Chapter 4
Pendulum of Consciousness: *Point Omega*

Published in 2010, *Point Omega*, DeLillo’s a short classic novel, is quite unlike his epic novels like *Underworld* and *Mao II* in terms of its size. The novel has a small number of characters who move about in situations contemplating on metaphysical subjects such as the meaning of “true life”, extinction, consciousness, relationship between perception and reality, and time and space. Apparently, the novel is set in a post 9/11 America, but it aims to investigate the metaphysical issues instead of grappling with the prevalent themes of consumerism, terrorism, global capitalism etc, as found in his earlier novels like, *White Noise* (1985), *Underworld* (1991) and *Mao II* (1993). The plot of the novel moves slowly to the extent that it becomes an anti-thriller. While praising the novel for its techniques and the author for entering a new phase in his career of writing, James Ladun comments:

*Point Omega* is much about lateness: late life, late empire, hindsight, dread, disappearance. It is also something of an object lesson in the method of late-phase literature in general, where the high gloss productions of the imagination in full spate give way to the sparer, stonier art of suggestion and juxtaposition. The idea is to shift some of the work from the maker to the consumer: to prompt reflections of a garden rather than create a full-colour garden on the page. (web)

DeLillo categorically avoids articulating cause and effect of the events that take place in the novel and leaves it on the readers to assume and speculate about them. Thus the involvement of the readers is induced by the writer as the novel unfolds. This speculative method forges a way where meanings that interplay in a novel like *Point Omega* remain open.

The slow movement of plot bolsters DeLillo’s attempt to explore more on the themes of time, space and consciousness. It also suits to the motive of revealing more during the slow process of watching things when time seems to slow down as compared to mere seeing those things when time seems to move at apparently normal speed. The slow pace of the novel reflects in its sentences as well, that are pithy and sparse. While Michiko Kakutani, in response to DeLillo’s inventive minimalistic style
in *Point Omega*, criticizes his choice of “sparse, etiolated, almost Beckettian prose,” Abeer Fahim finds that DeLillo’s simple use of language accentuates the central theme of the novel and adds to itself the “immediacy and intensity of the texts” (“Objectification” 116). It is DeLillo’s choice of sparse language and scenes of prolonged slow motion of the video work that draw attention not only to the act of seeing but also to the act of being conscious of seeing (Fahim 116). It is the slow-paced narrative movement and contemplative paragraphs that offer a meditative mood to the novel and become an exposition on philosophy and aesthetics.

The time reference, “2006, Late Summer, Early Fall,” right at the beginning of the novel, is not only suggestive of the time sequence of the novel but also of the time when DeLillo visited New York’s Museum of Modern Art, and watched Douglas Gordon’s video-work, *24 Hour Psycho*, that inspired this novel. The experience of Don DeLillo’s visit to the museum is reflected in the below quoted extract of an interview. He said:

> I walked into the museum . . . and there was this video about which I knew virtually nothing. But I found it oddly compelling. You were looking at a screen on which practically nothing happens. And as I looked I saw that there was something in here about time and mortality. . . . The idea of time and motion and the question of what we see, what we miss when we look at things in a conventional manner—all that seemed very inviting to me to think about.

In the same interview he defined his recent fiction as more focused on philosophical themes such as the subject of time.

*24 Hour Psycho*, first installed in 1993, is a slowed down and soundless version of Alfred Hitchcock’s memorable black and white movie, *Psycho*. The video-work of Scottish artist, Douglas Gordon slows down Hitchcock’s thriller to the pace of two frames per second so that the movie completes a 24 hour cycle. DeLillo introduces the video-work of Gordon in the prologue and unresolved epilogue of the novel titled as, “Anonymous” and “Anonymous 2” that take place on September 3 and September 4, respectively. In the novel, he illustrates the ways of thinking that he has been doing since *Underworld* and offers pure experiment with the concept of time and consciousness, and structure of novel, sacrificing the narrative to stagnant realm of
abstract concepts. The slow-paced narrative of the video-work and the text wakes up the reader towards more watchfulness and see unseen hidden within the frames of the video-work as well as the text itself. Gordon’s 24 Hour Psycho evokes critical ways of thinking about perception and consciousness in liaison with time and image. The course of action takes place in two distinctly diverse milieus: a cold dark gallery, where the slowed down version of the movie is being played and a desert in which time and space are creatively presented to operate in a much different and strange way as compared to the life in a city. The exhibition of the slowed down version of Hitchcock’s Psycho and the experience of the characters in the desert to perceive the time slowly suggest that the temporal experience of the gallery and the desert remains the same. The cold dark gallery and the hot expansive desert become synonymous with the zones of meditation and contemplation for the viewers and the characters, respectively.

The prologue and the unresolved epilogue are written in the third person, and are set in the cold dark gallery of the Museum of Modern Art, where an unnamed, mysterious, and lonesome character “the man at the wall” (4) is watching the conceptual art piece, 24 Hour Psycho intently. DeLillo describes the gallery thus:

There was a man standing against the north wall, barely visible. People entered in twos and threes and they stood in the dark and looked at the screen and then they left. Sometimes they hardly moved past the doorway, larger groups wandering in, tourists in a daze, and they looked and shifted their weight and then they left.

There were no seats in the gallery. The screen was free-standing, about ten by fourteen feet, not elevated, placed in the middle of the room. It was a translucent screen and some people, a few, remained long enough to drift to the other side. They stayed a moment longer and then they left.

The gallery was cold and lighted only the faint gray shimmer on the screen. Back by the north wall the darkness was nearly complete and the man standing alone moved a hand toward his face, repeating, ever so slowly, the action of a figure on the screen. When the gallery door slid open and people entered, there was a glancing light from the area
beyond, where others were gathered, at some distance, browsing the art books and postcards.

The film ran without dialogue or music, no soundtrack at all. (3-4)

There are various observations made by the narrator regarding the video-work that can be read as a separate narrative in the novel. After a while, though only for ten minutes, two more unnamed characters, visit the gallery, which afterward, in the novel, becomes clear are, Richard Elster, a 73 year old military intellectual and retired war planner at the Pentagon who had helped executing the Iraq war, and Jim Finley, an amateur filmmaker. The central part of the novel which is sandwiched between “Anonymity” and “Anonymity 2” consists of four chapters and forms the main action of the novel. This section of the novel takes place in the desert of California, in a desolated house, where Richard Elster holes in. He calls it as “a spiritual retreat,” (29) from the maddening cacophony of city life. The place where Richard lives is “a sad hybrid. There was a corrugated metal roof above a clapboard exterior with an unfinished stonework path out front and a tacked-on deck jutting from one side. This is where we sat through his hushed hour, a torchlit sky, the closeness of hills barely visible at high white noon” (23). Elster hopes to exchange his sense of time for existential time, i.e., his lived time. Jim Finley, who hopes to rope in Elster for a documentary on his experience in Iraq war, a single take film as memory and history, joins him after a few days. Elster keeps stalling Finley’s proposal and rather spends time with him by sharing his reflections on time, extinction and French paleontologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s concept, ‘Omega Point.’ The novel has a non-chronicle sequence—beginning from the gallery on September 3, to the days that follow in the desert and then again back to the gallery on September 4 and also possesses a variation in the identities of the narrator—third person, in the prologue and epilogue, and first person in the central piece of the novel. Besides, the split into two spaces—the claustrophobic art gallery and spacious deserts of California enables DeLillo to expound the concepts of consciousness, space and experience of time through the course of the novel. The conventionally perceived relationship between time and space is completely altered both in the art gallery and the desert.

After a few days of their stay in the desert, Elster’s daughter, Jessie arrives. Her stay brings a kind of comfort to both the men, especially Finley, who has
otherwise been counting his days in the forlorn desert. But just like her unexpected visit she disappears suddenly. All her belongings are left behind and there seems to be no trace of her despite their vigorous efforts to find her. The plot moves lethargically and even Jessie’s mysterious disappearance does not help the plot to pace up. The men finally give up and leave the desert for New York, leaving the readers wondering about the whereabouts of Jessie. Third section of the novel, titled as “Anonymity 2,” takes the readers back in past, to the gallery on the next day, i.e., on September 4, where, Elster’s emotionally detached daughter, Jessie visits the museum after learning about it from her father. She gets into conversation with “the man against the wall” with whom she presumably develops a romantic relationship subsequently. Since Jessie’s mother does not approve of her relationship with “the man against the wall,” who she thinks is named as Dennis, she sends Jessie to live with her father in Mojave Desert of California.

As a masterpiece that contemplates the interrelationship between time and human consciousness, Point Omega suggests that the alteration in conventional way of seeing things lead to an altered state of consciousness. It investigates into the metaphysical concepts of time and consciousness through the prism of ekphrasis. In Falling Man, DeLillo uses the still life paintings of the Italian painter, Giorgio Morandi to make the internal life of the observers visible. In Point Omega, he employs the conceptual artwork of Gordon, 24 Hour Psycho as ekphrastic object, instead of a painting. Conceptual art is a movement that triumphs ideas or concepts over the formal or visual components, the traditional aesthetic and material concerns of art work. American artist Sol LeWitt, while communicating his definition in the article “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art”, which also happens to be the maiden definition emerged in print, writes: “In conceptual art the idea/concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art” ( ).

In Point Omega, DeLillo launches the conceptual artwork, 24 Hour Psycho as an ekphrastic object to achieve what Murray Krieger sees as something “to freeze (discourse) during its indulgence in spacial exploration” (7). In other words, Krieger believes that ekphrasis aims to involve in the process of slowing down the temporal progression of a text. This facet of ekphrasis is elaborately defined by Sarah J.
Paulson and Anders Skare Malvik in their book, *Literature in Contemporary Media Culture: Technology - Subjectivity- Aesthetics*. Calling this temporal aspect of ekphrasis as the poetics of deceleration the authors assert that,

Deceleration (is a virtue since it) provides ample textual space for the image to unfold in the consciousness of the readers, a contemplative space that they may accommodate and internalize more acutely than the more fragmented spaces of film narrative or more speeded up prose forms. In addition, by temporarily suspending the progression of the literary trajectory to dwell on the image, however, linguistically mediated, the text gets immersed in the visual and becomes in a certain sense not only a multimodal or hybrid entity, but actually a form of visuality itself. (227)

The poetics of deceleration is put forward in *Point Omega* twice—in “Anonymity” and “Anonymity 2” thus expounding the complex relationship amongst word, image, space and time. The flexibility of time highlighted with the introduction of Douglas’ conceptual art in the novel seems to suggest feasibility of careful watchfulness and genuine understanding. Only with the slow paced perception of time one can understand the events evolving. The narrator highlights the technical significance of slowing down of time through the consciousness of Anthony Perkins thus:

> The nature of the film permitted total concentration and also depended on it. The film’s merciless pacing had no meaning without a corresponding watchfulness, the individual whose absolute alertness did not betray what was demanded. . . In the time it took for Anthony Perkins to turn his head, there seemed to flow an array of ideas involving science and philosophy and nameless other things, or maybe he was seeing too much. But it was impossible to see too much. The less there was to see, the harder he looked the more he saw. This was the point. To see what’s here, finally to look and to know you’re looking, to feel time passing, to be alive to what is happening in the smallest registers of motion. (6-7)

The above quoted text suggests that a great effort, focus and concentration are required to reach the interstices of everyday phenomenal happenings around us.
DeLillo seems to compare the shallow and mundane reality of everyday life with the pure time offered by the experience at the museum. The conceptual art, *24 Hour Psycho*, opens the portal of sublime experience for a critical reader as he/she finds the rupture in the accustomed flow of time that reveals too much which one is bound to miss otherwise. Such an experience has a tremendous effect on the observer’s consciousness as well. The close watchfulness, total concentration and absolutely keen perception prompted by the video-work propound an experience of pure consciousness. In his obsessive reassessing of the video-work, the anonymous man also hints at the inability of the humans to comprehend what Elster would later on call “the true life,” (21) underneath mundane moments of everyday time. Elster, too, is enthralled by the cosmological slowness of Gordon’s film. The conversation between Finley and Jessie at the retreat in the desert reveals Elster’s reaction on watching the artwork:

I took your father to a movie once. Called *24 Hour Psycho*. Not a movie but a conceptual art piece. The old Hitchcock film projected so slowly it takes twenty-four hours to screen the whole thing.

He told me.

What did he tell you?

He told me it was like watching the universe die over a period of about a seven billion years.

We were there ten minutes.

He said it was like the contraction of the universe.

The man thinks on a cosmic scale. We know this. (59)

What the anonymous man experiences in the gallery is similar to what Elster experiences in the desert. The anonymous man wants the film move even more slowly so that his eyes and mind are completely involved in the process of careful watchfulness. He wants “to bathe in the tempo, in the near static rhythm of the image . . . he wanted complete immersion…” (146). Similarly Elster’s familiarity with the desert as a meditative zone, isolated from all the connections, draws him completely towards it; he feels “the desert more than [he] see[s] it” (30). He sees beyond the
physical dimensions right into the feelings “that deepen over time. That’s the other word, time” (24).

The time has been variously conceptualized by several philosophers and physicists from Plato and Aristotle to Newton, to Einstein and Bergson. Time has broadly been distinguished as mathematical or absolute and physical or relative. Aristotle defines time as “a number of motions in respect to before and after” (Physics 219 b2). It must be noted here that Aristotle doesn’t imply that time is motion or change or movement itself, but rather a number of motions or changes or movements thereby, making it a function of motion. Time remains subordinated to movement in such hypothesis as time is perceived as a movement by which one can quantitatively (numerically) estimate qualitative modifications of something that experiences change. In other words, the multiplicity of movements implied a multiplicity of times, which led him to the conclusion that there must be something immobile or invariant outside of movement (or at least a most perfect movement) that could function as a metric by which all other movements could be measured. In the Timaeus, Plato had concluded that time was “a moving image of eternity” (Timaeus, 37d). Hence, both these philosophers perceived that time is subordinated to eternity or some perfect movement. Time was tracked by the reliable and constant circular movement of the sun, and thus, was perceived as absolute and mathematical. In the mechanism of physics, however, when need of the calendars to be revised arrived, the distinction between mathematical time and physical time became apparent. Eighteenth century physicist, Isaac Newton recorded the clear break between the two. He noted that:

[The common people conceive those quantities under no other notion but from the relation they bear to sensible objects. And thence arise certain prejudices, for the removing of which it will be convenient to distinguish them into absolute and relative, true and apparent, mathematical and common. Absolute, true, and mathematical time, of itself, and from its own nature, flows equably without relation to anything external, and by another name is called duration: relative, apparent, and common time, is some sensible and external (whether accurate or unequable) measure of duration by the means of motion, which is commonly used instead of true time; such as an hour, a day, a month, a year. (88)
While Newton’s definition perceived mathematical time as absolute “without any relation to anything external,” (88) physical time is the one in which all times are relative in the actual flow of events. The philosophy of absolute time was debunked by 20th century physicist, Albert Einstein. In his theory of relativity which he developed against the concept of absolute time in his short paper “Relativity: The Special and the General Theory”, and later published as a book in 1916, Einstein perceived time either as fast or slow in relation to each other. Then there were philosophers like Henri-Louis Bergson who dwelt on time as subjective and perceived it in relation to the consciousness of a person. He distinguishes time as we experience it also called as lived time or real duration and mechanistic time of science or clock time or abstract time in his book Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness in 1920. He understood real time or duree in relation to consciousness. Bergson proposed that time cannot be measured mathematically or scientifically because the moment one attempts to measure the “now,” it would be gone. By seeking to measure “now,” one seeks to measure something as immobile, and complete, whereas time is mobile and incomplete. For the individual, time may speed up or slow down, depending upon one’s state of mind. Hence Bergson decided to explore the inner life of man, which is a kind of duration, neither a unity nor a quantitative multiplicity. He contended that real time possesses an ineffable quality of not being able to be measured by human perception.

In the narrative of Point Omega as well as in that of 24 Hour Psycho, Henri Bergson’s subjective experience of time is reasonably apparent. Bergson claims that time is perceived through a series of separate and disconnected spatial constructs—just as seeing a film. One feels that one is seeing an uninterrupted flow of movement but essentially what one sees is a series of fixed images and stills. This is exactly what the anonymous man sees in the gallery—a series of frames, rather than an uninterrupted flow of movements. Cinema like Gordon’s 24 Hour Psycho provides an opportunity, a tool to perceive real time whereby the anonymous man creates an “ideal world” (10) in his mind and clears the otherwise clouded human consciousness. He feels that,

…the pace was paradoxically real, bodies moving musically, barely moving, twelve-tone, things barely happening, cause and effect so
drastically drawn apart that it seemed real to him, the way all the things in the physical world that we don’t understand are said to be real. (18)

DeLillo seems to put across the idea that consciousness and the existential time, the lived time of an observer are interrelated and hence change in any one of them would cause the change in another. What happens in the gallery suggests that time and consciousness are entwined with the close observation of movement—the slightest camera movement produced the profound shift in time and space for the anonymous man. This is what Bergson terms as pure duration, “the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself live, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states” (100). Drawing upon Bergson’s theory of abstract time, Deleuze explains that the concrete time is that which is condensed to an abstraction, a pattern, reflected on a watch but since the human mind is conditioned to move by the watch, the concrete experience is lost. This real time is experienced both by Elster and the anonymous man in 24 Hour Psycho, something which are pure conscious moments. This is what Elster distinguishes as ‘true’ life that cannot be reduced to either language or discourse. He says “The true life takes place when we’re alone, thinking, feeling, lost in memory, dreamingly self-aware, the submicroscopic moments... His life happened...when he sat staring at a blank wall, thinking about dinner” (21).

Deleuze further developed his theory on time in his philosophy on cinema which presented the possibility for critical thinking. The reason he enjoins a popular medium like cinema with philosophy is because cinema became an integral part of modern life, and philosophy, argues Deleuze, must remain open to life. He observes that it is only with cinema that a mode of ‘seeing’ is possible that is not attached to the human eye and that cinema offers “a percept: a reception of data that is not located in a subject” (Colebrook 30). Cinema offers a series of images freed from the human eye. Deleuze contends that “from the point of view of the human eye, montage is undoubtedly a construction, from the point of view of another eye, it ceases to be one; it is the purest vision of a non-human eye, of an eye which would be in things” (81). He elaborates his views on cinema in his books Cinema I: The Movement-Image and Cinema II: The Time-Image. In these two books he distinguishes between the movement image and the time image. Just like in the Greek understanding of time which concluded that time was subordinated to movement; the cinematic tradition of
movement image only gives the direct expression of movement and presents time indirectly. In the years post-World War II, cinema experienced the transition from the movement image to the time image reflecting apposite articulation of the lately developed philosophy of time independent of movement. Through time image, Deleuze propounds that “time produces movements, but the error has been to derive time from movements. Through affect art restores time’s disruptive power. We no longer see life as some unified whole that goes through time; we see divergent becomings, movements or temporalities from which whole would be derived” (40). Hitchcock’s *Psycho* is an example of movement image which forms a narrative of events that enables the viewer to create a succession of moments of movement into a perceived whole. In the novel, Jim Finley’s idea of documentary film on Richard Elster is an example of time-image as it would be an unedited, one-cut film devoid of clear narrative succession. In Finley documentary movement can no longer assist temporal experience, providing the viewers with a possibility of direct time experience. He aspires to film a film in which there is

“No plush armchair with warm lightning and books on a shelf in the background. Just a man and a wall,” I told him. “the man stands there and relates the complete experience, everything that comes to mind, personalities, theories, details, feelings. You’re the man. There’s no offscreen voice asking questions. There’s no interspersed combat footage or comments from others, on-camera or off.” (27)

Deleuze borrowed concepts from Bergson even those which he discarded. For instance, Bergson acknowledges time as a continuous flow but didn’t believe in time as a series of moments. Deleuze reintroduces time as a succession of moments because time is inseparable from the experience in human consciousness as postulated in quantum mechanics. In quantum mechanics, time appears to be smooth and continuous, and inseparable from human consciousness. DeLillo portrays Elster as a person conscious of the flexible and relative nature of time. He notes, “Days turns to night eventually but it’s a matter of light and darkness, it’s not time passing, mortal time. There’s none of the usual terror. It’s different here, time is enormous, that’s what I feel here, palpably. Time that precedes us and survives us” (56). He experiences time at quantum level, made of series of moments and devoid of past and future. Elster experiences timelessness in the desert as for him time slows down to a
grinding halt. There are no clocks and no calendars in the desert where they stay. Here, time sheds its mortal nature and becomes “blind” (30), “enormously old” “deep” and epochal” (90). In “Time, Consciousness, and Quantum Events in Fundamental Spacetime Geometry” Stuart Hameroff takes clue from Deleuze that time is inseparable from human consciousness and advances the view that consciousness not only experiences time relatively but also creates time. He further states that human consciousness is inversely proportional to time; the more expanded the human consciousness is, the slower is the experience of time. He illustrates:

People in car accidents describe “time slowing down”, and famous athletes like the basketball player Michael Jordan are able to excel because the other teams’ players seem to be reacting in relative slow motion. Physical speed aside, this may occur by an increase in the frequency of conscious OR events. For example if Jordan is having 60 conscious events per second, and the players defending him are only having 40 conscious events per second, Jordan has 50% more perceptions, decisions and reactions over any given time interval than his opponents, who will appear to him to be in slow motion. (np)

DeLillo chooses the deserts of Anza-Borrego, California as a meditative place where Elster’s consciousness expands to experience time at a slower pace. He demonstrates the interrelation between consciousness and time-experienced and how any change in any one of them would cause the other one change too. The desert, as a meditative place, offers Elster a chance to expand his consciousness to the extent that time nearly feels dead or ancient. Richard Elster says, “Time slows down when I’m here. Time becomes blind. I feel the landscape more than I see it. I never know what day is it. I don’t get old here.” (30). Elster finds the expansive desert a place where he becomes oblivious of the passage of time, days, minutes and hours. His statement, “I don’t get old here” hints that Elster finds himself living in the interstices of movements and is able to catch the moments that are individual entities in themselves. His life in the desert is akin to his experiences in the gallery where he watches 24 Hour Psycho, and where he is able to see the interstitial spaces/movements between the two consecutive frames. He learns to live ‘in the moment’ and becomes aware about the phenomenon of time as something smooth and continuous.
Contrary to Elster’s temporal experience in the desert, time appears fast paced to Finley and for the people belonging to the city. By juxtaposing the fast paced time of the cities with the expansive time of the desert, DeLillo observes that time is the function of speed at which life is lived. People living in the cities and towns have become accustomed to the speed of rapidly moving traffic and ephemeral electronic devices which define the life in the cities. Elster, while explaining to Finley and Jessie, as to how time assimilates in the cities, says:

It’s all embedded, the hours and minutes, words and numbers everywhere, he said, train stations, bus routes, taxi meters, surveillance cameras. It’s all about time, dimwit time, inferior time, people checking watches and other devices, other reminders. This is time draining out of our lives. Cities are built to measure time, to remove time from nature. There’s an endless counting down, he said. When you strip away all the surfaces, when you see into it, what’s left is terror. (56-57)

By “terror,” DeLillo means an altered comprehension of the time, space and existence. The city, where Elster has spent most of his life, doesn’t allow him to think beyond “News and Traffic. Sports and Weather” (23). The undying noise of the traffic and technology, the terms and conditions of various policy papers dictate the life in the city. Elster’s obsession with time is, in fact, his awareness about his expanding consciousness. Proximity with nature provides him with a different experience of time that is smooth and continuous in the words of Bergson and succession of moments, according to Deleuze. He verily asserts that cities have removed time from nature because there the time is not seen in Bergsonian or Deleuzean terms but as a linear phenomenon divided into past, present and future as well as into seconds, hours, minutes, days, weeks, months, years etc. The smallest unit of time as per modern clocks is one second where as quantum physics has proven that even $10^{-43}$ part of a second is also smooth and continuous and, therefore, cannot be considered as a separate unit of time. Moreover, life in the cities has generated innumerable layers of artificial and unnatural modes of living that predicate a blind adherence to a scientifically calculable time. A conscious observation of such a life reveals that underneath, there is an interstitial void, meaninglessness and terror, something which is a necessary reality which is lost as “unknown.” In the gallery, however, the
conceptual art offers an experience whereby the observer gets conscious of the process of careful watchfulness which one misses amidst the ubiquitous consumerism of the postmodern culture. The striking discrepancy between the two spaces is apparent when the door of the gallery slides for awhile to offer a glance of the milieu outside where

[T]here was a stir of mild traffic at the far end of the floor, people getting on the escalator, a clerk swiping credit cards, a clerk tossing items into large sleek museum bags. Light and sound, wordless monotone, and intimation of life-beyond, world-beyond, the strange bright fact that breathes and eats out there, the thing that’s not the movies. (19)

It would be pertinent to use a quote from the novel to bring to the surface, the contrast of the ambience, sounds, light and other features of sensuality between the life in a city and that of the desert. In the desert,

There were no mornings or afternoons. It was one seamless day, every day, until the sun began to arc and fade, mountains emerging from their silhouettes. This is when we sat and watched in silence.

At dinner later the silence held. I wanted to hear rain drumming down. We ate lamb chops that he’d grilled over charcoal on the deck. I ate head down, face in the plate. It was the kind of silent spell that’s hard to break, becoming more dense with every bite we took. I thought about the dead time, the sense of self-entrapment, and I listened to us chew our food. I wanted to tell him how good it tasted but he’d cooked the chops too long, all traces of sweaty pink lost in flame. I wanted to hear wind in the hills, bats scratching in the eaves. (46)

Here, time floats freely and slowly enabling Elster to project his views on metaphysical concepts. The solitude of the desert acquires a space “where the mind transcends all direction inward” (91), its gaze turns inward rather than scatter on the outward sensual phenomenal world. The days in the city are saturated with complications and disturbances which, as described earlier according to Hameroff, prove to be a major hindrance in the expansion of consciousness because the time
seems to pass too fast. The disturbance in the temporal experience of the characters in two different settings—the museum and the desert suggests the flexibility of time as experienced by the consciousness. Max Planck, a theoretical physicist who propounded quantum theory and won the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1918, expressed importance of consciousness as fundamental. He regards “matter as derivative from consciousness” and says that “we cannot get behind consciousness. Everything that we talk about, everything that we regard as existing, postulating consciousness” (np).

What Max Plank says, is something akin to DeLillo’s understanding regarding the inter-relationship between phenomenal world, conception of time, space, space, existence and above all, the terror of consciousness.

The rest of the novel continues to dabble with the issue of consciousness especially through Delillo’s introduction of the concept of “Point Omega.” DeLillo depicts Richard Elster as somebody who is profoundly inspired by French Jesuit and paleontologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s (1881-1955) whose theory of ‘omega point’ deals with future of human evolution. Chardin had spent a significant part of his life in China as a scientist and hence gained knowledge on Taoism and Buddhism which reflects in his theories. The Eastern philosophy belies Cartesian dualism of mind and promotes unification of mind or consciousness into one organic whole.

Influenced by the Eastern philosophy, Chardin formulated his research and investigation in the book, Le phénomène humain published in 1955 and translated as The Human Phenomenon (1959) under the theory of omega point, which explains the evolution of human race. He describes evolution as a process that motivates complexity—from unicellular organism to a multicellular thinking being. He writes that “the stuff of the universe, woven in a single piece according to one and the same system but never repeating itself from one point to another, represents a single figure. Structurally it forms a whole” (41). The emergence of Homo sapiens was the first step of this age and now human consciousness is on the next level to get unified into one organic whole, the consciousness that would be conscious of itself and that would be the final point of human evolution which he called as “omega point.” Acquainting Finley with Chardin’s philosophy, Elster adduces that “human thought is alive, it circulates. And the sphere of collective human thought, this is approaching the final term, the last flare.” (65). The desert offers him ample time to transcend the mundane boundaries of physical life as well as the scientifically divided time to reach the
higher consciousness. It becomes synonymous with his subliminal space bereft of maddening rush of the metropolitan space.

DeLillo, however, tampers with Chardin’s original concept of omega point with Elster’s death drive. Elster prefers to be “the dead matter we used to be” (64) and tells Finley that “Consciousness is exhausted. Back now to inorganic matter . . . we want to be stones in a field” (67). Elster’s vision of human consciousness regressing towards inorganic matter challenges Chardin’s utopian idea of evolving consciousness. Before being part of the war strategist team at the Pentagon, Elster used to give lectures in Zurich on the dream of extinction. After the Iraq war, Elster decides to retreat to the desert since he is completely disillusioned with the war. His enthusiasm at the beginning of the war is washed away when he learns about the real motive of the war. His meditation on Chardin’s omega point theory is disavowed and thwarted by the conflict in Iraq. While commenting on Elster’s contradictory views of the original theory of Chardin, Miroslav Ćurčić writes:

Upon such evolution, the question of ethics and moral will remain, while history reminds us that emancipation and progress does not necessarily mean humanity as much as they enforce power and control, which is why Elster is aware that technology is not to be trusted and that movement of people into any technologically advanced life-world would not imply that humanity and well-being would ensue, rather than more horrifying exercise of total control of what remains of the human being. If Chardin’s construction of the unification of man and divine holds, one might see the opposite direction DeLillo chooses to take in Elster’s interpretation: a movement towards inorganic matter seems very much pessimistic, and knowing that stones do not have self-awareness. . . . Eslter’s meditations on the nature of humanity and its movement into the technological future [are] only pessimistic testimony of the future of humanity, or the present thereof. . . . (517)

The expansion of consciousness that is conscious that unfolds in the process of slow passing of time when there is so much to look at, DeLillo puts across the possibility of knowing the meaning of true life. The ‘true life’ that the author speaks of is completely relegated due to the repressive tendencies of culture, institutionalized
religion as well as the market forces. In the essay “The Culture of Postmodernism” Ihab Hassan quotes Ernest Becker having said that “the human body represents the “curse of fate” and the culture stands on repression, not only of sexuality as Freud thought, but also of mortality, because man, according to Becker is primarily an avoider of death. In other words, humans have, over the years, raised a culture that has repressed the source (sex) as well as the end (death) of their existence. The pervasive prevalence of consumer culture of the 20th century that dovetailed with the boom of cyber capitalism of the 21st century has given rise to culture of fetishism in the realm of which humans are lost. As a result, what is left between the birth and death—the life, DeLillo reflects, has been shrouded by the layers of cultural, social, scientific and consumerist preferences. DeLillo has Richard Elster to elicit a genuine query as to what a true life is:

The true life is not reducible to words spoken or written, not by anyone, ever. The true life takes place when we’re alone thinking, feeling, lost in memory, dreamingly self aware, the submicroscopic moments . . . we become ourselves beneath the running thoughts and dim images, wondering idly when we’ll die. This is how we live and think whether we know it or not. These are the unsorted thoughts we have looking out the train window, small dull smears of meditative panic. (21-22)

Elster’s skepticism for words reflects the principle of Deconstruction regarding the instability of meaning in language which is the result of chain of signifiers or meanings. Each word, believes Derrida, is capable of producing endless chain of signifiers, thus failing to offer one fixed meaning. DeLillo’s claim that “the true life is not reducible to words” implies to postmodern uncertainty as well. Elster is well acquainted with the limitedness of language and that is why comments on the nature of language while explaining about omega point: “Whatever the intended meaning of this term, [the Omega Point] if it has a meaning, if it’s not a case of language struggling toward some idea outside our experience” (91). ‘Omega Point’ as Chardin seems to have conceptualized is the zenith of human consciousness, a state of no human affairs at all, a veritable trajectory that has attained escape velocity. Don DeLillo, a denizen of a highly evolved metropolitan and extremely consumeristic culture betrays an acute awareness about the existence of higher consciousness which
is beyond the realm of words, culture, development and cyberworld. DeLillo anatomizes the intricate relationship that is between seeing and words and brings out the importance of seeing which, in the words of John Berger,

... establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. Each evening we see the sunset. We know that the earth is turning away from it. Yet the knowledge, the explanation, never quite fits the sight. (7)

It is through the character of Richard Elster that DeLillo conveys his awareness about the consciousness that the process of human evolution and so called development has buried underneath the veneer of culture, accustomed perception and structures of time and space. For Elster, war becomes a trigger that lays bare the futility of evolutionary zeal of human race and turns his gaze inwards. After assisting the planners of Iraq war, Elster feels hollow and guilty of legitimizing the war by providing his intellectual authority to strategize morally convincing discourse for justifying the war. He retreats to a self-exile where “the sun was burning 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” (22). He tells Jim Finley that he decided to move there to reclaim his body in the scorching heat of the desert that he’d lost in the maddening phenomenon of the city life. In the humdrum of cities that run on the ethics of profit, consumerism and speed, the body as the phenomenon becomes the last priority. The desert, on the contrary, acquires a geographical correlative to a space, a no man’s land, where he seeks transcendence and true life from the incalculable aloneness of the desert. He believes that the only way one can become aware of one’s true self is when one is totally “alone, thinking, feeling, lost in memory, dreamingly self-aware” (21) It is in this vastness of the desert that the raw thoughts of a human, beneath the running thoughts and dim images, are laid bare.

Elster escapes from the city life where in the words of Jean Baudrillard, objects perpetually proliferate and thereby dominate the subjects. Subsequently, he states that the objects move toward their ecstacy accompanied by inertia of the
subjects and when a society is saturated with ecstasy of the objects it implodes and creates entropy. Entropy is a realm of excessive information and media messages bombarded with images that lead to the meaninglessness and deapthlessness in a society. Such a society, states Baudrillard, in which all the references of the real are lost, is hyperreal and what one encounters in hyperreal is the spectacle. Elster, aware of “the nausea of News and Traffic,” (22) dissociates himself from the spectacle of the city. The desert offers him a space bereft of the incomprehensible speed and indomitable development of objects and technologies. While Teilhard anticipated evolution of higher consciousness Elster fears human extinction. This may be because he believes that Iraq war was a mistake that civilization like America should not have committed. The novel is fraught with instances wherein Elster’s guilt surfaces invariably. This is why, contemplates David Cowart, Elster introduces the Teilhard phrase in an inverted order, “omega point” (52, 72). Cowart further notes that “Only Jim Finley, late in the text, shifts from “omega point” to “point omega” (98) and so christens DeLillo’s novel” (47). Iraq war is an ironic example of Teilhard’s theory and that’s probably one of the reasons why DeLillo inverts the title. The perpetual reversal of the order of the words demonstrates what Derrida calls as free play of language and thus subverts the plan of a single and unified meaning which Teilhard’s concept of point omega strived for.

It is with the same purpose that DeLillo adopts the conceptual art of Gordon’s in the novel. The bracketing of the main plot of the novel by two parts, which primarily talks about Gordon’s conceptual artwork, has been probed into by various critics in several ways. Izabella Kimak in “Book/Movie /Installation: The Interpretation of the Literary and the Visual in Don DeLillo’s Point Omega” remarks that Gordon’s conceptual art has been mutated by DeLillo to suit his own idiosyncratic and literary purpose of emphasizing the relative nature of time and limitation of language. Paul Giaimo, in Appreciating Don DeLillo: The Moral Force of a Writer’s Work, observes political reverberations in the sections, “Anonymity” and Anonymity 2”. He contends that the whole novel can be seen as a manifestation of DeLillo’s criticism of the Iraq war. In defense of the negative remarks by certain critics regarding the insufficient content of Iraq war, Giaimo suggests that

“...prolonged analysis of the Iraq war or critique of artistic treatments of the same as a surrogate for protest action to stop it would be simply
a prolongation of witness to murderous violence, perfectly metaphorized in the presentation of *24 Hour Psycho* that is described in the opening of the novel, which is the centerpiece of DeLillo’s frame. (178)

He contends that the slow-paced action of *24 Hour Psycho* allows its viewers to observe every detail of violence being acted out on the screen which is exactly how DeLillo aspires to dodge the violence of Iraq war in his work. In depicting the murder scene of the *24 Hour Psycho* not only does DeLillo undermine the violence of Iraq war in particular, but violence per se because “the man against the wall”

. . . knew it was a brief scene in the original movie, less than a minute, famously less, and he’d watched the prolonged scene here some days earlier, all broken motion, without suspense or dread or urgent pulsing screech-owl sound. Curtain rings, that’s what he recalled most clearly, the rings on the shower curtain spinning on the rod when the curtain is torn loose, a moment lost at a normal speed, four rings spinning slowly over the fallen figure of Janet Leigh, a stray poem above the hellish death, and then the bloody water curling and cresting at the shower drain, minute by minute, and eventually swirling down.

He was eager to watch again. He wanted to count the curtain rings, may be four, possibly five or more or less. (11)

In the above quoted extract, the intensity of the original violent scene in replaced by the motion of the curtain, number of curtain rings etc. thereby, undermining the violence as such.

The political nuances in the novel are woven neatly around metaphysical skein by the author. Though the author, in an interview, clarifies that *Point Omega* is “not at all political,” there are critics who have studied the novel as carrying political connotations. David Cowart explains that DeLillo’s remark “signals a literary aspiration largely at odds with the scoring of cheap shots at the expense of the Bush administration and those who kept it in place for eight years. DeLillo seeks to represent, in the novel, the anguish of one whose error—ethical, epistemological, *linguistic*—takes on a moral gravity that verges on the tragic” (42). However, by
placing Paul Wolfowitz, a US Deputy Secretary of Defence served in Bush administration, within the narrative of the novel, there is a strong possibility that DeLillo aspired to include the political scenario of America post Iraq war. After the war was over, Elster informs Finley, that he chose to live in seclusion unlike Wolfowitz who became the 10th president of the World Bank. Post Iraq war “Wolfowitz went to World Bank. That was exile,” he said. “This is different, a spiritual retreat” (29). The mentioning of Wolfowitz, who was one of the prime advocates of the war, is of utmost importance as it hints at DeLillo’s attempt to scrutinize the foreign policy of America.

In the novel DeLillo not only invests in investigating into the causes that led to invasion but also explores the indictment that the invasion invited on America. The novel performs an “indirect anatomy of America’s acquiescence to the Iraq war and its spurious rationale” (46). 9/11 proved to be an intense jolt that pulled America down from the ivory tower of being an invincible empire. DeLillo perceives 9/11 as a multiple fracture within America’s glorious history of being the only superpower whose sovereignty could not be questioned or threatened. Writing eloquently about the vehement relationship between America and technology in the essay he studies how it all changed in the wake of 9/11. He comments:

Technology is our fate, our truth. It is what we mean when we call ourselves the only superpower on the planet. The materials and methods we devise make it possible for us to claim our future. We don’t have to depend on God or the prophets or other astonishments. We are the astonishment. The miracle is what we ourselves produce, the systems and networks that change the way we live and think...after the attacks... There stands the smoky remnant of filigree that marks the last tall thing, the last sign in the mire of wreckage that there were towers here that dominated the skyline for over a quarter of a century. . . we have fallen back in time and space. (37)

The unexpected jolt of 9/11 wakes up America to a consciousness that had falsely been laden by her self-imposed American Exceptionalsim. 9/11 brings America back to “time and space” as a result of the implosion in her so called American Global
Hegemony viz-a-viz economy, and warfare. American Exceptionalism has become a snake that eats its own tail and experienced an implosion in the wake of 9/11.

He reiterates the same argument through the fictional character of Elster who further adds that in order to reclaim America’s position in the world again, it needs to act because “A great power has to act. We were struck hard. We need to retake the future. The force of will, the sheer visceral need. We can’t let others shape our world, our minds. We can’t let others shape our worlds, our minds. All they have are old dead despotic traditions” (38). The culmination of Cold War pronounced America as the centre of power and supremacy. The neoconservative speeches given by Elster are the result of his faith in American power and it is precisely this faith which had prompted Elster to be a part of the Pentagon team. He had believed that Iraq war could redeem America but “in those rooms, with those men, it was all priorities, statistics, evaluations, rationalizations” (38). DeLillo, through Elster, presents America’s moral and ethical error on America’s invasion of Iraq. Like Philip Roth, he surmises that Bush administration’s slogan of war on terror was more of an advertisement that camouflaged its ulterior motives. Elster’s vision of war is associated with haiku as he informs Finley. He continues:

Haiku means nothing beyond what it is. A pond in summer, a leaf in the wind. It’s human consciousness located in nature. It’s the answer to everything in a set number of lines, a prescribed syllable count. I wanted a haiku war. . . . I wanted a war in three lines. . . . What I wanted was a set of ideas linked to transient things. This is the soul of haiku. Bare everything to plain sight. See what’s there. Things in war are transient. See what’s there and be ready to watch it disappear. (37)

DeLillo, through the persona of Elster, wants America to behave with a consciousness that is based on honestly and transparency both in the eyes of Americans as well as the world. In this context Martin Paul Eve, in his extensive study on America’s invasion of Iraq notes that though the war was announced and waged by America in order to eradicate a regime that assists and harbours terrorists and supplies them weapons for mass destruction and to democratize the Middle East, it instead sought Iraq’s oil reserves for itself. Quoting the US State Department’s article, “Winning the War on Terror,” he writes that the Bush administration alleged that the regime of Iraq
committed outrageous human right abuses, and disobeyed the United Nations. He further argues that “It is surely unnecessary to point out the hypocrisy of such a rationale given that the invasion was launched in contravention of the United Nations Charter and deemed illegal by the UN Secretary, Kofi Annan. It is also surely unnecessary to say that subsequent claims for weapons of mass destruction and any evidence of cooperation with Al Qaeda were disproved” (12). In Point Omega DeLillo explicates how the Iraq war was a “created reality” (36). Through Elster, DeLillo suggests that the environment is simulated so that the state can act to centralize the power in its favour. Elster tells Finley that, “Lying is necessary. The state has to lie. There is no lie in war or in preparation for war that can’t be defended. We went beyond this. 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” (36). Elster’s disappointment that “their war is acronyms, projections, contingencies, methodologies” and that “their war is abstract” (28) speaks volumes about DeLillo’s forte of bringing Braudrillain infused American society to the forefront. In the realm of politics carried out by the state, it becomes imperative for the state to design realities which work in favour of consolidating its policies towards an ulterior motive. 

Point Omega positions Iraq war between state terrorism and terrorism. Linda Kauffman claims that “terrorism is inside us all—not just individuals, but nations” (Wake of Terror 360). In an article titled “Patterns of Global Terrorism” (2000), defines terrorism as “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience” (xii). In another definition given by a theoretician Christopher Harmon, “terrorism is defined as “the deliberate and systematic murder, maiming, and menacing of the innocent to inspire fear for political ends” (web). The only distinction between the two classifications seems to be that terrorism is carried out by “subnational or clandestine agents.” Nevertheless, the novel’s political reverberations get undermined and deflected by the heftier issues of devolution of American civilization which is mirrored in the inverted order of Tielhard’s ‘Omega Point’ as ‘Point Omega.’

DeLillo, in Point Omega, may not have directly articulated his political stance but with the assistance of the characters he has creatively placed it in the slow paced
plot of the narrative and by exercising metonymy of violence, conceptual art, and Iraq he has certainly tried to express himself. Through Elster, Iraq is transformed into a metonym of war which he loses on intellectual as well as personal front. The Mojave Desert, other than being a spiritual retreat, can also be read as a symbol for Iraq where Elster had hoped to find “space and time” (24) but instead is handed down a “skein of regret” (122) and “blank facts” (122) soon after he loses his daughter in the desert.

Elster’s condition as well as his silence deconstructs whole superstructure of his views and experience at the Pentagon, his views about war, extinction, consciousness life and death. Furthermore, the refusal of the text to talk about violence of Iraq war, of Jessie’s sudden disappearance and apparent death can be read as a form of silence which is often found in the aesthetic representation of tragedy and violence. The “search for the most perfect silence” (122) as explored by Georges Bataille in “The Teaching of Death,” is reflected in modernist texts of Beckett and mirrors some of the works of DeLillo’s including Point Omega. This concept as well as the way of its employment in the text, stimulates silence—a “paroxysm” (91) which speaks of extinction. When Elster and Finley drive back to New York after giving up their exhaustive search to locate Jessie, Finley notes the futility of Elster’s profound philosophies:

We drove in silence behind a motorboat being towed by a black pickup. 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 grief, one body, out there somewhere, or not. (124).

The sudden implosion due to Jessie’s disappearance in the profound realm of Finley and Elster renders all the theories of Elster’s meaningless. This event becomes synonymous with America’s failed mission of War on Terror on whose metaphorical shoulders it aimed to satisfy its imperialistic designs.

The sudden closing of the episode at Mojave Desert as well as untraced Jessie renders the narrative open ended and incomplete making its form anti-aristotelian and postmodernist. Postmodernism, that shares a close relationship with Deconstruction,
abides by the idea that there is no centre and thus hints at the intrinsic chaos, fissure, and disruption that the language possesses. This decenetring happens on account of some ‘event’ which Derrida calls as a ‘rupture’. The mystery of Jessie’s disappearance is a rupture within the narrative and never meets closure; besides the identity of the characters is deferred. DeLillo’s refusal to offer any fixed meaning within the narrative hints at the atmosphere of perplexity, anguish and paranoia post 9/11. Unlike Hitchcock’s Psycho, which has some similarities with the plot of Point Omega and has all its mysteries solved, the novel offers its readers with postmodern ontological indeterminacy as the readers never learn about Jessie’s fate. James Ladun’s assessment regarding the “shift[ing] some idea of the work from the maker to the consumer” is in fact his method to give Delillo’s novel a hermeneutic nature.

What boils down from the extensive analysis of the novel is that Point Omega belongs to DeLillo’s late period in which his experiments become more meticulous. The novel’s postmodern connection engenders hermeneutic self-consciousness which further branches out to deal with metaphysical concepts of time, consciousness, space, reality and true life. For this he revisits and rethinks Hitchcock’s Psycho to fit it within the narrative of the novel to generate an unspeakable terror that aims to dislodge the so called self imposed supremacy which Richard articulates from the beginning but is faded away with Jessie’s disappearance. In order to give the perceivable and comprehensible shape to the experience of 9/11, DeLillo, as discussed earlier, resorts to various technical experiments, one of them being the structure of the novel. By resorting to the nonchronological narrative scheme, coupled with flashback and flash-forward DeLillo succeeds in creating the debilitating impact upon the minds of the reader as it was post 9/11. DeLillo attempts to rediscover space and time by weaving the plot in the gallery and desert where space and time are perceived differently from the cities by human brains. This brings out the primal terror in humans which otherwise remains dormant on account of the culture of consumerism. The desert which acts as an extension to the gallery unleashes the force of geological time on Elster and Finley. By the end Finley realizes that he is just a cog in the machinery of cultural production and thus finds it utterly uncomfortable to return to New York. Gordon’s installation is an object correlative which prompts its viewers to think about time in relation to the fast paced life of the modern times, and hence “Real time [becomes] meaningless” (39).
The concepts of Ekphrasis and conceptual art also prove handy in doing the scene. DeLillo is able to penetrate into the interstices of everyday phenomenal happenings and unravel the consciousness of ‘pure time,’ something diagonally opposite to the accustomed perception of time. This chapter draws upon Bergson’s concept of time as well as Deleuze’s philosophy of cinema, particularly his idea of ‘time-image’ to understand the relationship between time and consciousness as depicted by DeLillo in *Point Omega*. DeLillo’s observation about time and consciousness border upon these concepts as understood by Buddha and Tao. That is why Elster finds himself in a state “where the mind transcends all direction inward” (91). As said earlier, DeLillo, far from being a didactic novelist, does not offer solution. He lays bare the diagonally contradictory ideas on the table and leaves it for the reader to form an opinion. If Elster, on one hand, is influenced by Chardin’s concept of ‘Omega Point,’ toward the end of the novel he is depicted as being completely shattered. The consciousness to which DeLillo strives to reach through this novel has also been dubbed as ‘true-life’ something which is “not reducible to words” (21), and thereby attempts to say the unspeakable. Even if the novel seems to allude to politics its primary aim remains to unravel the state of human consciousness or pure life, something which has been unburied beneath the veneer of culture, politics, accustomed perception and structure of time and space.