressions of himself" (*Point Omega* 40), Finley observes, matching Elster's projected presence with a need for acknowledgement. First encountered through a couple of forced attempts by Finley to solicit Elster's participation in his film project, and described as someone who wouldn't "make space for even the gentlest correction" (28), a shift soon becomes apparent in Elster's behavior.

In the desert, Elster begins to go "barechested much of the day," "his silvery hair" always "braided down into a short ponytail" (28). "In these desert days" Finley offers, "few things roused him from apparent calm" (40). Though seventy-three years old, Elster's new surroundings and recurrent, sometimes reverent demeanour together lend his eccentricities a

certain credibility. “The braided hair should have seemed incongruous but didn’t,” Finley muses during a pause in their dialogue, “it gave him a kind of cultural identity, a flair of distinction, the intellectual as tribal elder” (29). The image given of Elster is that of a voluntary hermit, possessing of a past he has ventured to escape but is hounded to divulge. A sanctuary from ticking seconds and days counted, his move to the desert is still intruded upon by Finley’s incessant reminders of his proposed film. “Just a man and a wall” Finley says of his idea, “[o]ne continuous take,” “any pauses, they’re your pauses, I keep shooting” (26-27). Even in one take, the film is ultimately restricted by length. Finley’s film inhabits a closed timeline, an end of a sort, and is to Elster an unrelenting reminder of the minutia of time.

Though Finley’s restrictions are few and his enthusiasm palpable, Elster remains sceptical to the project. “You feel a deep need to do this thing” Elster charges after the subject is again brought up, “[t]ell me why.” Finley’s reply borders on meta-commentary, positing the premise of *Point Omega* as the hunt for Richard Elster’s story: “You’re the answer to that question. What you say, what you’ll tell us about these last years, what you know that no one knows” (35). Presented below are ten lexias pertaining to Richard Elster and time chosen for codification, separated by a few short elaborative paragraphs. The lexias that follow are codified as an investigation of Elster’s elastic relationship with time, and the nature of the temporal shift he hopes to achieve by his desert venture.

(1) He said we do this all the time, all of us, we become ourselves beneath the running thoughts and dim images, wondering idly when we’ll die (21). The sentiment is one of helplessness, of the inability to conceive of the point of living while distracting oneself from the dread such a realization can create, all while advancing toward inevitable death. For Elster, the progress of time directly connotes with dying, but also a curious detachment, the result of a recognition that we lack the power to control how we die ★ (REF. Mortality)

(2) *This house is mine now and it's rotting away but let it* (29-30). The dilapidated state of Elster's inherited house is reminiscent of his own aging body. His attempt at escaping clock time necessitates an escape from modernity. One of the larger themes present in *Point Omega*, Elster cannot avoid being reminded of life's eventual end, mirrored in the state of his desert house ★ (SYM. Decay)

(3) *This is time draining out of our lives. Cities were built to measure time, to remove time from nature. There's an endless counting down, he said* (57). Here the progress of time in cities, steadily advancing unhindered in a place where everything is structured around its flow, symbolises a countdown. Every recorded second is one second closer to biological death. Elster's surroundings are bound to outlast him, and the countdown can only be realized as his own death ★ (SEM. Death)

(4) *He said it was like watching the universe die over a period of about seven billion years* (59). Though he and Finley only observed it for ten minutes, Jessie describes how Elster, faced with the installation featured in the novel's introduction and epilogue, quickly made clear his connection between the progress of time and the eventual cessation of all life. Even at a few frames per second, life moves closer toward its end ★ (REF. Entropy)

(I.) Though there are several ways to read exactly what has motivated Elster's conviction of his impending demise, it can by way of these first lexias be distinguished that such an end is to Elster his undeniable fate. The repeated mentions in addition suggest that an awareness of his life's end preoccupies him; it is no longer something on the distant horizon. Establishing this association between time and death, Elster's escape to the desert and its timeframe

represents a stalling: though he admits that he is approaching an end, he is not yet ready to welcome death. Something seemingly remains to be done: “I don’t have to see a bighorn sheep before I die,” he tells Finley after his daughter’s arrival, “but I want Jessie to see one” (72). Perhaps Elster feels the need to ascertain his legacy before his death.

(5) *It’s different here, time is enormous, that’s what I feel here, palpably. Time that precedes us and survives us* (56). The vast desert space now surrounding Elster has throughout the existence of the Earth seen many species come and go. Though the space of the desert continues to persist, it is a reminder of the absence of life ★ (REF. Extinction)

(6) *Doesn’t happen here, the minute to minute reckoning, the thing I feel in cities* (56). In the desert, where time is measured in eons, Elster believes he can free himself from meticulously advancing city-time. Over in the blink of an eye, human temporalities are insignificant when measured against those represented by the desert ★ (REF. Geometric Time)

(7) *Time slows down when I’m here. Time becomes blind. I feel the landscape more than see it* (30). Understanding Elster’s move to the desert as a retreat to space and time, his decaying body and house can by way of Jameson be seen as reductions of spaces into temporalities coming to an end: both are confined spaces, both are deteriorating. Reminded of death’s finality, Elster in defiance tries to extend his life by extending the space it is understood by. He wants to feel as the desert, be a part of it ★ (ACT. Becoming)

(8) *He’d exchanged all that for space and time. These were the things he seemed to absorb through his pores* (24) ★ (SYM. Antithesis). The juxtaposition of Elster’s environments positions his previous locale as lacking in space and time. The desert is different, untouched

by the artificial temporalities of human hands. The word absorb also collocates his presence in the desert with the desire to devour ★★ (ACT. Consuming)

(II.) Elster's desire to extend his life goes against the natural order of evolving organic matter. By trying to cut ties with the progression of human-made time, by the attempt to bask in and ingest the temporality of the desert, Elster is placing himself outside the domain of humanity. His transformation from belonging to the finitudes of humanity to the inanimate matter of the desert can be expressed as a hope of transcending the organic world in an accelerated realization of Teilhard's omega point. Problematically however, the rest of evolution does not seem as determined to voluntarily stop existing, as Elster wants to think. In trying to assume the space and temporality of the universe itself, he ironically manages to supplant his own personal motivations upon that of an existence which is at worst impartial, and at best at the whims of a supernatural creator whose workings by necessity are beyond human mentality.

(9) *He knew where he was, in his chair, alive to the protoworld, I thought, the seas and reefs of ten million years ago* (25). Elster has fled to the ancient oceans, now deserts, in the hopes of finding refuge from time passing. By appealing to the ancient histories of geologic time and early evolution he is simultaneously laying claim to an ancient, sluggishly advancing temporality ★ (SEM. Primordial)

(10) *Day turns to night eventually but it's a matter of light and darkness, it's not time passing, mortal time* (56) ★ (SYM. Antithesis). The desert is here directly decoupled with mortal temporalities, instead representing the atemporal which can not suffer the fate of death until the end of the universe itself. Day and night is to Elster in addition the only significant change in his static desert surroundings, seemingly frozen in time ★★ (REF. Eternity)

(III.) In a discussion about Elster with Finley, Jessie points out that “every second’s the last breath he takes” (58). Spanning from the dawn of creation to its inescapable end, the flexibility of the monolithic timeline Elster invokes reduces the scale of human temporality to a miniscule point. Even if, as Elster proclaims, the present world is merely “the last billionth of a second in the evolution of matter” (64), when it is measured on the scale of all known existence, such a moment can stretch to another’s eternity. A second in evolution spans several generations, a single one entirely insignificant in its scheme. By judging his existence by just such an ongoing second, Elster’s life is sustained by the desert.

4.2 Jim Finley: Obsession & The Unreliability of Time

As he narrates the largest part of *Point Omega*, I will in this section consider Jim Finley the novel’s main narrator. Supplementary to swathes of solitary introspection, Finley’s character is also reflected in the echo of Elster and Jessie’s dialogue. As the bulk of *Point Omega* is told from his perspective, specifically the novel’s largest second section, the underlying premise could rightly be considered ‘*Jim Finley’s* hunt.’ Just so, he is initially motivated by nothing short of a hunger to create a documentary about Elster. With Jessie, he reasons that “every project becomes an obsession or what’s the point,” going on to add that “[t]his is the one right now, your father” (51).

Finley, in fact, is only invited to join Elster in the desert after several unsuccessful attempts to generate interest in his project: “First he said no. Then he said never. Finally he called and said we could discuss the matter...” (26). Eventually, Finley’s obsessive motivation and repeated advances encounter resistance not only from Elster but from the desert itself, and what Finley searches for changes. Representative of pinpoint exactness and the narrowing

down of time, his idea of a film is warped by the temporality of the desert. Indeed, in the epilogue of the second section Finley realizes suddenly that “what it was that had passed out of mind until this moment” was “the film,” “[he] remembered the film,” “[i]t would never happen now, not a single frame” (124).

Removed from cramped city-time, Finley’s obsession, fitted more to a narrow understanding of temporality, suffers a metamorphosis into forgetfulness in the desert. As a result of this shift, and in part due to Jessie’s disappearance, Finley’s ambition to create a film amounts to little more than the fragments of an aging intellectual’s breakdown across a loose period of three months. The ten lexias codified below and their supplementary paragraphs constitute first a discussion of the progress of Finley’s temporal shift, then of the relation between his obsession and the resulting unreliability of time.

(11) *Not a long visit he’d said. Today was day ten* (26) ★ (SYM. Antithesis). What could first be dismissed simply as Finley calling Elster a liar is in a closer consideration testament to something else. Eventually invited to join the target of his project, Finley assumes the meaning of the deictical “long.” The fact that he has remained so long, however, and indeed continues to remain with Elster, reflects his dedication. Unaccustomed to the suddenness of such a precise indication in time, the reader is presented with an impression of ten days passing in an instant. The desert has here started to take hold of Finley, and begins to distort his understanding of temporality.

(12) *There were no mornings or afternoons. It was one seamless day, every day, until the sun began to arc and fade, mountains emerging from their silhouettes* (46). Finley’s wait can by this be considered as unfaltering. Apart from night and day, there exists little to no indication

of time passing. Pacing the sun travelling the sky, Finley nonetheless persists in his waiting, this suggestive of his obsessive behaviour ★ (SEM. Stagnation)

(13) *I tossed banana peels off the deck for animals to eat and I stopped counting the days since I'd arrived, somewhere around twenty-two* (83). As his stay extends well past its expected time allotment, Finley has accepted that no use can come from counting the days of city-time, incompatible with the desert. He nonchalantly feeds the otherwise unmentioned wildlife and resolves to give himself up to the temporality of the desert, and of Elster ★ (ACT. Surrender)

(14) *I took drives of my own looking for remote trailheads and then just sat in the car, conjuring the film, staring out at sandstone wastes* (41). In waiting, all that exists for Finley for a time is his project. Just as Elster rants about and in vain prophesizes an extinction that never arrives, so does Finley venture to immerse himself in the intricacies of an idea that will never come to fruition. For Finley, the realization of his film seems to depend on a waiting for Elster, something he at first accustoms to in solitude ★ (ACT. Preparation)

(15) *I began to understand what Elster meant when he said that time is blind here* (81). Spending more and more time in the desert, Finley can't help but be affected by his surroundings. As time progresses and recedes into the background, the grand scale on which Elster's prophecies unfold become more palpable. Finley's film, in turn, evolves past its boundaries and becomes unattainable ★ (REF. Assimilation)

(16) *Busy signal for half an hour, then an angry woman who resisted answering questions from someone she didn't know. The conversation went nowhere for a while* (105). Faced with

the puzzle of Jessie's disappearance, Finley's obsession finds purchase in a new project: Jessie's fate. With Elster wracked by grief, Finley resolves that the task of finding Jessie now falls to him. Once again, it is Finley's persistence that shows results. Against Elster's wishes, Finley calls up his ex-wife, Jessie's mother, and by cross-examination tries to construct a framework for Jessie's abduction/murder ★ (REF. Obsession)

(IV.) The fact that Finley arrives at Elster's desert house by way of a "hand-drawn map" that "arrived in the mail" (78) is testament alone both to his determination, and the isolation of the desert property. Lingering much longer than his expected "two days," "three at most" (78), Finley's determination in realizing his project is undeniable. His irritation with Elster's elusiveness shifts into indifference, him being all too eager to play along with his host's waiting game. By surrendering to the temporality of the desert, however, Finley loses his bearings and his project eventually falls out of focus, only emerging once again as an afterthought. His obsessive tendency, demanding of results that can never measure up to impossible standards, finds resistance in the desert, revealed in Finley's consideration to sacrifice his past life in pursuit of his film: "I wanted to lose the notion of going back there, to responsibility, old woes, to the burn of beginning something that would lead nowhere" (90).

(17) ... *I wondered if I really wanted to go back to being the man who lives in the two rooms that are surrounded by the city that was built to measure time...* (75). Overcome by his quest and his surroundings Finley, in being transported for a moment back to his New York City apartment, considers rejecting the entirety of his old life. He wavers on the brink, faced with the possibility that in order to capture Elster on film, he may very well have to wait for something like an eternity ★ (ACT. Doubt)

(18) *I keep seeing figures in isolation, I see past physical dimension into the feelings that these words engender, feelings that deepen over time. That's the other word, time.* (24). The two chief characteristics of *Point Omega*'s desert are pointed out here: time and isolation. Though the three characters do converse with each other, the dialogue is often followed by ruminatory silences. In the desert by choice (unlike Jessie), Elster and Finley are here fashioned as hermits, kindred in their retreat from civilisation ★ **(SEM. Eremitism)**

(19) *It could have been a hundred and fifty seven minutes, could have been four hours, six hours* (34). In lamenting his inability to settle on a running time for one of his earlier projects, Finley simultaneously demonstrates his aptitude for temporal fluidity. Though he admits to eventually having condensed the film to fifty-seven minutes, his reluctance, in addition, represents the proposition for the irreducibility of a text ★ **(SEM. Malleability)**

(20) *... the longer I stood and looked the more certain I was that we would never have an answer* (117) ★ **(HER. Enigma: jamming)** Having done everything he can conceive of doing in his search for Jessie, Finley is as a last resort once again reduced to waiting. Now more accustomed to the practice of idleness, Finley finally recognizes a fundamental truth about the desert's temporal shift: the slowing down of time also negates the resolution of events. Since waiting has yielded little for Finley's film project, why would anything more come from the waiting for Jessie. An additional note in this lexia is the parallel made between inaction and mystery, between apathy and the esoteric ★★ **(SEM. Anathema)**

(V.) Prevalent in these last four lexias is Finley's willingness to adapt, and what qualifies him as an excellent example of a character inhabiting multiple temporalities. By his obsession he is first shown as resistant to accustoming himself to the fluctuation of time, clutching on to his

project and the clock-time it represents. As time goes on, or rather as it doesn't, Finley first surrenders himself to Elster's whims of desert isolation and in his solitude keeps breathing futile life into his ever fading project. When Jessie arrives, Finley seems about ready to give up: "... I can't get an answer out of him. Do it, don't do it, maybe, never, some other time" he complains to Jessie, "I look at the sky and wonder. What the hell am I here for?" (51).

Apparently appreciating the futility of his situation, what motivates him to stay isn't wholly apparent. Between complicated hopes of familiarity, a dubious sexual desire for Jessie and later the impossible task of solving her disappearance, Finley's obsessive streak is realized in a myriad of forms.

4.3 Jessie / Anonymous: Disappearance & The Inaccuracy of Time

This final section of my analysis considers the two remaining characters in *Point Omega*: Elster's daughter Jessie, and the anonymous museum-visitor whose experiences serve as the novel's prologue and epilogue. The common denominator between the two is their ephemeral nature, with their characters more haunting the novel's pages than inhabiting them. Jessie accomplishes this by flickering in and out of Finley's story; the visitor by immersing himself in the video installation to the point of fusing with it. As commentary to his thoughts, the narrator of the anonymous sections posits the visitor's ideal world, how he himself "might have drawn it in his mind," as the result of when "nobody was watching him." The inevitable impasse, however, arrives on the same page – lacking all idea of how others see him, save that of his mother, now dead, the visitor wonders "what," exactly, "was left of him for others to see?" (*Point Omega* 10). Jessie, conversely described as loftily unconcerned, is still no less spectral: "She was sylphlike, her element was air," Finley describes of her shortly after she

arrives in the desert, “she moved through places in a soft glide, feeling the same things everywhere, this is what there was, the space within” (62).

Complementary to the novel’s brief account of their meeting, the joining together of them in this section stems also from similarity in their temporal dispositions. “[M]esmerized [...] by the depths that were possible in the slowing of motion...” (16), the visitor quickly finds in Jessie a confidante when she admits to “[liking] the idea of slowness in general,” “so many things go so fast, she said. We need time to lose interest in things” (135-36). Deterred by its velocity, Jessie has chosen to forsake ordinary clock-time, opting instead to exist indifferently in varying timelines, or outside of them. A good example of this, Jessie at one point recounts how she and a friend used to walk repeatedly up and down the same street, the first time around visiting its galleries, and on the next go passing them by: a “quietly exciting” experiment she explains, “it was like the idea of both their lifetimes” (85) existing simultaneously. Deliberately defiant of fixed temporalities as they are, an axiom of the visitor’s emerges as best capturing theirs and, to this essay, the very essence of *Point Omega* itself: “Real time is meaningless [...] There’s no such thing” (146). The first five lexias codified below are dedicated to Jessie, with the remaining five allocated to the visitor. Together these lexias explore the two character’s relationship with temporality, as well as their shared desire to exist outside of it. Through their joined perspectives, time is decidedly exposed as inescapably inaccurate when applied as a measurement of human experience.

(21) *I stayed a while. Because even when something happens, you’re waiting for it to happen*

(60) Cross-examined about how much time she gave the recurring video installation before leaving, Jessie here reveals a fundamental part of her temporal state. So powerful is the act of waiting for Jessie that its practice persists even after what was waited for has already occurred. Her position could alternatively be expressed as the impossibility of knowing with

exact certainty what one is waiting for, and how it will occur. One can never truly distinguish between events that anticipated and ones that weren't. As such, existence is one endless wait for something, nay, everything, that is going to happen ★ (ACT. Waiting)

(22) ... *[S]he was someone to talk to, which made the day pass* (50) Like this, Finley's observations about Jessie are at first rather deadpan, focusing on visible surfaces and practicalities. A further understanding of Jessie lies camouflaged in this lexia, however. As a result of the clash between her ambivalent relation to time and the near-stagnated creep of desert temporality, Finley discovers in their interactions respite from the maddening never-ending wait for Elster to become convinced and participate in his film ★ (SEM. Distraction)

(23) *Most of the time we talked about nothing, she and I. We had nothing in common, it seemed, but subjects kept flying by* (52) ★ (SYM. Antithesis) Usually aimless, Jessie and Finley's inconsequential dialogue over time begins to constitute an anthology of sorts, featuring haphazard details and events from their respective lives. Finley and Jessie's discordant personalities drop them in a conversational vacuum, but the jumbled shreds of meanings in their conversations together coalesce into a being of its own, albeit a disjointed one. Out of nothing here surfaces something.

(24) *Where was she? She wasn't lost in thought or memory, wasn't gauging the course of the next hour or minute. She was missing, fixed tightly within* (76) In line with her dismissal of the world noted above, Jessie has resolved to turn inward, choosing rather to face what lies within than beyond. Reminiscent of Elster's oratory about the final stage before Tielhard's omega point, where after having reached a plateau all life instead recedes inwards, eventually evolving out of existence, Jessie appears to be in the midst of the same process. Finley notices

that she in some ways already seems to be missing, starkly foreshadowing her later disappearance. The lexia in addition offers some support to the explanation of her vanishing as an expediated leap out of organic evolution ★ (REF. Omega Point)

(25) *Hers was another life, nowhere near mine, and it offered a release from the constant self-tunneling of my time here and also a kind of balance to her father's grip on my immediate future (Point Omega 53)* Contrasting sharply with Elster and Finley in her transcendental indifference, Jessie's presence works as a counter weight for her father's lofty and mystical aspirations of extinction. Before her arrival, the desert temporality adopted by Elster was the only available choice. Stifled in his subjection to Elster, both in terms of his project and time, Finley recognizes the value of Jessie's anomalous existence. Atemporal and free from the constraints of fixed time, Jessie's negation establishes a momentary equilibrium. Following her disappearance, however, this calm does not last, with Elster seemingly aging twenty-odd years overnight, and Finley on the brink of losing himself ★ (SEM. Equilibrium)

(VI) In some ways, Jessie exists as Elster's contradiction. As a proponent of the death of all organic matter, Elster is nonetheless markedly ignorant of what Jessie, as his daughter, represents. Even if Elster were to die, Jessie would foil the extinction of his species simply by continuing to live. Out of this fallacy, one gathers that the very first, glaring requirement for Elster's prophecy to be realized may very well be the removal of his daughter from the world. As this is exactly what does transpire, the irony embedded in the dualism of Elster's love for his daughter and his deathly ambitions, is palpable. It is not inconceivable that this realization, in part, is what rocks Elster so violently to his core, and cripples him with grief. Blind to his daughter as anything other than his treasure, Elster fails to recognize in Jessie the emergence of signs that bear a striking resemblance to the concept of the omega point he advocates. A

noteworthy connection to make here is Jessie's disappearance as occurring after Elster's suggestions of legacy (and bighorn sheep), as well as after Finley has started to entertain the notion of sexual desire for her. Fertility and extinction are again suggested as incompatible.

As she is outside of time, any attempt at applying temporal restrictions on Jessie can instantly be written off. Though time for her can never be an accurate judge, the result of Jessie's atemporality is an absence of belonging. Similar to the visitor's earlier vexation over his appearance, Jessie, in her denial of temporality, also cuts ties with a fundamental cornerstone of modern life. Unaffected by temporal domains, perhaps, Jessie is estranged from her humanity, beginning to fade already. As a child, Elster reminisces, Jessie's "body was not there until she touched it;" she needed no imaginary friends, he fills in, "she was" already "imaginary to herself" (89). Such alienation, if entertained by Elster throughout Jessie's life, emerges as one likely cause for her shift out of temporality and existence.

(26) His visits to the gallery mingled seamlessly in memory. He could not recall on which day he'd watched a particular scene or how many times he'd watched certain scenes (128). The effects of the slowed down video installation provoke a similar effect in the visitor as the temporality of the desert does in Finley. Excruciatingly slow, the twenty-four hour installation is by the museum's opening hours only made possible to experience in its entirety across several days. The visitor, having returned to the installation several times, is unable to recount the details of his previous trips to the installation ★ (SEM. Disorientation)

(27) This was the real movie. He was seeing everything here for the first time. So much happening within a given second, after six days, twelve days, a hundred and twelve, seen for the first time (134). At a fraction of its original frame rate, the visitor discovers in the installation film detail after detail undiscernable in the 'real-time' version. Faced with this

continous stream of hidden information, notably after frequent returns (six, supposedly, though he earlier admits to uncertainty in the matter), an alertness dawns in him about how much can pass one by unnoticed, even in a single second. This awareness spurs in the visitor a desire to grasp every minute detail contained within a second, the time it takes for two frames in the installation to show ★ (REF. Epiphany)

(28) *The less there was to see, the harder he looked, the more he saw. This was the point. To see what's here, finally to look and to know you're looking, to feel time passing, to be alive to what is happening in the smallest registers of motion (Point Omega 7).* The visitor's reasoning here suffers from the assumption that the pace of the video installation is the slowest possible, while, theoretically, a screening could be extended indefinitely. As an allegory, the process described is not too different from using a microscope. With every notch closer to what is being examined, myriads of new discoveries await. Consumed by the video installation, the visitor contends that its slowed pace allows an infinitude of previously unknown mysteries to be revealed ★ (ACT. Perceiving)

(29) *He wanted the film to move even more slowly, requiring deeper involvement of eye and mind, always that, the thing he sees tunneling into the blood, into dense sensation, sharing conciousness with him (146).* Within the visitor a hunger begins to grow for the pure temporal state, 'the real movie,' he has identified in the installation. He is bewitched, wishing to push the installation's format even further. In the attempt to access the truth he is determined exists within it, however, he also diagnoses the symptoms of such close atunement to the installation's temporality ★ (ACT. Assimilate)

(30) *But always back to the wall, in physical touch, or he might find himself doing what, he wasn't sure, transmigrating, passing from this body into a quivering image on the screen* (129). ★ **(HER.** Enigma: equivocation) Demonstrably fascinated by the installation as he is, in seeking a connection with its temporality the visitor concedes he is treading unfamiliar territory. Entertaining himself as on a threshold of discovery, the visitor nonetheless admits his puzzlement. In his excitement at attempting to adjust to the installation's temporality, he must also wrestle with the anxiety of being trapped within it ★★ **(SEM.** Fear)

(VII) Out of the four characters in *Point Omega*, only the visitor's escape from time can be described as unselfishly motivated. Jessie has always been beyond it, Elster dreads his, to him, sudden age and Finley first adjusts only to humour Elster for a better chance at realizing his project. The visitor, in contrast, seems to contend that the truth of existence lies enmeshed in compressed city-time, visible only by paying undivided attention to its minutiae. Wanting "to bathe in the tempo, in the near static rhythm of the image" (*Point Omega* 146), the stripped down timeline of the installation has kindled in him the desire to pursue this 'true' temporality, and the hope of discovering its veiled meanings. This endeavour of his, the exploration of time through art, is remarkably similar to what transpires in *Point Omega* on a whole. The only place that all characters pass through, the story can in a way be said to revolve around the slow motion Douglas Gordon installation. The fact that visitor even explicitly depends on the installation to form his understanding of temporality further suggests the possibility of art to distort the flow of time, when sufficiently isolated from other temporalities. *Point Omega* itself achieves this in its own indefinite timeline, earlier described as an element that lends it its status as writerly, and calls for application of Barthes'.

Whereas Jessie can largely be said to embody the temporal dimension as a loosely connected amalgam of conflicting timelines, with little heed paid to the prevalence of any

one, the visitor instead contends he has discovered in the installation an unadulterated expression of time, or a stem of sorts. With due consideration of Jessie's posited explanation of life as suspended in a ceaseless wait, the visitor's idea of time as something only comprehensible on a diminutive scale becomes an additional element of the esotericism of time in *Point Omega*. Regardless of whether or not their subjective understandings of temporality can be held in any regard as true, their expositions alone serve to demonstrate the imprecision inherent in any measurement of time: the waited for event that can never definitely occur; the limitless information imperceptible to us and lost in every conventional second that passes.

4.0 Conclusion

The flow of time in *Point Omega* is an unpredictable, sometimes bizarre force that avoids permanent definition. The four characters in the novel could be described as being in a state of temporal osmosis, submerged in a multifaceted identity of time. the transitional nature of. A story of their slow migration in and out of different timelines (city-time, desert-time, installation-time), *Point Omega* could just as much be described as a novel about life as a never-ceasing wait for unanticipated events. By establishing the presence of multiple temporalities in the novel, and by my attempt emulating a Barthesian codification to interpret their intricacies, I have had as a primary goal in this essay to investigate the subjective quality of time in the post-millennial literary era. Supplementary to this goal is the benefit of testing the relevance of Barthes' theory for the treatment of a more contemporary work of literature.

Where Balzac's *Sarrasine* provides Barthes with a more rigid referential map through his codification in *S/Z*, my analysis of *Point Omega*, though it is modelled after that in *S/Z*, achieves appropriately different results. This distinction between the results of analysing

Sarrasine and *Point Omega* can alternatively be expressed as one between that of Barthes' readerly and writerly text. As opposed to the writerly *Point Omega*, *Sarrasine* represents the readerly, to Barthes a familiar part of a more conventional canon of (French) literature. Two examples that qualify *Point Omega* as a writerly text are its shifting narrative perspectives, and the novel's division into three disjointed chapters that are still all related to one indetermined timeline. The result of my analysis provides another factor in this determination: with the novel's chronology largely unknown, and character's all having a unique experience of temporality, the flow of time in *Point Omega* is left to the active construction of the reader.

There are advantages in using a Barthesian approach to analysing *Point Omega*, but in certain respects this approach it is also limited. Barthes' lexias are a narrow frame to work with and, while codifying them does yield a comprehensive directory of their function and meaning, they also largely depend on context. In *S/Z*, this arises out of the full analysis of *Sarrasine*, and context there accumulates over time through many codified lexias and explanatory paragraphs, crystallizing into an enmeshed map of codes whose meanings together construct the literary world of the novel. As my analysis is necessarily much more limited in scope, I have in my essay instead fashioned the lexias, and their analysis, in accordance with the chosen thematic focus of my reading, and the pockets of supplementary analysis and information about *Point Omega* provided in my secondary literature. In applying the strict attention to the lexias Barthes requires, there was little room in the analysis proper for the overt reference to previous research. Closed off in this way by the structuralist designations of category and code, this choice to rely on meaning extracted from within the text over meaning applied from without effectively renders my literary review sections more the backdrop of temporal theory essential to my understanding of *Point Omega*, than something to be distilled into a systematic reading of the text. Though somewhat arbitrary, my method of selecting lexias, as well as the choice of the code(s) I recognize in them and their

attached meanings, is nonetheless enabled by the concepts of postmodern time extracted from Heise, Boxall and Jameson, and also depends on the presentation of my thesis as an investigation of temporality. My selection of lexias, based on the recognition in them of the codes most salient to my thesis about temporality in Don DeLillo, is inescapably a subjective practice, and positions this essay in inclination toward Barthes the poststructuralist. Slightly unorthodox in method, when compared to how a conventional thematic analysis of time might progress, this essay draws its strength more from the subjectivity of the writerly, the poststructuralist conviction inherent to Barthes' *S/Z*, over the rigidity of its structuralist preference to codify every sentence in a novel.

Supported on the groundwork edifice of my literary review outlining the malleable nature of time (in DeLillo's novels and elsewhere), my analysis across thirty selected lexias from *Point Omega* successfully work together to posit time as an unreliable measurement of human experience. I have also gone on to illustrate the multiplicity of time in the postmodern era, both through its subjective understanding, but also through *Point Omegas* characters' participation in multiple timelines. Further, I have in this essay ventured to investigate the relevance of Barthes' theory in the contemporary literary era, and discovered that its application, though it suffers somewhat in the limited scope of my essay, is not only possible, but highly contributive to a specialized reading of a work of modern literature.

More than anything, however, DeLillo's 2010 novel is a monument to a disparate post-millennial experience of temporality. Born out of their inability to fix themselves within its ebbs and flows, temporality assumes to the novel's characters an uncanny, eerie sense of ominousness. The four characters in *Point Omega* are all changed from their interactions with time, a force undoubtably not to be trifled with. Finley, during his return from the desert, "know[s] only that he would carry something with him from this day on, a stillness, a distance..." and Elster, now "a man past knowing" (*Point Omega* 124), has receded away

from the world entirely, into himself. Aside from a conspiratorily silent phonecall received by Finley toward the novel's end, there are no further allusions to the visitor or Jessie's ultimate fate. More than my speculation of her vanishing as the transcending of evolution, her disappearance is never resolved. This remaining enigma of Jessie's fate, in closing, bears striking resemblance to my proposed characterization of time as unreliable: after her disappearance, Jessie becomes simply just "one body, out there somewhere, or not" (125).

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