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**Telling Stories That Aren't There:  
Don DeLillo's *Running Dog* and the Problem of Missing Film**

If transitions between different media are fundamental historical events that r and restructure the ways in which our senses and minds process information, they are never as clear-cut or epistemic as the writing of history imagines them to be. On the contrary, the overlapping pluralities of media within the cultural system at any given moment suggests that an ongoing state of always uneven change is perhaps the rule rather than the exception, an arrangement within which different forms and technologies continuously modify, appropriate, and remediate one another's properties. Given this constant unevenness, a problem emerges at the center of any attempt to theorize media transitions across history: how does one media form narrate or render the possibility (however exaggerated or imagined) of its own imminent disappearance, the onset of its seemingly being eclipsed or becoming obsolete in the face of other, newer forms? The revision of an existing medium in order to remain relevant and integrated within the cultural landscape thus faces what might be considered a dually impossible representational task: such a medium must on the one hand engage its own representational blind spots and limitations and on the other hand attempt to approximate abstractly the new attributes of the emergent media that it cannot possibly anticipate or incorporate—two tasks that are, not coincidentally, often largely one and the same.

In the case of the relation between the novel and the visual media of the late twentieth century, the dense paradoxes raised by these questions become particularly problematic. The differences to be engaged between the novel and the various forms of visual representation present within this period are greater and more extreme than the differences between the novel and earlier visual forms (for example, the magazine or even the photograph) or between any of

those visual forms themselves (for example, between film and television). Thus while certain experimental novels pose important limit cases that suggest the possibility of a more closely engaged and integrated relation, we might safely say that it is effectively impossible for the traditional print novel to represent the moving visual and sound images of contemporary media such as film, television, or the internet in a way that is whole, precise, or concrete. Yet it is precisely within these blind spots and limitations of language that the novel possesses the capability to consciously and deliberately register difference in relation to these other forms, and in doing so to imagine for itself new ways of operating within and against the modes of thought that these other forms engender.

I want to consider Don DeLillo's 1978 novel *Running Dog* as a model text for these processes of novelistic revision within the media environment that emerges in the late twentieth century. The cultural impact of film is a frequent area of concern for novels of the seventies, but *Running Dog* goes beyond addressing the issue of film as an abstract, general force to center around a particular fictional film as a way of more closely thinking the problems of representation, translation, and materiality across different media; by foregrounding that film's status as a unique object, DeLillo creates a sort of representational and narrative crux around which it becomes possible to undo the traditional logic by which we understand film and in doing so to point towards other, more immediately emergent media technologies. The particular film in question, moreover, remains missing for the majority of the novel: the inability of both the novel's characters and its readers to either possess the film as an object or watch it as a text provides a testing ground for the novel to push against and expand its own representational boundaries. *Running Dog* poses itself the problem of film as a concretely absent presence, so to speak, within the world it imagines, an object that is inaccessible on all levels but nonetheless

exerts a compulsion to be found and “played back” within language. Thus if we consider the problem of the possession, representation, and viewing of a media artifact as its central narrative conceit, the novel’s status as a postmodern grail or quest narrative, as some critics have termed it,<sup>i</sup> takes on a particularly philosophically problematic dimension. *Running Dog* indeed recounts a quest that is failed, contingent, affectless, and commodified in the manner of many postmodern texts and experiences. Yet it also recounts a sort of narrative case text for the status of representation itself under late capital, a quest where the object being sought is an object and a text at once, with both elements of this status radically problematized by DeLillo, as I will suggest; as the status of this text/object shifts and reverses itself, so do the novel’s strategies for representing and reacting to it.

The central cinematic object of *Running Dog* is a deeply problematic one: the camera original of a film shot in the Berlin bunker of Adolf Hitler’s Reich Chancellery just before the fall of the Nazi party in 1945. Rumor within the world of the novel has it that this film records an orgy that took place among the occupants of the bunker in the last days, and this sensational, deeply fetishizable content, along with the singular uniqueness of the film itself, makes it a deeply sought-after commodity among the characters of the novel’s Vietnam-era world, what one critic describes as “an object like ‘the Maltese falcon’ for which a number of individuals and groups are vying for possession and distribution rights.”<sup>ii</sup> In keeping with its absent, materially inaccessible status, the film exerts influence for most of the novel as an (unseen) object rather than as a text, but in spite of this discursive invisibility—or rather precisely because of it—it becomes a locus around which the novel’s characters advance a theory of the contemporary image. Early in the novel, the erotic art dealer Lightborne explains this theory in telling terms, noting that an erotically decorated ancient coin is innocent precisely because “[i]t doesn’t move. .

. . Movement, action, frames per second. This is the era we're in, for better or worse. Motion, activity, change of position. You need this today for eroticism to be total. . . . Probably the single biggest difference between the old and new styles of erotic art is the motion picture. The movie. The image that moves."<sup>iii</sup> What is perhaps most striking about Lightborne's words here is the way in which they echo Walter Benjamin's famed theorization of the moving image in his essay on "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Just as Lightborne privileges movement as the key quality of contemporary erotic art, for Benjamin it is the defining characteristic of modern art's powers of physical, and perhaps political, mobilization:

The painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame he cannot do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed. It cannot be arrested. . . . The spectator's process of association in view of these images is indeed interrupted by their constant, sudden change. This constitutes the shock effect of the film, which like all shocks, should be cushioned by heightened presence of mind. By means of its technical structure, the film has taken the physical shock effect out of the wrappers in which Dadaism had, as it were, kept it inside the moral shock effect.<sup>iv</sup>

Lightborne's words suggest that in DeLillo's novel, an erotic and subsequently commercial shock has replaced the moral and political shock of Benjamin's model. This shift to a capitalist framework is certainly crucial, but given both the influence of Benjamin's thinking for the understanding of film and media across much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the ways in which that thinking has been critiqued and reshaped under late capital, it seems as if DeLillo is confirming this cultural history rather than contesting it.

However, even if we take the difference between the political moments represented in the two texts into account, looking more closely at the role of the bunker film shows that the novel's subscription to Benjamin's conceptualization of the cinematic moving image is far from a wholesale one. On the contrary, the role of the bunker film within *Running Dog* diverges in a crucial way from perhaps the most important (and perhaps also the most famous) element of Benjamin's argument, namely his vision of reproductive media's destruction of the aura of the work of art. Benjamin defines the elimination of aura as a process that would shatter tradition, "emancipate[] the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual" (*I* 224) and authenticity, and ultimately point it in the direction of politics. DeLillo foregrounds the auratic, radically unique status of the bunker film as a cinematic document—what Lightborne describes as "[u]nedited footage. One copy. The camera original" (*RD* 18)—in order to extract a wholly divergent possibility within the history of reproductive media, one in which perhaps the most aesthetically and politically fraught example imaginable of "the work of art designed for reproducibility" (*I* 224) has, paradoxically, not been reproduced, thus gaining a singularity and aura that would seemingly be impossible given its technological nature. The implication of such a rupture in the culture of reproductive material is not (or not merely) that fascism has on some level succeeded in aestheticizing politics in the way that Benjamin warns against in the epilogue of the *Artwork* essay, or that this aestheticization has in turn been transposed onto the commodified processes of late capital as many critics suggest; present within these larger and more generalized threats is the assertion that a single and singular aesthetic object still possesses the power to overload the circuits of the culture of reproduction in precisely the way that Benjamin suggests is no longer possible after the rise of reproductive media, thus effectively

destabilizing the ontological and technological realities that we take for granted in the late twentieth century.

Thus in echoing one component of Benjamin's argument so closely precisely in order to pose a radical exception to another, DeLillo uses the novel's central narrative conceit of a lost text/object as a structure for outlining the problems of mediation and media possession at a moment of transition between mechanical reproduction and simulation, and in turn uses the novel as a means for reflecting on its own powers of representation within this dynamic. The film's physical, material motion through the book's "worldwide network [of] buying and selling and bartering" (*RD* 16), perpetually escaping the grasp of the characters seeking it, directly contrasts the immediacy of its motion-based aesthetic, effectively undercutting any kind of political action—socialist, fascist, or, more likely, capitalist—that might come from possessing it; it is both the point of convergence for what Mark Osteen describes as the characters' "obsession with marketing and 'the marketing of [their] obsession'"<sup>v</sup> and the very thing that thwarts and thus defers those obsessions, a grail that is no longer buried but rather in motion in more ways than one. "The century's ultimate piece of decadence" (*RD* 20), as Lightborne describes it, thus also becomes the ultimate material and aesthetic void.

This shadowy, intangible status also shapes the way the novel's own language reacts to the film. Benjamin notes in the Artwork essay that because of photographic and filmic media's exact reproduction of the event that they represent, "behavior items shown in a movie can be analyzed much more precisely and from more points of view than those presented on paintings or on the stage. As compared with painting, filmed behavior lends itself more readily to analysis because of its incomparably more precise statements of the situation" (*I* 235-236). The novel, on the other hand, seems to actively resist such exactitude, a status that *Running Dog* foregrounds in

its descriptions of the absent film. For most of the novel, the film exists only as a barely perceptible rumor, the particulars of its sensational content effectively manifesting themselves as literally indescribable, only addressed through indirect language: Lightborne can claim relatively confidently that “[a] film exists” (RD 18), but with regard to who or what appears in the film, it seems safe only to say that “[t]hings get vague here. But apparently it’s a sex thing” (RD 19). In moments like these—and there are many within the novel, dealing with the film among other things—the novel uses language to subvert our desires as readers for an exact, cinematic description of the film, managing its intangibility through deliberate ambiguity. Just as the novel as a form can never fully represent or body forth a film, this novel’s characters can neither possess this film nor serve as channels for description of it in any concrete, direct fashion.

In the closing pages of the novel, after playing out a densely interwoven conspiracy plot, DeLillo does finally present the text/object that the characters have been seeking and competing for, but in an emphatically different form than that which the novel has promised: as the film that has been traced from the bunker to the present moment of the novel begins to play, what the gathered characters find themselves watching is not at all a pornographic film (at least not in the literal sense of the term), but instead a home movie shot by Eva Braun in which Hitler performs an impersonation of Charlie Chaplin for the members of the Third Reich assembled in the bunker, a “*pantomime, intended as Chaplinesque . . . enlarged and distorted by [the] involuntary movements*” of Hitler’s illness but nonetheless “*an accurate reproduction*” (RD 235, 236, italics original). DeLillo gives extensive space within the novel’s closing pages to a shot-by-shot description of the film as it plays, italicizing it in its entirety in order to underscore the intermedia status of this projection within language. The film explicitly responds to Chaplin’s burlesque of Hitler in the 1940 film *The Great Dictator*, and thus functions as another, perhaps a

foreclosing, statement in the representational exchange between fascist and socialist powers that Benjamin imagines in the epilogue to the *Artwork* essay. Most critics of the novel have chosen to read this seeming foreclosure as a function of paradigmatically postmodern simulacral confusion, what Paul Cantor, for example, describes as the “ultimate postmodern moment,”<sup>vi</sup> in which Hitler’s activation of the seemingly endlessly circular reproduction and simulation between these intertexts renders any critical engagement effectively impossible. John Johnston similarly understands the bunker film as the culmination of the novel’s suggestion that “there is no substantial reality behind or beneath surfaces, only images and representations obscuring and replacing other images and representations” (Johnston 177) in both ontological and ideological terms.

There is certainly something to be said for the way in which such readings focus on the layered play of surfaces within the novel and the film it contains—if Hitler can produce a film that parodically reproduces his greatest parodist from effectively beyond the grave, then it seems as if we are at least initially confronted here with a particularly complexly mediated case of the nested and interpenetrating worlds within worlds that Brian McHale catalogs in his influential 1987 critical text *Postmodernist Fiction* and suggests as central tropes of high postmodern narrative.<sup>vii</sup> However, these readings fall short of fully understanding the novel’s work with the bunker film in their ignoring the technological relations and differences among these layers, in failing to attend to the specificities and materialities of the mediations at work and the ways in which DeLillo’s language represents them here. And it is precisely through these specificities that DeLillo presents us with something other than the same old story, so to speak, about postmodernity and its mediations that these critics suggest is in play. The film is not merely an abstract, allusive intertext, nor does it function merely to represent and take part in a flattened



and flattening flow of intertextuality within a world of simulation, however problematic such a flow might be; indeed, its dual status as both a unique object and a text in its own right seems precisely to suggest that viewing the relations among mediated texts and forms in terms of such fundamental abstraction, however compelling a narrative of postmodern disembodiment and decline it might sponsor, can never fully account for those relations. On the contrary, the film's textuality and materiality raise specific, careful questions about the shifting properties of film and visual media in general as well as about this piece of media in particular. DeLillo uses the "false intertextuality" of this fictionalized found film as a means for momentarily leaving behind the confusions its content raises in order to think about how it operates as a piece of moving-image media, and consequently about how writing produces and responds to such an operation. I want to quote from DeLillo's description of the film at some length in order to give an example of how this thinking works. This is from before Hitler enters:

*The boy and the oldest girl carry in two more chairs. A woman appears, very drawn, moving toward the seated child. The lights flicker. Another girl appears; she notices the camera and walks quickly out of range.*

*The boy and oldest girl carry in two more chairs.*

*The camera is immobile. It does not select. People pass in and out of its viewing field.*

*The woman sits next to the small girl, absently stroking the child's hand. The woman is blond and attractive, clearly not well. She appears weak. It is even possible to say she is emotionally distressed. The oldest girl stands next to her, speaking. The woman slowly nods. (RD 226, italics original)*

The description of the scene remains tonally very much the same as it moves on from there. The language's gesture towards what we might initially consider the "precision" of film reveals itself

as a means for capturing the mundane and seemingly insignificant, and it becomes apparent that as DeLillo finally fills in the absence of the film within the novel, he does it with something other than film as such, with a series of images that are wholly different from any of the filmic aesthetic models that might logically be in play here: for example, Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda, Chaplinesque physical comedy, mainstream seventies film.

Instead, I want to suggest that the banal, laconic presentation of the scene evokes an altogether different mode of media production, namely that of the home movie and more generally of the home video technology emergent at the time of the novel's writing. Like the "immobile," non-selective camera that records the bunker film, video technology—precisely because of the increased mobility it offers rather than in spite of it—captures whatever comes before its eye in a flattened form, as if part of an unedited, unreconstructed documentary. Capable of recording conceivably anything but often restricted to the mundane, video operates in terms of the surfaces of private, domestic action, presenting a substantial break from the cinematic camera that Benjamin likens to the surgeon's tools for its ability to "penetrate[] deeply into [the] web [of reality]" (*I* 233). In the hands of amateur users, the medium's most crucial group in terms of number if not necessarily of public impact, it is a technology that is as likely to be seemingly formally withdrawn and transparent (like the bunker film) as it is to be tangibly interventive or interrogative; it is what Timothy Corrigan, in an essay tracing the relationship of the medium to film, describes as "[a] representational technology that continually reframes itself as a visible technology and not a narrative technology[.] It monitors . . . intensities and mobilities . . . and it does so without positioning itself across the narrative and textual structures it participates in; as a technological representation, it is in fact a public monitoring of the temporal movements of private actions."<sup>viii</sup>

By the way in which he textually screens the bunker film at the end of *Running Dog*, DeLillo puts the novel in the place not of the film camera but rather of the video camera, or perhaps of the video monitor, transposing the role of non-narrative monitoring that Corrigan describes onto language. Thus while along with the novel's characters, we as readers expect and hope for the pornographic spectacle of cinema, what we get is an evocation of the deflating intimacy of video. This mediating shift, one that crosses lines of technology as well as content and tone, fills in the novel's central representational absence not just with a critique of Hitler's use of images or of the addiction to these images, the cinematic voyeurism, that we share with the novel's characters, but more importantly with an aesthetic paradigm for how the novel might operate in response to the shifting forms, contexts, and reproductive statuses that those images take in the late twentieth century. Of course if cinema is the dominant technology to be contested in the historical moment of *Running Dog*, video is hardly a fully "outsider" form, and its status as potentially resistant has certainly largely eroded since the moment of the novel; the imminence of that erosion, and the shifts in mediated control that accompany it, are precisely what DeLillo's language here attempts to signal and redirect. Yet it is ultimately the process of mediation itself that the novel engages in here—the act of switching between technologies of representation—that matters most fundamentally, rather than the choice of any particular form *per se*. After all, no single media technology is aesthetically or ideologically pure, least of all the novel, and the novel can never fully contest or resist other forms; it can only attempt to register and appropriate them, using language to approximate and test their properties and limits as well as its own. Thus even and especially if, as in the case of *Running Dog*'s turn from film to video, those properties and limits mean representational passivity and blankness, it is precisely in

attempting, however incompletely, to absorb and map the qualities of a new form within its own fabric that the novel responds most dynamically to shifts in the contemporary media landscape.

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<sup>i</sup> See, for example, discussions of the novel in John McClure, *Late Imperial Romance* (New York: Verso, 1994), and Mark Osteen, *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press).

<sup>ii</sup> John Johnston, *Information Multiplicity: American Fiction in the Age of Media Saturation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 177. Page numbers for subsequent quotations appear in the text.

<sup>iii</sup> Don DeLillo, *Running Dog* (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1989, orig. pub. 1978), 15, 18. Page numbers for subsequent quotations appear in the text.

<sup>iv</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 238. Page numbers for subsequent quotations appear in the text.

<sup>v</sup> Osteen, 100.

<sup>vi</sup> Paul Cantor, "'Adolf, We Hardly Knew You,'" *New Essays on White Noise*, ed. Frank Lentricchia (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 56.

<sup>vii</sup> Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987). See especially Chapter Eight, "Chinese-box worlds."

<sup>viii</sup> Timothy Corrigan, "Immediate History: Videotape Interventions and Narrative Film," in *The Image in Dispute: Art and Cinema in the Age of Photography*, ed. Dudley Andrew (Austin: University of Texas Press), 318-319.