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

In a 1991 interview titled "I Don't Belong to the Club, to the Seraglio," Jean Baudrillard describes the period in which he studied under Roland Barthes as the point in his intellectual development at which "everything changed."[1] Drawing heavily on Ferdinand de Saussure's study of the linguistic sign, Barthes' exploration of consumer and media culture gave Baudrillard the impetus to study as functionaries of the system of language such "life signs within society" as myths, ideologies, fashion and the media.[2] As Mike Gane notes in *Baudrillard: Critical and Fatal Theory*, Barthes' reading of Saussure not only provided the general methodological guidelines Baudrillard would use throughout his career, but also provided him with the semiological background needed to examine the ways in which all objects interact to form a system that functions much like language.[3] This so-called "system of objects," he argues, is regulated by the same logic of value that regulates signification. This logic, he maintains, is dehumanising in that it renders all elements of the system—including what might otherwise be considered the human subject—objects: by grounding all meaning in the abstract realm of value rather than in the "real" world, consumer ideology envelops us within an artificial system in which we can only regard ourselves as commodities. However, he argues, the very knowledge

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

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

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

landscape of a human presence. As a result of such technol

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

That the world to which both David and his father escape during David's youth is the world of advertising suggests a preference for the simplicity of advertising's messages over the complexity of the mother's. Where the communiqués from David's mother, a figure LeClair describes as one of "pathos and respect, more in contact with memory and dreams, more

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Far from critiquing consumer culture, such toys as David's camera only serve to reinforce it.

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

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

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

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

Yet David continues to hold out for a mode of art that is, indeed, transgressive—like the motorcycle gang that rumbles through his boyhood town and causes his neighbours to look out their windows with "a strange mixture of longing and terror."[55] Although they are "gone in seconds," the gang of twenty marauders leaves a young David with the impression that "a hurricane or plague had struck the town," and as the gang disappears in the distance, he realises

doll" that represents a "menacing bitchy hermaphroditic divinity."[64] Neither man nor woman, the doll dissolves the bar between the terms of the sexual binary Barthes describes and, in so doing, nullifies the hierarchy that binary implies. Rather than substituting *dames*/messieurs for *messieurs*/dames (as Brand's novel does), the hermaphrodite divinity short-circuits the distinction between sexes and, as a result, imparts meaning that is not predicated on value. In other words, the doll is a symbol that allows for what Baudrillard terms ambivalence, or the incessant potential for the destruction of the illusion of value, to emerge. Yet the binary distinction between ambivalence and the logic of value underscores the conundrum of Barthes' call for a "fissuring" of "the meaning system:" if such binaries as *messieurs*/dames demonstrate that meaning under the current system is contingent upon value, then how does the binary *ambivalence*/value exemplify a system of meaning that is not contingent upon value? As David's interest in Zen philosophy demonstrates, however, this apparent paradox ensures the separation of language and value for which Barthes and Baudrillard call.

Referring to John Keats' "Ode On a Grecian Urn," David draws attention to the similarity between the poet's notion of "negative capability" and the distrust of words that marks Zen philosophy. "Beauty was too difficult and truth in the West had died with Crazy Horse,"[65] David explains, before describing Professor Hiroshi Oh's lectures on Zen:

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

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

D. T. Suzuki, whom David references as the author of the text used in Oh's class, explains in *Zen and Japanese Culture* that the philosophy of Zen is invested in engendering a quality ver v

where the utensil grounds the individual in the world and allows for what Suzuki calls a personal

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

Americana

58. Ibid., 125, 205.
59. Ibid., 112, 205.
60. Ibid., 288.
61. Ibid., 291, 307.
62. Ibid., 205.
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid. 289.
65. Ibid., 175.
66. Ibid., 176.
67. John Keats, "To George and Thomas Keats" [Negative Capability] in M. H. Abrams, ed., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Major Authors Edition, Revsd.*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968, 1738-40), 1739.
68. DeLillo, *Americana,* 175.
69. Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993 [1959]), 218.
70. Ibid., 218.
71. Ibid., 5.
72. Ibid., 7.
73. Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects,* trans. James Benedict (New York: Verso, 1997 [1968]), 86.
74. Suzuki, 5.
75. Baudrillard, *System,* 200.
76. Baudrillard, *For a Critique,* 149.
77. DeLillo, *Americana,* 288.
78. Ibid.
79. Ibid.
80. Ibid., 309.
81. Ibid., 317.
82. Ibid.
83. Ibid., 347.
84. Ibid.
85. Ibid., 331.
86. Ibid., 220.