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# Don DeLillo's *Point Omega*, the Anthropocene, and the Scales of Literature

PIETER VERMEULEN\*

## 9/11 fiction after trauma

In a widely noted essay from 2009, Richard Gray diagnoses 9/11 literature with a double failure of the imagination. Gray notes that while canonical 9/11 fictions such as Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children*, Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, and Jay McInerney's *The Good Life* duly acknowledge that after 9/11 "some kind of alteration of imaginative structures is required," they lack "the ability and the willingness imaginatively to act on that recognition" (2009: 134). The first problem is that their assessment of the psychosocial effects of the ashes of 9/11 rarely moves beyond "the preliminary stages of trauma" (2009: 130); the second is that these ashes are invariably gathered into the domestic domain: time and again, Gray writes, 9/11 fiction "retreat[s] into domestic detail" (2009: 134). The upshot of this preoccupation with domestic trauma is a foreclosure of the *global* dimensions of the affective and political changes that the events of 9/11 have unleashed. Against this tormented homelessness, Gray recommends a literature that is more willing to "open up and hybridize American culture" (2009: 153). In his response to Gray, published in the same issue of *American Literary History*, Michael Rothberg finds himself in broad agreement with Gray's assessment and recommendation, and adds that Gray's call for a hybridized America could be enriched by "a complementary centrifugal mapping that charts the outward movement of American power" (2009: 153). What is needed, according to Gray and Rothberg, is less domesticity and more world; what prevents a passage from the former to the latter is a tendency to linger over the disabling psychological effects of trauma.

The characterization of canonical post-9/11 fiction as overly domestic has become somewhat of a critical commonplace, even if Catherine Morley (2011) has shown that attention to the domestic already dominated late 1990s fiction, and Georgiana Banita has observed a growing interest in the global ramifications of the war on terror in what she calls the "second wave" of 9/11 fiction (2012: 166–67). The observations of Gray and Rothberg derive their critical thrust from these critics' shared commitment to transnational and cosmopolitan connectedness, ideas that still figure prominently on critical agendas in different disciplinary formations such as transnational cultural studies, postcolonialism, or world literature. In the face of the contemporary novel's retreat into the domestic, Gray and Rothberg propose that it extends its scope to a global arena, and that it trains its focus on the sites where the global has inflected the local. Still, this overt transnational commitment is underwritten by a second, and less conspicuous, conviction: Gray's and Rothberg's interventions convey an

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undiminished belief that the novel form, if only it would begin to live up to its potential, has the capacity to deliver ever more “otherness,” and can serve as an appropriate imaginative vehicle for addressing the ethical and political problems that face us in the early twenty-first century.

In this essay, I turn to a number of contemporary critical discourses that unsettle the conviction that contemporary challenges can adequately be addressed by repositioning ourselves along the continuum that ranges from the local to the global – by abandoning the domestic impasses of trauma for more worldly vistas. Ursula Heise has described the “theoretical stalemate” in which debates over the relative merits of the local and the global tend to end (2008: 7–8): it makes exactly as much sense to promote local modes of belonging as forms of resistance against capitalist globalization as to deride them for their refusal to transcend their provincialism. Indeed, phenomena like global warming or the sublime abstractions of financialization can arguably not be captured by merely extending the *geographical scope* of the literary imagination, but may well require a *shift in scale* beyond the scale on which human life is used to operating. In other words, addressing these issues may require from contemporary fiction that it learns to entertain spatiotemporal dimensions that the novel form never imagined it would have to imagine. If the novel form has traditionally been invested in the exploration of the fate of the individual and its relation to its social contexts, the discourses on the Anthropocene and on the geological ramifications of human culture I engage with in this essay present the contemporary novel with a new challenge: that of scaling up its imagining of the human to the dimensions of biological and geological time.

After my discussion of cultural geology and the Anthropocene, I go on to show that contemporary fiction has indeed begun to imagine scales that cannot be located on the spectrum between the domestic and the global. I focus on Don DeLillo’s short 2010 novel *Point Omega*, in order to measure its difference from his earlier *Falling Man* (2007), a novel that is often seen as paradigmatic of 9/11 fiction’s failure to move beyond “the endless reenactment of trauma” (Versluys 2009: 20; Dunst 2012: 60), as a work that is “immured in the melancholic state” (Gray 2011: 28). *Point Omega* is less fixated on one particular event: it is written against the background of the Iraq campaign, an incomplete, protracted, and non-climactic period that lacks the readability and narratability of the punctual events of 9/11 (Luckhurst 2012: 721). Like *Falling Man*, it is marked by a lack of narrative progress and imaginative resolution, yet it is organized around a very different evocation of space and time, which radically interrupts the domesticating tendencies that foreclose *Falling Man*’s imagining of the global ramifications of contemporary disaster. *Point Omega* does *not* offer a more worldly perspective, but instead negotiates the relations between the human world and spatiotemporal dimensions in which human concerns hardly figure. While *Falling Man* can be read as what Roger Luckhurst has called a “paradigmatic” trauma novel (2008: 90–97) and as a faithful and even formulaic example of what Rothberg calls traumatic realism, *Point Omega* signals a disruption of the protocols of realism – a disruption that trauma fiction, in spite of the rhetoric of unrepresentability and violence that accompanies it, has not managed to effect (Vermeulen 2012: 549–568). *Point Omega* displays what David Palumbo-Liu, in his account of contemporary fiction, has called “the disruption of literary realism by excessive otherness” (2012: 28–29). When “the invasion of otherness” occasions “the failure of the liberal imagination to make good on its aspirations to accommodate it” (Palumbo-Liu 2012: 61–62), we witness the breakdown of one of the crucial technologies through which the liberal imagination has tried to achieve that

accommodation: the literary novel. While Palumbo-Liu connects this crisis to “increased and intensified globalization” (2012: 143), the example of *Point Omega* – whose slender shape barely qualifies it as a novel – shows that globalization merges with other decidedly non- or post-human powers to subvert the psychological realism that a novel like *Falling Man* perpetuates.

By emphasizing that *Point Omega* not only breaks open the continuum from the global to the local but also moves beyond the compulsive repetitions of trauma, I want to underline another limitation of calls for transnational or cosmopolitan connectedness. These discourses tend to figure intercultural connectedness as geographical extension, and do not account for the transformative role of temporality in contemporary developments in literary form. In his magisterial survey of *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, Peter Boxall organizes the disparate set of concerns that animate contemporary fiction around that fiction’s commitment to register and shape a new temporal awareness. Boxall observes “the glimmering outline of a new kind of temporality” (2013: 39), “new measures of speed and slowness” (2013: 207). He presents *Point Omega* as one such novel that is concerned with “how to understand the transition from one time zone to another” (2013: 22). My reading makes Boxall’s general characterization more specific by showing that DeLillo’s novel figures that transition as a move beyond the temporality of trauma, and its foreclosure of *global* extension, to the nonhuman vastness of *geological* time. For Boxall, contemporary fiction’s renegotiation of temporality conveys “the perception that the narrative mechanics which have allowed us to negotiate our being in the world, to inherit our pasts and to bequeath our accumulated wisdom to the future, have failed” (2013: 217). *Point Omega*’s tentative narrative innovations make visible the limits of traditional narrative mechanics and intimate imaginative challenges that a mere geographical extension beyond domestic trauma cannot address.

### The scales of literature: Cultural geology and the Anthropocene

In a recent essay entitled “The Posthuman Comedy,” Mark McGurl commends Wai Chee Dimock’s influential work on the “deep time” of literary history for relating American literature to other continents and other times. Dimock’s daring juxtapositions of Thoreau and the Hindu *Bhagavad Gita*, for instance, or of Henry James and the *Odyssey*, expand “the tracts of space-time across which literary scholars might draw valid links between author and author” (2012: 533). For McGurl, Dimock instantiates the transnational turn that I have also identified in Gray and Rothberg: for her, as for those critics, an extension of space-time somehow reinvigorates “our very sense of the connectedness among human beings” (2012: 533) across the globe and literature operates as “a remarkably frictionless conduit of transnational sympathy and identification” (2012: 534). Yet if Dimock expands the scope of literary attention to the globe, then for McGurl the globe is not enough, as he argues for the need to supplement the transnational exploration of different locales and temporalities with the more encompassing perspective of a “new cultural geology.” This approach would “position culture in a time-frame large enough to crack open the carapace of human self-concern, exposing it to the idea, and maybe even the fact, of its external ontological preconditions, its ground” (2011: 380). Transnationalism, even in its most adventurous forms (as in the work of Dimock), fails to factor in “scientific knowledge of the spatiotemporal vastness and numerousness of the nonhuman world” (2012:

537). McGurl envisions a literature in which this nonhuman vastness “becomes visible as a formal, representational, and finally existential problem” (2012: 537). He does not find these more capacious spatiotemporal parameters in the realist novel, which typically “eddies in an unheroic present” (2013: 632), but rather in the genres of science fiction and horror. Unlike the literary novel, these genres are “willing to risk artistic ludicrousness in their representation of the inhumanly large and long” (2012: 539). For McGurl, “those rare works of literature that set themselves the task of scaling our vision dramatically up or down or both” (2012: 541) define what he calls the “posthuman comedy” – his term “for the appearance of the problem of scale in modern literary history” (2013: 632).

McGurl’s term “posthuman comedy” usefully foregrounds questions of genre and of the role that literary form can play in intimating nonhuman scales. Yet even if McGurl explicitly excludes the literary novel – as opposed to genre fiction – from the category of posthuman comedy, it persists in a less conspicuous form in his intervention. For one thing, McGurl’s expectation that genre fiction make the problem of scale “visible as a formal, representational, and finally existential problem” (2012: 537) voices a markedly *novelistic* conception of literature. The expectation that literature can recode historical and ontological challenges as existential concerns is traditionally directed at the literary novel, as the main modern literary technology for the management of empathy and desire. To put this point differently, if genre fiction has the means to *evoke* nonhuman otherness, it cannot therefore do the cultural work of making it *matter* as a formal and existential *problem*. Indeed, McGurl’s case would be better served by recording the breakdown of the human in the face of the nonhuman in the very form through which the human has traditionally been imagined: in the literary novel. Even if the impact of nonhuman otherness on human life requires that the narrative repertoire of the traditional novel be revised, this shift can be made palpable by confronting the limits of that repertoire in the very form where the reader expects it to operate. As I show below, this is precisely what happens in *Point Omega*, in which the exposure to nonhuman dimensions strains the limits of the novel form. DeLillo’s novel tests the form’s “elastic powers” only to have these powers radicalized to breaking point through their confrontation with an “excessive otherness” that overwhelms them (Palumbo-Liu 2012: 15, 29). Interestingly, McGurl recognizes that the breakdown of form can evoke the irruption of the nonhuman, even if he again attributes this potential to genre fiction, rather than to the literary novel: if works that aim to scale our visions up or down ultimately “fail to transcend their historical and medial conditions of possibility,” this “testifies to the limits of the human imagination ... but those limits are also what allow us to know and feel our presence in the world as something in particular” (2012: 541–542). Such a confrontation with the limits of the human imagination is precisely what takes place in *Point Omega*.

The overlap between questions of scale, form, and the human is also explored in discourses on the Anthropocene – and this is the second critical domain on which I will draw. The notion of the Anthropocene has gained a wide currency in the last few years, as its relevance for the study of literature and culture has begun to be assessed. Coined by the chemist Paul Crutzen and the biologist Eugene Stoermer in 2000, the term captures the influence of human activity on the world’s geological and ecological make-up, and proposes that man’s dramatic impact on the globe’s chemical composition and climate since James Watt’s

development of a practical steam engine in 1784 be recognized as a geochronological unit in its own right.<sup>1</sup> As “in terms of key environmental parameters, the Earth System has recently moved well outside the range of natural variability exhibited over at least the last half million years” (Crutzen & Steffen 2003: 251), it is time to start thinking of humanity “as a geological force” (Chakrabarty 2012: 2). The Anthropocene, in other words, demands that we must “scale up our imagination of the human” (Chakrabarty 2009: 206), as the human now at once participates in “differently-scaled histories of the planet, of life and species, and of human societies” (Chakrabarty 2012: 14).

While the notion of the Anthropocene opens up the same sublime vistas as McGurl’s posthuman comedy, the conception of human agency that it entails is very different. While McGurl insists on the vanity of human striving in the face of “an absolutely indifferent, starkly inhuman universe” (2012: 548), the Anthropocene inserts the human into geological deep time as a responsible agent. Deep time, in the Anthropocene, is not the human’s other, but rather another plane on which it cannot but exert agency. If anything, it further augments human responsibility and agency: the human is the force that has decisively contributed to global warming, mass extinction of species, and rising sea levels, but it is also the only power that can consciously intervene in the destructive movements it has unleashed. In the Anthropocene, the human needs to think of itself not only as a “human human” (human life as we think we know it), but also as a particularly “nonhuman human” (Chakrabarty 2012: 12), as a force that is of the same order of nonhuman agencies such as rocks, meteors, and volcanoes. We must now think “human agency over multiple and incommensurate scales at once” (Chakrabarty 2012: 1) and think “disjunctively about the human” (Chakrabarty 2012: 2). In the Anthropocene, human life is simultaneously both a geological force and a conscious agent. This is less a question of *evoking* nonhuman dimensions than of figuring the fissure that cultural geology and the Anthropocene locate at the heart of human life. As I will show, this challenge of figuring a disjunction that exceeds the psychological realism of trauma fiction is the one to which *Point Omega* imagines itself to be responding.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Dating the start of the Anthropocene to the 18th century is not uncontroversial, and will remain contested as the term awaits official recognition as a distinctive stratigraphic unit. Crutzen’s and others’ idea that the Anthropocene was inaugurated around 1800 is challenged by the contention that it began with the mass clearing of forests for agriculture about 8,000 years earlier. For a good sketch of these and other issues surrounding the use of the term, including the option of subdividing the period in different stages, see Szerszynski (2012).

<sup>2</sup>Noma Bar’s cover illustration for the Picador edition of the novel, which is only one in a series of stunning covers he has made for recent issues and reissues of DeLillo’s novels, captures this challenge to present a disjunction at the heart of the human. On the model of the famous “duck-rabbit illusion,” it presents a desert landscape with a lizard that, on closer inspection, also outlines two contiguous human faces. The lizard serves as the eye of the most prominent of these faces, which can be read as a way to bend the traditional image of the eyes as a gateway to the soul toward a recognition of evolutionary time at the heart of the human. Bar’s illustration points to the necessity as well as the difficulty of seeing human life *simultaneously* in terms of intersubjective relations and in terms of its irreducible implication in biological and geological time.

### “Horrible minimalism”: *Point Omega*’s slowness

If *Point Omega*, as James Gourley has argued, is “able to engage with the concept [of temporality] at a remove from the pressures of September 11” (2013: 86), it does so through two crucial strategies: its evocation of a contemporary work of art – Douglas Gordon’s *24 Hour Psycho* – and its own temporal organization. Significantly, in *Falling Man* these same two elements served to bind the novel to the repetitions and the lack of progression that mark psychological trauma. *Falling Man* begins in the immediate aftermath of the attacks on the Twin Towers, in “a time and space of falling ash and near night” (2008: 3), as Keith, the novel’s protagonist, leaves one of the collapsing buildings. Both Keith and his estranged wife Lianne fail to work through the impact of the events as they surrender to parallel lives of numbed disconnection. This lack of progression is sealed by the novel’s ending: the last of the novel’s intermittent efforts to inhabit the perspective of one of the terrorists ends when the airplane he hijacks enters the building from which Keith will emerge into the street on which the novel had opened. The novel’s narrative grammar constitutes a loop of endless repetition.

The novel also features several descriptions of unannounced public performances in New York by the fictional David Janiak, known as Falling Man (2008: 219). Letting himself fall and remain suspended by one leg, Janiak’s performances are “painful and highly dangerous,” keeping him bound, as we learn late in the novel, to his “chronic depression due to a spinal condition” (2008: 222). The effect of these performances, one of which Lianne witnesses at close range, is equally destructive for its audience: not only is Janiak’s bodily discomfort contagious (2008: 168), it also keeps Lianne ensnared in the traumas of her personal life – especially her father’s suicide (2008: 169, 218) – as well as those of contemporary U.S. society: Janiak’s posture mimics the weirdly serene image of a man falling from the Towers famously captured by Richard Drew and popularized under the name “Falling Man.” *Falling Man*’s evocation of Janiak’s reenactment of this iconic image is then, in a sense, a double ekphrasis. In this way, DeLillo’s evocation of art itself obeys a rhythm of contagious and compulsive repetition that does not allow the individuals it affects any sense of progression, and keeps them captured in an existence lived “in the spirit of what is ever impending” (2008: 212).

*Point Omega* also evokes a work of art that is itself an evocation of another iconic work: the four central chapters of this decidedly slim novel’s main narrative are framed by two chapters, entitled “Anonymity” and “Anonymity 2,” in which an unnamed character watches and reflects on Douglas Gordon’s *24 Hour Psycho* at the Museum of Modern Art. Gordon’s installation consists of a soundless projection of Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, slowed down so the movie now takes exactly 24 hours. If this double ekphrasis recalls *Falling Man*, the relation between the different moments in this process of remediation point to a rhythm that is very different from the compulsive repetitions of DeLillo’s earlier novel. For one thing, Gordon’s installation constitutes a revision of traditional models of subjectivity. It takes up a film that is often seen as a paradigmatic illustration of Freudian psychoanalysis, only to remove the model of subjectivity that underlies it. The strategy of slowing down the action breaks open the normal pacing of human action and perception in order to remove it from the realm of the eventual (“whatever was happening took forever to happen” [2011: 4]); and further, its decision to slow down the movie to exactly 24 hours synchronizes human life with the cosmic rhythms of night and day – a shift beyond human categories that

the novel's main narrative, which takes place in a desert that refuses to be constrained by human names ("the Sonoran desert or maybe it was the Mojave desert or another desert altogether" [2011: 25]), will repeat. As Gordon's installation also removes the sound that is such a crucial part of the effectiveness of Hitchcock's climactic scenes, the spectacle becomes "all broken motion, without suspense or dread or urgent pulsing screech-owl sound" (2011: 11); the viewer is, in Philip Monk's description, "always out of sync with the time of the action, which sunders our experience" (2011: 60). If *Psycho* is famously a movie about psychosis, a pathological dissociation from reality, Gordon's installation actualizes that dissociation through formal means by evacuating the psychoanalytical (or any other) framework that may still try to account for this disturbance in psychological terms. DeLillo's elaborate ekphrasis of this installation signals his ambition to repeat this depsychologizing operation in the novel form, a form that is traditionally beholden to social and psychological realism. *Point Omega*'s evocation of Gordon's installation announces its intention to disturb customary accounts of human perception and thought, including those that the post-traumatic patterns of *Falling Man* failed to undo.

While it is easy enough to read the novel's engagement with *24 Hour Psycho* as a reflection on the ontology of art, or as another instance of DeLillo's long-standing fascination with slow motion (Marcus 2013: 175), we can't fail to note the extent to which the encounter with this artwork is described in temporal terms. The viewer's "watchfulness" corresponds to "[t]he film's merciless pacing" (2011: 6), which liberates the viewer from customary experiences of suspense and dread and gives access to "pure time," as "[t]he broad horror of the old gothic movie [i]s subsumed in time" (2011: 7). Crucially, this different mode of temporality is *not* described as an escape from human time into a timeless realm that successfully transcends it – instead it is an experience that locates a rupture *within* human life. The film offers an experience that is "*near to elemental life, a thing receding into its drugged parts*" (2011: 12, my italics); it consists of "*film stills on the border of benumbed life*" (2011: 15, my italics). As Laura Marcus has noted, the novel never allows the reader to surrender to the magic of cinema and to forget "film's photogrammic basis, the materiality of film stock" (2013: 175). Gordon's installation uses a VCR, a videocassette, a video projector and a suspended screen, and the novel emphasizes that "this wasn't truly film ... It was videotape" (2011: 14). The first movie of Finley, the movie maker in the novel's central narrative, is entirely based on footage of Jerry Lewis, and relies on "kinescopes," offering an image of "some deviant technological lifeform struggling out of the irradiated dust of the atomic age" (2011: 32).

A temporality that interrupts the customary scale of human experience; a temporality, also, that is as finite and material as human life, and that is therefore less *an alternative to* than *a disjunction within* human experience: this is the very structure of the temporal provocation that cultural geology and the Anthropocene formulate for contemporary fiction. If the main narrative of *Point Omega* engages these issues on a thematic level, as we will see, their temporal implications are already negotiated in the frame around that narrative. The encounter with *24 Hour Psycho* provokes a recalibration of the scales of human experience, as it trains the viewer "to feel time passing, to be alive to what is happening in the smallest registers of motion" (2011: 7). Projecting only two frames a second, the installation foregrounds the interstices of time – what *Point Omega* calls "submicroscopic moments" (2011: 21) – that are neutralized in ordinary perception. These infinitesimal interstices have as much of a disruptive impact on the human scale as the appeals to cosmic vastness that we find in the novel's central narrative; as Mark McGurl notes,

“the scale of the posthuman resides both on the small side of the human and on the large” (2012: 551). McGurl draws attention to “physical processes so fast, so brief in duration,” that foregrounding them in the way *Point Omega* does intimates “[o]ur utter undermining by the small” (2012: 552). Slowing down narrative draws attention to the infinitesimal, and it is simultaneously “like watching the universe die over a period of about seven billion years” (DeLillo 2011: 59). McGurl associates these procedures with the “horrible minimalism” of the workshop story on the model of Raymond Carver’s short fiction (2012: 552), which helps make sense of the remarkable slimmness of DeLillo’s novel. If *24 Hour Psycho* is a defamiliarized film narrative situated in the darkness of an exhibition room, *Point Omega* offers a pared-down narrative captured between two “Anonymities” – or chapters entitled “Anonymity,” at least.

It is instructive to distinguish this set-up from one with which it unavoidably resonates – Vladimir Nabokov’s dictum, in the first sentence of *Speak, Memory*, that “our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness” (1966: 19). While Nabokov’s second sentence, which refers to man’s “forty-five hundred heartbeats an hour,” immediately opposes cosmic vastness to man’s biological nullity, *Point Omega* locates the tension between different temporalities at the very heart of human life. The framing chapters do not promote an alternative artistic temporality that escapes narrative, but rigorously maintain the continuous interaction between art and the human. They also attach this interaction to the novel’s minimal plot, as part of the anonymous narrator’s experience in the exhibition room is the passage of two visitors who, the reader can infer, are the filmmaker and the aging academic whose relation takes up most of the middle chapters.

This disjunctive temporality is also encrypted in the way the novel reflects on its title – a title that DeLillo, as Mary Holland has established, had been entertaining for several of his novels since 1982 (2013: 10). Lifted from the work of the Jesuit thinker Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “Point Omega” – or, more customarily, “Omega Point” – names a state of maximal consciousness and complexity to which the universe, according to Teilhard, is evolving (Marcus 2013: 176). Richard Elster, the aging academic turned defense consultant in the novel’s central narrative, glosses this teleological notion as “[a] leap out of our biology” (2011: 67), as “a sublime transformation of mind and soul” (2011: 91). The novel’s last mention of this notion gives the lie to this dream of transcendence, as we witness Elster grieving over the disappearance of his daughter. His loss reconnects her – and him – to a fleshy contingency that the novel does not allow human life to overcome: “The omega point has narrowed, here and now, to the point of a knife as it enters a body. All the man’s grand themes funneled down to local grief, one body, out there somewhere, or not” (2011: 124). Against Elster’s fantasy of transcendence, the novel’s structure presents the disjunctions between narrative rhythm, biological change, and geological time as integral to human life. As I already remarked, this brings its peculiar temporality in dialogue with discourses of cultural geology and the Anthropocene. In a sense, this connects the novel to a *different* Teilhard who has recently been recovered in work on the Anthropocene: *not* the teleological thinker of the Omega Point, but the thinker who, together with the Russian geochemist and naturalist Vladimir Vernadsky, is credited as a precursor of the notion of the Anthropocene through their coinage in the 1920s of the term “noösphere,” a notion that refers to “the anthropogenic transformation of the Earth system” (Steffen et al. 2011: 844). *Point Omega*’s experiments with temporality show how these transformations make it imperative to think disjunctively about human life, rather than to imagine its transcendence.

### “This was desert”: *Point Omega*’s vastness

The novel’s central narrative fills in the temporal template its frame provides by staging a confrontation between human finitude and the geological time that is one of its constituents. It focuses on the encounter between Jim Finley, a young filmmaker who recalls DeLillo’s earlier filmmakers in *The Names* and *The Body Artist*, and Richard Elster, a “defense intellectual” (2011: 35) who has retired to the desert after he had provided the Iraq campaign with “words and meaning” (2011: 37). This gesture of old age withdrawal not only recalls *Underworld*, but also the setting of DeLillo’s play *Love-Lies-Bleeding* (Coward 2012: 45). One way to read the novel is then as an attempt by DeLillo to recycle a number of his classical narrative devices for an exploration of a new temporality. Indeed, even if this withdrawal may seem to signal a choice for a melancholia that recalls *Falling Man* (De Marco 2012: 20) and an attempt to explore “the outer limits of the temporality of trauma” (Dunst 2012: 61), it is remarkable to what extent the narrative avoids the repetitions and instantaneity that mark the narrative grammar of trauma. Instead, the narrative reads like a sustained training session in protracted eventlessness: one character is living out the afterlife of his tangential involvement in a war in which he “was not one of the strategists” (2011: 35), while the other is preparing for a movie that will never be made.

The novel describes the desert as “the protoworld ... the seas and reefs of ten million years ago” (2011: 25). For Elster, the “Pleistocene desert” is located in “deep time, epochal time” (2011: 91). The novel associates the city Elster and Finley have fled with “the slinking time of watches, calendars, minutes left to live” (2011: 75); in the desert, urban devices like laptops and cell phones are “overwhelmed by landscape” (2011: 82), a landscape marked by “the force of geological time, out there somewhere, the string grids of excavators searching for weathered bone” (2011: 24). This last formulation makes clear that human life is implicated in this geological dimension; it portrays “the mutual penetration between people and the landscape characteristic of the anthropocene era” (Laist 2010: 90), a concern that Randy Laist has traced back through DeLillo’s oeuvre to the famous sunset descriptions in *White Noise*. In *Point Omega*, Elster works hard to resist the sense of sublimity that the sunsets in *White Noise* still evoke: “To Elster sunset was human invention, our perceptual arrangement of light and space into elements of wonder” (2011: 22). For Elster, there is “nothing but distances, not vistas or sweeping sightlines but only distances” (2011: 22); “There’s none of the usual terror ... time is enormous ... Time that precedes us and survives us” (2011: 56). While Elster believes geological time can offer a refuge from war, the novel presents both war and deep time as related domains that destabilize human life, even as they are decisively inflected by human activity.<sup>3</sup> The Anthropocene makes visible that particular human lives suffer the effects of

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<sup>3</sup>For a reading of the novel that does present it as “a return to the natural world and to the rhythms inherent within it as an antidote to the poisons of technological overkill” see Butler (2011: 102–103). De Marco incorrectly reads Elster’s turn to the desert as a disavowal of “extinction understood as death produced by the conflict in Iraq” (2012: 21). See also Dunst’s related argument that “*Point Omega* is set in a traumatized present outside of history” (2012: 60), rather than, as I am arguing, engaging in a more radical reimagining of temporality.

environmental changes that are themselves the result of accumulated human activities that never intended those consequences; *Point Omega*'s articulation of geological time and war then shows that the U.S. foreign campaigns that serve as the novel's background have a comparable structure. Wars, like climate change, are what Timothy Morton calls man-made "hyperobjects," assemblages that are something more than objects in that "they're massively distributed and so are unavailable to immediate experience" (2010).<sup>4</sup> When Morton notes that "[w]e have created things that we can hardly understand, let alone control, let alone make sensible political decisions about" (2010), he is primarily thinking of global warming, but *Point Omega* also qualifies war as something we can only imagine if we change our customary modes of thinking and perception.

Finley's original film project still approaches war as a matter of individual responsibility. He wants to interview Elster in "[o]ne continuous take," "[j]ust a man and a wall," in which the man "relates the complete experience" (2011: 26–27). The minimalism of this endeavor inevitably invites comparison to the ambition of DeLillo's novel itself – a novel that works in a form that has historically excelled at both "depicting the interior life of a singular consciousness and casting a wide narrative gaze over a complex social universe" (Woloch 2003: 19). If Finley's proposed project represents the cinematographic counterpart of the former (psychological) option, he explicitly opposes it to the counterpart of the latter (social) option: "There's a Russian film, feature film, *Russian Ark*, Aleksandr Sokurov. A single extended shot, about a thousand actors and extras, three orchestras, history, fantasy, crowd scenes, ballroom scenes" (2011: 27). *Point Omega* refuses both these options – after all, as I showed in the previous section, it has already found the cinematographic counterpart that it needs in order to bring into relief the co-implication of human time and geological time, of human agency and natural force, that neither psychological nor social realism can capture.

*Point Omega* can be read as an attempt to overcome the reliance of the novel form on distinctive events and identifiable individual agents, which can be considered as limitations on the novel's ability to abandon conventional realisms and imagine the geological ramifications of culture. The anonymity of the obsessive observer in the novel's two "Anonymity" sections is one aspect of this exercise; the sustained eventlessness of the central narrative is another. There is exactly one plot twist in the novel, which takes the form of a missed event: Elster's daughter, who is visiting, suddenly goes missing while Elster and Finley

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<sup>4</sup>Mary Favret usefully distinguishes between the concepts of "wartime" and "war" when she defines wartime as "the experience of those living through but not in war" (2009: 9). "Wartime" underlines how "war at a distance" becomes part of the barely registered substance of everyday life in countries that are at war abroad. While Favret's book draws on a romantic archive, one difference with the recent campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan is that the latter take place in a globalized world where the relative distance of wartime can at each moment spill over into war at home – where, indeed, the threat of such a shift sustains the normalization of wartime as a general condition. For U.S. audiences, then, contemporary wartime has a structure that is comparable to that of the Anthropocene; wartime, like the Anthropocene, is an assemblage in which one is minimally implicated as an agent, and which can never be definitively outsourced. For an evocation of the resonances between the Iraq campaign and the Anthropocene, see Scranton (2013).

are away on an excursion.<sup>5</sup> The novel scrupulously resists developing this twist into a detective story. There are rumors of a stalker, and a knife is found, but the desire to individualize responsibility and to identify the events that led to the disappearance is consistently frustrated. The novel invites the reader to sustain that ignorance, and to entertain new ways to think of agency, action, and responsibility. When Finley faces up to the impossibility of identifying the suspected stalker,<sup>6</sup> he decides to drive Elster out of the desert and back to the city. On the way, he gets a phone call, but this potential clue is disabled as the display identifies the caller as “blocked caller” (2011: 125–126) – the same message that had earlier prevented the identification of the alleged stalker. The novel later reaffirms the futility of identification and the necessity of accepting anonymity when the anonymous viewer, in the novel’s last section, is approached by a woman trying to make sense of the film and asking (about the murder on screen) whether she really “want[s] to know who’s stabbing him”: “He decided on the answer no” (2011: 133). When he tries to recall the name of Janet Leigh’s character, he accepts defeat (2011: 137). Through its insistence on non-identification, *Point Omega* frustrates narrative expectations and points to the limits of all too human (and all too novelistic) concerns.

Near the end of the novel the relations between human life and geological time have been reversed (and this, more than anything, makes it impossible to read *Point Omega* as merely an extension of the trauma template). The indifference and the vastness of geological time are no longer incorporated into a psychological drama; this vast anonymity has overwhelmed the bare outlines of a human plot, and come to assert itself as a blockage on the human scale it encompasses. This blockage is a powerful reminder of the challenge to reconfigure human agency, a movement that is underlined when the novel takes the reader back to the room at the MoMA to observe an artwork that, like DeLillo’s novel, refuses to offer the narrative and affective satisfactions of a thriller, and instead reconfigures narrative elements in a way that positions them “outside all categories, open to entry” (2011: 129), as elements that contemporary fiction is reconfiguring into new constellations of agency and worldliness. *Point Omega* breaks with the conventions of traumatic realism, not, as Gray and Rothberg recommend, in order to adopt a more transnational or cosmopolitan perspective, but in other to intimate ethical and political challenges that cannot be represented along the (all-too-human) spectrum between the domestic and the global. This also explains why the novel revisits crucial tropes from DeLillo’s work – deserts,

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<sup>5</sup>The novel subtly undercuts the irruptiveness of this event by already mourning Elster’s daughter Jessie before she disappears. I am thinking especially of the elegiac tone in passages such as the following, in which the combination of the past tense, the suggestion of iterative narration, and the emphasis on Jessie’s fleetingness already seems to present the cohabitation of Elster, Finley, and the daughter as complete, as decidedly a thing of the past: “We shared a bathroom, she and I, but she rarely seemed to be in there. A small airline kit, the only trace of her presence, was tucked into a corner of the windowsill. She kept soap and towels in her bedroom ... Her bed was never made. I opened the bedroom door and looked several times but did not enter” (2011: 62).

<sup>6</sup>Acceptance here also means facing up to the temporality of the desert, and refusing the pathetic fallacy that reads the landscape as a reflection of human concerns. If initially, “every passing minute [was] a function of our waiting” (2011: 110) and the desert seems “clairvoyant” (2011: 109), Finley comes to accept that it is indifferent to human concerns: “[i]t was too vast, it was not real... the indifference of it,” as it refuses to yield an answer or a corpse (2011: 116).

sunsets, withdrawals: they are part of a strategy to reorganize novelistic material from the past into a form that is more responsive to the exigencies of an uncertain future. The novel ends with a return to the artwork that served as its model for posing that question – which is also to say that it has not yet managed to answer it.

### Conclusion: The novel and the human

Through the device of a protagonist who worked as a defense intellectual, *Point Omega* ponders the question of cultural causation – of the impact that rarified cultural artifacts can have on worldly matters. Elster is the author of a controversial scholarly article on the word “rendition” – a word that, in the phrase “extraordinary rendition,” had become one of the enabling euphemism of the war on terror. Elster’s article, however, only obliquely alludes to the term’s use “as an instrument of state security” (2011: 44), and is instead occupied with the word history of the term, “with references to Middle English, Old French, Vulgar Latin and other sources and origins” (2011: 42). The essay’s refusal to pose questions of “crime and guilt” (2011: 44) is widely criticized as a disabling evasion of worldly responsibility. Yet the afterlife of the article does not stop there, as it earns Elster an invitation to “freshen the dialogue, broaden the viewpoint” (2011: 36) in strategic discussions over U.S. military campaigns. Elster and the strategists there coin new words in order “to create new realities overnight,” “words that would yield pictures eventually and then become three-dimensional” (2011: 36).

Elster’s job description comes close to the task I have ascribed to DeLillo’s novel: that of moving beyond available imaginative templates and of devising new forms to reflect, map, and energize altered understandings of human life as it finds itself overwhelmed by forces it has itself helped generate. Yet Elster’s mission does not model itself on the novel form, but rather on the haiku, a genre that, for Elster, has the power to alter people’s relation to “transient things”: it “[b]ares everything to plain sight,” allows people to “[s]ee what’s there and then be prepared to watch it disappear” (2011: 37). The novel chastises this destructive fantasy while proposing a sustained disjunction that learns to maintain both human agency and its geological ramifications. The difference between the novel form and the haiku, in the world of *Point Omega*, is conceived as the opposition between two kinds of temporality. *Point Omega* is not the only contemporary novel to which a reimagining of temporality is crucial. As Peter Boxall has remarked, “DeLillo’s relationship with lateness, singular as it is, resonates with a group of late stylists who register a kind of untimeliness, and who produce forms with which to explore a disjunction between newly passing time and the expired narratives with which we have made time readable” (2013: 30). As *Point Omega* shows, the intrusion of the Anthropocene is one crucial aspect of the untimeliness of the present, and of the need for contemporary fiction to think beyond the continuum ranging from the local to the global.

The interface of literature and the Anthropocene is often referred to an environmental thematics: from Rob Nixon’s study of aesthetic figurations of the environmentalism of the poor (2011), over Ursula Heise’s eco-cosmopolitanism (2008), to the mobilization of Henry David Thoreau as a witness of climate change (Primack & Miller-Rushing 2012). My reading of *Point Omega* argues that the recalibration of human life that geological change initiates also generates a fundamental reorganization of ethical and political categories, and of the forms

through which these categories are transmitted, inculcated, and imagined. Claire Colebrook has remarked that the Anthropocene calls for a rethinking of “the terms of our ethical vocabulary – justice, fairness, respect, forgiveness, hospitality or virtue” (2012: 185, 187–188). As DeLillo’s formal and thematic meditations on scale suggest, this rethinking will affect the cultural forms that have traditionally consolidated the ethical and political terms that are now under erasure. At the same time, the turn to temporality in contemporary fiction suggests that it is easier to formulate the challenge to conceive of a new form of the human than to offer a determinate response to that challenge. Indeed, it is significant that *Point Omega* worries over the residual possibilities for cultural work to impact on the ways of the world – and even Elster’s cynical recalibration of transience in times of war finally proves powerless in the face of “priorities, statistics, evaluations, rationalizations” (2011: 38). This raises the question whether the novel form will be able to respond to that imaginative challenge, or whether its undeniable limitations as a cultural force will limit its role to communicating the urgency of a new law of the earth it is no longer able to legislate.

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