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“Missing people never make sense”: Don DeLillo’s *Point Omega* or, Addressing the Terroristic Real to Oneself

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The War on Terror is something of a palimpsest, drawing on new meanings and memories to cover over the ruins of past violence. Yet, as with all palimpsests, the past is never fully concealed or subjugated, and it frequently emerges in the US War on Terror as something of a haunting.
Alex Lubin, *Never-Ending War On Terror*

We also have to work, though, sort of the *dark side*, if you will.
We’ve got to spend time in the shadows in the intelligence world.
A lot of what needs to be done here will have to be done quietly, without any discussion.
Vice-president Dick Cheney¹

In Don DeLillo’s *Point Omega* (2010), 73-year-old Richard Elster is a fervent advocate of the war against Iraq and one of its architects, a man who “still believes in the righteousness of the war” (54). He spent two years working with the “tight minds that made the war” (18) at the Pentagon, quite at a distance from the theatre of operations where atrocities were being committed. He has now retired to the Mojave Desert of Anza-Borrego in Southern California, a desert which right from the start accommodates, in a ghostly manner, other deserts and, among them, no doubt, its Iraqi counterpart: “somewhere south of nowhere in the Sonoran Desert or maybe it was the Mojave or another desert altogether” (20). The old man is being courted by a filmmaker named James Finley who wants to make a documentary about him that

¹ Reprinted in Alex Lubin on page 48.

immediately recalls Errol Morris' *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (2003) and its opening words uttered by McNamara himself: "Any military commander who is honest with himself, or with those he's speaking to, will admit that he has made mistakes in the application of military power. He's killed people unnecessarily" (Morris, *Fog*). As Elster tells the young man: "What you want, my friend, whether you know it or not, is a public confession" (53).² Despite a propensity for philosophizing, Elster is unable to acknowledge his acquiescence in the face of the American use of terror in counterterrorist policies. The third character is Elster's daughter, Jessie, who pays her father a visit. But a few days after she arrives, she vanishes without explanation. I would like to argue that Jessie's disappearance is nothing but the translation of the possible abduction that recalls the "extraordinary renditions" also known as "irregular renditions."³ Jessie is obviously no terrorist, but neither were most of the people⁴ who were captured, thrown to jail and tortured illegally by the Bush administration.⁵ A potential culprit is "the time obsessive art lover and creepy museum lurker" (Herren 151) present in the novel's short prologue and epilogue respectively called "Anonymity 1" and "Anonymity 2". The action takes place in MoMa in New York where this anonymous man watches the 1993 artwork "24 Hour-Psycho" by contemporary Scottish artist Douglas Gordon which features Hitchcock's 1961 movie *Psycho* slowed to a 24-hour running time. The claustrophobic aspect of these sections, in addition to the atemporal duration they expose, conjure up the temporality of torture and of indefinite detention.

Point Omega prolongs the terror that 9/11 established by bringing home and harboring in the homeland the counterterrorist response carried out abroad. Indeed, DeLillo's novel performs the terror of counterterrorist actions launched by the George W. Bush administration, but it does so surreptitiously, thus mimicking the illegal politics of counterterrorism. That is why I propound the idea that the novel is both

² The mention of the term "confession" immediately connects the plot to the subtext of torture. (See Rejali 35)

³ The *New Oxford American Dictionary* defines it as "the practice of sending a foreign criminal or terrorist suspect covertly to be interrogated in a country with less rigorous regulations for the humane treatment of prisoners".

⁴ "Certain [Coalition Forces] military intelligence officers told the ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross] that in their estimate *between 70 percent and 90 percent of the persons deprived of their liberty in Iraq had been arrested by mistake* [emphasis added]" (Danner 3).

⁵ Here is a telling example of such practice: "the *New York Times* reported, in February 2005, that an Australian national, Mamdouh Habib, had been taken off a bus in Pakistan right after 9/11 and beaten by local interrogators, with Americans present, before being shipped to Cairo as part of the CIA's rendition program. There, Egyptian interrogators subjected him to a mix of psychological and physical torture, threatening his family and beating him with sticks while suspending him from the ceiling. He made several confessions, which he later claimed were false. After six months in Egypt, he was shipped to Bagram for a week of interrogation with sexual harassment and electric shock. Then he was flown to Guantánamo for more brutal questioning. When the *Washington Post* published an article about his agony, he was quickly released, without charges or explanation, and in January 2005 rejoined his family in Australia after three years of detention" (McCoy 194).

overtly and covertly about a historical reality, that of the Global War on Terror and one of its tragic consequences, the Iraq War. This contradiction stems from the very nature of the uncommon war that was waged after 9/11. Indeed, the novel's conspicuous reference to the war is, or rather, cannot but be insufficient because that war relied on a shadowy implementation of itself as the Abu Ghraib torture scandal shamefully demonstrated. This paradoxical simultaneity is efficiently achieved thanks to a haunting poetics that is meant to signal a presence of the terroristic real. First of all, the War on Terror did not target an enemy embodied by a nation state. In fact, the war that the President declared—"as if terror were a state and not a technique" (Didion 8)—may thus be understood as a war against a state that does not exist. Rather than stating its non-existence, I would like to posit that its enemy is of a ghostly state, and perhaps even, that its enemy is a ghostly nation-state. In addition to that first spectral layer, it seems more than fair to argue that, on the case of the Global War on Terror, the United-States operated in the shadow as the quote from Vice President Cheney shows. Dwelling on those two ideas of the ghostly presence of an unidentifiable inimical entity and ghostly performances understood as secret and illegal exactions perpetrated in the shadow, in "black sites" (34), I contend that in staging the repression of the real—the messy and ugly real—the novel enacts not only a return of the real which refuses to be both inhibited and unembodied but that it does so according to an autoimmune principle that ultimately betrays the fact that the ghost was not a ghost and the enemy was no one else but the United-States itself. I will first focus on how the real is repressed and blanked out. I will then analyze how such repression ineluctably favors the return of the real under the guise of a haunting ghost before pinpointing the ways in which the US becomes in a self-reflexive manner the recipient of the terroristic real it had purported to deliver to the Other as a way to protect itself from said Other.

Repressing the real

Jessie's unexplained vanishing (75) defines the arbitrariness of an event in all its surprise and mystery. It is so excessive that it almost answers Elster's call in the following dialogue with Finley:

What idea?

What idea. Paroxysm. Either a sublime transformation of mind and soul or some worldly convulsion. We want it to happen.

You think we want it to happen.
We want it to happen. Some paroxysm. (72-73)

It is both ironic and paradoxical that what Elster heartily desires is what has already happened. His mistake has to do with time, or rather tense as David Cowart explains: "The nation really did, after 9/11, desire '[s]ome paroxysm,' as Elster remarks. When he adds, 'we want it to happen' (73), one faults only the present-tense construction" (Cowart 46). The awaited paroxysm is nothing but the Global War on Terror and its tragic aftermath. The lack he wishes to compensate for, in the future, already belongs to the past, or at least to his present. This blindness is itself derived from a revengeful stance, one clearly identified by Elster in his essay on the word *rendition*: "a revenge play that reflects the mass will and interprets the shadowy need of an entire nation, ours" (34). The mistake at the level of tense cancels, so to speak, the experiential grounding of the Global War on Terror as if the latter, in the traumatic mode, had passed through the filter of memory, had therefore not been registered, or, and it is even worse, had not actually happened. It simply vanished into historical oblivion. DeLillo identifies the erasure of history as it is taking place and its denial by Richard Elster. For Jim Finley, Elster's essay is filled with abstractions that do not do justice to the reality it was supposed to analyze: "But no specific mention of black sites, third-party states or international treaties and conventions" (34). Finley primarily reproaches Elster for writing an essay "where crime and guilt don't get mentioned" (34) while "find[ing] mystery and romance in a word that was being used as an instrument of state security, a word redesigned to be synthetic, concealing the shameful subject it embraced" (35).

What Elster does with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan recalls what Joan Didion's words denounced about the effects of 9/11:

we began to hear what would become in the year that followed an entrenched preference for ignoring the meaning of the event in favor of an impenetrably flattening celebration of its victims, and troublingly belligerent idealization of historical ignorance. "Taste" and "sensitivity," it was repeatedly suggested, *demand that we not examine what happened* (Didion 9, my emphasis).

Her dissent from the collective response to 9/11 lies in the fact that Didion honestly attempted to historicize the attacks so as to prevent the event from being interpreted as a mere accident. Judith Butler wrote in 2004 that "we can say, and ought to, that US imperialism is a necessary condition for the attacks on the United States, that these attacks would be impossible without the horizon of imperialism within which

they occur.” (Butler 11) Both Didion and Butler’s words are unequivocal. They suggest that history can be bended and manipulated through the instrumentalization of its memory, but also of its forgetting. There are at this stage some possible parallels to be drawn with what Ricoeur called “manipulated memory”⁶ through the process of *emplotment*. The narrativization process at stake here is the counterterrorism narrative prompted by the George W. Bush administration. The event consists in the repetition of the erasure and obliteration of history, in “the exercise of forgetting” taking place within a “pragmatics of forgetting” (Ricoeur 418). It all seems coherent with Elster’s reflection on time that DeLillo sums up in an interview: “This is the vast meditative time of the desert, geologic time, making Elster think about evolution and extinction” (DePietro np). The idea of forgetting is also broached in the prologue when the narrator explains that for the art lover in the museum “[t]here was an element of forgetting involved in this experience. He wanted to forget the original movie or at least limit the memory to a distant reference, unintrusive” (11). Ricoeur wrote that “the art of forgetting rest[s] on a rhetoric of extinction: writing to extinguish—the contrary of making an archive” (Ricoeur 504). This “rhetoric of extinction” is grounded in an enterprise of eradication of history enabling the latter to repeat itself but under the guise of an original experience insofar as its iterative quality has been nullified. “There is, in the words of Moroccan American writer Laila Lalami, nothing more American than forgetting the past” (Lalami 28). Mitchell relates this form of amnesia to the concept of immunity:

Immunity is a form of cellular memory; the body learns by experience how to fight measles, and it doesn’t forget. The most dangerous threat to the immune system, then, is amnesia, the forgetting of what it has learned: forgetting, for instance, that today’s terrorists (al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden) were yesterday’s allies, trained as antibodies against Soviet military power in Afghanistan; forgetting, even more dangerously, that yesterday’s terrorists are almost invariably tomorrow’s heroes of national liberation and that moral absolutes are not just useless but positively dangerous in any counterterrorist strategy (Mitchell 284).

It all explains why the history of American violent neo-imperialism repeats itself with the War on Terror. The war George W. Bush started is nothing but a pale copy of the

⁶ “[O]ne can always recount differently, by eliminating, by shifting the emphasis, by recasting the protagonists of the action in a different light along with the outlines of the action. For anyone who has crossed through all the layers of configuration and of narrative refiguration from the constitution of personal identity up to that of the identities of the communities that structure our ties of belonging, the prime danger, at the end of this path, lies in the handling of authorized, imposed, celebrated, commemorated history – of official history. The resource of narrative then becomes the trap, when higher powers take over this emplotment and impose a canonical narrative by means of intimidation or seduction, fear or flattery. A devious form of forgetting is at work here, resulting from stripping the social actors of their original power to recount their actions themselves” (Ricoeur 448).

one started in the 1980s, the "decades of the state terror" (Chomsky, *Power* 58) as historians called it. It may even be regarded not simply as a copy but as a model according to Noam Chomsky:

[The authors of the December 2002 issue of *Current History*] suggest that the war against Nicaragua [i.e. the first phase of the "War on Terror"] for which the United States was condemned at the World Court, is a good model for future acts against terror. Specifically two authors point out that the "contra" war against Nicaragua is a *good model* for the U.S. support for the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan [i.e. the current phase of the "War on Terror"] (Chomsky, *Power* 58).⁷

The repetition is even corroborated, and this partakes in making it all the more obscene by the political actors chosen in those two "Wars on Terror," namely Donald Rumsfeld and John Negroponte. There is a certain cynical efficiency in the cyclical effacement of history. Yet, history happened and the traces of its reality hover like a phantom in the novel.

The specter of the real⁸

Framing the main plot of the novel, the sections "Anonymity 1" and "Anonymity 2" evoke in an oblique manner the Global War on Terror as they contain all the ingredients for a torture scene to unfold: "The bare setting, and the darkness, and the chill air, and the guard motionless at the door" (102). Everything about the presentation of Gordon's video art installation functions like an ambiguous innuendo, enacting on the sly the shadowy historical context, with its secretive criminal exactions carried out in the name of counterterrorism. The general atmosphere of those sections suggest the discomfort of the interrogation room to say the least, recalling those "salvaged videotapes of caged men being subjected to severe physical pain" (33) that Elster mentions in the scholarly essay he wrote about the word "rendition."

On the very first line of the prologue, the anonymous museumgoer is introduced: "There was a man standing against the north wall, barely visible" (3). The sense of imprisonment derives from the multiple references to the "wall"—itself blended with the screen: "It was like bricks in a wall clearly countable" (5)—but also of the guards. The fact that DeLillo begins with the position of the body summons up images of "[f]orced standing" (Rejali 316-334) or "stress positions" (McCoy 124-125, 141) and,

⁷ See also (Chomsky, 9-11 99).

⁸ This section does not address the figure of Jessie but it should be noted that she too may be perceived as a ghost: "otherworldly" (36), Jessie "moved through places in a soft glide" (49), "kept appearing in some inner field of vision, indistinct, like something I'd forgotten to say or do" (76) or "Passing into air, it seemed this is what she was meant to do" (81).

notably, of the disgraceful photograph of the Abu Ghraib torture scenes, perhaps hinted at in the following quote: “Standing was part of the art, the standing man participates” (102). Such detail of the incipit is further verified by the fact that the gallery precludes any kind of sitting: “There were no seats in the gallery” (3). The lack of seat partakes in sketching a space characterized by deprivation⁹, a decisive feature of torture, also conveyed with words such as “barely,” “hardly,” “lighted only” (3). The fact that “[t]he film ran without dialogue or music, no soundtrack at all” (4) testifies to that¹⁰. On numerous occasions, in the prologue and in the epilogue, the narrative insists upon the “darkness” (3, 4) of the room, its peculiar light, its temperature: “The gallery was cold and lighted only by the faint gray shimmer on the screen” (3). This “cold dark space” (10) anticipates and corroborates Elster’s analysis in his essay:

From this he asked the reader to consider a walled enclosure in an unnamed country and a method of questioning, using what he called enhanced interrogation techniques, that was meant to induce a surrender (one of the meanings of rendition—a giving up or giving back) in the person being interrogated. (33)

It is therefore not surprising that the narrator associates the act of watching the screen with the idea of “punishment” (104) and wonders: “Who would survive physically or otherwise?” (12). DeLillo’s masterful signature here resides in the fact that we are objectively reading a scene occurring at the museum which is simultaneously doubled with one suggestive of torture. In other words, two realities happen at the same time and overlap, one devoid of terror and the other, saturated with it: “It felt real, the pace was paradoxically real, bodies moving musically, cause and effect so drastically drawn a part that it seemed real to him, the way all the things in the physical world that we don’t understand are said to be real” (14). That is the reason why there is almost a double-entendre in everything that is being narrated:

⁹ It also recalls the “deprivation of sensory stimuli”: “The more completely the place of confinement eliminates sensory stimuli, the more rapidly and deeply will the interrogatee be affected. Results produced only after weeks or months of imprisonment in an ordinary cell can be duplicated in hours or days in a cell which has no light (or weak artificial light which never varies), which is sound-proofed, in which odors are eliminated, etc.)” (CIA, *Kubark* 90).

¹⁰ “Low-tech noise, then, is common, and there is generally a marked preference among modern torturers for low-tech procedures. However, this is not what captures modern imagination. What captivates modern minds is high-tech noise. This includes placing subjects in boxes or rooms where they are bombarded with noise of all sorts from machines, or subjecting them to scientifically engineered noise that only machines can produce (“white noise”). It also includes noise that may not be heard by the human ear, but can cause serious bodily damage, what is called “high-intensity sound” or “infrasound”. This is what known about high- technology noise in the twentieth century” (Rejali 363).

"This was history he was watching in a way, a movie known to people everywhere" (12). Likewise, it is history that readers are reading "in a way."

The Return of the real

The conversation between Elster and Finley on the notion of paroxysm¹¹ quoted above adequately translates the US blindness towards its own history, and more specifically, towards the terror of its own terrorism, be it labeled counterterrorism or not. Even though the paroxysmal event, so heartily wished for, has already occurred and is thus irretrievable, Elster will nevertheless be subjected to a form of paroxysm by proxy, a return of the paroxysm, if I may say, which signifies nothing but the return of the real under a new form, namely the disappearance of his daughter Jessie. In other words, Elster is at the mercy of an event to come that will repeat the past trauma and that will surpass it. Thus understood, Derrida's comment comes to mind:

There is traumatism with no possible work of mourning when the evil comes from the possibility to come of the worst, from the repetition to come—though worse. Traumatism is produced by the *future*, by the *to come*, by the threat of the worst *to come*, rather than by an aggression that is "over and done with" (Derrida 97).¹²

Elster is the synecdochic figure of America and one can say that he represents America's narcissistic and hegemonic stance, a topic introduced in *Falling Man* by Martin Ridnour and crystallized in the formula, "the narcissistic heart of the West" (DeLillo, *Falling Man* 113). Elster rather egoistically—the war that the US was waging was, after all, "his war" (54)—declares: "We are a living history and I thought I would be in the middle of it" (30).

It is worth adding that Elster's wish for a paroxysm is imbued with suicidal undertones. His search for the general good at all costs in this "total extrapolation of Good" (Baudrillard 14) leads to a proportionate Evil: "Ultimately, Good could thwart Evil only by ceasing to be Good since, by seizing for itself a global monopoly of power, it gives rise, by that very act, to a blowback of a proportionate violence."

¹¹ For Chardin, the omega point is a paroxysm that cannot not be for it is irreversible: "The only universe capable of containing the human person is an irreversibly 'personalising' universe" (Chardin 290).

¹² What Derrida writes uncannily echoes what Chomsky characterizes as "preventive war": "*preventive war* [t]hat is, the United States will rule the world by force, and if there is any challenge to its domination—whether it is perceived in the distance, invented, imagined or whatever—then the United States will have the right to destroy that challenge before it becomes a threat. That's preventive war, not preemptive war" (Chomsky, *Imperial 2*).

(Baudrillard 13-14).¹³ The war on terror has significantly increased the spreading of terrorist actions.¹⁴

Elster is thus destined, so to speak, to *direct suffering towards* himself, or rather, *against* himself in an autoimmune process that Derrida defines as “that strange behavior where a living being, in quasi-*suicidal* fashion, ‘itself’ works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself *against* its ‘own’ immunity” (Derrida 94). However, this urge for a death *to come* recognizable only through its past—“We want to be the dead matter we used to be” (50) Elster solemnly and indecently muses—before the coming of the paroxysmal event, is concretized in Jessie’s disappearance. Because this event will thrust Elster into the severe melancholy of an indefinite mourning, as Jessie’s body will remain obstinately missing, hence haunting, chances are that he will face *visitations of the disappeared* and *invitations to disappear*. Indeed, people who are “disappeared” preclude any work of mourning: “By definition, the missing resist the work of mourning, like the future, just like the most recalcitrant of ghosts. The missing of the archive, the ghost, the phantom—that’s the future—JD.” (Derrida 189).

“What is a traumatic event?” asks Jacques Derrida:

For the wound remains open by our terror before the future and not only the past. [...] The ordeal of the event has as its tragic correlate not what is presently happening or what has happened in the past but the precursory signs of what threatens to happen. It is the future that determines the unappropriability of the event, not the present or the past. Or at least, if it is the present or the past, it is insofar as it bears on its body the terrible sign of what might or perhaps will take place, which will be *worse than anything that has ever taken place* (Derrida 96).

It is a traumatic future which is at stake when Elster bitterly exclaims: “*I still want a war. A great power has to act. We were struck hard*” (30) [my emphasis]. It is once again quite significant that what Elster wants has already happened. Wanting a war means that Elster minimizes, or rather denies the wars that are currently being fought in Afghanistan and in Iraq at the very moment he utters those words. Those wars do not seem to count, as if the US could not be held accountable for them: “We do not,

¹³ It recalls former lieutenant colonel Robert Bowman’s statement on the terrorist bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania: “That hatred we have sown has come back to haunt us in the form of terrorism” (Zinn 682).

¹⁴ For the United States and its war on terror, there is a contradiction between stopping terror plots in motion versus stopping terrorism. By pursuing the chimera of halting conspiracies in progress, Washington has used extreme methods, contributing to a larger political climate that fosters terrorism. In effect, the use of torture to stop terrorism has, paradoxically, created more terrorists (McCoy 200-201).

however, take the sign of destroyed life and decimated peoples as something for which we are responsible, or indeed understand how that decimation works to confirm the United States as performing atrocities." (Butler 6) They do not seem to deserve the name *war* as if they were not worthy of such a name. No, they are, at best, muffled murmurs against the roars of wars: "Iraq is a whisper" (50). By raising the question of which wars count as wars, DeLillo echoes, to a certain extent, Judith Butler's crucial and plain ethical question: "Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, What *makes for a grievable life*?" (Butler 20).

Addressing the real to oneself

Throughout the novel, Elster abundantly quotes French paleontologist and Jesuit philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) who coined the concept of "Point Oméga" in his 1955 posthumous essay *The Phenomenon of Man*. Chardin understood the universe in terms of expansion like most of his peers but he also believed in a form of internal expansion:

[the Universe] [...] presents itself to us, physico-chemically, as in process of organic *involution* upon itself (from the extremely simple to the extremely complex)—and, moreover, this particular involution "of complexity" is experimentally bound up with a correlative increase in interiorisation, that is to say in the psyche or consciousness. (Chardin 301)

Elster knows of Chardin's theory obviously but he fails to render it faithfully, perhaps because he succumbs—surrenders indeed—to the charm of its aesthetic dimension. Instead of focusing upon the quasi-divine perfection of consciousness, that is to say *hyper-consciousness*, Elster believes that "[c]onsciousness is exhausted" (53). He cannot properly translate Chardin's theory as its transcendent value seems to have been removed; on the contrary he reformulates it as a regression towards an infra-consciousness of Matter. The reversal appears in the title that David Cowart analyses thus:

Therein lies the chief irony of DeLillo's title. Elster, the character who introduces the Teilhard phrase, always does so with the English word order, "omega point" (52, 72). Only Jim Finley, late in the text, shifts from "omega point" to "point omega" (98) and so christens DeLillo's novel. The unfamiliar syntax, which duplicates that of the original French (*point oméga*), enacts the *bouleversement*—the reversal—of Teilhard de Chardin's most well-known concept. (Cowart 47)

What is paramount here is that, thanks to the English language, this reversal discloses the Americanization of the concept that suggests in turn the appropriation

process at the heart of American neo-imperialism. The Other laid bare here in the shape of the foreign language is assimilated into proper American, is being made into a property of the American language. The movement going from “Point Omega” to the “omega point” unveils “an imperialism of the same” (Levinas 87), a return of the same, to what is proper. It is a phenomenon that only produces terror, in response to terror in the manner of a *closed circuit*, the latter being underscored by the structure of the novel and its two-enclosing claustrophobic “Anonymity” sections.

What was meant theoretically to initiate an opening onto a mystical and transcendent experience bestowing a “thinking layer” (Chardin 182, 225, 244) to Earth has eventually contracted into a personal wound so deeply inscribed within Elster’s consciousness that it has turned into a wound in the flesh: “A million years away. The omega point has narrowed, here and now, to the point of a knife as it enters a body” (98). The reader remembers Elster’s arrogant and cynical question: “Do we have to be human forever?” (53). From the moment his daughter vanishes, Elster will never be more human than he was, than he has always been: “Look at him, frail and beaten. Look at him, inconsolably human” (96). Vulnerable as he is now, he has just stepped into the realm of the victims he has so persistently ignored: “Elster, too, meets his fate in the desert. Implicated in deadly political folly, he retreats in chagrin to his own personal Iraq” (Cowart 45). The Iraq that was a “whisper” is now simply him: “[i]t was hard for him to lift his voice above a whisper” (82). If his reference to Chardin was meant to suggest a tension towards the future,¹⁵ to Elster, this future is blocked in a *hyper-personal wound* that dwells and expands in a resolutely melancholic present that the slow pace of the narrative betrays.

Jessie’s disappearance conflates both national and personal traumas, the event of a double vulnerability. Her disappearance on a national level questions the validity of the American government response to 9/11. Far from solving the question of terror and terrorism, the national responses (*USA Patriot Act*) and the international responses (the war in Afghanistan launched as early as October 2001, and in Iraq in March 2003 but also the scandals of Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo) clearly display the limits of the American counterterrorism policy—for some, another form of terrorism, one stemming from the “West.”¹⁶ In their wish to eradicate terrorism, it

¹⁵ “The Future-Universal could not be anything else but the Hyper Personal—at the Omega Point” (Chardin 260).

¹⁶ “There are many terrorist states in the world, but the United States is unusual in that it is officially committed to international terrorism, and on a scale that puts its rival to shame” (Chomsky, “International” 15. See also: “We

seems that the US have inexorably directed it towards themselves. The author of an essay written from the torturer's perspective, Elster has been converted into the tortured, "barely able to move, either from medication or lack of sleep" (82). In that sense, the American that he is ceases to be and becomes instead a foreigner, that Other. When at a loss, after Jessie's disappearance he calls his wife and speaks Russian to her, "every word a plea, the response of an accused man [speaking] in awkward English" (82-83). The onomastics tends also to indicate a paragon of alienness if "Elster" is to be read as a sort of neologized superlative of "else". We may then argue syllogistically that if the American which is hurt is thus an Other, therefore the Other which is hurt is an American. In a quest for the general good, the United States have *rendered* themselves vulnerable in a suicidal manner by the very system they were trying to undo: "Tragically, it seems that the US seeks to preempt violence against itself by waging violence first, but the violence it fears is the violence it engenders" (Butler 149). On a personal level, Elster's overwhelming grief resonates with the national grief of a country still mourning and, like his Iraqi counterparts, Elster as a father mourns the unforeseen and unexplained loss of a relative.

Elster returns to New York without any clue about Jessie. The personal grief of this war partisan works like the archive of mourning that was done away with too quickly by the Bush administration:

President Bush announced on September 21 that we have finished grieving and that now it is time for resolute action to take the place of grief. When grieving is something to be feared, our fears can give rise to the impulse to resolve it quickly, to banish it in the name of an action invested with the power to restore the loss or return the world to a former order, or to invigorate a fantasy that the world formerly was orderly. (Butler 29-30)

But Elster's grief and pain point also implicitly more grief and pain, that of others, those anonymous victims of the wars of Iraq and Afghanistan, the "ghost detainees" of Abu Ghraib. As it is stated about the video art, "Everybody remembers the killer's name, Norman Bates, but nobody remembers the victim's name" (6). It may be also added that those victims announce more victims to come: "people here in Europe who will be victims of the escalating cycle of violence" (Chomsky, 9-11 66). It is precisely in that sense that *counterterrorism-as-terrorism* only deepened that which it was meant to withstand, in the first place, namely, loss and mourning.

should not forget that the U.S. itself is a terrorist state" (Chomsky, 9-11 72). And also: "If we want to consider this question [*i.e. Is the nation's so-called war on terrorism winnable?*] seriously, we should recognize that in much of the world the U.S. is regarded as a leading terrorist state, and with good reason" (Chomsky, 9-11 55).

The real is a mess

At the end of the day, nobody knows what happened to Elster's daughter therefore "her precise fate remains uncertain" (Herren 155)¹⁷. It would simply be inaccurate to state that she is dead or that she has been kidnapped and murdered by her former boyfriend Dennis (Banash 7). It is indeed tempting to incriminate Dennis (the Menace?): "I thought of him as Dennis X. Was there legal cause to trace the phone calls? Did the mother remember the man's name correctly?" (93). DeLillo induces us to rely upon an act of "deeming" akin to the one encouraged by the generalized atmosphere of suspicion inaugurated by the USA Patriot Act and, more generally, by the Global War on Terror. In doing so, readers are invited to reflect upon the uses of the tools of the state of exception so as to better condemn them: "[The] act of 'deeming' takes place in the context of a declared state of emergency in which the state exercises prerogatory power that involves the suspension of law" (Butler 59). A parallel with the detainees in Guantánamo appears inevitable: "They have to be 'deemed dangerous,' but the 'deeming' is not [...] a judgment for which there are rules of evidence" (Butler 71). We may note in passing that Guantánamo is also alluded to when it comes to Elster himself who is "beginning to resemble an x-ray, all eye and socket" (96), "Camp X-Ray" being the other name of Guantánamo (Worthington xii). Dennis gradually and, almost unconsciously, becomes the psychopath likely to be equated with the terrorist *in potentia*.¹⁸

The uncertainty around Jessie's disappearance ought to be fully acknowledged as it forces Elster to confront the arbitrariness of a violence that he has not hesitated to allow being inflicted upon others in an equally arbitrary manner. The pain he experiences echoes the pain of the Arab families, for like him, they had to cope with the mysterious disappearances of members of their families, and like him "Nothing happened that was not marked by her absence" (86). The disappearance of Jessie understood as an event embodies, potentially, the indefinite event of an indefinite detention in an indefinite locus. The Abu Ghraib scandal and the illegal detentions in

¹⁷ Eve explains that "the reader is never given enough evidence to uncover what has happened to Jessie or what has caused her disappearance, only strongly suggestive clues and forking paths" (Eve 580) while Sammarcelli states that "no clue is actually provided in spite of the focalizer's effort to come to terms with the brutal fact of disappearance" (Sammarcelli, np).

¹⁸ "The terrorists are *like* the mentally ill because their mind-set is unfathomable, because they are outside of reason, because they are outside of "civilization," if we understand that term to be the catchword of a self-defined Western perspective that considers itself bound to certain versions of rationality and the claims that arise from them" (Butler 72).

Guantánamo reverberate through her. Similarly, DeLillo displaces the war on terror on the American soil according to an autoimmune principle that is also at stake in the figure of Dennis who is relegated to the rank of the homegrown or the domestic terrorist. Unable to make "the differentiation of self and non-self" (Anderson and Mackay 140), America fails to look at itself and determine what is of itself, and in that failure runs the risk of hurting itself. The state of exception that unleashed and authorized state terrorism may lead to a confusion as to whom the enemy might be:

The administration has now claimed the right to round up people here, including American citizens, place them in confinement indefinitely without access to families and lawyers, and to hold them without charges until the president decides that the "war against terror," or whatever he wants to call it, is over. It's astonishing. The government is claiming the right to strip people of their fundamental right of citizenship if the attorney general merely *infers*—he doesn't have to have any evidence that the person is involved somehow in actions that might be harmful to the United States (Chomsky, *Imperial* 37).

Point Omega is a political fiction that stages the ghostly innerworkings of counterterrorism and that uncovers its "dark side," itself denoted by "the reverse side" (4) of the screen of Douglas Gordon's art installation. The "dark side" enunciated by Dick Cheney directly echoes the words uttered on February 2002 by Donald Rumsfeld who was then Secretary of Defense:

Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are *known knowns*; there are things that we know that we know. We also know there are *known unknowns*; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also *unknown unknowns*, the ones we don't know we don't know. (Morris, *Rumsfeld*)

Although the message seems confusing, the rationale behind is implacable. Yet, the logical demonstration is incomplete according to Slavoj Žižek:

If Rumsfeld thinks that the main dangers in the confrontation with Iraq were the "unknown unknowns," that is, the threats from Saddam whose nature we cannot even suspect, then the Abu Ghraib scandal shows that the main dangers lie in the "unknown knowns"—the disavowed beliefs, suppositions and obscene practices we pretend not to know about, even though they form the background of our public values. (Žižek 85)

Right before the epilogue, the phantomatic presence of the real manifests itself, notwithstanding Elster's attempts to quell it. It is the ugly truth that Elster keeps inside of him and that the novel helps maieutically expel from his body in the form of a secretion which is also a *secret* that forces itself out in the open, a secret which is an unbearably unaesthetic truth for a man who was concerned with what he labelled a "haiku war" (29):

he started coughing and gasping, struggling to bring up phlegm. I thought he might choke. The road was tight and steep, guardrail at the edge, and there was nothing for me to do but keep going. He ejected the mess finally, hawked it up and spewed it into his open hand. Then he looked at it wobbling there and so did I, briefly, a thick stringy pulsing thing, pearly green. There was no place to put it. I managed to yank a handkerchief out of my pocket and toss it over. I didn't know what he saw in that handful of mucus but he kept looking. (97)

It is the real that he disgorges, "the thing that's not the movies" (15), and what he stares at so intently signals both a *rendition* of sort, a "giving back" (33) and a form of "giving up" (33) too, a *surrender*. What is thus discharged is of himself—his mess—which coincides with a greater mess—the mess of America.

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