Understanding Don DeLillo

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Published by University of South Carolina Press

Veggian, Henry.
Understanding Don DeLillo.
University of South Carolina Press, 2014.

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Don DeLillo is known primarily for his literary novels despite his significant contributions to other literary modes. This is in part because until recently DeLillo’s stories were published in many small periodicals and magazines. Scattered over a number of decades, some proved hard to find, thereby presenting a problem of access to the reader and critic (some of his early fiction remains uncollected). Access is not the only reason for why DeLillo’s short fiction has not been widely discussed; another factor is DeLillo’s habit of considering the short story as a distinct mode requiring a writer to foreground different elements of the craft. To complicate this aesthetic distinction, DeLillo has nonetheless revised stories and then integrated them into longer works. Yet, while DeLillo’s novels have attracted a great deal of critical attention, very little has been written about his work as a short story writer.

In “The Angel Esmeralda,” a DeLillo short story that originally appeared in *Esquire* (1994) and then in a 2011 collection bearing the same title as the story (page citations are from that volume), an elderly nun named Edgar rises from bed and prepares for her day. She washes and prays. She dons her vestments, which the younger nuns do not wear. Edgar and her sisters leave their church in the New York borough of the Bronx to pick up and then deliver food to the poor. A priest asks the sisters to look for a young girl whom he believes to be homeless and living in the empty buildings of the South Bronx neighborhood known in the story as “the Bird,” a nickname given to it by the local police. Edgar notes the request. Before the nuns distribute food to the poor, Edgar dons a pair of latex gloves.
Edgar is observant, even severely so. She notices every detail of a person’s speech and gesture, and every smell and every stone of her surroundings. It is a habit reinforced by her fear of germs and her aversion to contact. (She no longer disciplines students by force but persuades herself that this is because of changes in the community’s demographics, not her avoidance of physical contact.) Edgar’s reputation among the younger sisters is that of a strict nun. It is one that she does not refuse, even if it is no longer true. Edgar’s scrupulous powers of observation have, however, complicated her faith, so much so that doubt has entered her heart. Edgar does not retire from the church, and the younger nuns do not understand her desire to stay. After the nuns distribute the food, they are caught in traffic. An irascible younger nun named Gracie spots the young girl after whom the priest inquired and chases her. Gracie returns alone. Several weeks later, the nuns learn that Esmeralda, the young girl of the empty lots, was raped and murdered.

In the story’s final pages, the nuns receive rumor of a miracle in the community. Crowds are gathering to see it. Gracie admonishes Edgar and a nun named Jan, both of whom express a desire to witness the phenomenon in question, and depart to see it with their own eyes. The assembled crowd parts for the two sisters. A train passes, shining a light on a large billboard. A face appears from the surface of the sign; it is the face of the murdered girl, Esmeralda. Edgar sees it, too. A wave of joyous recognition breaks over the crowd. When the crowd hugs Edgar, she forgets to recoil. DeLillo writes, “She embraced Sister Jan. They shook hands, pumped hands with the great-bodied women who rolled their eyes to heaven. The women did great two-handed pump shakes, fabricated words jumping out of their mouths, trance utterance, Edgar thought—they’re singing of things outside the known deliriums. She thumped a man’s chest with her fists” (99). The narration, which has been as meticulous as Edgar in noting her aversion to physical contact and the preparations she makes to avoid it, does not note at any point that Edgar is not wearing her gloves. In the final lines, the narration repeats much of the opening scene. But when Edgar rises from bed and prays this morning the long opening discourse on cleansing that first indicates Edgar’s doubt is replaced with a line of prayer.

DeLillo’s short stories pose particular challenges to readers of his novels. Whereas the novel invites commodification—as book, as film, as literary institution, and the privileged object of literary canons—the story is an ephemeral commodity. In DeLillo’s novels our cultural amnesia is substantiated, its historical development spelled out and dramatized in affective modes of stunned apprehension. The novels are systems that disrupt other systems. His short stories are instead objects of art that move in another direction, away from
systemic modes of narrative organization, taking the reliquary form of myth. In “Creation” (1979) two characters, a man and woman, are stranded on a Caribbean Island by ineffective bureaucracies, playing out Edenic desires. In “The Ivory Acrobat” (1988) a young teacher cannot help but think that the Hellenic gods persist; she survives by meditating on the broken ivory statue of a woman performing a somersault over the horns of a charging bull. While in his novels history operates according to chance and probability, DeLillo instead favors the fateful mood of the epic fragment in his short stories. Atmospheric subjectivity displaces the impossible objectivity of the novel’s panoramic scope; whereas glossolalia and aphasia gesture in the novels toward the confusion of capital and culture, the “trance utterances” that appear in “The Angel Esmeralda” occur as forms of mythic vocalization. The effect may be similar to what Walt Whitman described in “Song of Myself” as “Nature without check with original energy.” In these ways and others, DeLillo’s short stories do not provide the historical sequences and contexts offered by his novels. This is not to suggest that the short stories operate “outside” history but that their relationship to historical time—an element so integral to DeLillo’s novels—travels along other, more ephemeral trajectories. This is only partly due to their transient commodity form.

In a well-written discussion of the modern short story’s treatment of time, Michael Trussler remarked that “the short story pertains to the complexity of negotiating temporal experience through narrative.” As opposed to the novel, which organizes time along a spectrum (most often the sequential one of characters’ lives), Trussler writes, “Many short stories depict situations where characters are perplexed by a given set of circumstances.” In the case of Edgar in “The Angel Esmeralda,” for instance, the possibility of religious eternity revealed to her in the final pages transforms her secular biography. Prior to revelation, she had been “suspended,” to use Trussler’s term, in a historical context of which she was acutely aware, yet without any figural or literal contact. In the final scene, the reader learns that she will remain in that transformed context for an additional ten years. One may regard it either as her historical debut, or her spiritual awakening, or some combination of the two, but the fact is that time begins for Edgar when the story ends. In classical myth the gods visit mortals, but the mortals do not visit Olympus.

It is important to note that in the opening paragraph of his essay, Trussler summarizes DeLillo scholar Tom LeClair’s distinction between “excess” (a category of the longer novel) and “observation” (a property of the short story). Trussler make his case against LeClair, Jameson, and others who Trussler believes are too hasty in their dismissal of the short story. As we shall see below, scholars of DeLillo’s writings have paid little attention to his short
with, to, and against the novel

fiction, and the scant criticism that has appeared is often consistent in that it regards the short fiction as a premise to introduce discussion of DeLillo’s longer novels instead of treating it as a distinct aesthetic form in which DeLillo writes. It is tempting perhaps to consider DeLillo’s literary short fiction as a minor endeavor, a miniature of the novels as opposed to a separate literary form unto itself. (I do not say critics admit this, but it is often implied in the manner in which they treat the stories.) There are, however, considerable material reasons for the lack of consideration. The first reason has to do with DeLillo’s consistent but infrequent publication of short fiction (a pattern that suggests the care he takes to write it well). The second reason derives from the ephemeral format of publication. (DeLillo’s stories were until recently scattered among different publications, some of them inaccessible or obscure, over a period of fifty years.) Finally, there is the relationship of his short stories to his recent fiction. While these factors, which range from the sparse critical writings to problems of physical accessibility to the work, may seem to diminish the import of his short fiction, the opposite may indeed be true insofar as readers may only now have the opportunity to begin to recognize, distinguish, and celebrate DeLillo’s achievements in the art of the short story.

Don DeLillo only published short stories during the first decade of his career. He wrote and published six of them during the decade from 1960 to 1970. His first six published stories appeared in small literary journals and university-sponsored magazines of creative writing (such as the *Carolina Quarterly*). After publishing his first novel in 1971, the majority of his published short fiction consisted of excerpts or works in progress, with only four original short stories appearing between the years 1971 and 1982. (Keep in mind that he wrote six novels during that period and also his first play.) Following the publication of his first ten short stories—stories that appear as and are considered by scholars as individual works of fiction—DeLillo published an additional eight short stories between the years 1983 and 2011. All eight of those were reprinted in the aforementioned collection *The Angel Esmeralda* (2011), with the 1979 short story “Creation” added for a total of nine stories. As a result, most of the second half of DeLillo’s career as a short story writer is now available to us in the printed book form as well as electronically. (Not all of DeLillo’s published books are electronically available as digital downloads.) The majority of the short fiction from 1960 to 1982, consisting of nine of those first ten short stories, remains uncollected.

In addition to the rarity of their appearance (on average, one story roughly every three years), readers may also be confused by what precisely constitutes a DeLillo short story. For instance, he first published “Pafko at the Wall” in *Harper’s* magazine (1992). It later appeared in revised form as the prologue
to *Underworld* (1997), a chapter of sorts that sounded the keynote to that great historical romance. The *Underworld* version of the story was then reprinted in 2001 in a freestanding hardcover edition labeled a “novella.” This edition has a feature not present in previous versions of the story: a reprint of the October 4, 1951, front page of the *New York Times*, which heralded the New York Giants’ victory over the Brooklyn Dodgers for the National League pennant. The dust jacket also features the famous photograph of Dodgers left fielder Andy Pafko, the protagonist of the story, watching as the series-winning home run sails over the outfield wall. Is this stand-alone version a novella, as its dust jacket and title page proclaim, or a mixed-media work of literary and visual art? A reader of the 1992 version would have considered it a short story; twenty years later, the 1992 version is still a short story but one that migrated to other forms. This is often the case when DeLillo publishes short fiction in a magazine: it may be an excerpt from a work in progress, it may be an unrevised excerpt, or it may never appear in another form.4

At times it would seem the category of short fiction that “never appears in another form” invites a literary version of natural selection, and readers treat the short fiction as vestigial and rudimentary: something that refused to grow into something more. The habit is exemplified in John McClure’s recent discussion of the final pages of *Underworld* (1997). The novel disperses over its course sections and variants of the story originally published as “The Angel Esmeralda,” which was originally published in 1994 (and then “restored,” as it were, to its original form in the eponymous 2011 collection of DeLillo’s short fiction). Drawing upon the writings of Amy Hungerford, Mark Osteen, and other DeLillo scholars, McClure explains “the spiritual development of Sister Alma Edgar” in the novel, exploring the complicated and original views of modern Catholicism portrayed by DeLillo in his fiction.5 McClure understands the “Sister Edgar” sections of *Underworld* in relation to DeLillo’s wide-ranging interest in “ecstatic traditions” of religious worship (briefly using *Cosmopolis* as an example), and reviews the theological, historical, and narrative implications of the term “mystery.” McClure’s essay is a concise and insightful survey of its topic. In it he carefully expounds upon the relationship between DeLillo’s biography and Catholicism; he chooses relevant, ample, and diverse examples from a range of novels; and his expert use of scholarly references confirms the work of a consummate DeLillo scholar. But it does not mention that “The Angel Esmeralda” was in fact originally published as a short story.

If one were to survey DeLillo’s career as a short story writer in its entirety, however, the confusion surrounding it conceals important insights into his novels, his working habits, and also his public readings. Approaching
the short fiction as a causal force of his entire career, we can begin to see its centrality to his other writings. Rather than regard it as something to be discarded or revised, we may see DeLillo’s short fiction not only as the workshop in which he elaborates the narrative techniques of his novels and plays but also as a place where he creates finished products that are not meant for assembly into other forms. Consider the segmented organization of his novels. *Americana*, his first novel, is an episodic book divided into distinct parts and chapters. The novel’s first chapter is similar in length and quality to the short fiction DeLillo wrote and published during the decade that preceded *Americana*. One might easily consider it a short story unto itself. In addition, longer chapters of *Americana* might stand as short novels in their own right. The novel’s long sixth chapter, in which David narrates a fragmentary story of his family history and hometown, might easily have been extracted and published as a stand-alone novella (as was the case with the prologue to *Underworld*). When *Sports Illustrated* reprinted most of the long chapter at the middle of *End Zone*, DeLillo’s second novel, the magazine’s editors likely noted that the section could stand apart from the novel as an excellent short piece of sports fiction.

A long-standing economic model for literary publishing offers an explanation for the variety of DeLillo’s publication of short fictional works. The mid-nineteenth-century advent of steam cylinder printing presses combined with higher literacy rates among American readers to create a market for short-format and serialized fiction in the periodical press. This shift prompted a split that Michael Denning describes as a “gradual but incomplete separation of the news and story function of the newspaper.” In that print economy, writers could sell their work to periodicals and (ideally) have the work reprinted and sold in book form (for which they would presumably be paid, though this was not always true for the later edition). It is an ingenious system: having introduced readers to excerpts or chapters in disposable newsprint, publishers could more easily persuade those same readers to purchase the collected excerpts in the more durable form of a dime novel or other printed book. In this way the serial chapters and stories functioned as a form of advertising for the fiction and its writer. By and large, the “incomplete separation of the news and story” format persists in those periodicals such as *Harper’s* and *The New Yorker*, which sometimes publish DeLillo’s stories and excerpts from his fiction.

I noted at the start of this chapter that the stories offer some insight into DeLillo’s working habits and also into the longer fiction. I argued that the stories should be considered in and of themselves as separate works rather than as templates or drafts of the longer fiction. The fact is that DeLillo no longer
writes very long novels. Consider DeLillo’s most recent published work of literary fiction, *Point Omega* (2010). It is less than thirty pages longer than *Pafko at the Wall*, the 2001 reprint of the *Underworld* prologue. (This “novella” edition is available from the publisher now only in electronic form.) If we scan the past decade and a half of DeLillo’s career, we see a pattern of shorter, more compact books. *The Body Artist* (2001) and *Point Omega* are nearly identical in length, and each is substantially shorter than the nine collected stories in *The Angel Esmeralda*. Indeed, the title story of that collection appeared in truncated form in the final pages of *Underworld*. (the collected volume of stories “restores” the story to the form of its original publication, as it were.) Like the prologue to *Underworld*, the two recent short novels/novellas are characterized by a density and tautness of style. One can almost imagine, regarding them in light of other examples, as excerpts taken from longer novels that do not exist. *Cosmopolis* (2003) and *Falling Man* (2007), the two longer novels of that same period, are also considerably shorter than three of the four that preceded it, those three being *White Noise*, *Libra*, and *Underworld*. (Comparison to the last is perhaps unfair, as it is twice the length of anything else that DeLillo has published.) The late trend in DeLillo’s literary career has clearly favored the style of precise, short hits known to baseball aficionados as “small ball.”

During a 1993 interview, DeLillo discussed the relationship between the opening scenes of *Mao II* and *Underworld* and the short story in the following way. Adam Begley, his interviewer, asked, “Could the set piece . . . be your alternative to the short story?” DeLillo replied, “I don’t think of them that way. What attracts me to this format is its non-short-storyness, the high degree of stylization. In *Players* all the major characters in the novel appear in the prologue—embryonically, not yet named or defined. . . . This piece is the novel in miniature. It lies outside the novel. It’s modular—keep it in or take it out. The mass wedding in *Mao II* is more conventional. It introduces a single major character and sets up themes and resonances. The book makes no sense without it.”

The economics of literary publishing, accessibility to the short stories in their periodical form, and the trend towards more compact literary forms complicate the role of short fiction in DeLillo’s career. Few major authors publish short fiction with any consistency once they have achieved a certain success. As a practical matter, the explanation seems obvious: it is difficult if not impossible to earn a living on short fiction. (One might consider the plight of Fenig, the impoverished short story writer who lives above Bucky in DeLillo’s *Great Jones Street*, as exemplary.) If one is to continue working with consistency and innovation in the form, it must be out of devotion to
the short story as a space for literary expression that offers something to the
writer and reader that other forms do not.

One should note that DeLillo also publishes stories in small literary maga-
zines such as the venerable *Granta*, as well as in small, obscure publications. His *Granta* stories have been published in special thematic issues of that mag-
azine. The first story published there, “The Ivory Acrobat,” (1994), appeared
in a thematic issue with the title “Murder,” edited by British writer Martin
Amis. The biographical note about DeLillo contains the following sentence:
“He [DeLillo] was living in Greece at the time of the 1981 earthquake.”
“The Starveling” (2011), the second story he published in *Granta*, appeared
in a special issue (devoted to the topic of “Horror”) featuring writers such as
Stephen King and Roberto Bolaño. DeLillo’s stories in these two special issues
resemble his public readings, where the relevance of what he reads on such
occasions is often circumspect and original. In either case, the two stories in
question take on different significance in the original context of publication.
Like Edgar in “The Angel Esmeralda,” these stories have biography and his-
torical context after all; unlike hers, theirs is made privy to us.

In total, these seemingly disparate elements all point in one direction: to
the way DeLillo writes. He described his working habits as follows in 1993:
“When I was working on *The Names*, I devised a new method—new to me,
anyway. When I finished a paragraph, even a three line paragraph, I automati-
cally went to a fresh sheet of paper to start the new paragraph. No crowded
pages. This enabled me to see a given set of sentences more clearly. It made
rewriting easier and more effective. The white space on the page helped me
concentrate more deeply on what I’d written.”

Readers who have attended DeLillo’s public readings will have noted per-
haps that he sometimes reads from a stack of typed pages, which he turns at
irregular intervals. The audience sees it and the writer describes it, but the
typed page vanishes into the consecutive paragraphs in the printed pages of
books and magazines. DeLillo’s modular working method suggests physical
reasons for the compact organization of his literary prose, and particularly
that of the period following *The Names*, the writings of which he clearly fa-
vors (the same being implicitly true of the later short fiction). One can also
imagine the method extending to the interwoven narrative threads of *The
Body Artist*, wherein the sentences of the opening chapter appear cut from
two perspectives (those of Lauren and Rey), then reassembled into a single
narrative, as if DeLillo had not written one paragraph but spliced one sen-
tence per page only to later splice them into the published order.

By virtue of its brevity, however, the short story is not a form that would
seem to nurture extensive experiments with narrative form within a single
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piece (although one might argue that DeLillo’s recent shorter novels are his most technically accomplished in that regard). Critical readings of the matter are rare, however, a problem that is underscored by the economics of scholarly publishing. (Monograph-length studies of the short story are scarce, and increasingly so.) One might take the naïve view and argue that the short story speaks for itself and is therefore immune to elaborate critical evaluation. With respect to DeLillo, the lack of critical writings is surprising given the quality of the work in question. Of course, there is the matter of declining readerships to consider, too, as well as the ephemeral nature of the periodical: when the next issue is published, covers of the unsold copies are returned to the distributor and the remainder of each issue thrown away. Libraries, collectors, and the occasional second-hand shop offer sanctuary to what remains.

There exists nonetheless a rich history of humanistic inquiry in the study of the short story. As with the study of DeLillo’s short fiction, such criticism is often embedded within longer studies on literary prose. One important modern example is that offered by Georg Lukács, who mused on the short story in *The Theory of the Novel* (1920) as follows: “In the short story, the narrative form which pinpoints the strangeness and ambiguity of life, such lyricism [as that of the minor epic form] must entirely conceal itself behind the hard outlines of the event. . . . The short story is the most purely artistic form: it expresses the ultimate meaning of all artistic creation as mood, as the very sense and content of the creative process.”

Lukács’s quasi-romantic emphasis remains true, however, insofar as it stresses the subjectivity of the form. That subjectivity had its precedent in the historical distinction between “sketch” and “tale,” a division fundamental to understanding the development of literary fiction in the United States during the early nineteenth century. Jonathan Arac notes that the division is evident in the works of Washington Irving. In the sketch, Arac notes, “nothing happens . . . except for the verbal action of displaying to the reader something that the narrating voice considers of interest,” whereas “in the tale something does happen, often something rather remarkable.” Arac goes on to note that the sketch is aligned with the first-person narrative voice, the tale with the third person. The distinction is rarely absolute in modern fiction; even Irving combined the sketch with the tale in “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.” The legend is narrated in the first person, but as we learn from the fictional historian Diedrich Knickerbocker’s postscript, he heard it told at a public reading in New York City, from which he collected it (specifically referring to it
as a “tale”). The postscript is itself in the manner of a sketch, told in the first person, describing the context of the tale’s reading and a certain exchange between the storyteller (the implied narrator of the main tale) and a certain “cautious old gentleman,” in which nothing is concluded but which leaves the reader wondering as to poor Ichabod’s actual, as opposed to legendary, fate.

In narrative terms DeLillo’s stories are often divided between the first-person manner of the sketch and the third-person narration of the tale. The story “The Runner” (1988), in which a jogger sees a kidnapping, most clearly resembles the sketch by virtue of its brevity and the protagonist’s ambiguity regarding his initial reaction to one witness’s explanation of the event and his later falsified explanation of it to that same witness. “The Angel Esmeralda” most closely resembles a descendant of the “tale,” with its third-person voice, overt spiritualism, and detailed scrutiny of events. But DeLillo’s stories also distort these admittedly arbitrary distinctions, and at times they do so by experimenting with narration and perspective. “Midnight in Dostoevsky” is DeLillo’s story about two college students who imagine an elderly local man in their college town to be a spy defected or expelled (or perhaps not) from behind the Iron Curtain. The majority of the story, which is narrated in the pluralized first-person point of view (“we” is the story’s favored pronoun), stresses a shared atmosphere and inference until the final confrontation, which in the end disrupts the pronoun’s integrity. There is the intensely subjective first-person narration that typifies “The Starveling” and “Hammer and Sickle,” the latter being perhaps DeLillo’s most timely short story. It seems a microcosm, told from the point of view of an imprisoned father and financier, about the turbulent global capital markets after speculating banks destroyed them in 2008. “Hammer and Sickle” inhabits a terrain in between his earlier novel *Cosmopolis* (2003) and the ambiguous atmospheres of his short fiction, as a sketch in the form of a tale.

As noted earlier, critical analysis of DeLillo’s short fiction is scarce. The major volumes of collected criticism edited by Harold Bloom (2003) and Frank Lentricchia (1991) seldom mention it, and most often in passing. When a critic turns attention to the short fiction, the strategy is generally the same: it is regarded in those instances as a precursor to the novels, a shorthand way of introducing some feature that will appear in grander form therein. For example, Tim Engles uses two early short stories “Take the ‘A’ Train” (1962) and “Spaghetti and Meatballs” (1965) in an essay on individualism, white masculinity, and identity in DeLillo’s fiction. Stripping the stories of their ethnic context and language, Engles invokes Daniel Aaron’s arguments that refute the import of DeLillo’s Italian American roots as a key to understanding his works. Engles proceeds to disagree with Aaron’s claim and argue that while
DeLillo’s fiction stresses “individuals,” it does not necessarily renounce group affiliation. Rather, its focus is critical in nature: DeLillo’s characters complicate “the white authorial tendency to create autonomous, individual protagonists.” Josephine Gattuso Hendin uses the same two short stories to make a somewhat different case: that ethnicity, and in particular the renunciation of Italian American ethnicity, is a key feature of DeLillo’s novel *Underworld.* Astutely using Antonio Gramsci’s writings on *cultura negata* (or “negated folk culture”) to explain the dynamic, Hendin argues that DeLillo’s novel acts out a process of assimilation, a movement from “ethnicity” that typifies broader social movements of the postwar era, thereby resulting in another sort of group identity, one whose common ground is that of a lost, or self-negated, history whose traces are inscribed in the in the novel’s descriptions of “found art.”

In these two examples, we see how biographical criticism remains a flashpoint, and an extraordinarily generative one at that, in discussions of DeLillo’s fiction. In both cases, however, critics treat the short fiction as a passing curiosity, a sort of straw man that is used simultaneously to introduce an argument and to prefigure (even if by way of contrast) some later concern or feature of the novels. One finds this to be true even in discussions of later, “nonethnic” short fiction by DeLillo. With respect to the earlier fiction, a short story such as “The Uniforms” (1970) is used to prove DeLillo’s interest in cinema and introduce a novel or novels. Discussing a more recent story, DeLillo’s “Baader-Meinhoff” (2002), Linda S. Kauffman has noted that the story itself shares in the post-9/11 problematics of DeLillo’s New York fiction by drawing “parallels between German and American state repression [which] are never explicit, but never far from mind.” Kauffman’s excellent explanation of the story admits that its connection to 9/11 “is difficult to pin down,” a phrase that captures the difficulty that DeLillo’s stories pose to readers who seek to compare them with his novels.

Mark Osteen’s *American Magic and Dread* (2000) is comparable to Kauffman’s essay by virtue of the subtlety, insight, and scope with which it treats the short fiction. Osteen’s book contains one of the more extensive critical discussions of DeLillo’s short fiction. The first half of its first chapter is devoted to analysis of DeLillo’s early short fiction; occasional remarks on later stories appear in other sections. The book is also the most critical discussion of DeLillo’s short fiction insofar as it recognizes the serious designs of the works. As other critics have done, Osteen claims that the stories prefigure elements of later novels. Discussing DeLillo’s story “Coming Sun. Mon. Tues.” (1966), Osteen notes that it contains “hyperarticulate characters [who] exchange mini essays in tersely elegant prose.” He discusses
similarities between the novels and stories but also notes important differences in the manner in which DeLillo will engage the same topic in later novels. The most important feature of Osteen’s argument is drawn from the film director Jean-Luc Godard, whose “essayistic” films he cites as a source of inspiration (as well as content, as the story alludes to them) for DeLillo’s short stories. Continuing through extensive discussions of “Baghdad Towers West” (1968) and “The Uniforms” (1970), Osteen concludes that DeLillo’s stories raise critical questions “exploring the collusion between cinema and consumerism, [whereby] DeLillo questions the possibility of any truly radical filmmaking aesthetic. And by hammering new frames around these pretextual films, DeLillo presents advertisements for the future that turn the camera back upon novelists and image makers, as if to ask, ‘to what degree is our art just another consumer product?’”17 In this way, Osteen usefully describes how DeLillo used short fiction to elaborate, and sometimes refute, ideas that would appear in his later novels.

Generally speaking, critics who have written about DeLillo’s short fiction have focused on DeLillo’s earliest stories. These works, all of which were presumably written in the 1960s (the last of them, “The Uniforms,” was published in 1970), are generally privileged because critics claim that they offer “previews,” as Osteen calls them, of DeLillo’s later work. If we agree with Osteen’s formidable arguments, we risk conceding that privilege and thereby diminishing DeLillo’s talents as a writer of short fiction. As a result, we risk fusing the short fiction into the biographies of the novels in question. It is a sequence that erases precisely that which makes the stories unique: their mythic sense of time beyond time, what Trusller calls the “suspended” temporality of short fiction and what Boxall describes as the “unmeasured time” that would seem to carry over from the stories to DeLillo’s more recent short novels.

Patterns of development and elaboration are evident in DeLillo’s writings. Those patterns do extend from the stories to the novels, where at times they attain a more elaborate development in the latter form. As such, it is reasonable to regard DeLillo’s short stories as playing a role in the development of the longer novels but not only to celebrate the novels at the expense of the short fiction. Critics might instead reconsider how we privilege the novel as the key by which we explain his career. Reconsidering the privilege does not require reversing its priority so as to afford new status to the short fiction. We might instead keep in mind that DeLillo’s short stories and novels are distinct literary forms that travel in similar directions along parallel courses, the novels moving on a contemporaneous line, the stories in extemporaneous flight.
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