



# Don Delillo's *Point Omega*; Ecstasy and Inertia in a Hyperreal World: A Baudrillardian Reading

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## Abstract

This paper aims to present a Baudrillardian reading of Don Delillo's *Point Omega* in the framework of Baudrillard's definition of the contemporary world as 'hyperreal' and also his twin concepts of 'ecstasy and inertia'. According to Baudrillard, the contemporary time is the hyperreal era in which subjects do not have access to 'real' primarily because they are supplied with the 'simulations' first and then with the 'real' entity and probably never confronted with the 'real' itself through media, advertisements, and virtual world. Thus, the perception they have from incidents, objects, places and even other people is 'hyperreal'; edited, censored, beautified and exaggerated versions of reality; more real than real. In this study *Point Omega* will be examined as Delillo's 'hyperreal' version of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* since the movie is screened in the course of the novel and despite the similarities between the novel and the movie they end contrastingly. Symbolically 'real' is not found in the novel due to 'Mobius spiraling negativity' which is one of the features of Baudrillard's definition of 'hyperreal' age. Baudrillard believes in the triumph of objects over subjects. While the object's world is perpetually cultivating frenziedly, objects and technologies begin to dominate the stupefied subjects consequently he states when the objects are moving toward their 'ecstasy', the subjects are stricken in 'inertia'. This supremacy of objects and technologies will be displayed in *Point Omega* regarding Richard Elster's inert behavior and reaching the 'omega point' that Teilhard de Chardin envisions for human race is rendered impossible due to Elster's destiny in the framework of Baudrillard's concept of evolution.

**Keywords:** Ecstasy, Inertia, Hyperreality, Baudrillard, Don Delillo, *Point Omega*, Omega Point, Teilhard de Chardin, Alfred Hitchcock.

## 1. Introduction

Richard Elster, the central character of *Point Omega* is a retired scholar who has worked in Pentagon for two years to conceptualize the Iraq war. He is spending his retirement forlorn in a desert to distance himself from what Baudrillard calls the 'hyperreal' ecstatic world of objects and 'simulations', on the other hand he aspires to reach the 'omega point' that Teilhard de Chardin defines. Jim Finely, a documentary film maker, and Elster's daughter, Jessie, also accompany him in his solitary withdrawal. But out of the blue one day Jessie disappears and there aren't any traces which help others to detect her. There are two 'anonymity' sections in the beginning and ending of the novel in which an anonymous man watches Douglas Gordon's *24Hour Psycho* in the museum for consecutive hours and some links between Jessie and the anonymous watcher can be noted but which ultimately remain obscure. The affinities and the differences between the events which take place in *Point Omega* and in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* would be clarified in the framework of Baudrillard's definition of 'hyperreal' era.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Baudrillard claims that the contemporary era is 'hyperreal' in which the references to real are lost and people are confronted with 'simulations'. "The era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials". (Simulacra and Simulation, 1994, p. 2) When simulations expand in television and computers, their references to social, political and historical realities are lost and they instead refer to each other. Therefore, the depth and meaning is vanished and the individuals are only presented with the spectacle and not reality and meaning. He states that in the age of 'ecstasy' of meaning subjects are confronted with abundant information and superfluous meaning which creates a kind of 'nebula', the 'entropy' of excessive information and media messages, that results in the disappearance of meaning and renders the subjects stupefied and disappointed since they cannot grasp and make sense of it all. According to him due to 'Mobius spiraling negativity' the investigation for real entities and real causes remain impossible since:

The facts no longer have a specific trajectory, they are born at the intersection of models, a single fact can be engendered by all models at once. This anticipation, this precession, this short circuit, this confusion of the fact with its model... is what allows each time for all possible interpretations, even the most contradictory—all true, in the sense that their truth is to be exchanged, in the image of the model from which they derive, in a generalized cycle. (Simulacra and Simulation, 1994, p. 17)

In the 'hyperreal' world that Baudrillard portrays the objects and the technologies are growing to be more sophisticated and intelligent progressively. This proliferation and complicatedness of objects which he calls the 'ecstasy' of objects, creates a catastrophe for the subjects, since the 'ecstasy' of the objects is accompanied by the 'inertia' of the subjects. The smart, developed objects and technologies are growing and replicating uncontrollably to the extent that they are surpassing the boundaries and going beyond the 'use-value' and 'exchange-value'. "The only revolution in things is today no longer in their dialectical transcendence, but in their potentialization, in their elevation to the  $n^{\text{th}}$  power, whether that of terrorism, irony, or simulation. It is no longer dialectics, but ecstasy that is in process." (Fatal Strategies, 2008, p. 63) The subject is encircled to the 'ecstatic' and 'obscene' excrement of powerful objects and begins to slow down and become numb and motionless. Therefore, in his *Fatal Strategies* (1983) Baudrillard discusses that subjects begin to surrender to the rules and strategies of the objects and are stupefied by their complexities; in this regard his conception of the contemporary man is quite contrary to Teilhard de Chardin's concept of evolution of man. Teilhard believes in the metaphysics of evolution. In his theory "the universe is constantly developing towards higher levels of material complexity and consciousness" (Tonelli, 2011, p. 97) and human beings are also in the process of converging toward a final unity, the 'omega point' which is the supreme complexity of consciousness. He asserts that beyond the tendencies of the material world toward production and sophistication human being is also becoming more complex and more completely unified. He believes human's body is evolved sufficiently with a sophisticated nervous system to permit rational reflection and self awareness. The 'omega point' that Teilhard envisions for human beings is in sharp contrast with the way Baudrillard portrays subjects in the 'hyperreal' era. "As information starts to circulate everywhere at the very speed of light. There is no longer an absolute by which to measure the rest. But behind this acceleration something is beginning to slow down absolutely. Are we now slowing down absolutely?" (Fatal Strategies, 2008, pp. 37-38). Consequently, Baudrillard challenges the evolution of man and claims that human beings are not accompanying the complicatedness and 'ecstasy' of objects and technologies. Don DeLillo accordingly presents Richard Elster in his novel who believes in the 'omega point' and aspires to reach it in the silence and solitude of the desert but in the course of the novel and via Elster's fate, DeLillo discloses his opposition with Teilhard's theory.

### 3. Baudrillardian Reading of *Point Omega*

*Point Omega* centers on Richard Elster's forlorn retirement in a desert in California. He is an emeritus intellectual who has worked in Pentagon for the last two years to provide them with "an intellectual framework for the Iraq war." (Kakutani, 2010) He has escaped the very expansion of the objects' predominance and is taking refuge in the empty landscapes of the desert. "The sun was beaming down. This is what he wanted, to feel the deep heat beating into his body, feel the body itself, reclaim the body from what he called the nausea of News and Traffic." (DeLillo, 2012, p. 22) Elster distances himself from the 'hyperreal' ecstatic 'simulations' since he doesn't want to surrender to the object's rules and be stupefied by their complexities. As Baudrillard names Elster is in the state of 'inertia' and in the desert he is remote from the development and speed of objects and technologies: "Time slows down when I'm here. Time becomes blind...I don't get old here." (p. 30) Elster asserts that he is in the desert to "eat, sleep and sweat, here to do nothing, sit and think". (p. 22) He has withdrawn to desert to stop being exposed to "News and Traffic. Sports and Weather" (p. 23) remote from the claustrophobic scenes of the city. Now he is in an underfurnished house in the desert and observes "nothing but distances, not vistas or sweeping sightlines but only distances." (p. 22)

Elster states that he used to come to this house before as well "to write, to think" (p. 29) but this time in what he calls his "spiritual retreat" (p. 29) he determines to solely reclaim his body and mind since he is 'inert' and is escaping the 'ecstasy' which has made him 'inert'. As Michiko Kakutani puts: "All three central characters in this novel...are alienated, oddly detached people. They are individuals dwelling in a limbo state, searching for something that might give order or meaning to their lives or simply shell-shocked by the randomness and menace of modern life." (Kakutani, 2010) Elster escapes to desert to stop being exposed to the flood of information. Jim, the documentary filmmaker who accompanies Elster and aims to make a documentary film starring him, also is impressed by the absence of information and media messages and decides to cease his exposure to them "I went inside to check my laptop for e-mail, needing outside contact but feeling corrupt, as if I were breaking an unstated pact of creative withdrawal." (p. 31) Jim says: "I wasn't using my cell phone and almost never touched my laptop. They began to seem feeble, whatever their speed and reach, devices overwhelmed by landscape." (p. 82)

Teilhard de Chardin states that human's consciousness is reaching the 'omega point' similarly Elster comments: "human thought is alive, it circulates. And the sphere of collective human thought, this is approaching the final term, the last flare." (p. 65) Teilhard's notion of 'omega point' is in contrast with Baudrillard's worldview according to which against the development and sophistication of the technology and the objects, human being is beginning to slow down and feel stupefied. The object's world is accelerating toward its point of 'ecstasy' flourishing to a level which is beyond the perception of human being and people cannot reckon the complicatedness of objects and technology. Teilhard aspires an 'omega point' toward which human is pacing but according to Baudrillard the 'ecstasy' of objects and technology does not carry human being with itself too and humans have to conform to the rules and strategies of the objects and consequently they become 'inert'. While Teilhard envisions an 'omega point' of supreme consciousness and intelligence toward which humans are approaching Baudrillard portrays human being entrapped by the sophistication of their world and being stricken in the state of 'inertia'. While Teilhard believes in metaphysics of evolution of man to the final convergence with the supernatural order Elster ponders about human extinction in the desert, human is going to be extinct the way other species became extinct. He watches the landscapes in the desert and reflects about the species being extinct million years ago. Spreicer suggests "Point Omega portrays the exhaustion of the complex system of American-style visuality and connects it to the space of the desert, where the retardation of time functions as an

ominous foreboding of system entropy affecting the genuinely American sense of endless future development, the relentless self-perpetuation of the capitalist system.” (Spreicer, 2011) Elster suggests, humans are moving toward a dead point: “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.” (p. 67) Contemporary man lives in “the desert of the real” (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1994, p. 1) and Elster reflects about human’s extinction in a ‘hyperreal’ atmosphere with dumb experiences which are simulated what is the destiny of humankind? Earlier in the novel Elster accompanies Finely to the Museum of Modern Art where they watch Douglas Gordon’s *24Hour Psycho*. He enjoys the movie though he doesn’t stay long, Scott Morris in his review on *Point Omega* explains Elster’s interest: “Gordon’s film appeals to him (we learn later) because its cosmological slowness anticipates the ‘heat death of universe’ a collective entropic end for the human species.” (Morris, 2010)

Anyway Elster aspires to reach the ‘omega point’ in the silence and solitude of desert “where the mind transcends all the direction inward.” (p. 91) He wants to be all inside without connection to outside world. This is contrary to the notion of watching, a current theme in *Point Omega*, where as Mary K. Holland says “self becomes what self perceives”. (p. 10) She states that the novel becomes “a warning about the dangers of constituting the self purely externally, through image and representation.” (p. 10) The man who is watching *24Hour Psycho* wants “complete immersion” (p. 146) with the movie. He wants to “bathe in the tempo, in the near static rhythm of the image...He wanted the film to move even more slowly, requiring deeper involvement of eye and mind, always that, the thing he sees tunneling into the blood, into dense sensation, sharing consciousness with him.” (p. 146) The postmodern man is assimilated to what Jessie names the “ritual” (p. 88) of watching and receiving the simulations. Jessie visits an old couple who watch TV all day long. The old woman watches her husband searching for his response to what he sees and Jessie watches the old woman and she is part of the ritual “one watching the other watch the other.” (p. 88) Therefore, Elster who seeks to reach the ‘omega point’ in the desert remote from all connections to outside world is also a part of the culture of watching via the simulations of which he construct parts of his identity. He is extremely connected to his daughter and the loss of her distances him violently from reaching the ‘omega point’ before Jessie’s disappearance he comments: “I feel the landscape more than see it. I never know what day it is. I never know if a minute has passed or an hour.” (p. 30) He seems to be thoroughly assimilated with the landscape and be drawn inside but he is on the other hand connected to Jessie. Jessie was “Elster’s possessiveness, his enclosing space...he wanted her near him all the time.” (p. 49) And the panoramas in the desert alter to be empty and leave him deserted. When Jessie is lost Elster deteriorates thoroughly, all his speech and egoism turns to grief for the loss of his daughter and he becomes a wretched old man. As David Cowart puts Elster “meets his fate in the desert. Implicated in deadly political folly, he retreats in chagrin to his own personal Iraq.” (p. 45) He had worked in Pentagon to prepare the Iraq war like an advertisement to be presented to the world. His job was to make a simulated, unreal war. In Pentagon they were dealing with simulations and not the realities as he himself claims: “they think they’re sending an army into a place on a map.” (p. 35) They were dealing with statistics, the risk assessments, policy papers, evaluations and they were far from the realities of the violence taking place in the war. The war for them is a ‘hyperreal’ entity in which the references to reality are obscure. “There were times when no map existed to match the reality we were trying to create.” (p. 36) They deal with the war like an advertisement to be shown on TV, the depth and realities of the war fade away in the simulated presentation of truth in TV. “We tried to create new realities overnight, careful sets of words that resemble advertising slogans in memorability and repeatability. These were words that would yield pictures eventually and then become three-dimensional.” (p. 36) Elster must justify the war and he is so remote from its violence. He says: “I hate violence. I fear the thought of it, won’t watch violent movies, turn away from news reports on television that show dead or wounded people...Violence freezes my blood.” (p. 63) But only after the disappearance of Jessie he can reckon the real grief of loss. Delillo reverses Teilhard’s ‘omega point’ to ‘point omega’ as David Cowart puts “therein lies the chief irony of Delillo’s title.” (p. 47) Jim reflects:

I thought of his remarks about matter and being, those long nights on the deck, half smashed, he and I, transcendence, paroxysm, the end of human consciousness. It seemed so much dead echo now. Point omega. A million years away. The omega point has narrowed, here and now, to the point of a knife as it enters a body. All the man’s grand themes funneled down to local grief, one body, out there somewhere, or not. (p. 124)

*Point Omega* is Delillo’s 21<sup>st</sup> century’s version of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*. Similarly the girl disappears in both tales. In the movie Marion Crane the character is murdered and she is looked for meticulously. There are traces she has left behind and finally her dead body is found. There are definite references to the ‘real’ which is the dead body of Marion, the others inspect them and they reach the ‘real’. But in Delillo’s version Jessie is lost, the ‘real’, and there are not any references for others to reach clues helping them find her dead or alive and ultimately she is not discovered. The ‘real’ is not to be grasped because in the ‘hyperreal’ there aren’t any references to real. Marion Crane in the movie is killed by a knife and similarly in the novel after a couple of days the searchers find a knife in an area called Impact Area in the desert but even they cannot assert the exact application of the knife; “could be a hiker’s or camper’s, any number of uses.” (p. 114) Baudrillard calls this feature of ‘hyperreality’, ‘Mobius spiraling negativity’:

If one envisions the entire cycle of any act or even in a system where linear continuity and dialectical polarity no longer exist, in a field *unhinged by simulation*, all determination evaporates...indeed the objectivity of the facts does not put an end to this vertigo of interpretation. That is, we are in a logic of simulation, which no longer has anything to do with a logic of facts and an order of reason. (*Simulacra and Simulation*, 1994, p. 16)

As Martin Paul Eve states in his article *Point Omega* encompasses “postmodern ontological indeterminacy” since “the reader is not given enough evidence to uncover what has happened to Jessie or what has caused her disappearance, only strongly suggestive clues and forking paths.” (Eve, 2014, p. 6) Delillo presents this logic of postmodernity in his work. The events happen and the definite cause of the events or the initiators of the events and catastrophes are not going to be discovered and the doors to interpretations are permanently open. For each event in the postmodern era there is not a clear cut source to be declared and accepted socially since events “are born at the intersection of models, a single fact can be engendered by all models at once”. (Simulacra and Simulation, p. 17) There are always rumors for other originators and diverse aims behind an event or a catastrophe. Delillo manifest this embedded logic in political and social events of the contemporary era in his version of *Psycho*. In Delillo’s tale Jessie disappears, this is the catastrophe but the reasons behind this event is not going to be discovered. It’s not definite, whether she is kidnapped or murdered or she has simply escaped the house since there aren’t any clues which direct the searches into a conclusion and even the dead body, if it is taken for granted that she is murdered, is not found. As Scott Morris puts, the same thing happens in *24Hour Psycho*. He believes the movie: “is achingly slow, the events of the original movie are disconnected. Cause is sundered from effect, each forgetting the other. A masterwork of suspense like *Psycho* relies on pace and succession to achieve any emotional impact.” (Morris, 2010) In the movie version there is a private detective Arbogast and after he is murdered another detective scrutinizes the events, the clues and reactions and finally he lays bare all the motivation behind characters’ actions, the sequences of the events and the psychological trauma which intrigues Norman Bate to commit the chain of murders. Norman Bate’s psychological association to his mother when she was alive and after her death are declared but the reader’s urge to find out about the man who is watching the *24Hour Psycho* and his psychological relation to his mother that engages his mind through the novel is not satisfied. Similar to *Psycho* which ends with Norman Bate’s mental dialogue with his mother, the novel ends with the watcher’s memory of his dialogues with his mother “Sometimes he sits by her bed and says something and then looks at her and waits for an answer. Sometimes he just looks at her.” (p. 148) But contrastingly the reader of *Point Omega* only knows that the first name of the man Jessie was dating is probably Dennis as Jessie’s mother guess who might be the watcher of the *24Hour Psycho* and might not. In fact *Point Omega* is Delillo’s version of Hitchcock’s suspense movie in which the suspense is not resolved finally because as Jim says: “New York City...where people do not ask” (p. 47) where the riddles are not going to be solved since there are simulated clues which do not lead to ‘real’. At the end Elster asks Jim: “Jimmy what happened?” a question that Jim is not able to answer. According to Baudrillard “catastrophe is always ahead of the normal schedule; it’s always a telescoping, a sudden instantaneity of time...meaning is always too late...This is the eternal delay to which things are condemned by meaning.” (Fatal Strategies, pp. 198-199) And no information is gathered about Jessie’s disappearance and the reader is left with unanswered questions.

#### 4. Conclusion

Through a Baudrillardian reading of *Point Omega*, it would be clarified that reaching Teilhard’s ‘omega point’ is impossible in the contemporary ‘hyperreal’ era since while the objects’ world is pacing toward its ‘ecstasy’, the subjects approach to the state of ‘inertia’. In *Point Omega*, Delillo suggests that all themes of human’s evolution evaporate with the violence and terrorism which is happening worldwide. When Elster experiences the grief of loss, he is so far from reaching the ‘omega point’; on the other hand, in the ‘hyperreal’ era along with the triumph of objects over subjects the numbed subjects do not have the chance of being transcended to the ‘omega point’. The fact is that Elster as the embodiment of the ‘inert’ postmodern subject who is exposed to the ‘ecstasy’ of objects, technologies, and violence of terrorism on the other hand is far beyond reaching Teilhard’s ‘omega point’. Delillo has included Douglas Gordon’s *24Hour Psycho* in his novel which is the slowed version of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* and he presents the reader with his own version of *Psycho* but the logics of postmodernity; the loss of ‘real’ and ‘references’ in what Baudrillard calls ‘Mobius spiraling negativity’ direct the catastrophe and leads to the open-ended ending of the tale. Jessie disappears without any trace and there aren’t any references which leads the researches to find her dead or alive. Also her connection to watcher of *24Hour Psycho* remains vague and she remains the ‘real’ which is not to be regained. The reader also remains in suspense; in the same way that humans are in suspense of finding the ‘real’ causes and initiators to the events and catastrophes happening worldwide.

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