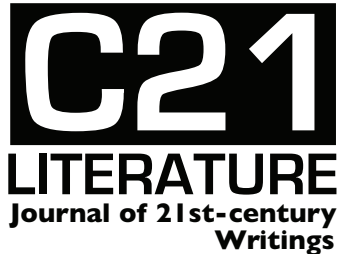




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## Review

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## REVIEW

# Book Review: *The Self-Reflexive Art of Don DeLillo* by Graley Herren (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), ISBN 9781501345067, 288 Pages, RRP \$108.00 (hb), \$86.40 (E-book)

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The status and significance of Don DeLillo as a meditative and critical commentator on the literary and political landscape of modern US society cannot be underestimated. The novelist has spent fifty years exploring and shaping the creative vanguard of US culture. From the Kennedy assassination in *Libra* (1988) to the rise and fall of dotcoms in *Cosmopolis* (2003) via the biting satirical *White Noise* (1985), DeLillo's is an essential critical voice whose commentaries and observations both reflect and shape the zeitgeist. DeLillo's oeuvre has a particular focus on the creative process; many of his characters are both artistic creators themselves and/or are spectators of others' creative output, and it is to this particular facet of DeLillo's fictional body of work that Graley Herren applies his own critical lens.

*The Self-Reflexive Art of Don DeLillo* is the first academic study to identify and analyse the signature DeLillo motif of the embedded author and the first to focus primarily on the visual aspects of his work. Spanning his entire career but focusing primarily on his later work from *Underworld* (1997) to *Zero K* (2016), *The Self-Reflexive Art of Don DeLillo* is a sophisticated, original and readable insight into DeLillo's creative process. What distinguishes this new analysis by Herren is that it eschews both the chronological and thematic approaches in favour of a systematic

analysis of DeLillo's signature metafictional motif; his deliberate foregrounding of an artist-figure within a work whose presence draws attention to the artistic process itself, as well as its reception at an intra- and extradiegetic level. Instead, Herren focuses on the form, function and frequency of the numerous iterations of the self-reflexive in DeLillo's fictional oeuvre, re-examining better-known texts and shedding light on less familiar ones. In his selection of key texts and foci, Herren steers away from the obvious choices in favour of an exposition and examination of what he terms DeLillo's 'secret-artists' (x). He chooses to focus his analysis on a series of related critical reflections, with an acknowledged emphasis on visual artists, illustrated through a close examination of novels, plays, short stories and essays whose protagonists, plots and preoccupations exemplify and illuminate his intention to create an intertextual, multidisciplinary appreciation of DeLillo's work.

Chapter one, 'How to make metafiction', traces DeLillo's literary lineage from the modernist and postmodernist influences of Joyce via Gaddes, Borges and Nabokov. Herren draws out core and continuous features of DeLillo's work which bear witness to these literary forebears: the use of mirror imagery and mirroring language which exemplifies the self-reflexive style of the book's title and which, according to Herren, DeLillo employs as a tool to critique and question not only the nature of postmodernist fiction and its questioning of conventions, but equally the tendency of successive US governments to reinvent and distort reality. Herren also identifies playfulness and gameplaying as key aspects and functions of DeLillo's self-reflexivity, drawing out DeLillo's acknowledged debt to Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962) with its embedded author and multi-layered literary games as evidence of the author's consistent commitment to 'the mirroring dynamics of metafiction' (20). Herren himself employs the very self-reflexivity he admires in DeLillo, referring to himself in Nabokov's terms as a 're-reader' of DeLillo who he identifies as a 'direct descendent of Nabokov in the metafictional family tree' (17), thus adding through his own critical lens a further interpretative dimension.

In chapter two, 'American Narcissus', a Lacanian lens is applied to *Americana* (1971/1989) as a means of moving beyond the American Oedipus label previously applied to the character of David Bell. Herren argues that an interpretation of Bell

informed by Lacan's Mirror Stage allows the reader to understand that the mirror effect of Bell's unresolved infantile narcissism is both reflected and magnified in his fascination with film. Lacan's theory of the fundamental roles of both mirrors and mothers in the formation of the ego is applied to reinterpretations of the character of David Bell and of the text itself. Herren argues that *Americana* is a portrait of a protagonist and a culture that is in thrall to images of every kind. He notes wryly that De Lillo's assimilation of aspects of Lacanian theory into the novel predates Lacanian film theorists, stating that 'DeLillo's art proves to be a step ahead of the theoretical frameworks most useful for situating it' (26). Herren further relates David Bell's cinematic focus to Lacan's desire *of* rather than *for* the other. He posits that this focus is Bell's attempt to revert to the idealised narcissistic Mirror Stage via cinematic images in an unresolved journeying between Narcissus and Oedipus which reflects his unresolved relationship with his mother and also his jealous rivalry with his father. Herren argues that the narrative arc and shifting forms of *Americana* trace both the Lacanian landscape of the Imaginary to the Symbolic, and David Bell's own illusory fantasies which in turn reflect and refract the fragile American Narcissus.

Chapter Three, 'Libranth' is devoted to *Libra* (1988) which Herren describes as metafictional labyrinth. Herren identifies *Libra* as the first text in which DeLillo first introduces multiple authors who double as characters. His reading of *Libra* identifies Nicholas Branch, the CIA investigator, as fulfilling a dual function: the embedded author of the fictionalised retelling of Lee Harvey Oswald's historical account and, Herren suggests, as its embedded author. Herren references DeLillo's 1997 essay 'The Power of History', which characterises history and fiction as engaged in a perpetual battle, to illuminate the extensive parallels he draws between DeLillo's narrative style in *Libra* and the autological form adopted by Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). He argues that in *Libra* DeLillo deliberately and knowingly borrows narrative strategies and motifs from Joyce's Stephen Dedalus and repurposes these in the character and functions of Nicholas Branch. Both Branch and Dedalus transform historical events into fictional accounts and are engaged in a perpetual battle between self-as-protagonist and self-as-narrator; both are prisoners of their own narratives.

Herren allocates chapters four and five to *Underworld* (1997). He approaches the novel from two contrasting yet related perspectives which each shed new light on the function of key characters as prisms for DeLillo's self-reflexive textual construct. Chapter four, 'The Martiniad', invites us to closely examine a selected sequence of chapters which focus on father and son, Manx and Cotter Martin. Herren suggests that the novel's protagonist, Nick Shay, is in fact the embedded author of this sequence of chapters he terms 'The Martiniad'. Authoring these chapters, Herren argues, serves a dual purpose for Shay; they allow him to explain the acquisition of his talismanic Bobby Thompson homerun ball, while also enabling Shay to vicariously explore his own problematic father-son relationship through the proxy of the Martins. The quintessentially all-American game of baseball is used to illustrate the shortcomings of Manx Cotter as a father which sharply contrasts with the instant, paternal bond which springs up between Cotter and Bill Waterson. The influence of Joyce is once again evident in Nick Shay's blurring and warping of father-son relationships through the prism of the iconic game. Instead of forging a bond between father and son, baseball and *this baseball* in particular, come to symbolise a double betrayal of Cotter by Manx, and, for Nick Shay as the embedded author of these chapters, of him by his own father's unexplained disappearance. Herren is operating here as a literary detective, doggedly hunting down and bringing to light the linguistic, structural and thematic evidence which supports his well-argued theory of the authorship of *The Martiniad*.

Having touched on the importance of Klara Sax as a key artistic influence on Nick Shay in chapter four, Herren devotes an entire chapter, 'The artistic gestation of Klara Sax', to DeLillo's portrait of this singular artist. Chapter five explores the 'lifecycle' of the artist-character, drawing out the themes of conception, gestation, (re)birth and metamorphosis which characterise both her work and life. Representing the creative life force in the novel, Klara Sax's joyfully fertile artistic creations juxtapose yet also mirror Nick Shay's more introspective and self-referential creative output. Klara Sax's gestation as an artist is divided into distinct trimesters, each distinguished by a key work, and each signifying a (re)birth of the artist's creative self. Herren in turn adopts a tripartite structure, examining Klara's artistic evolution under three headings:

Creation, Metamorphosis, and Death and Rebirth, thus drawing our attention to DeLillo's choice of a disrupted chronology to present Klara's life which Herren states serves multiple purposes. It highlights the metamorphosis motif present throughout *Underworld*; it forms a reverse time-lapse of Klara's artistic gestation; it underscores the interweaving of Klara and Nick across time and place; and invites the reader to consider the dialectically contrasting reactions of the two linked characters to their encounters with impactful artists and artworks.

Herren shifts his analysis to post-*Underworld* DeLillo for the second half of his study. Chapter six, 'Performing self-dialogue in "The DeLillo Variations"', draws together a triptych of DeLillo texts united by their variations on the themes of time, memory, mortality, and self-dialogue. Herren pays homage in this chapter to the contrapuntal and self-referential structure of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, and to Gould's idiosyncratic recordings of them, foregrounding the contrapuntal nature of DeLillo's mid- and late-career writing, and outlining his obsessive revisiting of key themes with ever increasing urgency. Although a chronological study would consider *The Body Artist* (2000), 'Counterpoint' (2004), and *Love-Lies-Bleeding* (2005) in turn, Herren opens this chapter with a close analysis of 'Counterpoint'. This is the first critical study of this essay, which he argues forms a bridge between the two fictional texts which precede and postdate it and, revisits and develops many of the recurring motifs at the heart of DeLillo's later work. In 'Counterpoint: Three Films, a Book, and an Old Photograph', DeLillo explores the connections between solitude, art and death in the lives and works of Glenn Gould, Thelonious Monk and Thomas Bernhard in a contrapuntal, extemporised composition of his own. Herren also offers insight into the recurring preoccupation of the relationship between time and space in DeLillo's work through an exploration of temporal shifts in the narrative of *The Body Artist*. He suggests that DeLillo applies modern physics' concept of the space-time continuum to the novel in order to capture the nebulous border between fantasy and reality experienced by Hartke after her husband's suicide. In *The Body Artist*, performance artist Laurie Hartke attempts to become her own blank canvas. She divests herself of blemishes, body hair and even her own sense of self to become a medium for the voices of others. Inspired by Serbian performance artist, Marina Abramovic,

DeLillo creates an artist whose performance art is deeply personal, whose body and mind are hypersensitive to the painful experiences of others and whose relationship with the material world is mediated through her identity as the body artist.

The third and final focus of this chapter is the 2005 play *Love-Lies-Bleeding*. Just as Hartke places her own body *in extremis* for her art, Herren's reading is that the entire action of the play is in fact the product of the imagination *in extremis* of the artist Alex Macklin as he contemplates his imminent death. Moving beyond previous critical responses to the play which have focused primarily on the controversial plot, Herren examines the metadramatic features of the play and identifies Alex Macklin as its embedded author whose end-of-life reflections on his own mortality and past experiences allow DeLillo to present the ethically challenging considerations of euthanasia from the perspective of the dying man. Herren concludes the chapter with the observation that DeLillo's writing, whether creative non-fiction, fiction, or theatrical, 'returns again and again to enact themes from his previous work and to rearrange them into inventive new combinations' (137). This is a complex and densely argued chapter in which Herren successfully employs the extended use of a musical metaphor to tease out the common features and concerns of three seemingly very disparate texts.

In chapter seven, 'Art Stalkers', Herren focuses on several of DeLillo's compulsive male characters whose spectatorship of particular artworks triggers or reveals an underlying unhealthy obsession with a female spectator gazing at the same piece of art. He considers the treatment of this trope in four texts; two of which, 'Baader-Meinhof' (2002) and *Falling Man* (2007), are told from the perspective of the female object of desire, and two which narrate the scenario from the male point of view in *Point Omega* and the short story 'The Starveling'. DeLillo's male art-stalkers are deeply disturbed and disturbing characters whose fetishization of specific artworks overshadows and oversteps the boundaries between art and reality. Herren compares the reactions and motivations of the female spectator in 'Baader-Meinhof' and *Falling Man*'s Lianne Glenn; both are drawn to artworks which reflect their personal preoccupations. Herren posits that DeLillo himself borrows from Gerhard Richter's photographic response to terrorism in *October 18, 1977* to begin the process of responding

to 9/11 from an oblique angle. Herren argues that DeLillo uses 'Baader-Meinhof', written the year after the 9/11 attack, to explore at several removes the challenge of responding to terror as a creative artist before developing his response in *Falling Man* (2007). Herren reflects in turn on his own decision to employ three different aspects of 'Baader-Meinhof' as the basis of his interpretative examination of DeLillo's repetitive-compulsive dialogues, thus mirroring DeLillo's as well as his characters' repeated, compulsive engagement with a single, triggering artwork.

Chapter eight, 'Literary Triangulation: DeLillo-O'Hara-Oates' is, in part, a continued exploration of the art stalker theme as depicted in the short story 'Midnight in Dostoevsky' (2009). Herren examines DeLillo's literary triangulation within the story and develops his own critical triangulation, using O'Hara's prose poem 'Meditations in an Emergency' (1957) and Joyce Carol Oates' story 'Three Girls' (2004) to illuminate the homoerotic subtext which provides much of the story's tension. Delving deeply into the origins and artistic influences of O'Hara's source text, Herren identifies multiple ways, beyond the story's title, in which DeLillo acknowledges and plays with O'Hara's influences and allusions in Robby and Todd's sexually charged relationship. Whereas in DeLillo's text, the unacknowledged sexual tension between the men is channelled into their obsessive stalking of the hooded man, De Lillo uses Oates' story in which a chance encounter with an unmade-up Marilyn Monroe acts as a catalyst for one of the female characters to abandon her own 'mask' and act on her desire for the other.

In chapters nine and ten Herren again devotes two chapters to different facets of a single novel: *Zero K* (2016). Chapter nine, 'A miniature star: Remains and returns in the metafiction of *Zero K*', approaches the novel as a study of multiple deaths through the resurrection and reiteration of characters, structures and ideas from previous texts. Herren regards *Zero K* as the apotheosis of DeLillo's autological trajectory; this is a text which reflects on, revisits and arguably resolves the quandary of the autological author. Jeff Lockhart, another son with unresolved issues with his father, is identified as the embedded author of the pivotal ARTIS MARTINEAU section at the heart of the novel. Unlike his previous incarnations, David Bell and Nick Shay, Jeff Lockhart evolves into a self-aware adult through the process of authoring



the existential reflections of ARTIS MARTINEAU which bridges the two sections of the novel. This complex and closely argued chapter aims to map a way through DeLillo's work from *Americana* to *Zero K*, pointing out to the reader the landmarks, ley lines, and significant nomenclatures they may have missed on previous journeys. From Teilhard's philosophy in *Ratner's Star*, via Joyce's literary metempsychosis, with references to Pythagoras and Teilhard along the way, Herren loops back, detours and revisits, as does DeLillo's fiction, and suggests new and intriguing routes to explore.

Having ended the previous chapter with a meditation on naming, anagrams, and the star motif, which culminates in his revealing the solution of the ARTIS MARTINEAU anagram, Herren devotes his final chapter, 'A portrait of the Artis' to a microscopic examination of ARTIS MARTINEAU and the hallmarks of Jeff Lockhart's authorship. In common with previous embedded authors, Jeff has experienced loss of one parent and abandonment by another. Herren argues that these unresolved traumas, coupled with Jeff's lifelong fascination with words, patterns and configurations of three, culminate in his authorship of ARTIS MARTINEAU, an embedded fiction incorporating Jeff's own existential reflections and deep-rooted fears. Furthermore, the repetitions, questions and shifts in narrative voice from first to third person indicate a distinct shift from solipsistic, ontological musings of the immature Jeff to the fully realised adult who emerges in the final chapter of the novel.

Unusually, Herren rounds off his in-depth and closely argued analysis with a self-reflection of his own. His 'Coda' recounts a detailed dream which reveals the extent to which Herren's subconscious has absorbed and is now reflecting back to him through a distorted lens the labyrinthine puzzles he has examined so thoroughly in his scholarly gaze. It is an apt, introspective meta-reflection which picks up the musical metaphor employed in other chapters. Herren's final flourish returns us neatly, and inevitably, to his initial reflective starting point; 'it is difficult to gaze deeply into DeLillo's metafictional mirrors without eventually seeing one's own reflection' (xiii).

*The Self-Reflexive Art of Don DeLillo* is a wide-ranging, detailed and richly dense study in which Herren sifts and resifts, zooms in on and zooms out from, views and reviews DeLillo's trademark thematic preoccupations, narrative traits, and complex intertextual connections. Herren's systematic close reading, informed by an

impressive variety of theoretical lenses, acknowledges, responds to and enhances the field of DeLillo studies, and his particular prism acts as a kaleidoscope offering a fascinating array of insights into the multifaceted complexity of DeLillo's oeuvre.

### Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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