Don Delillo’s Point Omega:Ecstasy and Inertia in a Hyperreal World: A Baudrillardian Reading

Faeze Yegane (Corresponding author)
Department of English Language and Literature, Islamic Azad University, Central Tehran Branch, Iran
E-mail: faeze.yegane87@yahoo.com

Farid Parvaneh
Department of English Language and Literature, Islamic Azad University, Qom Branch, Iran

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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 ‘nepula’, 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 nth 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’ excessiveness 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.


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 detector 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 instantaneous 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.

References


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