

2015

## Don DeLillo's Art Stalkers

Graley Herren  
*Xavier University*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://www.exhibit.xavier.edu/english\\_faculty](http://www.exhibit.xavier.edu/english_faculty)



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Herren, Graley, "Don DeLillo's Art Stalkers" (2015). *Faculty Scholarship*. Paper 560.  
[http://www.exhibit.xavier.edu/english\\_faculty/560](http://www.exhibit.xavier.edu/english_faculty/560)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Exhibit. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Exhibit. For more information, please contact [exhibit@xavier.edu](mailto:exhibit@xavier.edu).



## DON DELILLO'S ART STALKERS

---

Graley Herren

Throughout his career Don DeLillo has remained persistently engaged with art, artists, and the creative processes through which various artworks are made. His focus has increasingly shifted of late toward the other end of the artistic transaction, examining the reception processes through which artworks are perceived, assimilated, deconstructed, and reconstructed to suit the needs of individual viewers. DeLillo is particularly interested in characters that are drawn to visit the same artworks or art venues over and again. Driven by shadowy forces that they scarcely understand or control, these compulsive characters return repeatedly to a museum, gallery, or cinema where they can gaze once again at the objects of their obsessive desire. Although their obsessions are diverse, sometimes perverse, and always imagined as private, these intimate artistic encounters all take place in public spaces. Such conditions provide the basic components of a scenario to which DeLillo himself is repeatedly drawn: a male predator gazes on a female spectator gazing at an artwork, stalking his prey back and forth between the presumed sanctuary of the art venue and the vulnerable world outside.

DeLillo's first passing reference to this scenario comes in *The Names*, where a woman complains, "I don't like museums. Men always follow me in museums. What is it about places like that? Every time I turn there's a figure watching me" (147). He again alludes to the eroticized potential of museums in his play *The Day Room*. During a sexually charged seduction scene in a motel room, Lynette mentions that she is routinely propositioned by men in museums: "They think I won't mind, surrounded by serious art. . . . I'm supposed to believe if a man is in a museum, he is wonderfully sensi-

tive and intelligent. We have sensitive things to say to each other. An afternoon of intelligent sex is sure to follow" (80–81). According to these characters, museums are ideally suited for scoping out and picking up women. DeLillo exposes institutional conditions for viewing art that are latent with sexual permissiveness and conducive to exploitation. In their book *Crimes of Art and Terror*, Frank Lentricchia and Jody McAuliffe call into question "the virtually unavoidable sentimentality that asks us to believe that art is always somehow humane and humanizing, that artists, however indecent they might be as human beings, become noble when they make art, which must inevitably ennoble those who experience it" (9). DeLillo's art stalkers deflate such pieties, dramatizing scenarios where art is manipulated as sexual bait. His first extensive treatment of this theme is in the short story "Baader-Meinhof," which was followed by a condensed allusion in *Falling Man*, both told from the perspective of women who are threatened in galleries by shady male figures. He then significantly reimagines the scenario in *Point Omega* and "The Starveling," both told from the male perspective of an art stalker, the former in the mode of deadly noir, the latter as pathetic farce.<sup>1</sup>

DeLillo keeps coming back to this scenario, much as his characters keep returning to the scene of art and crime. In fact, this tendency toward perpetual return is the crucial animating dynamic common to all of DeLillo's art stalker stories. Characters arrive on site, dwell in deep meditation, and then return to the world outside, only to gravitate back to the museum, gallery, or cinema the following day, resuming the vigil (or the hunt). This *fort-da* oscillation is symptomatic of a repetition compulsion within each narrative. It also invites correspondent recursive strategies from the reader, in effect falling into step with the characters and compulsively coming back for more. The present essay represents one such case in point. The most conventional approach to examining DeLillo's art stalkers would be to develop the analysis chronologically, tracing a linear progression from the earliest manifestation through the most recent. However, in initially attempting to orient my argument in this direction, my critical impulses kept drawing me back to DeLillo's haunting "Baader-Meinhof," his first full treatment of the theme. Finally, I recognized that this urge mirrors the tendency of both DeLillo and his characters for returning to the work of art that first inspired and disturbed the imagination, a melancholic circuit that rejects moving on in favor of coming back. Instead of resisting this repetitive urge, I have adopted it as the interpretive approach most appropriate to DeLillo's oscillating narratives. The following study will therefore move back and forth between his first full expression of the art stalker motif and subsequent reiterations, wandering from wing to wing of the DeLillo



Figure 1. *Tote (Dead)* by Gerhard Richter. Digital Image © 2003. The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY. Reproduction courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery.

Gallery as it were, contemplating variations on the theme, but always coming back to the primary confrontations and perceptual frameworks established in "Baader-Meinhof."

### **"Baader-Meinhof" I**

The first scene of "Baader-Meinhof" is set in an exhibition gallery of New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), where Gerhard Richter's *October 18, 1977* is on display. This series of fifteen canvases depicts several scenes from the lives and deaths of members of the Red Army Faction (RAF), sometimes referred to as the Baader-Meinhof gang, led by Andreas Baader, Ulrike Meinhof, and Gudrun Ensslin.<sup>2</sup> The RAF was strongly opposed to what they saw as the imperialist war in Vietnam, the crypto-fascist policies of the West German government, the vacuous materialism of the German *Wirtschaftswunder* (economic

miracle), and the narrow-minded shackles of bourgeois morality. The group used terrorist tactics to wage urban guerrilla warfare on the West German state. The apotheosis of their campaign was the German Autumn of 1977, ending in the coordinated suicides of Baader, Meinhof, Ensslin, and other imprisoned RAF leaders on October 18, 1977.<sup>3</sup> Appalled, fascinated, and haunted by the bloody cataclysm, Richter responded eleven years later with *October 18, 1977*, a series of oil paintings based on black and white photographs from the German Autumn. Richter's series draws renewed attention not only to the Baader-Meinhof group, but also to the perceptual mechanisms of art's mediated gaze. By working from photos, Richter chooses from the start to position his gaze one remove from the actual persons and events he depicts. He incorporates images from a different medium, captured by someone else with a different agenda and sensibility, and interjects an additional frame of reference onto the canvas. Richter's trademark distortion brings the transformative gaze of the artist even further to the fore, rendering the images unclear, destabilized, elusive, and thus thwarting the spectator's efforts either to romanticize or to fetishize the figures on display. In effect, what one sees in *October 18, 1977* becomes secondary to how one sees it, how that perception is refracted through multiple mediating gazes.

DeLillo adopts a number of Richter's techniques for his own literary approach to the Baader-Meinhof group. Although he certainly could have written a story directly about the RAF, he chooses instead to focus on shadowy paintings of the group, thus placing himself at a remove even more distant—culturally, historically, and phenomenologically—than Richter's vantage. He channels his response through a fictional woman's perspective and then further complicates the perceptual matrix by introducing yet another frame of reference from an unnamed male visitor lurking behind the woman. In fact, the opening passage of the story focuses not on the paintings but on the disturbing incompatibility of one frame of reference with another: "She knew there was someone else in the room. There was no outright noise, just an intimation behind her, a faint displacement of air" (105). The man's unnerving presence disrupts her private communion, a disturbance rendered all the more creepy by the suspicion that he is gazing at her more than at the paintings. From the outset then, DeLillo's primary emphasis in "Baader-Meinhof" is less on the RAF or Richter's series than on the competing perceptions and agendas of two visitors drawn to the museum for starkly different reasons.

The opening scene marks the third consecutive day that the woman has returned to view the Baader-Meinhof paintings. What does she see when she looks at these paintings? And what compels her to keep coming back to look again? In part she is drawn to im-

ages of death: "and this is how it felt to her, that she was sitting as a person does in a mortuary chapel, keeping watch over the body of a relative or a friend" (105). DeLillo is renowned for careful ekphrastic descriptions of artworks, and the opening scene includes several such translations of images into words. He even takes the unusual step in *The Angel Esmeralda* to include a reproduction of one of these images, something he had only done in one previous book, *Mao II* (1991). The visual image, one of three blurry profiles of the dead Meinhof in profile (see figure 1), serves as preface to the story and as focal point for the woman's contemplation: "The woman's reality, the head, the neck, the rope burn, the hair, the facial features, were painted, picture to picture, in nuances of obscurity and pall, a detail clearer here than there, the slurred mouth in one painting appearing nearly natural elsewhere, all of it unsystematic" (105).<sup>4</sup> Both the visual and verbal renditions of Meinhof are spare, obscure, and "unsystematic," in the sense that there is no symbolic embellishment, no political editorializing, no fixed intentionality, and no implied proper stance for viewing and interpretation. The burden of making sense of these deathly images, if any sense can be made, falls squarely on the subjective spectator.

In his influential lecture "The Creative Act," Marcel Duchamp examines "the two poles of the creation of art: the artist on the one hand, and on the other the spectator" (77). Duchamp characterizes art not as a finished manifestation of the artist's vision, but as a process of "esthetic osmosis" between artist and spectator, where the latter supplies the missing link in the work's transubstantial chain of subjective reactions. Duchamp terms this missing value the "art coefficient." He concludes that "the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification and thus adds his contribution to the creative act" (78). Similarly, throughout DeLillo's oeuvre art functions less as object than as transaction, a mutually transformative process whereby the spectator enters into dialectical engagement with a piece, projecting his or her own experiences, desires, anxieties, and fantasies onto the canvas or screen, metamorphosing the artwork into what he or she needs it to be. This dynamic informs all of DeLillo's art stalker stories, beginning with "Baader-Meinhof."

From the perspective of the female spectator in "Baader-Meinhof," the "art coefficient" of Richter's paintings is keyed to forgiveness, specifically the capacity to forgive acts of terror. By comparing her museum visit with "keeping watch over the body of a relative or a friend" (105), she acknowledges a sense of empathetic kinship with the Baader-Meinhof figures. Her impulse to mourn their deaths

is most evident in her response to *Beerdigung (Funeral)*, the final canvas in the sequence (see figure 2): "The painting of the coffins had something else that wasn't easy to find. She hadn't found it until the second day, yesterday, and it was striking once she'd found it, and inescapable now—an object at the top of the painting, just left of center, a tree perhaps, in the rough shape of a cross" (108). Curator and critic Robert Storr also calls attention to *Funeral's* cross in his catalog for *October 18, 1977*. He concedes that many viewers are likely to resist the religious connotations of such a gesture, yet he observes, "it is hard not to acknowledge the deliberateness of what Richter has done and recognize his addition to *Funeral* as a discrete benediction at the end of a modern-day passion play which, in his scrupulous and agonizing rendition, offers no other consolation" (110). The woman's conjectures are perfectly compatible with Storr's commentary when she muses, "It was a cross. She saw it as a cross and it made her feel, right or wrong, that there was an element of forgiveness in the picture, that the two men and the woman, terrorists, and Ulrike before them, terrorist, were not beyond forgiveness" (109). In her personal and private communion with Richter's series, she consistently labels the RAF members as "terrorists"; nevertheless, moved by their ghostly images, she is also inclined, rightly or wrongly, to extend them forgiveness for their crimes.

An aura of collaboratively conferred benediction might have prevailed in the story were it not for the intrusion of a countervailing perspective interjected by the male museum visitor. Most art theory (including Duchamp's "The Creative Act") presupposes an ideal interface between the solitary artist and the fully engaged spectator, an abstraction that rarely matches up with the material facts. What such theories fail to account for are the real institutional conditions in which art is usually encountered, public conditions where any number of extraneous factors and contingent influences can disrupt, divert, compromise, or otherwise short-circuit the pure communication between artist and spectator. Christian Heath and Dirk vom Lehn have attempted to redress the undervaluation of context in the critical hermeneutics of art. They assert, "Theories of the perception and experience of art and artifacts largely rely upon an imaginary situation in which an individual views a single artwork alone, independently of the circumstances of viewing. Both the viewer and the artwork are removed from the context, the situation in which they encounter an exhibit" (46). By contrast, Heath and vom Lehn observe that, "in visiting museums and galleries, the very presence and conduct of others, whether they are people one is with, or others who just happen to be in the same space, may be consequential not only to the ways in which one navigates exhibitions but also to



Figure 2. *Beerdigung (Funeral)* by Gerhard Richter. Digital Image © 2003. The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY. Reproduction courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery.

how one examines a work of art or artifact" (46). They contend that social interaction "is of profound relevance to the ways in which an aesthetic experience is 'created.' Underlying these concerns is an interest in revealing the ways in which the participants' bodies, and in particular their bodily and spoken conduct, feature in the perception and experience of exhibits in museums and galleries" (46). The "bodily and spoken conduct" of the male spectator completely rewires the artistic circuitry of "Baader-Meinhof."

The man initiates contact by asking, "'Why do you think he did it this way?'" (105). This opening gambit could indicate genuine curiosity, but as the conversation unfolds his skepticism and distaste for the material soon become evident. He eventually admits that he is utterly unmoved by the paintings and has only come to the museum to kill time before an afternoon job interview. He takes issue with the woman's apologist defense of the terrorists, mocking her suggestion that they may have been killed by "the state" and denouncing the RAF's entire enterprise: "'They were terrorists, weren't they? When they're not killing other people, they're killing themselves'" (106-07). The man persistently attempts to wedge himself and his derisive perspective between the woman and her sense of sanctified connection to the Baader-Meinhof images. Because the limited third-person narration is tied to her perspective, the reader has no direct access to

his inner motives. His manner may seem abrasive, but nothing that he does or says in the opening scene is overtly threatening. Nevertheless, the pall cast by *October 18, 1977* makes the attentive reader wary that DeLillo is preparing the stage for a similar date with terror and death. Asked what the paintings make her feel, she replies, "I think I feel helpless. These paintings make me feel how helpless a person can be" (109). She is hypersensitive to the helplessness of the figures, but she seems oblivious to her own potential vulnerability while viewing the paintings. As Linda S. Kauffman rightly notes, "The contrast between the portentous paintings and the mundane (if perverse) boy-meets-girl story seems incongruous. But the paintings are an objective correlative for blindness and insight: she studies the canvasses, but is blind to the man's motives; he is blind to the paintings, but shrewdly sizes her up" (359).

### ***Falling Man***

Although 9/11 is never named, DeLillo makes several veiled allusions to it in "Baader-Meinhof." The story first appeared in the April 1, 2002 edition of the *New Yorker*, mere months after the attacks of September 11, 2001, and demands consideration within a post-9/11 context.<sup>5</sup> As DeLillo's first published work of fiction after 9/11, "Baader-Meinhof" still gropes for purchase on how to address terrorism through art.<sup>6</sup> The female spectator recognizes that Richter is grappling with that very problem through his series on the Baader-Meinhof terrorists. She tells the man, "What they did had meaning. It was wrong but it wasn't blind and empty. I think the painter's searching for this. And how did it end the way it did? I think he's asking this" (110). The search for meaning behind terrorist acts can be easily misconstrued as justifying those acts or sympathizing with the terrorists. The male spectator implies at times that the woman is beginning to fall down this slippery slope. Storr notes that Richter himself has been accused of glorifying the Baader-Meinhof gang. However, in the catalog for Richter's career retrospective, Storr astutely argues, "Richter's aim was more complex than hagiography and by far harder to achieve" (77). Storr contends that Richter's ambivalent agenda was to mourn, but also that "he wanted to give a human face to the victims of ideology who, for ideology's sake, created victims of their own, and to free the suffering they experienced and caused from reductive explanations of their motives and actions, and from political generalizations and rigid antagonisms that triggered the events in the first place." DeLillo is inspired by Richter's example to create art that remembers, interrogates, and mourns, and to do so

in ways that avoid hagiography or sloganeering. "Baader-Meinhof" represents his first fictional attempt at processing 9/11, but his efforts in that respect are still preliminary and tenuous. Although DeLillo's essay "In the Ruins of the Future" challenges post-9/11 writers to produce "counternarratives" that dare "to take the shock and horror as it is" (39), he was not yet fully prepared to do that himself in 2002. But DeLillo does begin to pose troubling questions raised by terrorism at home, and he establishes his specialized interest in using art as a mirror or projection screen for both artists and spectators to mediate terrors great and small. He builds on these nascent efforts in his most fully developed response to 9/11, the novel *Falling Man*.

Several details carry over from "Baader-Meinhof" to *Falling Man*. For instance, one of DeLillo's characters, the art dealer Martin Ridnour (an alias for Ernst Hechinger), was once a member of Kommune 1, a forerunner of the RAF. His prior affiliation with the German radical movement leads him to sympathize with the 9/11 attackers: "He thinks these people, these jihadists, he thinks they have something in common with the radicals of the sixties and seventies. He thinks they're all part of the same classical pattern. They have their theorists. They have their visions of world brotherhood" (147). DeLillo again ascribes prescience to German movements of the sixties and seventies in anticipating terrorist dilemmas of the new millennium. He also follows Richter's genre-mixing lead by making central use of multiple media for his own novelistic response to terrorism. The book's title refers simultaneously to three distinct sources, each representing a frame of reference progressively further removed from Ground Zero: first, an anonymous jumper from the south tower, whom Keith Neudecker sees falling past his office window; second, the notorious "Falling Man" photo by Richard Drew, capturing the harrowing image of one of the jumpers plummeting headlong to his death; and third, the performance artist known as Falling Man (posthumously identified as David Janiak), a character invented by DeLillo, who appears unannounced at various sites around the city and reenacts the "Falling Man" photographic pose while suspended from a harness. Each of these falling men summons up the terror of 9/11, and yet each denies full access to the story, taking his testimony with him to his death. Some crucial missing essence of the experience seems to defy apprehension. But art offers a potential portal into that experience, as DeLillo asserts in "In the Ruins of the Future": "The writer tries to give memory, tenderness and meaning to all that howling space" (39). The still-life paintings of Giorgio Morandi (see figure 3) in particular offer some purchase on 9/11 for Lianne Glenn, Keith's estranged wife, who develops perceptual strategies first tested by the female spectator in "Baader-Meinhof."



Figure 3. *Natura Morta*, 1956 (V. 1013) by Giorgio Morandi. Digital Image © 2013. Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome. Reproduction courtesy of Museo Morandi, Bologna.

The woman in "Baader-Meinhof" reads retrospectively like a preliminary sketch of Lianne. Julia Apitzsch goes so far as to label the story "an intertext for the novel" (105). Both female leads are employed irregularly in the book publishing trade. Both are troubled by failing marriages, and both are haunted by images of death. Both even have brushes with art stalkers, or at least men who interfere with their aesthetic experiences at an art venue. Lianne's experience takes place at a Chelsea gallery where she has gone to view a Morandi exhibition.<sup>7</sup> "A man came in. He was interested in looking at her before he looked at the paintings. Maybe he expected certain freedoms to be in effect because they were like-minded people in a rundown building, here to look at art" (210). No interaction develops

between Lianne and the anonymous male creeper; nevertheless, as in "Baader-Meinhof," the man's intrusive presence is enough to break the spell of the woman's artistic communion: "She went back to the main room but could not look at the work the same way with the man there, watching her or not. He wasn't watching her but he was there" (210). Not only are Lianne and her predecessor in "Baader-Meinhof" both art lovers, but both are also drawn repeatedly to images that seem to address their innermost personal demons and extend the promise of exorcism. In fact, both find their deepest concerns already anticipated or mirrored in the artworks that move them, setting up a symbiotic fantasy of identification where the viewer supplies the missing value in the artwork and the artwork addresses a "spectator coefficient" within the viewer.

This kind of artistic exchange in *Falling Man* is best captured through Lianne's repeated encounters with Morandi. The painter's work has long been a part of her life through her mother:

What she loved most were the two still lifes on the north wall, by Giorgio Morandi, a painter her mother had studied and written about. These were groupings of bottles, jugs, biscuit tins, that was all, but there was something in the brushstrokes that held a mystery she could not name, or in the irregular edges of vases and jars, some reconnoiter inward, human and obscure, away from the very light and color of the paintings. *Natura morta*. The Italian term for still life seemed stronger than it had to be, somewhat ominous, even, but these were matters she hadn't talked about with her mother. Let the latent meanings turn and bend in the wind, free from authoritative comment. (12)

The ekphrastic passage above communicates a sense of familiarity, but also traces the outline around a mysterious lacuna at the heart of the piece that resists interpolation. Immediately following the September 11 attacks, everything seems to offer implied commentary on terror. Viewed within this context, Morandi's lacuna becomes filled with 9/11. Martin muses, "I keep seeing the towers in this still life" (49). Guided by this prompt, the familiar paintings gradually become defamiliarized for Lianne: "Two of the taller items were dark and somber, with smoky marks and smudges, and one of them was partly concealed by a long-necked bottle. The bottle was a bottle, white. The two dark objects, too obscure to name, were the things that Martin was referring to" (49). Ultimately she admits to herself, "She saw what he saw. She saw the towers" (49). Three years later, after her mother's death, Lianne pursues Morandi to the Chelsea Gallery. There her recent loss colors her perspective, and she refashions

Morandi's still lifes accordingly: "She could not stop looking. There was something hidden in the painting. Nina's living room was there, memory and motion. The objects in the painting faded into the figures behind them, the woman smoking in the chair, the standing man" (210). After 9/11 the bottles remind Lianne of the towers, but after her mother's death each Morandi memento reminds her of a different *mori*: "All the paintings and drawings carried the same title. *Natura Morta*. Even this, the term for still life, yielded her mother's last days" (211). DeLillo's choice of Morandi is appropriate, with his simple bottles, jugs, vases, and biscuit tins, because the imagery consists of containers, vessels that can be emptied and replenished whenever and with whatever the occasion requires. On a meta-artistic level, too, the paintings contain empty spaces, which Lianne as spectator fills with projections of the deaths, losses, anxieties, and regrets that she brings with her to the viewing experience.

### "Baader-Meinhof" 2

Art contains death in other senses as well, irrespective of subjective projections brought to bear by the spectator. The Italian term *natura morta* elegantly communicates a central truth, not just about still-life painting but about all figurative art: it is "dead nature," a thing modeled after the living, transferred from the organic to the inorganic state of dead matter. The woman in "Baader-Meinhof" compares the museum to a mortuary where she is visiting old friends, but then all museums function as mausoleums for dead art, whether or not death is the overt subject matter of a given artwork. Theodor Adorno asserts, "Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association. Museums are like the family sepulchres of works of art" (175). *Et in MoMA ego*. DeLillo has long been intrigued by art in multiple media as the crossroads where life and death—or more pointedly, sex and death—converge. Actually, the road metaphor can be misleading since it suggests that sex and death are divergent paths whereas in DeLillo they are more often configured as a continuous loop, where laps through one state invariably lead back through the other.<sup>8</sup>

While Richter's morbid images lead the woman in "Baader-Meinhof" to contemplate mortality, the gaze of her scopophilic male counterpart moves sexward instead of deathward. It is worth noting that sex and death were inextricably intertwined in popular representations of the Baader-Meinhof gang. A disproportionately high number of the group's militants were women (the German press often called them "*Terrormädchen*" [terrorist girls]), and an atmo-

sphere of free love between members was fostered as an extension of their larger campaign against bourgeois values. Two of the leaders in particular, Baader and Ensslin, have often been compared to the cinematic antiheroes Bonnie and Clyde, as young, sexy, magnetically attractive killers.<sup>9</sup> The art stalker in "Baader-Meinhof" may not know the historical links between sex and violence in the RAF, but DeLillo assuredly does and draws on them in depicting the museum as a passageway through Thanatos en route to Eros and back again. After an opening scene steeped in art and death, the action shifts to the livelier setting of a snack bar, followed by the intimate setting of the woman's nearby apartment. Even though the narrative trajectory leads nominally "back to her place," the movement away from the museum signifies a shift away from comfort and control, out into the surrounding world where she is less at ease and more vulnerable. There the man soon presses the plot sexward, announcing that he has canceled his interview so that he can spend the afternoon with her. "Tell me what you want. . . . Because I sense you're not ready and I don't want to do something too soon. But, you know, we're here" (114). His matter-of-fact manner belies unmistakably hostile intentions: he regards her invitation to the apartment as implied consent, and one way or the other he does not plan on leaving until he has achieved the sexual release to which he feels entitled. She tells him unequivocally: "I want you to leave, please" (114). Undeterred, he confesses to sizing her up from the start, measuring her wounded helplessness: "She's like someone convalescing. Even in the museum, this is what I thought. All right. Fine. But now we're here" (115). While the man makes his way to the bed, the woman escapes into the bathroom, listening intently at the door to the sound of him undoing his belt and zipper. "When he was finished, there was a long pause, then some rustling and shifting" (117). DeLillo does not spell out precisely what he was finished doing, but the implication is that he masturbated in her bed. Afterward, he leans against the bathroom door and says, "Forgive me. . . . I'm so sorry. Please. I don't know what to say" (117). Then he leaves.

The apartment scene is deeply disturbing, but it also frustrates expectations and resists clear comprehension in ways that resonate with Richter. To borrow the man's opening gambit at the museum, "Why do you think he did it this way?" (105). The semiotic signs DeLillo plants for the reader instill an expectation of rape and murder. Needless to say, it is a relief that the story stops short of this vile scenario. But it is difficult to determine what to make of the diverted path the story follows instead. Were pursuit, territorial violation, and psychological terror the full measure of the man's intentions all along? Or does his masturbation represent an unplanned interruptus, an

impromptu departure from the usual script? His subsequent plea for forgiveness is even more maddening. Can it possibly be understood as sincere, the unlikely onset of postclimactic scruples? If not, is it merely an attempt to squirm out of criminal culpability after the fact? In fact, all of the most contentious questions are left unanswered. DeLillo once compared his approach to scene construction with painting:

I try to examine psychological states by looking at people in rooms, objects in rooms. It's a way of saying we can know something important about a character by the way he sees himself in relation to objects. People in rooms have always seemed important to me. I don't know why or ask myself why, but sometimes I feel I'm *painting* a character in a room, and the most important thing I can do is set him up in relation to objects, shadows, angles. ("Interview" 14)

The way DeLillo chooses to position the characters and objects in relation to one another in the apartment scene conceals psychological states as much as it reveals them. By choosing to place the woman behind the bathroom door during the scene's climax, DeLillo provides her with some flimsy protection, but he also partitions off her perception of what actually takes place. Consider the true depth of our mutual ignorance: neither the woman nor the reader can say with any certainty what—if anything—the man actually did while she was in the bathroom. By erecting such fundamental perceptual barriers and occluding the view of his subjects, DeLillo employs literary techniques comparable to Richter's distortion effects in *October 18, 1977*.

### **Point Omega**

In *Point Omega* DeLillo re-envisioned the art stalker theme from the man's perspective. This time obsessive art lover and creepy museum lurker are one and the same. The scene is once again MoMA, and the artwork is Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho*, a video installation that ran from June to September 2006. Again DeLillo was inspired by a work inspired by another work, in this case Gordon's manipulation of Alfred Hitchcock's iconic film *Psycho*. Gordon projects the film on a translucent screen at the speed of two frames per second, as opposed to the standard twenty-four frames per second, slowing the total running time down to approximately a full day. Ken Johnson of the *New York Times* described reviewing the familiar film in such a defamiliarized way:

Shown on a see-through screen in a dark, empty room, the blurry, pixilated video progresses at a jerky snail's pace, so

slowly that few viewers will be able to tolerate it for very long. But you don't have to watch for long to get the idea and to begin meditating: How does film time relate to real time? What is real time, anyway? If I watch this thing long enough, will it reprogram my brain?

The answer to that last question, according to *Point Omega*, is yes. DeLillo's first treatments of the art stalker theme emphasize what the spectator brings to the artistic transaction and how her perspective reshapes the artwork under examination. *Point Omega* reverses the focus, examining how art can reprogram the spectator, in this case transforming a virtual stalker into a real one.

The prologue and epilogue take place on the final two days of the exhibition and are told from the perspective of a male spectator who comes back for six consecutive days to view *24 Hour Psycho*. These sections are labeled "Anonymous" and "Anonymous 2," not because the man's identity is unknown (his name is later disclosed as most likely Dennis), but because his identity is in the process of being erased and reprogrammed; he is a tabula becoming steadily reinscribed by the images on screen. DeLillo never invokes Jacques Lacan by name, but his depiction of Dennis's encounter with *24 Hour Psycho* effectively replicates the mirror stage of ego formation. Lacan posits this key experience of infantile development as the stage where the child sees its image reflected in a mirror, or in the person of its mother, and is so enthralled by this coherent external image that the child models an internal sense of "I" that emulates the idealized imago. From the first page of *Point Omega*, Dennis is devoted to this kind of exercise in identification, mirroring the gestures on screen: "the man standing alone moved a hand toward his face, repeating, ever so slowly, the action of a figure on the screen" (3). The man is conscious enough of his surroundings to register the presence of others, but unlike the woman in "Baader-Meinhof," he is able to shut out the corrupting influence of fickle passersby (at least until the epilogue) and maintain a privileged sense of connection with the artwork. He even compares his encounter with the artistic imago to his (dead) mother's gaze: "This was the ideal world as he might have drawn it in his mind. He had no idea what he looked like to others. He wasn't sure what he looked like to himself. He looked like what his mother saw when she looked at him. But his mother had passed on. This raised a question for advanced students. What was left of him for others to see?" (8). Frames of reference proliferate here even more than in "Baader-Meinhof," but the perceptual matrix between mother and child subsumes all others. Now that Dennis's constitutive gaze with his dead mother is broken, he seeks to establish a new identification fantasy drawn from *24 Hour Psycho*.

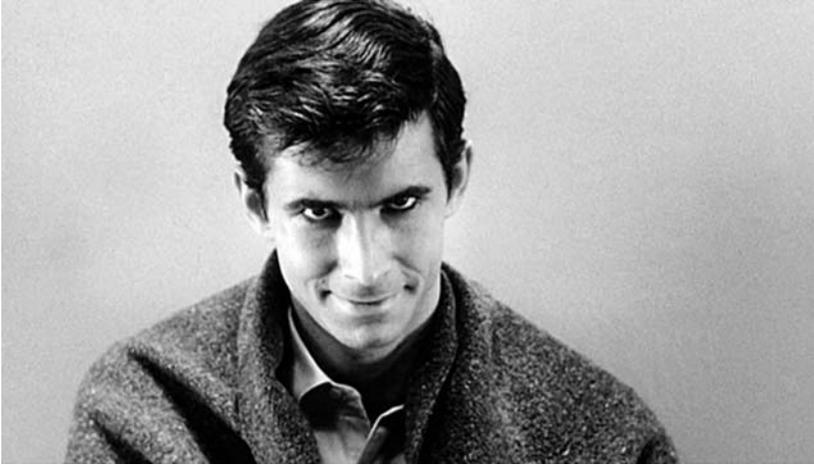


Figure 4. Norman Bates (played by Anthony Perkins) in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (Paramount Pictures, 1960).

As with "Baader-Meinhof," DeLillo adopts themes and techniques from his artistic sources and reflects them in his fiction. *Point Omega* functions on the whole as a resilvered mirror of Hitchcock's *Psycho*. DeLillo's Dennis shares a number of disturbing affinities with Hitchcock's Norman Bates (see figure 4), the unassuming motel clerk ultimately exposed as a schizoid killer and the most famous psychosexual stalker in cinematic history. By all appearances, both are damaged sons of dead mothers; both pathologize their identification fantasies; both are voyeurs driven by strong scopophilic desire; both face irresolvable difficulties in forming and transferring libidinal attachments; and both stalk their female prey and lash out with violence, tellingly selecting phallic knives for their weapons. Well, maybe. Actually, unlike Hitchcock who solves his mysteries, exhumes his bodies, quarantines his killer, and explains Norman's psychological motives and lethal methods, DeLillo hints at much but confirms little. What we do know from the dominant middle section of the novel is that filmmaker Jim Finley and war theorist Richard Elster visit the Gordon exhibition at MoMA on September 3, 2006, the day before it closes. Elster recommends *24 Hour Psycho* to his daughter, Jessie, who presumably checks it out the following day. In the early fall the daughter arrives in the desert to visit her father. Her mother recommends that she get out of the city for a while to avoid a recently estranged boyfriend, Dennis (if the mother remembers the name correctly), who has begun harassing her. Jessie soon goes missing in the desert, and by the end of the novel she has still not

been found. Finley and Elster suspect she is the victim of the stalker ex-boyfriend Dennis. This theory is lent possible credence when police investigators discover a knife in the desert that might have been used as a weapon. Meanwhile, the epilogue returns to MoMA on September 4, the last day of the exhibition. There the male spectator meets a woman who fits the profile of Jessie, although they fail to exchange names. They strike up a conversation, however, and he follows her out onto the street, where they exchange phone numbers to arrange a future rendezvous. Is the man at the museum Dennis? Is the woman Jessie? Was Jessie abducted at knifepoint and murdered by Dennis? As in "Baader-Meinhof," DeLillo raises fundamental questions about his art stalker and victim but declines to answer them.

*Point Omega* also displays DeLillo's deep dialectical engagement with *24 Hour Psycho*. Gordon's manipulation of Hitchcock's film consciously drains the thriller of its thrills. The video installation diverts attention away from pulse-racing plot twists and refocuses it with pulse-slowness deliberation on the ravages of time. At two frames per second, the moving images of Hitchcock's film have all but ceased to move. The effect is of Eros grinding down toward Thanatos, approaching the omega point. DeLillo takes his title from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the controversial French Jesuit who proposed the evolutionary development of humans toward ever greater complexity and heightened consciousness, ultimately approaching the Omega Point, his term for supreme transcendence of the cosmos. Elster embroiders on these theories in his own predictions for humanity's future: "Because now comes the introversion. Father Teilhard knew this, the omega point. A leap out of our biology. Ask yourself this question. Do we have to be human forever? Consciousness is exhausted. Back now to inorganic matter. This is what we want. We want to be stones in a field" (53). David Cowart aptly notes, "These formulations owe more to the Freud of *Jenseits der Lustprinzip* [*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*] than to the Teilhard of *Le phénomène humain* [*The Phenomenon of Man*]" (47–48). That is to say, Elster's prognostications sound less like Teilhard's Omega Point and more like Freud's death drive, that primal human urge to return to the prior condition of inorganic matter. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud posits compulsions to repeat and return that are even more fundamental than the pursuit of pleasure. These primal drives serve as animating forces behind DeLillo's art stalker narratives.

Elster's appropriation of Teilhard, Gordon's appropriation of Hitchcock, and DeLillo's appropriations of them all lead asymptotically toward death. However, the culminating satisfaction of a concrete ending, the final destination of death achieved, remains tantalizingly out of reach. Elster is dying, and with Jessie's disappearance seems

to wish he were dead, but he's not dead yet. Jessie may well have been murdered, but her body has not been found and her precise fate remains uncertain. Gordon's rendition of *Psycho* strangles it down to near stillness, but it still manages to limp through its paces on a 24-hour loop. DeLillo's decision to close the novel on the final day of the exhibition reminds us that the end of this particular loop is immanent, but the novel ends before the final frame. Indeed, the pending consummation of one deathly loop promises to spawn yet another. After following Jessie out into the street, Dennis returns to the museum to resume his vigil during MoMA's final hour of *24 Hour Psycho*. "The man separates himself from the wall and waits to be assimilated, pore by pore, to dissolve into the figure of Norman Bates" (116). This total immersion fantasy marks a crucial turning point in Dennis's identification with Norman Bates. The circumstantial evidence suggests that Dennis is now prepared to assume the identity of the virtual stalker and carry out his mission in the real world beyond the museum. The novel thus ends poised on a pivot between the omega point of death-based art and alpha point of art-based death.

### "Baader-Meinhof" 3

As a senior at Fordham University in 1958, DeLillo was required to take a course sequence called "Alpha and Omega" as part of the core curriculum.<sup>10</sup> According to the catalog description, this sequence was designed as an "integrating course, aimed to assist the mature senior in forming a unitary view of all reality. God as efficient, exemplary and final cause of the created universe. God's special creation, elevation and providential care of man. . . . God's nature, attributes and personality as revealed in His natural and supernatural creations. God, ALPHA and OMEGA" (112–13). The course description placed special emphasis on God as creator, God's proprietary autonomy over his creations, and God's reflected genius discernible within his creations. Such a "unitary view of all reality" grows out of the Ignatian principle of "finding God in all things." But it also faithfully characterizes a Western, Christian understanding of artistic creation and reception that predominated until the nineteenth century. According to this view, the artist is master of his material and reflects his genius in the work of art. It falls to the spectator to appreciate the beauty and truth of the creation by discerning the embedded genius of the creator.

Very different assumptions about the creation, reception, and function of art adhere in DeLillo's work, where genius is replaced by confusion, mastery replaced by uncertainty, passive audience appreciation replaced by active reconstitution, . . . and a unitary view replaced

by fragmented and shifting perspectives. Nonetheless, reflection remains a core principle for the Jesuit-educated DeLillo. From his very first novel *Americana*, he acknowledges art's capacity to function as a mirror of its creator. The filmmaker-protagonist David Bell observes of his experimental film: "What I'm doing is kind of hard to talk about. It's a sort of first-person thing but without me in it in any physical sense, except fleetingly, not exactly in the Hitchcock manner but brief personal appearance nonetheless, my mirror image at any rate. . . . I mean you can start with nothing but your own mirror reality and end with an approximation of art" (263). DeLillo's more recent fiction studies this mirror principle from the other side of the looking glass, examining strategies employed by spectators, either to conceptualize art as an external reflective surface for their internal preoccupations, or to reconfigure their inner makeup to conform more perfectly to the ideal images depicted on canvas or screen. But these mirroring dynamics do not pertain exclusively to a spectator's isolated interaction with an artwork. Beginning with "Baader-Meinhof," DeLillo's art stalker stories investigate the consequences when one spectator begins to regard another person as his projection screen or mirror reflection.

The disturbing encounter at the woman's apartment radically alters her perspective. "She saw everything twice now. She was where she wanted to be, and alone, but nothing was the same. Bastard. Nearly everything in the room had a double effect—what it was and the association it carried in her mind" (117). In part this is DeLillo's microcosmic translation of the pervasive post-9/11 syndrome where everything seems divided into "before" and "after," and coated with the residue of violent destruction and traumatic violation. One might expect that, given this unsettling experience, the woman would not want to return to the museum, another space sure to be haunted by this spectral "double effect." Nevertheless, she compulsively gravitates back to MoMA, where she finds not the man's ghost but the man himself: "When she went back to the museum the next morning he was alone in the gallery, seated on the bench in the middle of the room, his back to the entranceway, and he was looking at the last painting in the cycle, the largest by far and maybe most breathtaking, the one with the coffins and the cross, called *Funeral*" (118). Any number of motives might have prompted his return. His reappearance at the Richter exhibition may constitute a calculated escalation in his stalking of the woman. Or, assuming that she would not dare return, he may be positioning himself to stake out his next prey. DeLillo's decision to place him in front of *Funeral*, the very painting that had inspired the woman's instincts for empathy and forgiveness the day before, is particularly provocative. Kauffman enumerates several thorny questions raised by this concluding image:

The ending makes us reevaluate the beginning, when the heroine was still innocent—or blind. She wants to see an element of forgiveness in Richter's paintings, but, by the end, forgiveness seems preposterous. What are we to make of her harsh transformation? Are we to conclude that forgiveness is fine in the abstract, but impossible once one's territory has been invaded? Or that, such noble sentiments are only possible in art, not in life? Or that they only apply to those long dead? (361)

Kauffman is attuned to the post-9/11 resonance of the scene, articulating the difficulty, and maybe the foolishness, of answering unprovoked terror with unconditional clemency. However, Kauffman also perceives this scene as a contrast in blindness and sight, a perception worth considering further. If the woman can see things by the end that she was blind to at the start, could the same be true of the man? Among the possibilities DeLillo invites is that the man returns to MoMA, not to resume stalking, but to look more carefully at the Baader-Meinhof paintings. The day before, he expressed mild curiosity for Richter's art and subdued scorn for the RAF terrorists. But in the interim he has committed acts that can be classified as domestic terrorism of a sort. Does *October 18, 1977* signify differently "after" than it did "before"? Might he now see himself mirrored in these images? On the harsher end of the interpretive spectrum, he could be attracted by a deepening sense of kinship with the terrorists; on the kinder end, his plea to be forgiven may have been sincere, leading him back to the museum in search of the same absolution the woman first gleans from Richter's images.

Ultimately, the female spectator ends "Baader-Meinhof" in a position to see both Richter's paintings and the male spectator from a different parallax view because of DeLillo's painterly repositioning of his figures in the room. The story begins with the art stalker standing behind the woman, gazing at her as she gazes at Richter's paintings. In the closing scene, however, DeLillo places her behind him. This would seem to be the more advantageous position, since she can now scope out the scene fully, monitoring his actions before calculating her next move. As Karin L. Crawford notes, "She is in a position to determine the ending: she is standing in the doorway and can either enter the exhibition hall or leave. She is on the threshold of regaining her subjectivity (either in confronting the man or in leaving)" (228). DeLillo's reconfiguration also sets up an inversion that potentially alters the stakes of the final scene. The woman ends up occupying an identical vantage point to the one initially occupied by the man, and vice versa. He sees from her perspective, and she sees from his. This may sound like a situation conducive to communica-

tion. However, context is everything, and given all that has transpired between them, it is, to use Kauffman's word, fairly preposterous to imagine that the ensuing scene would end well. But there is no ensuing scene; the story ends there, and here lies the salient point. DeLillo cranks up the potential energy of the scene, primed for either confrontation or reconciliation, but he does not release it into the kinetic momentum of narrative. He brings the story full circle back to the museum, rearranging his figures into new patterns; but then he suspends all animation, replacing the dynamics of plot and character with an arresting image, an ekphrastic *natura morta*, where the man and woman end up as fixed and inscrutable as the Richter canvases that surround them.

### "The Starveling"

The last story in *The Angel Esmeralda* returns to the art stalker theme, borrowing a number of elements from previous treatments. But DeLillo departs from his previous prototypes in important ways, pointing tentatively toward a potential exit from the perpetual cycle of repetition. The protagonist of "The Starveling," Leo Zhelezniak, is the latest in a long line of DeLillo characters obsessed with films. Leo has kept to a strict schedule for years, attending multiple film screenings each day at various venues scattered across the city. As with all of the primary characters in the art stalker stories, Leo's human relationships suffer because of his artistic obsessions. Years ago he broke up with his wife Flory, although they amicably share an apartment now and have a better relationship as a divorced couple than they ever had while married. Unlike the previous art stalker stories, where DeLillo limits access to only one privileged perspective, in "The Starveling" he gives voice to both Leo's and Flory's thoughts. One might expect his ex-wife to be resentful of his cinematic fixations, but she actually finds much to admire in Leo's rigorous discipline. "He was an ascetic," according to one of her theories (187). "She found something saintly and crazed in his undertaking, an element of self-denial, an element of penance. Sit in the dark, revere the images." However, Flory also suspects that Leo's obsession is symptomatic of some old and deep wound, and that he goes to the movies seeking a cure for this formative trauma: "Or he was a man escaping his past. He needed to dream away a grim memory of childhood, some misadventure of adolescence. Movies are waking dreams—daydreams, she said, protection against the recoil of that early curse, that bane."

Flory is on the right track, but Leo's pathology stems more from something that has failed to happen, a beast in the jungle that has yet to pounce. Leo's perception of this central lack is thrown into

sharp relief by his growing obsession for a fellow obsessive, a female spectator who likewise attends multiple movies each day. Drawn to this gaunt doppelganger, Leo begins stalking her, first following her out of the theater, later shadowing her from one venue to the next, and eventually going so far as to track her all the way to her neighborhood in the Bronx. The woman apparently never notices him, or anyone else for that matter, so withdrawn is she into the hermetically sealed solipsism of her own private world (or so Leo supposes). Because of her extremely thin frame, he suspects she is anorexic, but he coins an even more evocative term for her condition and her identity: the Starveling. As he conceives her, she is so devoted to film, to the uncompromising discipline of her devotion that she cannot even be bothered to eat. Her condition is not medical so much as spiritual and existential; like Kafka's hunger artist, her only appetite is for starvation, since the world fails miserably to provide her with whatever ineffable sustenance she needs to fill her inner void. Or so Leo supposes. Once again, DeLillo's arch-perceiver sees in objects and in others whatever he needs them to be, which generally comes down to exorcising his personal demons onto another and mirroring his narcissistic fantasies. In the initial stages of his obsession, he simply projects his own traits outward: "He thought she was a person who lived within herself, remote, elusive, whatever else. . . . She had no friends, one friend. This is how he chose to define her, for now, in the early stages" (196). When he presumes to name her the Starveling, he defines her primarily as empty inside, depleted, hollow—in short, he treats her as his vessel, like one of Morandi's bottles, ready to be filled by whatever elixirs he concocts. Paradoxically, what he fills her with is emptiness. He is the real starveling, and he projects his sense of incompleteness and spiritual hunger onto her.

He regards her by stages as his kindred spirit, secret sharer, and soul mate—his better half. This fantasy leads him to recognize what he has really been searching for all these years at the movies: the missing half of his life. Leo muses,

It was something he'd never tried to penetrate until now, the crux of being who he was and understanding why he needed this. He sensed it in her, knew it was there, the same half life. They had no other self. They had no fake self, no veneer. They could only be the one embedded thing they were, stripped of the faces that come naturally to others. They were bare-faced, bare-souled, and maybe this is why they were here, to be safe. The world was up there, framed, on the screen, edited and corrected and bound tight, and they were here, where they belonged, in the isolated dark, being what they were, being safe. (206)

Leo laments, but also boasts, that he and the female spectator lead half-lives. This shared condition is a source of pain that permanently alienates them from most people, but it is also a point of pride in that each remains genuine, "bare-faced, bare-souled," and has never stooped, in the words of J. Alfred Prufrock, "To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet" (Eliot 27). Instead they retreat to the larger-than-life fantasy world of the movies, a regression into a dark sanctuary safe from the real world's glaring duplicity. Like twins joined in the womb, Leo fancies that he and the woman might fill in the missing parts of each other's incomplete lives.

Much as he tries to merge his life completely and harmoniously with hers, as Dennis attempts to do with Norman Bates, Leo can never square his perspective as perfectly as he wants with that of the Starveling. He tries sitting directly behind her in the cinema, replicating the sightlines first established in "Baader-Meinhof," in hopes of seeing through her eyes. But he aborts the effort when their perceptual wavelengths prove ineluctably out of sync: "Their bodies were aligned, eyes aligned, his and hers. But the movie was hers, her film, her theater, and he wasn't prepared for the confusion. The movie seemed stillborn" (198). He then tries to achieve synthesis through purely imaginative channels, attempting to conjure up a vision of her: "He closed his eyes for a time. He tried to see her standing naked in body profile before a mirror" (199). This exercise emphasizes most emphatically his efforts to co-opt her as mirror-double. His salacious gaze at her naked body hints at the sexual menace of a stalker. However, the primary function of her nudity here seems to emphasize her physical diminishment and her unadorned authenticity. Most telling is the fact that, even in his fantasy, he only views her mediated reflection, not her actual body. For that matter, he does not view her head-on but only in profile, like the image of the deceased Meinhof that opens "Baader-Meinhof." He sees a view of her that she could never see herself, but this perspective also effectively deflects her gaze and withholds direct access to her identity.

Finally, frustrated by these half-measures, Leo recklessly barges in on her in the women's restroom of a movie theater. The echoes of "Baader-Meinhof" ring clearly, but there the bathroom provided a protective barrier between the art stalker and his prey, whereas in "The Starveling" it serves as the site for direct confrontation. The tenor of these scenes is radically different as well. In the former, DeLillo builds tension on the woman's part and suspense on the reader's part because the stalker is an unknown quantity; we are given no access to his inner thoughts or true motives, and the clues planted from the start all point toward terror and death. In the latter story, Leo is humanized by our privileged access to his thoughts and his sympathetic

portrayal by Flory. His stalking behavior is unconditionally wrong, but he comes across more as a social misfit than a full-blown sociopath. Accordingly, the bathroom scene in "The Starveling" plays more as farce than tragedy. Leo's excuses are lame, his speech rambling, his efforts to bond with her pathetically misjudged, and his overall demeanor that of a delusional loser. He fails to solicit a single word of response from the flabbergasted woman, who takes advantage of another patron's arrival in the restroom to dash out the door.

### Exit?

"The Starveling" might well have concluded here on a note of abject starvation. However, in the end Leo receives unexpected sustenance from the last place he thought to seek it: home. DeLillo experiments for once with sending his stalker home at the end instead of back to the museum, and this simple mutation yields remarkable results. Leo always trudges home at the close of a long day, mounting each step to Flory's apartment as wearily as Sisyphus approaching the summit with his boulder. The night after the bathroom fiasco, he opens the apartment door to find Flory performing her workout regimen in the flickering fluorescent light of the kitchen. This is the sort of domestic sight he has witnessed on countless nights and always blindly dismissed. From the story's beginning we are informed, "It was a life that had slowly grown around them, unfailingly familiar, and there was nothing much to see that had not been seen in previous hours, days, weeks, and months" (183–84). But for some reason on this particular evening he sees something in Flory's quotidian image that he has failed to see before, and the sight staggers him with all the power of an epiphany, the beast pounced at last:

He didn't move a muscle, just sat and watched. It seemed the simplest thing, a person standing in a room, a matter of stillness and balance. But as time passed the position she held began to assume a meaning, even a history, although not one he could interpret. Bare feet together, legs lightly touching at knees and thighs, the raised arms permitting a fraction of an inch of open space on either side of her head. The way the hands were entwined, the stretched body, a symmetry, a discipline that made him believe he was seeing something in her that he'd never recognized, a truth or depth that showed him who she was. He lost all sense of time, determined to remain dead still for as long as she did, watching steadily, breathing evenly, never lapsing.

If he blinked an eye, she would disappear. (211)

The blindness and sight imagery Kauffman locates in "Baader-Mein-hof" is at play once again here as Leo's eyes are finally opened to the beauty, discipline, symmetry, and strength of the woman he has been more or less ignoring for years while escaping to the movies. Instead of stopping at the threshold of some major perceptual breakthrough or life-altering experience, this time DeLillo gives his protagonist and his readers a glimpse of what might lie on the other side. After years of seeking transcendence, transformation, completion, or safety in art, Leo seems suddenly prepared to recognize that what and who he was looking for was waiting at home all along.

Lest I misrepresent this exquisite conclusion as a hackneyed and sentimental happy ending, it is important to note how precariously Leo's epiphany hangs in the balance of the last line: "If he blinked, she would disappear" (211). Viewed in concert with the flickering fluorescent light illuminating the scene, this closing remark begs comparison with something Leo was told many years earlier in a college philosophy class: "*All human existence is a trick of the light*" (195). The story's closing revelation links back to Leo's earlier interrogation of that philosophy lesson: "Was it about the universe and our remote and fleeting place as earthlings? Or was it something much more intimate, people in rooms, what we see and what we miss, how we pass through each other, year by year, second by second?" (195). By the end of the story, Leo has learned to recognize something intimate that he had missed for years. However, just because he sees it in a flash of clarity does not guarantee that he will continue to see it, that this insight will remain permanently imprinted on his consciousness and alter his behavior henceforward. In fact, given years of blindness, neglect, and retreat, it seems more likely that he will forget this lesson just as quickly as he learned it. But at the story's conclusion he clings to this freshly minted perception for as long as he can. "All human existence is a trick of the light" suggests a perception-based philosophy like that of Bishop Berkeley, who asserted "*esse est percipi*" (to be is to be perceived) (42).<sup>11</sup> From this ontological viewpoint, Leo stands to lose the incandescent being before him the instant he ceases to perceive her in the proper light. Furthermore, if human existence is merely an ephemeral trick of light, then is humanity really so fundamentally different than the flickering make-believe of the movies? Tempting as it is to read the story's conclusion as a deep and lasting transformative experience where Leo finally chooses Flory over the Starveling, reality over fantasy, and life over art, one must also recognize an equally valid interpretation in which Leo merely learns to view Flory in the same way as he views the movies: captivating images capable of delivering powerful virtual experiences but ultimately destined to dissolve once the lights change, replaced by the next magical but fleeting chimera.



Figure 5. *Gegenüberstellung 1 (Confrontation 1)* by Gerhard Richter. Digital Image © 2003. The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY. Reproduction courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery.

All of DeLillo's stories on this theme feature characters pursuing something they lack, namely an acceptable way of seeing and being in the world. They turn to art in pursuit of elusive remedies that will heal what is damaged or restore what is missing. Art offers the allure of total communion, lasting catharsis, complete integration, and perfect harmony—in short, all that the cruel and broken outer world fails to provide. However, DeLillo dispels this idyllic fantasy in these stories, uncovering the confusion, duplicity, and menace lurking within the supposed sanctuary. When one enters an art venue,

one does not exit the world of others or the inner turmoil of the self. "Baader-Meinhof" establishes the rules of this game, and DeLillo plays out variations in *Falling Man*, *Point Omega*, and "The Starveling." The latter work offers a potential exit strategy, but whether this strategy is tenable or sustainable remains profoundly uncertain. Rather, Leo is a blink away from resuming the pattern of his art stalker predecessors, revolving to and fro like Dante's damned, pausing occasionally for placid moments of lucidity before resuming their doomed wanderings. Their revolutions invariably intersect the paths of other wanderers, colliding suddenly then separating again, in a desolate pattern of catch and release.

Museums, galleries, and cinemas bring strangers together and invite them into intensely intimate experiences with artworks and potentially with one another. It deserves emphasizing that, present evidence to the contrary, these encounters are often entirely positive and benign in real life and in DeLillo's earlier work. But in his later work DeLillo becomes increasingly fascinated by artistic experiences that take a darker, pathological turn. This is not just a matter of inventing aberrational scenarios in which a sicko is let loose among the otherwise enlightened clientele and noble artwork of a revered cultural institution. Rather, DeLillo considers ways in which artworks and art venues can subvert the higher impulses traditionally attributed to them. Artistic reception involves separation and distance; a canvas or movie screen cannot be regarded clearly if one gets too close. Art venues also facilitate a kind of aesthetic promiscuity, encouraging spectators to shuttle from one intensely intimate experience to the next. Thus, DeLillo characterizes the spectator's transaction with art as a fervent but fleeting exchange across an unbridgeable divide, and this same dynamic informs and undermines the human relationships he depicts among spectators gathered in the shadows of art.

## Notes

1. "Baader-Meinhof" was originally published in the April 1, 2002 issue of the *New Yorker*. "The Starveling" was first published in the Autumn 2011 issue of *Granta*. Both stories are included in DeLillo's short story collection *The Angel Esmeralda: Nine Stories*, and those are the versions cited throughout the present study.
2. Stefan Aust, who knew some of the members of the RAF, has written the definitive account of the movement. His book *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex*, first published in German in 1985, was an avowed influence on Richter's *October 18, 1977*. Most of my own information on the group is drawn from the English translation, *Baader-Meinhof: The Inside Story of the RAF*.

3. The original leaders had been arrested in 1972 and held in Stammheim Prison in Stuttgart. Meinhof was found dead by hanging in her cell on May 9, 1976, prompting an escalation of efforts to free the remaining leaders. The RAF kidnapped Hanns-Martin Schleyer in September 1977 and threatened to kill him if the remaining RAF prisoners were not released. This agenda was supported by militants from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, who hijacked a plane filled with passengers and likewise demanded the prisoners' release. German counterterrorism forces staged a successful operation to free the passengers and kill the hijackers on October 18, 1977. After learning about the siege, three of the RAF prisoners—Baader, Ensslin, and Jan-Carl Raspe—apparently followed through on a suicide pact, although some supporters maintain that they were murdered. Surviving RAF members reacted by killing the hostage Schleyer that same day.
4. The Richter image included in the short story collection is *Tote (Dead)*, the third and smallest in a subseries of close-ups of the dead Meinhof in profile (see figure 1). When the story originally appeared in the *New Yorker*, it was instead accompanied by *Gegenüberstellung 1 (Confrontation 1)*, a blurry image of Ensslin (see figure 5). By contrast, this image depicts Ensslin while still alive, in medium range, and facing forward.
5. There is some question as to which exhibition serves as the setting for DeLillo's story. Critics have assumed that he refers to the *October 18, 1977* MoMA exhibition just before 9/11 (November 2000–January 2001), but Richter's series was again on display just after 9/11 (February–May 2002, as part of a career retrospective), and DeLillo's manuscript of "Baader-Meinhof" bears the date February 2002. (I thank Emily Roehl, a research assistant at the Harry Ransom Center, for retrieving information on the manuscript's date from the DeLillo papers [Box 85, Folders 2–3].) Since the latter show ran contemporaneously with the original publication of the story, readers of "Baader-Meinhof" could still go to MoMA and view the series for themselves, apprehensively looking over their shoulders the entire time.
6. For consideration of the relation of art and terrorism in a wider context, see Lentricchia and McAuliffe 1–4 and 18–40.
7. DeLillo apparently refers to the small Morandi show at the Lucas Schoormans Gallery in Chelsea from September 23 to December 4, 2004. See the exhibition catalog, *Giorgio Morandi: Late Paintings 1950–1964. Natura Morta, 1956* (see figure 3) was part of this exhibition and appears to be the model for DeLillo's ekphrastic description of a Morandi still life in *Falling Man*. See 49.
8. To cite a representative example, consider Babette and Jack Gladney's sex life in *White Noise*. The couple uses art, in this case erotic literature, as a form of foreplay, resorting to simulated sex in an effort to stimulate the real thing. The scene is supremely unsexy until Babette balks at reading erotic clichés, like "Enter me, enter me, yes, yes," which immediately arouses Jack: "I began to feel an erection stir-

- ring. How stupid and out of context" (29). Ready to add fuel to their virtual fire, Jack dashes off in search of some pornographic letters to read Babette, only to discover instead an old family album filled with photos of dead relatives and bygone days. The couple ends up foregoing sex in favor of communing with images of death and loss.
9. Ensslin dabbled with a movie career before becoming radicalized, starring in the experimental film *Das Abonnement*, which features her nude in a number of sexually explicit scenes. Ensslin was often portrayed in the press as a femme fatale, while Meinhof, who had twin daughters, was depicted as a monstrous mother. For a particularly incisive critique of the negative gender stereotypes that distorted media coverage of the RAF women, see Clare Bielby.
  10. I am indebted to Patrice Kane, the Head of Archives and Special Collections at Fordham University, for kindly providing me with copies of the core curriculum requirements and course catalog descriptions for Fordham University during the period when DeLillo attended as a Communication Arts major (1954–1958).
  11. "For as to what is said of the absolute existence of unthinking things without any relation to their being perceived, that seems perfectly unintelligible. Their *esse* is *percipi*, nor is it possible they should have any existence, out of the minds or thinking things which perceive them" (Berkeley 42).

## Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor W. "Valéry Proust Museum." *Prisms*. Trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber. Cambridge: MIT P, 1967. 173–85.
- Apitzsch, Julia. "The Art of Terror—The Terror of Art: DeLillo's Still Life of 9/11, Giorgio Morandi, Gerhard Richter, and Performance Art." *Terrorism, Media, and the Ethics of Fiction: Transatlantic Perspectives on Don DeLillo*. Ed. Peter Schneck and Philipp Schweighauser. New York: Continuum, 2011. 93–108.
- Aust, Stefan. *Baader-Meinhof: The Inside Story of the RAF*. Trans. Anthea Bell. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008.
- Berkeley, George. *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*. Ed. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop. London: Nelson, 1949.
- Bielby, Clare. *Violent Women in Print: Representations in the West German Print Media of the 1960s and 1970s*. Rochester: Camden, 2012.
- Cowart, David. "The Lady Vanishes: Don DeLillo's *Point Omega*." *Contemporary Literature* 53.1 (2012): 31–50.
- Crawford, Karin L. "Gender and Terror in Gerhard Richter's *October 18, 1977* and Don DeLillo's 'Baader-Meinhof.'" *New German Critique* 36.2 (2009): 207–30.
- DeLillo, Don. *Americana*. New York: Penguin, 1971.
- . *The Angel Esmeralda: Nine Stories*. New York: Scribner, 2011.
- . "Baader-Meinhof." *The Angel Esmeralda* 105–18.

- 
- . "Baader-Meinhof." 2002. TS. Don DeLillo Papers. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas, Austin.
- . *The Day Room*. New York: Penguin, 1986.
- . *Falling Man*. New York: Scribner, 2007.
- . "In the Ruins of the Future." *Harper's Magazine* Dec. 2001: 33–40.
- . "An Interview with Don DeLillo." By Thomas LeClair. 1982. *Conversations with Don DeLillo*. Ed. Thomas DePietro. Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 2005. 3–15.
- . *The Names*. New York: Knopf, 1982.
- . *Point Omega*. New York: Simon, 2010.
- . "The Starveling." *The Angel Esmeralda* 183–211.
- . *White Noise*. New York: Penguin, 1985.
- Duchamp, Marcel. "The Creative Act." *Marcel Duchamp*. Ed. Robert Lebel. New York: Paragraphic, 1959.
- Eliot, T. S. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." *Collected Poems, 1909–1962*. London: Faber, 1974. 13–17.
- Fordham University. *Fordham University Course Catalog*. New York: Fordham U, 1956–58.
- Heath, Christian, and Dirk vom Lehn. "Configuring Reception: (Dis-)Regarding the 'Spectator' in Museums and Galleries." *Theory, Culture and Society* 21.6 (2004): 43–65.
- Johnson, Ken. "At MoMA, Douglas Gordon: The Hourglass Contortionist." *New York Times* 9 June 2006. Web. 8 Mar. 2013.
- Kauffman, Linda S. "The Wake of Terror: Don DeLillo's 'In the Ruins of the Future,' 'Baader-Meinhof,' and *Falling Man*." *MFS* 54.2 (2008): 353–77.
- Lentricchia, Frank, and Jody McAuliffe. *Crimes of Art and Terror*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003.
- Morandi, Giorgio. *Giorgio Morandi: Late Paintings 1950–1964*. New York: Lucas Schoormans Gallery, 2004.
- Storr, Robert. *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting*. New York: MoMA, 2002.
- . *Gerhard Richter: October 18, 1977*. New York: MoMA, 2000.