If DeLillo was an E-Lit Writer: DeLillo's Language as Visual Art in the Digital Age

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DeLillo is a future-oriented writer with certain prophetic prowess. His novels constantly reflect on contemporary life and its future as one of his most important themes. David Foster Wallace describes him as "[t]he true prophet […] in U.S. fiction" (Wallace 47). Martin Amis comments on "DeLillo's predictive powers […] that the gods have equipped [him] with the antennae of a visionary." (Amis) In an interview, DeLillo agrees that "being active as a fiction writer propels one toward the future" (DeLillo). Apart from DeLillo's prophetic talent, his writing practice equips him with acute vision of the society and its tomorrow.

To some extent, writing is his way of seeing the future: his novels, through the interplay of images and language, construct a visualized space for the writer's observation and imagination. As a writer who simply does not email or own a mobile phone, DeLillo reserves a pure off-line space between his typewriter and iPad for artistic creation. In writing *Zero K*, DeLillo admits that he tries to "keep [the archival research] within strict limit": "The rest was pure imagination […] And, along with the perennial challenge of new work, there was an element of pleasure […] in exploring fresh territories." (Treisman) Writing is like a process of modelling to create a virtual reality of the unknown, and imagination helps expand the database for the models.

Writing is also his way of presenting this future: the pictorial space invites readers to spectate and feel, encouraging them to explore the many possibilities of seeing. In the Epilogue of his 1997 masterpiece *Underworld*, DeLillo imagines a cyberspace for his readers' exploration. Readers open the main page by simply clicking on the address "*http://blk.www/dd.com/ miraculum*" and view the two ending sections by keystroking the hyperlinked titles "Keystroke 1" and "Keystroke 2". When readers surf the web, the characters simultaneously enter the cyberspace and act out as online players in the virtual reality. For example, the characters from different social and historical communities are connected through the screens in the way of a nuclear chain reaction: "Shot after shot, bomb after bomb […] A click, a hit and Sister joins the other Edgar. A fellow celibate […] hyperlinked at last to

Sister Edgar—a single fluctuating impulse now, a piece of coded information […] Everything is connected in the end" (DeLillo 826). Sister Edgar and her namesake J. Edgar Hoover have their shared name encoded as the same piece of information, and their meeting is the result of a simple one-click search. Surprisingly enough here, DeLillo seems to forecast the prototype of today's social media networks such as Facebook and WeChat, in which everyone is connected to live as a virtual citizen of the cyberspace. What you need to be alive is to be "online".

This experimental "cyber" writing uses the web text as the medium of visual communication and shows DeLillo's attempt to challenge the traditional textuality by connecting his language to the Internet and displaying it through the computer screen. Actually, there has been a mid-90s web project called *White Noise on White Noise*, which, as many other digital generators, randomly selects from the original texts of the novel and presents the fragments of the text on hyperlinked pages, in order "to provide an experience akin to quickly browsing through the novel in a bookstore". By simulating a very traditional reading experience, this digital presentation of DeLillo's texts exemplifies an effective communication between the print and the digital. The co-existence of both forms in our digital ecology calls for more discussions that can bridge the traditional and the new, in the same way as the "digital humanities scholars [who] draw on the imagination of Jorge Luis Borges […] to analogise the internet's expanding and looping, infinite information structure" (Gander and Garland 204).

While DeLillo believes that novels will exist as a "flourishing" and "the most accommodating form" of art that "fit[s] in with this technological culture" (O'Connell) and continue to play an important role in the inevitable negotiation with the techno-future, especially in the age of megadata, he does admit that technology will inevitably change our traditional narrative aesthetics and reminds us of the changing texture of language on digital mediums:

> The question is whether the enormous force of technology, and its insistence on speeding up time and compacting space, will reduce the human need for narrative—narrative in the traditional sense. Novels will become user-generated. […] This shrinking context will necessarily change the language that people speak, write, and read. Here's a stray question (or a metaphysical leap): Will language have the same depth and richness in electronic form that it can reach on the printed page? Does the beauty and variability of our language depend to an important degree on the medium that carries the words? Does poetry need paper? (Begley 107)

I quote DeLillo's interview here at such length not only because he has a good insight into the future of novels, but also to highlight his question on the medium of language as a productive topic for my following arguments. As a writer, DeLillo is highly intuitive in pointing out the subtle changes of language in the digital era. Just as Hayles suggests that "[l]anguage comes to

media not all at once but in fits and starts as technologies develop and practitioners discover—and create—the medium's specificity," the evolution of paperlessness in literature is never a one-off conversion from printed books to e-books. (Hayles) Instead, language is shaped by the electronic environment through a complicated "physicochemical" process of reaction, and the media DeLillo refers to are more likely to be the user-oriented networks, instead of the specific devices or file formats. The electronic form of language means it can not only be hyperlinked, deleted, or coloured through computer programming, but also, and more importantly, be constantly influenced by digital platforms.

Electronic literature (digital literature, or born-digital literature) is a product of our digital culture. Hayles provides the most widely used definition that electronic literature is "a first-generation digital object created on a computer and (usually) meant to be read on a computer" (Hayles 3). It is different from the simply digitalized print literature and can take various forms such as hypertexts, literary games and digital poetries through algorithm and computation. Of course, the "computer" here can now be expanded to any digital devices such as iPad, smartphones or even smart watches if you will. One feature of electronic literature is its multimedia platform that covers the whole creation as well as the reading process. The images, sounds and texts all exist in the artworks as data, creating a digital space to accommodate various forms of artistic elements and to provide more freedom and flexibility for the interaction between the digital contents and readers.

Although Hayles believes in the bright future of digital literature in "the 21st century canon", she insists that the print literature is and will be another essential component "of a complex and dynamic media ecology", in which "print and electronic textuality deeply interpenetrate one another" (Hayles 86). In a similar manner, I understand DeLillo's writings as the ecology of language recycling, in which the impact on writings from past technology is still significant. DeLillo's work on the manual typewriter may seem conventional, and the Olympia typewriter will never make him a real e-lit writer, his language art is nevertheless experimental.

To DeLillo, language is a kind of visual art that is not only to be read, but also to be looked at. Dewey describes DeLillo's immersive experiments with language from the aspect of its physical features: "he is a consummate stylist, engaged by his own admission in mastering the technology of language itself […] He even works on a manual typewriter, relishing the physical imposition of ink onto paper and the accumulating drift of drafts." (Dewey) Outside his fictional worlds, DeLillo performs his own visual art with sentences and words as what other visual artists do. He sees the construction of sentences as the basis of his writing career: "the basic work is built around the sentence. This is what I mean when I call myself a writer" (Begley 91). His exploration of the changing textures and shapes of language is a performance art that recycles the typewriter, the past technology, by recreating more possibilities for his fictions.

DeLillo's seventh novel *The Names* (1982) foregrounds language. The narrator-protagonist, James Axton, a former American freelance writer, lives alone in Athens as a risk analyst in Greece. His estranged wife Kathryn lives with their son Tap on a fictional island called Kouros and volunteers in an archaeological work under the leadership of the archaeologist Owen Brademas. The main plot is closely related to language: A group of cultists called "The Names" or "Abecedarians" commit murders by matching the initials of the innocent victims' names to those of the place names where the murders occur. To unlock the secrets behind the murders, James, Owen and the independent filmmaker Frank Volterra separately start their trips to some of the oldest cities in Greece, Pakistan, Jordan, Turkey, Egypt, Jerusalem (Israel/Palestine) and India, to investigate the cult and their *modus operandi*. In the following sections, I will explore the possibility of viewing DeLillo's language as visual art in *The Names* and examine whether his practice shares any affinity with some digital literary works.

Language as Computer-Generated Images

In *The Names*, the multilingual setting of the novel provides opportunities for the characters to interact with new languages. Each encounter with a foreign language, as DeLillo describes, is an experience to become "the child again, made to learn a language, to think in lists" (DeLillo, 284). The only child character Tap, however, plays the role of a language expert: his experience of naturally interacting with languages can be very instructive. In an interview, DeLillo expresses his idea that children are more talented in exploring the primitiveness of "nature": "I think we feel, perhaps superstitiously, that children have a direct route to, have direct contact to the kind of natural truth that eludes us as adults." (DeCurtis 302) As Cowart comments, "for DeLillo, then, children are close to the perhaps redemptive mystery of language" (Cowart 178).

As a confident learner and user of languages, Tap explores a new language by playing with it outside the established grammatical system. For example, he learns Ob "as a kind of substitute Greek or counter-Greek" by "inserting o-b in certain parts of words": the Ob of "good night" is "gobood nobight" (*The Names* 11, 42, 22). He makes up Ob as his own rule in the language game, so that learning Greek becomes a playable renovation of the fully developed language system. Greek is to him an open and convertible language gathering, to which new linguistic elements can always be added. His proficiency in Ob shows his flexible and creative use of languages.

A more important role of this precocious nine-year-old boy is the writer of a non-fiction. However, in his parents' eyes, Tap is an "unqualified" writer who makes too many mistakes in writing. For example, James considers that his son is only "scribbling" (*The Names* 8). In Kathryn's words, "[Tap] absolutely collides with the language [and] the spelling is atrocious" (*The*

Names 33). Different from these characters, DeLillo sees a huge success in the boy's "scribbling". In Giaimo's view, DeLillo makes the name "Tap" as a pun "on the tapping of the writer's keyboard, uniting signifier and signifier as both the product and process of writing." (Giaimo 78) In his letter to David Foster Wallace, DeLillo expresses the gratification he gets from using a manual typewriter: "finger striking key, hammer striking page […] a gratification I try to soak my prose in." (DeLillo 1) The name "Tap", in this sense, describes an ideal state to be a writer who works on a typewriter, and the boy's misspellings are nothing else but the typos that are easily made as a natural part of writing.

Tap's non-fiction appears in the novel's last chapter as "The Prairie", which is regarded "as a thematic microcosm for the rest of the novel [that] satisf[ies] expression of feeling through intuition rather than reason." (Bryant 16-17) As the boy becomes the co-author of *The Names*, the novel forms a kind of metafiction, and Tap's creation process as a full sensory experience satisfies DeLillo's gratification of tapping out a prose on a keyboard and enjoying the freedom of writing. Tap's intuitive assembling of letters, words and sentences is similar to the functions of digital literature generators: while the linguistic segments are transformed to data sets, language becomes the images of the generated free flow of data.

A typical example of this is Nick Montfort and Stephanie Strickland's poetry generator *Sea and Spar Between* (2010), which can be read as a mega-poem with around 225 trillion stanzas. The words used to assemble the poem are selected from Emily Dickinson's poems and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851). Although readers can navigate the stanzas according to the unique latitude and longitude or simply by clicking the mouse or scrolling the wheel, they will never have the chance to read the complete stanzas. According to the two artists, this work "defines a space of language populated by a number of stanzas comparable to the number of fish in the sea." (Montfort and Strickland) The poem is almost infinite as the sea and the stanzas are as many as fish. Against the ocean blue interface, every stanza even seems to me to resemble the shape of fish. Exploring the poem, readers experience great freedom by swimming in the oceanic space of language.

This mega-poem shows its sublime in the endless possibilities of language combination. In the same way, Tap's misrenderings show his "freedom-seeking" nature of writing (*The Names* 313). In Paula Bryant's words, the boy's work demonstrates "the potential for human freedom inherent in the deliberate disordering and recreation of language". (Bryant 16-17) DeLillo clearly understands the danger of language as a system and its capacity to control and contain things. Wittgenstein's famous argument "[t]he limits of my language mean the limits of my world" expresses the same conflict between the expressible and inexpressible. (Wittgenstein 68) The systematic language imposes orders on things and can possibly lead to the inertia of

thinking. What Tap achieves in the deliberate disordering of language is to explore the possibility of liberating the world from the various systems, which is in line with DeLillo's pursuit of "automatic writing" (Begley 90). In a 1993 interview, DeLillo explains: "you want to let go […] The best moments involve a loss of control. It's a kind of rapture" (Begley 90). The loss of control is enjoyable because it enables writers to create outside the pre-existed structure of language. Only by letting go of this control and walking out of the comfort zone can we capture the real "rapture" from artistic creation. Tap's use of language and the poetry generators all illustrate writing as a free flow of data, with great potential as an art for the future.

Language is also visually presented as a part of the natural landscape. Tap's Ob language and the nonfiction are both inspired by another character, the archaeologist Owen Brademas, whose initials happen to be "O" and "B". As the prototype of Tap's protagonist, Owen is an explorer of language. In his observation of the longest Sanskrit epic poem, he understands that this language art is also created in the life scene of people and nature: "The epic material had to refine itself in these delicate aquarelles" (*The Names* 278). He tries to appreciate the beauty of the epic through the view rather than the text itself: the carved stone of the poem makes him recognize that it is not for interpretation but for reading as a pure visual experience. A very similar example is the boustrophedon presentation of the code of law carved in a Dorian dialect on a stone wall, which mimics the way the ox "turns" and "plows" from left to right and continues from right to left in the next line. To Owen, boustrophedon is more suitable for reading because it is closer to what the world really looks like.

This pictorial feature of language in nature is echoed in Chen Qianxun's new media artwork *Shan Shui* (2014), which is a computer program that automatically generates Chinese Wujue poems (quatrains with five syllables per line) and corresponding classical Shan ("山", mountain) Shui ("水", water) paintings with every click on the page. Checking the source code of the artwork, we can find that the poems are generated through the permutation and combination of 38 Chinese characters and words according to some fixed tone patterns. Every reordering of these characters and words intelligently depicts a meaningful Shan Shui painting. In this way, the calligraphy of the poems in the top-right corner is superimposed on the paintings and becomes an inseparable part of the background image. Different from *Sea and Spar Between*, this generator highlights the relationship between language and image by visualizing the poems as a part of the natural landscape. Both Owen's observation and Qianxun's practice show the "reshapable" feature of language as inscriptions or drawings through the very expressive shapes and patterns of the letters. While Owen sees the epic poem and its aquarelle-like backdrop as an integral whole, Qianxun's work presents this panoramic view as an interactive flash work, using the platform provided by digital technology.

The Materiality of Language

In his letter to David Foster Wallace, DeLillo explains his habit of working on a manual typewriter: "The reason I use a manual typewriter […] concerns the sculptural quality I find in words on paper, the architecture of the letters individually and in combination." (DeLillo 1) DeLillo expresses his interest in the form of language from a flat surface to a three-dimensional space. In *The Name*s, the sculptural quality of language exists in the ruins of inscriptions on the blocks in Qasr Hallabat. In history, the new dynasty Umayyads used these blocks and stones as building materials without considering any writings on them. Different from many archaeologists who strive to match the blocks to place the inscriptions back to the original order, Owen is overwhelmed by the beauty of the reordered letters and words as anagrams:

> The castle, the stones, the inscriptions is situated midway between Zarqa and Azraq […] these names are seen at once to be anagrams […] this evocative botched ruin, lay between perfect twin pillars—place-names with the same set of letters, rearranged. And it was precisely a rearrangement, a reordering, that was in progress at Qasr Hallabat […] The mind's little infinite, he called all this. (*The Names* 78)

In the ruins, the order of the letters or words of the inscriptions are "totally upset" (*The Names* 76). Some carved stones are even covered with plaster. This scene, however, does not disappoint Owen, who describes his finding of these blocks of letters as "mysterious" and "strange" but meanwhile important and "reawakening" (*The Names* 35, 36). He is deeply amazed by the recreated place-names, not only because the free rearrangements of the letters give meanings to the new city and its people, but also because they suggest how language is integrated with the changeable environment. The blocks of the characters show their physical feature as the objects of different shapes, colours and textures: "fire-hardened clay, dense black basalt, marble with a ferrous content. These things I lay my hands against, feel where the words have been cut. And the eye takes in those beautiful shapes" (*The Names* 35).

Screen (2003) is such a digital simulation of what Owen experiences in Qasr Hallabat. As one of the co-founders of the Electronic Literature Organization, the postmodern novelist Robert Coover invites writers to create digital literary works in the CAVE (Cave Automatic Virtual Environment) at Brown University. *Screen* is one of their collaborative works that allows the readers to bodily interact with the text and words in a surrounding virtual environment. At the beginning of the work, readers are given a three-walls' reading task until suddenly the displayed words start to peel away. To prevent the words from falling to the floor, readers are encouraged to hit them back onto the wall to preserve the semantic integrity of the text. However, the work is designed to simulate a frustrating reading experience. Some of the hit words do not always return to the original place and contribute to a

randomly-formed new text. Failure turns out to be the only ending option of the work: the peeling of the words gets faster and faster until the readers can no longer catch, leaving the CAVE a ruin of words in broken pieces.

Screen reminds its readers that the conventional evaluation of letters is not always practical. In Alan Golding's discussion on the "material features of the print and digital environments", he points out that "new media poetries […imagine…] language in all its textual and material variety […] from nonalphabetic, glyph-like designs to hand-produced letter-like drawings to barely legible palimpsests to simple pen strokes", and this materiality of words "seem[s] crucial to thinking about new media poetries" (Golding 252). It is true that digital platforms provide new possibilities for people to re-evaluate language that it is not only visual, but also material. The changing textures of words, as displayed in *Screen* and other new media artworks, reveal the unstable existence of language and indicate a dramatic change to the traditional methods of reading. As the strangely reordered blocks, the peeling words subvert the readers' understanding of letters and invite reflections upon how to unchain ourselves from the accustomed view of language and how to prepare for a dynamic interaction with the fleeting words.

Its bodily interaction with the text provides a multi-sensory reading experience that the readers are able to feel, touch and play with language, although, due to the loss and resemblances of the semantic units, the text is not always readable. As Gander and Sarah Garland observe, the "multi-sensory […] aesthetic experience […] push the established boundaries of symbolic systems" (Gander and Garland). In a similar manner, the unreadability of *Screen* can be the result of the multi-sensory interaction: the readers are driven out of their comfort zone: they are overwhelmed by the feeling of urgency, helplessness, anxiety and panic while bodily responding to the constant collapse of the text. Unlike some new media artworks to be viewed and played within the interfaces of touchscreens, *Screen* creates a more traditional virtual reality that encourages full bodily participation. More importantly, their reaction to the moving letters is itself a way of interpretation, a test of the readability, or, a hermeneutic process. The tiredness, as the real physical reaction to the artwork, clearly tells the readers the limits of their reading experience.

The installation artwork *Text Rain* (1999) is another example that allows readers to interact with language by imagining language as material. Developed by Camile Utterback and Romy Achituv, this work makes texts falling on the screen. The readers can participate by moving in front of the screen, catching the raindrop-like letters with their bodies. The letters float and randomly group together and generate a poetic line on the theme of the body and rain, although most lines may not be grammatically and semantically acceptable. This work resembles *Screen* that both encourages the readers' physical participation in the virtual interaction with language.

Besides the interactive ways of viewing, both digital works emphasize the fragility of language, although in a less aggressive way in *Text Rain*. As the ruins of blocks in *The Names*, language is so easily destroyed and reordered as its embodiment of bricks and raindrops in the process of reification. The broken letters from the peeling walls and the fragmentary text in *Screen* represent the ruins of language in a virtual reality; The raindrop-like letters move as the free flow of water to any place whenever the obstacles are removed and shows the unstable existence of language in the material world. While the novel and the electronic artworks all view language as a fragile object, the latter works benefit from the digital platform and can thus simulate the two situations where the readers actively and passively play with language outside its original semantic frame. In this sense, the digital works present the instability of language through the readers' ability and inability to intervene in language's natural connection to the material world. In James's trip to Damascus, one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, he realizes how letters are fully shaped by the society it serves:

> I saw writing everywhere, the cursive beaded slant in tile, tapestry, brass and wood, in faience mosaics and on the white veils of women crowded in a horse-drawn cart. I looked up to see words turning corners, arranged geometrically on mud-brick walls, knotted and mazed, stuccoed, painted, inlaid, climbing gateways and minarets […] Even writing was design, not meant to be read, as though part of some unbearable revelation. I didn't know the names of things. (*The Names* 137, 138)

Here, DeLillo presents a visual world of letters to show how language subtly connects to every perspective of human society. Being used as the design of various living materials, language no longer needs to be "read". As language migrates from books to the public living space, we see the visualized characters being "taken out of nature" and resuming their lives as vine type plants (*The Names* 137, 138). By "turning corners" and "climbing gateways" with its coexistent human activities, language is alive outside its semantic construction. It is noticeable that these daily necessities, such as tapestry and brass, become the drawing boards for the paintings of letters and words in decorative patterns.

Perhaps Maltby's words can best conclude our discussion here: "[*The Names*] suggests that the visionary power of language will only be restored when we "tap" into its primal or pristine forms, the forms that can regenerate perception, that can *reveal* human existence in significant ways." (Maltby 263) DeLillo not only suggests in his novel more possible ways to view language as the free flow of data and as part of the natural or social landscape, but also reminds his readers of its visible and invisible textuality beyond printed books. The society, including the cyber-society, is the home of language, from which we regenerate our perception of it as a more powerful existence than what we may imagine. More importantly, DeLillo's imaginative

interaction with language reminds us of our own existence in the world. This is the reason why DeLillo, in the ending part of the novel, encourages us to be grateful to language and "bring [it] to the temple" as "our offering" (*The Names* 331).

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