

DeLillo's Cultural Comedy:  
A Humour Study of Don DeLillo's Early Novels

by

Junaid Ahmed

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

at

York University  
Toronto, ON  
Dec, 2015

© Junaid Ahmed  
2015

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

## PART ONE: The Philosophy of Humour

Introduction .....	4
Why Humour? .....	9
The Three Theories .....	13
Bergson's Presence: What does it Really Mean to be Absentminded? .....	27
Dark Humour .....	31

## PART TWO: DeLillo's Early Novels

<i>Americana: A Commercial Reel of the Fear of Death</i> .....	38
<i>End Zone's Inverse Humour: The Joy of Nuclear Annihilation</i> .....	56
<i>Ratner's Star: Entropic Humour and Moholean Relativity</i> .....	77

EPILOGUE.....	93
---------------	----

WORKS CITED.....	94
------------------	----

PART ONE:

The Philosophy of Humour

## INTRODUCTION

One of the funniest scenes in DeLillo's pseudo-science fiction novel, *Ratner's Star*, takes place between a fourteen-year-old boy-genius and a suspicious maintenance man who calls himself Howie Weeden, "the fume sewer man" (39). Based on his inexplicable excitement and persistence to not take "no" for an answer, it's easy to believe his aim is to take advantage of the novel's kid protagonist. Weeden insists on showing the boy, Billy Twillig, around the astronomical research facility at which Billy has only just arrived. The boy tries reasoning with Weeden, explaining how he is needed in the morning and must go to bed, but Weeden persists, trying to capture the boy's interest with offers of travelling deep into the restricted areas of the facility where there are "fume sewers, evaporators, recyclers, backup spewing filters... accelerators, storage rings, proton impactors" and "collision machines" (39). Billy, who appears to be aware of the danger of a stranger, if not his own responsibility to be well rested for the morning, declines all of Weeden's offers, including a chance to see a python. It is only when Weeden mentions spying on a naked woman that Billy says, "Let's go" (40).

The boy's unequivocal response, swift and funny as it is, is merely the precursor to the humour that follows. The next passage begins with a kind of stipulation to Weeden's offer:

"If anything happens, grab my tongue," he (Weeden) said.

"I don't understand."

"Just be ready to grab my tongue."

"I want to know why."

"I never had to tell anybody before. They always knew. You tell somebody to grab your tongue, you don't have to say why. Just if I slam out, go for the tongue, that's all I'm saying."

“How often does this happen?”

“More often than not.” (40)

Weeden’s use of the term “slam out” is as close as he gets to anything resembling an explanation to Billy. Presumably, Weeden suffers from seizures – hence his request that Billy grab his tongue, so he won’t bite himself when he loses control of his muscles. Weeden’s expectation of Billy (and everyone, for that matter) is undoubtedly bizarre – but the reader does not have much time to dwell on it. Stipulation or not, the very prospect of seeing the woman appears to be a pipe dream. Weeden, in a run on sentence that exemplifies the anomaly of the situation, describes how “you can see her in a ceiling reflector if you look through a hole in the wall standing on a bench in the workroom over near the next sector up one level” (40). Regardless of whether or not this is plausible, Weeden stays true to his word (for the most part). Billy finds himself staring through a “small vertical slit” while standing on Weeden’s shoulders (Billy is not tall enough to stand on the bench). The woman is there – however she is fully clothed and, to Billy’s surprise, an acquaintance that he had made on that first day at the institute. When he gets spotted (his eye is magnified on the ceiling of the woman’s bathroom due to a complex system of mirrors – a satirical nod to *Ratner’s Star* preoccupation with mathematics) he continually demands that she undress despite her disparagement of Billy as a sad and wretched boy. Weeden, on all fours with Billy on his back, encourages the boy to continue talking to the woman by requesting that she reveal herself in various ways. Billy responds by saying, “You didn’t tell me there’d be conversation. I expected to see things without this talk.” (42). The scene ends with the woman leaving the bathroom and Weeden stating that he “played a trick” on Billy because he knew that she already finished her bath. However, there is no time to process the strangeness of this trick because Weeden says: “I think It’s here.” When Billy asks, “What’s

here?” Weeden says: “I can feel it. It’s here. I’m getting ready to slam. The tongue. Prepare to go for the tongue. I’m slamming out” (43).

It is likely that the reader, at one or more points during Billy’s encounter with Weeden, either burst out laughing (as I did), broke into a smile (suggesting that he or she was “laughing inside”), or at least acknowledged the *incongruity* of the situation, the fact that a fourteen-year-old boy had been abruptly approached (by someone probably at least three times his age) for the chance to sneak a peak, through an advanced but incidental system of one thin hole and multiple mirrors, at a lady taking a bath in a cutting-edge astronomical facility (the boy had been called to this facility, by the way, because he was the only living person who may have had what it took to decode a transmission from outer space believed to be sent by aliens). And we cannot forget the ambiguous motivations of the maintenance man, his unfortunate medical condition and his bizarre nickname – more additions to DeLillo’s jumble of themes, characters and circumstances that supply him with his sense of humour.

Scholarship on DeLillo mirrors the heterogeneous nature of this scene from *Ratner’s Star*, insofar as literary critics have approached his work with their own exceptional diversity. Critical analyses direct attention to such topics as consumerism, the narrative construction of events, the profane, the mundane, the environment, simulacra, technology, the intellectualization of genre, Tibetan Buddhism, visual poetics and terrorism. This should not come to us as a surprise, however, considering the fact that DeLillo’s own writing is as diverse as his critics. His novels center on characters in professions both commonplace and extraordinary: a television network executive, an American professor of Hitler Studies, a rock star who walked off the stage, a risk analyst, a philosophically inclined college football player who enjoys nuclear annihilation and other forms of mass destruction but doesn’t know why, a lawyer, and, as I have

already mentioned, a boy genius tasked with decoding a message from outer space. These character summaries, brief as they may be, are clear indications of DeLillo's penchant for heterogeneity. The medley of scholarship on DeLillo is a testament to this fact.

I would like to suggest that although there is an impressive assortment of critical work on DeLillo, a very large gap remains to be filled. Approaching an author, whose works are as heterogeneous as DeLillo's, from multiple angles is no doubt a fruitful task that offers a wealth of interpretations. But multiplicity does not necessarily allow us to see the big picture. It allows us to see Tibetan Buddhism from one angle and terror psychology from another – but it does not allow us to properly see both these and other angles as units within DeLillo's vast cultural inquiry. Humour studies, on the other hand, is preoccupied with incongruity and the absurdity of synthesizing disparate parts. Theorists of humour can offer analyses of DeLillo's writing that might bring us closer to the big picture, to the power, in his novels, that resides at the core of each cultural topic: this is *mystery*, in and of itself, described by Thomas LeClair as “the single most important value word in [DeLillo's] fiction, nonfiction, and interviews” (15).

This paper is based on the premise that there is one subject that theorists generally have neglected to explore in their attempts to decipher DeLillo's elusive writing: humour studies. Scholarship on DeLillo's sense of humour is sparse. There are a few writings on the theme of laughter in *Underworld* (Nadel, Secord), but these critics are more concerned with the symbolic implications of laughter than the steps necessary to create laughter in a fictional text. Perhaps the most eminent scholar of DeLillo's humour is Joseph Dewey, who has led inquires with his articles on the early novels and DeLillo's National Book Award winner, *White Noise*, a novel which has come to epitomize DeLillo's talents for dark humour. Dewey's articles approach DeLillo as a satirist and are therefore insightful for their analysis of parodied violence and

consumerism. But Dewey's writings, with their emphasis on satire, also treat humour as a function more than a technique, insofar as they are commentaries on the culture DeLillo is parodying rather than a study of DeLillo through the lens of humour studies. In short, there is no sustained analysis of humour in DeLillo's writing, no study that breaks down DeLillo's humour into its constituent parts. So much is left unsaid about DeLillo's novels when we fail to acknowledge and interpret the building blocks of his humour – the punch lines, the unmet expectations, the insane turns of thought, the dead pan prose.

In this paper, I will showcase DeLillo's comic genius. My aim is not only to place DeLillo in the pantheon of great humour writers, but also to illustrate how his humour synthesizes vastly different topics as part of a multi-layered critique of American culture. When I use the term "American culture," I refer specifically to a culture in which the line between reality and the mimicry and simulation *of* reality have become blurred due to the nonstop dissemination of images and ideas through powerful groups such as the state and television and advertising industries. To be clear, anyone with a modicum of knowledge of DeLillo scholarship can tell you that this consideration of culture is nothing new. Mark Osteen, in his book *American Magic and Dread*, is quick to mention that DeLillo is read "both as a denouncer and as a defender of post-modern culture" because of the way his novels satirize the parlance of various cultural forms (3). He has written violent thrillers and conspiracy theory novels, sports and science fiction novels, he has obsessed over pop music, advertising, futurism, military tactics, film and television. What I would like to propose is that by reading DeLillo through theories of humour, one realises that his novels alert us to American culture's propensity to both dehumanize and mysticize, to monotonize human beings but also to offer them transcendental opportunities that reaffirm their humanness. This paradox is made possible by the *incongruous* nature of DeLillo's writing, in



particular his tendency towards heterogeneity, as illustrated in the overwhelming “fume sewer man” scene from Ratner’s *Star*. *Incongruity* is a term that has been defined in various ways by various humour theorists, but at its most basic level it refers to two or more conflicting things that are brought together in such a manner as to create humour. I hope to show, over the course of this project, how this kind of humour works to reveal the monotony and transcendentalism of American culture in three of DeLillo’s early and too often neglected novels: *Americana*, *End Zone* and *Ratner’s Star*.

### WHY HUMOUR?

Aside from the fact that there is a gaping hole in the section of DeLillo studies that pertains to humour, there are a number of reasons why any literary analysis would benefit from humour studies. I wish to briefly mention these points because, although it has made progress as a discipline in the last few decades, humour studies still has a long way to go before it can exercise as much clout as other methods of philosophical inquiry. John Morreall, one of humour studies’ chief proponents, wrote the following in 1987:

There are few things on which most people place more value than having a good laugh. Countless questionnaires have ranked “a sense of humor” as among the two or three things we find most essential in a spouse or friend. Humor abounds in our literature and art. And yet it takes a lot of searching through philosophy journals and university course catalogs to discover anything about laughter and humor being written or taught by a philosopher. (*Laughter and Humor* viii)

Although written nearly thirty years ago, Morreall's critique remains relevant today. In a more recent publication, Morreall writes at length about the merits of comedy over the more widely recognized and respected genre of tragedy. Here, he comes to a similar conclusion: "Dozens of articles have been published about whether or not we pity Anna Karina or fear Dracula, but no one asks whether we are really amused by Falstaff or Daffy Duck" ("Comic Relief" 30).

Morreall goes on to describe in detail how there is an inherent "mental rigidity" in the tragic form due to the hero's stubbornness, lack of imagination and resignation to fate (80). He argues that tragedy is restrictive largely because:

Tragic heroes are role models for the mental rigidity of emotions. They often face problems with simplistic, standard conceptual schemes that divide the world into good and bad, honorable and dishonorable, etc. Sophocles' Antigone, for instance, thinks that she must either obey Creon's order not to bury her brother, and thereby dishonor her family – or bury her brother, and be executed as a traitor. But any comedy writer would tell you that's a false dilemma. In the same predicament, Lucille Ball would get someone else to remove the body at night, or stage a chariot crash as a diversion, snatching the body away in the confusion. The world of tragedy is full of problems that would be quickly solved in comedy, with a little imagination. (79)

Because comedy distances itself from emotions, he argues, it "fosters a more rational, critical, creative attitude that is more adaptive" (81). Morreall claims that this creative attitude is necessary for the complexities that comedies tend to have, which, when compared to tragedies, include more characters, more types of characters and intersecting plot lines (79). Unfortunately, Morreall does not give an example of comedy's "complex conceptual schemes" (79), which

opens him to attack from fans and proponents of tragedy. Nevertheless, I will support Morreall's claim throughout this project by providing examples of my own. Few writers showcase the complexities of humour better than Don DeLillo. One need not look further than his first novel, *Americana*, to find an overwhelming cast of characters that push and pull at the protagonist's conception of the American dream. Still, one must be wary of the claim that the heroes of comedies are more rational than those of tragedies. David Bell, the protagonist of *Americana*, creates more problems than he solves. Of course, one might argue that the monotony of capitalism and the deindividuating tendencies of the American dream are what truly caused him to leave his high paying job – but that does not address the fact that David Bell is a deeply disturbed, egotistical womanizer who rarely elicits our sympathy. Although Bell, along with many other DeLillo protagonists, don't always fall into Morreall's categorization of comic heroes as more imaginative and rational than their tragic counterparts, we can at least say that their humorous circumstances allow *readers* to exercise creativity and rationality in their attempts to understand the protagonist's thoughts and actions.

At face value, Morreall's argument is about proving to his readers how comedies are more thought-provoking than tragedies – a bold, but much needed endeavour, considering humour theory's modest presence in the academy. Still, one must remember that theories of humour are not as eminent as theories of tragedy, in large part because humour is so vast in scope and subjective in experience – meaning that defining it and creating a methodology is a very difficult (some would argue *impossible*) task. At the same time, one might argue the opposite – that the very elusiveness of humour is what grants it its inclusivity. Andrew Stott, for example, is nearly as resentful as Morreall when it comes to the denigration of comedy in favour of tragedy (28). However, his view of humour in relation to other forms is much less rigid:

...comedy permeates every aspect of human life and is as common to living as breathing. As such, it is better understood as a tonal quality rather than a structural one, something related to narrative, character and plot, but also independent of them. Considered this way, comedy is a mood, viewpoint, or sentiment capable of manifesting itself in many places and at any time, irrespective of genre. Frequently it appears in a series of themes that seek to question the things that we take for granted. Like water in rocks, comedy has a particular talent for finding the cracks in the world and amplifying them to the point of absurdity. (2)

Stott goes on to use such phrases as “diverse environments” and “multilateral” in order to describe comedy. He concludes that it is “at once a literary tradition with identifiable structural qualities, and a way of describing isolated events or passages within other types of work” (3). I would like to point out here that Stott’s definition of “comedy” is synonymous with my use of the word humour. This is especially important because I wish to read DeLillo not as a “comic” author (in the sense that a *genre* defines his work), but as an author who has many “isolated events” and “passages” that are amusing to the reader. Like Stott, I believe that humour is a viewpoint “capable of manifesting itself in many places and at any time, irrespective of genre.” DeLillo is not usually categorized as an author who writes in the genre of “humour” or “comedy.” Perhaps the reason DeLillo has not carried these monikers the way Kurt Vonnegut or Mark Twain have is because of the diversity of his writing. In the next section I will consider multiple theorists who agree that the abundance of incongruent themes in a work of literature is an invitation to use humour as an analytical lens, more than it is an opportunity to sift through multiple topics one by one, as the ongoing trend in DeLillo scholarship suggests. What Stott

offers with his insight is the notion that, as heterogeneous and chalked full of nuance as it is, the whole world – not just an overtly humorous form – is the playground of humour. Readers of DeLillo will know that he is a world builder. With his creation of underground networks, intellectual black markets, incongruous characters, and wild variances in theme, DeLillo builds worlds that are rife with humour. This is how he finds “the cracks in the world and amplif(ies) them to the point of absurdity.” With Stott’s theory in mind, we might now see the slit in the wall that Billy peers through as a *metaphorical crack*, a peephole through which we see the absurdity of placing humankind’s push for continual scientific progress in the mind of a libidinous teenager who would rather spy on a naked woman through an elaborate and nearly impossible system of angles and mirrors, even if it means endangering himself with a suspicious maintenance man who suffers from seizures and expects people to grab his tongue without any valid explanation. As my long and winding analysis suggests, the absurdity in DeLillo’s humour is complicated, involving multiple layers, both obvious and subtle. In the next section, I address several theories of humour which will prove useful in analysing DeLillo’s heterogeneous novels.

### **THE THREE THEORIES**

Perhaps the greatest strength and weakness of humour studies is its inextricable bond to the diversity of human subjectivity. It is a strength because it opens up a wealth of interpretive possibilities; it is a weakness because subjectivity can impede the creation of a methodological framework. Mood, life experience, prejudices, perceptions, desires and needs are all factors that influence one’s ability to feel amused (Martin 174) – which means that one person’s idea of humour might be completely different from another’s. Despite this potential shortcoming, there are baselines through which we can objectively analyse humour. Most contemporary humour

critics acknowledge three pivotal models: the Superiority Theory, the Relief Theory and the Incongruity Theory. Given my preoccupation with synthesis and heterogeneity, this research project will use the Incongruity Theory – mostly as a foothold for achieving more nuanced ideas of humour specific to DeLillo’s writing. Nevertheless, it is useful to briefly describe the other humour theories, since, as we will see, they are not necessarily at odds with one another.

The superiority theory is based on the premise that the one who is laughing is superior to the object or subject of laughter. This idea can be traced back to Plato, who was bothered by what he saw as the hostility of humour. He was especially skeptical of those passages in *the Iliad* and *the Odyssey* where Gods would laugh at mortals from the heights of Mount Olympus. “If anyone represents men of worth as overpowered by laughter,” he writes in *The Republic*, “we must not accept it, much less if Gods” (388). Plato’s critique was extended in the decidedly realist writings of Thomas Hobbes, who believed in the idea that humans are constantly in competition with one another, meaning laughter is the result of our amusement at ourselves winning while others are losing. Laughter, as he writes in the *Leviathan*, is “caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleases them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves” (1.6). Prior to the Enlightenment, Plato and Hobbes were the prevailing theorists of humour. John Morreall traces the development of the Superiority Theory to its modern day adherents, namely Roger Scruton, who sees humour as an “attentive demolition” of a person or something connected in some way to a person (168).

Despite its support from select contemporary theorists, the Superiority Theory is largely outdated. Morreall attributes its current unpopularity to the theory’s anti-social insinuations, specifically the fact that if the Superiority Theory were correct, it would “have no place in a well

ordered society, for it would undermine cooperation, tolerance, and self-control” (*Comic Relief* 7). In fact, the Superiority Theory fell out of popularity as early as the eighteenth century, when Francis Hutcheson critiqued Hobbes’s narrow understanding of humour. The Superiority Theory suggests that laughter cannot result out of anything other than a comparison of ourselves to others “or some former state of ourselves” (9). This is simply not true. Hutcheson uses the example of how we laugh at odd metaphors or similes without comparing ourselves to anybody. Hutcheson also questions the link between superiority and laughter by pointing out how we often feel superior towards people we pity without laughing at them. When the well-to-do among us pass beggars on the street, Hutcheson argues, “we are in greater danger of weeping than laughing” (29). Hutcheson’s point suggests that the Superiority Theory is flawed for its failure to recognize the unique and subjective experiences of human beings. Art philosopher Ted Cohen extends this point in his critique of the three humour theories by narrating his experience of watching a documentary film of orangutans in Indonesia:

Whenever I have seen this film, I and everyone else in the audience have been amused by one particular episode in which an extended family of orangutans is shown making its way through the jungle. All but one of the family are young and relatively small, and they make their way by swinging from vine to vine. The oldest male, however, has grown too heavy to swing from vines, and although he tries from time to time, he always comes crashing down as his weight pulls the vine loose. He is reduced to running as fast as he can along the jungle floor trying to keep up with his airborne relatives. Why is this funny? Do I feel superior to the overweight beast? I don’t think so. I just find it funny.

Is it somehow incongruous that he should be running and huffing while others are swinging and gliding? I don't think so. (473)

If Cohen feels no sense of superiority to the overweight orangutan, why does he laugh? With this question in mind, we can return to the Peeping Tom scene of *Ratner's Star*. Few readers would respond with a sense of superiority to Howie Weeden's seizures. If anything, they might be squeamish about Weeden's episodes and the highly uncomfortable notion that his tongue must be grabbed by someone else. Yet we still feel amusement towards his predicament (as well as Billy's), not from a sense of superiority, but from the devices and techniques that DeLillo uses to create this scene.

Once challenged, the Superiority Theory began to be replaced by both the Incongruity Theory and the Relief Theory. The latter has its roots in Freud's theories of unconscious repression, although most humour theorists credit Herbert Spencer's essay "On the Physiology of Humour" with bringing the Relief Theory into prominence. Here, Spencer uses the hydraulic theory of nervous energy, a popular nineteenth-century idea which posited that the build-up of nervous energy within our bodies finds its release through muscular movement. According to Spencer, laughter is one such method through which this nervous energy escapes the body. He critiqued the Superiority Theory's neglect of biology by asking the following question: "Why, when greatly delighted, or impressed with certain unexpected contrasts of ideas, should there be a contraction of particular facial muscles and particular muscles of the chest and abdomen? Such answer to this question as may be possible, can be rendered only by physiology" (99, 100). According to Spencer, laughter is the release of feelings deemed by society to be inappropriate. These feelings are vented first through speech, since those are the muscles "which feeling most



habitually stimulates” (105). If that does not remove all nervous energy, then the repressed feelings exhibit themselves in the muscles connected to breathing, then arms, then legs, etc.

Freud expands Spencer’s theory in his book, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. He argues that the creation of humour is not the expulsion of repressed feelings; it is rather the expulsion of *the energy that normally represses* those feelings. Morreall points out that most summaries of Freud overlook this idea and describe laughter as nothing more than a release of repressed energy (“Comic Relief” 18), which is true for Spencer’s hydraulic theory, but not Freud’s. With this distinction in mind, Freud’s theory is important for its idea that humour is the result of releasing our internal censor, which suggests that this censor was superfluous to begin with. Humour, then, becomes a kind of liberation tool from oppressive social bindings. Even Ted Cohen, with all his cynicism towards the three theories, admits that Freud’s theory is “an extremely useful idea, probably with even wider application than Freud gives it.” Cohen praises Freud’s theory for its suggestion (not necessarily mentioned by Freud) that humour is a universal and good-natured medium through which we can give vent to society’s foibles:

There are any number of things we find ourselves constrained not to speak, or give active voice to, because of political, social, moral or other strictures that seemingly declare these things out of bounds. And yet we think about them, wish to declare our interest in them, and have a need to express ourselves about them. So we do this with jokes, perhaps partly for the reason Freud suggests, that these things are just bursting out of us anyway, but also because we take advantage of a presumption to the effect that humor is slight, good-natured, benign, and therefore virtually universally acceptable. (473)

Morreall would agree here, at least with Cohen's community-oriented interpretation of the Relief Theory, which doesn't have the "anti-social stigmata" of the Superiority Theory (*Comic Relief* 17). Still, both Morreall and Cohen critique the Relief Theory for failing to address those types of humour which don't seem to involve a release of repressed feelings. Morreall mentions how single-image comics as well as short poems and other forms of wordplay evoke laughter in us without our having to feel emotions at all, never mind releasing them. And in terms of repressing feelings, Morreall cites a psychological experiment by Hans Jurgen Eysenck in which sexual and aggressive humour was enjoyed more by people who gave those feelings "free reign," as opposed to a second set of participants who were known to have repressed them – a conclusion, according to Morreall, that is in direct conflict with Freud's theory of humour because, if Freud's theory were correct, it would mean that people who repress sexual and aggressive feelings would be the ones who laugh hardest at jokes about them (*Comic Relief* 20, 21).

There are also problems in Cohen's analysis of the Relief Theory as the venting of frustrations against repressive institutions – especially when reading a DeLillo novel. DeLillo's writing isn't quite a critique of social and political strictures, as I will argue in the following chapters. DeLillo's humour doesn't take the easily recognizable political bent of satires such as Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* or Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*. Perhaps David Cowart describes DeLillo best when he writes that DeLillo "seems little invested in politics *per se*. Rather, he focuses on the fine grain of American consciousness under the various stresses to which it has been subject over the course of several dramatic decades" (154). Cowart's use of the phrase "various stresses" is crucial in this passage, as we see in the Peeping Tom scene of *Ratner's Star*, which deals with such stresses as boyhood in the nuclear age, the language of mathematics, bodily limitations, scientific progression and the exploitation of women's

sexuality. Cowart, rather unintentionally, has summarized DeLillo's penchant for humour through heterogeneity – a form of comedy that can be best explained through the Incongruity Theory.

Although there appears to be a line of progression from superiority, to relief, to incongruity, it is important to remember that “these are terms of art and not names adopted by thinkers consciously participating in traditions” (Morreall, *Comic Relief* 9). The Incongruity Theory, for example, can be traced as far back as Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. Although he doesn't use the word “incongruity,” Aristotle instructed his readers to create humour by building up expectations just for the sake of violating them (11). This is not far from Morreall's definition of “incongruity” as it pertains to standard incongruity theories, namely that “some thing or event we perceive or think about violates our normal mental patterns and normal expectations” (11). Morreall cites James Beattie, a contemporary of Kant, as the first person to use the word “incongruity” in their analysis of humour. Beattie wrote that humour arises from “two or more inconsistent, unsuitable or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage” (320). Beattie's use of the word “united” is crucial to our study of DeLillo, since one of the great questions surrounding DeLillo's heterogeneous writing is whether or not his collection of characters, themes, organizations, and other things truly coalesce – and whether this should be read as a criticism or an approval of American culture.

Perhaps the incongruities in DeLillo's novels might benefit from being read alongside the writings of Arthur Schopenhauer, a nineteenth-century German philosopher who believed that laughter arose out of the disconnect between *conception* and *perception*. In his chapter “On the Theory of the Ludicrous,” Schopenhauer describes incongruity as the “subsumption of an object under a conception which in other respects is different from it” (58). For Schopenhauer, humour

represents our failure to categorize adequately our sense experience. As a way of rectifying this failure, he uses the term “subsumption of the heterogeneous” in order to explain how our sensory information, when described with “wit,” becomes included under the category (or conception) in question, despite being incongruous. He writes how:

... under a conception, or in general an abstract thought, a real thing is, directly or by means of a narrower conception, subsumed, which indeed, strictly speaking, comes under it, and yet is as different as possible from the proper and original intention and tendency of the thought. Accordingly wit, as a mental capacity, consists entirely in a facility for finding for every object that appears a conception under which it certainly can be thought, though it is very different from all the other objects which come under this conception. (58)

For an example of this wit, Schopenhauer refers to an anecdote in which a Berlin actor, strictly forbidden from improv, had to appear in front of the audience on horseback. When he trotted on stage, the horse defecated. The audience began to laugh but saved their hardest laughs for when the actor broke out of his script and said to the horse: “What are you doing? Don’t you know we are forbidden to improvise?” (57). This scenario is rather peculiar because it has multiple layers – the horse’s act of defecation is incongruous to people’s expectations of the play just as much as the actor’s dismissal of his script. And there is also the question of whether or not the audience is aware of the fact that the play has veered away from the script – perhaps they think this whole mishap is part of the scene. Schopenhauer’s point, however, is that *wit*, as exercised by the actor, is an awareness of the incongruity between our conceptual understanding of things and our sense experience of those same things. The actor is witty because he improvised his lines in order to make the horse’s defecation on-stage less awkward. The audience’s *conception* in this example is

that line improvisation is not allowed during the play. However, their perception of sense experience contradicts this conception. They see and hear the actor improvising his lines. The result is that line improvisation, through the horse's poorly timed defecation, becomes subsumed under the category of a fully scripted play.

For the "ultimate subsumption," Schopenhauer uses the example of a heterogeneous conception that "take(s) place contrary to our intention." Schopenhauer, writing in 1844, tells the story of a freed slave in North America, who "imitates the whites in everything" (57). In this case he places an epitaph over his dead child: "Lovely, early broken lily" (57). Schopenhauer never explicitly states whether the humour of this story is in the black man's propensity to imitate the white man (by using the white-coloured lily, of all flowers, as a metaphor) or in the absurd amount of oppression the black man has had to endure under the white man, which has been so devastating that the freed slave still imitates his former oppressor. Or perhaps this is an example of one of the more subjective sides of humour, where amusement is in the eye of the beholder – after all, the joke is layered with macabre references and its intention is not clear. Whether it is funny or not, unintentional heterogeneity is the kind of incongruity that Schopenhauer values most. His belief is that "only children and quite uneducated people" will laugh at the "plain, common irony" of someone who purposely says "Nice weather we are having today" when it is actually raining hard.

Although Schopenhauer does not adequately explain just how incongruous perceptions can be subsumed under their arbitrary thought categories, his analysis is useful to DeLillo studies for its preoccupation with heterogeneity. Still, Schopenhauer's theory has its flaws – chief among these is his constant use of dualisms when providing examples of the heterogeneity of sense experience. His story about the freed slave, for example, is more of a binary between black

people and white people than an insight into the diversity of life. Nevertheless, Schopenhauer's conclusion is a helpful aide in deciphering humour. He writes:

In every suddenly appearing conflict between what is perceived and what is thought, what is perceived is always unquestionably right; for it is not subject to error at all.... Its conflict with what is thought springs ultimately from the fact that the latter, with its abstract conceptions, cannot get down to the infinite multifariousness and fine shades of difference of the concrete. (60)

Whether or not we choose to agree with Schopenhauer's championing of perception over thought, his theory forces us to consider how our conceptions might be influenced by American culture and how DeLillo works this question into his humour. I will explore this further in my chapter on *Americana*, where I illustrate how Schopenhauer's theory is useful for discerning the incongruity at the core of DeLillo's rendition of consumer culture: namely that consumeristic images hide the fear of death under the glamour of marketed products.

One thing must be made clear about the Incongruity Theory: it is not just another name for "irony." Schopenhauer's theory, as useful as it may be for DeLillo studies, fails to acknowledge this point – partly because his examples are somewhat ineffective at conveying his argument. Consider his example of the "ultimate subsumption." In many ways, the black man's unwitting imitation of the white man is nothing more than irony. This story is, after all, illustrative of a world in which the opposite of what is real appears to be true. Those of us who felt no amusement after hearing the story might be inclined to classify it not as humorously incongruent, but as ironic. This leads me to turn to philosophy professor Mike Martin, whose article, "Humour and Aesthetic Enjoyment of Incongruities," offers an addendum to this failing of the Incongruity Theory. Martin takes issue with the Incongruity Theory's inability to separate

itself from irony. He builds on the ideas of Michael Clarke, who, writing in 1970, posited that humorous incongruity must be defined by the following features: “(1) A person perceives (thinks, imagines) an object as being incongruous. (2) The person enjoys perceiving (thinking, imagining) the object. (3) The person enjoys the perceived (thought, imagined) incongruity at least partly for itself, rather than solely for some ulterior reason” (Morreal, *Laughter and Humor* 174). Both Martin and Clarke are critical of Schopenhauer’s “simplistic treatment of the relationship between laughter and amusement” (174). Martin points out how laughter doesn’t always spring from amusement – it can come from the joy of good fortune, the hysteria of a tragedy, or the sadistic enjoyment of another person’s suffering. He also mentions how laughter can be purely physiological, such as from tickling or nitrous oxide (175).

Where Martin and Clarke differ is in the concept of the enjoyment of incongruities for their own sake. Martin criticizes Clarke’s third condition (“The person enjoys the perceived [thought, imagined] incongruity at least partly for itself, rather than solely for some ulterior reason”) because we can enjoy irony as much as humour. He mentions, for example, how the ironies present in *Oedipus Rex* can be aesthetically enjoyed even though they are “anything but funny” (176). Martin goes on to criticize Morreal’s theory of humour as emotional detachment by questioning the notion of comedic objectivity, especially in jokes that are sexual and aggressive in nature (183). Martin’s argument is that humour fails as an aesthetic category because too much of it involves “the expression of desires and interests of a very practical sort” (182). But this debate veers from the point at hand. Martin’s main contribution to the Incongruity Theory, at least for our purposes, is in his *laughter* addendum to Clarke’s three conditions of humorous incongruity. Martin’s belief is that laughter, which is “neither a necessary or sufficient

condition for amusement,” is nonetheless the “most characteristic way of enjoying humour.” He writes the following:

It is sufficient for amusement, I suggest, that Clark’s conditions are met and at least one of the following occurs. (a) The person laughs spontaneously at the incongruity. (b) The person has a spontaneous inclination to laugh in response to the perceived incongruity, but suppresses it. (By “spontaneous” is meant unmediated by a judgement that the incongruity should be laughed at or is suited to be laughed at.) (c) The person laughs or has an inclination to laugh following an explicit judgement that the incongruity is worthy of laughter. (d) The person experiences episodic cheerfulness (without an inclination to laugh) in response to the incongruity and does so because he or she judges the incongruity to be laughable, i.e., worthy of or suited to be laughed at. (178)

Martin’s writing on laughter is highly technical and precise – strange, considering the elusive characteristics he and many other critics ascribe to the physical manifestations of humour. Yet it succeeds in distinguishing the Incongruity Theory from its cousin, irony. By drawing our attention to laughter and by suggesting that laughter as a category should encompass less obvious forms such as “inclination(s)” and “episodic cheerfulness,” Martin helps legitimize the Incongruity Theory as a viable method of inquiry.

Although he believes that the Incongruity Theory “has the breadth needed to capture the enormous variety of things we are amused by” (175), Martin argues that humour is not an aesthetic experience due to its inability to separate itself from human emotions and desires – subjectivities that are “ulterior” to the pure enjoyment of incongruities (following the same



premise as the popular notion of aesthetics as “art for art’s sake” [183]). John Morreall, on the other hand, offers a convincing argument in favour of the neutrality of humour – with far-reaching consequences for the Incongruity Theory as a methodological framework. Morreall uses evolutionary psychology to argue that humour promotes rational thinking, “To become rational,” he says, “early humans needed a mental mode in which they could be surprised, especially by failure, without going into fight-or-flight emotions such as fear and anger, which inhibit abstract, objective thinking. Humorous amusement is just such a mode” (*Comic Relief* 66). Morreall refers to the playfulness of humour as the means through which people contemplate and cope with difficult situations, based on evidence from several psychological studies. Indeed, Morreall garners support for his theory with a lot of hard science: he describes how emotions find their home in the brain’s limbic system, while humour “is centered in the more rational cerebral cortex.” He also cites several studies of humour to prove how laughter reduces physiological symptoms associated with fight-or-flight emotions, such as heart rate, blood pressure, muscle tension and stress chemicals such as epinephrine, norepinephrine, cortisol and DOPAC (66). He concludes with the following:

Humor promotes divergent thinking in two ways. First, it blocks negative emotions such as fear, anger, and sadness, which suppress creativity by steering thought into familiar channels. Secondly, humor is a way of appreciating cognitive shifts: when we are in a humorous frame of mind, we are automatically on the lookout for unusual ideas and new ways of putting ideas together.

A third intellectual virtue fostered by humor is critical thinking. In

looking for incongruity in society, we look for discrepancies between what people should do, what they say they do, and what they actually do. (113)

Morreall uses the term “cognitive shift” as a way of describing a person’s experience of incongruity without reverting to what he believes is the vagueness of “incongruity” as a term in humour studies (52). Through the lingo of stand-up comedy, Morreall describes how a cognitive shift involves a *set-up*, which is “our background pattern of thoughts and attitudes,” and a *punch*, the thing that “causes our thoughts and attitudes to change quickly” (52). This definition is simple enough on its own, but for the audience to experience humour, Morreall argues, they must be emotionally disengaged. He lists various psychological phenomena that promote distance such as fictionalization (the more obvious it is, the greater the “play mode” achieved), the passage of time, physical distance and one’s role (or lack of role). This last point is perhaps the most important and Morreall summarizes it with a quote from the early-twentieth century comic, Will Rogers: “Everything is funny if it happens to the other guy” (53). It is with these distancing phenomena that Morreall comes in direct conflict with Mike Martin. While Martin sees humour as a non-aesthetic, subjective and emotional form (he goes so far as to equate dirty jokes with pornography), Morreall sees jokes and other more complicated forms of humour as problems that have become “aestheticize(d)” so that “the mental jolt they give us brings pleasure rather than negative emotions” (53). It is this aestheticization of problems, according to Morreall, that allows us to use our rationality and intellect in order to contemplate the incongruities around us. For Morreall, the power of humour is in its propensity towards “play.”

**BERGSON'S PRESENCE – WHAT DOES IT REALLY MEAN TO BE  
ABSENTMINDED?**

Morreall's idea of the neutrality of humour can be traced back to one of humour theory's most famous philosophers, Henri Bergson. Writing in the first half of the twentieth century, Bergson argued that humour was the result of the automatism of the soul. He used the phrase "mechanical inelasticity" to refer to those moments when we expect to find "the wide-awake adaptability" and "living pliability of a human being" but are met instead with the opposite (10). As an example, he tells the story of a man "who attends to the petty occupations of his everyday life with mathematical precision." He wakes up one day to find that the objects around him have been tampered with. For example, when he dips his pen into the inkstand, he finds mud; when he goes to sit on his chair, he ends up on the floor. In this scenario, "habit has given the impulse: what was wanted was to check the movement or deflect it. He did nothing of the sort, but continued like a machine in the same straight line" (9-10). Central to Bergson's mechanization theory of humour is his belief that laughter "has no greater foe than emotion" (10). It takes a disinterested spectator to see the dramas of life as comedy. Bergson describes this as "a momentary anesthesia of the heart" (10).

Both Bergson and Morreall use the emotionlessness of humour to launch into the idea that humour appeals to our intelligence and propensity to socialize. It was Bergson who wrote that "laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary" (6). In fact, Bergson ridicules other theorists for describing humour as absurd, since it implies that laughter is isolated and singular. "To understand laughter," he says, "we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all we must determine the utility of its function, which is a social one" (7-8). Bergson's definition of humour

as “something mechanical encrusted on the living,” (38) is meant to interrogate this idea of the socialness of humour. In *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, he describes society as a “living being,” since humans are both “in it and of it” (44). Bergson returns to this idea later in his career, using the term *élan vital* to describe how the energy of creativity, intuition and impulse are the true mediators of social interactions. In *Laughter*, Bergson posits that humour can be found in the mechanization and automatic regulation of society. He believes that “we laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing” (58). In other words, when we become aware of a person’s adherence to social stricture, we will see the latent humour of his or her actions.

One of the more underappreciated aspects of Bergson’s theory is in his idea of “presence.” Suppose an anomalous situation occurs which showcases how one or more individuals stick out from the strictures of society – that is when we should realize that there is “something mechanical encrusted on the living.” The mishaps of absentminded people are actually “quite coherent,” says Bergson, because they are actions that question the rigidity of our surroundings. Bergson believes that many people who seem aloof are operating with a presence of mind rather an absence. The “presence” in these individuals gives them surroundings that are “definite” (like regular, non-comic figures) but also “imaginary.” That being said, I’d like to call attention to the discrepancy between the words “definite” and “imaginary.” Bergson uses these terms to suggest that the so-called absent-minded person acts according to an *ideal* that challenges the status quo of his or her society (13-14). This ideal is “imaginary” because it doesn’t exist to others, but it is “definite” because it has the potential to replace the governing social system. Bergson elaborates: “Doubtless a fall is always a fall, but it is one thing to tumble into a well because you were looking anywhere but in front of you, it is quite another to fall into

it because you were intent upon a star” (13). The “whimsical wild enthusiasts” and “madmen who are yet so strangely reasonable” make us laugh by “playing on the same chords within ourselves” (Bergson 14). Bergson’s belief that humour is social is based on this connective link between the comic figure and those who laugh at the comic figure. By laughing at the mishaps of others, we unite ourselves with them. We become what he describes as “runners,” chasers of an ideal “who stumble over realities, child-like dreamers for whom life delights to lie in wait” (14-15). In this way, Bergson suggests that laughter is a corrective to the inelasticity of society and its overbearing influence on the individual.

Unlike Thomas Hobbes, Bergson believed that to laugh at someone is to form a sense of community with them (often unknowingly). This community is, according to Bergson, a sign of a shared desire for an ideal society that does not interfere with the dynamic and creative energies of human life. The purpose of laughter, for Bergson, is not to assert one’s superiority over others – yet his theory still contains a kind of superiority in its propensity towards idealism and its disdain for the status quo. Does this mean that Bergson is an adherent of the now largely defunct Superiority Theory? And what about those examples of the incongruity between reality and one’s “presence” of mind? Victor Raskin, editor-at-large of *Humor*, the journal for the International Society for Humor Studies, is right to point out that the three theories “characterize the complex phenomenon of humor from very different angles and do not at all contradict each other – rather they seem to supplement each other quite nicely” (40). It is no surprise, then, that Bergson’s writings on idealism contain elements of both the incongruity and superiority theories.

With his belief in the political idealism of humour (laughter as *corrective*), the question begs to be asked: how is Bergson’s theory of humour relevant to DeLillo, whose novels are metaphysical mazes more than they are utopian tracts? There is at least one aspect of Bergson’s

writing which should prove beneficial to our reading of DeLillo. This is in “the ceremonial side of social life,” which, according to Bergson, “must always include a latent comic element” (44). Bergson defines the ceremonial as “social actions of a stereotyped nature,” such as prize distributions or the “solemn sitting of a court justice.” He describes these things as “form(s)” and “ready-made formula(s) into which the comic element may be fitted” (45). Some of DeLillo’s best and most mysterious humour can be found in ceremonies – and it is hard to deny the existence of a “latent comic element” in any of these.

Take, for example, the pre-game warm-up in *End Zone*, DeLillo’s novel about football. In the runway to the field, college boys line up in preparation for “ritual danger.” They make “private sounds” and “fierce alien noises.” They smack each other to prepare for imminent violence and they speak in senseless banalities like “get it up, get it in” and “work work work.” They listen to a speech from their coach, who ends up saying not more than five words: “I want the maximal effort” (105-107). Although there is no outright manifestation of humour, one can find the “latent comical element” as long as one follows the cognitive shifts (to borrow Morreall’s term) of the narrator, Gary Harkness. He often tells the story in a way that subverts reader expectations, as when he describes various physical features of their coach, a commanding figure who had the attention of the entire team and made the room “absolutely still” in a matter of seconds. We expect a lengthy and inspiring speech to ensue, but instead he says one line that doesn’t mean much in the grand scheme of things. In this passage, the pre-game act of *getting pumped* is the ceremony in question. It has the ready-made forms that Bergson speaks of – preparatory violence and uncommunicative noises – and the narrator’s reversal of expectations, along with other subtle cues (snappy, unintroduced dialogue and prolonged descriptions) are what call our attention to its rigidity as a common form of social interaction. Is

Gary Harkness *present-minded* like one of Bergson's comic heroes? Probably yes, considering the distance he continually puts between himself and the things he participates in. But he doesn't outwardly criticize the status quo, nor does he refuse to participate in the ceremony of football. These are factors that exemplify the need for a nuanced approach to DeLillo's humour.

### **DARK HUMOUR: LAUGHING AT LAUGHTER**

With no generally agreed upon definition of humour, it is not surprising that *dark* humour is even trickier to explain. One of the most recent publications in the field is a volume in *Bloom's Literary Themes*, a series devoted to examining canonized works of literature through various literary devices. The volume on dark humour, however, offers no new insights into comedy, never mind dark humour. Harold Bloom opts to keep the term aloof, deciding that a definition is "virtually impossible" because of its closeness to irony. Bloom, whose writing in the book is limited to a one-page blurb on Shakespeare as "the master of dark humour" (xv), completely ignores the complicated discussion around humour and the three established theories, which must inevitably serve as the base for understanding humour's darker forms.

Perhaps the best (and sadly one of the only) methodological inquiries into dark humour is Patrick O'Neil's article, "The Comedy of Entropy: The contexts of Black Humour." O'Neil's article (which Bloom slipped into his volume with hardly any commentary) was originally published in 1983 as a response to the increasing interest in dark humour over the previous two decades, with the emergence of satirists like Kurt Vonnegut Jr. and Thomas Pynchon. It is certainly a step in the right direction to include O'Neil's article in a collection on dark humour,

but still unfortunate that his work hasn't been critically assessed in any major way over the course of three decades.

Despite its age and isolation, O'Neil's article is useful for our inquiry into DeLillo's humour. He begins by posing fundamental questions, such as whether or not *all humour* is dark humour.<sup>1</sup> Many critics would agree, at least insofar as they believe that humour is about "problems." In his explanation of cognitive shifts, for example, Morreall is quick to quote classic American satirist Mark Twain: "There is no laughter in heaven" (*Comic Relief* 51). It is O'Neil's belief that contemporary culture is much more preoccupied with dark humour than its more "benign" predecessor. He cites how most psychoanalysts after Freud "have either ignored or renounced a benign type of humour" (153), a comedic form which is warm, tolerant, sympathetic and sentimental. Literary figures such as Shakespeare's Falstaff and Charles Dickens's Mr. Pickwick fall under these categories (153). At first, O'Neil compares benign humour not to its darker counterpart, but to "derisive humour," a form that is cold, intolerant, unsympathetic and based on rejection, correction and undefended norms (he uses the example of Neoclassical writer Jonathan Swift). Both these forms, he argues, are alike in that they are "expressions of the humour of certainty" and "cosmos." They are self-reassuring, self-congratulatory and "spring from a world of unimperilled values – the humour of those inside and safe rather than outside and lost" (154, 155). Dark humour, on the other hand, is different from benign and derisive humour because it is "the humour of lost norms, lost confidence" and "disorientation." It is through the use of *entropy*, a physicist's term for "the tendency of closed systems to move from a state of order into one of total disorder," (154) that O'Neil expresses the aims of dark humour.

---

<sup>1</sup> O'Neil uses the term "black humour." Throughout this project, I will instead use the more widely accepted phrasing of "dark humour."



He argues that it is more useful for literary critics to define dark humour in terms of its “mode of being” rather than its content, meaning entropic analyses need not be limited to fiction preoccupied with despair, death, evil, or other taboos such as murder, mutilation or insanity (153-156). “The comedy of entropy,” as O’Neil terms it, is a unique form of humour because it is highly self-reflexive. In its most aggressive manifestation, O’Neil argues that entropic humour acts with a kind of circularity that paradoxically promotes the very universe it is parodying (161). O’Neil, however, ascribes a great deal of freedom to his definition of entropic humour when he says that it comes in “many shapes and forms” and that our laughter of entropic humour “may contain many degrees of bitterness and hollowness, mirthlessness and parody and pain” (165). Because of its vastness as a term (and keeping in mind the notion that “all humour at bottom is black” [145]), it is necessary to discuss O’Neil’s methodological framework of dark humour in more detail.

O’Neil offers two conditions for classifying dark humour: 1) It must be based on the incongruity of the comic treatment of material which resists comic treatment; 2) this incongruity must be the “expression of a sense of disorientation rather than a frivolous desire to shock” (156). On top of this, O’Neil argues that there are five “basic modes of articulation” of dark humour: the satiric, the ironic, the grotesque, the absurd, and the parodic” (156). I will take a moment to describe each. O’Neil’s understanding of satire is in the form of a scale – at one end, there is benign satire, “firmly and tolerantly anchored in its own value system.” In the middle there is derisive satire, “where the emphasis begins to shift from the didactic to the punitive.” At the far end of the spectrum is entropic satire, where there is a lack of belief in moral education and “didactic confidence gives way to a fascinated vision of ... total disorder” (157). To define irony, O’Neil uses Bergson’s idea of how ironic idealism acts a counter to the real (which is

expressed through humour). O'Neil goes on to suggest that irony "points to the gap separating the real from the ideal." When the gap widens "to the point where the real is perceived as no longer being true" (in other words no longer reconcilable to the ideal) irony subverts itself by detaching from "the magnetic attraction of satire" in order to become entropic (158). O'Neil suggests that irony is traditionally a "finely-honed instrument, a rapier rather than a bludgeon" (158). When it becomes entropic in nature, irony loses its wily understatement and turns exaggerated and *grotesque*. O'Neil quotes aesthetic critic Wolfgang Kayser in order to define the grotesque as "the artistic expression of that estrangement and alienation which grips mankind when belief in a perfect and protective natural order is weakened or destroyed" (158). Unlike irony and satire, which, according to O'Neil, "only gradually become entropic" (159), the grotesque always represents incongruity. When it is compounded with the "secondary incongruity of combining the exaggeration of the grotesque and the understatement of irony," we experience "simultaneous horror and exhilaration" (158). In the peeping tom scene of *Ratner's Star*, this is likely the way readers feel when they encounter Howie Weeden's nonchalant demand that his tongue be grabbed to minimize the effects of a seizure. DeLillo employs ironic understatement in the way Weeden mentions the tongue to Billy as an aside. The scene is also grotesque because it stresses the vulnerability of the tongue and the complete lack of control over one's body. O'Neil also suggests that the grotesque often has a metaphysical side. He draws on the works of Kayser and Henniger to suggest that the grotesque is the opposite of the sublime in that "the sublime guides our view towards the true and the good, while the grotesque points to the inhuman and the abyss" (159). O'Neil, however, adds that the grotesque must maintain its link with irony and (therefore comedy) in order to call itself dark humour.

O'Neil doesn't quite define his last two articulations as clearly as the first three, but they are worth describing nonetheless. Perhaps the best way to begin is to elucidate O'Neil's theory of metahumour. O'Neil is of the belief that dark humour, by its very nature, is self-aware and self-critical, yet he reserves the term metahumour for those forms of entropic comedy which are "highly-self conscious, self-reflexive, and essentially marked by parody" (161). In these forms, dark humour "laughs the dianoetic laugh," which is not "the passive laughter of connivance, of keeping up the joke," but the laughter of "parodic norms, flaunted fictivity" and "gratuitous constructs" (161). It is in this atmosphere that the absurd is born. The absurd, according to O'Neil, destroys the ideal (as represented by irony) altogether. The absurd laugh is the "dianoetic laugh," "the saluting of the highest joke" as Beckett calls it (160). The absurd is the final ground in the movement of dark humour – and through its metafictional qualities, we find parody in "the paradoxical celebration of entropy" (161). O'Neil uses the one-sided continuous surface known as the *Möbius Strip* to explain this last point. He describes how metahumour circles back on itself "until the celebration of entropy becomes a paradoxical celebration of order, cosmos regained, but through the looking glass" (161).

Examples of metahumour abound in DeLillo's novels. *Ratner's Star*, in particular, is filled with the "flaunted fictivity" of researchers who believe that science is the truest reality and the only reality capable of uncovering the mysteries of the universe. Yet they all suffer from bizarre and unexplainable ailments that lie outside of the scientific structure they so ardently support. Nearly all of the forty-five researchers in *Ratner's Star* embody this incongruity and the protagonist meets them one by one in a tour that resembles Alice's adventure down the rabbit hole. There is no real way to explain the coincidence of dozens of scientists who suffer from decidedly unscientific ailments. This is "flaunted fictivity" in its truest sense, a metafictional

construct that calls our attention to the artificiality of the story. The second part of *Ratner's Star* has a completely different style of narration, one that focuses on team dynamics rather than a stream of isolated and grotesque scientists – this also suggests an awareness of the fictivity of the novel. DeLillo's humour is, in the words of O'Neil, a humour of "parodic re-orientation," one that paradoxically reapplies form and structure to a world premised on chaos. O'Neil borrows the phrase of Patricia Merivale to describe this final achievement of dark humour as the "euphoric flaunting of artifice" (162). Knowing that DeLillo is a dark humourist, it is not surprising to hear O'Neil use such terms as euphoric and exhilarating in his methodological inquiry. These are terms that suggest a kind of metaphysical power – indeed O'Neil's own description of the grotesque alludes to the anti-sublime, the inhuman abyss. In DeLillo's writing, metaphysical power is embodied in the various manifestations of American culture – Cold War politics, television and advertising, consumerism, scientific progress. The artifice of this culture is almost certain, yet many of his characters are drawn in for decidedly non-artificial reasons. In *End Zone* we see how Cold War rhetoric becomes a self-discovery in the capabilities of language. In *Americana*, the erratic and insanely hurried nature of television advertising becomes embedded in a man's westward exile. And in *Ratner's Star* we watch how scientific progress launches top scientists into states of transcendent fetal helplessness. My analysis of dark humour in this paper is limited to *Ratner's Star*, but it is easy to see forms of the "grotesque sublime" in nearly all of DeLillo's novels.

PART TWO:

DeLillo's Early Novels

*Americana: A Commercial Reel of the Fear of Death*

David Bell lives a banal and unfulfilling life as a television network executive in New York City. He is a senior in his workplace, he has his own secretary, and he is only twenty-eight years old. But Bell cannot shake off the feeling of automatism: his dilemma is that he no longer controls the doors” (97). He can hear himself saying words but can’t believe they’re coming from his mouth. The meetings, the power struggles, the programming restrictions, the lack of self-expression – these are all issues that drive David Bell to journey west, into the American heartland. His trip begins under the patronage of the network: David must travel to the Midwest in order to begin filming a documentary series on the Navajo. At first, David uses the opportunity to escape the drudgery of the workplace. But as he goes deeper into the country, David loses his documentary interests in favour of recreating himself through an autobiographical film project. In effect, David has opted to pursue his own ego through (seemingly) more creative means. To put it bluntly, David Bell is obsessed with himself because he feels that his selfhood is tragically inseparable from a culture based on images “made in the image and likeness of images” (130). This is by no means a suggestion that David is America’s counter-cultural hero. He is fully complicit in the absurd ego battles of the network. He admits to behaving “as a child might react after he has been disappointed or rebuked,” (26) which includes philandering with women in order to exert superiority over his rivals, asking his secretary to scout out other network executives who are younger than he is but higher in the workplace hierarchy, and depositing mucus-filled handkerchiefs in the drawers of senior executives who criticize him (26). Despite his complicity in these childish ego battles, David Bell is critical and highly aware of the banalities that his workplace promotes. We see this most clearly in his reverence towards the “Mad Memo-Writer,” an unidentified network individual who distributes

cryptic messages under the name of various historical figures. The most prominent of these is a quote from St. Augustine: “And never can a man be more disastrously in death than when death itself is deathless” (21).

Bell goes on to discover that this message, along with all the others, has been orchestrated by his colleague, Ted Warburton. Warburton analyses the St. Augustine quote as follows:

We are endlessly dying.... We begin dying when we are born. A short time later we die. By universal consent, more or less, this is known as death... in this paradoxical, redundant and somewhat comical passage, what Augustine is getting at beyond all the gibberish is that death never dies and that man shall remain forever in the state of death (100, 101).

Although Ted Warburton becomes less relevant later in the novel (as Bell journeys away from the network offices), his memo has far-reaching implications, making it more than a mere riddle to a bored protagonist. One of *Americana*'s chief concerns is the notion of “endlessly dying.” There are many morbid references in DeLillo's lengthy first novel, ranging from a smug JFK assassination reference by one of the novel's antagonists (66), to the haunting memories of David's mother, who died tragically from cancer while he was a boy. These references are secondary, however, to the novel's truest preoccupation with morbidity, which is the idea that death is a presence behind the images of advertising. With all its appeals to beauty, efficiency and comfort, advertising appears to be the very opposite of dying. It is certainly counter-intuitive to see semblances of death and the daily act of dying in a commercial promoting the health benefits of hand lotions with emollient shea butter and provitamin B5. Yet DeLillo's writing of *Americana* – which happens to be just as “paradoxical, redundant, and somewhat comical” as St.

Augustine's quote – suggests that at the core of every consumerist image is the fear of death. In both form and content, *Americana* unearths the hidden incongruity of image-based consumer culture, more often than not through the use of humour. In this chapter, I will supplement the ideas of traditional DeLillo scholars (who have written on the heterogeneity of DeLillo's writing) by drawing primarily on the work of Arthur Schopenhauer, who claims that humour is the result of the incongruity between our inaccurate conceptions of perceived realities. His theory is especially useful for a study of *Americana* because DeLillo writes his first novel in a style that draws together vastly different themes to create insanely fast-paced incongruities. In effect, DeLillo writes *Americana* like a commercial reel, except he uses humour to expose our automation towards a non-stop plethora of images that differ wildly from one another. The most glaring incongruity, however, is the fear of death that lurks behind consumerist images, exposed by DeLillo in ways that prompt us to question the social conditioning of our conceptions. One such example is the story of a mouthwash commercial, cancelled because marketing executives felt the presence of an old "oriental" spoiled the aura of youth and vitality (274). My aim is to demonstrate how the humour in *Americana* effectively exposes consumer culture for its inherent profiteering off of the human fear of death and rationalizes David Bell's westward journey "into the slaver's mouth of an incredible and restless country" (111).

More than anything, DeLillo's writing style captures the unseen dread in clichéd images. Consider this description near the beginning of David Bell's journey:

We got our bags from the car and walked over to Brand's aunt's house. It was a fine old house, the place where everyone's grandmother lives in television commercials, full of other people's memories and yet warmed by a mood of love and simplicity that was universal. Starved lean men and little girls with



straight blond hair looked darkly from photographs hung in the hallway. The living room was all chintz and needlepoint and bible kindness, wallpapered with faded yellow roses and soaked in an odor of old bodies rocking toward sleep (115).

Not all of DeLillo's descriptions explicitly compare themselves to television commercials, which is why this passage stands out among others. Here, DeLillo supplements the all-too-familiar image of a grandmother knitting in her rocking chair with photographs of "starved lean men" and "little girls with straight blond hair," (literal) images that go hand in hand with scenes of elderly domesticity on television. DeLillo's use of precise adjectives is what unveils the presence of death in this scene. The rigidity of "starved" clothing and "straight hair," the corpse-like quality of being "lean," the powerlessness of being "little" – these are all descriptors that call our attention to the presence of death in the image. DeLillo's most effective phrase in this passage is arguably his anticlimactic "odor of old bodies rocking toward sleep," an ironic understatement of the slow, gradual death of old age. By consulting theories of humour, we can see just how clever DeLillo's writing is in this passage.

I turn now to John Morreall, whose theory of "cognitive shifts" comes from the same line of thinking as Schopenhauer's "subsumption of an object under a conception which in other respects is different from it" (*Comic Relief* 58). Both Morreall and Schopenhauer are concerned with how our existing conceptions are undermined by our immediate perceptions. Morreall describes the cognitive shift in the framework of stand-up comedy, where the *set up* (which is "our background pattern of thoughts and attitudes") becomes undermined by *a punch*, the thing that "causes our thoughts and attitudes to change quickly" (52). In DeLillo's passage of the stereotypical television grandma, the set up is the imagery we associate with the gentle and

loving elderly woman who passes her time with ease: “yellow roses,” “bible kindness” and “chintz and needlepoint.” The phrase that disrupts the setup is “the odor of old bodies rocking towards sleep.” Notwithstanding Morreall’s terminology of *punch*, DeLillo uses ironic *understatement* (in this passage in particular) to call our attention to the presence of death in the image. Sleep has morbid, if not sinister, undertones when we read it as part of an image of “starched lean men” and “little girls” “looking darkly” from hanging photographs. DeLillo, here, does not create an incongruity as much as he *reveals* the incongruity that the consumer-based image hides as part of its marketing scheme. Although there is nothing really being marketed in the passage above, it is nonetheless useful as a breakdown of DeLillo’s technique of writing subtle humour.

DeLillo doesn’t only mock consumer culture in his prose. *Americana*’s entire structure parodies consumerism and advertising. His novel is filled with abrupt changes of scene, arbitrary chapter placements and a seemingly endless stream of digressions. The scene in which Bell shares breakfast with his fellow travellers on the first morning of his trip is one such example. There is Pike, an old man who owns the group’s RV and calls everyone “Jack”; Brand, a former air force pilot who has decided to write a novel after coming off of a drug trip; and Sullivan, an avant-garde woman, whom Bell continually compares to his deceased mother. Their conversation begins with Pike’s job as a shop owner who specializes in “toasters with doors and prewar radios,” before Pike changes the subject to a hypothetical fight between a tiger and a polar bear (121-122). Brand asks where the bout is taking place, stating his belief that “you can’t have them fighting in a vacuum” (122), at which point the entire philosophic premise of the fight is put into question. From there the conversation moves into paraphrase: David and Sullivan have a semi-religious discussion on mathematics, with bits of bacon and a fried egg standing in

as symbols of numbers and God. Then without any paragraph break, Bell calls his secretary at the network to find out that seven of his colleagues have just been fired and that he may be getting promoted (122-123). All this in less than three pages. *Americana*'s tendencies toward rushing and digressions are summarized best by David Bell, who describes himself along with his fellow network executives as "electronic signals," moving "through time and space with the stutter and shadowed insanity of a TV commercial" (22). *Americana* certainly reads with a kind of "stutter and shadowed insanity" – much of the novel's humour comes from ridiculous incongruities and blunt dialogue that is much too rushed to be explained or rationalized. DeLillo himself has described his writing of *Americana* as "hurling things at the page" (LeClair, "Interview" 4) and his rationale mimics the insanity of the subject matter:

At the time I lived in a small apartment with no stove and the refrigerator in the bathroom and I thought first novels written under these circumstances ought to be novels in which great chunks of experience are hurled at the page. So that's what I did. The original manuscript was higher than my radio. (4).

The heterogeneity of *Americana* is a direct result of DeLillo's "hurling" writing style. The fast pace, the steady stream of disparate topics, their blatant (and at times cleverly subtle) disjointedness – these techniques characterize how DeLillo uses comedy to parody our image-based culture.

David Bell is well aware of the cultural impact of his line of work. He feels that images are so embedded into the American consciousness that they are inseparable from one's sense of self. His main motivation behind leaving the network, journeying west and making a film are all based on an attempt to escape the proliferation of images. He admits that, until recently, he had believed in:

the dream of the good life.... The institutional messages, the psalms and placards, the pictures, the words. Better living through chemistry. The Sears, Roebuck catalog. Aunt Jemima. All of the impulses of all the media were fed into the circuitry of my dreams. One thinks of echoes. One thinks of images made in the image and likeness of images. It was that complex. (130)

Bell believes that the American dream makes “no allowance for the truth beneath the symbols” (130). It does not allow people to peel off the images and find their true selves. For Bell, true individuality and originality can be found somewhere in the “presence of something black (and somehow very funny) at the mirror rim of one’s awareness” (130). Bell does not really explain how or why one’s true, image-free self can be black and somehow very funny, but it is obviously worth analysing for our study of DeLillo’s humour.

Most if not all scholarship on *Americana* will allude to the above passage in an attempt to understand DeLillo’s play on our culture of images. It is one of the most grounded intellectual moments of the novel and a rare glimpse at David Bell’s motivations as a character. In his article “For Whom Bell Tolls: Don DeLillo’s ‘Americana,’” David Cowart uses Bell’s theory of the American dream as a springboard for his argument about “the national incest.” Bell’s “existential distress,” says Cowart, “seems to have an important oedipal dimension, seen in his troubled memories of his mother and his relations with other women in his life” (611). Cowart believes that the relationship between David Bell and his mother “ramifies symbolically into the life of a nation” (611). It’s true that another pivotal moment in *Americana* is the nearly sexual encounter between adolescent David Bell and his mother, which is averted by the sound of his father’s “bare feet on the stairs” (197). Cowart sees Sullivan as a stand in for David’s mother – and David does make explicit comparisons between Sullivan and his deceased mother. Not only does

Sullivan's aura resemble "the vast white silence" of his mother's deathbed (97), but she also tells David several bedtime stories, including one about a Sioux mystic named Black Knife, who prophesies that America's obsession with efficiency will culminate in a dystopian megalopolis of "straight lines and right angles" (118). Black Knife ascribes most of the blame not to big corporations or governing bodies, but to average consumers because they "want to wallow in the terrible gleaming mudcunt of Mother America" (119). Clearly some kind of parallel exists between David Bell's incest taboo and our culture of consumption. Yet Cowart is off the mark when he refers to David as the "American Oedipus," a person who seeks "to understand the malaise from which his country suffers" only to discover "its cause in his own manifold and hideous violations of the mother, the land that nurtures and sustains." (619). This isn't true simply because David does not suffer from blindness like Oedipus does. David is quite the opposite in fact. He is hyper-aware. Even while narrating his own incestuous feelings, Bell says "I knew what was happening and I did not care to argue with the doctors of that knowledge" (196). And it's no surprise that DeLillo of all writers would choose self-awareness as a trait for his protagonist. Most of his narrators have a knack for telling stories with a sense of metafictional removal from what is obvious, such as plot and character motivations. They are aware of their own circumstances and the absurdities of others to such a degree that they hardly feel anything more than nonchalance when confronted with alarmingly bizarre scenarios. David Bell is no exception. He has nothing to say, for example, when Walter Faye, his network colleague, suggests that airing a "pissing scene" (if not visually, then by sound) at least once would expand "the consciousness" of America (66). Nor does David offer any commentary on Brand's ridiculous and egotistical vision of a future in which he lives on the Oregon coast in isolation and is visited by female pilgrims from exotic locations who carry his poetry and wish to sleep with

him. He simply quotes Brand and then moves on to describing his own visit to a local library (290-292) – another hurled piece of story from DeLillo. David narrates with a consistently fast pace, a refusal to analyze absurd situations, ideas and scenarios, and a sense of elevated removal that implies his own self-awareness.

David's nonchalance and lack of emotion are not only indicators of his hyper-awareness; they also explain much of the novel's humour. DeLillo's hurling and David's removal go hand in hand. It's hard to say which informs the other (is it David's nonchalance that prompts DeLillo to hurl things at him, or vice versa?) but either way, they invite us to read *Americana* through philosophies of humour. Schopenhauer's theory of conception and perception is especially useful. I mentioned earlier how *Americana* is written with morbid undertones and a suggestion that the fear of death is at the core of advertising. David Bell appears to realize this when he visits a small town and says there is "a vein of murder snaking across the continent beneath highways, smokestacks, oilrigs and gasworks, a casual savagery fed by the mute cities" (124). In a nutshell, Schopenhauer's theory is that humour is the result of our inability to categorize our sense experience. The clash between our (inaccurate) conceptions of things and the reality of our perceptions is what creates humour. DeLillo, in *Americana*, lays bare the hidden reality of death-in-advertising by allowing us to perceive the fear of death alongside our existing conceptions of advertising as vital, helpful, and life-giving. Nowhere is this clearer than in the follow passage:

I went into the bathroom. There were books, woodcuts, a magazine rack, two scatter rugs, a small bronze gong. I sat on the rim of the tub and flipped through a magazine article about the war. Each page of the article was adorned with color photographs. Opposite a picture of several decapitated villagers was a full-page advertisement for a new kind of panty-girdle. The model was

extraordinarily lovely, a tall dove-colored girl holding a camel whip. The copy said this high-fashiony girdle clings to your bodyskin and comes in three huggy colors. I turned to a brandy ad. A woman in a white evening dress was walking a leashed panther across the lawn of a Newport estate. The war article covered about fifteen pages, the text set in very small type. I realized the bathtub was full of waterbugs. I went into the kitchen and Wendy turned and then we were all over each other, heavy and ravenous, jammed into a corner, and what I saw in my mind was Binky asleep on a sofa. (104-5)

When I first read this passage, I was more inclined to believe that it was about the heterogeneous insanity of our culture of images. And to a large extent it is. The panty-girdle and brandy ads are unrelated to one another and to the article about the Vietnam War. I soon realized, however, that DeLillo was suggesting something far more sinister. Later in the novel, when David is filming his autobiographical movie, we learn about the “guerilla warfare being fought behind the lines of the image” (271). There is a scene in which David films an actor portraying his dad, Clinton Bell. Clinton makes his living in the advertising industry and he (or rather his character in David’s film, played by Yost) believes that behind every image is an “anti-image,” “a picture of devastating spiritual atrocities” (271). He believes the anti-image surfaces mostly in “slice of life” commercials, in recognizable scenes in suburban homes anywhere in the U.S.A. that usually deal “with the more depressing areas of life – odors, sores, old age, ugliness, pain” (272). Clinton believes these commercials are ineffective because the consumer is much more likely to identify with the vitality of the image, whether that is “The Marlboro Man” or “Frank Gifford and Bobby Hull in their Jantzen bathing suits” (272). He nonetheless goes on to describe the slice-of-life commercial as an ineffective marketing technique because it does not mask its

anti-images or the fact that it is actually the “slice-of-death.” Under Schopenhauer’s theory of humour, we can posit that the anti-image is the realism of our perceptions, the fear of death that lurks beneath the image. On the other hand, the image is our half-true conception, inaccurately given to us by advertisers who wish for us to see nothing more than the vitality of their products.

Although the image and its anti-image appears to be a binary, their varied and disparate manifestations permit us to see them as more than a dualism. I turn now to Mark Osteen’s essay on *Americana*, “Children of Godard and Coca-Cola: Cinema and Consumerism in the Early Fiction.” Osteen sees DeLillo’s heterogeneity as originating from the films of Jean-Luc Godard. DeLillo claims that Godard has influenced his literary style more than any writer. In writing *Americana*, DeLillo was inspired by “the strong image, the short ambiguous scene, the dream sense of some movies, the artificiality, the arbitrary choices of some directors, the cutting and editing. The power of images” (qtd in LeClair, “Interview” 9). Osteen focuses on film as much as advertising in his analysis of *Americana*. He argues that, in David Bell’s quest for “stable identity and perfect originality,” the frame narrative<sup>2</sup> eventually exposes his quest as a “chimera, and originality as merely the echo of an echo. Film is revealed not as a magical solution, but as a mirror that reflects the distortions of personal and national history” (8, 9). The *chimera* is where Osteen believes Godard’s influence is most visible. In other words, DeLillo uses Godard’s film techniques to create heterogeneity in his own novels. This is best exemplified through DeLillo’s style of “hurling things at the page” (LeClair, “Interview” 4). When combined with David Bell’s sense of removal from absurd situations (such as Walter Faye’s peeing scene proposition or Brand’s ridiculous fantasies), DeLillo’s style of hurling is what creates humour in *Americana*.

---

<sup>2</sup> Although subtle, *Americana* is about a person in the future writing about the making of an autobiographical film in 1970, which necessitates flashbacks, both during filming and narration, as well as background story about what drove him to want to make the film in the first place.



Even Osteen, who is not concerned with humour, at the very least admits that DeLillo uses “distancing devices,” which place his characters “in a neverland where all events occur as if in a dream.” Osteen suggests that DeLillo’s inclination toward heterogeneous images and distancing devices is borrowed from Godard, who:

typically cuts out connectives and explanations in order to speak a ‘purer present tense,’ as Susan Sontag puts it. DeLillo’s Godardian strategies suggest that the future [for David Bell] will be an eternal present of instant gratification and consumer fulfillment in which psychological density has been supplanted by endless mirror images. (10, 11)

Osteen also draws on film critic Richard Roud, who posits that one of Godard’s central strategies was in his “analogical” plotlines, where the story would include seemingly irrelevant digressions as part of some sort of commentary or collage (22). DeLillo, as I’ve pointed out with reference to Schopenhauer’s theory, uses the same kind of analogical plot in *Americana*, except it is less about collage and more about unearthing incongruous realities and the false conceptions that have been provided to us by our consumer-based culture of images.

Osteen goes on to suggest that cinema and advertising exist in a relationship of “collision and collusion,” which applies also to the image and the anti-image (25), meaning they are not as separated as one might think. Apart from the films of Jean-Luc Godard, Osteen cites Akira Kurosawa’s *Ikiru*. Outwardly, *Ikiru* is referenced in David’s own film, when the actor who plays David’s father relates his POW experience during the Bataan Death March in the Philippines. Under Japanese captivity, Clinton narrates how he and his fellow prisoners saw an old man singing sorrowfully on a swing – arguably the most iconic image in all of *Ikiru*. In Kurosawa’s film, the figure on the swing is Watanabe, a man who, knowing he is terminally ill with stomach

cancer, chooses to spend his final days mustering a stagnant and useless bureaucracy (of which he is a member) to build a playground over a toxic local swamp. Watanabe references appear in several moments throughout *Americana*, including another portion of David's film when his father narrates the shooting of a mouthwash commercial, which goes perfectly except for "the oriental," an old man who somehow ended up in the extras and stood out, according to Clinton's client, for not being "young," "healthy," and "gleaming" like everyone else in the commercial (274). Osteen sees the Watanabe figure as an anti-image and his presence in the commercial "brings to light what the ad is trying to suppress: that postwar prosperity was built on the (Japanese) ruins and suffering of war; that the fear of death lurks behind ads for personal care products" (26). Osteen makes a good point: in his quest for originality, David Bell ends up rehashing the tricks and images of avant-garde filmmakers (Osteen goes on to cite several other names in the new wave movement), meaning he fails to truly escape the profusion of images and fails to find his true self, which would appear to be the case since David eventually gives up on his indie film project to "seek out the final extreme" (*Americana* 345), what Osteen aptly describes as "an erasure of self somewhere beyond representation" (28).

With this in mind, Osteen presents a strong case for the idea that cinema and advertising collide with one another in *Americana*, since they both leave their mark on the psyche of individuals and connect with one another in mysterious ways, like in Clinton's mouth wash commercial. However, Osteen's argument that the image and the anti-image are in collusion with one another is not quite as strong. Osteen agrees that the fear of death lurks behind advertisements, but his argument suggests that anti-images are just as sinister as the images they hide behind, which does not quite make sense if Watanabe on the swing is supposed to be both an anti-image and a figure that David is meant to identify with (Osteen 27). It is more rational to

see Watanabe in Schopenhauer's terms: as a reality that does not comply with our conceptions of the terminally ill. He epitomizes life in his dying days and – in what appears to be a reversal of the image and anti-image schema – paradoxically symbolizes life, while the image he hides behind comes to embody a false sense of liveliness – which, if you think about it, is true of most ads. The reason the mouthwash commercial is different is that Clinton explicitly explains its lies and contrivances. His commercial more or less lies about the health benefits of its product in comparison to competing brands (Clinton calls this “pre-empting the truth”) (273). In this way, it is more reasonable to view Watanabe as a symbol of life, despite his obvious positioning as an anti-image. Here, I admit that in analysing the image of Watanabe in *Americana*, I am applying Schopenhauer's theory to a decidedly non-humorous passage. However, the figure of Watanabe does resurface in *Americana* as the old man in the mouthwash commercial – evidence of wildly incongruous heterogeneity (Watanabe moves from a dying man who chooses to live his final days making a difference in the Japanese bureaucratic system, to the subject of racism and dental hygiene in an American commercial that is cancelled by a company that lies about its mouthwash). Watanabe's ability to transform and travel between space, time, and media is a testament to how he has been “subsumed” by DeLillo into the heterogeneously humorous framework of *Americana*.

While the heterogeneity of Watanabe offers one form of humour in *Americana*, the more dualistic relationship between image and anti-image as described by Clinton Bell (through the acting of Yost) offers another form of humour, which I believe unlocks the ultimate absurdity of DeLillo's first novel. Under our Schopenhauer model, Clinton suggests that the anti-image is the realism of our perceptions, while the image is our half-true conception of a product, inaccurately given to us by advertisers (what Clinton Bell, a person who works in the industry, would call

“good advertising”). However, the discrepancy between image and anti-image is hidden by the advertising industry – obviously it is in their interest to hide the fact that they profit off of our fear of death. We know now that *Americana* is funny because it unearths the hidden incongruity between image and anti-image. The anti-image is the ironic understatement of death lurking in the home of the prototype television grandma. It is Binky asleep on the sofa in David’s mind as he makes love to Wendy Judd. It is the old man in the mouthwash commercial who kills the aura of youth and vitality. It is, in other words, the “presence of something black (and somehow very funny) at the mirror rim of one’s awareness.” For David, a man trying to find his true self, this is alarming because it suggests that, when he peels off the images that have become embedded into his self, all that will remain is the fear of death. If anything, David should loathe his awareness of the image and the anti-image. It makes sense for him to be averse to the realization that his “conceptions” are incongruous to his perceptions. And based on the fact that he abandons his autobiographical film project, David is indeed distraught by what appears to be his true self. Have images become embedded so deeply into his consciousness that the anti-image is all that remains of his true self? Is David distraught that the anti-image is the only way he can view his own mortality? David never explicitly answers these questions. Nevertheless, my argument is that the “somehow very funny” addendum to the presence of something “black... at the mirror rim of one’s awareness” refers to the notion that the consumerist image is so pervasive that it stands as the only reference point for David’s understanding of mortality. This is the ultimate absurdity of *Americana*, accessible through DeLillo’s reveal of the incongruity between image and anti-image, an incongruity that forces our conceptions of advertising to expand beyond vital images to include the morbid stimuli hurled at us from page to page.

Clinton Bell is as self-aware as his son (at least in the way he is portrayed by Yost), so it's not surprising that he projects a future in which advertisers and copywriters will use the fear of death in their commercials metafictionally. Clinton suggests that, in the future, the advertising industry will truly capitalize on the absurd amount of control they have over our conception of mortality. Although he criticizes so-called "slice-of-life" commercials for their inability to present the consumer with vitalism, Clinton nonetheless supports the anti-image in principle. He describes how it has potential if it can ditch the old themes, the stereotyped dialogue and its literalness. He believes it needs "a touch of horror, some mad laughter from the graveyard. One of these days some smart copywriter will perceive the true inner mystery of America and develop an offshoot to the slice-of-life. The slice-of-death" (272). With this in mind, the "mad laughter from the graveyard" is another reference to the ultimate absurdity of *Americana*, the consumerist image's usurpation of our understanding of death. For DeLillo, the most prominent trait of humans is our ability to be enthralled by mystery. A good writer, he has said, has the "conviction that some truths aren't arrived at so easily" (qtd in LeClair, "Interview" 13). LeClair tells us that DeLillo's books are elusive because his fiction "draws its power from and moves toward mystery" (3). The idea, then, that the advertising industry might one day "perceive the true inner mystery of America" is alarming because it robs us of what makes us human. DeLillo, however, proceeds to describe such a commercial as "mad laughter from the graveyard." What makes it funny? DeLillo uses the idea of laughter to illustrate just how absurd it is that the human conception of mortality (the ultimate mystery, because DeLillo has said that his fiction is not the "living section" of a newspaper, but the "dying section" [LeClair 13]) has been and continues to be taken over by an advertising industry that wishes to profit off of our despair. I use the term "absurd" here in the same way as Patrick O'Neil, who describes it via his theory of dark humour

as the destruction of “the ideal” (160), which in this case would be the ideal premise that humans view death as a mystery – as something unexplainable and thus representative of their own humanity – as opposed to the mere motivation behind their purchase of a product.

Both Osteen and Cowart neglect to mention the humour in *Americana*'s incongruities. Admittedly, the figure of Watanabe in *Americana* is a better example of latent humour than outright humour, especially considering the grim subject matter (The Bataan Death March) and the subtlety of the connection between Watanabe and the old man in the mouthwash commercial. However, Cowart and Osteen fail to see DeLillo's hints at humour in some of the most crucial passages of *Americana*. Neither of them makes any reference to the “implication of *serio-comic* death” in the illusion and self-deception of the American dream (*Americana* 130). Nor do they say anything about the truth beneath the images, “the presence of something black (*and somehow very funny*) at the mirror rim of one's awareness' (*Americana* 130). They also remain silent on the anti-image's potential to spark “mad laughter from the graveyard” (*Americana* 272). Even if, subjectively, one does not experience any amusement while reading *Americana*, surely these hints prompt readers to think about how DeLillo uses humour. That is not to say that Osteen and Cowart do not offer useful insights into *Americana*. Osteen's reading of “echoes” is no doubt valuable. He suggests that an echo is the effect produced when Bell attempts to foster creativity and originality but ends up not only duplicating the works of artists before him, but also the images from film and advertising that have become so ingrained in the consciousness of America that they are inseparable from one's sense of self. His theory is quite useful for understanding just how pervasive our culture of images really is. Schopenhauer's theory, however, allows us to see David Bell not as a helpless man drowning in the proliferation of images, but as a highly-aware and highly critical consumer who, despite being unable to discover his own imageless

originality, is at least able to see the reality behind the false dreams promoted by advertisements. Schopenhauer's theory allows us to see the incongruity between images and their anti-images, which creates an analytical environment conducive to understanding Ted Warburton's assessment of the St. Augustine memo ("And never can a man be more disastrously in death than when death itself is deathless" [21]) as "somewhat comical." At its core, the humour of *Americana* is dark. The question of whether or not it falls under O'Neil's definition of the highly metafictional *entropic humour* would require another discussion entirely. However, it is clear, through Schopenhauer's theory, that DeLillo's ideal world – a world in which humans are enthralled by the mystery of death – is being destroyed by the consumerist image. The St. Augustine memo is funny in the context of *Americana* because it suggests that humans are in a constant state of death, not because of the inherently finite nature of their time on earth, but because they buy mouthwashes advertised by young Formula One drivers who don't repel women with their bad breath. The incongruity between St. Augustine's enigmatic quote on mortality and the usurpation of death by the advertising industry creates what O'Neil refers to as "simultaneous horror and exhilaration": a key ingredient in the creation of dark humour (159). Yet all is not lost for David Bell, the highly aware and highly critical protagonist of *Americana*. I turn back to Ted Warburton's interpretation of St. Augustine when I say that laughter must be the first step in understanding how one's daily act of dying is more meaningful than purchasing a new kind of panty girdle that "comes in three huggy colours" (105) from the Sears, Roebuck catalogue.

*End Zone's Inverse Humour: The Joy of Nuclear Annihilation*

DeLillo's second novel is about the great American tradition of college football – except in place of huge stadiums and dim-witted athletes, you'll find junior philosophers who gnash and tackle as much as they theorize on the notion of footballs being aware of their own “footballness” (33). These players, who tend to be more “jargon” than they are human (according to DeLillo himself [in LeClair 5]), provide much of the novel's humour. Chief among them is the narrator, Gary Harkness, a self-described “exile” (*End Zone* 5) from upstate New York who has accepted an offer to play football for Logos College in West Texas. Gary was unsuccessful in several other far more prestigious colleges, not for academic or athletic reasons, but for subordination against organized structure and a conflicted anxiety over the mortality of others. At Syracuse University, he barricaded himself in a room “with two packages of Oreo cookies and a girl named Lippy Margolis. She wanted to hide from the world and (he) volunteered to help her” (18). At Penn State, he grew skeptical of his coach's idea of the “oneness” of a football team because it didn't mean oneness “with God or the universe or some equally redoubtable super-phenomenon” (19). At the University of Miami, he became depressed after realizing that he enjoyed studying the disaster possibilities of nuclear warfare (21) – a problem that he brings with him to Logos College. His most recent stint at Michigan State (which he attended only because “the draft board began to get interested” [21]) culminated in a gang tackle on the field that left an opposing player dead. Needless to say, Gary was distraught and retreated back to his parent's house (as he does each time between schools). Finally, after seven weeks of shuffling cards in his room, Gary discovers “a simple truth:” his life means nothing without football (22).

Gary Harkness, as I hope I've made clear, is openly rebellious toward social strictures to an almost absurd degree. He is now at his fifth school and, based on the recurring pattern of his



life, we are likely to read *End Zone* with the anticipation that the novel will chronicle his final act of rebellion. Much like *Americana*'s David Bell, Gary is also highly-aware – for example, it is Gary's *awareness* of his own apocalyptic joy that drives him to drop out of the University of Miami. With these two points in mind, it would seem as though Gary Harkness is the perfect prototype of Bergson's theory of humour. He has the *presence* of mind to be aware of social "inelasticity" and he continually acts out against "the ceremonial side of social life," described by Bergson as "form(s)" and "ready-made formula(s) into which the comic element may be fitted," (45) which, in the case of *End Zone*, is the game of football. However, there is one major flaw with our Bergson prototype: Gary's actions are based on his desire to simplify, to create strictures that he hopes will uncomplicate a world ruled by nuclear weapons. Gary's methods are based on a kind of *modern asceticism*, where the individual seeks transcendence through exaggerated (and therefore humorous) consumerist strategies in order to simplify his or her life and reduce the relevance of politics and history. The modern asceticisms of *End Zone* mainly involve regimens that invert the traditional ascetic model of fasting and worldly removal, replacing them with consumption and virtual worlds with strict rules. Gary's asceticism ranges from his encouragement of others to put on weight (to literally consume) as a way of asserting individuality, to his own fascination and love-hate relationship with games (most notably football), which, in *End Zone*, is inherently linked to the modern day reality of nuclear weapons. Reading deeper into the cultural commentary of the novel allows us to see the nuclear warhead – an armament that lawmakers spend enormous sums on simply to wield in a display of power – as the highest form of consumption in American culture. The result, for Gary, is an inverted asceticism that endorses games of nuclear strategy and nuclear annihilation for the purpose of simplification.

However, this reversal of asceticism (along with DeLillo's reversal of Bergson's humour theory) does not mean we should give up on reading Bergson's writing alongside *End Zone*. Bergson's theory of *presence* and *ceremony* is prevalent in Gary's reaction to the social binds of militarization and football, just as the ascetic qualities of self-mortification and ritual are prevalent in Gary's vegetarian phase and daily ruminations on newly learned words. DeLillo's humour in *End Zone*, then, is not quite about "something mechanical encrusted on the living" (38), as Bergson would claim; it is instead about something living encrusted on the mechanical, and the attempt to convert that living thing into a simplified form while somehow avoiding a return to the mechanical. I understand that "encrusted" may not be the best descriptor for a word such as "living," but it nonetheless succeeds in articulating the logic of *End Zone*, which offers a method of reasoning in which thriving social, political, and cultural histories are limiting rather than liberating. These cultural histories are in direct conflict with (or in other words, *encrusted* on) the military-speak of nuclear warfare, which articulates a simplified and mechanical language at odds with the thriving cultures they are destroying. But since the warhead offers ascetic and individuating experiences for Gary and others, its mechanizations are quite disturbingly in the interests of human freedom. The paradox of inverting Bergson's theory, then, suggests a catch-22 in *End Zone* that is just as illogical as the reigning Cold War strategy of nuclear deterrence.

I will begin this essay with a discussion on the humour in DeLillo's use of language, which expertly conveys the absurdity of jargon in both sports and nuclear warfare. I will then broaden my discussion of humour to include character analyses that are crucial to understanding DeLillo's inverse-Bergson style of humour. An analysis of language suggests that *End Zone* adheres to Bergson's model of humour. But when we supplement language analysis with

character analysis, it becomes evident that *End Zone* actually inverts Bergson's theory of humour. By advocating humour that both coincides with and inverts Bergson's theory of humour, *End Zone* succeeds in deriding both nuclear weapons and the culture that nuclear weapons seek to destroy.

You'll recall from Part One that Bergson viewed society as a "living being," inherently at odds with ceremonies because they stifle the complexity of social interactions and the pliability of humans (44). For Bergson, the *ceremony* is the prime example of mechanical inelasticity. In *End Zone*, my proposition is that the mechanical is *language*, specifically words that have become separated from their meaning. Much of the novel's humour comes from the simplification of language through jargon that is so technical that its practical meaning becomes near impossible to discern. I turn now to Bing Jackmin, the kicker of the Logos College football team. Bing appears to take great pride in inventing the term "psychomythical" to explain how football harks back to "ancient warriorship" and "cults devoted to pagan forms of technology" (36). Gary says he doesn't like the term because not only is it "vague and pretentious," but it also "means nothing" (36).<sup>3</sup> Bing – who also happens to be the one who believes that the football is aware of its own "footballness" – takes a complete turn later in the novel when he complains that the coaches are training them using "antiquated procedures." When Gary calls him out on his hypocrisy, Bing mistakenly refers to his previous theory not as "psychomythical," but as "hyperatavistic" (63), thus illustrating the meaninglessness of jargon. Bing changes his position on football just as quickly as he forgets his own terminology, suggesting a discrepancy between

---

<sup>3</sup> The kicker of any football team, I'd like to point out, is frequently the butt end of jokes. He is something of an anomaly, not quite a member of the offensive or defensive units since he is only used between touchdowns (for the extra point) or after unsuccessful offensive drives as a way of getting the ball closer to the other team's end zone. The kicker also usually lacks the heavy build of regular football players, since their body types are more suited for soccer, which is usually the sport they get their kicking skills from. Gary's harshness towards Bing Jackmin could very well be DeLillo's homage (or anti-homage) towards the inherent humour of kickers on football teams.

highly technical language and its apparent meaning. The change in language here also suggests a kind of *false pliability*, where words appear to be living (in the sense of Bergson's theory) through the interchangeability of terminology, but are in fact mechanical and unable to convey the meanings of that which they imply.

Mark Osteen sees this same sort of mechanization of language in *End Zone*'s preoccupation with the jargon of nuclear warfare. "Just as the weapons themselves would simplify geography," he says, "so the jargon simplifies language by emptying it of referentiality and proceeding towards meaninglessness" (Osteen 38). Osteen is referring to Gary's ruminations on the language of nuclear war. Indeed, Gary admits to taking pleasure in words and phrases such as "thermal hurricane, overkill, circular error probability, post-attack environment, stark deterrence, dose-rate contours, kill-ratio" and "spasm war" (21). At the same time, however, Gary is aware that these words have lost their meaning. To one of his instructors, an Air Force Major teaching a course on "Aspects of Modern War," Gary stresses that "there's no way to express thirty million dead. No words. So certain men are recruited to reinvent the language" (85). He goes on to say that the words behind nuclear warfare "don't explain, they don't clarify, they don't express. They're painkillers. Everything becomes abstract" (85). These words are simplified and therefore mechanistic ways of conveying the enormity of entire civilizations crumbling.

DeLillo's most sustained use of humour in language occurs in "Part Two" of the novel, during Gary's narration of the big game against West Centrex Biotechnical, the toughest football team in the division. This section of *End Zone* is narrated partly in code, in play names and player routes that are meant to be indecipherable to everyone other than the players and coaches of the Logos College football team. Gary begins by speaking directly to the reader about

football's "assault technology motif" (111).<sup>4</sup> He claims it is his authorial duty to "unbox the lexicon for all eyes to see" (113). The result is some forty odd pages of calculated violence, trash talk and jargon. The sports jargon is especially jarring – it is interspersed throughout "Part Two" in stand-alone paragraphs that have no apparent bearing on Gary's play by play of the game.

Here is an example:

Twin deck left, ride series, white divide.

Gap-angle down, 17, dummy stitch.

Bone country special, double-D to right (141).

The constant shift from game narration to football lingo brings humour to an otherwise serious and violent encounter between two teams. It highlights the incongruity of the violence of the game world and the language that is simplified, mechanized and instrumental in coordinating that violence. Yet there are even funnier moments in the West Centrex game where DeLillo calls our attention to the rigidity of the game world. Here is one example, near the beginning of the match:

When we huddled at the 24, Hobbs said: "Stem left, L and R hitch and cross, F weak switch and sideline. On hut.

"What?" Chuck Deering said.

"On hut."

---

<sup>4</sup> It is unclear whether or not DeLillo truly accepts the premise of football as warfare. Although there are clear parallels between the mechanistic use of language in both nuclear warfare and football, DeLillo introduces a character who rejects the notion of football as warfare. It is Alan Zapalac, Gary's Exobiology professor, who believes that "warfare is warfare. We don't need substitutes because we've got the real thing" (111). Gary is of the opinion that belief in the notion of football as war is not as important as the "exemplary spectator's" understanding of sport as a "benign illusion." This benign illusion (which Gary explains as "the illusion that order is possible" [112]) alludes to the ascetic pleasure Gary finds in virtual, highly structured worlds, be they football fields or post-nuclear attack environments.

“No, the other thing. F something.”

“F weak switch and sideline,” Hobbs said.

“What kind of pattern is that?”

“Are you kidding?”

“What a bunch of fetus-eaters,” Kimborough said.

“When did you put that pattern in Hobbsie?”

“Tuesday or Wednesday. Where the hell were you?”

“It must have been Wednesday. I was at the dentist.”

“Nobody told you?”

“I don’t think so Hobbsie.”

“Look, you run out ten yards, put some moves on your man and end up near the damn sideline.”

“I’m co-captain to a bunch of fetus-eaters.”

“On hut. Break.” (115)

In this passage, DeLillo disrupts the jargon of football with a player who is not familiar with the name of a pattern. Chuck Deering’s lack of exposure to the militarized language of football prompts him to appear absent-minded beside his peers in the huddle. This is an excellent example of Bergson’s notion of *presence* of mind, where an individual who appears to be absent-minded is actually behaving and acting according to a different kind of world. In the above example, it is the world of the dentist, or rather life outside of the strictures of the game world, where language is representative of a thriving society instead of militaristic running and blocking patterns. This is an example of Bergson’s humour in the conventional sense, insofar as the rigidity of language in military-speak is revealed as “something mechanical encrusted on the

living.” A similar moment occurs during a pile-up of bodies, when Gary hears a racist chant from one of the opposing team’s players. It appears to be directed towards Taft Robinson, the lone black player on Logos College:

Middle-sift W, alpha-set, lemmy-2.

Taft went burning up the middle for fifteen. He got six on the next play. I was up ahead, blocking, and we went down along with three or four other people. I was on my back, somebody across my legs, when I realized their tackle, 77, was talking to me, or to Taft, or perhaps to all of us spread over the turf. He was an immense and very geometric piece of work, their biggest man, about six-seven and 270, an oblong monument to the virtues of intimidation. His dull hazy eyes squinted slowly deep inside the helmet as he whispered over the grass.

“Nigger kike faggot. Kike fag. Kike. Nigger fag. Nigger kike faggot.”

(118-119)

In this passage, the mechanized language of football is replaced by the equally mechanized racist chants of player number seventy-seven. The chants are a simplified use of language that promotes violence on the field, much like play codes and the terminology of nuclear warfare. The difference here is that derogatory terms, instead of jargon, have desensitized player 77 to violence. Thus, the humour in this passage is in the interchangeability between racist chants and football plays. The language of play codes and the language of bigotry mechanizes the thriving culture that exists outside of the game world in order to perpetrate maximum violence against that culture. This is how DeLillo’s use of language fits under Bergson’s model of “something mechanical encrusted on the living.”

I turn now to a more character-oriented analysis because, as I mentioned earlier, it is necessary to analyze Gary and a handful of other key characters in order to attain a more thorough understanding of humour in *End Zone*. To see just how DeLillo inverts Bergson's model of humour, I begin with Gary, who is not only a human being (obviously); he is also the highly aware protagonist of DeLillo's funny novel. So, according to Bergson, he should be pliable and averse to the military's simplified and mechanistic use of language. And he is, but not in the way we might think. Gary is in fact only auditing Major Staley's course on "Aspects of Modern War." When Staley sees Gary's high marks and asks him to consider enrolling in the cadet wing of the Air Force, Gary says he doesn't want to go too far into the subject matter. He's "interested in certain areas of this thing in a purely outside interest kind of way. Extracurricular. I don't want to drop H-bombs on the Eskimos or somebody. But I'm not necessarily averse to the purely speculative features of the thing. The hypothetical areas" (157). Gary is interested in nuclear warfare because of the hypothetical premise that it might offer an ascetic experience in which the simplification of language and geography allows one to transcend affiliations with history and politics.

Because of his focus on individuality and transcendence from social strictures, Gary's ascetic interpretation of nuclear warfare exemplifies Bergson's theoretical model of *the living*. Throughout the novel, Gary and several other characters ascribe metaphysical qualities to nuclear weapons. Chief among these is Major Staley, who plays a nuclear war game with Gary. The Major explains that "there's a kind of theology at work here. The bombs are a kind of god... We begin to capitulate to the overwhelming presence. It's so powerful ... We say let the god have his way.... Let it happen, whatever he ordains" (80). Yes, the metaphysicality of nuclear weapons implies that the threat of human extinction offers Gary and others the promise of



transcendence. There's no way to deny that this model is inherently problematic – but Gary is aware of his disturbing propensities. In fact, his awareness (Bergson would say *presence* [13]) is the reason why he is so troubled. Gary's fascination with nuclear extinction is the plot or "problem" of the novel, the obstacle that he, as protagonist, is expected to overcome. This premise is made clear in the beginning of the novel, when Gary mentions how his fascination with nuclear warfare prompted him to drop out of his previous school, the University of Miami. In *End Zone*, Gary's fascination with nuclear warfare is the grounds for latent humour that continually flips Bergson's model. In fact, Gary's belief in the livingness of both nuclear warfare and football is made clear in his narration of the game against West Centrex, when he refers to the game world as "not just order but civilization." He writes about "occasional lusts," which are not for warfare itself, but for "details" behind the war: "impressions, colors, statistics, patterns, mysteries, numbers, idioms, symbols." These details ascribe livingness ("civilization[al]" qualities, to use Gary's terminology) to an otherwise rigid world that is confined to the rules of the game. Gary describes the game world as a "society that is rat free... organized so that everyone follows the same rules... electronically controlled," a society that "roots out the inefficient and penalizes the guilty; that tends always to move toward perfection" (112). Yet this world, for Gary and others, is the means by which they can escape the oppressive trappings of politics and history. Like the mechanized language it promotes, the rigidity of the game world, along with Gary's championing of it, suggests an inverse-Bergson style of humour in which the living (the actual world, alive with history and politics) is encrusted on the mechanical, on the simplified language and the simplified rules that exist in the game world. This results in humorous incongruities, such as the synthesis of God and warhead: an unlikely pairing which

stems from both Gary and Major Staley's view of nuclear weapons as an ascetic cleanser that can rid the world of complications that inhibit individual freedom.

The humorous incongruity of God and warhead points to DeLillo's expose of the logic of nuclear deterrence. Osteen calls attention to the notion of The Bomb as God in *End Zone*, and, although his concern isn't with humour or humour theory, Osteen uses language and methodology strikingly similar to Bergson's. He builds off of the ideas of Tom LeClair, who analyzes DeLillo's novels through systems theory. LeClair sees the theology of the bomb as a kind of logocentrism, or, as Osteen paraphrases, "a re-inscription of theological values." Osteen uses LeClair's argument to understand the theological implications of the attraction of a warhead's capacity to bring total destruction. He writes that nuclear weapons "can be 'present' in our minds only when not used – when absent physically – because when truly 'present' – that is, when used – they could cause an ultimate absence, the end of civilization and perhaps even the extinction of humanity." He goes on to compare this "sinister deity" with another DeLillo novel, namely *Underworld*, because it:

resembles the God described by Nick Shay in 'The Cloud of Unknowing' ... whom we cherish precisely for His 'negation' (*Underworld* 295). The Bomb eludes the metaphysics of presence because it generates logical contradictions: it is the one weapon whose value depends upon its never being used.... [it] represent(s) a negation, an ultimate simplicity, an end zone, for which we often yearn (Osteen 37).

Though not identical to Bergson's definitions, Osteen's theological grounding of the terms *absence* and *presence* suggests that the human metaphysical experience is an adequate example of Bergson's "living pliability of a human being." Bergson, as I pointed out in Part One, argues

that a comic figure's apparent absentminded behaviour is actually a showcase for his or her *presence* of mind. The comic figure operates according to imaginary environments that are nonetheless "definite" because they exist as an idealization of prevailing social mores. In the same way that Bergson's absent-minded comic figure is actually *present*, the physical absence of nuclear weapons is actually the metaphysical presence of The Bomb as God. This confusing logic, central to the humour of *End Zone* (though difficult to comprehend), is directly related to the military strategy of nuclear deterrence, which abides by the rationale that possessing nuclear weapons will prevent others from launching their own, since neither side wishes to be destroyed. Osteen summarizes the paradox of deterrence best when he says that nuclear weapons have become "the means of our deliverance from their own 'dark presence'... The Bomb thus seems to save us from itself" (38). Again, the words "deliverance" and "save" suggest that "there's a kind of theology at work here," as Major Staley tells Gary during their nuclear war game (80).

Thus far we have analyzed Gary and established that there is an intersection between theology, nuclear weapons, and an inverse-Bergson style of humour. *End Zone* would not be a DeLillo novel unless several other themes entered the fray to make it a monster of heterogeneity. For the purposes of my argument (and also because *End Zone* is not nearly as hulking as *Americana* or *Ratner's Star*), I will introduce only one more theme, crucial as the others – especially since it carries over from DeLillo's first novel: consumerism. Massive football players who balloon upwards of two hundred and fifty pounds are the perfect metaphors for consumers in late capitalist culture. Foremost among these is Gary's roommate, three-hundred pound Anatole Bloomberg, who (quite ridiculously) has decided to play football in the Texan desert at Logos College to "unjew" himself (46). Bloomberg shares Gary's fascination with nuclear destruction. He believes:

An individual's capacity for violence is closely linked with his ascetic tendencies ... in our silence and our terror we may steer our technology toward the metaphysical, toward the creation of some unimaginable weapon able to pierce spiritual barriers, to maim or kill whatever dark presence envelops the world. (215)

Gary convinces Bloomberg to forego the diet given to him by his offensive line coach (who is training Bloomberg to have quicker feet) so that Bloomberg might grow larger and larger. Gary "revere(s)" Bloomberg's heft, he sees it as "devout vulgarity," a

worthwhile goal for prospective saints and flagellants. The new asceticism. All the visionary possibilities of the fast. To feed on the plants and animals of the earth. To expand and wallow. I cherished his size, the formlessness of it, the sheer vulgar pleasure, his sense of being overwritten prose. Somehow it was the opposite of death. (49)

When Bloomberg decides to give up his diet, he offers a lengthy speech on the ascetic merits of obesity, on how it affirms one's self-awareness and individuality. Bloomberg felt that his original plan, which was to gain self-control through dieting in order to gain the self-control needed to "unjew" himself, was not working. He felt that, by losing his old body, he was losing his "newly acquired mind" (77). Here is a snippet of his thoughts on why the individual should be free from their politico-historical backgrounds:

Gentlemen, I allude to my Jewishness. This is the subsoil, as it were, of my being. It would be the only thing left and I would be, in effect, a fourteen-year-old Jewish boy once more. Would I start telling jokes about my mother? Would

I put some of that old ghetto rhythm in my voice – jazz it up a little? Would the great smelly guilt descend on me? I don't want to hear a word about the value of one's heritage. I am a twentieth-century individual. I am working myself up to a point where I can exist beyond guilt, beyond blood, beyond the ridiculous past. Thank goodness for America. In this country there's a chance to accomplish such a thing. I want to look straight ahead. I want to see things clearly. I'd like to become single-minded and straightforward in the most literal sense of those words. History is no more accurate than prophecy. I reject the wrathful God of the Hebrews. I reject the Christian God of love and money, although I don't reject love itself or money itself. I reject heritage, background, tradition and birthright. These things merely slow the progress of the human race. They result in war and insanity, war and insanity, war and insanity. (77)

Just as in *Americana*, where the seeming vitality of consumerist images masks the fear of death, so too does Bloomberg's immensity. His feeding on "the plants and animals of the earth," (to go back to Gary's thoughts) suggest a consumerist culture that operates according to death and the fear of death (recalling that Bloomberg's consumption, according to Gary, felt like "the opposite of death"). Both Osteen and Joseph Dewey have used the word "fascistic" to describe Gary and Anatole's drive towards simplicity and the eradication of politico-historical ties. It is certainly problematic to implicitly wish for the extinction of human kind in order to experience transcendence and individuality, so Osteen and Dewey are not necessarily far off the mark. But neither Osteen nor Dewey have much to say about how the novel's satirization of a world ruled by nuclear weapons can be traced to this comic form of asceticism. The very fact that Gary and

Anatole see nuclear weapons as a form of ascetic liberation suggests a kind of humour that is as derisive of nuclear weapons as the culture that nuclear weapons seek to destroy.

To see the full force of consumerism in *End Zone*, it is not enough to analyze only Bloomberg's weight and asceticism. Osteen cites first Bloomberg and then Gary's girlfriend, Myna Corbett, as a chain of obese (and obese-revering, when we include Gary) characters that suggest that The Bomb is "the ultimate consumer item." Like Bloomberg, Myna chooses to be obese for personal reasons – in her case, it is to reject the "responsibilities of beauty" (66). That being said, there is a discrepancy between her personal aims and her symbolic weight: the former suggests rebellion against consumerism; the latter suggests complicity. There is also her highly incongruous sense of fashion. At one point she is wearing an "Icelandic sheep coat, a visored butterscotch cap, her 1930s celluloid bracelet, and tricolored hockey socks" (149). While Myna's style challenges accepted standards of beauty, she is nonetheless active in consuming these items of clothing, even if it is part of a social statement against consumerism. Gary first becomes attracted to Myna when he sees her walk by at the end of one of his football practices. She is wearing an orange dress with a mushroom cloud applied on front. Gary ends the chapter by saying he thought "she must be a little crazy to wear a dress like that with her figure" (41). Later on, Gary tells Myna that she resembles "an explosion over the desert" (68). Osteen suggests that Gary's attraction to Myna "is thus coupled with his fascination with nuclear holocaust" (42). To complicate things further, Myna comes back from vacation twenty pounds lighter and with the mindset to lose more weight. She claims that "she had been satisfied just consuming everything that came along." Her incongruous fashion sense, she realizes, had taken her away from herself and made her life "a whole big thing of consumption, consuming, consume." She believes she is now ready to find out whether she really exists or whether she's "something that's just been put

together as a market for junk mail” (229). Osteen quite rightly points out that Myna has tangled the relationship between “self-mortification” and “self-indulgence” when she decides to lose weight. Osteen writes:

She asserts that her obesity represented consumerism, but by losing weight and accepting the responsibilities of beauty, she may be placing herself more solidly into the consumer fantasy of emaciated female beauty. Even self-discipline, in other words, may be self-indulgence, or an outgrowth of the American consumer mythology of self-improvement. She believes that she is now facing the responsibilities of beauty, but the reader may wish to ask whose beauty it is. (43)

Osteen appears to be ascribing blame to Myna rather than suggesting that consumerism is nearly impossible to escape, even though the progression of his argument suggests the latter. Osteen goes on to argue that people in the United States “do not see expenditures on nuclear arms as waste but as a necessary deterrent to nuclear attack” (43). Enormous sums of money are spent on warheads, but not for the purpose of using them – we only wish to show them off so that we can prove our superiority. If the United States were to actually use them, it would mean the destruction of the “global economy in which they have value,” in which they are, in fact, “the ultimate consumer item” (43). Osteen concludes by saying that “*End Zone* reveals how the ascetic impulse and its accompanying hunger for apocalyptic endings emerge from the promptings of consumer culture, where nuclear weapons might bring instant relief from the headaches of morality and politics” (43). Osteen has already established the notion that The Bomb has become God, and now that we see The Bomb as “the ultimate consumer item,” it is apparent, through both Anatole and Myna, that consumerism has found its way into not only

self-indulgence, but self mortification. Gary's asceticism, then, is inherently linked to the consumerism of the bomb. Gary seeks the "instant relief" of nuclear weapons, in the same way that regular products are sold to instantly satisfy human needs. A similar brand of instantaneousness is prevalent in the language of nuclear jargon, where highly technical terms are used to nullify the meaning behind mass extinction and the end of complex human history. We say a term like "post-attack environment" and instantly mechanize and therefore shrug off the deaths of millions. Yet such a term allows both Gary and Anatole to be individuals free of social strictures. They are examples of Bergson's notion of the *living*, except inverted to be encrusted on the mechanical, since their disturbing form of *living* implies the instantaneous destruction of humanity. The notion of The Bomb as both God and the ultimate form of consumption is proof that DeLillo's humour goes beyond the use of nuclear jargon. Bloomberg's desire to "unjew himself" through post-nuclear attack fantasies and egregious consumption is DeLillo's strategy of poking fun at our culture of consumption, which has become so extreme that it has acquired the ability to destroy itself, quite ironically, through the power of consumption.

In his discussion of obesity and consumption, Osteen sees Myna Corbett as similar to Anatole Bloomberg. However, to gain an understanding of the individual and his or her social role in *End Zone*, it is better to compare Myna to Taft Robinson, the star running back of the Logos College football team. Myna's rebellion against consumption and the standard of beauty is largely a failure. She is trapped between being a tool of consumerism and adhering to her socially-prescribed role as a woman. Taft appears to have more success in the drive toward individuation, although he embraces the politico-historical. Nonetheless he is a humorous example of Bergson's model of *the living*. Taft is the only black player on the squad and by far



their fastest, most powerful asset. Thinking about their biggest game of the season, Gary ruminates on how Taft brought the crowd to their feet:

This was it then, the legend, the beauty, the mystery of black speed... it was not just the run that had brought them to their feet; it was the idea of the run, the history of it. Taft's speed had a life and history of his own, independent of him. To wonder at this past. To understand the speed, that it was something unknown to them, never to be known. (191-92)

Near the end of the novel, Gary is shocked to hear that Taft is quitting football because he cares more about studying and taking time to “think about things” (233). His room is nearly barren, except for a few precisely-placed objects (two clocks on the wall and pencils in ex-marmalade jars, among other things) that carry spiritual resonances. He also appears to have recently converted to Islam, as he tells Gary “it’s almost time to face Mecca” (238), despite forgetting “the name of the black stone of Abraham” (241). Joseph Dewey argues that Taft’s sudden turn to “monkish seclusion” and “engaged contemplation” suggests that he has superficially embraced theology and that he has “restructured his dorm room into an exercise in hermetically sealed control akin to the very gamefield he is forsaking” (59). Dewey, however, does not see the emphasis placed on Taft Robinson as the only black member of the football team. Not only does Taft cite “the history books” in explaining how historical figures such as Abraham, Mary, Rembrandt, and Bach were black or had traces of African blood in them (239), but he also complains of his own status as the stereotypical black athlete. He is the minority figure, the black man that the crowd cheering at “the mystery of black speed” will never truly understand. In his reasoning for why he quit the “great big game” of football, Taft says he wants “less of white father watching me run” (233). Taft has essentially given up being a black athlete, the crowd

favourite, in order to be a black scholar. He has also chosen a religion for himself that is subversive in a place like West Texas, deep in the Bible belt. Yes, unlike Bloomberg, Taft has wholeheartedly accepted his history – but he has done this in a way that challenges the ruling white social order and makes him more human individual than pawn on the field. In rejecting his socially prescribed role, Taft embodies an individualism akin to Bergson's hypothesis of *the living*. Dewey is right, however, in raising concerns about Taft's apocalyptic joy, but this is more of a parody of the drive toward apocalypse in late capitalist culture than it is an indication of superficiality on Taft's part. Taft has the same fascination with apocalypse and self-awareness of said fascination as Gary. Both of them continually read about destruction and suffering, despite the fact that they "can't bear" it (240). Taft's apocalyptic interests are more aligned towards atrocities, particularly "the ovens," a reference to the cruelty endured by Jews in the concentration camps of Nazi Germany. Although Taft has asserted his individuality through his own race, he sees apocalyptic destruction in the same way as Gary and Anatole: as a kind of simplification, a spiritual cleansing and a chance for renewal. The difference with Taft, however, is that his apocalyptic joys are based on uncomplicating the racism of human history so that there is "less of white father watching (him) run" (233). Thus, Taft's individuality, his *livingness*, is similar to both Gary and Anatole insofar as it is an inversion of Bergson's theory. In order to live in a racist free world, one in which other people will see him as more than just a black man, Taft turns to apocalyptic annihilation. Global nuclear destruction (the mechanical) would create a new world free of racism, one where he would be able to fully realize his individuality (a world that would embody Bergson's notion of the living). In this way, Taft and Gary undergo a humorous moment of bonding near the end of the novel, when they both admit they have apocalyptic

desires. Tragedy becomes inseparable from comedy when Gary tells his teammate “there must be something we can do” (241).

With characters like Anatole, Myna, and Taft taking jarring and seemingly irrational turns throughout the course of the novel, one might wonder if they would continue turning until reaching 360 degrees (or surpassing that) if *End Zone* were to carry on. If that were the case, then the circular forms of Patrick O’Neil’s methodology in “Dark Humour: The Comedy of Entropy” may provide a better analytical tool for reading *End Zone*. Yet DeLillo’s second novel is shorter than his others and, as a result, the decisions of Anatole, Myna, and Taft are final. Of course, with themes like *the simplicity and joy of apocalypse* and *The Bomb as God* pervading the novel, it wouldn’t be wise to take their personal decisions too seriously. Still, we should be serious in trying to wrap our heads around the fact that it takes a special kind of humour to flip one of humour theory’s most acclaimed philosophers on his head. For a novel to proceed under the premise that there is something living encrusted on the mechanical is truly bizarre. Yet the asceticism found in meaningless jargon and apocalyptic simplicity is a scathing commentary on military speak and the absurd amounts of power that we have entrusted to nuclear weapons. Beyond that, it is also a critique of our culture of consumption, which has become so extreme as to threaten its own existence. The fundamental problem that Gary faces is in championing the simple without straying into the mechanical. His fascination with and love of game worlds exemplifies this problem. In football, for example, Gary’s thoughts are “wholesomely commonplace” and his actions are “uncomplicated by history, enigma, holocaust or dream” (4). However, the game proceeds as a mechanism “within the chalked borders of the playing field” (4). Likewise, there is an inherent problem in destroying a world ruled by nuclear weapons (and the meaningless jargon of nuclear weapons) only to replace it with an uncomplicated game

world, one in which wars might be fought with a “referee and a timekeeper” (81). There aren’t many funnier exposes of how deeply The Bomb has impacted our culture than in Gary’s rationalization of ascetic truth in nuclear warfare.

*Ratner's Star: Entropic Humour and Moholean Relativity*

It is hard to find a more suitable humour theorist to read alongside *Ratner's Star* than Patrick O'Neil. His interpretation of dark humour in "The Comedy of Entropy" is modelled on the title of a children's story that is intertextually referenced throughout DeLillo's hulking fourth novel. The story in question is *Through the Looking Glass*, Lewis Carroll's sequel to *Alice in Wonderland* (which is also referenced in *Ratner's Star*). As its title suggests, *Through the Looking Glass* features Alice climbing into a mirror and entering a world just as fantastical as the one she left in the rabbit's hole. O'Neil borrows the language of Lewis Carroll to explain his theory of entropic humour, a highly self-reflexive form of humour that destroys both the established order and the social idealism promoted by humour of the more benign variety. Entropic humour, in the words of O'Neil, is metahumour that circles back on itself "until the celebration of entropy becomes a paradoxical celebration of order, cosmos regained, but through the looking glass" (161). It should come as no surprise that O'Neil chose the language of *Through the Looking Glass* to formulate his theory. Not only is the mirror world a complete breakdown of the laws of physics and all that is rational (an unsubtle movement towards entropy): it is also a world that is literally inside a mirror, the best possible metaphor for entropic humour's self-reflexivity, since it is through Alice's looking glass – a mirror that is both reflective of the real world and projective of the disintegration of real world systems – that we see the paradoxical celebration of entropy as an order of its own.

Similarly, it should be no surprise that the few literary critics who have written on *Ratner's Star* have referred to it as, among other things, a retelling of Lewis Carroll's *Alice* stories. The protagonist, fourteen-year old math genius Billy Twillig, like Alice, is an adolescent who ventures to a fantastic world filled with allegorical creatures, quick and insane changes of

scene, and all things topsy-turvy. In *Ratner's Star*, “wonderland” is Field Experiment Number One, a high-end research facility in Central Asia filled with scientists furiously working on “individual crackpot theories” (Dewey 62). Billy’s role in Field Experiment Number One (henceforth FENO) is to decode a message believed to be sent from a planet orbiting Ratner’s Star. Billy is replacing Endor, a world famous scientist who eventually abandoned the project in order to eat worms and claw at the earth in a hole miles away from the research facility. Endor is of the belief that humans need “metaphysical burrows that lead absolutely nowhere” (90). He warns Billy of the dangers associated with the code from Ratner’s Star and “the dark side to Field Experiment Number One.” He speaks to himself and downplays his own insanity by cryptically saying, “It’s surprisingly easy to adjust to living in a hole. Out there, in other words, there’s just as much holeness and mudness” (90, 91). He is one-dimensional in the sense that he has little to no backstory or plausible human motivation. Endor, it would seem, is a symbol of forewarning, of the dangers of attempting to make sense of that which we know not. He is but one example of the many figurative, larger-than-life characters in *Ratner's Star*.

Unlike Endor, however, most of these characters thrive on science and an objective, (or so they claim) mathematical worldview in order to systematize their own perceptions. The human perception of the universe is a crucial theme in *Ratner's Star*, centered around “Space Brain,” a supercomputer that simulates “gas outflows, explosions, the expansion of molecular clouds and other observed and probable phenomena” (49). Space Brain converts the radio emissions from dish antennas to create these galactic pictures. This is how Billy continually receives news about Ratner’s Star – through updates from the “computer universe” (49). Nyquist, an elderly scientist tasked with briefing Billy when he first joins FENO, makes clear the importance of Space Brain when he says, “In some shape or other we try to find the pictorial link

between the universe and our own sense of perception” (49). Yet Nyquist and Schwarz, along with most other characters in *Ratner’s Star*, are of the belief that “there is no reality more independent of our own perception and true to itself than mathematical reality” (48). DeLillo begs to differ. He uses the figure of Orang Mohole, a character that embodies the humorous incongruity of science and magic, as a countervailing force in *Ratner’s Star*. Mohole’s bizarre ailments (and bizarre remedies to those ailments) function outside of science and established medical practice. Thus he is a figure that creates ironic humour which questions the scientification of the mysteries of the universe. Mohole’s theory of the universe is also ironic, because it uses science to promote the subjectivity of human perception. That being said, it’s important to also recognize that DeLillo’s humour goes beyond the simply ironic. His technique of writing humour follows the model of Patrick O’Neil’s “comedy of entropy,” because he dismantles our notion of the cosmos only to recreate it with his own “gratuitous constructs” (O’Neil 161). Through humour, DeLillo creates a system of his own, modelled on Mohole’s self-named theory of moholean relativity, which predicts eventual entropic collapse. DeLillo’s humour in *Ratner’s Star* is metahumour that circles back on itself to expose our perceptions of the universe as perceptions of ourselves and our own inescapable subjectivity. The point of *Ratner’s Star*, however, is not to disparage our inability to systematize; it is rather to critique systematization itself for denying us the mystery that is inherent to our humanness.

According to O’Neil, dark humour – in its fullest, most “active” sense (161) – is best explained through *entropy*, a physicist’s term for “the tendency of closed systems to move from a state of order into one of total disorder” (156). O’Neil’s synthesis of science and literature is meant to be beneficial for reading all kinds of dark humour, but it is especially relevant to DeLillo’s science-obsessed writing in *Ratner’s Star*. This goes hand-in-hand with their shared

interest in self-reflexivity and the books of Lewis Carroll. In FENO, DeLillo parodies the notion of scientific truth by forcing the research institute to collapse onto itself due to a failure of mathematical perception. I refer here specifically to the dramatic climax of the novel, the unpredicted solar eclipse that leaves scientists clinging to wacky forms of mysticism with the hope that they will understand the mysteries of the universe. Prior to this point in the novel, however, the scientists of FENO are largely attuned to the idea that mathematics is the only truthful means for perceiving the universe. Nyquist explains:

Think of the fundamental order of atomic structure as seen in the periodic table. Think of the laws of planetary motion. Consider the fact that, relative to their respective diameters, the average distance between stars is roughly the same as the average distance between atomic particles in interstellar space. Is this mere ‘coincidence’? From the Medieval Latin. To happen together. Something and its shadow. Think of the secretion patterns of red ants. The shell of a chambered nautilus. The cubic crystals in ordinary table salt. The honeycomb, the starfish, the common snowflake – all so stunningly reasoned in surface configuration. But not nearly final enough to soothe our disquiet. However, there’s always the view that an ultimate symmetry is to be avoided rather than sought, the reason being that this structural balance represents not victory over chaos and death but death itself or what follows upon death. A logarithmic spiral. The polyhedral cohesion of virus crystals. (49)

In this passage, Nyquist is debriefing Billy about the Ratnerian code, particularly its implications for humanity’s potential to completely understand the universe. He goes on to say that it’s “safe to assume the Ratnerians are superior to us” and that if Billy deciphers the message, “it may



mark the beginning of an exchange of information that could eventually tell us where we are and what the universe looks like” (50). The morbid disclaimer at the end of Nyquist’s debrief foreshadows entropic collapse. But just how does DeLillo proceed to destroy the mathematical absolutism that his novel at first seems to promote? DeLillo more or less retains the view that “an ultimate symmetry is to be avoided rather than sought,” though not necessarily for the reasons that Nyquist claims. DeLillo writes *Ratner’s Star* as a parody of Nyquist’s rhetorical question about mathematical “coincidence.” The residents of FENO are scientists and mathematicians, leaders in their respective fields who promote theories of varying plausibility. Yet nearly all of these characters are manic or afflicted with physical ills that are never truly explained and therefore appear bizarre and fantastical alongside the hard science of the novel. This incongruity is at the core of *Ratner’s Star*.

In his article ““More Advanced the Deeper We Dig,”” David Cowart describes FENO as an “entertaining survey . . . of eccentric geniuses.” In the first half of the novel alone, “Billy encounters twelve or so staff members and some forty-five of his fellow researchers” (601). Schwarz and Nyquist are merely the first few of these, and their physical conditions are as debilitating as the rest of their colleagues. Schwarz is described as “a densely packed individual weighing well over three hundred pounds,” with “concentrated flesh,” “eye slits,” and “bubble-like hands” (46). Nyquist on the other hand is blind, with “small crisp flakes” adhering to the inner edge of each eye (48). Not only are their conditions unexplained, but Billy’s child-like curiosity lightens the severity of their physical ailments. So when Schwarz babbles on about the importance of the Ratnerian code, Billy’s off-topic questions (“Did you just fart?” and “How much do you weigh?” [48, 51]) ease the tension surrounding Schwarz’s serious and unexplainable ailments. Billy’s questions also undermine the validity of the scientification of the

universe. Consider the dialogue bit that succeeds Schwarz's declaration that "there is no reality more independent of our perception and more true to itself than mathematical reality:"

"Did you just fart?"

"This is serious."

"We're in a little room here without any air blowing through."

"This may be the most important day of your life."

"Have some mercy" (48).

DeLillo's dialogue is funny here because he alters the discussion of science so that the question of whether or not Schwarz just farted takes precedence over the mathematical truth of the universe. Apart from poking fun at Schwarz's grotesque body, (which, in the mind of Billy, must produce equally grotesque farts) this passage suggests that it can never truly be determined who farted, since neither Billy nor Schwarz admit to passing gas. In this way, DeLillo uses Billy's dialogue to promote the subjectivity of human experience and to deride the notion of mathematical truth.

The interactions between Billy and his colleagues at FENO are an example of the light treatment of the *grotesque*, an aesthetic that is essential to O'Neil's theory of dark humour. To reiterate, O'Neil's definition of the grotesque is based on Wolfgang Kaiser's idea of "the artistic expression of that estrangement and alienation which grips mankind when belief in a perfect and protective natural order is weakened or destroyed" (158). In FENO, unexplainable deformities of body and mind are rampant to an absurd degree. Furthermore, the scientists' grotesque physical and psychological features challenge the precise nature of their work. In *Ratner's Star*, the "perfect and protective natural order" is mathematics, which fails to adequately explain the unpredicted solar eclipse and the ailments of FENO researchers. Perhaps the most unexplainable

of ailments are the misfiring neurons and “snap(ing)” suffered by Orang Mohole, a scientist who refers to himself as the “acknowledged kingpin of alternate physics” (178). Mohole takes pills to deal with his “psychological value pattern” (183), which is centered on the premise that he would react more drastically than anyone in situations of impending doom. Of course, there is nothing within the bounds of science and mathematics to explain his ailment; nor is there anything scientific about the pill he is taking, which is described only as being “big” and “green” (186). DeLillo, here, suggests that the human mind is as mysterious as the structure (or structurelessness) of our universe, thus likening Space Brain to modern medicine, since they are both incapable of completely classifying that which they seek to understand. Mohole’s role as both kingpin (he lives in a penthouse-like suite complete with a room reserved solely for vomiting: the “vomitorium”) and researcher promotes an incongruity that once again lightens the severity of his grotesque psychological ailment. For Mohole, the grotesque reaches its most exaggerated point when he implicitly threatens Billy to take the green pill. He says he “hurt(s) all over” because Billy has refused him, so much so that Mohole envisions himself standing in a window high above the street “with a high-powered rifle and a whole lot of ammunition” (186). But Mohole’s threat to massacre civilians is mediated by nonchalance. He immediately changes the subject and offers to provide Billy with “female companionship”:

“That reminds me. I’m having some female companionship drop up later today. Maybe you’d like to stay and meet it?”

“What’s it consist of?”

“There’s only one but she might have a sister.”

“They told me to get back at once and I didn’t. If you could find out for sure about the sister thing, I could try to leave the meeting early again” (187)

The danger Mohole poses towards Billy is undermined by the sudden turn toward light-humoured dialogue. This is an example of a “cognitive shift,” as termed by humour theorist John Morreall. Based on what we’ve learned about Mohole so far (through DeLillo’s “set up”), our expectation is that Mohole will take a gun out of his closet and force Billy to take the pill. Instead, DeLillo undermines our expectations with sudden amiableness between Billy and Mohole. The reader’s thoughts and attitudes change quickly when they realize that Billy and Mohole share an interest in women (Morreall, *Comic Relief* 52). Billy’s interest is based on his pubescent adolescence, while Mohole’s is based on his deranged psychological make up and his rather sleazy title of “kingpin.” In this passage, DeLillo’s cognitive shift generates humour by bringing together two wildly different characters through their mutual interest in “female companionship.” Like his exchange with Schwarz, Billy’s dialogue with Mohole is illustrative of ironic understatement, which, when coupled with exaggerated displays of grotesquerie (as seen in Mohole’s psychological ailments), results in what O’Neil describes as “simultaneous horror and exhilaration” (158). It is this link between the ironic and the grotesque that allows us to read *Ratner’s Star* as dark humour.

The device that makes *Ratner’s Star* truly entropic, however, is the pantheon of researchers and staffers at FENO. Billy offers the reader a tour of a facility as obsessed with science as it is marred by unexplainable psychoses and disfigurement. This tour, much akin to Alice’s adventure in wonderland, is how *Ratner’s Star* promotes what O’Neil refers to as the laughter of “parodic norms, flaunted fictivity” and “gratuitous constructs” (161). According to O’Neil, these are metafictional qualities that allude to the paradoxical celebration of entropy, or the order of disorder as seen through the looking glass. The “gratuitous construct” of *Ratner’s Star* is the seemingly impossible coincidence that nearly all of FENO’s workers suffer from noticeably

grotesque ailments that lie beyond the scientific structure that they so ardently believe in. Mark Osteen sees this parody as related to the idea of *Ratner's Star* as a “hypertrophic children’s book” (62). Osteen argues that Part One of the novel, “Adventures: Field Experiment Number One,” features FENO workers as “various scary creatures” (62) who confront a youthful protagonist. He suggests that the episodic structure of “Adventures” “mimics the form (“and then, ... and then, ... and then”) of the stories small children tell” (62). Osteen goes on to compare Billy to Alice, citing how the intertextual link between Carroll and DeLillo “form[s] an indispensable substratum” in *Ratner's Star* that is “much more pervasive and significant than DeLillo or his critics have acknowledged” (64). Osteen cites several creatures from the Carroll books, such as the caterpillar and the Mad Hatter, who bear resemblances to different theories and characters in *Ratner's Star*.<sup>5</sup> I am not as interested in analysing these comparisons on a case-by-case basis as I am interested in analyzing the overall similarity in structure between *Ratner's Star* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. By alluding to the Carroll books, DeLillo situates *Ratner's Star* among children’s books that are structured by a protagonist’s non-stop encounters with “various scary creatures.” The child-like storytelling in “Adventures,” so unlike DeLillo’s

---

<sup>5</sup> One of the more striking comparisons relevant to the humour of *Ratner's Star* is in Osteen’s theory of the “grin without a cat,” a reference to the Cheshire Cat from *Alice in Wonderland*. Osteen argues that many chapters in Part One of *Ratner's Star* correspond to chapters in *Alice in Wonderland*. One of these is chapter 6, “Convergence Inward,” which showcases Billy’s exposure to metaphorical and literal theories of black holes, the “perfect astronomical embodiment of convergence inward.” Osteen describes black holes as “collapsed stars that create gravitational forces so powerful that not even light can escape from them, black holes are invisible, and their existence can be determined only by measuring their disruptions of spacetime” (72). He argues that chapter 6 of *Alice in Wonderland* “contains its own famous illustration of convergence inward: the Cheshire Cat, a massive ‘invisible object’ (*Ratner's Star* 101) that slowly disappears, leaving ‘a grin without a cat!’” (Carroll 91). Osteen believes that “black holes play a similar joke on the laws of spacetime” (72). He goes on to argue that Celeste Dessau, an eyepatched scientist in FENO who is obsessed with existing in Billy’s mind without being physically present, (*Ratner's Star* 113) espouses the same kind of spacetime-bending logic of “inward convergence” as the Cheshire cat.

other novels and completely antithetical to the narrative style of Part Two,<sup>6</sup> is a form of “flaunted fictivity” (O’Neil 161) that illustrates the self-reflexivity of *Ratner’s Star*. DeLillo celebrates entropy in *Ratner’s Star* by promoting the ridiculous premise that nearly every single scientific researcher in FENO is marred by an illness or psychosis that falls outside of the testable realm of science. A mathematical entity named in Billy’s honour, the “stellated twilligon” (116), is another example of *Ratner’s Star*’s preoccupation with humorous self-reflexivity. In order to illustrate this point, I turn back to the “acknowledged kingpin of alternate physics,” Orang Mohole. Mohole’s model of the universe is based on Billy’s stellated twilligon: “two triangles sharing the same base: with one abnormality: the base is invisible” (181). Mohole uses the Twilligon in his theory of an entropic universe:

I postulate eventual collapse in a sort of n-bottomed hole or terminal Mohole. First let me describe the two paths of expansion in my model – paths represented by the two left or ascending sides of the twilligon as you call it, both lines generated by the same point. One path is taken up by detectable matter, growing outward since the big bang. The other line is gravity, getting stronger as the universe becomes more dense with both detectable and missing matter. We are currently at the apex of matter, the hallway point of gravity. As expansion ceases we turn our attention to the right or descending sides of the figure. What was open begins to close. Matter begins its inward fall at the apex of the twilligon. Gravity becomes dominant at the sub-apex. The two right

---

<sup>6</sup> Part 2 of *Ratner’s Star* is titled, “Reflections: Logicon Project Minus One,” and features stream of consciousness writing and a shift away from Billy’s central role as protagonist.

sides at the same terminal point. Gravity clutches matter in a terrific frenzy.

(181-82)

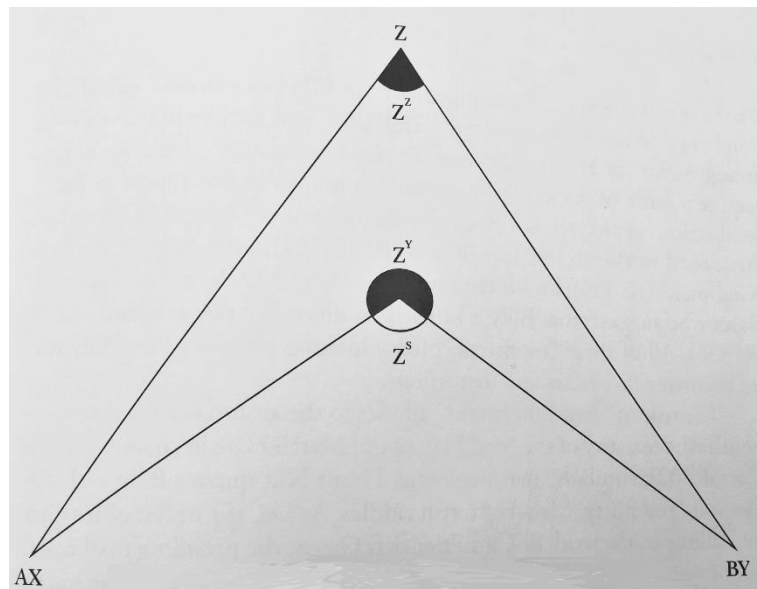


Figure 1. Billy's stellated twilligon as a model of universal entropy.

Mohole alters the stellated twilligon in one way: he gives things a chance “to drip through.” At point BY, Mohole suggests there is an opening – “the final mohole,” as he calls it, “is not leakproof” (182). He goes on to say:

We can't actually see this on paper or even in our minds because the two descending sides of the twilligon conclude in a single point and you can't have an opening in a point. But we can pretend a little, can't we? We're not so scientific that we can't have a little make believe, right? Then, if something drops through, there's a continuation, another chance, the universe refreshed.

(182)

In effect, Mohole's admission of “make-believe” is a self-reflexive reference to his own bizarre ailments, which, as I mentioned earlier, involve neuron misfires, inclinations to shoot civilians from upper storey windows, an inability to be refused, and random vomiting (178-189). These

psychological and physiological illnesses are scientifically unexplainable and any attempt to diagnose them would be as make-believe as Mohole's theory of the universe. Thus the "terminal Mohole" is an example of entropic humour in the sense that it is "humour about humour" (O'Neil 162). It succeeds in reorienting that which it parodies. This, for O'Neil, is the most advanced form of dark humour: metahumour that remodels a system disrupted by the chaos of dark humour. By admitting that his own theory is "make-believe" (indeed he goes on to say that it's just a theory, "soothing" on paper, but dreadful if proven true) Mohole offers structure once again by positing that science and imagination (Osteen would use the term "magic") need not be at odds with one another in coming to an understanding about the mysteries of the universe.

Mohole's theory of the universe has another layer of self-reflexivity, one that alludes to O'Neil's theory of the looking glass. Notice how the stellated twilligon shares the same shape as a boomerang. DeLillo gives this shape special attention at the end of "Convergence Inward," when Billy wonders "whether it was by accident or design that the [stellated twilligon] resembled a boomerang" (118). The boomerang is another example of DeLillo's preoccupation with "convergence inward," as seen in the change from Part One to Part Two of *Ratner's Star*, which is titled "Reflections: Logicon Project Minus One." DeLillo has described Part One and Part Two as having "strong demarcations." He calls them "opposites. Adventures, reflections. Positive, negative. Discrete, continuous. Day, night. Left brain, right brain. But they also link together, The second part bends back to the first" (qtd in LeClair, "Interview" 12). Based on this hint from DeLillo, I wish to argue that the chaotic and largely unstructured narration of Part Two – which includes the arbitrary linking of first person chapter titles (from Billy's perspective) with third-person stream of consciousness writing – mimics Mohole's theory of the universe. This goes beyond Mohole's appropriation of Billy's stellated twilligon. Mohole's theory of the



universe posits that chaos also exists in the form of multiple perceptivity, based on his theorization of “the value-dark dimension” (185). He tells Billy that “in a mohole the laws of physics vary from one observer to another” (185), meaning that his theory of the universe is the complete opposite of Einstein’s theory of relativity. Osteen elaborates by drawing on the works of Katherine Hayle and Thomas Jackson Rice, two literary critics who have written on the “science of chaos.” Osteen points to the fact that, contrary to popular belief, Einsteinian relativity does not mean that “everything is relative.” Instead, Einstein’s theory of relativity:

... saves the invariance of physical laws throughout the universe; indeed, at one point, Einstein considered calling it the ‘theory of invariance’ (Hayles, *Cosmic* 45). Although relativity shows that measurements of time and space vary according to the observer, it does so to prove that the laws of motion and gravitation are absolute for any system in uniform motion. Thus the Einsteinian universe is an interconnected whole that lacks an objective frame of reference. Mohole inverts Einstein. Whereas in Einstein’s universe ‘spacetime is the same for everyone’ (Hayles, *Cosmic* 47), in Mohole’s universe spacetime is different for everyone. (77-78)

Thus, “Mohole postulates a looking-glass universe where one sees whatever one projects” (Osteen 77). DeLillo’s preoccupation with multiple perceptivity extends to Part Two of *Ratner’s Star*, where Billy’s chapter titles (which range from “I Take a Scary Ride” to “A lot Happens” [280, 378]) are but singular interpretations of reality, separate from the rest of his colleagues. These passages are largely devoid of humour, especially the long “system interbreak” (429-433), which narrates the unpredicted eclipse moving across South Asia. Here, DeLillo’s writing focuses on mysticism, tribal politics, and poverty. This last point prevents readers from

experiencing the amusement contained in most other sections of the novel. Indeed, it is not possible to find Morreal's *distancing device* (which permits readerly amusement) in such lines as, "the shadow crosses into Bangladesh, thousands waiting on line and for each at best some pebbles of unleavened bread, control maintained by men with sticks" (432). It would appear as though not all of the entropy of *Ratner's Star* is designed for our amusement. In many ways, "Reflections" epitomizes entropic collapse in both form (the writing slips between multiple subjectivities) and content (order dwindles and everyone becomes powerless to the whims of the unpredicted eclipse). David Cowart describes the "Reflections" section of *Ratner's Star* by using the phrase "perspectival fluidity," which becomes more pronounced near the end of the book, when paragraphs and even sentences no longer separate shifts in consciousness. Cowart suggests that:

DeLillo allows the text itself to become a mohole, a space in which identity, answerable to no coherent law, enters its own value-dark dimension. This increasingly prominent feature of the narration disorients readers, preparing them for the novel's bizarre denouement (604)

The denouement of *Ratner's Star* is the unpredicted solar eclipse, which renders math and science ineffective as systems for understanding the hidden mysteries of the universe. The stellated twilligon, then, is a boomerang in the way it bounces back to us to create entropy where we thought there would be order and understanding. It is the looking glass that projects structure onto the universe, hiding the chaos of reality that is both dreadful and mysterious to humans. On top of this, we must consider Mohole's appropriation of the stellated twilligon, which adds metahumour to the boomerang symbol. As a model of the moholean universe, the stellated twilligon mocks structure by promoting a structure of entropy. Mohole's usurpation of this

boomerang as the model for his wacky theory of the universe offers self-reflexivity in the form of laughter directed at a humorous construct, namely the repetition of grotesque characters who fail to explain or even realize the indeterminacy of their own ailments, despite their strict adherence to scientific systematization. In other words, Mohole's theory of the universe is DeLillo's idea of laughing at laughter. Through its own inherent irony (its use of a mathematical structure to create a model of a structureless and infinitely subjective universe), Mohole's theory mocks the "gratuitous construction" of similarly ironic scientists in FENO, who trust in science despite being afflicted with unscientific ailments. In this way, DeLillo succeeds in writing metafictional dark humour that destroys our understanding of the cosmos and reconstructs it through the looking glass of moholean relativity.

Orang Mohole, perhaps more than any other character in *Ratner's Star*, embodies the humorous incongruity of science and magic. Yes, his theory in "alternate physics" is clearly flawed. Billy even drops a hint to the reader that Einstein's theory of relativity is far more plausible (184). Yet Mohole does utilize the geometric model of the stellated twilligon, and claims to have been "fanatically determined" to make his mark among the great figures of modern science. And he has two "Cheops Feeley" medals to prove it. One thing we know for certain about Mohole is that he is pompous. Yes, he has an entire theoretical system of relativity named in his honour, but, as Billy points out, it was named in his honour by himself (184). And yet, Orang Mohole has the prototypical self-awareness of a DeLillo character – to such a degree that his theory of relativity pokes fun at the short-sightedness of his purely scientifically-inclined colleagues. It would be wise of us, however, to ponder the limits of his reflexivity. Certainly he sees the stellated twilligon as a model that harks back to its origin. If matter can drip through the "n-bottomed hole," he says, then there's "another chance, the universe refreshed" (182). Since he

believes in renewal, he also sees the stellated twilligon as a boomerang, as a return to origins and restored order, to “cosmos regained,” as O’Neil writes in his theory of entropic comedy (161).

But does he see the looking glass through which his theory is displayed? It appears as though he actually *is* aware that his rendition of the universe is a reflection of his own “psychological value pattern” (183). DeLillo’s preoccupation with inward convergence, specifically as it pertains to the boomerang, suggests that the theories we throw at the universe eventually fail and come back to us because they are more a part of us than they are of the universe we strive to understand.

This argument rationalizes the paradoxical metahumour of Mohole’s attempt to bring structure to the universe by promoting a theory on the chaos of multiple perceptivity. It is an affirmation of our inherently subjective formulation of the universe. Osteen, who reads *Ratner’s Star* alongside its references to the history of mathematics and science, cites the Pythagorean notion of

“‘counter-earth,’ the belief that a shadow-version of our earth moves around the Central Fire.”

During its time, the counter-earth theory was held in high esteem because it explained observable phenomena in a world without telescopes (94-95). If there is any lesson to be learned from *Ratner’s Star*, it is that observation affects what is observed – the premise behind scientific advancement since the ancients. For DeLillo, writing in the twentieth century (and for us reading in the twenty-first), there is humour in the notion that the Ancient Greeks believed in a “shadow” earth. It is the incongruity between our current advanced science and the primitive science of our predecessors that creates this humour. The best way for us to accept the mystery of the cosmos is to be aware that the humans of future centuries will laugh at us for following what will eventually become outmoded models of the universe.

## Epilogue

This research project has been selective. I have chosen to write on what I believe to be three of DeLillo's funniest early novels. I had planned to write simply on his first three novels, but *Great Jones Street*, his third, lacks the humorous incongruities that are so prevalent in his other works. DeLillo himself has admitted that he wished *Great Jones Street* were funnier (Binelli). That said, I would like to briefly mention here that there is much more to be said about DeLillo's comic abilities. In picking theorists of humour to read alongside DeLillo, I made my decisions based on patterns I saw between various mechanisms of humour and the form and content of DeLillo's novels. This is not to suggest that other combinations are invalid. One might read the consumerist image's usurpation of death in *Americana* through the entropic qualities of dark humour instead of Schopenhauer's theory of conception and perception. Likewise, *Ratner's Star* might be read alongside Schopenhauer's theory in order to showcase how our conceptions of the universe are constantly questioned by new perceptions, whether they are from explicitly observable phenomena or the computer simulations of Space Brain. And *End Zone* might benefit from a more nuanced reading that incorporates theories of superiority into our understanding of Gary's desire for apocalyptic simplification. This last point suggests a whole other avenue of humour theory that I did not have the chance to analyze in detail. I'm certain that a case can be made to study DeLillo's humour using modernized versions of the Superiority and Relief Theories. I hope that this research project plays at least a small part in promoting the field of humour studies and challenging critics to use humour to glean the mystery (which is just that, mystery) that is central to DeLillo's writing, whether it is in his newer novels, his classics, or his underappreciated early novels.

## Works Cited

- Beattie, James. "An Essay on Laughter and Ludicrous Composition." *Essays*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. London, 1779.
- Bergson, Henri. *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the comic*. Trans. Brereton, Cloudesley and Fred Rothwell. New York: Macmillan, 1911. Web. 1 May 2015.
- Bloom, Harold and Blake Hobby. *Dark Humor*. New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2010. Print.
- . *Don DeLillo*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003.
- Cohen, Ted. "Humor." *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*. Eds. Berys Gaut and Dominic Lopes. London: Routledge, 2001. Web.
- Cowart, David. "DeLillo and the power of language." *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- . "For Whom Bell Tolls: Don DeLillo's 'Americana.'" *Contemporary Literature* 37.4. (Winter 1996): 602-619.
- . "'More Advanced the Deeper We Dig': *Ratner's Star*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 45.3. (1999): 600-620. Web.
- DeLillo, Don. *Americana*. New York, N.Y.; Toronto: Penguin Books, 1989.
- . *End Zone*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972.
- . *Ratner's Star*. 1st ed. New York: Knopf, 1976.
- Dewey, Joseph. "DeLillo's Apocalyptic Satires." *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*. Ed. Duvall, John N. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 53-65. Print.
- . "The Dark Humor of *White Noise*." In Bloom, Harold, Ed. *Dark Humor*, Bloom's Literary Themes. New York: Chelsea House, 2010. *Bloom's Literary Reference Online*. Facts On File, Inc. Print.
- . *In a Dark Time: The Apocalyptic Temper in the American Novel of the Nuclear Age*. West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 1990.
- Duvall, John N. 1956-. *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*. Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Humor." *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*. Ed. Morreal, John. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987.
- Hayles, Katherine N. *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990.

- Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan. English Works*. Vol. 3. Ed. Molesworth, William. London: Bohn, 1840.
- Hutcheson, Francis. "Reflections Upon Laughter." *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*. Ed. Morreal, John. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987.
- LeClair, Thomas. "An Interview with Don DeLillo." *Conversations with Don DeLillo*. Ed. DePietro Thomas. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005. 3-15.
- . *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987.
- Martin, Mike. "Humor and Aesthetic Enjoyment of Incongruities." *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*. Ed. Morreal, John. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987.
- Morreall, John. *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*. Chichester, U.K. ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
- . *Taking Laughter Seriously*. Albany: State University of New York, 1983.
- . *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987.
- Nadel, Ira. "The Baltimore Catechism; or Comedy in *Underworld*." *Underworlds*. Ed. Joseph Dewey, Steven G. Kellman, Irving Malin. London: Associated UP, 2002. Print.
- O'Neil, Patrick. "The Comedy of Entropy: The Contexts of Black Humour." *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 10.2 (June 1983): 145-166. Web.
- Osteen, Mark. *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000. Print.
- Plato. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Carins. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978.
- Raskin, Victor. *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*. Dordrecht: Reidel, 1984.
- Rice, Thomas Jackson. *Joyce, Chaos, and Complexity*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. "On the Theory of the Ludicrous." *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*. Ed. Morreal, John. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987.
- Scruton, Roger. "Laughter." *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*. Ed. Morreal, John. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987.
- Spencer, Herbert. "The Physiology of Laughter." *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*. Ed. Morreal, John. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987.
- Secord, Amanda. *Civilized Music: Postsecularism and the Humoured Body in Don DeLillo's Underworld, Thomas Pynchon's Vineland, and David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest*. Diss. Dalhousie University, 2015. Web.

Stott, Andrew McConnell. *Comedy*. Second edition. Routledge, 2014.